

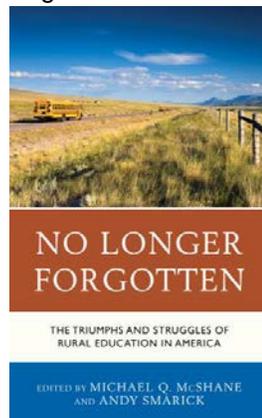
Book Review: Challenges and Current Interventions in Rural Schools

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Book Reviewed: *No Longer Forgotten: The Triumphs and Struggles of Rural Education in America*, edited by Michael Q. McShane and Andy Smarick. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018. ISBN: 978-1-4758-4608-9. 177 pages.

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The editors of this book, Michael Q. McShane and Andy Smarick, come from two different backgrounds: McShane is a former high school teacher and currently works for the Show-Me Institute, and Smarick is a former assistant secretary for the U.S. Department of Education but now works as a director at R Street Institute. The book's eight essays address some challenges and current interventions happening in rural schools. Each of the contributors brought their own unique understanding and views on the current state of rural education, including how to better understand the statistical breakdown of rural schools, minorities in rural locations, the opioid crisis, poverty, school finance, staffing issues, and the lack of charter schools in rural areas.



Relevance to Current Rural Educational Practices

Over the last few decades, urban schools have been the focus of most educational research and policies. However, rural education is starting to receive attention for both positive and negative

issues that students, teachers, and school administrators face. Rural schools are traditionally identified using the National Center for Education Statistics (2007) urban-centric classification system, based on a school's physical address and its proximity to clusters of densely populated areas. Using this model, Burdick-Will and Logan (2017) found that, of the 67,977 public schools located in Metropolitan Statistical Areas, 6% of schools are located in rural areas. Therefore, with fewer schools in these areas it may be easier for some to minimize and trivialize the unique challenges they face.

Rural schools currently face issues related to poverty, lower student diversity, and higher numbers of students with special needs (Showalter, Klein, Johnson, & Hartman, 2017). One 2018 study found that 22.4% of children under 18 years old living in nonmetro areas are living in poverty compared to 17.3% in metro areas (Farrigan, 2020). Another study determined that the poverty level where a student lives has more of an impact on a student's achievement than the student's personal poverty level (Siegel-Hawley, 2016). One of the most frequently cited reasons for student underperformance in school is the effect of living in poverty (Noguera, 2011). Siegel-Hawley (2016) estimated that in most states only 17% of the allotted educational funding goes to rural schools,

while 18.7% of students attend rural public schools. Over the last few years, the use of standards, standardized testing, and teacher evaluations has been implemented as a result of various legislative acts, including the Reading Excellence Act, the No Child Left Behind Act, and the Every Student Succeeds Act to track the educational outcomes of both rural and urban students (Lykins, 2011).

Review of the Text

The first chapter of the book, “A Statistical Portrait of Rural Education in America,” by Nat Malkus, discusses different statistical analyses of rural schools across the nation. One of the key points in this chapter is the fact that the many schools in rural locations may differ greatly from each other. For example, while poverty is normally seen as an issue in all rural schools, in the Northeast only 10% of students live below the poverty rate, whereas in the South, nearly 21% of students live in these conditions. However, students in rural kindergarten programs tend to perform higher than those in towns and cities. Rural districts are located away from city centers and tended to rely on jobs that involve the land. However, trying to group all rural schools into one category may be oversimplifying this issue.

The second chapter, “African-American Education in Rural Communities in the Deep South: ‘Making the Impossible Possible,’” explores the current state of education for African Americans. Author Sheneka M. Williams discusses how rural communities of color are often situated away from quality health care, safe neighborhoods, good jobs, and adequate housing. To best reach these students, teachers must work diligently to inspire students to reach beyond their means. Therefore, teachers of rural African American students must not have a deficit mindset.

