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RURAL SCHOOLS STRUGGLE TO ATTRACT HIGHLY QUALIFIED TEACHERS

by ADAM MILLER

Problems facing urban public schools have long been researched, studied and identified. Much of the plight of urban public schools has been attributed to low teacher salaries, large class sizes, lack of resources, poor physical working conditions and student discipline problems.¹ However, these troubles are not unique to urban schools.

According to The Education Commission of the States, “schools in rural America face an array of problems every bit as daunting and intractable as those confronting schools in urban communities.”²

Perhaps the greatest problem facing rural schools is attracting and retaining high-quality teachers. Two-thirds of the nation's K-12 math and science teachers are expected to retire by 2010.³ This will hit rural school districts particularly hard, as it will be increasingly difficult to fill the growing number of teacher vacancies.

School administrators in geographically isolated areas find that they have few applicants to choose from, and as a result, little choice in hiring decisions.⁴ Some school administrators claim they are forced to consider hiring individuals with lower credentials than those previously considered, hire full-time substitutes or simply cancel courses.⁵

THE RURAL SCHOOL POPULATION

Statistics help show the scope of the challenges faced by rural schools. More than 31 percent of regular elementary and secondary public schools nationwide are in rural areas.⁶ Twenty-two percent of U.S. public school students attend schools in more than 26,000 rural communities, each with 25,000 people or fewer.⁷ Thirty-two percent of all public school teachers teach in rural schools.⁸

These numbers amount to approximately 10 million rural students who are directly affected by the teacher shortage in rural America.⁹ According to Doris Williams, the director of capacity building at the Rural School and Community Trust, "each of these children deserves an opportunity that is not being afforded to them because of where they happen to be born or happen to live."¹⁰

Rachel B. Tompkins, President of the Rural School and Community Trust, agrees. "It is time for action—not just acknowledgement—that rural schools need help," wrote Tompkins.¹¹

NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND HAS BEEN NO FRIEND TO RURAL SCHOOLS

The rural teacher shortage is compounded by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). NCLB was established by the federal government to improve state academic achievement levels by requiring states and local education agencies to implement strategic plans to assess student achievement and educational

improvement.¹² NCLB requires that all teachers of core academic subjects be “highly qualified.”¹³ To be considered “highly qualified,” a teacher must hold at least a bachelor’s degree, be fully certified, and he or she must demonstrate subject-matter competency in each of the academic subjects taught.¹⁴

Many rural school districts, however, have struggled to comply with the requirements of NCLB, as their small populations and geographical seclusion have greatly affected access to resources.¹⁵

In rural communities, “Young teachers in particular can’t find spouses [or] housing, and feel professionally disconnected from a larger community,” said Williams.¹⁶

