

A Special Collection: Student Performance and Work-Based Learning

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Despite evidence to the contrary, perceptions persist that rural America is marked by small and ineffective school systems, a place that falls short in its ability to adequately prepare students for college, and lacks supportive family and community environments for promoting educational success. These perceptions, often rooted in popular images of rural areas, are incongruent with the substantive improvements that much of rural America has witnessed over the course of the last few decades. For example:

- The number of nonmetro residents with a college education has tripled since 1960, a rate of growth that matches that of metro-based adults. (Gibbs, 2003a)
- Adults completing some college education increased from 7% to nearly 26% between 1960 and 2000 in rural America. (Gibbs, 2003a)
- Rural areas of the U.S. are currently retaining and capturing a larger pool of educated adults, and estimates are that this trend will continue over the course of the next several years. (Gibbs, 2003b)
- Performance of nonmetro students on state or national standardized exams have been on par or surpassed those of metro students, despite the fact that metro schools often have greater fiscal resources and more advanced course offerings. (Gibbs, Swaim, & Teixeira, 1998)
- Smaller-sized schools—commonplace in many rural areas—spur greater involvement of parents, community residents, and local institutions in the very life of the school (Eco-

nomics Research Service, 2003). At the same time, they facilitate expanded engagement of students in school-related programs and activities that contribute to lower high school dropout rates. (Howley & Eckman, 1997; Nathan & Febey, 2001)

These statistics are not recited to distract the reader from the serious educational challenges that persist in select nonmetro areas of the U.S.—such as the depressed educational progress of children embedded in high poverty counties of the South and Southwest (Whitener, 2005). Rather, they are intended to counter and correct a pervasively gloomy view of rural education and its relationship to economic and social conditions. A growing number of social science researchers, education specialists, and policy advocates have come to realize that it is possible (even necessary!) to view contemporary problems in rural education through the lens of long-standing rural socioeconomic dilemmas—such as the historical link between low human capital and low demand for skills among rural employers—without succumbing to the temptation to assume rural educational inferiority.

While rural distinctiveness in this regard has been the focus of research by individual scholars over the past several years, there have been few opportunities for recognized rural education researchers and policy analysts to bring their collective attention to bear on the current health of education in rural America. The four articles included in this special collection of the *Journal of Research in Rural Education* have their roots in a national research symposium hosted by the Economic Research Service, the Southern Rural Development Center, and the Rural School and Community Trust in 2003 entitled, “Promoting the Economic and Social Vitality of Rural America: The Role of Education.” That gathering of about 45 individuals engaged in applied research, practice, and policy analysis led to 2 days of focused discussion and debate on the state of rural education. Four overarching themes served as the focal point for the research papers commissioned for this important gathering: (a) achievement in rural schools; (b) rural schools, communities, and at-risk

populations; (c) schools and local community impacts; and (d) education and the labor markets in rural communities. The articles showcased in this issue of *JRRE*, based on four of the original conference presentations, are representative of the issues explored at the conference and, we believe, are best aligned with the interests of this important education journal.

Without question, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) has generated considerable debate and concern on the part of education leaders since its implementation. Three of the articles included in this issue devote in-depth attention to issues that have direct bearing on the progress that schools and students across the U.S. are expected to make under NCLB guidelines.

In his study of rural Pennsylvania, Stephan Goetz (2005) investigates the links between school size and the average academic performance of students. Given that schools are required to make “adequate yearly progress” in terms of student performance on key standardized tests, Goetz notes that schools having small student enrollments can experience large year-to-year changes in test scores simply as a result of modest shifts in school enrollment and student composition, as well as by sheer chance, which have little to do with the delivered quality of education. He delves into this issue by examining the reading and math scores of Pennsylvania fifth and eighth graders over a 5-year period (1997-1998 through 2001-2002). He finds that average test scores do indeed vary much more among smaller schools, and that this variation is largely due to nonpersistent forces—factors that are largely beyond the control of schools. He offers strategies that might be considered for refining the precision and reliability of test scores used to evaluate school performance.

In a similar line of research, Beck and Shoffstall (2005) explore the high-stakes testing system now in place in Illinois, with a particular eye to how school test outcomes might be affected by the socioeconomic attributes of students served at the local schools. Of special interest to the authors is the state’s planned implementation of a “performance-based” designation system, one that labels schools on a 6-point scale, from highly successful to ones that are on “academic watch.” Drawing upon data from the 2000 Illinois Standards Achievement Test, they find that the most successful schools tend to be located in high income, predominantly white, stable and affluent schools, while the most problematic schools are located in highly mobile, low-income, economically depressed, high minority neighborhoods. Consistent with Goetz’s findings for Pennsylvania, they show that nearly two thirds of the variance associated with student performance is attributable to factors that cannot be altered by teachers or school administrators. One of the more interesting findings from their statistical analyses is that rural schools generally perform better than nonrural schools on the state sanctioned standardized achievement

tests when factors such as poverty, student turnover, property values associated with schools are held constant.

High rates of student transiency are another of the exogenous factors that challenge many rural school systems. Frequent residential mobility impedes students’ ability to immerse themselves in the academic and social life of their schools. The third article in this special issue, authored by Kai Schafft (2005), documents the extent of transiency among nonmetro students and its association with academic performance. Of special concern to Schafft is how communities and their institutions are affected by the problem of student mobility. Focusing his study on the upstate region of New York, the author examines approximately 300 rural and urban school districts, nearly evenly divided between those in economically poor and wealthier areas of the region.

Basing his analysis on a mail survey of superintendents in these districts, Schafft finds that student mobility is twice as high in poorer school districts, and that the incidence of student transiency is more pervasive among young people who reside in low-income households. A major contributing factor to the mobility problem, argues Schafft, is the limited stock of affordable housing available for low-income families. Further complicating matters is the havoc created by high turnover rates among economically disadvantaged school districts as they attempt to predict overall school enrollments and fiscal resources for high needs students. Moreover, schools may begin to face serious consequences over the low achievement levels of students who are often in the school system for only a limited period of time during the academic year. The author concludes that a systematic effort must be made to better document student mobility and to implement programs that address the needs of low-income families—particularly programs that can reduce student turnover in poor, rural schools.

Unlike the state-based studies of the previous three articles, the final article by Gary Green (2005) draws upon a survey of 1,600 rural employers nationwide to uncover major factors affecting participation in school-to-work and apprenticeship programs. Affirming the findings in the current research literature, Green finds that key factors associated with involvement in school-to-work programs are firm size and community population—larger firms in larger towns are more likely to participate. Similarly, larger firms and those engaged in manufacturing are more likely to participate in apprenticeship programs. This is especially true for manufacturing firms that experience difficulties recruiting new workers.

Green expresses concern that these workforce preparation programs may be a poor fit for rural labor markets whose changing industrial mix might offer young people few opportunities to transition smoothly into the workforce. Given the growth of service-related firms in rural America—enterprises that are less likely to take part in school-to-work or apprenticeship programs—Green believes it is vital that

students be offered a balanced education: one that builds skills aligned with the needs of local labor markets and imparts knowledge relevant to a broader range of employment opportunities.

Taken as a whole, the four articles suggest that rural schools and communities face a number of challenges, most prominently the severe stress placed on local education and training systems in many rural localities due to their socioeconomic and demographic characteristics. Many rural schools will undoubtedly continue to make progress in meeting the performance and accountability requirements associated with NCLB. But lasting improvements will only happen as their communities become more proficient in fighting poverty, addressing the support service needs of a diversifying population, and building a more stable economy. Only then will the positive efforts of educators in the rural classroom become fully apparent.

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