Clayton Hale and Sally Satel, authors of “From Basketball to Overdose Capital: The Story of Rural America, Schools, and the Opioid Crisis,” explore the reasons why in 2016 an estimated 42,249 deaths in our nation were related to opioid overdose. States such as West Virginia, New Hampshire, Ohio, and Kentucky have the highest rates of addiction. Once known mostly for their highly successful rural sports teams, these areas

are now mostly known as a hotbed of addiction. This chapter highlights some of the reasons this has happened in these locations. Many students in rural areas are have less exposure to other forms of drugs and are more likely to obtain opioids from family members who have prescriptions or even their own emergency room visits. Since opioids are often prescribed by doctors, students living in rural areas report a belief that opioids are low-risk drugs. This belief has resulted in students in rural areas having a higher rate of opioid misuse at younger ages than their urban peers.

Rural identity and its effects on politics is the focus of the fourth chapter, “The Power of Place and the Politics of Rural School Reform.” Here Sara Dahill-Brown and Ashley Jochim explore the reasons that rural districts may have higher graduation rates than some urban areas yet far fewer students enroll in postsecondary education. They explain that rural students tend to live in close-knit communities that are distrustful of outsiders, which causes them to be resistant to change. Rural areas also historically tend to vote Republican, and the more remote the area, the more Republican the residents seem to be. Additionally, rural areas are typically home to less powerful teacher unions and fewer special interest groups that work to make changes to the status quo. All of these issues contribute to the idea that rural districts may not be as progressive as more urban locations.

Rural poverty is another challenge that rural school districts face. Chapter five, “Rural Poverty and the Federal Safety Net: Implications for Rural Education,” by Angela Rachidi, looks into the impact poverty has on education. Rachidi argues that one of the best ways to overcome the effects of poverty is to ensure that students are receiving a quality education. However, in rural areas, on average less than 20% of the population has a bachelor’s degree or higher level of education. Since rural communities are close-knit, those who need support may not seek help due to shame.

School finance is the topic of Chapter six, “School Finance in Rural America,” by James Shuls. The chapter explains that looking at all rural districts in the same way is a mistake as finance varies from area to area. Funding formulas may favor urban

districts in some areas, as rural districts are often taxed at lower rates. Additional per-pupil rates can be misleading as they do not show how districts are using the money being spent.

The lack of funds in some districts that may contribute to the staffing issues of rural schools is the topic of Chapter seven, "Staffing America's Rural Schools." Daniel Player and Aliza Husain explain that, while rural districts do have barriers to hiring staff, the area of most concern is finding teachers for English language learners, along with teachers for science, technology, engineering, and math classes. However, many rural districts are utilizing a grow-your-own approach to encouraging former students and local professionals to become teachers.

Another issue, presented by Juliet Squire in the final chapter, "Right Place, Right Time: The Potential of Rural Charter Schools," is the lack of schooling options for students in rural schools. As previously mentioned, owing to rural districts' close-knit nature and poverty, communities may resist and not be able to support multiple schools. In addition, virtual schools may not be an option for those in rural communities due to the lack of broadband connection.

This book concludes with an afterward written by the editors, stressing many of the main ideas found in Chapters 1–8. First, rural districts may share some of the same features; however, thinking that they are all the same is a mistake. Second, many residents are Republicans and often see themselves as blue-collar workers and may be resistant to outsiders trying to bring change to their schools. Finally, when trying to make improvements to education in rural communities, it is important to understand each rural community and its individuals before presenting solutions that may not work in that community.

Takeaway

This book presents issues that rural schools are currently facing but makes it clear that it is a mistake to think that all rural areas are facing the same issues. This book may be extremely useful for those just entering administration in rural areas, and it explores many unique issues that many rural

locations are facing. By increasing their understanding of these issues, administrators may gain a better understanding of the communities they are serving. Additionally, this book is a must-read for those in government positions who work with educational reform. This book can help these individuals develop a greater understanding of rural education and the problems they face, along with potential solutions.

However, for the classroom teacher working in a rural location, there is limited useful information, like strategies or tips for working with rural students. McShane and Smarick present this book in a way that explains the current issues rural schools face without being completely negative. In fact, by focusing on the uniqueness of these areas, the editors and contributors showcase rural districts as having positive attributes that can be utilized to increase the educational attainment of their students.

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