

## Mandated Achievement in Rural Kentucky: Contrasting Responses

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*The Kentucky Education Reform Act of 1990 mandated that all schools in Kentucky demonstrate a high level of achievement within 20 years of the passage of the legislation. This article describes and discusses how local, within-school factors influenced the efforts to achieve those goals of two schools located in different parts of the state. In particular, we discuss the tension created by imposing generic reform measures on very different rural places.*

### Introduction

In the spring of 1990, the Kentucky General Assembly passed a massive piece of education reform legislation that reflected a national movement toward “systemic reform” (Murphy, 1990; Smith & O’Day, 1990). The AEL embarked immediately on a study of the impact of the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA), beginning with a three-month, baseline study in the fall of 1990 of reactions to KERA in six rural school districts. We then launched into a longitudinal, qualitative study of KERA in four rural districts located across the state. That study began in the spring of 1991 and is ongoing through 2000.

The major goal of the research is to provide timely feedback to policymakers about the impact of the reform legislation. A secondary goal, and one that has proven problematic, is to study the impact of school reform on rural schools. This goal has proven problematic because of the nature of schooling in the United States today. Over the past century, as schools became professionalized, centralized, and bureaucratized (Tyack, 1974; Tyack & Hansot, 1982; Tyack & Tobin, 1994), they came to look and behave very much alike regardless of locale. Moreover, control of what happens in schools became concentrated in the hands of professional educators and state policymakers. While many rural school teachers have roots in the local community, they have been schooled in rather generic approaches to education, and often have goals that are contradictory to those of rural parents. They view it as their responsibility to prepare students to participate in the larger society and economy, and may hold negative views of local value systems (DeYoung, 1995; DeYoung & Lawrence, 1995; Haller & Monk, 1988).

The generic quality of schools sometimes makes it difficult for education researchers to tease out ways in which community context makes individual schools unique. In Kentucky, local educators are responding to a reform effort that was not locally designed, and in which their accountability is to the state. In addition, the legislation laid out no significant role for parents or the community in the reform effort. Aspects of the law encouraged or even mandated parent involvement, but only in the context of enlisting parent involvement in helping implement the state reform. Because of these conditions, and because the primary goal of our research has been to inform state policymakers, most of our fieldwork over the past 8 years has been conducted inside schools with school professionals. This is not to say that we have been unaware of how the local context influences reform implementation. But that influence has been more subtle—and more complex—than we expected. The result has been that our study evolved more into a study of systemic reform in schools located in rural places than a study of rural schools per se.

In spite of the difficulties we have faced in trying to “ruralize” our study, we have come to appreciate the extent to which the local context has influenced the implementation of school reform, and how context affects student achievement.<sup>1</sup> In the following sections, we tell the story of two rural schools in culturally different areas of the state, and how local context figured into the reform effort and resulted in differential student achievement. Rather than offer a critique of the systemic reform movement, we present a description of and commentary on how this reform effort influenced two rural schools differentially, and how they influenced the reform.

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<sup>1</sup>For us, local context refers not only to community, but to the context of the local school itself. The local actors on whom we focus are educators, most of whom are members of the rural communities they serve.

### The Study

AEL's qualitative policy study of Kentucky reform focuses on four small, rural districts containing 20 schools: three county districts, representing the eastern, central, and western parts of the state; and a small independent district contained within the boundaries of a rural county district. (Pseudonyms are used below to maintain confidentiality.) For most of the study period, four researchers worked as a team, with each assigned responsibility for one of the study districts. Typically, we spent 2-3 days per month in each district conducting interviews, observing school functions and classroom instruction, and collecting relevant documents. Common, open-ended interview protocols were used to ensure comparability of information.

We gathered a massive amount of data from over 1000 interviews with state and local informants, including interviews with many of the same informants over time. During the 1991-1995 phase of the study, we interviewed approximately 200 school administrators, 250 teachers, 80 parents, 20 community members, and 60 students. In addition to interviews, to date we have conducted over 400 hours of classroom observation; observed over 250 school or district meetings; and attended in excess of 30 special school or community events. We also reviewed key documents, such as local newspapers, professional development plans, school council and school board minutes, school transformation plans, and test scores.

From 1990 through 1995, we focused on how all 20 schools in the four districts were putting certain aspects of KERA into place. From 1996 through 2000, we are examining the conditions under which KERA is affecting curriculum and instruction in ways that impact students. We have narrowed our focus to six of the 20 schools, and even more specifically to the class of 2006—a group of students who have had their entire schooling under KERA, and who completed fourth grade in 1997-1998.

