

Book Review

McShane, M. Q., & Smarick, A. (2018). *No longer forgotten: The triumphs and struggles of rural education in America*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

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Five years ago, the Rural Opportunities Consortium of Idaho (ROCI) was created in collaboration with Bellwether Education Partners with the stated purpose of “informing the national body of work on rural education and explore its implications for increasing educational attainment and economic competitiveness of Idahoans and other Americans who live and work in rural communities” (ROCI, 2014). ROCI released a number of research and policy documents, starting with one declaring rural communities to be a “new frontier” for charter schools (Smarick, 2014). Howley (2014) refuted this document, declaring it an attempt to “export generic schooling fads to rural places in the name of fixing supposed rural deficiencies” (p. 4). *No Longer Forgotten* synthesizes much of the work of ROCI (Smarick is on the advisory board, and several chapters are reworked research papers that were released by the group), advocating for an increase in charter schools despite a shaky research foundation. The editors of this book share a long history as school choice advocates, having worked for the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy, a conservative think tank. Michael McShane now works for EdChoice, an education reform organization founded by Milton Friedman; Andy Smarick has openly called for making public schools easier to close in order to replace them with privately operated charters (Smarick, 2010).

There is a complex and nuanced discussion to be had regarding charter schools in rural communities, specifically regarding the maintenance of local, democratic control in the face of state and regional policies that pursue consolidation and the closing of small, rural schools. *No Longer Forgotten* does not engage in that discussion. Instead, this book serves

as a basic overview of rural America and a primer for those who would introduce privatization to rural communities. This book views rural as a base for expanding charter schools, noting that rural communities can actually have an outsized influence in shaping school policy at the state and federal levels, claiming “rural communities have flexed their political muscles to slow, weaken, or reverse a number of significant reforms” (p. 62), essentially arguing that if rural communities can embrace charters, they can affect policy at the state and federal level, thereby making it easier to expand charters in urban and suburban communities.

The book begins with a statement that should be a red flag for readers: “precious little scholarship exists on rural schools” (p. 1). In making such a statement, the authors show that they have either not attempted to engage with existing research, or they have completely ignored it. While the total number of studies on rural schools may not reach the number on urban schools, it is simply dishonest to make such a claim. Indeed, the very publication you are currently reading has covered many of the topics that are discussed in this book. One exception is discussed in chapter 2, where the author describes the lack of attention paid to African-American rural communities. The author rightfully notes the lack of diversity in rural education research, explaining that “rural America is not monolithic” (p. 29) but includes numerous African-American, Native, and Latino communities that are often absent from the literature.

McShane and Smarick describe three overall purposes of this book: (1) to provide a better understanding of “rural” as a term and a concept, (2) to “provide some background about the milieu in which rural schools operate” (p. 1), and (3) to “explain the philosophical orientation of this volume” (p. 2). Much of this review focuses on the third purpose, the pro-charter stance of the book and the arguments therein, but first it must address the first two purposes. Regarding the first stated purpose, the editors note that “there is enormous variability within and between rural communities” (p. 3),

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and there is no “satisfying definition of rurality” (p. 3), recognizing that many of the authors of the chapters may have different personal definitions of rural (a reality that no doubt most rural researchers have accepted!). The first purpose is mostly met in the first chapter, in which the author presents a statistical overview of rural education, providing various ways of defining rural, describing rural experiences in schools, and discussing the various education benefits and challenges facing rural communities. Much of the data in this chapter comes from the U.S. Census Bureau and the National Center for Education Statistics. It is a stretch to call this chapter an “in-depth statistical analysis” (p. 7), as the data are mostly descriptive, and the author offers very little analysis of said data. The main conclusions offered in the chapter—that “there are relative differences between rural education and other locales, [and] there are absolute differences within rural areas” (p. 26), and rural schools differ “across regions ... [and] rural areas in the South and West differ dramatically from those in the North and Midwest” (p. 26)—are not particularly new or unique to the field of rural education. The information provided in this chapter can provide a decent foundation for non-rural educators looking for a place to begin an understanding of rural schools and communities, which of course, is the audience of this book.

The second purpose of the book, to describe the background in which rural schools operate, begins with a broad but shallow statistical overview of the opioid crisis in rural America and what it means for rural schools. The authors of this chapter ultimately call for an increase in charter “recovery high schools” that “combine treatment and counseling” (p. 52) and school sports. However, the connection between sports and opioid use is unclear, and the authors do not actually explain how they see sports’ making a difference, as “more research is needed to establish a clear relationship between athletics and opioid misuse” (p. 53). Perhaps it is only mentioned to bookend the cringeworthy basketball metaphor that opened the chapter: “unlike Logan (WV) Wildcats’ narrow defeat in the semifinals, there was no contest as Logan more than doubled Baltimore’s overdose rate” (p. 45).

