



Preparing Rural Students for Success Beyond High School

North Carolina, Monday, February 15th – Wednesday, February 17th, 2010

Defining Rural Education

Due to the wide diversity of geographic settings, demographics, and financial resources that characterize rural communities, “rural schools” is an often ambiguous term. The Census Bureau, Office of Management and Budget, and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) developed a new education classification system in 2006 that divides schools into one of four general categories: city, suburban, town, or rural. Under the NCES classification system, a “rural” classification is awarded to a school based on the school’s physical proximity to an urbanized center. Rural schools are further subdivided into fringe, distant, and remote schools. The schools that fall under the classification of rural therefore encompass a variety of school settings which might include such diverse examples as small schools in affluent New England towns, large majority-Hispanic high schools in the American Southwest, and impoverished elementary schools in remote areas of Appalachia.

Rural Education in the United States

In recent years, a national focus on school reform in larger, urban school districts has overshadowed the importance of rural school districts to our country’s overall economic and educational prosperity. Yet our nation cannot overlook the needs and challenges of rural schools. Nationwide, nearly one-half of all operating school districts are in rural areas, and 10 million children—approximately one-fifth of the nation’s student population—attend a rural school.¹ Furthermore, rural school enrollment is accelerating, and in recent years, a time in which total school enrollment increased by a mere 1%, enrollment in rural districts increased by 15%.²

An educational report card for rural schools presents mixed results. Performance on the 2005 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) suggests that despite boasting higher test scores than urban school districts, rural schools continue to lag behind suburban school districts in 4th- and 8th-grade reading, mathematics, and science assessments. High school graduation rates mirror this trend with graduation rates for rural high schools (73%) situated slightly below suburban high schools (74%) and considerably higher than that of urban areas (59%).³ Yet despite a strong emphasis on high school graduation, most rural school districts lack the “college-going culture” that characterizes other localities, and consequently possess significantly lower college enrollment rates than both urban and suburban districts.⁴

¹ National Center for Education Statistics: <http://nces.ed.gov/PUBSEARCH/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2007040>

² Rural Schools and Community Trust: <http://files.ruraledu.org/wrm07/WRM07.pdf>

³ Alliance for Excellent Education: <http://www.all4ed.org/files/RuralHSReportChallengesOpps.pdf>

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Key Issues in Rural Education

The challenges facing rural school districts differ greatly from the challenges facing their urban and suburban counterparts. Though rural school districts possess high levels of parental and community involvement and lower student-teacher ratios, rural districts generally have fewer financial resources and possess a higher average poverty rate (21%) than urban school districts (18%).⁵ Due to limited financial resources, many rural school districts lack the means to confront both traditional education issues such as purchasing new textbooks or funding bus transportation, as well as new challenges such as providing services to the increasing number of English Language Learners and responding to requirements of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Smaller budgets also pose a problem for teacher recruitment and development as most rural school districts are unable to match the salaries and development opportunities offered to teachers in urban and suburban districts.

In addition to financial challenges, rural school districts generally serve a relatively small number of students and are geographically isolated and thus often lack the logistical ability to introduce specialized or technical programs that facilitate educational achievement at other school districts such as advanced mathematics or foreign language courses. Geographic isolation and low enrollment also implies that teachers may be required to teach more than one subject or grade level—a necessity that makes it more difficult for states to comply with NCLB's emphasis on having "highly qualified" teachers.

Many of the problems faced by rural schools have become even more pressing in the last few years. Due to budget shortfalls in 2008 and 2009, 28 states and the District of Columbia cut funding to K-12 schools, and additional cuts are proposed for 2010 and 2011 budgets. Traditionally, since rural areas generate less property tax revenue than urban districts and instead rely heavily upon state funding, rural schools have been disproportionately affected by state budget cuts. Additionally, since costs of transporting students is significantly greater in rural areas, higher fuel costs have further tightened state budgets by forcing rural school districts to shift funding from critical educational programs to transportation.

Rural Education in North Carolina

With almost 677,000 students enrolled in rural schools, North Carolina tops the nation in total rural school enrollment⁶ and struggles with many of the challenges mentioned above. An overwhelming 46% percent of its rural students live below the poverty line and only 66.5% graduate from high school. Furthermore, in recent years, North Carolina has struggled to recruit teachers to rural counties and has faced difficulties ensuring that all teachers—particularly those that teach multiple subject areas—are fully certified in compliance with NCLB.

To confront these roadblocks, North Carolina has incorporated new technology and innovative programs into a new state initiative entitled "Career & College: Ready, Set, Go!" The initiative, which begins by working to ensure all students can read, write, and understand basic math by third grade, continues through the high school level by emphasizing teacher recruitment and high educational standards. To complement this program, the state recently launched an eLearning initiative that provides online courses and resources ranging from the elementary to post-secondary level so that students have access to a strong education curriculum regardless of where they live.

In addition to electronic learning, North Carolina has also pioneered several innovative high school models designed specifically to promote career and college readiness. With the support from the Bill &

⁵ Alliance for Excellent Education: <http://www.all4ed.org/files/RuralHSReportChallengesOpps.pdf>

⁶ Rural Schools and Community Trust: http://files.ruraledu.org/wrm09/North_Carolina.pdf

Melinda Gates Foundation, North Carolina has opened more than 100 innovative high schools since 2003, including 96 early college high schools and 36 redesigned high schools oriented toward a specific subject such as technology or health science. Though data returns are limited, early data suggests that these innovative high schools are successful; on average, attendance at innovative high schools is 2 percent higher than the surrounding district, and the annual dropout rate is 2.8 percent—nearly half that of traditional North Carolina high schools.⁷

Warren New Tech High School

Warren New Tech High School (WNTHS) opened its doors to students in the fall of 2007 and is located about 15 miles south of the Virginia-North Carolina border in Warren County, North Carolina. Approximately 25% of children in Warren County live below the poverty line, and only 33.4% percent of students pass their End-of-Course (EOC) exams. Like many rural counties, Warren County has traditionally lacked the college-going culture prevalent in other locales; 32.5% of county residents have less than a high school diploma and only 11.6% of the county's residents possess a bachelor's degree or higher.⁸ WNTHS facilitates college and career readiness through the development of 21st century skills—a term used to describe skills needed to be successful in the modern workforce environment and a global economy such as critical thinking and technological literacy. In order to develop these skills, WNTHS places emphasis on Project Based Learning (PBL) and student-directed classes. WNTHS boasts a 1:1 student to computer ratio and ensures that every student has access to his or her own computer in each classroom.

Sampson Early College High School

Sampson Early College High School (SECHS) is located on the campus of Sampson Community College in Sampson County, North Carolina—an agricultural community about 70 miles southwest of Raleigh. In Sampson County, 21.5% of school children live below the poverty line and only 41.4% percent pass their EOC exams.⁹ Like Warren County, Sampson County lacks a strong college-going culture; 30.9% of county residents have less than a high school diploma and only 11.1% possess a bachelor's degree or higher.¹⁰ SECHS, which has a current enrollment of 190 students, places a heavy emphasis on creating a personalized learning environment and fostering student-teacher relationships. Students apply to the program in the fall of the eighth grade and enter the program as high school freshmen. The program lasts five years, and upon completion, a student graduates with both a high school diploma and either two years of transferable college credit or an associate's degree. In addition to the high school and college curriculum, students also have access to a variety of extracurricular activities and are required to complete a 50-hour internship and graduation project their senior year.

⁷The North Carolina New Schools Project: <http://newschoolsproject.org/page.php?p=5.0>

⁸ North Carolina Rural Economic Development Center: <http://ncruralcenter.org/databank/counties.asp>

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