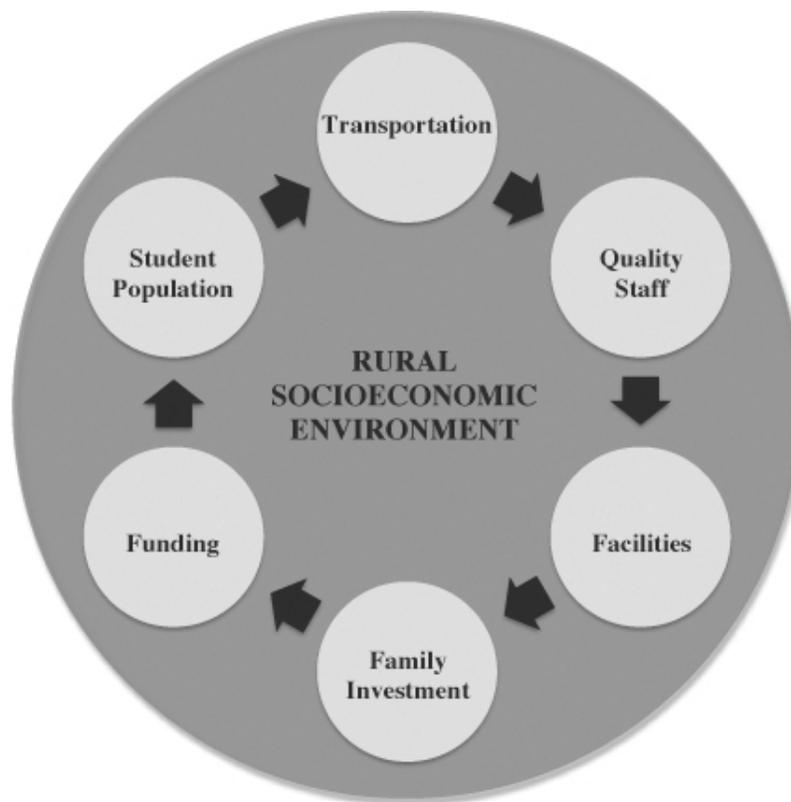


Rural School Dropout Issues

Implications for Dropout Prevention

Strategies and Programs



by

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Mary Reimer, Ph.D.

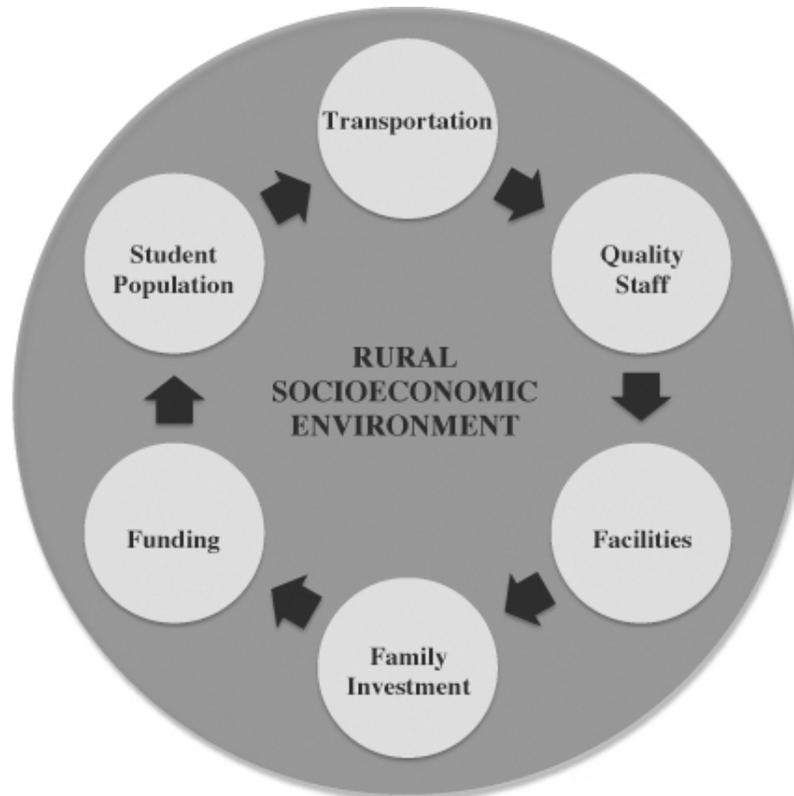


A Publication of the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network

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Introduction

The purpose of this report is threefold: to provide a brief overview of national dropout issues—both data and risk factors, with emphasis on those in rural areas—and then focusing on the particular factors that have the greatest impact on students in Mississippi; present the critical challenges for rural areas; and finally to recommend strategies and programs to address the issues discussed.

School dropouts have gained increased attention in the past five years. In addition to school leaders, business groups and the National Council of Governors have indicated concern about the number of students who are not completing school. The impact of dropouts on the United States economy is staggering. According to the Alliance for Excellent Education (2007), the loss of income from dropouts from the class of 2007 would be \$329 billion in their lifetimes. A high school diploma is increasing in importance because 60% of new jobs will require at least some postsecondary education (Steinberg & Almeida, 2004). Therefore, rural school leaders will need to increase high school graduation rates in order for young people to be prepared to acquire postsecondary education or job-ready skills to be competitive in our expanding economy.

National Dropout Rates

Researchers use several different measures to report dropout rates including census data. One statistic often used is the percentage of individuals ages 16 to 24 who have dropped out of school, called the high school status dropout rate. Using this data, the United States posted a current rate of 9.3% in 2006. The dropout problem is most acute with lower-income and minority students. For example, Hispanics posted a dropout rate of 22.1% and African-Americans 10.7%, while the rate for whites was 5.8% (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], p.30).