### The Reform

KERA came about as the result of a lawsuit filed by 66 of the state's poorest school districts, virtually all of them rural. The suit charged that the state's system of financing public schools placed too much emphasis on local resources. The Kentucky Supreme Court ruled in the summer of 1989 that the entire state school system, not simply the finance formula, was unconstitutional, and ordered the state legislature to restructure entirely the state's system of public schooling by July 15, 1990 (*Rose v. Council for Better Educ.*, 1989).

The Kentucky legislative leadership formed the Task Force on Education Reform, which was divided into committees on governance, finance, and curriculum.<sup>2</sup> The cur-

riculum committee hired David Hornbeck, then with Hogan and Hartson (Washington, DC) but, at the time of this writing, superintendent of the Philadelphia schools. Under Hornbeck's guidance, the committee crafted a curriculum reform package that strongly reflected the national trend toward "systemic reform," in which it is believed that states ought to mandate high standards for all students and hold schools accountable for producing those results, but leave it to schools to determine how to achieve those goals (Murphy, 1990; Smith & O'Day, 1991). In keeping with this philosophy, KERA shifted the focus from teacher inputs to student results, gave schools autonomy to decide how to help students achieve reform goals that emphasized higher order skills (see Appendix for a list of those goals), but held them accountable for student performance as measured by a partially performance-based assessment instrument.

From 1991 through 1998, the assessment program was known as the Kentucky Instructional Results Information System (KIRIS). KIRIS has comprised writing and math portfolios, open-response questions, performance measures, and multiple-choice questions.<sup>3</sup> Until 1998, schools were expected to demonstrate a specified level of improvement on KIRIS from one biennium to the next in order to earn financial rewards or avoid sanctions, such as the firing or demotion of teaching staff and the option for students to transfer to "successful" schools. The 1998 legislature, however, ordered a re-working of the assessment and accountability program, renaming it the Commonwealth Accountability Testing System (CATS), which was underway at the time of this writing. The high stakes built into the law were intended to motivate massive change even in the most resistant schools, and, indeed, educators in the four study districts have consistently told us that fear of sanctions has motivated them to make most of the changes that have occurred in the study schools (Kannapel, Coe, Aagaard, & Moore, 1996).

To enable schools to determine their specific needs and make changes needed to reach their goals, KERA established school-based decision making (SBDM) councils to select principals and set policy in key areas. These councils consist of the principal (who serves as chair), three teachers elected by teachers at the school, and two parents elected by parents of enrolled students.<sup>4</sup> Recognizing that schools do not have control over all factors affecting student learning, the curriculum measures included a number

<sup>2</sup>We will focus on the curriculum portion of the reforms, because that has been the primary focus of our research throughout the study.

<sup>3</sup>The assessment format has changed over time and continues to be developed. Writing portfolios and open-response questions have been included throughout, but other formats have been introduced or removed for research and development.

of tools that schools may employ to help students overcome barriers to learning. These include preschool programs for at-risk and handicapped 4-year-olds; integrated services centers to help students overcome social, emotional, and physical barriers to learning; extended school services for students who need additional time to meet the mandated outcomes (e.g., extended school day, week, or year); and replacement of grades K-3 with an ungraded primary program designed to eliminate early school failure by allowing students to progress through the early years of schooling at their own rate.

### A Tale of Two Schools

Imagine an elementary school located on the edge of the seat of a rural county in Kentucky. The school, which serves about 500 students, draws students from both the town itself and nearby rural areas—not a homogeneous community. About 60% of the student body qualifies for free or reduced price lunch. Achievement scores on standardized tests have consistently been among the highest in the district. About the time KERA is passed, a new female principal comes to the school. She is experienced, dynamic, and an ardent believer in all the new opportunities embodied in KERA. She does her best to inspire the faculty to implement KERA faithfully, and the faculty—with some hesitation—makes the changes she asks of them. Initially, KERA mandates are implemented scrupulously. The school purchases many new materials; teachers spend numerous days away from their classes receiving expanded and enriched professional development. Over time, implementation of the new programs and processes becomes less scrupulous and better adapted to the needs of the school.

This brief description of KERA implementation applies equally well to two of the schools we have studied, one in eastern Kentucky and the other in central Kentucky. By the only objective measure of success under KERA—KIRIS scores—the outcomes of very similar responses to KERA were, in fact, very different. The two schools began

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<sup>4</sup>Schools may apply to the State Board of Education for an alternate structure or to have someone other than the principal serve as chair. Such alternate structures must, however, maintain one-third representation of parents.

