

Introduction: Implications of Recent Changes in Nonmetropolitan America

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Following the publication of the results of the 1980 census, a spate of articles and reports was published about the status of rural America. A number of these synthesized the economic, social, and political forces impacting nonmetropolitan areas, confirming that dramatic changes were occurring there (e.g., Bender et al., 1985; Jensen & Tienda, 1989; Lazere, Leonard, & Kravitz, 1989). Other articles attempted to draw out the implications of these changes (e.g., Brown & Deavers, 1987; Reid, 1989; Rosenfeld, Bergman, & Rubin, 1989; Stern, 1992). The publication of these works, as well as the think pieces that followed (e.g., Berry, 1986; Haas, 1990; Sample, 1989; Sher, 1988), served to alert the nation that more attention must be given to the condition of rural America. And, it would seem, this literature has informed and helped shape the national, state, and local policy responses apparent in the early years of the decade of the 1990s (e.g., Bhaerman & Van Sciver, 1994; Coe, Kannapel, & Lutz, 1991; Federal Interagency Committee on Education, 1991; McGranahan & Ghelfi, 1991).

Recently, the availability of 1990 census data has instigated the publication of a new set of analytical works reporting on the economic, social, and political trends that are likely to influence policy development for rural communities in this decade. It seems important that the rural education research community be cognizant of these trends as they establish priorities for rural education research that will inform public policy. As well, the rural school improvement community must be knowledgeable of these trends as they formulate plans for rural school improvement strategies intended to address the needs of rural schools and communities. The articles in this special issue of the *Journal of Research in Rural Education* are intended to inform the efforts of rural education researchers and practitioners as they carry on their important work.

The first article is by David McGranahan, who draws on data from the last two censuses to portray the socioeconomic trends that will impact rural schools and communi-

ties. His analysis concludes that it is likely that rural schools will experience additional stress from three sources: students' backgrounds, financial support, and the press for improved educational outcomes.

Daryl Hobbs, the author of the second article, stresses the changing demographic profile of nonmetropolitan America and the significance of those changes for researchers and practitioners. The differences between urban life and rural life today, he avers, are less noteworthy than the differences between rural life as it used to be and as it is now. Also, diversity seems to be increasing in rural America. It is incumbent on education planners to stay current with information on the demographic and economic trends that might impact their locales.

An analysis of political trends impacting on rural America is the subject of the third article, written by Paul Nachtigal. The disempowerment of rural people is the theme of this piece. Two stories are used to illustrate the factors that impact the political welfare of rural residents. Included are suggestions as to how alternative future scenarios could effect improvements in the political status of citizens living in rural America.

In the fourth article, Robert Stephens suggests that in addition to the economic, social, demographic, and political trends cited by the previous authors, rural researchers and practitioners will also need to keep their eye on major educational trends. The paper analyzes 14 major developments in education that have emerged since 1989. The analysis includes an estimate of the hypothesized impact of the developments on the overall institutional capacity of the major subsystems of rural school systems.

Finally, Robert Bhaerman and Steve Nelson each provide commentaries on the implications of the aforementioned trends. Bhaerman considers the implications of the trends for the success of the systemic reform movement in rural communities, concluding that for systemic reform to work in a rural context will require a broadening of our conception of the rural context and, ultimately, a frontal attack on the poverty that handicaps many rural communities. Nelson suggests that the four articles reinforce three "fundamental lessons": It is a mistake to think of rurality as a form of victimization; local rural public interest groups will have progressively less influence on rural outcomes; and new strategies and perspectives are needed for appreciating diversity.

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These articles represent a timely analysis of research on the economic, social, and political factors impacting rural schools and communities. This analysis updates an earlier one, *The Changing Context of Education in a Rural Setting* (Stephens, 1988). Presenting an analysis such as this every five years doubtless will provide important implications for both school research and school improvement in rural communities.

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