

# Teacher Education for Rural Schooling – A Status Report

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This paper describes the results of a survey of 56 universities, from states with large rural populations, to assess their offerings of teacher training programs designed specifically around the needs of rural educators. While the responding schools acknowledged that large proportions of their graduates found employment in rural schools, the delivery of courses and programs does not always reflect that fact. Description of needs, implications, and suggestions for teacher training for rural settings are made.

Over the past ten years a rediscovery of rural life and rural education has occurred. This "rural renaissance" has been keyed to dissatisfaction with urban problems, rising urban and suburban property costs and the growth of industries in rural areas, among other things.

Even before this growth (as of 1975), however, more than fifteen million children were in non-metropolitan area schools. This was approximately one-third (32%) of all children in public schools in the United States.

Despite these figures the plight of rural teachers has been largely ignored. One-third of public school teachers (790,000) teach outside of a metropolitan area. There seems to be a need for teachers to be trained for rural areas as well as a need for expanded inservice for rural teachers and administrators. Unfortunately too little is known about such teacher training. A number of questions demand attention.

What attention is paid to the particular needs of rural teaching? Do teacher training institutions in rural states or rural areas attempt to provide rural experiences for their preservice teachers that are different from the general training? Are unique inservice vehicles utilized to meet the needs of practicing rural teachers?

In order to answer these general questions and to get a better picture of what teacher training institutions are doing in terms of rural education, a survey questionnaire was sent to 56 universities in states with large rural populations or with a large percentage of the population considered rural. In order to avoid the debilitating semanticism that surrounds the definition of the term "rural," the researcher used the Census Bureau's non-urban definition and supplemented it with his knowledge of the location of rural universities. The list of institutions and a copy of the complete questionnaire is available from the author. There was an attempt to use the questionnaire to determine which other institutions might be providing training for rural education so that a larger pool of institutions might be formed.

The questionnaire consisted of 11 questions, six related to preservice training, six to inservice. Forty-one questionnaires (73%) were returned and almost all answered all questions.

## Results

### *Preservice*

Only three of the training programs offered a course that dealt specifically with teaching students in rural areas. One institution offered a between terms, "Christmas in the Country" which was one to two weeks of living in a rural part of the state while schools were still in session. Another institution offered a field based seminar in rural education following student teaching. Neither of the aforementioned programs were required. One institution did require a seminar comparing teaching skills in urban schools to those in rural or small schools.

In contrast to the lack of courses on rural education, 17 of the 41 institutions offer what they consider components that deal with teaching in rural areas. The most frequent attention is within the context of foundations courses with introductory elementary education, methods courses or observation field experiences following.

A preservice practicum in a rural area away from campus is offered in 22 of the 39 programs, although most seem to be observational and involve only commuting from campus to rural schools on a daily basis. These experiences are coordinated generally by a director of field or clinical experiences. A number of schools have field site coordinators or supervisors to provide for a rural student teaching experience. Two universities reported having established Teaching Centers with districts in their states although only the University of Nebraska Center operates almost exclusively for preservice teachers.

Brigham Young University has developed, with a number of school districts, a cooperative venture in preservice/inservice education that involves removing the regular teachers and administrators from selected schools and replacing them for a one to five day period by student trainees. Similar models have been developed in Iowa, Kansas and Oregon.

At the David Thompson Center of the University of British Columbia a three month practicum is required in year three of a five year program. In addition, a two to six week practicum is required in the fourth year (certification is granted after year four). The practica are ar-

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ranged so that students may travel at school district cost to rural, northern school districts. There they also are taught three courses by a faculty associate in the northern locale in conjunction with the practica.

Of the 41 respondents, 10 (24%) reported that at least 50 percent of their graduates in teacher education found positions in predominantly rural areas, 24 (59%) reported 25 to 50 percent of their graduates found such positions, and seven (17%) reported less than 25 percent rural placements. Clearly there is a need for organized institutional focus on the nature of rural areas and rural education. It also should be noted that there seemed to be no relationship between the extent of program development in rural education and the percentage of preservice teachers who found positions in rural areas. It appears that some institutions have recognized a need and acted upon it while other institutions have not.