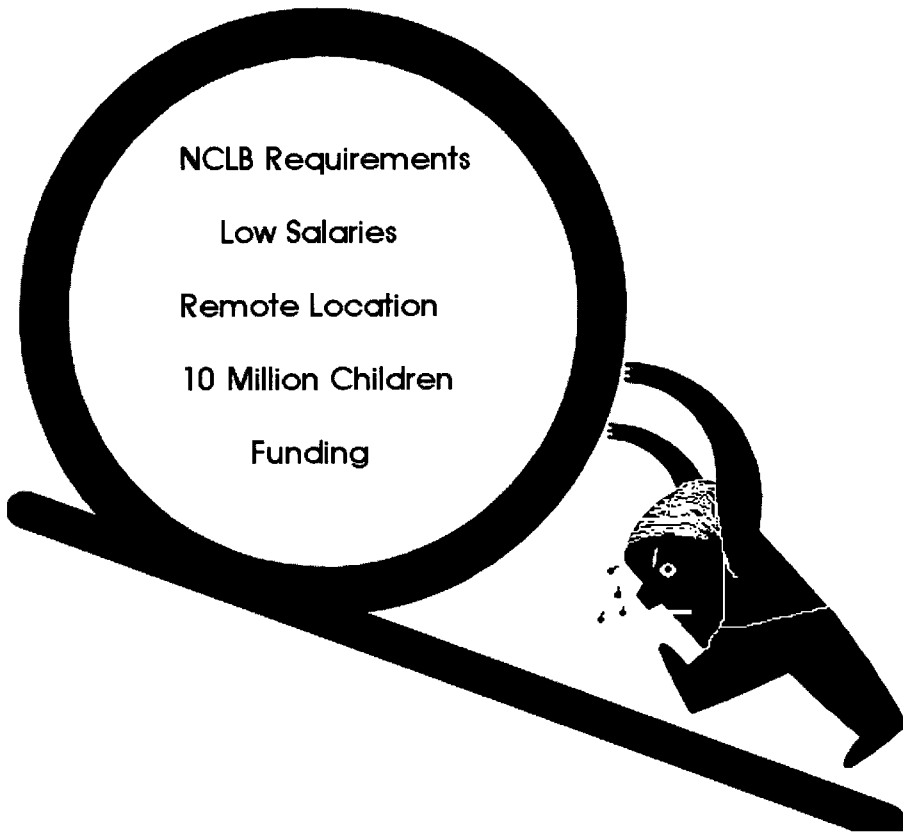
Recognizing that rural districts need help, The U.S. Department of Education (DOE) established the Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP) “to provide additional funding to help schools address challenges that are unique to rural districts.”¹⁷ The funds could be used for several purposes, including professional development, teacher recruitment and teacher retention.¹⁸

While states were originally required to meet the “highly qualified” component of NCLB by the 2005-2006 school year, the DOE has provided up to three additional years for teachers in eligible rural districts to become highly qualified under certain conditions.¹⁹ Additionally, those states that demonstrated a good-faith effort to meet the requirements of NCLB, but who were ultimately unsuccessful by the initial 2005-2006 school year deadline, were given more time and flexibility to implement individualized state-wide plans aimed at meeting the requirements of NCLB.²⁰

Originally set to expire in September, 2007, NCLB now faces possible reauthorization; speculated to occur in 2009 or 2010.²¹ Ultimately, if and when NCLB is reauthorized, Congress will have an opportunity to provide further support to rural schools.²²

HAS NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND LEFT RURAL SCHOOLS BEHIND?

In 2003, the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), in partnership with the Appalachia Educational Laboratory (AEL), surveyed more



than 3,000 rural school superintendents nationwide about rural schools' ability to satisfy the teacher requirements of NCLB.²³

Some responses indicated that while many rural teachers already met the standards required under NCLB, the requirements may be hard to satisfy in future years.²⁴ One superintendent commented: "[we] currently have highly qualified teachers in the classrooms. My concern is that as we face a funding shortage and decreased student population we will be forced to eliminate [some of these highly qualified teachers]."²⁵

Another issue affecting retention of qualified teachers is that some middle school teachers, who may hold only an elementary certificate or an education major, may move to teach elementary school rather than complete the additional courses and testing needed for the subject-specific secondary certification under NCLB.²⁶ This could create a large absence of middle school teachers in rural areas. According to one superintendent, "we will lose a sub-

stantial number of our middle school teachers to transfers to elementary positions where they will meet the criteria for being highly qualified.”²⁷

Low teacher salaries in rural areas, however, may be the largest barrier to attracting and retaining teachers. Across the United States, the average salary in non-rural areas is approximately 13 percent higher than in rural areas.²⁸

While some districts have successfully attracted and retained teachers using financial incentives such as tuition assistance and bonuses,²⁹ many rural areas are unable to raise teacher salaries due to general funding inequities that often favor larger and wealthier districts.³⁰ Funding is often allocated on a per-pupil basis. So although rural schools represent large geographic areas, they wind up at a financial disadvantage due to their low per-pupil demographics.³¹