Dropout rates vary by region of the United States. For example, 6.5% was the rate in the Northeast, 6.1% in the Midwest, 11.7% in the South, and 10.9% in the West (NCES, p.30). Also, the South and West often manifested their highest dropout rates in districts of 1,000 or fewer students (U.S. Department of Education, Common Core of Data, 2007).

Much of the research focuses on urban dropouts due to funding support for this population, but dropouts in rural areas are also an issue (Johnson & Strange, 2007; Roscigno, Tomaskovic-Devey, & Crowley, 2006; Roscigno & Crowley, 2001). Almost 25% of schools in the United States are classified as rural, so it is an issue that calls for further study (American Association of School Administrators [AASA], n.d.).

Rural Dropouts

The high school status dropout rate for rural areas (11.1%) is the same as the national average (11.1%), while the suburban dropout rate is 9.0% and the city rate is 12.8% (Provasnik et al., 2007). Poverty and race impact school completion rates. The status dropout rate for those living below the poverty level in rural areas is 23.2% (Provasnik et al.) whereas it is 17.6% in the city and 18.4% in the suburbs. Rural whites tend to drop out at a higher rate than non-rural students. The dropout rate for African Americans is similar to that of urban areas.

The averaged freshman graduation rate is another statistic used to provide an estimate of the number of on-time graduates with a regular diploma divided by an estimated ninth-grade enrollment



(the sum of 8th-, 9th- and 10th-grade enrollments in a given year divided by three). The most recent data provided by the U.S. Department of Education shows an averaged graduation rate for the U.S. of 74.7% (Planty et al. 2008).

In 2006, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) in cooperation with the Census Bureau revised its definition of rural schools. There are now four major locale categories—city, suburban, town, and rural—each divided into three subcategories. The Census designated rural areas as those that do not lie inside an urbanized area or urban cluster (NCES, 2008). NCES has classified all schools into one of these 12 categories based on the schools' actual addresses. The new system classifies town and rural areas on the basis of their proximity to larger urban centers. It is important in doing research to differentiate between schools in remote areas and those located adjacent to an urban center because their needs and resources are often different.

“Based on NCES figures, there are 87,631 public schools in the U.S., of which 21,636 are classified as rural (almost 25 percent)” (AASA, n.d., p. 2.). Over 14% of all students attend a rural school. The average rural school size is approximately 305 students as compared to 525 students for non-rural schools. Rural school districts have one to three schools while urban/suburban districts may have hundreds of schools (AASA, n.d.). Using this new system, Johnson and Strange (2007) estimate there are ten million rural school children. Enrollment in rural schools has increased 15% while overall public school enrollment has increased by 1% from 2002-2003 and 2004-2005 (Johnson & Strange, 2007).

Rural communities often conjure up images of Mayberry, Sheriff Taylor, Aunt Bea, and Opie, but rural communities are changing. Rural communities are experiencing an influx of many of the problems that urban areas face, as well as changing demographics. Rural adolescents between the ages of 12 and 17 have higher levels of drug use than adolescents in other community settings (Collins, Bronte-Tinkew, & Logan, 2008). Rural families are now beginning to mirror urban families in the rates of divorce and nonmarital childbearing (Roscigno, Tomaskovic-Devey, & Crowley, 2006).

Using NCES figures, Mississippi has a total of 152 districts of which 56% are classified as rural. NCES divides rural areas into fringe, distant, and remote. There are 17 fringe, 41 distant, and 28 remote districts in Mississippi. In comparison, there are 5 districts in the city category—1 midsize and 4 small (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2008, Table 1). There are 1051 schools in Mississippi, and 56% are classified as rural. One hundred and fifty one schools are in fringe areas, 229 are distant, and 129 are remote (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2008, Table 2).

Mississippi's Rankings

The Rural School and Community Trust ranks the 50 states on a Rural Education Priority Gauge based on urgent education issues. Mississippi received the highest priority ranking based on socioeconomic status and the challenges facing them (Johnson & Strange, 2007). Socioeconomic challenges that relate to school dropout and must be addressed are the low percentage of rural adults with a high school diploma, the high rural adult unemployment rate, the low rural median household income, the high percentage of rural families in poverty, and the high percentage of rural students eligible for free or reduced meals.

Approximately 46% of the students live in rural areas and over 50% of state education funds go to rural districts. Other priority challenges include low instructional expenditures per pupil, salary



expenditures per instructional staff member (FTE) in rural districts, and size of the schools and districts (Johnson & Strange, 2007).

Student achievement outcomes are closely tied to the previous school challenges. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores represent the average of 4th and 8th grade scores. The lower the math or reading scores, the higher the state ranks on the Rural Priority Gauge. Mississippi's priority ranking of four for NAEP math scores and three for NAEP reading scores are among the lowest in the country (Johnson & Strange, 2007). States facing urgent socioeconomic issues, such as Mississippi, tend to have lower NAEP math scores.

As mentioned earlier, the most recent data on the averaged graduation rate for the U.S. was 74.7% while the rate for Mississippi was 63.3% (Planty et al., 2008). The lower the graduation rate, the higher the priority ranking. Mississippi's rural schools have less operating funds than any other state, yet they serve student populations with the severest socioeconomic challenges in the country. More than one in five families lives below the poverty line and 65% of students are eligible for free or reduced lunch (Johnson & Strange, 2007).

