
Keep Rural Schools Open: Position and Policy

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Abstract

Rural schools are a central pillar in the communities in which they belong. They offer not only education for the community's youth, but serve as a community space, educational location for all community members, and enhance new generations' understanding of local history and current events. The schools ensure that education is accessible to everyone in the community by avoiding long commutes, employing numerous locals, and having smaller class sizes to better cater to individual student needs. While there are benefits to closing schools, often ones of financial nature, the loss of these schools is felt deeply within rural communities. There are options to pursue and consider prior to taking the drastic action of closing a school, including seeking additional state funds, incorporating place-based educational approaches, and working to cooperatively provide extracurricular opportunities between local rural schools.

Keywords: *rural education, rural sustainability, rural, schools, policy*

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INTRODUCTION

Sustainability plays an increasingly important part of our society. Through efforts to preserve our natural ecosystems, address inequities in society, and work to enhance our economical gaps, we can move towards a world where all needs are met. I believe that rural communities play a large role in these sustainability efforts. The United Nations (2009) also addresses this and considers rural communities to be integral to an overall sustainable world. To ensure ongoing sustainable development and viability, we must work to invest in rural communities via infrastructure, environmental protection efforts, health-care, and education (United Nations, 2009). Through focusing on these areas and investing in the future of these communities, society can move towards holistic, national sustainable development. I want to address the educational aspect of sustainability as related to rural communities. This is, to me, the best starting point for enhancing rural life and contributing to a more sustainable system overall.

The United Nations supports rural development as an important aspect of global sustainability. However, rural concerns seem to be left out of conversations regarding equity and sustainability within discussions of progress.

A critical driver of the unsustainability of rural communities is the long-term and ongoing reduction of education access in rural areas. These reductions result from funding concerns, staffing issues, and decline of the student population. Local rural school closures lead to additional issues in these communities. Without easy access to local education, there is less involvement from the local population in the local government, community activities, and education related opportunities. The community sees a loss of additional members due to job loss stemming from closing schools. This in turn impacts the level of funding the community receives from community members' tax dollars, reduces the number of community members voting and engaging in local politics, and leads to brain-drain from educated members moving away for better opportunities (Bosman, 2018).

Shrinking populations are making rural school closures increasingly commonplace. In Wisconsin, for example, up to 71% of rural school districts experienced lower enrollment between 2011-2016; this is a direct result of shrinking populations (Bard, et al., 2018). Rural schools face closures more often than their suburban and urban counterparts (Bard, et al., 2018). In addition to low enrollment numbers, rural schools also face budgetary concerns. With school funds highly dependent on property

tax allocations, shrinking rural populations have a negative financial impact on local schools. Marty Strange (pg. 12, 2011) writes, “Most damaging are school funding systems that rely too heavily on local property taxes. The local property tax is the bane of most rural schools, especially those in low-wealth regions.” Without proper funding, districts are unable to be adequately staffed, provide ongoing maintenance upkeep, or offer engagement opportunities for the student population in their schools.

Rural voices are important, particularly in environmental sustainability and societal equity. Rural communities have a lot to offer to sustainable practices. These areas are responsible for growing and raising much of our food and each area has its own rich culture. Each rural area possesses unique knowledge of the land and methods for preserving that land while meeting the needs of the people who live there. Rural communities face unique inequities that deserve to be noticed, discussed, and addressed. These inequities tend to be a result of ongoing poverty, lack of technological resources, and lack of educational access (Statti & Torres, 2020). Equity across all communities is important for our social sustainability on a local, national, and global scale. Society cannot become sustainable and healthy when large portions of our communities are living in poverty, unable to access necessary resources, and don’t have the opportunity to learn and better themselves and their local community.

DEFINING POSITIONALITY ON TOPIC OF INTEREST

Rural schools offer many benefits to their local communities. The cost of operating a small, rural school is worth the funds when compared to the additional benefits they provide. Rural schools have smaller class sizes, which contributes to a deeper sense of belonging and development among students. Rural schools also provide a place for community gatherings, engagement opportunities outside the classrooms, and high community investment overall. These benefits merit sufficient funding and the effort to identify funding and resources beyond the local tax base. Funding from state budgets is worth exploring to determine how state funding is distributed among districts and schools. Another method to enhance access to resources is sharing extracurricular activities between districts to boost involvement; this can help ensure rural communities have access to all aspects of education.

