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Status of Rural Education in the South: A Survey of Key Indicators

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Discussions of education policy tend to revolve around the problems and promise in America's urban and suburban districts. At both the state and federal levels, concerns for student achievement and conversations about student assessment, school reform and accountability often center on the plight of students in large schools and large districts. In part the assumption has been that schools are focused on the same goals regardless of location, and thus the policy strategies that are successful in one area should be transferable. In the past decade, however, a shift toward a more place-based policy approach has begun to emerge. In its wake has come an acknowledgement that schools are influenced by their location and their community. This ***Regional Resource*** will review several educational indicators, providing at times comparisons between rural and non-rural schools and students, as well as provide some general population data on the rural parts of the Southern Legislative Conference region.

How Are Rural Schools Different?

Rural schools and communities are distinct from those in suburban and urban locales, but also from one another. Rural communities may include a diverse mix of immigrants and native born residents, or be composed of a relatively homogenous population mix. Rural areas tend to have lower income levels, but also may enjoy lower costs of living. Rural schools differ in key ways from those found in urban and suburban districts. Possibly, the most important difference is size. Rural schools, on average, are smaller than their counterparts in other locales. They also have higher than average levels of poverty and more students who are eligible for free or reduced lunch. Rural schools may be more central fixtures in their communities than their urban or suburban peers as well.

From a governance standpoint, rural school districts tend to be smaller in population, although larger geographically, and are less "layered" than urban and suburban districts, with fewer administrators and specialists than in other areas. Among the areas where this becomes important are grant writing and administration; record processing;

Defining Rural

Defining "rural" poses some complications. The principal federal agencies responsible for tracking rural populations (the Departments of Education and Agriculture and the Census Bureau) use differing definitions. While this probably does not lead to major differences between classification systems, it renders the comparison of data on a longitudinal basis more difficult. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) most often uses a system of locale codes to identify the degree of urbanicity for a given school or district. Under this system, rural schools are most often understood to be in towns with populations of fewer than 25,000 people, places outside and within metropolitan areas designated as rural. Some reports use a more restrictive definition of rural as a town with fewer than 2,500 people.

In order to allow for the use of cross-cutting data from a variety of sources, this ***Regional Resource*** will divide schools into non-rural, small town and rural, and rural. Small town and rural schools include those in places with fewer than 25,000 people, a classification which incorporates many smaller towns. Rural schools are defined as those in places with fewer than 2,500 people, the more traditional cut-off point for "rural." In using a slightly broader definition, this report brings into consideration a number of schools located in or near small towns which serve rural populations, as well as rural districts for which the head office is located in a small town. The use of this broad definition also brings into the discussion of rural schools students and communities that would be perceived as rural by most Americans.

and curriculum and testing development. Rural communities very often view themselves as different, emphasizing many of the positive elements of these areas. As this *Regional Resource* demonstrates, with respect to education, rural areas are in some ways indeed different, serving a disproportionately disadvantaged population with higher than anticipated outcomes. In some studies, schools in rural areas also report having safer learning environments and fewer problems with drugs and alcohol than schools in other areas. In other ways, rural areas reflect the general population of their states, with consistent levels of students requiring special education and language services.

Key Indicators

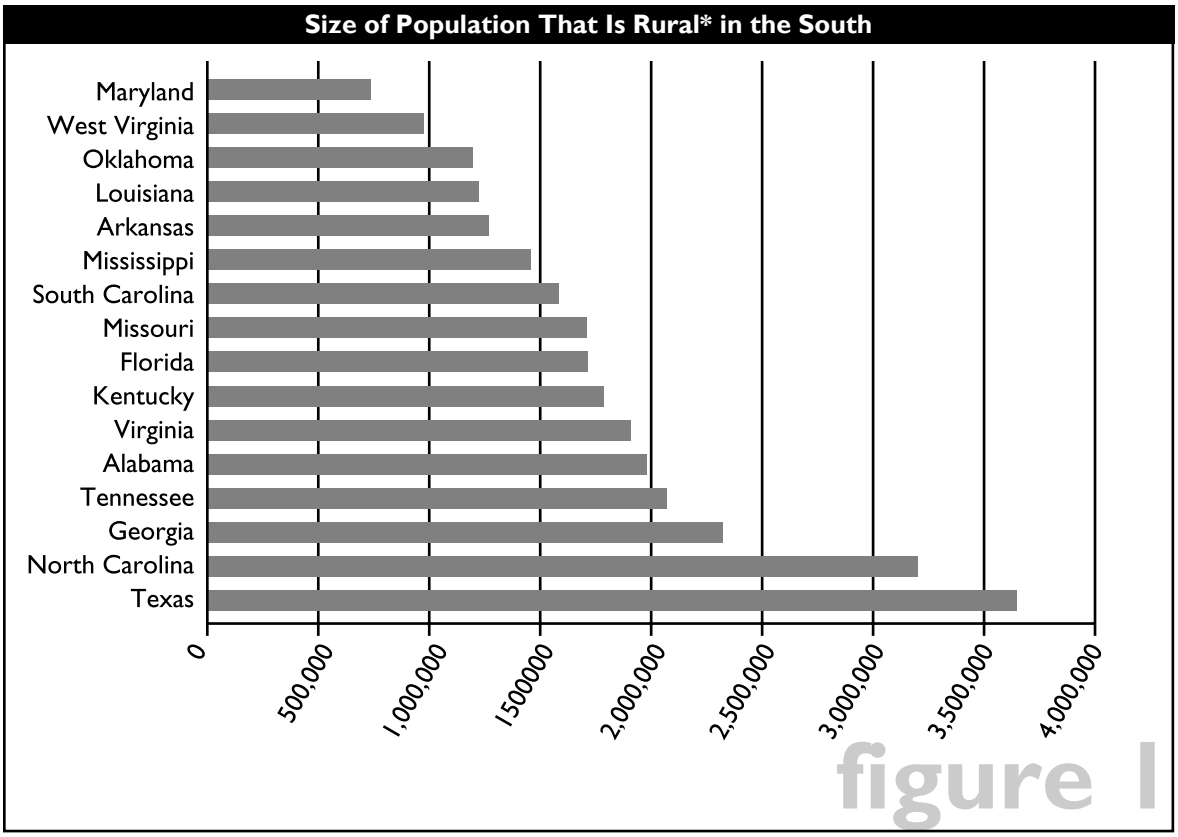
The "Ruralness" of Southern States

The ruralness of a state is an indication of how many of its residents live in rural areas. For the purposes of this discussion, the Census Bureau applies a more restrictive definition of rural, including only that portion of a state's population which lives in places of fewer than 2,500 people. Not surprisingly, most Americans do not live in very rural areas. In only four states (Vermont, Maine, West Virginia and Mississippi) do a majority of the population live in these areas.

The national average for rural residency is 21 percent. This is somewhat deceptive, however, since only 17 states have rural population percentages lower than this. The reason for this is the size of the population in these "least rural" states, which represent some of the largest states in terms of population. The South is by far the most rural region in the country, with 13 of 16 states above the national average (compared to four of 10 states in the East; five of 13 for the West; and six of 11 for the Midwest). Half of the 10 most rural states in the nation are located in the South.