Monroe County Statistics

The educational level of adults in Monroe County is generally less than other counties in the state and reflects patterns seen in rural areas across the nation. For example, in Monroe County, approximately 43% of adults do not have a high school diploma. Related data is illustrated below.

Educational Attainment

- 4-year degree or better 9.0%
- Some College 17.9%
- High School Diploma 29.6%
- Some High School 23.7%
- Some Elementary 19.8%

Additionally, Monroe County is a poor county that continues to endure significant challenges as a result of a high unemployment rate (10.8%) and a population that has historically had low levels of educational attainment. The data below illustrates the reality of the economic situation.

Income Data

- Per Capita Personal Income \$17, 623 as of 1999 46th in state
- Percent Below Poverty Level 21.2% as of 1999 70th in state

(Note: There are 82 counties in Mississippi)

Labor Force

- Total Civilian 15,110
- Unemployed 1,630
- Unemployment Rate 10.8%



Significant Risk Factors for Dropout

Rural schools, like urban and suburban schools, are trying to improve their graduation rate and lower their dropout rate. The factors that make a student at risk of dropping out are actually found in four domains—individual, family, school, and community—so it is important to understand what these factors are in order to identify appropriate solutions. The National Dropout Prevention Center, in partnership with Communities In Schools, Inc., identified the following *individual, family, school, and community risk factors* (Hammond, Smink, Linton, & Drew, 2007). The report cited identified individual and family risk factors with a solid research base, whereas the school and community risk factors identified below were not as strongly supported in the literature. Their reliability as research-based factors are on a very different level and should be considered as likely factors.

Individual Risk Factors

- has a learning disability or emotional disturbance
- high number of work hours
- parenthood
- high-risk peer group
- high-risk social behavior
- highly socially active outside of school
- low achievement
- retention/overage for grade
- poor attendance
- low educational expectations
- lack of effort
- low commitment to school
- no extracurricular participation
- misbehavior
- early aggression

Family Risk Factors

- low socioeconomic status
- low parental education level
- high family mobility
- single-parent homes
- number of siblings
- family disruption
- having a family member who had dropped out
- low parental expectations for educational attainment
- lack of parental involvement with the school
- few conversations with parents about school

School Risk Factors

School Structure

- Large school size, particularly for low SES schools has also been linked to higher dropout rates.

School Resources

- High student-teacher ratios were found to be linked to dropout in low SES schools.



Student Body Characteristics

- Schools with high concentrations of low-income or minority students have higher dropout rates, over and above the individual background characteristics and performance of students.

Student Body Performance

- The level of performance of the student body as a whole also impacts a student's chances.

School Environment

- Negative school environment or climate. School environments with high rates of absenteeism or high rates of misbehavior have been linked to higher individual dropout rates. Being in a school with a high-risk incoming class (many individual risk factors such as low SES, low grades and test scores, and disciplinary problems) increased the chances that a student would drop out.
- Feeling unsafe at school can be a risk factor for dropout.
- Being in a school with a high level of attendance, violence, and/or safety problems.
- More likely to drop out when large proportions of students view discipline at their school as unfair or have low ratings of teacher support.

Academic Policies and Practices

- Standards-based reforms and high-stakes testing policies may be increasing the likelihood that low-performing students will drop out of school. Accountability and high-stakes testing may be increasing attrition between 9th and 10th grades.
- Because of retention, some students began high school two or more years behind those in their age group, increasing the probability that they would drop out by age 17 by 8 percentage points.
- Another problem with raised standards is that they are often put in place without providing the supports, such as tutoring and summer programs, that students need to meet the new standards.
- Students report a lack of relevant high school curriculum as a main reason they drop out.
- A majority of dropouts surveyed felt that schools could improve the chances that students would stay in school if they provided opportunities for real-world learning, had better teachers who made classes more interesting, and kept classes smaller with more individualized instruction.

Community Risk Factors

Location and Type

- Dropout rates are consistently higher in urban than suburban or rural schools.
- Geographic location also matters for dropout, where students are more likely to drop out in western and southern states, those with higher proportions of minorities, or those with a large foreign-born population.
- Higher dropout rates have been linked to communities with high numbers of single-parent households or adult with low levels of education.
- There is some evidence that employment rates are related to dropping out—where low unemployment may encourage youth to leave school early and high unemployment discourage it.

Environment

- Conditions in communities can increase the likelihood that students will drop out. Higher dropout rates have been found in those communities with a high amount of instability and mobility.



- Urban, high poverty areas also are more likely to have high levels of violence, drug-related crime, and overcrowding which could also impact school engagement, performance, and ultimately dropout.

Risk Factors Related to Rural Dropouts

The previous risk factors were derived from a comprehensive review of the literature from the past two decades with no specific parameters for type of school or community. Therefore, an additional review was focused on risk factors common and specific to rural areas to answer the question, “What do research reports on rural issues indicate would be particular risk factors commonly found in rural areas?” Those factors related to rural issues are presented below using the same four domains common in the literature.

Individual

Drug Use

It may be surprising that substance abuse is rampant in rural areas. “In fact, rural adolescents between the ages of 12 and 17 have the highest levels of drug use in this age group” (Collins et al., 2008, p. 1).

Numerous Siblings

Numerous siblings have a negative effect on educational performance due to decreased parental attention, family resources, and educational supervision (Roscigno & Crowley, 2001).