Class Sizes & Youth Development

While closing rural schools may seem favorable in times of financial hardship, financial factors should not be the only consideration. It is also important to consider the

social implications of school closures. Due to lower enrollments in most rural schools, student-to-teacher ratios are smaller as are the overall class sizes (Provasnik, et al., 2007). Students learn more and achieve at a higher level when their teachers are able to be more engaged in the classroom; this is a direct result of small student-to-teacher ratios (Schazenbach, 2014). In addition to class sizes, local rural schools are a main source of developmental opportunities for rural youth (Irvin, et al., 2011). Not only are students able to learn in the classroom, they can also study place-based topics that are applicable to their everyday lives. Without a local school, this place-based mindset is lost, and students may feel less engaged without the real-life connections to their home. Place-based educational efforts also enhance the empathy one has for the local environment, economy, and government by allowing students to apply what they learn at school in their daily lives. Place-based education enhances not only student’s academic progress and understanding, but their lives outside of school.

When a local school closes, community members are forced to find reliable transportation for students to and from schools that are farther away. Transportation options include driving or bussing students to the larger institution. Either option typically takes longer, using up time that students could spend on educational or other activities. Additionally, students who must take a bus to get to and from school are often left without the opportunity to engage in activities after school (Diorio, 2018). The bus leaves directly after classes end and there often is no later bus available should a student wish to engage in after-school, extracurricular activities. This is a loss for rural students as extracurricular activities allow students to continue learning beyond the classroom, and gaining important social and academic skills.

Conversely, when local schools remain open, students are able to more easily participate in after school activities. Students benefit from safe, social experiences and often are introduced to new material in a fun, engaging manner. Extracurricular experiences also provide opportunities for community members to be involved as leaders or coaches for the activities. This local engagement in the school strengthens the entire community. It strengthens the bonds between the school, the students, parents/families, and the general community.

Rural schools offer more than K-12 education. The schools invite family and community involvement through various means, often at higher rates than at larger, more urban or suburban institutions. Families and general community members are likely to be involved in local schools when opportunities are available to participate in, such as volunteering for school events (Provasnik, et al., 2007). Schools are central pillars of their communities, often serving as a hub for social activities including programs such as theater and music and

athletic events (Miller, 1995). Beyond serving as a physical place for community engagement, local schools also provide job opportunities for many community members in locations where poverty can be high. Without a school, there is a loss of jobs for teachers, custodial and maintenance staff, administrative positions, food service, and paraprofessional positions.

In order to enhance the sustainability of rural communities, a place-based education approach can be beneficial to not only teach about unique aspect of a community but to also include community members in the shaping of their youth. Place-based education acts as a bridge between curriculum, students, families, and the larger community (Hendrickson, 2012). Place-based learning approaches have shown to foster engagement beyond the classroom, resulting in greater civic engagement and concern for environmental health. Eliminating the ability for educators to employ place-based learning strategies creates a disconnect between classroom learning and the local community experience. The loss of a strong place connection results in a lack of understanding about how one's actions impacts one's home (Eppley, 2017).

Equity and social justice impact on local rural schools

Rural communities want to keep their schools open. While a community may not want to see taxes raised, typically they do not actively advocate for their local school to close. Many local rural schools are integral parts of the rural communities (Bosman, 2018). As such, there are many repercussions that result from school closures, many of them having social justice impacts. There are four main areas of social justice: human rights, equity, access, and participation (Soken-Huberty). Without a local school, communities struggle with access to participation not only in the classroom, but in the community as a whole. Part of human rights is learning about history, place, and global society and happenings. If there is not a local school, students lose the ability to understand their role and their home within a global context. The community also loses out on ongoing educational opportunities that bridge equity concerns on a large scale to the importance of social justice issues at home (Soken-Huberty). Social issues can be brought to light through the classroom, especially those that may not be visible or tangible within the community. Schools offer a safe place to learn about social justice concerns. Without a place to teach about these issues, students may never be exposed to them and may be unable to contribute to a just world, both at home and in our larger global society. Classrooms, teachers, and peers offer insights into different cultures and societal norms, allowing students to learn beyond their daily lives. They

learn to engage in understanding and sharing their experiences, developing empathy for people who experience life differently than them. Teaching about inequities allows for compassion and can lead to advocacy for change and equity.