<sup>5</sup>The Kentucky accountability index is a single number that combines information about student achievement on the state test with non-cognitive factors, such as rates of attendance and retention. The goal for all schools in the Commonwealth has been to achieve an index of 100 within 20 years.

<sup>6</sup>Kentucky's independent school districts are a throwback to school organization earlier in the 20th century, where schooling was generally offered in the larger towns. When county districts became the norm, many towns opted to retain their own "independent" district rather than be absorbed into the larger county district.

the testing program with remarkably similar scores: in the high 30s on the state accountability index.<sup>5</sup> After 6 years of reform implementation and testing, however, students at one school have demonstrated continuous, dramatic improvement in test scores to achieve an index of 63 by 1997-1998. The other school had inconsistent results—improved followed by declining scores—so that after 6 years, the school's index stood at 46.

We will argue that the differences in implementation and results for these two schools had to do with local factors that were very different. We will focus on three factors that were salient in how the schools responded to the reform, all of which were influenced by, if not rooted in, the local rural context: (a) the extent to which reform tenets had meaning for teachers, (b) the extent to which teachers identified with their students and believed in students' capabilities, and (c) the role that school leaders played in encouraging reform implementation.

These case studies reveal that key actors at one school viewed the reforms as providing many of the tools they needed to work with their student population, and they were led in reform implementation by a local, trusted principal. The other school had a more diverse faculty and student population, did not necessarily view the reforms as fitting their needs, and had difficulty uniting behind an "outsider" principal who encouraged the kinds of reforms about which they were uncertain.

### Orange County Elementary School

#### *Background*

Orange County is home to about 23,000 people in Appalachian eastern Kentucky. The Orange County economy was once based primarily on mining, and some residents still commute to other eastern Kentucky counties to participate in the mining industry, but all but a few small local mines have been exhausted. Currently the economy is based on a few very small industries, the school system, two area hospitals, and jobs in the county seat (mostly minimum wage). Small communities within the county range from an increasingly defunct coal mining community to isolated communities still engaged in small-scale farming. Public assistance rolls are high. In 1990, the per capita income for the county was about \$8,500; 29% of the population was below the poverty level, and about 49% of the population over the age of 16 was in the labor force (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1992).

Orange County contains two of Kentucky's 176 school districts, one county district and one independent district.<sup>6</sup> The independent school district serves about 900 students, the majority of whom reside in the county seat (population 4,300)—from which the district also draws its tax base. Because the county seat is a market town for the area, the

independent district has a richer economic base than does the county district. The Orange County school district is much larger and poorer than the independent district that it encircles. The district serves about 4,500 students in six elementary schools, one middle school, one high school, and one alternative school. Orange County Elementary School (OCES) is the most “urban” elementary school in the district by virtue of being located on the edge of the county seat. The school draws some students from the county seat area, as well as from several smaller communities. About 60% of OCES students qualify for free or reduced price lunch—one of the lowest rates in the district.

### *Local Factors Influencing Reform*

*Meaning of reform.* There is a widespread stereotype of Appalachia as a poverty-stricken area in which local politicians exert undue power through nepotism, patronage, graft, and other forms of corruption (DeYoung, 1991; Precourt, 1983). Ordinary citizens are viewed as having few options, and it is commonly believed that they do not value formal education (DeYoung, 1995). Nepotism, cronyism, and patronage in Kentucky’s mountain school districts were in the headlines during the development of KERA (Geiger, 1990; Kaukas, 1989), and much of the governance portion of the law was aimed at these practices.

When we began our study in 1990, we were told by central office administrators in Orange County that political corruption and infighting had once been rampant in the district, but that those days were over. They reported that the turning point came in the 1980s when the district was placed under state supervision. Since that time, Orange County educators have worked hard to change the district’s image, although factionalism still exists. The district and OCES instituted a number of “KERA-like” reforms prior to the law’s passage in an attempt to improve performance for the students, and also to escape the district’s image as the stereotype of an eastern Kentucky school district.