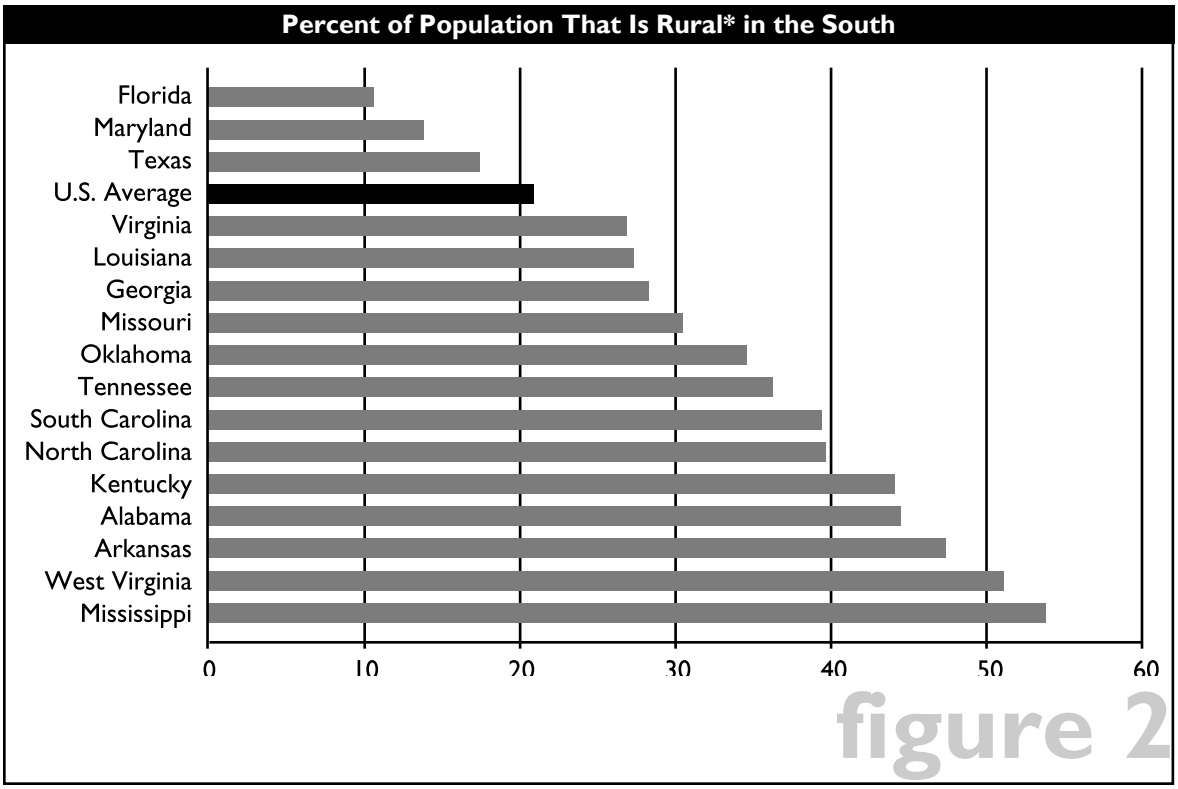
The region also has the largest rural population in terms of absolute numbers among the four regions. Texas has the largest rural population in the country, with 3.6 million people in the state living in places with 2,500 people or fewer. North Carolina is second in this list with nearly 3.2 million. The contrast between these two states is interesting, however. While Texas has the greatest number of rural residents, its percentage of rural population is below the national average at 17.5 percent. North Carolina, ranks 12th among all states in the percentage of population classified as rural at nearly 40 percent. Every state in the South except Maryland ranks above the median amount for the size of their rural population. The size and proportion of the rural population in the South has an impact on the prevalence and importance of schools in these areas. States with proportionately large rural populations often find that rural issues are more likely to be considered by policymakers. States with large rural populations may also have vocal and powerful rural constituencies, although their influence can be diminished by the extent to which rural people are a small segment of the state's population.

Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the size and proportion of the rural population in the Southern states.



Source: Census 2000, as extracted by the Rural School and Community Trust in *Why Rural Matters 2003*.

*Rural is defined here as places with fewer than 2,500 people.



Source: Census 2000, as extracted by the Rural School and Community Trust in *Why Rural Matters 2003*.

*Rural is defined here as places with fewer than 2,500 people.

As Figure 1 and Figure 2 show, a significant minority of Southerners live in rural areas. Indeed, 10 Southern states have a more than 30 percent rural population. The fact that 14 Southern states have rural populations of more than one million is also an indication of the significance of this demographic. What is interesting, although not surprising, is that the states with the largest rural populations have lower percentages of their total population living in rural areas. This is particularly true of Texas, where the 3.6 million rural residents account for only 17.5 percent of the total population. The state in the region with the greatest percentage of rural residents—West Virginia—has the second-fewest total rural residents, less than 1 million.

North Carolina's place among Southern states is unique. The state ranks high among states with a rural population both in total population and the percentage of the population that is considered rural. North Carolina has the second-largest rural population not only in the region but in the nation. The state also ranks in the top six in the region and in the top 12 in the country in terms of rural population as a percentage of the population (nearly 40 percent). By comparison, Georgia, with the next largest rural population in the region, is less than 30 percent rural and ranks 26th nationally and 11th regionally in terms of the percentage of the state's population that is rural.

Student Population

With a large rural population, it follows that the South also has a significant rural student population. The South also has a large number of rural districts in many of its states. Tables 1 and 2 provide a comparison of the number of rural students and school districts in the Southern region.

Number and Percent of Non-Rural, Small Town/Rural and Rural Students 2000

State	% state Population Rural	Total # of Students	# of Non-Rural Students	% Non-Rural Students	# of Small Town/ Rural Students*	% Small Town/ Rural Students	# of Rural Students†	% Rural Students
Alabama	44.6	728,978	367,128	50%	361,850	50%	231,648	32%
Arkansas	47.5	449,959	187,426	42%	262,533	58%	137,141	30%
Florida	10.7	2,434,787	1,941,785	80%	493,002	20%	403,662	17%
Georgia	28.4	1,440,029	745,147	52%	694,882	48%	457,832	32%
Kentucky	44.2	621,956	254,758	41%	367,198	59%	237,044	38%
Louisiana	27.4	730,816	459,924	63%	270,892	37%	190,668	26%
Maryland	13.9	860,640	680,277	79%	180,363	21%	159,740	19%
Mississippi	51.2	493,509	159,207	32%	334,302	68%	197,148	40%
Missouri	30.6	911,895	524,314	57%	387,581	43%	251,236	28%
North Carolina	39.8	1,315,363	612,103	47%	703,306	53%	523,280	40%
Oklahoma	34.7	622,139	351,352	56%	270,787	44%	159,762	26%
South Carolina	39.5	673,079	340,394	51%	332,685	49%	233,215	35%
Tennessee	36.4	816,193	423,763	52%	392,430	48%	242,306	30%
Texas	17.5	4,163,447	3,233,572	78%	929,875	22%	575,921	14%
Virginia	27	1,163,091	770,610	66%	392,481	34%	324,853	28%
West Virginia	53.9	282,875	97,015	34%	185,860	66%	129,946	46%

table 1

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data, Public Schools Universe Survey, 2000-2001; U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000.

*Small Town/Rural Students attend schools in places with fewer than 25,000 people.
† Rural Students attend schoold in places with fewer than 2,500 people.

Number and Percent of Non-Rural and Small Town/Rural and Rural School Districts 2000							
State	Total # of School Districts	Total # of Non-Rural Districts	% Non-Rural	# of Small Town/ Rural Districts*	% Small Town/ Rural	# of Rural Districts†	% Rural
Alabama	128	44	34%	84	66%	40	31%
Arkansas	310	39	13%	271	87%	202	65%
Florida	67	30	45%	37	55%	20	30%
Georgia	180	35	19%	145	81%	78	43%
Kentucky	176	40	23%	136	77%	82	47%
Louisiana	78	31	40%	47	60%	28	36%
Maryland	24	10	42%	14	58%	11	46%
Mississippi	152	19	13%	133	88%	80	53%
Missouri	524	88	17%	436	83%	351	67%
North Carolina	120	26	22%	94	78%	67	56%
Oklahoma	544	74	14%	470	86%	357	66%
South Carolina	90	30	33%	60	67%	34	38%
Tennessee	138	37	27%	101	73%	56	41%
Texas	1,040	292	28%	748	72%	566	54%
Virginia	135	46	34%	89	66%	69	51%
West Virginia	55	11	20%	44	80%	32	58%

Table 2

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data, Public Schools Universe Survey, 2000-2001; U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000.

*Small Town/Rural Districts are those in places with fewer than 25,000 people.
† Rural Districts include only those in places with fewer than 2,500 people.

Tables 1 and 2 demonstrate two key facts about rural education. For much of the region, significant percentages of students are enrolled in rural schools, including five states where rural students are the majority of school children. And rural school districts are disproportionately represented, even when a more restrictive definition of rural is applied. This latter fact has important implications for the ongoing debate over district consolidation.

Equally interesting is how the percentage of rural students correlates, and sometimes fails to correlate, with the population in rural areas. In some ways this reflects the differences between the definitions of rural used by different organizations (population statistics are from the 2000 Census; students from the U.S. Department of Education). In much of the region this holds true, but there are a number of states where there is a smaller percentage of rural students than the general population indicates. Some of the most obvious examples are Alabama, where 45 percent of the state is rural, but only 27 percent of the students, and Arkansas, where the states' 48 percent rural population is represented by only 28 percent of the states' students.

When the broader definition of rural is applied, and those students found in rural areas and small towns are considered together, it becomes apparent that schools in communities smaller than 25,000, but larger than 2,500, represent a large part of what this ***Regional Resource*** considers rural students. In the examples cited above, 16 percent of Alabama students and 28 percent of Arkansas students are found in schools in places between 25,000 and 2,500 in population.

Indeed, students in small town schools often comprise a major segment of the student population in and of themselves. Mississippi's 51 percent rural population is the second-

largest in the region, but only 43 percent of students are rural. Twenty-eight percent of the state's students are from small towns larger than 2,500 people, but no larger than 25,000 people. Georgia is in a similar situation, with a rural population of 28 percent, a rural student population of 24 percent and a small town student population of 17 percent. This pattern holds true as well in Kentucky, West Virginia and elsewhere. Indeed, small towns account for small percentages of students in only the two least rural states in the region: Florida and Maryland.

The smaller than expected rural student population and the large small town student population point to a tendency for rural students to attend small town schools, particularly in the upper grades, rather than truly rural schools. It is also important to keep in mind that demographically rural places have an older population with fewer adults of childbearing age and fewer children as a percentage of the population than other areas.