### *Inservice*

Of the 41 responding institutions, 26 have attempted to revise delivery systems of courses for practicing rural teachers. The most common "revision" has been the offering of courses off-campus through continuing education programs. Although this may be new to some institutions, it is not to many others. The major problem with such a delivery system is that it fails to provide professional fulfillment for many teachers since the courses offered may not be part of a regular graduate degree program.

A number of universities have tried to rectify that problem by offering an "extended" masters degree program to rural teachers. This "outreach program in field settings" idea has been attempted in some way by universities in Nevada, South Carolina, Alabama, Virginia, New York, Pennsylvania, North Dakota, Missouri and Kansas. The funding for at least two of these programs has come from the Teacher Corps. With the current cutbacks in support programs for education, it remains to be seen whether such programs can and do continue.

Seven institutions report they offer special inservice courses that are established to meet localized, identified needs. Two universities offer a "weekend college" for teachers and offer selective workshops for particular districts. A number of other variants include a state rural conference sponsored by the university, staff development centers established with a consortia of 20 school systems around the state, a teacher center program and the bringing of teachers to campus to take courses and talk to undergraduate classes.

The institutions were asked what had retarded or prevented the revision of the delivery systems and a number of reasons emerged. Most common was the belief that there was simply no need. Seven institutions reported enough teachers came to campus, and six reported "no need." The second reason was money; costs were deemed prohibitive by five respondents. Other answers included teachers have enough credits (N = 2), the Graduate School or Council won't approve an off campus degree (N = 2) and the faculty is not interested in other modes of delivery

(N = 1). Six institutions claimed that they were currently working on alternative modes of delivery.

Eleven of the 41 institutions offer a course (or courses) that deal with the development of a rural curriculum or a curriculum for rural schools. Ten of 40 have offered a course to rural school personnel that focuses on "grantsmanship." This latter need often has been identified as the greatest "lack" of rural schools. Of course, that identification was made when there were more federal funds for schools. Currently the knowledge of proposal writing may be less appropriate.

Numerous responses were received to a question of "what aspects of working with rural school people are most rewarding?" The most prevalent (paraphrased) were: (1) rural school people are grateful for the consideration that they get (N = 9); (2) rural school people have interest, desire, motivation and are open (N = 9); (3) rural school people know teachers and administrators well (N = 4); (4) rural school people want to improve their teaching (N = 3); and (5) rural school people are good people with high student expectations (N = 3).

The biggest drawbacks to working with rural school people are obviously time and distance. Thirteen respondents identified those directly and many other factors are really functions of those same features. The "problem" of money comes up as both a distance and time factor and by itself. A number of drawbacks really are related to lack of funds. These include limited options and resources, small faculties, lack of library and/or media resources. It is undeniable that spending more effort, time and money on rural schools is *not* cost efficient in relation to urban areas. No one can dispute that. What universities must recognize is the obligation of such institutions to meet the needs of as many educators as possible. It is hard to remove the cost effective factor from universities, particularly state supported ones with limited budgets and fiscally sensitive state legislators. These same legislators, however, do represent many rural districts. Universities may have to try to capitalize on that constituency through lobbying and education.

Even with cooperative districts and legislators, there are still faculty members to convince to get off campus and work with rural school staffs. A number of institutions recognized this problem. If school districts were sampled, they might see it as an even bigger problem.

### **Conclusions**

Despite the lack of one standardized model, many rural teacher training institutions are recognizing the uniqueness of teaching in rural areas. This is reflective of the state of rural education and rural areas generally; they are unique in quality. This feature has been seen by many writers as one of the strengths of rural education; it cannot be easily characterized. However, this same feature has led to difficulties in federal funding for rural projects.

It is encouraging to see cooperative teacher training efforts between universities and school districts. The movement toward state-wide block granting appears to be the best structure for continued improvement of teacher

education in rural areas.

Rural education and schools serve one-third of the nation's students and they deserve recognition and assistance. As one respondent noted, "rural people don't like attention because of their ruralness," that is akin to viewing animals at the zoo. Rather, rural schools have

positive features to offer educators generally and serving rural schools should be seen as mutualism, not symbiosis, in the biological sense. Teacher training for rural schools is occurring in many ways; there is room for more and that training should be attempted by more universities.