Ethnicity

Whites in rural areas tend to drop out at higher rates (10%) than those in cities (7%) or suburbs (6%) (Provasnik et al., 2007). Students in high minority schools tend to have higher dropout rates (Roscigno & Crowley, 2001; Roscigno, Tomaskovic-Devey, & Crowley, 2006; Rumberger, 1995). Minority students make up 25% or more of the student population in Mississippi and are often concentrated in rural areas resulting in majority minority schools (Johnson & Strange, 2007).

Family

Low Parental Education

Provasnik et al. (2007) found that the percentage of rural school-age children having at least one parent with a high school diploma was approximately 10% higher than children in cities and suburbs. However, the percent of adults who have a bachelor’s degree as their highest degree (13%) is lower than the national average (17%) (Provasnik et al, 2007).

Low SES

The low level of family income may be attributed to the depressed rural economy that relies on low-wage, labor-intensive work and low-wage service sector jobs. There is approximately an \$8,000 difference in family income between rural and non-rural families (Roscigno & Crowley, 2001). Rural child poverty rates are higher than central city child poverty rates in 19 states, and the overall rural child poverty rate exceeds 30% in Mississippi (Rural Child, 2008). “Nearly one in five rural children lives in poverty, compared with 15 percent of children in urban areas” (Collins et al., 2008, p. 1).

Large Families

Numerous siblings have a negative effect on educational performance due to decreased parental attention, family resources, and educational supervision (Roscigno & Crowley, 2001).



Low Educational Expectations

Parental educational expectations are often low because of the lack of perceived economic return on educational investments. Families often do not see the connection between education and a better future (Roscigno & Crowley, 2001). A higher percentage of rural parents (42%) expect their children's highest degree to be less than a bachelor's degree than do parents in cities (30%) and suburban areas (25%) (Provasnik et al., 2007).

School

Lack of Funding

Many rural communities do not see the value of investing in education when the best and the brightest students leave the area (Roscigno & Crowley, 2001). Federal funds account for a smaller percent of rural school revenue (9%) than city public schools (11%), but more than suburban schools (6%) (Provasnik et al., 2007). Less educational revenue is available because of depressed local property taxes, lack of corporate taxation, and a high tax burden (Roscigno & Crowley, 2001). The per pupil expenditure is about \$700 less per year than in non-rural areas (Roscigno & Crowley, 2001).

Low SES

The depressed rural economy creates large numbers of families with a low level of income (Roscigno & Crowley, 2001). Rural schools often have poor student bodies (Roscigno, Tomaskovic-Devey, & Crowley, 2006).

Low Teacher Salaries

"Public school teachers in rural areas earn less (\$43,000), on average in 2003-04 than their peers in towns (\$45,900), suburbs (\$45,700), and cities (\$44,000), even after adjusting for geographic cost differences" (Provasnik et al., 2007, p. vi).

Teachers Have Low Expectations of Students

The limited labor market in rural areas contributes to teachers' lower expectations because they often work in poor and/or majority minority schools (Roscigno & Crowley, 2001).

Low Math and Reading

Achievement "Average math and reading achievement is approximately 2.53 standardized points lower in rural localities ($p < .05$)" (Roscigno & Crowley, 2001, p. 284). Provasnik et al. (2007) found that lower percentages of rural students scored at or above Proficient level in reading and math on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP).

Community

Low SES

Poverty tends to be concentrated in remote rural areas where American Indian/Alaska Native and African American students live and attend school (Provasnik et al., 2007). "In 2000, 2.7 million rural children (under 18) were poor, representing 34 percent of the rural poverty population" (Rogers, 2003, p. 1). Students living in poverty have a higher status dropout rate (23%) than those living above the threshold (17%) (Provasnik et al., 2007).

High Property Taxes

In very poor counties, over one half of a family's income can go to pay property taxes (Bryant, 2007). The fact of this high tax burden prevents schools from asking for higher millage rates for support of local schools, thus leading to inadequate funding levels.



The Six Critical Challenges of Rural Socioeconomic Environments

Without question, the environment of economic hardship found in rural areas has had a major impact on dropout. The Rural School and Community Trust ranks socioeconomic factors as the most urgent challenge facing Mississippi. (Johnson & Strange, 2007) Studies based on the National Educational Longitudinal Survey and the Common Core of Data have found that students in rural areas have lower levels of educational achievement and higher levels of dropout than those in non-rural areas. Their research looks at these educational deficits as a function of resource disparities found in rural areas and their impact on influential investments at the family and school level. This economic distress is taking its toll on the rural family structure. Economic distress also impacts school resources through high poverty levels and lack of revenue generated from local property taxes.

Serving all school populations in rural schools is difficult but serving at-risk populations adds additional major challenges for rural areas. Many children live in poverty, with one in five rural children having limited, uncertain, or no access to nutritious food. In these rural areas, there is limited access to health care and social services. In addition, rural youth are at risk for academic failure and may be involved in substance abuse and criminal behavior because of poverty and limited health services. Indeed, there is an increased risk of poor mental health because of limited access to services, and as a consequence, rural areas have some of the nation's highest suicide rates (Collins et al., 2008).