Beyond learning about global and local social justice concerns, there is also the aspect of losing support that is crucial for students with different needs. If a student is reliant on the local school guidance counselor who is heavily involved with the student's at home support system, losing that person in their educational journey may prove detrimental to the student's success. The loss between the classroom and home live connection can hinder a student's ability to thrive in either. Having a local school also allows for employment for many community members from teaching to paraprofessionals to food service to custodial staff. Without a local school, many community members of differing work backgrounds will become unemployed, putting additional strain on the local and state economy.

Having a local school also allows students access to the internet to do homework, learn about global happenings, and research ideas. Many rural areas lack access to affordable, reliable, high-speed internet. However, with a local school there is technology and internet available to students. Sometimes these items may also be available for community use after school hours or on weekends. The building can also be used during times of crisis to house people, such as a dangerously cold winter or a flood where people are unable to stay in their homes.

Finally, it is often overlooked that rural communities are made up of more than just people of European descent. Rural America is diverse and should be treated as such. Native American Reservations are often in rural areas. Migrant workers are present in rural locations. In order to achieve racial justice in the United States, we must include rural communities in our conversations and ensure that all children have easy access to quality education. Schools are also locations where community educational efforts can occur, such as English as a second language classes, citizenship test preparation, financial planning, and more. A local school may be able to offer a high level of support for marginalized community members.

Summary of Position

Rural voices are important in the realm of sustainability; they have a lot to offer to sustainable practices. Rural communities face unique inequities that deserve to be noticed, discussed, and addressed. Part of hearing and caring for rural communities includes keeping rural schools open to teach about sustainable practices, to utilize place-based education, and to enhance the community. I believe wholeheartedly that rural schools should

remain open to offer the most applicable and accessible route to education and community engagement for rural areas. Smaller, local schools enhance their communities by providing a more personal education, a place for community gatherings, an opportunity for parents to be involved, and the opportunity for students to be engaged in extracurricular activities. I believe that rural education matters and deserves to be recognized and funded.

DEFINING THE COUNTERPOINT OF VIEW

The closing and consolidating of rural schools allows for some benefits to local communities and students. These efforts specifically allow for financial relief on the communities. By closing under-enrolled and under-funded schools, larger schools can provide more robust educational opportunities to students with the additional funds. Closing a school greatly reduces a school system's overhead cost such as utilities, staff pay and benefits, extracurricular activities, and food service (Fiorillo, 2017).

Money Saving Measure

Due to the financial implications, many rural schools have been closed in an effort to combat rural financial issues from a policy-maker lens (Bard, et al., 2018). Closing small or under-enrolled schools can be a money saving measure for a school district and community. By closing a school and consolidating the students into a larger school, the district can use the money from the small school savings to improve the student experience at the larger school for more students. If multiple communities are funding one larger school, they can pool their money to gain access to resources for all students including more staff, better building upkeep, and equipment for classroom and extracurricular activities. These added resources can help boost academic performance and student engagement while allowing students from marginalized backgrounds the additional support they may need (Tieken, 2020). This is especially true for students in need of tailored special education experiences. Qualified staff and proper education plans are more likely to occur at a well-funded, larger institution. This helps ensure students are getting the adequate assistance and educational experience they need.

Holistic, High-Level Education

With more public funding being allocated at a larger, consolidated school, a better more holistic educational experience can be offered. Students will learn skills that are applicable to the world, not just their core commu-

nities. Students have the chance to learn about different economic structures, world languages, historical cultures, and more beyond their physical location. Special accommodations for students with disabilities or other different needs can be better distributed at larger schools due to the ability to hire dedicated and trained professionals in these areas. This is all due not only to more funds, but also to the sharing of resources and enrollment prospects of multiple communities where smaller schools only rely on one community's resources (Sell, Leistriz, 1997). Larger schools often draw more applicants for jobs, as well. This allows for these larger schools to be able to staff adequately and be able to hire qualified staff who excel in their roles. Hiring more qualified staff with official credentials helps students gain a better education by ensuring they are learning a broad range of topics. This in turn can assist in standardized test scores increasing, potential leading to more funding for these schools. More funding means better pay for staff, and so on and so forth for a cycle of improvement through staffing.

