

Commentary

Rural Education: A New Perspective is Needed at the U.S. Department of Education

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Rural children and youth represent a substantial minority of U.S. students, yet the unique educational needs of rural communities have been largely ignored by the U.S. Department of Education (USDE). This statement is hardly a revelation to educators, experts, and advocates who have grown weary of seeing rural schools being treated as the poor country cousins of the U.S. education system. Recent efforts by the USDE have done little to change that perspective. Indeed, they point to a troubling trend of using resources allocated for rural education issues to fund generic programs that are just as applicable to suburban and urban contexts as they are to rural places.

The most recent example of the USDE's indifference to the needs of rural schools and communities is the 2004 Government Accountability Office (GAO) report (GAO, 2004) on the challenges facing small rural schools districts in implementing the requirements of *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB). The GAO used multiple methodologies to evaluate implementation issues in small rural school districts and the support available for those issues. These methodologies included a nationally representative survey of rural and nonrural school districts as well as interviews with rural educators and officials in the USDE. The results indicate that small rural districts face unique obstacles to implementing NCLB that have not been adequately addressed by the department. As a result, the GAO recommended that the USDE "provide additional assistance on approaches small rural districts can use to address their unique challenges."

The report also urged the USDE to instruct its new National Research Center on Rural Education Support (NRCRES) to focus on finding effective, scientifically based methods that improve student performance in small rural districts. It seems odd that the GAO had to point this out, but the agency could find no indication that the newly created NRCRES would direct any of its research toward the unique problems of small rural school districts. Perhaps that's because instead of selecting a project targeting a critical problem in rural schools, the Institute of Education Sciences chose one that focuses on the transitions that students in rural areas make from home to school and from elementary to middle school. I don't know of any superintendents who are losing sleep over that problem.

In response to the GAO report, then Deputy Secretary of Education Eugene W. Hickok wrote, "the authors of the report may not understand all the actions we have already taken in this area" (GAO, 2004, p. 48). These actions include the formation of a rural education task force, updates to nonregulatory guidance, flexibility for meeting "highly qualified teacher" requirements, and a variety of workshops. Hickok cited several other major activities, none of which was designed to specifically address the unique needs of small rural districts. For example, two technology leadership summits were held to which the department "made a special effort to invite and encourage participation from small and low-income rural schools districts" (p. 48). The GAO report (2004) did credit the USDE with providing a variety of guidance and assistance, such as posting information on its website and communicating "with state officials in all states through telephone calls, conferences, and visits" (p. 36). I'm underwhelmed.

The USDE's efforts to support rural communities is even more disappointing when compared to that of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Education Secretary Margaret Spellings should take a page from the HHS playbook on how to address the needs of rural communities. In 2001, HHS Secretary Tommy Thompson directed his department's offices and agencies to improve and enhance health care and human services for rural Americans. One year later at the Summit on Rural America held in Denver, Thompson presented *One Department Serving Rural America* (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2002), a report that outlined the HHS's response. The document discusses a number of issues that are identical to those raised by rural education advocates. It is a remarkable document in that it shows that HHS actually considers rural issues seriously and, further, is taking actions to address them.

HHS's Rural Task Force identified three important findings in the report about the department's work to improve rural health care (HHS, 2002). First, HHS does not use a common definition of *rural*, which makes it difficult for HHS to develop policy, target grants, evaluate services for rural communities, and measure its investment in rural health. Second, even though a substantial number of HHS programs serve rural communities, they often have difficulty accessing these resources due to unique application, implementation, and evaluation requirements. Third, HHS policy decisions may have negative effects on rural communities or fail to reach their potential because they were made without considering rural issues. All three of these findings have parallels in rural education.

The task force also identified five goals for HHS: (a) improving rural communities' access to health and human services; (b) strengthening rural families; (c) strengthening rural communities and supporting economic development; (d) partnering with state, local and tribal governments to support rural communities; and (e) supporting rural policy and decision making and ensuring a rural voice in the consultative process. If you substitute the word education for the terms "health and human services" in the first goal, you've got an inspiring set of goals for the USDE.

Why has HHS moved aggressively to address the problems of rural communities while the USDE has not? Because no one in a position of authority at the USDE is committed to addressing the unique education needs of rural communities. Although former Education Secretary Rod Paige grew up in rural Mississippi, he then went on to serve as superintendent of the Houston Independent School District in Texas. He also established the Center for Excellence in Urban Education while at Texas Southern University. Tommy Thompson grew up in rural Wisconsin but also served as the state's governor, which required him to pay attention to rural, urban, and suburban issues.

The USDE continues to make the mistake Thompson identified at HHS—thinking about rural communities as small cities. As a result, rural schools are forced to implement policy initiatives that were developed with urban and suburban schools in mind. Rural educators need solutions that will build on the strengths of rural schools, not ones that ignore those assets. Why did Congress authorize and fund a rural education research and development center? Because they were convinced the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) wasn't going to adequately study rural education issues. The USDE only addresses the needs of rural schools when forced to or when an initiative also deals with issues relevant to urban or suburban situations. In the case of the rural research center, IES selected a project that could have been carried out in any context but just happens to occur in a rural place. The project is also flawed in that it focuses principally on one region of the U.S. where circumstances are quite different from those found in other parts of the country.

These events may seem unimportant until they are placed in the context of previous actions taken by the USDE. In restructuring the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), the IES eliminated the Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools (CRESS) along with the other specialty areas. ERIC CRESS was the one federally funded program that took its responsibility seriously to develop and disseminate information specifically about rural schools. That clearinghouse had been housed at AEL (formerly Appalachian Educational Laboratory), which also happens to hold the regional educational laboratory contract for the Appalachian region. About 9 years ago, AEL was designated as the lab with the rural education specialty area. That specialty area was eliminated 5 years later when the current round of regional educational laboratory contracts were awarded. The USDE is still required to ensure that "across the entire laboratory program, at least 25% of the resources are used to benefit rural areas" (USDE, 2000, p. 81). That works out to be about \$15 million a year. It's debatable whether rural schools have gotten \$60 million worth of services and products from the regional labs over the past 4 years.

One of the important things the USDE did for rural schools was publish *The Condition of Education in Rural Schools* (Stern, 1994). This report is a comprehensive look at the state of education in rural communities and is considered a key resource in the field. The report covers the years 1980 to 1990 and, unfortunately, is now outdated. Although there were discussions about updating the report, officials at the USDE decided instead to develop a website containing recycled data from the National Center for Education Statistics. This decision sends a clear message: The USDE is unwilling to allocate resources once every 10 years to produce a rural education report to guide policymaking and better support rural communities.

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What about the Rural Education Task Force that Secretary Hickok mentioned in his response to the GAO report? Has it achieved anything approaching the importance of the HHS Rural Task Force? Alas, no. The only accomplishment I can find is a virtual town hall meeting in September 2003 on how rural communities are using technology to meet the goals of NCLB. Secretary Spellings should reconstitute the Rural Education Task Force under the lead of a high-ranking deputy. Further the secretary should instruct this group to develop the USDE's plan for providing better service to rural communities. To support that effort, she also should direct all USDE offices to find ways to improve upon the provision of education available to rural Americans.

Officials from the USDE claim that the department is working hard to support rural schools and communities. But the facts do not match the rhetoric. It is time for the USDE to follow HHS's lead and back their stated commitment to rural schools with substantial and significant action that provides tangible benefits for rural Americans. Failure to do so will negatively impact rural children, youth, and communities, which ultimately will hurt all of us.

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