A disproportionate number of school districts serve the rural and small town student population. In six states in the region, 80 percent or more of the school districts are either rural or in small towns, with an additional four states having more than 70 percent of their districts in these places. Seven states have more than half of their school districts identified as rural. In part, this is due to an historical anomaly: school districts have often been created as county and municipal entities. In general, there is a strong correlation between a greater number of school districts in a state and a higher percentage that are rural. Texas, with 1,040 school districts, has 72 percent of its districts identified as small town/rural, and 54 percent as strictly rural. This even though the state is only 18 percent rural in its general population, 21 percent small town/rural in its student population, with 12 percent of its student population attending rural schools. Oklahoma, with 544 school districts, has 86 percent of these considered small town/rural, and 66 percent rural, has rural general population of 35 percent, a small town/rural student population of 45 percent, and a rural student population of 25 percent.

Table 3 and Figure 3 illustrate the number and percentage of schools in the region by urbanicity.

Number of Schools by Urbanicity

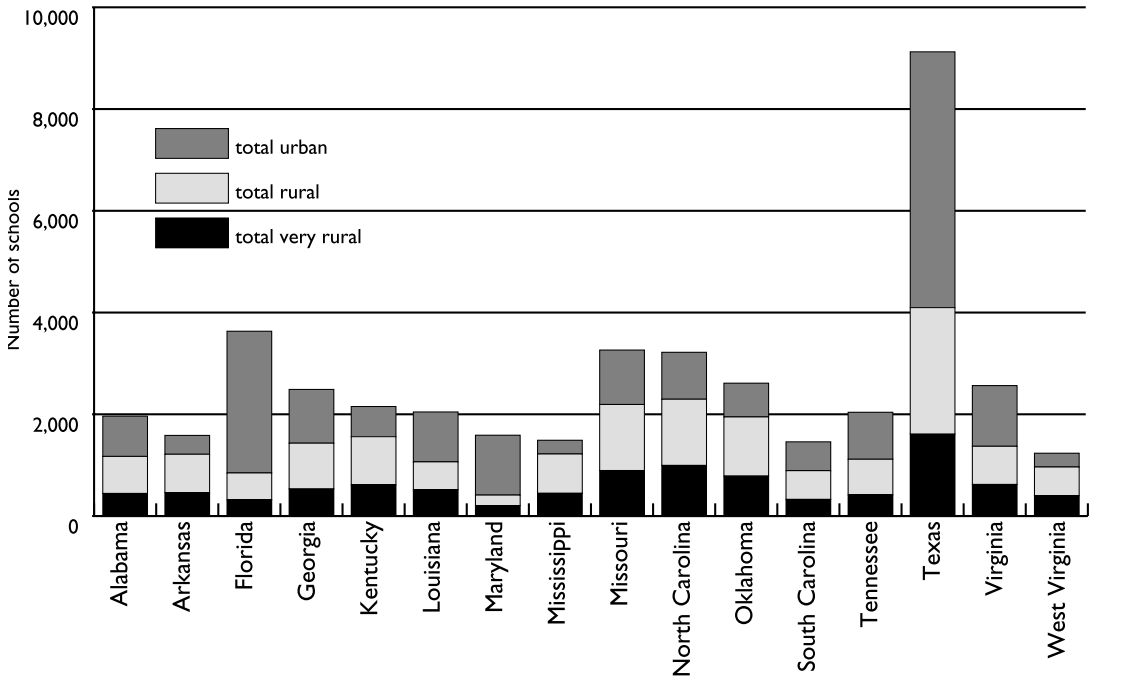


figure 3

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data, Local Education Agency Universe Survey, 2000-2001.

Percentage of Schools by Urbanicity						
State	Total State	Total Non-Rural	Total Small Town/ Rural	Percent Small Town/ Rural	Total Rural	Percent Rural
Alabama	1,520	792	728	47.9%	444	29.2%
Arkansas	1,138	371	753	66.2%	461	40.5%
Florida	3,316	2,786	530	16.0%	317	9.6%
Georgia	1,957	1,057	900	46.0%	532	27.2%
Kentucky	1,542	593	949	61.5%	611	39.6%
Louisiana	1,530	981	549	35.9%	516	33.7%
Maryland	1,383	1,177	206	14.9%	206	14.9%
Mississippi	1,030	270	773	75.0%	447	43.4%
Missouri	2,368	1,070	1,298	54.8%	895	37.8%
North Carolina	2,224	923	1,301	58.5%	995	44.7%
Oklahoma	1,827	664	1,163	63.7%	785	43.0%
South Carolina	1,132	567	565	49.9%	327	28.9%
Tennessee	1,624	924	700	43.1%	416	25.6%
Texas	7,516	5,028	2,488	33.1%	1,609	21.4%
Virginia	1,943	1,193	750	38.6%	621	32.0%
West Virginia	840	271	565	67.3%	399	47.5%

table 3

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data, Local Education Agency Universe Survey, 2000-2001.

The percentage of schools in rural and very rural areas, much like the number of rural and very rural districts, trends above the percentage of rural students. In most cases, the discrepancy is only a few points difference. A few states in the region—Arkansas, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Texas and Virginia—have differences that exceed 10 points, with Louisiana at nearly that magnitude. Texas, with a rural student population of 21 percent, has 33 percent of its schools in rural areas. Notably, the states with the greatest rural student population—Mississippi and West Virginia—have relatively small discrepancies between the number of schools and the number of students. Across the board, however, the spread between the percentages of students and schools is less, in most cases considerably far less, than that between the percentage of students and districts.

The number of schools serving any population of students is, obviously, far more elastic than the number of districts in a state. As student populations decline, closing schools, while politically difficult and often acrimonious, does not face the same hurdles as eliminating school districts, which are political subdivisions often with taxing authority and statutory precedence.

Schools in rural areas often serve several purposes in addition to educating children, however. Schools in rural areas may be used as community centers, continuing education facilities, and auditoriums for public meetings. Schools also may be the only building large enough to provide shelter in case of disaster or emergency. Schools also often are a central component of local identity and pride and can provide the cement for rural communities.

The large number of rural schools in some ways misrepresents the delivery of educational services in rural areas. Rural schools in general have smaller enrollments and larger service areas than their urban and suburban peers. Increasing the enrollments of rural schools often requires increasing service areas to sizes unacceptable to students and parents. Such

a change also contradicts a body of research touting the benefits to students of attending small schools. As the Knowledgeworks Foundation and the Rural School and Community Trust note in the report *Dollars and Sense*, "there are several diseconomies in large facilities, and…they do not create the best schools in which to nurture or educate children."(p. 21) This adds to the value to small communities of these schools and the impact when they are closed.

Small school districts emerged as a political issue in Arkansas, Oklahoma and Missouri, where shrinking state revenues prompted calls for consolidation to achieve efficiencies. This is an issue of considerable emotion for those involved, a fact which makes reading the research and results more complicated. This being said, there have been some studies of the impacts and outcomes of consolidation.

Among the most targeted is a study conducted in New York State throughout the 1990s by the Center for Policy Research.[1] While not without its limitations, the report highlights both the costs and benefits of consolidation. The report notes that consolidation provides benefits primarily through economies of scale. Among these is the ability of administrative staff to serve an upwardly flexible number of students without diminishment of the quality of their work. Two districts with 500 students may each require the same number of administrators as a combined 1,000 student district. At some level, administrative positions have to be added as consolidated districts grow in student populations, but the new staffing level is not as large as that of the pre-consolidation districts combined.

Other key benefits from economies of size include increased efficiencies related to physical plants, such as heating and cooling, meal preparation, and other costs. Of course, these benefits are mostly realized in situations in which schools as well as districts are consolidated. Further benefits arise from opportunities in specialization. Consolidated districts and schools appear better able to hire specialized staff, including special education, English as a second language, higher level math and science, and specialized vocational teachers, because they serve a population with sufficient numbers of students needing or desiring these courses to justify these positions. While on the surface this would seem to also only apply to consolidated schools, some applications to consolidated districts would be relevant.

Hence, consolidated districts will benefit through lower costs of purchasing. Larger districts are better able to negotiate lower per-unit prices on everything from supplies and equipment to utilities and services. A consolidated district covering a considerable geographic area may also be able to negotiate lower labor costs and impose lower wages on its employees, thereby realizing a cost savings.

Finally, in larger districts and schools, teachers have a greater number of colleagues with whom to exchange ideas and experiences. This increases the ease and lowers the costs of implementing new curriculum and educational strategies. This also provides more opportunities for teachers to critique one another and provide meaningful suggestions for improving their teaching. Furthermore, in a consolidated district, the costs of providing professional development to this larger group of teachers can be greatly reduced.

Consolidation is not without its costs, however. Most of these are related to school consolidation, including increased transportation costs, negative impacts on staff, student and parental motivation and involvement, and increased labor costs or conflict due to stronger and more active unions in larger districts. Aside from transportation costs, which are a function of geography, much of these costs are related, at least in part, to the benefits of small schools as educational and work environments. Smaller schools tend to foster positive learning, improved staff morale, "flatter" administrative patterns, and increased parental involvement. Furthermore, there is considerable research pointing to the many advantages of small schools, not the least of which are improved student performance and connectedness, reduced discipline problems, and increased parental and community involvement. The cost benefits of these advantages are difficult to quantify, of course, a fact which leads economists to exclude them from final analysis.