Within the context of the impoverished socioeconomic situations found in rural areas, we have identified six critical challenges that impact the rural dropout rate (Figure 1):

1. Funding Structures to Support Education
2. Student Population
3. Transportation Related Issues
4. Quality Professional Staff
5. School Buildings and Support Facilities
6. Family Participation and Investments in Education

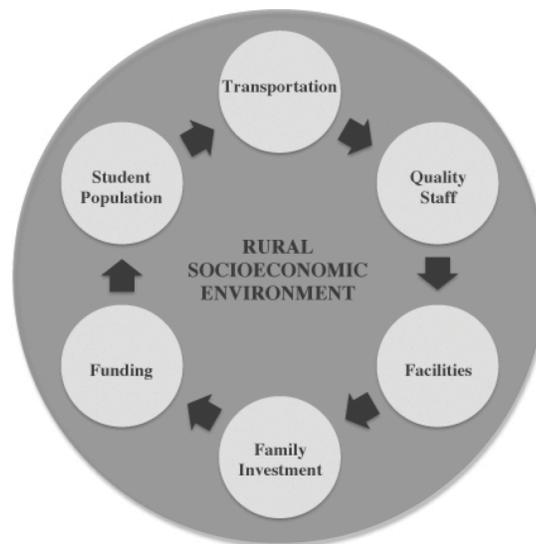


Figure 1



As in most rural areas, these issues are of high significance in Mississippi. The challenges are listed independently as each has specific dimensions that affect schooling opportunities. However, the collective impact of all six issues has a cyclical synergy; each one is related to all the others, and there is a potent effect when all are evident.

Funding Structures to Support Education

In rural areas, there are limited financial resources available because there are few businesses, community organizations, and public institutions from which to request funds or to partner with. In addition, rural communities have difficulty obtaining discretionary state and federal funding because of their small populations. There are several indicators supporting this first critical factor.

Although student/teacher ratios are usually lower in rural schools than in urban or suburban schools, the benefit of this asset is decreased because the per-pupil expenditure is usually lower making it harder to maintain highly qualified teachers in the classroom (AASA, n.d.).

In most states school funding formulas, there is a reliance on three revenue sources: income tax, property tax, and the sales tax. However, most school budgets are based on local property taxes. This presents a major challenge, with few businesses providing tax revenues and the socioeconomic environment failing to provide sufficient resources from other taxes. Consequently, rural communities continually face minimal revenues to support their schools' needs.

A comparison of inner-city and rural students shows many similarities (Roscigno, Tomaskovic-Devey, & Crowley (2006). Both groups have lower incomes and lower parental education levels than families in suburban areas. A major disparity is the per-pupil expenditure rate; inner-city schools have higher per-pupil expenditures because of the influx of federal funds targeted at high-poverty schools.

Student Population

Another challenge facing many rural areas is an enrollment decline in the overall school population. A decrease in the number of students often raises the threat of consolidation and a loss of per-pupil funding from state-based formula. A smaller student base generates fewer instructional resources. It then becomes harder to recruit and retain qualified teachers and administrators because a school does not have the funding to offer competitive salaries.

In addition to enrollment decline and recruitment of more qualified teachers, there is a corresponding issue related to student achievement. Mississippi received a rank of 4 in NAEP math scores and a rank of 3 in NAEP reading scores with a national rating system having a result of one as most crucial or most urgent (Johnson & Strange, 2007).

Finally, it is more difficult for schools with a declining school population to secure funds for repair or construction of facilities because funding priority is often given to schools whose student populations are growing (Schwartzbeck, n.d.).



Transportation Related Issues

The geographic isolation of rural communities contributes to poor access to transportation, a major problem for rural schools. Rural areas rarely have public transportation, and higher fuel prices limit travel. “Children in impoverished rural households are three times more likely to be without transportation than are children from non-rural households” (Collins et al., 2008, p. 1). Children often have to travel long distances to school because of the remoteness of the areas in which they live.

Small districts spend a greater percentage of their budgets on transportation. Rural districts spend 6-8% of their budget on transportation compared to 4% in non-rural districts (AASA, n.d.).

The length of bus rides is also an issue for many rural districts. A standard recommendation for one-way rides for elementary students is 30 minutes, and for high school students 60 minutes. Over 85% of rural elementary schools exceed this limit, and 25% of schools have rides of more than 60 minutes (Schwartzbeck, n.d.). In actuality the rides are often longer because many students are not picked up at their door, but must travel to designated pick-up sites. This increased transportation time has a negative impact on opportunities for extra learning time.

Quality Professional Staff

Recruiting and retaining qualified teachers and administrators are difficult tasks for rural schools (Arnold, Gaddy & Dean, 2004). The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) has increased the pressure on schools to hire qualified teachers. Many rural teachers do not have advanced degrees or additional certification which creates further problems in meeting the NCLB requirements (Schwartzbeck, n.d.). A disturbing trend in rural areas is that the chief education officer (CEO) does not have any formal training in education, but is more of a business manager (Schwartzbeck, n.d.). Recruiting qualified administrators can be difficult because they often serve in several capacities—instructional leader, athletic director, and even bus driver (Arnold, Gaddy & Dean, 2004).

Teacher salaries tend to be about 13% lower than non-rural districts which makes it even more difficult to recruit and retain qualified teachers (Schwartzbeck & Kusler, 2005). Low salary is cited as the reason most rural teachers leave the profession. Retaining teachers is a difficult challenge as 40-50% of beginning teachers leave after five years (Schwartzbeck & Kusler, 2005).

Teachers tend to have lower levels of education. Approximately 43% of rural teachers have a masters degree or higher compared to 52% in the suburbs and 49% in cities (Provasnik et al., 2007).

Many rural schools have teachers teaching out-of-field because they teach multiple subjects. For example, in Mississippi 36.7% of teachers in the state who are teaching out-of-field are in rural schools which comprise 32.1% of public schools (Schwartzbeck, n.d.). Teachers teaching multiple subjects range from 25% to 57% in rural districts (Schwartzbeck & Kusler, 2005).