Partly due to this precedent, many Orange County educators perceived KERA as a unique opportunity to obtain additional funding and resources to continue on their path toward reform. In addition, they viewed many of the mandates as tools to help them advance their mission of upgrading the education and, consequently, the future prospects for their students. For instance, the massive increase in state funding enabled the very poor district to implement new instructional programs, purchase materials, and offer professional development to teachers—which it could not possibly afford otherwise. District leaders saw family resource and youth services centers as a unique opportunity to help low-income families in their area, and immediately applied for centers at all schools. The extended school and preschool programs were also seen as opportu-

nities to help disadvantaged youth overcome barriers to learning.

*Attitudes toward student capabilities.* OCES educators expressed the view that their mission is to help their students surpass the Appalachian stereotype. The entire faculty at OCES appears to have dedicated itself to the mission of proving that their students can achieve at high levels. The vast majority of OCES teachers are from the mountains themselves, and they appear to identify strongly with the youth they serve. One of the central tenets of KERA is that all students can achieve at high levels—a position that closely matches that of OCES. When asked directly in 1997-1998, the two OCES fourth-grade teachers each said they subscribed to this notion. One OCES teacher said, “Our motto here is that all children can learn, but you have to use a variety of teaching styles.” The other replied, “I think it is true. I think you must have high expectations for all kids.”

*School leadership.* Ms. Hamill was hired by the school board as OCES principal in 1990, shortly before KERA went into effect. An Orange County native, she had been an educator in the district for many years, first as a kindergarten teacher, later as an assistant principal, and most recently as principal of an outlying rural elementary school. She had earned a reputation for being innovative and energetic. At OCES, she inherited a generally forward-looking teaching staff, but not all of them were enthusiastic about research-based innovation. OCES was the only school in the district to implement a school-based decision making (SBDM) council at the outset of KERA, when SBDM was still optional.

Ms. Hamill’s management style was assertive and enthusiastic, in contrast to the laid-back style typical of most male administrators in the district. She believed in getting teachers involved in decision-making. Initially, teachers were wary of her leadership, suspecting that her friendliness masked a determination to do everything her own way. Over time, Ms. Hamill used the SBDM structure both to convince the teachers that she truly meant to share leadership with them and to build a structure of committees through which teachers could exert leadership. During a 1993 interview, an OCES teacher council member was asked who exerted the most influence on the council. She replied:

Teachers have the most. For some reason, the parents will listen to us, I think because we deal with the kids every day. We’re in a different capacity than what Ms. Hamill or the parents are. And there’s been times that we had to go into executive session and discuss things. You know, Ms. Hamill didn’t agree with the way we felt . . . But whatever the teachers say goes.

A few teachers resisted KERA innovations. One teacher resisted repeated efforts by Ms. Hamill to include her in a collegial relationship with other teachers in implementing the nongraded primary program. Eventually, Ms. Hamill and the SBDM council gave up their efforts to induce this teacher to change her instructional methods; Ms. Hamill observed philosophically that some parents wanted their children in traditional primary classrooms and valued the teacher's strict discipline.

### *Reform and Student Achievement*

The combination of effective leadership, belief in student capabilities, and subscription to the central tenets of KERA resulted in the development of a child-centered ethic at OCES in which the entire staff used the tools made available by the reform to help their students prove to themselves and the world that they could overcome "disadvantaged" backgrounds and meet high standards. OCES's approach appeared to pay off in terms of student results on the state assessment. At the beginning of KERA, OCES's baseline index of student achievement on KIRIS was 38.6, the second highest score in the district, and in line with the performance of elementary schools around the state. For the next three accountability cycles (2-year periods), OCES had the highest score in the district and also the highest rate of improvement during the first cycle. The school's index for 1997-1998 was about 63—which was the highest in the district. OCES students have also performed well on more traditional measures of student achievement. On the CTBS/5 in 1998, the Total NCE was 53 for third graders and 56 for sixth graders, the second highest scores in the district at these grade levels.

Other data on OCES also reveal positive outcomes for students. During the 1997-1998 school year, we interviewed the parents of six students (chosen by a stratified random selection) from the class of 2006. The parents were unified in their satisfaction with the education their children were receiving at OCES. The general perception was that fourth grade work was more advanced now than it was before KERA, and that if the OCES teachers believed a student could meet the expectation they would push the student to be sure the work was accomplished. Parents indicated this pressure was applied in a very caring manner, noting that the principal and teachers loved the students and seemed genuinely concerned about them. One parent remarked approvingly that OCES teachers did not treat poor children any differently from more affluent students. Two of these families told us they *chose* OCES rather than the nearby independent elementary school as the better one for their children.

