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Toward the Construction of a Federal Policy-Impact Code for Classifying the Nation's Rural School Districts: A Response to Stephens, Reeder, and Elder

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The papers by Stephens, Reeder, and Elder represent a significant milestone in the ongoing saga of giving definition to that sector of the elementary-secondary educational enterprise known as rural education. The necessity of giving definition to rural education has grown as public education has become more and more urbanized. At the point when America was primarily a rural agrarian nation, public education was, with few exceptions, *rural* education. Public policy relating to education that existed at the state and federal level was, for the most part, congruent with the reality of rural schools. As public policy increasingly reflected the urbanization of society, it has become more and more problematic for rural schools. Rural schools and rural communities have been poorly served, in part, because we had no good way to talk and think about schools that were not urban. Schools/communities were urban or non-urban. The only language we had for talking about rural schools is what it was they were *not*, not what they were. The papers presented today represent the beginnings of a language and a way of conceptualizing rural schools and rural school districts so that we can say what they *are*.

Bob Stephens' paper provides the backdrop for this discussion. He identifies four sets of research issues that need to be addressed: definitional issues, conceptual issues, methodological issues, and policy application issues. By confronting these issues, we will, within the context of rural diversity, be better able to approach such questions as (a) How would we know a rural school if we saw one, and how could it be described? (b) How well is it doing? and (c) How can this information be used at the federal policy level to insure educational equity across the spectrum of public education, including rural schools in whatever context they might exist?

The papers by Bill Elder and Rick Reeder relate directly to Stephen's "definitional" issues. Both papers make an important contribution to the development of a typology, or classification system, that discriminates among different types of rural schools for public policy purposes. With the Bureau of the Census' Topologically Integrated Geographic Encoding and Referencing (TIGER) System; the National Center for Educational Statistics' School District Mapping Project; Elder's work, which combines a number of different sets of criteria and data analysis strategies for identifying rural schools; and Reeder's analysis of strengths and weaknesses of selected economic, social, and fiscal indicators; we are now coming close to having the pieces of the puzzle needed to create a rural school classification system. In other words, much of the knowledge needed to address Stephen's "definitional" issues—or my first question, How would we know a rural school if we saw one—is now in place.

Arriving at answers to Stephens' "conceptual" issues, or, How well are rural schools doing?, will be a much more difficult task. First, measuring the effectiveness of rural schools requires some set of standards against which to measure their performance. And while there is much talk these days about national and world-class standards, there is as yet little agreement concerning whether or not such standards should exist— and if so, whether they should be the same for all schools, rural and urban. Should rural schools continue to pursue an agenda that is primarily urban and national in its focus or should they assume more of a responsibility for contributing to the sustainability

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of rural communities, playing a more central role in rural development? There are both philosophical and operational issues to be addressed before these questions can be answered.

Second, currently there are no good alternative models for how rural schools might operate more effectively. The "one best system" very much dominates rural education as it does urban education. And because it is a "mass-production" system requiring large numbers to operate efficiently and effectively, rural schools by this measure are always second best. This wide-spread perception has permeated large segments of both rural and urban America. So, considerable work will be needed to move ahead on this front, work that is both research and development in nature. Recognizing that progress occurs along a broken front, rather than constituting a rational linear process, the creation of federal policy that would provide the necessary resources for the development of alternative rural school models could go a long way in creating rural schools that capitalize on the strengths of small size and the rural context within which they operate.

The "methodological" issues raised by Stephens relate to the characteristics of a defensible classification system: "What level of precision . . . is required to establish diversity?", "How many classes of rural districts is it possible to use that will not only establish the diversity in the universe, but will also enjoy utility in the policy community?", "What approach should be used for the development of indicators that will distinguish the health and performance of rural systems?" If this exercise to create a federal policy impact code is to benefit the cause of rural schools and rural communities, resolving these methodological issues will be determined by the extent to which the system meets the test of practicality. It will be much more important that the "level of precision" satisfies face validity, as assessed by the general practitioner, rather than the academic rigor of the researcher. Similarly, such a policy code schema will need to meet the utility criteria of those who make public policy.

These three papers reflect the fact that significant progress is being made to create the tools for understanding and talking about rural schools with more exactness. However, just having the tools is not sufficient. What is needed are well-informed individuals who feel strongly about the need for healthy rural schools and communities, and who have the skills to craft public policy that is truly in service to those schools and communities that exist beyond the bright lights and freeways.