

A Rejoinder to Toni Haas' Reply

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Toni Haas' reply to our article, "Mandated Achievement in Rural Kentucky" (Kannapel, Coe, Aagaard, & Reeves, 1999), raises several issues that warrant thoughtful discussion among those of us studying school improvement efforts in rural places. In our article, we spoke frankly about the difficulties we faced trying to "ruralize" our study of systemic reform. Haas concurs with us that we are not yet where we need to be. Much of what we have focused on has been in response to questions that policymakers had about the implementation and effects of the Kentucky Education Reform Act of 1990. In the current phase of the project (1996-2000), we are gathering more information on community context, which we hope will more adequately enable us to contextualize the Kentucky reform effort.

We have some minor quibbles with Haas' critique before we turn to more important issues. While our study was strongly biased toward interviews with educators in the first 5 years (1991-1995), 16% of interviews conducted during that phase were with parents and community members—not less than 10%, as Haas asserts. That proportion has increased during the current phase of the study to about 30% (with another 20% conducted with students). In addition, Haas states that our findings are not unique to rural schools, yet she somewhat misstates two of our findings. Our point about school leadership was not simply that trusted leaders get more cooperation from teachers, but that a leader who was native to the community and behaved in ways compatible with local mores was more successful than an "outsider" principal—certainly an issue that is salient in rural schools. Also, we did not claim that OCES teachers embraced reform because it was more familiar to them, but because it seemed an appropriate antidote to what they perceived as their unique circumstances. The point here is that state—or nationally-imposed reforms need not be inappropriate for rural schools. The success of a reform depends, in part, on how well-suited it is to each community's needs.

Turning to more substantive concerns, we take issue with the narrow way that Haas has depicted rural schools and rural school improvement. She implies that only certain kinds of rural schools doing certain kinds of things can be considered rural schools engaged in true improvement efforts. She identifies indicators of "significant rural edu-

cation reform," including a "bicultural" education, reciprocity between schools and communities, the way schools see themselves as public institutions. We agree these are important issues, but not the only indicators of rural school improvement. If the Kentucky Education Reform Act were implemented as intended, it would certainly be a significant reform of rural (as well as urban) schools.

We also question Haas' conception of the rural school context. She states that unless one studies the context of the school—and that context is rural—it can't be a study of rural education. We agree the rural context must be studied, but the context of a rural school is not just local; it also includes state, national, and global factors. It is impossible to study rural schools or rural communities today without considering how they fit into the state, national, and international scene. Nor is the context of the rural school found only in the community. Rural schools are filled with rural people. Most of the teachers in our study schools are native to the area, and our conversations with them (which, by the way, have been about more than curricular reform issues) reveal that many of their values reflect those of the community. So, while we agree that our article does not consider all contextual factors, it does present many that are relevant to rural places.

Another issue Haas' reply raises is whether it is useful to draw such a sharp distinction between the needs of rural and urban schools. We share the concern of many rural advocates that rural communities and their schools are losing their distinctiveness as they become increasingly absorbed into a national and global economy and culture, but this is not just a rural issue. Loss of community identity and orientation is even more critical in urban areas where children are often bussed out of their neighborhoods, and where dual-income families result in deserted neighborhoods for most of the waking hours. Urban schools might (and some do) provide this missing sense of community, regardless of the attendance zones from which they draw students. All urban schools could benefit from the community orientation espoused by education specialists and researchers who have heretofore focused their attention on rural schools.

This leads us to our final point: There should be more public conversation between rural education proponents and national advocates of educational restructuring (currently known as "systemic reform"). The reality of the interconnectedness of rural schools with state and national systems

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makes this dialogue essential. Rural school improvement and systemic reform are not mutually exclusive. Many of the central goals of the systemic reform movement are quite compatible with rural school improvement, most notably those goals that relate to what happens in classrooms. These include holding high expectations for all students, teaching critical thinking and problem solving, integrating subject matter, and helping students apply what they learn to real-life situations. These sorts of goals are characteristic of rural school improvement efforts such as Foxfire, Rural Challenge projects, and many of the programs described in Nachtigal (1982).

One of the most significant ways that rural school improvement analysts could contribute to the reform discussion is to offer some substantive ideas about what it means to meaningfully engage schools with their communities. Systemic reformers recognize that parent and community support is essential to successful reform implementation, but they have not worked out logistically or philosophically how to establish reciprocal relationships between schools and communities that are mutually beneficial but that may result in a reshaping of the reform effort. In addition, the systemic reform movement could benefit from serious discussion about the need to teach children community orientations, not just the individual pursuit of high academic goals. Likewise, the rural school improvement

discussion must deal with such thorny issues as the downside to parent/community involvement in decision making. (Consider, for example, that tolerance of ethnic diversity might never become a goal in some rural communities without outside intervention.)

To conclude, we who are involved with and who study rural schools need to be part of the systemic reform discussion, and those advocating systemic reform need to be part of the discussion of rural school improvement. We recognize that this will not happen solely by studying systemic reform in rural places, but neither will it happen by perpetuating a rural/urban dichotomy that insists that school improvement in urban and rural places is necessarily incompatible.

References

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