

Taking the Road Less Traveled: A Reply to Edmondson and Shannon

Michael Arnold

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Rural education scholars have an important decision to make each time they write for publication. As in Robert Frost's poem *Road Less Traveled*, the decision lies in choosing between two roads that lead in different directions. The first road has been well traveled by rural education scholars. It is a road of biased advocacy, along which scholars devote their energies to proving that small schools are essentially good and that preserving them is pedagogically and economically sound. Although these scholars are well intentioned, their biases lead them to ignore facts and research evidence that contradict their personal views.

The second road is directed toward a critical examination of rural school quality. It is the one traveled less frequently by rural education scholars. Those who travel this path have accepted the values of the scientific community. They believe in the importance of accounting for and minimizing biases that might influence the research process, of the preeminence of evidence, and of "disciplined, creative, and open-minded thinking" (National Research Council, 2002, p. 53). They also believe in posing important research questions and investigating them using sound research designs that best answer those questions. The recommendations to improve education research put forth by the National Research Council (2002) and Grover Whitehurst (2002), Director of the Institute of Education Sciences, come as no surprise to those who travel this road.

The intent and timeliness of "Reading First Initiative in Rural Pennsylvania Schools" (Edmondson & Shannon, 2003) are good. There is much conversation about the effects that *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) will have on rural schools, but there is little in the way of hard data upon which to draw sound conclusions. This article would have been a step toward providing those data if the authors had chosen to take the road less traveled.

The manuscript begins with Shelley's claim that "they're setting us up." This statement is commonly heard among educators in rural and nonrural contexts. The evidence offered to support this claim is that Shelley's district did not receive a Reading First grant from the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE). The authors describe

what appears to be a tale of injustice perpetrated on a poor rural school district that was punished for not succumbing to the will of the state and federal governments. A closer look at the situation throws serious doubt on the validity of Shelley's contention of being set up for failure, at least in the context of the Reading First grant application process. Most troubling is that the authors appear to be more interested in furthering a political agenda than in discovering what is really going on with the Reading First grants in Pennsylvania's rural schools.

To support their argument, Edmondson and Shannon identify "two substantial issues" in Shelley's claim that her district was being "set up." The first issue is the Reading First application process that was developed and implemented by the PDE and approved by the United States Department of Education. The problem, as outlined in the article, is that Shelley's district submitted a grant proposal that was not funded. She believed that it was not funded because the district proposed a reading program, the Ohio State Literacy Framework, that was not sanctioned by the federal and state governments. Edmondson and Shannon are clearly dismayed that the state would not accept this program even though the district believed that it met the criterion of being scientifically based.

We cannot determine the validity of Edmondson and Shannon's claim that "in effect, the state told Shelley that her district's reading program was too artistic, too labor intensive to be scientific." They do not provide any information about the research base of the Ohio State Literacy Framework, the rubric used to score proposals, or the 15-point list of recommended revisions from the PDE. Information on the Ohio State Literacy Framework is available online (<http://www.lcosu.org/>), including a document expressly for the purpose of providing language that districts can use to write a successful proposal for federal funding (Literacy Collaborative at Ohio State, n.d.). The authors could have checked if any other districts had proposed using the Ohio State Literacy Framework to see if they had similar experiences with their proposal.

It also would have been helpful if the authors had described the scoring rubrics used to evaluate the proposal to provide a sense of potential problem areas. There were 20 items in the scoring rubric (PDE, 2003), any one of which could have made the difference between a successful and

unsuccessful proposal. One weakness of the proposal suggested in Edmondson and Shannon is that Shelley's district proposed to fund "professional advisors to identify existing gaps in their current approach." To receive a rating of "Meets Standards" on the first PDE criterion, the proposal had to "identify gaps in current initiatives and programmatic needs related to scientifically-based reading research." In essence, the district is admitting that it did not identify gaps in its reading program and, as a result, their proposal should receive the rating *Does Not Meet Standard*.