School Buildings and Support Facilities

Maintaining and improving school buildings are difficult tasks in rural areas. The smaller districts are more apt to have buildings in less than adequate condition. Many states require that districts show stable or increasing enrollment in order to qualify for funding for upgrading or constructing new



buildings. Approximately 55% of schools with fewer than 300 students have at least one building feature in less than adequate condition. Elementary schools usually have more facility quality issues because high schools students often attend consolidated schools that are in better condition (Schwartzbeck, n.d.).

Many times in rural communities, school buildings may serve as the central point of the community's social or cultural gathering center. However, persistent weak economic conditions in Monroe County have not permitted this opportunity because the tax revenues and other resources have not been sufficient to maintain facilities beyond the minimum standards.

In general, facilities are inadequately funded except for safety issues, and new facilities are usually the first budget line to be trimmed in lieu of instructional resources or quality staff. Over a period of time, the pattern just continues to burden school budget and community resources. Furthermore, specific curricular needs such as a career technology programs tend to be inadequate or poorly supported because these programs tend to require unique facilities and added support structures.

Family Participation and Investments in Education

Families with low income, poor education, and disruptions are less likely to make investments in their children's education. Parents often do not see the connection between making an educational investment and improving the futures of their children. Cultural and political orientations in conjunction with the opportunities in the local labor market impact the investment that families make in education (Rosigno & Crowley, 2001; Rosigno, Tomaskovic-Devey, Crowley, 2006).

It is commonly understood that family involvement in schools is extremely important and provides a very important message to children that parents support and value education. However, in addition to more poverty and other economic challenges, rural environments cause other issues disruptive to schooling opportunities. They include issues related to required health services, lack of public transportation, inadequate library services, or parents simply not having sufficient time because their employment is in a nearby larger community.

Furthermore, the wide geographic areas covered by most rural schools tend to foster a noncaring attitude for school pride outside of athletics that is much more likely found in a suburban or larger city environment. The powerful advantages of civic engagement and strong family support for education seem to be minimal in all school districts in Monroe County.



Recommendations

Although rural schools face many challenges, some schools and districts have discovered creative ways to convert these challenges to opportunities for improvement. The following strategies have proved successful in some rural areas:

Funding Structures to Support Education

Identify Possible Funding Sources for Out-of-School Programs

- Corporations, local foundations, public service organizations, and individuals are possible sources of funding.
- The United Way, YMCA, and YWCA may provide in-kind contributions, reduced rent, or volunteers.
- Some federal sources may provide funds: The U.S. Department of Education's 21st Century Community Learning Centers (CCLC) Program; Child and Adult Care Food Program; U.S. Department of Justice's Tribal Youth Program, and U.S. Department of Agriculture's Cooperative State, Research, Education, and Extension Service (CSREES).

Regional Services

Some states are implementing regional service units to provide some services that are usually provided by districts. These units provide “. . . cooperative purchasing agreements, shared staff development programs, shared special education services, curriculum development services, and management support services, such as payroll” (Schwartzbeck, n.d., p. 14).

- Concentrate resources in high-poverty areas. Schools with poor student bodies need more support per pupil.

Student Population

Enrollment Decline

Enrollment is declining in some of the most isolated rural areas, making it more difficult to recruit and retain qualified teachers. Therefore, distance learning and using schools to provide social services are ways to deal with these issues related to families and youth.

Transportation Related Issues

Build Coalitions to Assist with Transportation for Out-of-School Programs

- Build coalitions with stakeholders such as parents, schools, community leaders, community organizations, and funders.
- Investigate federal and state funding such as the Workforce Investment Act.
- Discuss bus route changes with schools.
- Establish partnerships with public transportation services and/or subsidize fares.
- Partner with community organizations that may have vans or buses.



Four-Day Week

- Districts are finding creative ways of providing services with limited funds. Many school districts are going to a four-day school week (Schwartzbeck, n.d.). The shortened week does reduce transportation, but not personnel costs. “The benefits include better attendance and morale, longer class periods, less time lost to extracurriculars and doctor’s appointments as well as teacher training” (Schwartzbeck, p. 12).

Quality Professional Staff

Cooperative Agreements

Some districts have formed cooperative agreements for sharing specialized teachers and administrators (Schwartzbeck, n.d.). Some schools even share sports teams.

Technology

Technology and the Internet have been boons to rural areas. Distance learning allows students to take courses such as foreign languages and advanced math and science courses that their schools can not offer on site (Schwartzbeck, n.d.).

- Maximize rural school effectiveness and efficiency with technology. Distance learning is important in providing a broader and more challenging curriculum in rural schools. Schools need help in establishing and maintaining the necessary technology infrastructure (Johnson & Strange, 2007).

Recruiting and Retaining Qualified Teachers

Recruiting and retaining qualified teachers is extremely difficult for rural areas. Schwartzbeck and Kusler (2005) suggest the following strategies:

- Emphasize mentoring or induction programs, and the personal attention new teachers will receive as well as small class sizes.
- Offer the best benefits possible, and educate newly graduated teachers about the importance of good retirement packages.
- Work more closely with nearby colleges and universities to increase awareness of the requirements and benefits of teaching in the district.
- Highlight the positive aspects of the district, such as low cost of living and safety.
- Provide a personal network to make teachers feel welcome in the community (p. 31).

Increase the Number of Trained Staff Members

- Recruit public school teachers because they are already trained.
- Provide staff training. At least train one or two staff members who can impact others.
- Recruit retirees who have free time to volunteer.

Use Existing Volunteer Organizations to Recruit Staff

- Use work-study employees.
- Become a site for AmeriCorps volunteers.
- Utilize the PTA as a resource.
- Partner with 4-H Afterschool and the local cooperative Extension System.
- Collaborate with the Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts.