The analysis of district consolidation in New York attempted to determine if consolidation created efficiencies while maintaining student achievement. While this would, on the surface, seem to be an essential question to answer before undertaking any

change in education delivery, it has also been remarkably absent from the research on the issue. Thus the New York study, while obviously limited geographically in its application, provides some background to the issue in a broader context.

The study found that, somewhat surprisingly, the capital costs for consolidating districts exceeded those which did not consolidate. This was, in large part, a result of new capital projects most likely related to consolidation. In many consolidated districts, there appears to be a delay in capital projects of a few years as the newly reconstituted district assesses its needs and options. The expenditures for administration and teaching either grew more slowly in consolidated districts or declined. Uniquely, consolidation did not seem to have any effect on teacher salaries, which remained consistent between consolidating and non-consolidating districts.

Student achievement showed little difference between the two categories of districts, which leads to the conclusion that any boosts to student achievement realized by consolidation are nominal. A point to mention here, however is that districts which consolidated in this study were generally poorer and had more students on subsidized lunch, factors which generally correlate with lower student achievement.

What is perhaps most striking about the New York study is its conclusion regarding the "tipping point" at which the cost advantages of consolidation are overcome by either the achievement or cost drawbacks. Combining two 300-student districts realizes far greater benefits than combining two 1,500-student districts. Above 751 students, the report authors found that there were "strong diseconomies of scale." Arguably, such a figure is not a "golden mean" but a benchmark. Consolidations above this figure may realize improvements in costs without reductions in student achievement, and consolidations below this figure may realize increased costs and decreased performance. Nonetheless, the report does point to a somewhat limited regime of consolidation. Importantly, New York provides financial assistance to consolidating districts, which may serve as an incentive to consolidate.

School Characteristics

Comparisons of schools and districts without reviewing the students who comprise them are not particularly instructive. In many places, rural schools serve a remarkably diverse population reflecting the composition of the state's school children as a whole. While rural schools in many ways reflect the overall population of their state, there are some areas in which they are often unique, particularly in the areas of poverty and school size. Even in areas where rural schools match statewide averages, the limited size and capacity of rural schools to address significant educational challenges make for greater difficulty in meeting the needs of all students.

Household Poverty

While not strictly an education statistic, the number and percent of a population in poverty has a double impact on schools. There has long been a statistical correlation between poverty and lower student performance. Poverty often adversely affects the capacity of a community to fund its schools. In most cases in the region, areas which are nominally rural (that is, those places with no more than 25,000 people) usually fare better than the state average for poverty both for total population and for children under the age of 18. When a more restrictive definition of rural is considered (fewer than 2,500 people or fewer than 1,000), this situation reverses. In the most rural communities, the poverty rates may be up to one-fifth to one-quarter of the general population. Among children under the age of 18, generally between one-quarter and one-third of the population is in poverty. Only Maryland and Virginia have very rural child poverty rates below 20 percent, with Missouri registering at that level. Table 4 reflects this information.

Percentage of State Population in Poverty and Child Poverty 2000										
	State Population in Poverty					Percent children under 18 in poverty in state				
State	State Average	Non-Rural	Small Town/ Rural	Rural	Rural (1,000 or less)	State Average	Non-Rural	Small Town/ Rural	Rural	Rural (1,000 or less)
Alabama	16.1	16.9	15.1	18.9	19.5	21.2	22.7	19.4	25.2	25.7
Arkansas	15.8	17.3	14.2	19	20.7	21.4	24.1	18.4	26	27.7
Florida	12.5	12.6	11.8	16.2	18.1	17.2	17.3	15.7	23.4	24.3
Georgia	13.0	13.3	12.3	22.4	19.6	16.7	17.3	15.2	30.4	25.5
Kentucky	15.8	14.1	17.9	22.8	20.7	20.4	18.7	22.3	29.8	26.7
Louisiana	19.6	20.5	17.4	25.7	23.7	26.3	28.1	21.5	32.9	29.9
Maryland	8.5	8.9	5.8	11.5	11.1	10.3	10.9	6.5	13.7	15.2
Mississippi	19.9	21.8	18.2	27.4	27.4	26.7	29.9	23.8	37.8	37.0
Missouri	11.7	11.7	11.8	16.5	16.3	15.3	15.3	15.1	21.6	20.8
North Carolina	12.3	12.6	11.8	16.9	16.6	15.7	16.4	14.7	23.5	22.7
Oklahoma	14.7	15.2	13.9	18.8	19.7	19.1	20.0	17.5	24.3	25.0
South Carolina	14.1	14.2	14	18.2	19.3	18.5	18.8	18.0	24.6	27.0
Tennessee	13.5	14.2	12.2	16	16.7	17.6	19.3	14.7	20.4	21.1
Texas	15.4	15.9	12.8	17.6	18	20.2	21	16.2	23	23.3
Virginia	9.6	9.4	10	13.8	14.1	11.9	11.8	12.1	18.7	17.6
West Virginia	17.9	17.5	18.3	20.2	23.1	23.9	23	24.7	28.7	32.3

table 4

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000 Summary File 3, Matrices P53, P77, P82, P87, P90, PCT47, and PCT52

The impact for schools serving this population is considerable. While poverty is not necessarily an indicator of poor educational performance, the challenges of teaching a large population of students in poverty place disproportionate burdens on schools with lower overall resources. Furthermore, because high-poverty districts also have lower property valuations, raising revenue through millage increases is much more difficult. The revenue potential of a one mill increase for urban or suburban districts may be equal to a 30-mill increase in some rural districts. This inequity between the taxing potential for districts based on their locale creates and perpetuates funding inequities which are difficult to surmount.

A different measure of poverty "in the schoolhouse" can be found in student eligibility for free or reduced lunch programs. While eligibility is based on a student's family income, and thus closely matches the poverty scale in Table 4, free and reduced-price lunch programs use a broader definition of low income; thus roughly double the percentage of students in poverty are eligible. Table 5 illustrates the percentages of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch in the South by location.

Number and Percentage of Rural Students Eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch by Locale								
State	Number of Students Eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch				Percent of Students Eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch			
	Total	Non-Rural	Small Town/ Rural	Rural	Total	Non-Rural	Small Town/ Rural	Rural
Alabama	335,143	158,462	176,681	108,168	46.0	43.2	48.8	46.7
Arkansas	205,058	75,784	129,274	66,294	45.6	40.4	49.2	48.3
Florida	1,079,009	875,555	203,454	157,433	44.3	45.1	41.3	39.0
Georgia	622,183	326,687	295,496	163,882	43.2	43.8	42.5	35.8
Kentucky	305,149	110,068	195,081	129,275	49.1	43.2	53.1	54.5
Louisiana	432,267	271,456	160,811	105,887	59.1	59.0	59.4	55.5
Maryland	255,544	219,941	35,603	28,309	29.7	32.3	19.7	17.7
Mississippi	322,149	92,047	230,102	131,185	65.3	57.8	68.8	66.5
Missouri	320,266	172,610	147,656	91,987	35.1	32.9	38.1	36.6
North Carolina	505,507	223,024	282,483	200,278	38.4	36.4	40.2	38.3
Oklahoma	302,869	150,772	152,097	91,465	48.7	42.9	56.2	57.3
South Carolina	328,061	144,982	183,079	122,255	48.7	42.6	55.8	52.4
Tennessee	no data	no data	no data	no data	no data	no data	no data	no data
Texas	1,889,948	1,474,663	415,285	229,806	45.4	45.6	44.7	39.9
Virginia	340,823	226,628	114,195	89,393	29.3	29.4	29.1	27.5
West Virginia	142,663	40,435	102,228	73,593	50.4	41.7	55.0	56.6

table 5

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data, "Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe: School Year 2000-2001."

One-third of the states in the region have rural free or reduced-price lunch rates that exceed the state average poverty rate by more then a few percentage points, most notably Arkansas, Kentucky, Oklahoma, South Carolina and West Virginia. In all of these states, as well as in Mississippi and Missouri, the gap between eligibility rates for rural areas exceeds those of non-rural districts (which, in this analysis, includes urban fringe/suburban schools). For the most rural schools, only Florida, Georgia, Maryland, Texas and Virginia have smaller percentages of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch than their non-rural peers. These figures reinforce the picture of rural schools, particularly those in very rural areas, as having more poverty and near poverty than most other parts of the country. The implications for the educational challenges in these areas are clear.

Entrenched rural poverty has been an item of concern for policymakers for decades, and great strides were made in the last century to close the gap between urban and rural populations. The economic boom of the 1990s largely bypassed America's most rural places, however. Reducing rural poverty has proven to be a vastly complex and involved problem. Efforts to improve rural education may provide some relief, since educational attainment and economic advancement are generally linked. Rural high school graduates, particularly those who continue to college, often leave rural areas in search of better opportunities in city centers, exacerbating the economic problems of rural areas by depleting the workforce of its most educated members. This in turn leads to a predominance of entry-level positions in the rural economy which do not offer potential for advancement, continuing cycles of poverty and poor economic and educational expectations for rural areas.