The 15-point list of recommended revisions provided by the state suggests that there were a number of problems with the proposal. What were those 15 points? We don't know, because Edmondson and Shannon did not report them. The authors give us four state guidelines, noting that "Shelley thought that her original proposal had met those guidelines." Since almost everyone that submits a proposal believes they have met proposal guidelines, the authors could have made a stronger case for Shelley's claim if she, in fact, had succeeded in this regard.

However, the authors do report a significant problem: Shelley's district did not receive adequate support for revising her district's proposal at the state capitol meeting. One can easily imagine the frustration of not getting help from the person who is supposed to be assisting you. I am reminded of a former state department of education employee (not from Pennsylvania) who told me that people at the department did not worry about the small rural schools because these educators presumably would figure things out on their own. It is precisely the small rural districts that need help because they often lack the specialized staff to help prepare grant proposals. Edmondson and Shannon could have provided useful insight into the level of technical assistance made available to rural districts by contacting other districts to determine if Shelley's experience was common or anomalous. They could have also contacted the district's assigned Reading First technical support advisor to determine why he was not able to provide more assistance. Perhaps he was assigned a large number of districts to work with or maybe Shelley misunderstood the level of assistance that was available. It would have also been helpful to know about the structure of the 3-day meeting with the Pennsylvania Reading First staff to understand what technical assistance was provided at the meeting.

Shelley's second issue is the "movement to privatize public schools" in NCLB as it plays out in her district. Edmondson and Shannon make some good points about the accountability steps prescribed in NCLB. Their sentiments have been echoed in many venues, but the authors fail to provide a convincing argument that the steps will be harmful to students and the community. Indeed, some of the authors' assertions sound nice but are of little substance. What does it mean that "notification of school failure [that

the school is in 'school improvement'] is a rhetorical act that undercuts the school's authority within a community"? What authority is being undercut—the authority to withhold information on how well children are doing in school? There's no evidence that student learning improves when the school withholds information.

So what's going on here? We know that Shelley's district did not receive a Reading First grant in the first round of awards and that she feels her district is being set up. A visit to the Reading First section of the PDE web site (<http://www.pde.state.pa.us/>) provides additional information that Edmondson and Shannon could have included in the article. Of the 43 districts eligible for Reading First grants in Pennsylvania, 28% (12 districts) were rural (having locale codes of "7" or "8"). Only seven districts received funding in the first round of grants. Of those, two districts (29%) were rural and had considerably smaller enrollments than the 5,000 students in Shelley's district. In the second round of Reading First grants, 21 sites received grants; four (19%) were rural. Given that a lower percentage of rural school districts were successful in the second round, we might wonder whether rural schools were put at a disadvantage. A report on the experiences of other rural Pennsylvania schools may have provided greater insight into the funding decisions. We also do not know whether Shelley's district was successful in the second round of grant awards.

Edmondson and Shannon also overlook the importance of substantiating Shelley's claims with the Reading First staff at the PDE. Instead, they rely almost exclusively on Shelley's comments and perceptions. There are many resources available online that the authors could have easily accessed to support Shelley's assertions and provide details about Pennsylvania's Reading First program and the Ohio State Literacy Framework.

It is commonly acknowledged that NCLB is a reform program that creates unique challenges when applied to rural contexts. This is one of the reasons why Senator Mike Enzi (R-Wyoming) founded the Senate Rural Education Caucus and why a similar caucus has been formed in the U.S. House of Representatives. The Edmondson and Shannon article could have been an important contribution toward increasing our knowledge about what works and doesn't work, leading us to seek solutions that fit the rural context. Unfortunately, it is one in a long line of essays that plays to the emotions and fails to improve our understanding of school reform in rural schools. Indeed, it could actually harm rural schools in the long run by directing attention away from real problems and inequities.

Edmondson and Shannon may have actually identified significant issues related to rural schools and NCLB. But because they have not substantiated their claims, their argument is weakened. This article doubtlessly will be embraced by many rural education advocates, but they are not the ones who should pay more attention to rural schools

and communities. How do we get information and knowledge to those who need convincing? Robert Frost points the way: "Two roads diverged in a wood; And I took the one less traveled by; And that has made all the difference."

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