Access to Activities

As previously discussed, extracurricular opportunities enhance the student experience. These opportunities assist with student academic achievement, character development, social development, and allow for the student to be involved in the community (Christison, 2013). However, many students of small, rural schools do not have access to these opportunities and miss out on these additional developmental activities. This is due to many reasons, including a lack of personnel and student participants to warrant offering these activities (Frey, 2015). In addition, there is a lack of other community-based organizations that offer comparable activities for youth. In larger schools, multiple local areas can lend support to ensure schools can offer a variety of extracurricular opportunities (Frey, 2015).

Summary of Counterpoints

Fiscal impacts are valid and worthy of being considered. Without proper funding, building maintenance, staff salaries, equipment, and more are unable to be purchased. Without funding, rural schools are unsustainable. Looking into how our public schools are funded and how to make that process more equitable is one way to combat this problem; another is to close the smaller schools to ensure larger schools have funding to accommodate all student needs.

However, financial concerns cannot trump the other impacts of school consolidations and closures. Communities and school districts must determine if the cost of continuing to provide local education is worth the bene-

fits it brings to that community (Foreman-Peck, 2011). Communities face losing more than just a school; they face losing a central part of their community where their youth learn, their neighbors are employed, and community engagement happens (Bosman, 2018).

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

Funding for public schools comes from tax payer dollars, but there are more state funding options to consider for funding avenues. High-wealth districts, typically in suburban and urban settings, have access to strong property tax funding, but rural communities do not often have this luxury (Strange, 2011). By the state allocating additional funds in annual budgets, rural schools can have access to similar levels of financial support as their high-wealth counterparts. By properly funding schools to ensure facility upkeep, to meet supply needs, and to offer fair pay, rural schools can compete for resources such as qualified staff, infrastructure, technology, and support for additional community events and engagement opportunities.

Rural communities can also utilize place-based education efforts to incorporate local experts and community members into the learning process. Teaching about the unique aspects of the local community can help prevent brain drain and a desire for students to leave the community. By relying on community member expertise and involvement, more members will be engaged in the school system, beyond being a parent or guardian of an enrolled student. The Northeast Regional Educational Laboratory (Miller, 1995) has used a similar approach, called Community Development Partnerships, to recognize the importance of place within a school. A community is more than its economics; a strong community of support leads to sustainability of not only the local school, but the local community as a whole (Miller, 1995). This is especially important as we see rural population shrinking on a continuous basis. Brain drain, where educated people are moving out of their rural home towns to seek better opportunities in suburban and urban areas, is a serious concern in rural locations. Not only does this mean rural communities are losing people, but they are also losing expertise, local knowledge, and the opportunity to enhance their lives via learning from community members who leave for higher education and return to share what they have learned. There are always new practices and understandings of life-applicable topics in rural communities. By ensuring educated community members can return to their hometowns to work and live, these communities can enhance their local expertise with a new-age lens, whether that is technology or best practices. Place-based education ensures that local community members can understand and learn about their history and place, locally and within the larger global

scale; it also allows for experts in the community to be engaged and celebrated for what they know.

A final suggestion to consider for the enhancement of the rural school experience and to assist with funding efforts is a cooperative learning approach between two or more rural schools or school districts. If a school has interest in creating a sports team, but not enough students to form a team, a cooperative approach can bring together students from multiple districts to create a full team. The students meet new peers, engage in team building, and can learn healthy competition through play. The purpose of a cooperative approach is to ensure students in small, public schools are granted the same opportunities for involvement and development as students in larger public institutions. These extracurricular opportunities assist in the holistic development of students, offer a method of involvement for social wellbeing, and give students the experience they may need or want to obtain future goals for higher education and/or for the workplace. A cooperative opportunity pools resources to ensure financial strains or lack of student participants are not a burden on one school over the other and also allows for staff or local community members to be involved in youth development.

CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

Society cannot expect to improve collective living conditions, including ecological and social wellness, without access to education that is immersed in the local ecosystems and community. Closing local schools is messy, causes divisions, and is harmful to the overall wellbeing of rural communities. While consolidating schools may alleviate some financial constraints and allow for additional combined resources, the benefits of keeping local schools open to their respective communities outweighs those minimal benefits. We must work diligently to better educate on the importance of local schools, speak out on the community impacts of closing rural schools, and work to implement policies and practices that protect rural communities from harm and enhance their contributions to society.



Emily Norman is a recent graduate of the EdD program in Educational Sustainability through the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. Her dissertation research focused on the mindsets of rural Midwestern communities regarding education as related to their level of access to education.

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