Moreover, poverty generally is linked to limited access to medical care and health insurance, which can lead to irregular medical care for very young children. Learning

disabilities that are identified in young students may often have their roots in poor healthcare in infancy. Undiagnosed, untreated chronic conditions also can hamper learning and cause students to miss school. The extent to which states have extended their Medicaid programs to serve poor children has ameliorated some of these negative affects, although there are still a number of poor children who lack adequate health insurance and who seldom see a medical professional. In part, this often is due to a lack of healthcare providers acceptance of Medicaid patients.[2] Nonetheless, this component of the rural dynamic demonstrates how complex the issue of rural education can become.

Special Education Students in Rural Areas

School districts are required to provide appropriate educational services to all students, including those with disabilities. In the past 10 years, the number of students receiving special education services has grown tremendously. According to U.S. Department of Education statistics, the percentage of students served in federally-supported programs for the disabled has grown from 8.3 percent in 1990 to 13.2 percent in 2000. The largest growth has been in the number of students with specific learning disabilities.[3] These children account for 45 percent of all children in programs for the disabled, with the number of children increasing by 300 percent between 1990 and 2000. While there is a vigorous debate about the causes of this growth, the outcome is clear: schools are providing services to more students with a range of exceptionalities, greatly increasing the costs to local schools. While the federal government bears a share of the costs (the federal contribution to special education reached its highest level ever—18 percent—in fiscal 2003), local and state governments continue to carry the bulk of the financial burden of this federal mandate.

Rural schools tend toward a representative proportion of the state's special education population. In general, the percentage of students who are identified as needing special education is roughly 13 percent. This figure holds true across the region, with slight variations, regardless of the location of the school district. Given the high costs of providing services to special education students and the scarcity of specialists in the field, however, providing special education services to the more than one out of ten students who require them is a challenge. Rural areas have a much more difficult time recruiting and retaining qualified teachers for this specialty area, which often results in special education students being taught by teachers who may lack appropriate training. Table 6 illustrates the population statistics for special education students in the region.

Percentage of Special Education Students in Rural Schools										
State	Grand Total	Total Non-Rural	% Non-Rural	% of Non-Rural Students	Total Small Town/ Rural	% Small Town/ Rural	% of Small Town/ Rural Students	Total Rural	% Rural	% of Rural Students
Alabama	95,708	55,412	57.9%	15%	39,699	41.5%	11%	24,553	25.7%	11%
Arkansas	56,165	23,265	41.4%	12%	32,900	58.6%	13%	17,172	30.6%	13%
Florida	378,251	328,631	86.9%	17%	49,620	13.1%	10%	31,720	8.4%	8%
Georgia	170,106	91,501	53.8%	12%	78,605	46.2%	11%	47,517	27.9%	10%
Kentucky	98,146	42,114	42.9%	17%	55,797	56.9%	15%	34,026	34.7%	14%
Louisiana	98,145	70,162	71.5%	15%	27,983	28.5%	10%	19,041	19.4%	10%
Maryland	111,511	97,724	87.6%	14%	13,787	12.4%	8%	10,746	9.6%	7%
Mississippi	62,117	16,819	27.1%	11%	45,298	72.9%	14%	28,274	45.5%	14%
Missouri	140,676	84,712	60.2%	16%	55,964	39.8%	14%	34,735	24.7%	14%
North Carolina	186,255	82,439	44.3%	13%	103,816	55.7%	15%	79,181	42.5%	15%
Oklahoma	87,672	48,203	55.0%	14%	39,469	45.0%	15%	24,024	27.4%	15%
South Carolina	98,423	47,991	48.8%	14%	50,432	51.2%	15%	32,508	33.0%	14%
Tennessee	143,116	87,834	61.4%	21%	55,282	38.6%	14%	31,745	22.2%	13%
Texas	495,493	379,740	76.6%	12%	115,753	23.4%	12%	66,879	13.5%	12%
Virginia	164,523	112,249	68.2%	15%	52,274	31.8%	13%	43,005	26.1%	13%
West Virginia	50,080	19,410	38.8%	20%	30,670	61.2%	17%	20,452	40.8%	16%
SLC Total/ Average	2,436,387	1,588,206	65.2%	14%	847,349	34.8%	13%	545,578	22.4%	12%

table 6

Source: Common Core of Data, National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, Local Education Agency Universe and Public School Universe, 2000-2001 school year. Special Education students are those identified as having an Individual Education Plan.

Language Minority Students in Rural Schools

Among the changes in rural communities over the past decade has been a large increase in the number of foreign-born immigrants that locate there. Driven in part by immigration related to agriculture and agricultural processing facilities, this wave of immigrants brings both a vital component of the workforce and new challenges to rural places. Principal among these challenges is how to educate children for whom English is not their first language, and which may not be spoken at all at home. These students require special services and attention in order to thrive in school. Staff with specialized training in working with students with limited English proficiency is a scarce commodity in schools everywhere, but particularly in rural areas.

Limited English proficient (LEP) students can also pose challenges for schools in other ways. Creating connections with parents is critical for a school's mission as community centers. Parents who do not speak English are less able to interact with school officials, are less likely to understand communications sent home from school, and are less able to ask questions in order to be well-informed. Getting language minority parents involved in schools is a serious challenge in any community. In rural areas, where a lack of bilingual staff or community members often is most pronounced, this challenge is particularly difficult to overcome.

In general, rural areas in the South have experienced growth in their language minority populations, but it is often not evenly distributed. In a handful of rural communities

near poultry or meat processing facilities, the children of the immigrants filling the jobs created by these operations often represent sizable portions of a school's enrollment. A similar rural school without a processing plant or slaughterhouse may very easily have few or no limited English proficient students. Thus, when reviewing the data from Table 7 below, it is important to bear in mind that for many states in the region, the number percentage of LEP students in a locale group represents an averaging of widely disparate populations.

It is worthy of note that every state in the region has an LEP population that is smaller than the proportionate share of the state's students (that is, while 9.4 percent of Virginia's LEP population is in rural areas, rural students comprise 26 percent of the state's enrollment). A few states stand out in the size of their rural LEP population, notably Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, North Carolina, and Oklahoma. Alabama, Mississippi and South Carolina both might also belong in this group, but their reported populations are so low as to raise questions as to how complete

Limited English Proficient Students by Locale, 2000

State	Total	Total Non-Rural	% Non-Rural	Total Small Town/ Rural	% Small Town/ Rural	Total Rural	% Rural
Alabama	7,159	4,305	60.1%	2,854	39.9%	1,637	22.9%
Arkansas	13,187	9,862	74.8%	3,325	25.2%	1,241	9.4%
Florida	204,208	193,017	94.5%	11,191	5.5%	8,300	4.1%
Georgia	63,272	45,052	71.2%	18,220	28.8%	10,530	16.6%
Kentucky	6,012	4,922	81.9%	1,090	18.1%	436	7.3%
Louisiana	10,629	9,339	87.9%	1,290	12.1%	956	9.0%
Maryland	32,534	31,442	96.6%	1,092	3.4%	611	1.9%
Mississippi	2,279	890	39.1%	1,389	60.9%	793	34.8%
Missouri	8,157	6,679	81.9%	1,478	18.1%	870	10.7%
North Carolina	52,644	26,621	50.6%	26,023	49.4%	21,901	41.6%
Oklahoma	37,618	21,723	57.7%	15,895	42.3%	9,264	24.6%
South Carolina	6,409	3,495	54.5%	2,715	42.4%	1,863	29.1%
Tennessee	No data	No data	No data	No data	No data	No data	No data
Texas	601,791	536,696	89.2%	65,095	10.8%	31,478	5.2%
Virginia	43,535	39,443	90.6%	4,092	9.4%	3,360	7.7%
West Virginia	915	789	86.2%	126	13.8%	89	9.7%
SLC Total/ Average	1,090,349	934,275	85.7%	155,875	14.3%	93,329	8.6%

table 7

Note: In many instances, reporting for LEP students and other subgroups is inconsistent in the Department of Education survey at the district level. This may result in some over/ underreporting.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Common Core of Data, Local Education Agency Universe Survey, 2000-2001.

the count is for these states. Regardless, it is clear that a number of Southern states have large LEP student populations in their rural and very rural areas. This fact, and the tendency of immigrant and refugee groups to "cluster" in areas, points to a number of rural communities within Southern states that are faced with LEP populations entirely out of proportion to their general student population, a fact that is borne out by anecdotal reports from around the region. Given the staffing supply situation for educational professionals certified in English as a Second Language, it is unlikely that these rural schools and districts have the resources and personnel necessary to serve the educational and social needs of these students.

Teachers

Research has established the importance of a high quality teacher to the educational advancement of a child. Across all geographic regions, schools have had trouble recruiting and retaining qualified staff. Until the recent economic downturn, teacher shortages were a dominant feature of the educational landscape. Even in the current economic climate, many schools continue to face challenges in finding the teachers they need.[4] This is particularly true for rural schools. Teachers in rural areas almost always earn less than their urban counterparts. This is true for beginning and experienced teaches alike. Nationally, according to the Rural Trust, beginning teachers earn 11.3 percent more in non-rural districts. The most experienced teachers in non-rural areas out-earn their rural peers by more than 17 percent.[5] Thus, teachers seeking positions in schools will find greener pastures away from the pastures and closer to the shopping malls. Table 8 illustrates the differential between state average and rural teacher salaries in the region.