Another problem facing rural schools is the fact that they can't just raise salaries on their own. On one hand, many state statutes allow local communities to raise additional taxes to increase the teacher salary scale.³² However, rural communities are at a financial disadvantage as their tax base, whether derived from property or income, is usually lower than in most non-rural districts.³³

A further obstacle is that many rural districts are simply unable to use financial incentives to entice teachers to work in rural areas. Consequently, rural districts have used alternative methods to fill teacher vacancies at the district level including advertising, local and online recruiting, alternative certification routes, changing employment restrictions for retired teachers, and increasing reciprocity of certification between states.³⁴

Another strategy rural districts have used to address the teaching shortage has been to recruit and train teachers from the local community.³⁵ According to Erin McHenry-Sorber, the Managing Editor of the *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, “rural schools provide a great place for engagement with the community because historically, the rural school has been the social center of the community.”³⁶

Considered a “grow your own” initiative, the strategy of looking within the community aims to target individuals with ties to the community and the qualities to be good teachers in an effort to increase the likelihood of teacher retention.³⁷

One policy consideration that has been suggested to help improve the outlook for rural education is to implement technology consistent with non-rural areas.³⁸ Distance learning, for example, makes it possible for geographically isolated schools to provide professional development for its teachers, and offer a more comprehensive curriculum, without incurring the high costs associated with hiring and travel.³⁹

The energy and imagination needed to improve rural schooling does not deter some advocates. Lorna Jimerson of the Rural School and Community Trust says “[g]eography should not dictate which children obtain an excellent education and which do not.”⁴⁰

Yet it is the geographic isolation of rural areas that is paramount to the struggle of attracting and retaining the “highly qualified” teachers required under NCLB. The rigorous requirements of NCLB have been attributed to the cut-back of certain “non-fundamental” subjects, reduction in both student and teaching creativity, or thinning of those activities that keep children interested in school.⁴¹

According to Williams, “if we really want to impact what is happening in education . . . we really have to pay attention to rural places and rural children.”⁴²

NOTES

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2 *Id.*

3 U.S. Department of Education, *Highly Qualified Teachers for Every Child*, Aug. 2006, <http://www.ed.gov/nclb/methods/teachers/stateplanfacts.html>.

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9 Tompkins, *supra* note 6.

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16 Webcast Interview with Doris Williams, *supra* note 10.

17 Farmer, Leung, Banks, Schaefer, Andrews, and Murray, *supra* note 12, at 1.

18 Schwartzbeck and Prince, *supra* note 1, at 7; *Teacher Quality*, *supra* note 14.

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20 *No Child Left Behind Implementation Update*, Centerview, The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning, Aug. 2006, <http://www.cftl.org/centerviews/august06.html>.

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23 Schwartzbeck and Prince, *supra* note 1, at 4.

24 *Id.* at 10.

25 *Id.*

26 *Id.* at 11.

27 *Id.*

28 *Rural Education*, *supra* note 6.

29 Schwartzbeck and Prince, *supra* note 1, at 5.

30 *Rural Education*, *supra* note 6.

31 *Id.*

32 Jimerson, *supra* note 4, at 14.

33 *Id.* at 10.

34 Schwartzbeck and Prince, *supra* note 1, at 19; Jimerson, *supra* note 4, at 15.

35 Reeves, *supra* note 14, at 10.

36 Webcast Interview with Erin McHenry-Sorber, Managing Editor, Journal of Research in Rural Education, during Webcast Seminar 10 Million Children: Teaching and Learning in Rural Schools (Mar. 20, 2008).

37 *Id.*

- 38 *Biennial Survey of Rural Schools Reveals a Dramatic Increase of Minorities and Overall Enrollment Growth*, *supra* note 11.
- 39 Reeves, *supra* note 15, at 12.
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- 41 Anthony Rebor, *NCLB's Effects*, TEACHER MAGAZINE, Apr. 3, 2006, http://www.teacher-magazine.org/tm/articles/2006/04/03/04nclb_trends.html.
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