

Train Them the Way They Should Go: Developing Leaders Among Aspiring Rural Teachers

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As the COVID-19 pandemic winds down, the devastating results are evident in rural America. Many teachers joined the “great resignation” and left classrooms that moved between remote and physical for two years. Who will step up to serve these students who have experienced learning losses at unprecedented rates? Who will understand the connection between devastated communities ravaged by a deadly virus and the classroom exploited by politicians and the media as never before? Rural communities have experienced isolation among typical threads which have traditionally provided solid rural support. This Educator Preparation Program established a requirement of service for aspiring educators. Over 600 volunteer hours have been documented among these aspiring educators between community and school involvement with students reflecting upon their address of personal biases, deficit thinking, and the development of an understanding in a real way of the needed connections that support future classrooms and students in these rural areas.

INTRODUCTION

The Context

Defining what one means by “rural” has become ever increasingly important as we discover that the “one size fits” model approach is often the norm when interacting and engaging with rural schools (McCardle, 2019). The U.S. Census Bureau calls rural “not urban” (Gomes, 2021).

Perhaps this simplistic definition of rural is a rude awakening to many who attempt to lump all rural areas together in one “deplorable basket” (Montanaro, 2016). “When we get rural wrong, we reach incorrect research conclusions and fail to reach the people, places, and businesses our governmental programs are meant to serve” (Isserman, 2005, p. 467). What works in urban areas indeed should work in rural America. Right? Wrong! Placing solutions intended for the suburban and urban educational setting does not work for rural communities, and it is time we move beyond these false perceptions and assistance models.

During Covid, media’s portrayal of rural areas has been particularly harsh (Community Strategies Group, 2020). Social media and journalism in general have not been too kind to rural areas, perpetuating perceptions of poor, uneducated and politically dangerous inhabitants. Stereotypes and broad generalizations create a simplistic view of rural areas and exacerbate major issues such as inequities at a time when it is essential to deal with the realities to provide “care” for these rural areas.

These perceptions, although erroneous, are seen as reality by persons living outside of rural areas and in many other regions of the United States. Also included is the perception that “rural is synonymous with white and conservative. (Ingraham, 2020). Lumping perceptions of rural America together to argue political points is demeaning and detrimental to attracting business and economic development to these challenged areas. In addition, this perception can drive local educators away as they hear these perceptions, which are not the reality faced each day in a classroom.

Tieken, author of *Why Rural Schools Matter*, offers a more contextual perspective relative to rural education and provides the rationale for this chapter, “When you’ve seen one rural school, you’ve seen one rural school (2014). In this author’s mind, this perspective has been detrimental to much-needed support targeted at supporting a unique, diverse, and unique environment.

The South continues to be an economic powerhouse for the U.S. economy. However, examining the data more closely reveals several areas in which the South needs more robust measures targeted to the specific needs of these rural communities. The population of the South continues to diversify quickly. School districts report large influxes of immigrants into an already strained support system. Even though an economic powerhouse, the rural South has some of the most economically depressed communities from which students attend schools with much teacher turnover based on many reasons (Paschal, 2017; Love & Powe, 2020; Rowland & Love, 2020). Rowland and Love (2018) also add that the rural south ranks at the bottom in health and wellbeing.

Rural education has taken a tremendous hit concerning the teacher shortage. Rural communities have struggled not only to secure teachers but also to retain them. Schools and districts within these rural communities often struggle with several challenges in recruitment and retention efforts for their rural communities. First, with funding sources smaller than their urban and suburban counterparts, these districts struggle to pay a competitive salary to teachers (Latterman & Steffes, 2017). Rural schools may have larger class sizes or overload new teachers due to the lack of in-field teachers (Williams, 2010, p. 8). Many of these professional educators will seek other more urban classrooms to teach due to many of these erroneous perceptions described previously about rural education, which have been put before them almost daily over the past several years. In addition, more amenities within the larger urban and suburban areas are typically more attractive to a younger teacher force (Williams, 2010).

Add on top of the many challenges *or opportunities* described above, the pandemic has also been extreme for its impact on rural education and its educators (Anderson, 2020). As the pandemic began many schools began an intensive outreach for teaching and learning via their digital resources. Unfortunately for rural areas, the digital divide was evidenced in many ways during this pandemic, with many rural

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