Chapter 4 offers a discussion of why rural areas are suited for school reform through privatization. The authors write, “school reform politics has been shaped by teachers’ unions and the decisions of state and federal policymakers, as well as general government actors like mayors” (p. 59). These actors, the author notes, are less likely to support rural reform than urban reform, as they are less well organized and lack political clout in rural communities. The authors also note that these actors are seen as outsiders, and “rural communities place strict limits on the extent to which outsiders can lend their ideas and support” (p. 59). The authors ultimately claim that “understanding and

navigating [the] tension between rural insiders and urban outsiders is a key to supporting rural schools” (p. 59). This chapter raises an immediate red flag, as the authors are not positioning themselves as insiders who understand the rural needs of rural communities, or as outsiders who are trying to see things from a rural perspective. Instead, they are the outsiders who understand how rural politics work and want to share this knowledge with like-minded school reformers way to ensure their policies can be implemented, regardless of whether these policies truly meet the needs of rural communities. The authors do not attempt to discuss or examine what rural communities value or desire in their education, but instead focus on the rural vs. urban dynamic, noting that outside reforms leave rural communities feeling “disrespected or threatened” and with a “strong resentment to cities and urban elites” (p. 62), and that “rural identity is shaped in part by rural communities’ opposition to reforms advanced from urban elites” (p. 66). The response to this supposedly innate rural resistance is not a call for outsiders to try to see education from a rural perspective, but a how-to on navigating rural politics. “Reform efforts must tread carefully or be cast aside as yet another ‘outside’ initiative” (p. 73). The authors provide a quick run-through of the various influencers on rural education, such as local business leaders, school boards, and superintendents, all whom one must understand if they are to “advance school reform through politics” (p. 72).

This chapter also describes why it is important for reformers to get a foothold in rural education, as rural communities “are likely to shape American education in the years to come” (p. 74). The authors note that rural communities have been “powerful sites of resistance to federal and state reform efforts” (p. 62) and have a “substantial representative advantage in Congress” (p. 63). Rural communities have also “played leading roles in school-finance equalization and adequacy cases around the country” (p. 63). It is becoming clear that rural is no longer being viewed as the “new frontier” for reform, but the vanguard, as reformers are recognizing that it is more important for policy to be promoted from rural areas and expanded to urban and suburban rather than attempting to bring urban policies to rural communities, where it will generally be met with resistance.

Chapter 5 provides a brief statistical overview of rural poverty, along with descriptions of some of the federal programs aimed at alleviating its effects. The author describes the effects of poverty on educational attainment and notes that although schools cannot solve the problems of poverty, they do “inevitably play a role given that it is likely the only institution that comes into contact with almost all poor children” (p. 94). The author expresses the need for rural schools to understand and help to coordinate federal safety net programs to ensure children and families

are accessing all services for which they are eligible. Despite commenting that most of these programs have shown some level of effectiveness, the author also asserts that more must be done because, despite showing some success, federal programs “lead to dependency” (p. 94). The author calls for additional policy efforts that focus on “underlying causes of poverty,” specifically “employment” (p. 94), and calls on schools to “partner with workforce development agencies to offer resources to unemployed parents” as well as “prepare students for jobs” (p. 95). The belief that simply offering jobs can alleviate poverty ignores decades of neoliberal economic policies that allowed for corporate takeover of small and family-owned farms and businesses, forcing communities to “compete” for industries through low wages and tax breaks, and the closing down of small, supposedly “inefficient” schools (Edmondson, 2003). Focusing solely on getting a job obscures the systemic roots of poverty, paradoxically ignoring the reasons behind why there may be no jobs in the first place.

Chapter 6 examines school funding, noting that rural schools tend to struggle to generate local revenue, making them more reliant and state and federal sources of financial support. Since states set aside specific amounts for rural schools, those schools are more beholden to meeting state standards in terms how much and where to do certain spending. Often small schools struggle to meet these requirements, which leads to consolidation if the state believes it can create a more financially equitable or efficient system. The author offers suggestions for policymakers, such as looking beyond simple financial aspects of schooling, when making determinations on issues like consolidation, which have such far-reaching consequences. The author notes that “finance is subjective” (p. 114) and suggests that it is important to take numerous factors into account—beyond the numbers—when determining school funding.

Chapter 7 looks at staffing issues (teacher recruitment, retention, and quality) in rural schools. The authors note that despite the perception that rural schools are understaffed, “they do not report strikingly different vacancy rates than non-rural schools” (p. 131). Aside from difficulties in filling STEM and ELL vacancies, their data show no particular differences from urban and suburban schools. However, the authors are concerned that a shift in policy toward improving teacher quality may make attracting and keeping rural teachers more difficult, as they will have a smaller pool from which to choose after dismissing ineffective teachers. The authors are making a strange leap in logic here, from finding there is no distinctive issue in staffing rural schools (at least no issues that differ from other geographic environments) to assuming that once teacher quality is accounted for, rural schools will not measure up. There is no reason to believe

rural teachers are of lower quality, or that rural teachers and their schools will struggle to improve their abilities. The argument presented here stems from deficit-model thinking, a practice that was criticized earlier in this volume as not “building on the strengths of rural communities” (p. 5). The authors see teaching in a rural community as unattractive, believing that high-quality teachers will not want to go to rural schools, and they suggest that rural schools must “address the key challenges of being a teacher in a rural area” (p. 128).