### Vanderbilt County Elementary School

#### *Background*

Vanderbilt County is a rural county of about 10,000 people located within an easy commute of two major urban centers. The county is on the edge of the Bluegrass region of the state, which is known for its history, rich farmland, bourbon, and thoroughbred horses. Vanderbilt County is not one of the wealthier rural counties in this part of the state today, but a recent history published by the county historical society indicates that the county was once part of antebellum plantation society in Kentucky. The local history attributes the decline of the gentrified life in Vanderbilt County to the emancipation of slaves, which moved "the entire economy toward a more subsistence level."<sup>7</sup>

Small family farming took hold after this time, with tobacco moving to the forefront in the early 20th century. Major sources of agricultural income today are tobacco, beef and dairy cattle. In 1990, the per capita income for the county was about \$9,600; 19% of the population had incomes below the poverty level, and about 61% of the population over the age of 16 was in the labor force. Vanderbilt County has the only substantial minority population in any of the study districts; about 10% of the total population is African-American (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1992).

Vanderbilt County is a stable rural community strongly committed to traditional family, community, and religious values; yet it is somewhat more diverse than many rural counties in Kentucky. In addition to the African-American population, there is a large Catholic population in the county. The county's lovely rolling hills and fertile farmland have recently attracted a small Amish population, along with several members of the Jehovah's Witness faith. Because of this religious diversity, about 15% of the county's school-age children attends parochial, Amish, or home schools.

The district currently serves about 1,700 students in four elementary schools, one junior/senior high school, and one alternative school. Vanderbilt County Elementary School (VCES) is the most "urban" elementary school in the district, located adjacent to the junior/senior high on the outskirts of the county seat. Because the African-American population in the county is concentrated in the county seat, about one-fourth of VCES students are African-American. About 60% of VCES students are on free/reduced lunch (50% of white students, 70% of African-American students). The school was constructed in 1973 on the open-concept model—but walls have since been erected in the building.

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<sup>7</sup>Specific title of this source is not provided in order to maintain the district's anonymity.

### *Local Factors Influencing Reform*

*Meaning of reform and school leadership.* Because leadership and the meaning that the reform had for teachers are so intricately connected at VCES, these two themes will be discussed in tandem. Prior to KERA, Vanderbilt County schools were reportedly quite traditional in their approaches to curriculum and instruction, but more progressive in management and decision-making practices. The long-time superintendent had established a highly collegial style of leadership, including all the principals in district decision making. Most principals followed his lead and included teachers in decision making at the school level. Thus, when KERA required SBDM, the central office urged all schools to implement SBDM at the outset on the rationale that no great change would be required. All but the smallest school in the district did so.

In addition, the district prided itself on its congeniality and willingness to try new practices. When KERA passed, central office staff and most building principals urged teachers to implement new curriculum and instructional strategies, and provided ample materials and professional development to enable them to do so. The impetus for this action appeared to be that the state required it, and district leaders as well as teachers believed in making a good faith effort to implement the reforms.

There did not appear to be a strong-felt need to change what was happening in schools, and district leaders adopted a "hands-off" approach to KERA implementation. That is, they provided the supports for teachers to make changes, but left it to the individual schools to decide what sort of changes to make. At the school level, teacher attitudes generally reflected those of the district leadership. That is, they were enthusiastic about trying new approaches and willing to make a good faith effort to implement the new law.

VCES had reportedly been one of the most traditional schools in the district prior to KERA. The principal who was in place at VCES when KERA passed was reportedly somewhat autocratic, and supported a traditional, basic skills curriculum. On standardized tests, the school had always scored among the highest in the county. This principal opposed many provisions of KERA, and resigned at the close of the 1990-1991 school year. The first official action of the newly formed SBDM council was to hire Ms. Smith as principal in the summer of 1991. Her hiring was noteworthy not only because she was the first principal hired by a council under KERA in Vanderbilt County, but because she did not reside in the county and was selected over local applicants.

VCES teachers, in retrospective interviews, reported that VCES faculty always lacked cohesion, even before KERA and the arrival of Ms. Smith. While some teachers at the school supported KERA-like reforms, others were

more skeptical, especially given their past success with a more traditional approach. The nearly simultaneous arrival of a major reform effort and a very different instructional leader likely heightened existing tensions. Ms. Smith, however, strongly supported the concepts embedded in KERA. Early reports from teachers were mostly complimentary; they knew they had to implement this reform, and they appreciated the new principal's energy and enthusiasm in seeking resources for them to get the training they needed to do so.

