

What Makes Education Reform Difficult: Poverty in Rural America

Published on [September 28, 2015](#)

By Dr. Linda Lemasters.

While writing the blog last week on the achievement gap, I read a great deal of research on urban education and inner city schools. Education in rural America is mentioned often as an afterthought. There is little knowledge of failing schools and children in need across sparsely populated farmlands, mountains, and deserts (Wang, 2014). A few researchers are very vocal about problems of education reform in rural areas, and suggest more research is needed. Until that happens there will be a limited awareness of facts and concerns about resources, programs, school buildings, and ultimately achievement in rural schools; and, education reform will be thwarted and limited. The following are facts about rural education, which can *jump-start* our discussion:

- One third of rural American schools have low-income students, low achievement on standardized tests, and low rates for college attendance (Rees, 2014).
- Rural communities are generally small with a low local tax base, resulting in inadequate funding for schools.
- Rural schools serve over 40% of U.S. students, yet receive only 22% of federal funding.
- “. . . Students in rural communities are likelier than their peers to live in poverty and only 27% go on to college” (Rees, 2014).
- Rural areas suffer a critical shortage of teachers, often employing teachers who are not licensed in the subjects they teach (Wang, 2014).
- Based on US DoED statistics, reading and math scores in rural districts are as low or lower than those in urban districts (Biddle, 2011).
- Graduation rates for poor and minority students who attended and/or graduated from rural high schools during the 2005-2006 school year were the same as the urban districts. Based on available research and anecdotal evidence, schools attended by low-income students have major deficiencies compared with those used by their richer peers. Although there has not been a nation-wide survey for nearly 20 years, available state data suggest there is a nexus between the condition of schools, the number of low-income students attending schools, and their achievement.

In 2009, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania conducted an enrollment and building capacity study (Yan). Some of the findings of this work included:

- Rural schools in general were older than their counterparts in the suburbs and cities, both in real and functional age.
- Respondents from schools with functional ages of 15 years or more were more likely to note roofs, foundations, and walls as unsatisfactory, poor, or borderline.
- Older schools typically had worse building safety conditions and often reported fire alarms, smoke detectors, and sprinkler systems in poor condition. Emergency lighting was rated as borderline.
- Building energy efficiency was reported as poor or borderline in older facilities.
- Building accessibility, handicapped accessibility, student drop-off areas, and vehicular ingress and egress were often rated poor or borderline in the older schools.

Arkansas, Virginia, Washington, DC., North Dakota, and other states also have been the topic of similar studies. Dewees and Earthman's (2000) research on rural schools noted that it was not unusual that rural students attend schools over 100 years old. The Educational Facilities Clearinghouse has fielded calls from rural areas that report problems due to deferred maintenance and bond issues, which have been voted down numerous times. The vote by the community may or may not be due to lack of support for the local schools; it may be a lack of income on the part of the voters or the low assessed value of local real estate. In contrast, school age of urban schools is improving, and funds to build new urban schools are more available through local or state support or in some instances federal dollars.

It would be negligent should I not mention that rural schools do produce students who achieve, many rural schools have small class sizes, and students are able to take advanced coursework by making use of distance learning and technology. What I want to be recognized, however, is that rural schools often face the same challenges as our urban schools. When it comes to research and funding, their needs must be recognized, if education reform is going to be successful in all of our united states.

References and Resources

- Biddle, R. (2011, August 2). The myth of differences between urban and rural schools. *This Is Dropout Nation*. Retrieved on August 26, 2015: <http://dropoutnation.net/2011/08/02/the-myth-of-differences-between-urban-and-rural-schools/>

- Dewees, S., & Earthman, G. (2000). Trends and issues affecting school facilities in rural America: Challenges and opportunities for action. In S. Dewees & P. C. Hammer (Eds.), *Improving rural school facilities: Design, construction, finance, and public support*, (pp. 1-20). Charleston, WV: AEL, Inc.
- Koziol, N. A., Arthur, A. M., Hawley, L. R., Bovaird, J. A., Bash, K. L., McCormick, C., & Welch, G. W. (2015). Identifying, analyzing, and communicating rural: A quantitative perspective. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 30(4), 1-14.
- Rees, N. (2014, February 10). 3 things that should be done to help rural schools. *US News and World Report*. Retrieved on August 26, 2015: <http://www.usnews.com/opinion/blogs/nina-rees/2014/02/10/3-ways-to-help-rural-schools>
- University of Michigan. (n.d.). *Rural Education*. Retrieved on August 26, 2015: http://sitemaker.umich.edu/butler.356/rural_schools
- Van Dyk, J. (2015, August 24). *Map: The aftermath of the great recession*. Retrieved from EdBuild on August 27, 2015: <http://edbuild.org/blog>
- Wang, A. B. (2014, November 12). The forgotten struggles of rural schools: Simply finding enough teachers can be tough. *Education Week*. Retrieved on August 26, 2015: <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2014/11/12/12wang.h34.html>
- Yan, W. (2009, September). *Rural school district enrollment and building capacity: Projections for the next 10 years*. Harrisburg, PA: Center for Rural Pennsylvania Schools. Retrieved on August 28, 2015: http://www.rural.palegislature.us/school_enrollment_build_cap.pdf

Linda Lemasters, associate professor in the Graduate School of Education and Human Development of the George Washington University,