It can be argued that in rural areas the cost of living is often lower than in non-rural areas. This is particularly true with respect to housing costs. This in turn is reflected in a lower teacher salary scale for rural areas. Simultaneously, other items and amenities may not be available in rural areas or only at premium prices. In the first instance, the cost of living would be further reduced, in the latter, increased. Calculating these items on a strict cost basis overlooks a basic component of how people live, however. Given their portable set of skills, teachers can select areas based on a range of factors. The remoteness of an area likely weighs in on a potential teacher's decision. Furthermore, when used to justify increased state aid to schools in high cost areas, the effect is often the provision of higher support for higher wealth districts, further exacerbating inequities in state formula funding for rural districts.

Other elements influencing salary levels are length of tenure, amount of experience and level of education. Schools with chronic staffing problems, which often include low-wealth schools in all geographic areas, and rural schools in general, often have teachers with less experience, less training, and less education. Thus rural schools may have a handful of experienced staff and numerous new teachers in high-turnover positions. If this is the case, the average teacher salary would be lower. This would also indicate a very perilous situation for the education advancement of the students in such a school.

Furthermore, averages are not necessarily the best indicator of actual situations in rural schools, since they tend to blur the regional

State Average and Rural Teacher Salary 2001

State	State Average	Rural Average	Ratio Rural to State Average
Alabama	37,956	34,087	0.90
Arkansas	36,182	28,563	0.79
Florida	38,230	33,757	0.88
Georgia	42,216	37,867	0.90
Kentucky	36,589	33,908	0.93
Louisiana	33,615	28,623	0.85
Maryland	45,963	41,163	0.90
Mississippi	31,954	30,284	0.95
Missouri	36,715	28,584	0.78
North Carolina	41,496	33,964	0.82
Oklahoma	34,499	29,024	0.84
South Carolina	37,938	35,083	0.92
Tennessee	37,431	30,951	0.83
Texas	38,361	33,979	0.89
Virginia	40,197	32,366	0.81
West Virginia	35,888	32,916	0.92
South	37,827	32,820	0.87

table 8

Source: National Education Agency Teacher Salary Survey 2001; Rural School and Community Trust *Why Rural Matters 2003.*

variations inside states. Nonetheless, the comparison of averages, and the general trend toward lower pay to teachers in rural areas provides an indicator of a problematic situation for rural schools. Regardless of these factors, for teacher recruitment problems to abate in rural areas, salaries must rise to a point at which qualified staff is attracted to the district. The persistent recruiting challenges facing rural schools would seem to indicate that the lower salaries offered there are not compensated for by lower costs of living.

Even if teacher salary is at this clearing point, schools in all areas need to retain teachers. Teachers leave schools for a variety of reasons, thus there is no silver bullet for this problem, but rural areas face particular challenges. Among these, lower salary rates for similarly experienced teachers certainly are a factor. If a teacher in a rural district is likely to earn more in a suburban district, the inducement to transfer is great. In this way the receiving district benefits by adding an experienced teacher, while the rural district experiences a perennial drain on experienced staff. Through this process, rural schools and their poorer urban counterparts serve as the training grounds for their richer suburban peers.

A second challenge to rural schools in retaining teachers is the difficulty teachers face in obtaining appropriate professional development. Professional development is important to a teacher's advancement in the classroom, renewal of licensure, and refreshment of skills. For many of the same reasons, rural teachers will have a more limited circuit of peers with whom to share experiences and strategies. While little researched, anecdotal reports indicate this professional isolation is a serious problem for retaining teachers in rural areas.

A further issue is tied more directly to the economic development of rural areas. A major cause teachers give for leaving a position is family reasons, which, in addition to the birth of a child, includes relocation with a spouse. As rural areas struggle economically, the spouses of teachers often seek employment elsewhere, taking their teacher-spouses with them. Given the limited economic growth in rural areas, the reverse very seldom happens, and teacher-spouses do not flood into rural areas with their spouses due to job relocation.

While teacher retention is a multifaceted issue, providing more and better professional development and exchange for rural teachers would seem to be a major key for helping rural schools keep the teachers they have. In a broader sense, improving the economic possibilities in rural areas would further help to slow the loss of skilled teachers to urban and suburban areas.

Educational Outcomes

Student performance is, for most observers, the ultimate test of whether schools are functioning. Measuring performance is, of course, a highly controversial subject. Data for student performance is seldom differentiated by the urbanicity of the school or district. Thus, there are few reliable sources for student performance data comparing rural and urban schools. National tests, such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress, offer limited views on student performance in rural areas, but the periodical nature of NAEP makes it very difficult to measure current conditions (the NAEP is administered every other year for subjects such as reading and math, and less frequently for others). NAEP is also not designed for comparisons at the state-level, although it is possible to draw some conclusions. Furthermore, NAEP only recently began releasing data by urbanicity, with the 2002 reading results being the first to offer a glimpse at how well rural students match up against their urban and suburban peers across all three tested levels. Nonetheless, this data does offer a valuable window on how well rural schools are performing. Table 9 provides a comparison of student scores by school location and state.

Average NAEP Reading Score and Percentage of Students at or above Selected Achievement Levels, by Locale, Grades 4 and 8, 2002

State	Grade level	Central City				Urban Fringe/Large Towns				Rural/Small Town			
		Below basic	At or above basic	At or above proficient	At advanced	Below basic	At or above basic	At or above proficient	At advanced	Below basic	At or above basic	At or above proficient	At advanced
Alabama	4	56	44	20	5	40	60	28	6	48	52	21	4
	8	49	51	14	51	28	72	27	2	35	65	21	1
Arkansas	4	48	52	24	5	27	73	35	7	42	58	25	4
	8	33	67	27	3	20	80	34	2	29	71	25	1
Florida	4	41	59	25	5	41	59	27	5	35	65	28	6
	8	28	72	31	4	29	71	27	2	24	76	31	2
Georgia	4	50	50	24	6	39	61	30	7	40	60	28	6
	8	37	63	22	2	29	71	27	2	30	70	26	1
Kentucky	4	39	61	28	5	35	65	32	8	35	65	29	6
	8	23	77	37	3	21	79	35	2	23	77	29	2
Louisiana	4	59	41	16	3	42	58	24	5	48	52	20	3
	8	40	60	23	2	29	71	24	1	28	72	21	1
Maryland	4	64	36	7	1	36	64	32	8	29	71	38	10
	8	49	51	12	0	26	74	34	4	19	81	38	5
Mississippi	4	56	44	15	2	47	53	21	4	57	43	14	2
	8	38	62	18	1	24	76	29	1	36	64	18	1
Missouri	4	48	52	23	4	27	73	38	9	34	66	31	6
	8	30	70	25	1	16	84	35	2	15	85	34	2
North Carolina	4	35	65	33	9	32	68	32	6	32	68	31	6
	8	26	74	32	2	23	77	32	2	23	77	31	2
Oklahoma	4	46	54	23	4	32	68	33	6	42	58	23	3
	8	29	71	27	1	21	79	31	1	24	76	26	1
South Carolina	4	41	59	26	6	34	66	31	7	47	53	22	4
	8	34	66	24	1	24	76	31	2	36	64	20	1
Tennessee	4	56	44	17	3	34	66	31	7	36	64	27	5
	8	40	60	22	2	20	80	35	2	26	74	29	2
Texas	4	44	56	24	5	33	67	31	7	34	66	31	5
	8	34	66	25	2	19	81	36	3	21	79	34	2
Virginia	4	39	61	29	7	23	77	43	10	29	71	36	8
	8	27	73	29	1	15	85	45	5	21	79	33	2
West Virginia	4	31	69	34	7	29	71	34	6	38	62	25	4
	8	27	73	27	1	22	78	30	2	22	78	30	1
U.S. Average	4	49	51	21	4	33	67	34	8	34	66	31	6
	8	36	64	23	2	22	78	35	3	22	78	33	2

Table 9

Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress, State Reading 2002 Reports, June 2003.

A note on NAEP: The National Assessment of Educational Progress is administered to a sampling of students in each state opting to participate. For the 2002 Reading Assessment, every state in the SLC participated. First conducted in 1969, NAEP constitutes the only nationally representative longitudinal assessment of student knowledge and skills in various areas. NAEP provides results for demographic subgroups and for the state as a whole, but not for schools or individual students. Tests are administered at the 4th-grade, 8th-grade and 12th-grade level. NAEP reports scores on a scale of 500, with scores ranked as below basic, basic, proficient, and advanced.