As she helped teachers obtain the training they needed, however, many teachers felt that Ms. Smith also began to pressure them to change their instructional practices in ways that were compatible with KERA. At first, teachers tried to accommodate her requests because they assumed the changes were necessary to reach the assessment goals set by the state. Yet, the new approaches were not compatible with many teachers' belief systems, and they found themselves implementing strategies that did not make sense to them. In addition, teachers increasingly resented the lack of autonomy to decide how to assimilate the reforms with their own beliefs and practices. The problem was exacerbated by the principal's personal style, which was more formal than was common in this area.

As teachers grew increasingly resentful of a reform that required a great deal of extra time and effort on their part, they directed much of their frustration at the principal who supported these reforms, and who seemed to have an endless supply of time and energy for implementing them. Many teachers could not understand how Ms. Smith, who, like many of them, had young children at home, could devote so much time to her job—and expect the same of them. Ms. Smith was given the sometimes not-so-subtle message that family and church were considered more important locally than any vocation. Ms. Smith, herself, expressed frustration that it was difficult to adequately plan for and implement all aspects of KERA when so many teachers had to leave immediately after school to fulfill personal or family obligations:

I can't get anybody on my instructional leadership committee to go to a single meeting after school to learn new things. "Ms. Smith, I've got children at home. Now I know you've got children, too. You've made your decision, but I'm not going to sign my life away to KERA." What do you do? . . . It is almost a sin if you don't go home to your family at 3:10. You are not a good person. That is a real strong feeling here . . . But I think you ought to have some kind of balance. I'm perceived as not having a balance at all. But I like to do my job, and if that means I have to stay until 5:00, I have to stay until 5:00.

The downward spiral in school morale was intensified when the school's KIRIS scores were released at the end of the first biennium. All of the other district elementary schools—small, outlying rural schools—had achieved rewards under KERA's accountability system. VCES improved its scores, but did not meet the goal set by the state. Worse, the more rural schools had earned rewards without making as many substantial changes in instruction as VCES. Many teachers at VCES and throughout the district interpreted this as a sign that VCES had gone too far in throwing out tried-and-true methods. Here is where the combination of lack of identification with both reform tenets and with the school leadership combined to disrupt the effort to implement KERA. Teachers who had tried to follow the principal's direction in reform implementation began to question this course. VCES teachers became more vocal about their dissatisfaction with what was happening at the school.

After the release of those first biennium KIRIS scores, Ms. Smith began to give teachers more freedom to find approaches with which they were comfortable. In reacting to an early draft of this paper, Ms. Smith read the above quote and commented that she felt she had changed since she made those remarks. She acknowledged that she had tried too hard to prove herself as a new principal in the early years, but that she now realizes that teachers must adopt approaches with which they are comfortable. She is still trying to urge them toward innovation, but is now giving them freer reign in the classroom.

*Attitudes toward student capabilities.* The attitude of VCES teachers toward their students' capabilities is more subtle than at OCES. VCES teachers clearly work hard to help their students achieve, but there is an underlying tension created by feelings of doubt that all of their students are capable of success. We asked teachers repeatedly to explain their reaction to the assertion that "All can learn at high levels." We could not uncover a single teacher who subscribed wholeheartedly to this philosophy. Some teachers did agree that expectations for students should be raised, but many added that family background or innate abilities would interfere with students' abilities to achieve at high levels. One teacher commented:

Due to cultural background or environmental background, some will not achieve at a high level. We can't change what happens outside our building. Many times we are working against an environment. It is like working against a brick wall.

Another teacher expressed greater concern for disadvantaged students' emotional and physical health than for their academic achievement, commenting that she was more concerned about helping children feel good about themselves than getting them to the "proficient" level.

In this respect, VCES teachers echo a refrain described by Wasley, Hampel, and Clark (1997), in which teachers of disadvantaged students tend to emphasize emotional caring over academic expectations because of the "baggage" students bring to school. VCES teachers certainly work hard with their students and want them to do well, but there is not the same kind of individual analysis of student needs, nor commitment to high achievement for all, that we witnessed at OCES. In fact, when VCES was compared with other schools in the district that performed better on KIRIS, many VCES teachers protested the comparison on the grounds that the outlying schools serve a more homogeneous and less deprived student population than VCES.