School Buildings and Support Facilities

- Maximize resources by partnering with private and other schools, community centers, and colleges and universities (Collins, et al., 2008).
- Keep schools small. Small schools can be cost effective in low-income communities.
- Fulfill facility needs at the community level. Cooperation with community service groups, faith-based organizations, and service agencies can increase the use of school space and technology.

Family Participation and Investments in Education

Family education investments can make a difference and have a positive impact on educational achievement. Although families and schools in rural areas have fewer resources, they have the ability and opportunity to make wise educational investments. Families can invest in their children through cultural capital, educational items, and parental involvement by:

- visiting museums
- encouraging their children to take classes in dance, art, and music
- providing computers
- providing books and magazines
- being involved in their schools (Rosignano, Tomaskovic-Devey, & Crowley, 2006)

Schools should build strong school-family-community partnerships, doing whatever is necessary to work closely together to ensure every student succeeds, through

- building relationships
- linking to learning
- addressing differences
- supporting advocacy
- sharing power (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007)

The publication, *Beyond the Bake Sale* (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007) provides the framework for developing and maintaining such partnerships.



Getting Started

Dropout prevention in rural areas has unique characteristics related to the socioeconomic setting and the Six Critical Challenges discussed in this paper. This analysis provides a framework for rural communities to use as they approach the myriad issues of dropout prevention in their local schools.

The starting point would be to establish a Rural Advancement Initiative to continue a more thorough study of the issues in Monroe County. This initiative should be organized with representation on six task forces, one for each of the Critical Challenges. The recommendations in this report are indeed only a beginning, but they do provide the individuals who will serve on these committees a place to begin as they seek solutions to the dropout crisis.



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APPENDIX

RURAL EXEMPLARY PROGRAMS*

Program Name

Adolescent Transitions Program (ATP)

<http://cfc.uoregon.edu/atp.htm>

Overview. The Adolescent Transitions Program (ATP) is a multilevel, family-centered intervention targeting children who are at risk for problem behavior or substance use. Designed to address the family dynamics of adolescent problem behavior, it is delivered in the middle school setting to parents and their children. The parent-focused curriculum concentrates on developing family management skills such as making requests, using rewards, and providing reasonable consequences for rule violations. Strategies targeting parents are based on evidence about the role of coercive parenting strategies in the development of problem behaviors in youth. The program focuses on arresting the development of teen antisocial behaviors by improving parents' family management and communication skills.

Strategies. Case Management, Family Strengthening, and Family Therapy. Other: Family Identification Assessment

To accomplish program goals, the intervention uses a "tiered" approach with three levels of activities that build on each other: (1) a strategy targeting all parents, (2) an assessment to identify high-risk families, and (3) provision of professional support to identified high-risk families. Program evaluation found that putting high-risk youth together into groups for the Teen Focus curriculum resulted in escalation of problem behaviors; therefore this activity was excluded from the above list.

Components. The program includes the following components: (1) videotape examples and newsletters disseminated through the Family Resource Center, (2) family goals established at the beginning of the program, (3) weekly parent meetings for discussion and practice, (4) parent consultants, (5) individual family meetings, (6) weekly phone contacts with each family, and (7) monthly booster after group completion.

Targeted Risk Factors/Groups. Targeted groups include high-risk, special needs, *rural middle school youth, and their families.*

Relevant Impacted Risk Factors

Individual risk factors: (1) high-risk social behavior and (2) misbehavior.

Research Evidence. A two-year randomized clinical trial was carried out to assess the effectiveness of the parent and teen interventions. The most recent evaluation was a four-year randomized trial of the parent-focused ATP component with eight small community samples in Oregon. Relevant findings include:

- Decreased total problem behavior
- Reduced youth smoking behavior
- Decreased antisocial behavior at school

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Program Name

Fast Track

www.fasttrackproject.org/

Overview. FAST Track is a comprehensive and long-term prevention program that aims to prevent chronic and severe conduct problems for high-risk children, with intensive interventions at school entry and from elementary to middle school. It is based on the view that antisocial behavior stems from the interaction of multiple influences, and it includes the school, the home, and the individual in its intervention. FAST Track's main goals are to increase communication and bonds between these three domains; enhance children's social, cognitive, and problem-solving skills; improve peer relationships; and ultimately decrease disruptive behavior in the home and school.

Strategies. Academic Support, Family Strengthening, Life Skills Development, and School/Classroom Environment.

The curriculum used in the primary intervention helps children develop emotional awareness skills, self-control, and problem-solving skills; foster a positive peer climate; and improve teachers' classroom management skills. A selected intervention for high-risk children includes parent training, child social-skills training, and academic tutoring.

Components. Fast Track includes: (1) modified PATHS curriculum for all students in grades one to five; (2) multistage screening to identify high-risk children; and (3) parent training groups, home visits, peer-pairing activities, reading tutoring three times per week, and social skills building for targeted children.

Targeted Risk Factors/Groups. The primary intervention is designed for all elementary school-aged children in a school setting. The selected intervention is specifically targeted to children identified in kindergarten for disruptive behavior and poor peer relations.

Relevant Impacted Risk Factors

Individual risk factors: (1) has a learning disability or emotional disturbance, (2) misbehavior, and (3) early aggression.

Family risk factor: low contact with school.

