

## Introduction

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### *Background*

The three articles that follow attempt to determine certain considerations for gauging the effects of state and federal policies on rural schools. The focus is on rural America, but the concerns represented have been forged within a wider arena. For some time now the nation has held a sustained focus on education as the key to economic health and the ability to maintain its leadership in the world. This focus took on a new level of commitment and visibility when, in 1989, the President and the governors, in an unprecedented move, met at an education summit to agree upon a set of education goals for the nation. These goals affect everyone, from pre-school children to adults.

Measuring progress toward these goals is a critical concern. Efforts to do so are building upon earlier and continuing activities for determining the health of the American education system. These activities coalesced several years ago in the drive to identify a few key education "indicators". Many states now issue reports that use indicators, and the U.S. Department of Education's flagship statistical publication, *The Condition of Education* from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), has been following an indicator format since 1986.

Focusing attention on indicators by no means settled the controversy over *what* to select as an indicator from the myriads of data available from the widening array of surveys conducted by NCES and others. Indeed, the debate is ongoing and public. Witness the recent report, *Education Counts* (NCES, 1991), by the congressionally-established Indicators Panel. The panel took issue with the intentionally slim version of *The Condition of Education*. The 1992 edition consequently is much expanded in depth and breadth. Not only are more indicators added, but the

classical categories of input, process, and outcomes have been replaced with six substantive groupings.

### *Rural Education*

Often missing in the debates on goals and indicators is reference to the millions of children who live and attend school in rural America. The reason for this is the tendency to view schooling as a monolithic enterprise, despite the fact that local initiative saw to the founding of schools in this country and that local perspectives still largely help shape the values and, to some extent, the curricula, of schools. The papers presented here constitute one attempt to widen the policy perspective by highlighting rural schools in particular.

Bob Stephens, veteran observer and analyst of rural education issues, organized a symposium at the 1992 meeting of the American Educational Research Association to consider the topic of rural education "impact codes". He asked Rick Reeder, who is an economist with the Economic Research Service (ERS), U.S. Department of Agriculture, and Bill Elder, a rural sociologist with the Office of Social and Economic Analysis at the University of Missouri, to join him in presenting papers related to the topic. I was invited to chair the session in my capacity as rural education coordinator for the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) in the U.S. Department of Education.

### *Purpose of the Papers*

In my work, I am often asked what is *different* about rural education. Even though television and transportation have homogenized much of the country's

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culture, historical roots are deep and powerful differences remain. After all, rural families represent settlers from countries throughout the world, as well as native Pacific Islanders, Eskimos, and Indians. And focusing on employment as only one other aspect of diversity, rural students include the children of fishermen, sharecroppers, loggers, agricultural workers, coal miners, owners of businesses, and commuters to jobs in cities, towns, and suburbs.

But if with all this diversity it is argued that rural education issues are somehow unique, then it is incumbent upon those who take that position to articulate what makes it so. Of course, defining "rural" is done all the time for programmatic reasons at the state and federal levels. These definitions generally take into account sparsity of settlement and, perhaps, economic factors. While the basic approach is probably quite suitable for any given situation, there may be insufficient information for crafting the definitions correctly. Indeed, defining "rural" for policy purposes remains a challenge.<sup>1</sup>

However, the topic addressed here is *not* defining rural, though the purpose is not unrelated. These papers are concerned with developing rural education *policy impact codes*. The operative words are "policy" and "impact". All states and the federal government may be said to have policies regarding rural education, given that the absence of an articulated position may be said to constitute a policy. For better or worse, these policies have effects, or impacts. *The goal, then, is to adequately reflect the impact of government education policies upon rural schooling.*

Dr. Stephens' paper presents the context for considering this goal, and discusses the pros and cons of several typologies, as well as the most appropriate unit of analysis for addressing rural education issues. He then proposes a list of indicators considered especially critical to measuring education in a rural setting.

Dr. Reeder brings to his paper a perspective of extensive research on local government in nonmetropolitan counties. He targets issues that have proven particularly difficult for measuring fiscal capacity (i.e., rural unemployment and underemployment) and highlights findings on the cost-of-living question that challenge popular assumptions. Reeder stresses the importance of recognizing that some current social

and economic indicators have implicit urban or rural biases.

Dr. Elder's paper represents a breakthrough in quantifying information on rural schools. In 1989, the NCES Johnson codes categorized schools by location and thus made it possible to precisely number and locate rural schools and students. Dr. Elder has gone on to quantify rural school districts and the extent to which urban districts include rural schools and vice versa. Meanwhile, to better reflect the modern reality of rural diversity, ERS in the 1980s grouped nonmetropolitan counties within two alternative sets of economic policy impact codes. Elder merged his school district analysis with the ERS codes to yield an unprecedented documentation on rural districts by dominate economy together with settlement size and proximity to a metro county.<sup>2</sup>

Dr. Stephen's premise is that only with proper definition and measurement can targeted policies be crafted that truly benefit rural schools. His paper thus defines the context and purpose of the concern, while the Reeder and Elder papers demonstrate some of the issues that must be considered and the sophistication that must be brought to the tasks of classification and analysis. These considerations warrant thoughtful reaction. Initially, this has been supplied by two representatives from the rural education research community: Bob Bhaerman of the Philadelphia-based Research for Better Schools and Paul Nachtigal of the Mid-continent Regional Educational Laboratory. As directors of the federally-funded rural education initiative in their respective educational laboratories, they were invited by Dr. Stephens to comment on the three papers. Those of us involved hope that the views expressed in this special issue of the *Journal of Research in Rural Education* collectively will inspire further responses leading to a high level of informed discussion about government rural school policies and their effects.

## References

- National Center for Education Statistics. (1991). *Education Counts*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Stern, J. D. (Ed.). (in press). *The condition of education in rural schools*. Washington, DC: Office of Educational Research and Improvement.

<sup>1</sup>Important progress in this regard recently has been made by a joint effort involving Programs for the Improvement of Practice (which administers the regional educational laboratories), together with the rural coordinators of these laboratories, NCES, and the Bureau of the Census.

<sup>2</sup>See *The condition of education in rural schools* (Stern, in press).