It is possible that the racial composition of the school is a factor here. Nearly one-fourth of VCES students are African-American, and these students, as a group, are poorer and have performed more poorly on both the KIRIS and standardized tests than have white children. Yet, until recently, issues of race were seldom discussed openly at the school. Ms. Smith reported upon reading an early draft of this paper that the 1997-1998 school transformation plan addressed underachievement of African-American students. She acknowledged, however, that this was the first time the school had dealt with the issue forthrightly. There are no African-American teachers at VCES (and just one in the entire district at last report); it is likely that the all-white teaching staff does not identify as closely with their minority students as do OCES teachers with their Appalachian population.

#### *Reform and Student Achievement*

VCES was hampered in its reform effort from the start by the lack of a strongly felt need for reform, even though many teachers supported the KERA initiatives. Teachers were never able to constitute a unified vision of what they wanted for their school. Ms. Smith tried to get the faculty moving in a common direction—toward KERA implementation—but she was hindered by existing philosophical differences among teachers, and an interpersonal style that was not well accepted in the local culture. In addition, the faculty has not seemed convinced that its student body is, as a whole, capable of achieving at high levels. Many curricular and instructional changes did occur, but they were often reactive. Changes did not represent a coherent faculty ethos, much less adherence to the KERA vision.

Given this state of affairs, it is hardly surprising that achievement of VCES students has not consistently met expectations—although KIRIS scores have improved. VCES 4<sup>th</sup> graders set a baseline score in 1991-1992 of 36.7, which was the second highest among elementary schools in the district. The school improved in the first biennium of accountability, but fell short of its goal, and attained the lowest absolute score in the district. Scores improved sub-

stantially in the second biennium with a score of 51.6—the highest fourth grade score in the district, and the highest rate of improvement, which earned the school reward money. Scores in the third biennium did not meet expectations, declining to about 46. CTBS/5 scores in 1998 were about 49 for third graders and 43 for sixth graders.

Despite disappointing performance on state and national tests, parents of VCES students were nearly as positive about their school as OCES parents. The eight parents interviewed in 1997-1998 expressed overall satisfaction with the school and with the education their children were receiving. When asked if their children had learned as much as expected, six parents said they had learned as much or more than expected. The two parents who responded differently had children with learning disabilities, but even these parents expressed a high level of satisfaction with the school and the teachers. They felt their children were given the extra attention they needed.

#### Discussion

The preceding sections have illustrated the influence local conditions can exert on a statewide school reform. Although both OCES and VCES are Kentucky county districts, they are in dissimilar rural societies, and the teachers who teach in the two schools are, by and large, long-standing members of those rural societies. Local variations have made all the difference in whether the provisions of KERA held meaning for and were adopted by local schools. As mentioned previously, many of the resources and programs embodied in KERA matched OCES educators' perceptions of what their school needed. The district as a whole was already making substantial changes in the way it operated, perhaps in response to state intervention in the 1980s. KERA provided much needed financial resources, along with several programs tailor-made for the disadvantaged students in the OCES attendance area, such as preschools and family resource centers.

In addition, OCES educators' attitudes toward formal education closely matches that found by DeYoung (1995) and Seal and Harmon (1995) in other Appalachian communities. They believe it is part of their mission to make up for disadvantages students experienced at home, and to educate them for success in the larger American or even global society. Moreover, they do not view students' backgrounds as excuses for underachievement. Because KERA is very much directed toward preparing students for the global society, OCES educators—under the leadership of a trusted, energetic, and local principal—perceived the reforms as a tool in their mission, and they took full advantage of it. This is not to say that OCES teachers have adopted everything contained in KERA. To the contrary, there has been some backing away from KERA-like practices in recent years. But generally, the school is committed to the

central tenets of the reform, particularly the notion that schools must help all students achieve at high levels, and that it takes diverse approaches to instruction to accomplish this aim. The school's high rate of student achievement is, we believe, strongly connected to this unified commitment.

In contrast, the Vanderbilt County economic scene has been dominated by farmers and wage earners for many years. This population has not pushed for strong pre-university preparation for its student body. They have tended to approve the kind of basic education traditionally provided, an approval that educators value and with which they are comfortable. The community and the school district has also earned a reputation for congeniality, so average citizens and even teachers are reluctant to disrupt a process that seemed to work well for the majority of students. The virtually complete silence on the issue of underachievement by African-American students may be indicative of many things, but it appears to indicate that, until quite recently at least, the school did not recognize this as an area in need of attention. Thus, there was no strong impetus to make major changes in curriculum and instruction, other than the fact that the state required it and the principal pushed it.