Research Evidence. Fast Track has been evaluated through a randomized clinical trial involving 50 elementary schools in four U. S. urban and rural locations with data collected post-intervention in the 1st grade and at the end of the 2nd and 3rd grades. Compared to control groups, intervention children had:

- Significantly lower rates of special education assignment
- Significantly lower serious conduct problems
- Improvement in aggression and oppositional behavior

Parents participating in the program, compared to the control group, showed:

- More maternal involvement in school activities

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Program Name

Responding in Peaceful and Positive Ways (RIPP)
www.modelprograms.samhsa.gov/pdfs/model/RiPP.pdf

Overview. Responding in Peaceful and Positive Ways (RIPP) is a three-year, school-based, violence prevention program designed to provide students in middle and junior high schools with conflict resolution strategies and skills. The goal of the program is to promote nonviolence in the school setting by teaching students more effective ways of dealing with interpersonal conflicts than fighting, and by lowering the number of violent incidents in school settings. Students learn to apply critical thinking skills and personal management strategies to personal health and well-being issues.

Strategies. Conflict Resolution/Anger Management, Life Skills Development, and School/Classroom Environment.

The problem-solving model is the backbone of the cumulative curriculum and uses experiential learning, guided discussions, and opportunities for peer mediation. It is typically taught during the academic subjects of social studies, health, and/or science. A trained RIPP facilitator teaches the curriculum, serves as an adult role model for pro-social attitudes and behavior, promotes the program schoolwide, and supervises the peer mediation program.

Components. The program components include: (1) school commitment to program; (2) required trained (five-day workshop), full-time RIPP facilitator; (3) ongoing technical assistance; (4) peer mediation program (with optional training); (5) teacher's manual, student workbooks, materials on nonviolence; (6) 25 50-minute sessions in year one, 12 50-minute sessions in years two and three; and (7) program implementation options for slower program introduction.

Targeted Risk Factors/Groups. The program was developed and initially delivered to a primarily urban, African-American middle or junior high (grades 6-9) population but has been successfully implemented in similar grades with ethnically diverse, *multilingual populations in rural and suburban settings.*

Relevant Impacted Risk Factors

Individual risk factors: (1) misbehavior and (2) early aggression.

Research Evidence. Achievement of program outcomes requires a three-year complete implementation of the program. Three published studies have examined the effectiveness of RIPP using random assignment of students or classes. Follow-up data ranged from one to two years post-intervention. In comparison with control students, students who participated in RIPP have shown:

- Fewer school disciplinary code violations for violent behaviors
- Fewer in-school suspensions
- Fewer fight-related injuries
- Lower frequencies of aggression

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Program Name

Strengthening Families Program

www.strengtheningfamiliesprogram.org/index.html

Overview. The Strengthening Families Program (SFP) is a family therapy program that involves weekly skill-building sessions for elementary school children and their families. The program uses family systems and cognitive behavioral approaches to increase resilience and reduce risk factors. It seeks to improve family relationships, parenting skills, and youth's social and life skills. Topics in the parental section include setting rules, nurturing, monitoring compliance, and applying appropriate discipline. Youth sessions concentrate on setting goals, dealing with stress and emotions, communication skills, responsible behavior, and how to deal with peer pressure.

Strategies. Family Strengthening and Life Skills Development.

Parents and children work separately in training sessions and then participate together in a session practicing the skills they learned earlier. SFP has been successfully implemented in a variety of settings: schools, churches, mental health centers, housing projects, homeless shelters, recreation centers, family centers, and drug courts.

Components. SFP includes (1) seven consecutive sessions, with children and parents working separately for one hour and together for a second hour; (2) three-hour booster sessions at six months to one year after the primary course; (3) program manuals and materials; (4) part-time site coordinator; (5) four group leaders; (6) two- to three-day training for coordinator and group leaders; (7) four to 14 families per group; and (8) provision of family meals, transportation, and child care recommended.

Targeted Risk Factors/Groups. Although originally developed for children of substance abusers, ages six to 12, SFP has been modified and found to be effective for families of elementary school-age children with diverse backgrounds: African American, Asian/Pacific Islander, Hispanic, and American Indian families, *rural families*, and families with early teens. SFP is available in English and Spanish.

Relevant Impacted Risk Factors

Individual risk factors: (1) has a learning disability or emotional disturbance, (2) high-risk social behavior, and (3) early aggression.

Research Evidence. To achieve maximum results, all seven two-hour sessions of SFP must be completed. SFP has been evaluated more than 17 times, some studies using experimental or quasi-experimental designs and up to five-year follow-up. The program has resulted in:

- Clinically significant decreases in conduct disorders
- Significant decreases in aggression
- Significant decreases in delinquency
- Decreased substance use

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*Programs are from Hammond, C., Smink, J., Linton, D., & Drew, S. (2007, May). *Dropout risk factors and exemplary programs: A technical report*. Clemson, SC: National Dropout Prevention Center. Alexandria, VA: Communities In Schools. (Available online at <http://www.dropoutprevention.org/ndpcdefault.htm>.)



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Dr. Smink is recognized as a national leader and authority on best practices and effective strategies for dropout prevention programs including mentoring, service-learning, alternative schools, and career technical education. His latest book, *Helping Students Graduate: A Strategic Approach to Dropout Prevention*, identifies the fifteen most effective strategies to reduce the dropout rate. He is a frequent guest on radio and television, and consults regularly with education news reporters regarding the dropout issue including how schools and communities work collaboratively to increase high school graduation rates. He also is respected as a keynote speaker for major national and state conferences and is a skilled workshop leader on numerous administrative and instructional topics such as student learning styles, attendance and truancy, early identification of students at risk of school failure, and how to develop, implement, and evaluate dropout prevention, intervention, and recovery programs for struggling students.

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