With relative consistency, students in rural areas and small towns performed better than their peers in central cities, but usually not as well as students in urban fringe areas. In some states, the differences in performance between rural and urban fringe performance is often very small, notably Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, North Carolina, Tennessee and Texas. North Carolina students in rural and urban fringe areas are almost identical in their performance, and rural students in Florida and Maryland perform at higher levels than their urban fringe counterparts. On the other end of the spectrum, Mississippi and Oklahoma both have performance results for rural schools which closely match their central city peers, particularly in 4th grade. Arkansas' rural students, while outperforming their central city

peers by a small margin, lag well behind their urban fringe peers.

On the national level, rural areas tend to track very closely to their suburban counterparts, with central city students performing considerably worse. The relative strong showing of rural students should be welcome news to policymakers concerned with rural schools, particularly given the disadvantages rural schools face with respect to staffing and poverty. However, these results point to an overall less encouraging picture. In very few states are more than four-fifths of all students in any geographic area performing at or above basic level. The challenge of raising performance across the board for all students is starkly illustrated by Table 9 as well.

Comparative research on mathematics results from the 1992 and 1996 NAEP yielded even stronger evidence of the positive performance of rural schools. Analysis by Jaekyung Lee and Walter G. McIntire of the University of Maine revealed that rural students nationally realized greater gains on the reading assessment than their non-rural peers. Lee and McIntire attributed the gains to the advantages of small school size, safer and more orderly environments and greater collective support. Moderating these advantages were increased poverty, and fewer instructional resources and course offerings. Rural achievement when measured in these terms, is not consistent across all states, with some states' rural students not realizing any gains against their non-rural peers. Unfortunately for the South, all seven of the states not realizing gains (Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia and West Virginia) were in the region. The researchers noted that the uneven performance of rural students often appears tied to the instructional resources, school climate (e.g., safe and orderly school conditions) and collective (community) support, which in the South lagged behind rural schools elsewhere during the reporting period.[6]

While an imperfect measure of school success, these NAEP scores demonstrate that rural schools are, in most instances, doing a fair job in preparing their students and, in many cases, often do a better job than those serving similar populations in other areas. Another category by which schools are often measured is high school completion rates. While four-year completion rates are not exact, and they overlook those students who either return to school or earn a GED, they can provide a snapshot of how effective schools are in meeting the basic needs of students.

A 2002 report from the National Center for Education Statistics noted that "relatively high dropout rates were most often observed in reporting school districts that served large or mid-sized cities and least frequently in rural areas."[7] The authors of that report also note that when considering districts with relatively low (below 4 percent) dropout rates, rural schools dominate, on a national level, with no states reporting a large city dropout rate of less than 4 percent in 1997, compared to 16 states with rural districts reporting this and 12 states with urban fringe/large city reporting this. Updating this to the 1999-2000 school year reveals very little change

This good news on a national level hides a fair degree of unevenness at the state level. In the same report, for the states in the region reporting data, slightly more than half reported rural dropout rates below the state average and, of those, a few differed only by a percentage point. Table 10 provides state data for those reporting.

Dropout Rate for Grades 9-12, by District Locale and State 1999-2000								
State	District Locale							
	Total	Urban					Rural	
		Large City	Midsize City	Urban Fringe of Large City	Urban Fringe of Mid-size City	Large Town	Small Town	Rural
Alabama*	4.5	4.3	3.9	3.5	4.5	0.8	5.1	5.7
Arkansas	5.7	†	6.3	7.6	†	6.9	6.3	4.9
Florida	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Georgia	7.2	7.6	9.0	5.9	6.9	8.4	8.8	8.0
Kentucky	5.0	†	5.7	5.4	5.0	3.8	4.2	5.2
Louisiana	9.2	11.5	9.2	9.7	8.6	8.3	8.3	8.1
Maryland*	4.2	10.5	6.1	3.0	3.5	†	5.1	4.4
Mississippi	4.9	†	5.8	2.2	5.0	4.1	5.1	5.2
Missouri	4.4	7.7	6.1	3.6	4.2	6.5	4.2	3.7
North Carolina	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Oklahoma*	5.4	9.3	5.8	4.4	4.0	4.6	5.6	3.7
South Carolina	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Tennessee	4.2	7.5	3.8	3.0	3.2	3.4	3.0	3.8
Texas	5.0	7.0	5.6	3.3	4.6	4.6	4.3	3.4
Virginia*	3.9	4.9	4.8	3.5	3.4	4.2	4.2	3.9
West Virginia	4.2	†	4.7	6.4	4.4	3.4	3.6	3.9

table 10

— no data

* This state reported on an alternative July through June cycle rather than the specified October through September cycle.

†Not applicable. There were no districts in the particular code for this state.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data, "Local Education Agency Universe Survey Dropout and Completion Data File: School Year 1999-2000."

As Table 10 demonstrates, the performance of rural schools in most states is better than average, but not usually by wide margins. Nonetheless, in no state are rural schools the poorest performing schools with respect to dropouts, and for the most part they remain very close to the state mean when they have greater than average dropouts. There are a number of speculative suggestions for why this may be so. On the one hand, rural schools often have strong community ties which may increase pressure for students to remain in school. This is countered by what is often lower educational attainment for community members and lower levels of college attendance, both of which point to higher degrees of acceptance of non-completion of high school. Furthermore, in rural communities, many employers may not require a high school diploma as a condition for employment.

These two opposing forces—strong community pressure to perform academically and limited compulsion to remain in school—are often viewed in isolation by policymakers (how to reinforce the former and reduce, mitigate or eliminate the latter). In part this is because different rural communities, as with communities everywhere, have a varying mixture of these two forces. It is valuable, however, to consider how the economics of rural areas, particularly with respect to the employment opportunities in these areas, affect the educational expectations of the students who live in these areas. While this discussion is beyond the scope of this paper, analysis by the Southern Rural Development

Center at Mississippi State University and the Rural Policy Research Institute in Columbia, Missouri, both point to the tendency of job creation in rural areas to be very undemanding educationally, with little expectation or opportunity for advancement beyond entry level.[8]

Equity and Adequacy from a Rural Perspective

School finance weighs heavily when discussing the potentials and problems of rural education. Rural districts have sued in several states to have the state formula for funding education adjusted. Rural schools often contend that the formula for funding local schools, resting most often on local effort and resources, creates disparities and inequities for property poor districts, which include the great preponderance of rural districts. School finance litigation has changed considerably since 1971, when the *Serrano* v. *Priest* case created a series of lawsuits challenging the legality of how states finance K-12 education.

The first generation of these lawsuits focused on equity, that is, the relative equivalence of funding and other resources available to school districts and how districts compare with one another on a variety of indicators, fiscal and otherwise. There have often been yawning gaps between resources in rich and poor districts, and these early cases rested on the obligation of the state to, in some way, equalize these resources to provide all students with an equal opportunity to receive a quality education.

Over time, school finance litigation shifted toward adequacy, specifically, whether the resources available were sufficient to satisfy state constitutional and statutory mandates and the concomitant expectations for a quality education. Equity in funding in this context may still be a component, but the more critical theme of these cases is the question of what the amount of funding for education must be to sufficiently provide for an adequate educational experience for all students regardless of where they attend schools. This shift, while subtle, creates a conundrum for lawmakers, namely: How much is enough?

Rural school systems generally are property poor and have much greater difficulty raising funds to cover rising costs. The financial realities of rural schools can create glaring disparities in the physical conditions of schools, teacher salary, access to new technologies, and appropriate training for staff compared to schools in more property-rich districts. These disparities have been at the center of lawsuits in a number of states.

In Arkansas, the tiny (and rural) Lake View school system successfully brought litigation on both equity and adequacy of the school finance system. The outcome may obligate the state to increase education spending by a projected $500 million to cover the disparities between districts. Consolidation was a major item of discussion during the 2003 session of the Arkansas General Assembly because of the school finance conundrum. The state Supreme Court has ordered the General Assembly to create a new plan by 2004.

Equity and adequacy lawsuits also have been brought by rural school districts in Kentucky, North Carolina and South Carolina. In Kentucky, a lawsuit was filed in January 2003, by parents and students mainly from rural areas in the state contending that the General Assembly has not funded education in a manner sufficiently equitable or adequate. In Texas, the state's "Robin Hood" school finance law, for which lawmakers approved a phase-out in the 2003 legislative session, will remain in effect if the state does not create a school financing structure which satisfactorily supports the state's numerous rural districts by the date on which the law is scheduled to be retired. ("Robin Hood" laws essentially share property tax revenues from rich districts with poorer districts through a state-imposed structure.)

In Tennessee, the state is struggling with complying with a court order to equalize teacher salary between districts following litigation brought by rural districts, which have disproportionately lower teacher salaries than the rest of the state. The plan currently under consideration would cost an additional $27 million in the 2003-2004 school year alone. In an interesting development from outside the region, in New Jersey, 17 rural districts in the state were added to the 30 poor, urban districts afforded additional funding from the state as a result of that state's school finance litigation.

The National Picture

Rural schools in the South are not unique in facing many challenges. In general, rural schools everywhere are confronting problems similar to, and in some instances more severe than, those facing the region. National statistics on rural education offer an interesting

perspective on how the South matches, and at times defies, broader trends. This national data also provide a snapshot of rural education as it compares to non-rural areas.