The final chapter of this book (excluding the conclusion), expresses the main purpose of its publication: a philosophical orientation that campaigns for expansion of rural charter schools. The author begins this chapter by describing the various arguments against rural charters, noting that it is difficult to open charters with “small populations and low population density” and “limited support” (p. 136)—key issues when the main argument for charters is that competition will create better schools. It is difficult to have competition in places where multiple schools cannot be supported. The author also argues that rural populations have limited knowledge about charters, which is a rather insulting argument to make, given that the author provides no evidence that this lack of knowledge exists. To claim that rural populations would openly embrace charter schools if only they knew what they were is no different than the old argument that rural places are “backwards, in need of modernization” (p. 61), which was criticized earlier in this very volume. The author also recognizes that existing rural charters have not been “a panacea” as they “cannot and will not solve the challenges of rural education” (p. 139). Despite recognizing that charters may not be the solution, the author claims there is still potential, although she does not adequately address any of the concerns mentioned previously. In the argument for charters, the author first offers the “classic application, to induce improvement in and provide alternatives to beleaguered school districts” (p. 139). The case of Oklahoma’s Academy of Seminole, a school started by an aerospace company CEO who did not believe young people were prepared for work, is offered as an argument for charters. It is unclear how this example supports anything, as the school was not open at the time this chapter was published (“it will open its doors in August 2018” [p. 141]). Even if this school were successful, it would not negate the overall lack of any empirical evidence that charters and competition with school districts have improved schools. For many years, the promise of charters was that students would perform better on standardized tests, and when that did not happen, the argument shifted to college readiness (Saltman, 2018) and college preparatory course enrollment, mentioned previously. Again, as a then-unopened school is the only argument for competition in

this chapter, it has not been made clear how charters will improve education any more than working to improve existing public schools will.

The second argument for charters made in this chapter is that they can be used as a “mechanism for local control” (p. 142). It should be noted that the previously described Academy of Seminole was very much not a mechanism of local control, as it was rejected by the local school board. The board’s decision was subsequently overruled, and the school was approved by the state (Willert, 2018). However, the issue of local control as it relates to school closure and consolidation is an important topic, and one that requires more space than the two pages provided in this book. The author notes that consolidation is a concern for rural communities and provides two examples of communities that have opened charters to try to maintain their local schools. The author also recognizes that “the path to sustain a rural charter school as a local community school is not an easy one, but it can allow a community to maintain a school as its center” (p. 143). It is a disservice to the overall book that this issue is not more deeply explored, as it would provide the strongest argument for charter schools in rural communities. The connection has been made between the closing of schools in small, rural communities and economic downturn and depopulation (Lyson, 2002). Consolidation has had mixed effects at best, and even positive benefits can be dubious as they are based in the market logic that good schools are efficient schools that aid in economic development (DeYoung & Howley, 1990). Existing rural charters can also provide a counterexample to the image of charters as for-profit, privatization schemes. Eppley (2017) notes that only 93% of rural charters are operated by community organizations, as opposed to management companies, and rural charters are not necessarily being created to introduce competition with public districts as the public school is generally being closed when the charter opens.

The author’s third argument is that charters can “increase autonomy” and “reduce the burden of compliance and reporting” (p. 143). Examples for autonomy are exemptions from state and federal guidelines regarding “staffing decisions, use of funds, and curriculum.” How these examples are hurting public rural schools is not explained, nor is how charters would provide an alternative to those requirements. The author is most likely referring to the “teachers unions’ and general government actors” (p. 59) discussed in chapter 4. As for reporting, it is also unclear from what rural charters would be exempt, as even the even the author writes, “charter schools are hardly free from reporting requirements, and burdens and compliance vary from state to state” (p. 144).

The author’s final argument for charters is that they can “specialize in ways district schools cannot” (p. 145).

The author explains that rural student populations can be facing such challenges as deep poverty, the preservation of tribal cultures, or seasonal migrations. Aside from already establishing that small communities cannot necessarily support multiple schools, a suggestion for specialized schools for specific populations is essentially resegregation of predominantly Latinx and Native students. This argument is not only lazy but also wildly irresponsible in its inability to understand what is actually being proposed. Aside from this highly problematic suggestion, the example provided as the pro-charter argument is a vocational school for adult students. Such a school is an important piece of the community, but it does not really fit an argument that is focused on K-12 education.

No Longer Forgotten does not provide any new or unique information and adds little to the field of rural education. Its purpose seems to be to provide basic background for school reformers looking to move into rural communities, but it does not even properly support its own purposes. Even its chapter on charter schools seems to come to the conclusions that there is no particular purpose they can serve, there is very little demand, and there is no reason to think they would be an improvement. Of course, improving education is not the real purpose here. *No Longer Forgotten* is an attempt to get “school reform” to take hold in rural places where it can then be more easily transferred to urban and suburban places—once rural communities push for policies that remove state barriers to and increase funding for privately operated charters. It is unfortunate that so much attention must be paid to such a poorly researched book, but given the support of the American Enterprise Institute and its partner organizations, the ideas within it are not going anywhere anytime soon.

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