VCES educators were willing to give KERA a try, but they lacked a strongly felt need, and commitment to its central tenets. When poor KIRIS scores convinced them that they were not helping their students attain educational goals, they quickly retreated from KERA, and interpersonal relations at the school took a turn for the worse. Not surprisingly, in an uncertain climate such as this one—and where there was not a school-wide culture of upholding high expectations for students—student achievement did not measure up to KERA goals.

What lessons may educators, be they systemic reformers or academics concerned for rural schools and communities, take from this tale of two schools? For systemic reformers, there is clearly a message that humans cannot be manipulated to behave in ways that do not match their own belief systems—although they may well feign such belief for a time. As Noble and Smith (1994) observe, there is great irony in deploying a behaviorist technology (rewards and sanctions) to induce teachers to employ a constructivist ideology in their classrooms. Clearly, the OCES teachers were able to associate KERA provisions with their own previous experience and understandings, and were able to help their students achieve better. VCES teachers did not attach the same kind of meanings to the reform. Their compliance was superficial, and lacking commitment to KERA tenets, they were arguably unable to address KERA's goals effectively.

These cases suggest a question often raised by rural education scholars: Is it really appropriate to impose generic, national reforms on all schools? Clearly, problems

are created when reforms are imposed from above. Yet, it is difficult to take issue with the goal of helping all students achieve high standards, particularly when the standards are aimed at such goals as teaching students to think critically and creatively, and to apply their knowledge to real-life situations. These sorts of goals need not be incompatible with rural school improvement efforts that are more oriented toward the community.

KERA is clearly a reform effort that was modeled on national, "expert" views of what all schools ought to look like (Kannapel, 1991). While many aspects of the governance and finance portions of KERA were tailored to Kentucky's needs, the curriculum measures that we have considered in this paper were more generic in nature. Yet, this does not mean that these reforms should be dismissed as having no application to rural schools. Indeed, we would argue that many of the central tenets of the reform do have meaning in some rural places, as illustrated by the OCES case.

Some rural scholars might find OCES teachers' enthusiasm for the reforms irritating in its demonstration of "cosmopolitan commitments" (Howley, 1997), such as a desire to increase student aspirations, overcome the disadvantages of students' backgrounds, and implement "best practice." Clearly, the goal for OCES teachers was to elevate students beyond their backgrounds, to serve as a "cultural bridge" to the larger society (DeYoung, 1995) or, as Theobald (1997, p. 2) describes it, equip children "with the factual knowledge needed by future employers, the global economy or the Educational Testing Service" (or in this case, KIRIS). Yet, one should not assume that OCES teachers' aspirations for students are necessarily disconnected from strengthening the community. Most of the teachers are themselves natives of this area, and have returned to it for employment and to raise their children.

Perhaps the major issue we raise is whether it is possible or prudent to induce all schools, whether urban, suburban, or rural, to adopt certain tenets of a systemic reform movement that are purported to be crucial to the welfare of the nation. Central among these tenets is the need to improve learning for all students. At the same time, it is important to preserve the uniqueness of rural schools, and to incorporate both community-building and nation-building orientations into the schooling process. An important task for researchers and education reformers involved in rural and urban schools is to wrestle with the question of how to marry the systemic reform movement with rural concerns.

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Appendix  
KERA Goals

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KERA removed all previous curriculum mandates and adopted instead a list of goals that schools are expected to achieve:

- (a) Schools shall expect a high level of achievement of all students.
- (b) Schools shall develop their students' ability to:
  - 1. Use basic communication and mathematics skills for purposes and situations they will encounter throughout their lives;
  - 2. Apply core concepts and principles from mathematics, the sciences, the arts, the humanities, social studies, and practical living studies to situations they will encounter throughout their lives;
  - 3. Become a self-sufficient individual;
  - 4. Become responsible members of a family, work group, or community, including demonstrating effectiveness in community service;
  - 5. Think and solve problems in school situations and in a variety of situations they will encounter in life; and
  - 6. Connect and integrate experiences and new knowledge from all subject matter fields with what they have previously learned and build on past learning experiences to acquire new information through various media sources.
- (c) Schools shall increase their students' rate of school attendance.
- (d) Schools shall reduce their students' dropout and retention rates.
- (e) Schools shall reduce physical and mental health barriers to learning.
- (f) Schools shall be measured on the proportion of students who make a successful transition to work, post-secondary education, and the military (Kentucky Department of Education, 1994, p. 274).