On average, rural schools are considerably smaller.[9] The average urban fringe or central city school has an enrollment of more than 620 students. In rural areas, the average enrollment is 400 students. Teachers in rural schools are more likely to be male than their urban and suburban peers (28 percent rural to 26 percent urban/suburban), but are far less likely to be a member of a minority group (8 percent minority in rural areas compared to 25 percent in central cities and 11 percent in urban fringe areas). Rural teachers are also slightly less likely to hold advanced degrees than their urban and suburban peers (37 percent versus 47 percent).

Half of rural schools have at least one inadequate building feature. Leaking roofs and pipes; faulty wiring; inadequate or broken ventilation, heating and air conditioning; sagging floors; and other signs of wear affect more than 4.5 million students in rural areas. Meeting the challenges of repairing and replacing decaying infrastructure is complicated by local tax bases which have failed to grow substantially in the past decade. Indeed, for many rural schools across the country, the stagnation of local tax rolls has abetted the deterioration of school facilities, particularly the older buildings which are a regular feature of rural school districts.

Rural Schools and the No Child Left Behind Act

Changes in federal law related to education have created a mix of results for rural schools.[10] The recent reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the No Child Left Behind Act, increased the amount of flexibility and, initially, the amount of funding, rural schools had. At the same time, the Act dramatically increased the requirements on schools everywhere. Among the most far-reaching of these actions are requirements for annual testing of students in grades 3-8, reporting of student performance by population subgroups, and school- and district-level interventions for poorly performing units. For schools in urban areas, the stipulations of the Act may prove to be difficult or inconvenient to implement, increasing expenses, directing curriculum decisions, and forcing adjustments in data collection and reporting.

For rural schools, these changes could prove more challenging. The Act requires schools to report the annual yearly progress on all students in each subgroup (e.g. Hispanic, Black, White, Asian/Pacific Islander, etc.) as determined by their performance on annual assessments. For rural schools, the cohort of students at any given grade level may be very small. While the school does have some allowances on not reporting on subgroups so small as to render the results individually identifiable, there is no provision for reporting data of a statistically inadequate sample size. A fact for small schools regardless of their location, using discreet testing events to determine school performance places an undue weight on each individual test-taker. In small groups, each individual's performance carries disproportionate weight in determining the overall performance. What this means for small schools is an increased likelihood of slipping into and out of compliance with annual progress goals based upon the poor performance on a test by a very small number of students.

Failure to meet performance targets triggers a range of actions, from additional private tutoring services and school choice for students in poor-performing schools to school or district reorganizations. Providing tutoring services to urban students is largely an issue of establishing a list of providers and hoping the funds are available (the district is responsible for paying for the services used by the students). For rural areas, tutoring services may be patchy or nonexistent. School choice options are similarly easier for urban schools than their rural peers. The distances between rural schools can often be considerable, and, particularly at the middle and high school level, the nearest school may be a county away from the student's community, family and home.

The Rural Education Achievement Program

Tucked away in the No Child Left Behind Act was the Rural Education Achievement Program, or REAP. Essentially an umbrella for three initiatives, REAP offers rural schools considerably more flexibility than schools in other areas in how they spend so-called formula funding. The benefits of this flexibility are obvious. Because formula grants are based principally on population, smaller rural schools may receive relatively small amounts of money within each category. Under previous legislation, schools were required to

use these funds for the express purposes for which they were distributed, regardless of the fact that the amount a rural school received may be insufficient to accomplish much of anything toward that goal. The flexibility of REAP allows small schools to accomplish their priorities in given areas with the federal funds they receive. REAP also released rural schools from many of the "set-aside" requirements associated with categorical funding, such as requirements that a percentage of some funds be used for staff development. REAP is both a recognition of the special circumstances of rural schools and an effort to provide these schools with a mechanism for spending their funding more efficiently and effectively. Under REAP, rural schools have enhanced authority to consolidate or transfer funds among four programs (Teachers, Technology, Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Innovative Programs) or into (but not out of) Title I, the principal federal funding for low-income students.

The remaining components of REAP are two formula grants for rural schools. These consist of the Small, Rural School Grant Program and the Rural and Low-Income School Program, both of which are intended to provide funding for targeted educational activities. For rural schools, perhaps the most welcome part of REAP was an additional set of funds for grants to districts to supplement the formula funding they already received. Called the Rural Education Initiative (REI), districts were eligible for direct, noncompetitive grants of between $20,000 and $60,000, depending on their population, to be used in any of the program areas covered under fund consolidation allowances. While perhaps insignificant in larger school systems, this is a considerable amount of funding for small, rural schools. In its first year, 4,026 of the 4,700 REAP-eligible districts participated in the program.

Authorized for $300 million by Congress, REAP was funded in fiscal 2002 at just over half of that amount. While the budget submitted by President Bush to Congress for fiscal 2003 increases overall spending on education by $2.8 billion, it zeros out funding for REAP, including the REI grants. The Department contends that changes made in the 2002 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act eliminate the need to fund discrete categorical programs such as the two rural education programs. Indeed, states are required to demonstrate that rural schools receive an equitable portion of the federal funds. The reauthorized legislation targets a greater percentage of program funds directly to local school districts and provides all districts, particularly rural ones, with greater flexibility in the use of federal funds.

Charting a Course

With nearly two in five students in the region attending school in a small town or rural area, there is a critical mass of school children for whom the success of rural schools is critical. These children benefit from the small sizes of rural schools and close connections with their communities. Rural school children often attend classes in buildings which are freer from violence and drugs than those found in other areas. But these buildings may be older, in poorer repair, and less likely to have teachers with access to professional development and competitive pay. Rural students with special needs, including language barriers to learning and learning disabilities, are less likely to find specialists to serve their specific needs than their peers in urban and suburban schools. And rural students are often poorer and more likely to be eligible for free or reduced-price lunch programs.

Given these contrary forces, rural schools do a remarkable job in educating children. Educational outcomes in rural schools are strong, and rural communities are often fiercely loyal to their schools. But loyalty is an insufficient means of sustaining and expanding educational excellence in these areas. Among the areas where rural schools report the greatest need are overall funding, which, due to the property-poor nature of many rural districts, is a vexing challenge to resolve on the local level; teacher recruitment and retention; and capital improvements, including stabilizing and modernizing aging facilities.[11]

For much of America's history, rural schools have played a central role in the education of the nation's children. The many strengths of rural communities are key factors in the vitality of rural schools. As policymakers look to create a place-based education policy for rural areas, building on these advantages while mitigating and eliminating the constraints that these areas face will be key to the future of rural schools and the future of the rural people they serve.

Endnotes

[1] William Duncombe and John Yinger, *Does School District Consolidation Cut Costs?* Working Paper No. 33, Center for Policy Research, Syracuse, New York, January 2001.

[2] *Building Strong Rural Schools in South Carolina: The Foundations We Need,* The South Carolina Rural Education Grassroots Committee, Columbia, South Carolina, March 2003, p. 12.

[3] Specific learning disabilities are defined as limitations to learning which are essentially psychological in nature, and do not include blindness, deafness, or mental retardation. Among the fastest growing of these is diagnosis with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, or ADHD, but other conditions have also been growing swiftly among American school children.

[4] For a more comprehensive discussion of teacher supply and shortages, please see Jonathan Watts Hull, *Filling in the Gaps: Solving Teacher Shortages*, Southern Legislative Conference, Atlanta, Georgia, April 2003.

[5] Lorna Jimerson, *Competitive Disadvantage: Teacher Compensation in Rural America*, The Rural School and Community Trust, Washington, D.C., March 2003.

[6] Jaekyung Lee and Walter G. McIntire, *Understanding Rural Student Achievement: Identifying Instructional and Organizational Differences between Rural and Nonrural Schools*, The University of Maine, Orono, May 2000.

[7] Beth Young and Lee Hoffman, *Public High School Dropouts and Completers from the Common Core of Data: School Years 1991-92 Through 1997-98,* U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, National Center for Education Statistics, Washington, D.C., April 2002.

[8] Bo Beaulieau, presentation to the Southern Legislative Conference Agriculture and Rural Development Committee, July 16, 2001, Savannah, Georgia; Chuck Fluharty, presentation to the Southern Legislative Conference Agriculture and Rural Development Committee, August 5, 2002, New Orleans, Louisiana.

[9] Statistics for this section are from NEA Research, *Status of Public Education in Rural Areas and Small Towns – A Comparative Analysis*, National Education Agency, Washington, D.C., September 1998; and U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Common Core of Data, Schools and Staffing Survey, and Digest of Education Statistics.*

[10] For a more complete review of the impacts of the *No Child Left Behind Act* on rural schools, see Jonathan Watts Hull, "No Child Left Behind?" in *State Government News*, June 2003, The Council of State Governments, Lexington, Kentucky.

[11] Extracted from a survey conducted by the National Education Agency's Rural Education Unit, 2002.

This ***Regional Resource*** was prepared for the Education Committee of the Southern Legislative Conference (SLC) by Jonathan Watts Hull, SLC Regional Representative.

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