



## Building Community Connections for the Success of All Children

*“What would a community look like if all available resources were focused on the success of all its young people?”*

That question is one that hundreds of community residents in five rural eastern North Carolina counties have been working together to answer for themselves. Now, they are working to plan and implement their ideas in their communities.

The conversations took place through “study circles,” structured conversations in small groups of people that culminate in an action forum, where participants plan together their next steps.

“It was important that these conversations move from talking about the ‘student’ to talking about the ‘child,’ the whole child, and from talking about school conditions to talking about community conditions,” said Jereann King Johnson, project coordinator for the Rural Trust’s Connecting School and Community (CSC) project.

A major goal of CSC is to get local people involved in defining how their community can function so that all children flourish. Equally important is getting people involved in making those things happen.

“We have to take responsibility for our own community. It’s all about connectedness,” said J. A. Person, a participant in one of the eight study circles held in Warren County.

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## Students of Color Comprise Majority in High Poverty Rural Districts

The 800 rural districts with the highest poverty rates (we call these districts the “Rural 800”) serve a population made up primarily of students of color. The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that these 800 rural districts, scattered across 38 states, serve approximately 969,000 school-age children. About 26% are African American, 20% Hispanic, and 10% Native American.

On average, 32% of all students in Rural 800 districts are eligible for federal Title I funding—most because they live in households with income below the poverty line. Eligibility rates among the districts, however, range from a low of 26% to a high of 100%.

The total student count in these districts varies from that we reported earlier for the Rural 800 districts for two reasons: data from the 2007–08 school year is now available and because this count excludes any district with fewer than 10 Title I students.

Title I is the federal program that gives local districts funds to provide extra help to disadvantaged children.

Some students who are not from poor families are eligible because they are neglected or delinquent, receive public assistance, or are in foster homes. Title I eligibility is used as an estimator of poverty levels, however, because overall, about 96% of Title I children are eligible due to family income.

The percentages of students of color in Rural 800 districts vary across the country, with some states showing very

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### RPM-Online Exclusives

- > Small Alabama High Schools Keep More Students in School; Online Supplement
- > Building Community Connections for the Success of All Children: Expanded Online Version
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**Q: In what five states are rural per pupil expenditures on instruction the lowest?  
Answer on page 4.**

# Fewer Students Leave Small Alabama High Schools Before Graduation

Alabama's smallest rural high schools, on average, keep a higher percentage of students in school through 12th grade than their larger counterparts, and they do so despite higher rates of student poverty.

In addition, while larger schools show notable differences between African-American and white students in the average percentage who remain in school through 12th grade, smaller schools do not.

The Rural Trust calculated the rates at which students progress through high school by comparing the number of 9th graders enrolled to the number of 12th graders enrolled three years later. We call this the "persistence rate."

While the persistence rate does not account for overall changes in school enrollment or for student transfers, it reveals much about the extent to which students leave school before they graduate. A higher persistence rate suggests more students are in school and on track to graduate, while a lower persistence rate indicates students are no longer enrolled and unlikely to earn a diploma.

For this analysis we looked at overall persistence rates for the graduating classes of 2003, 2004, and 2005 for public schools located in rural communities and small towns.

We divided schools into five groups or "quintiles" (each with the same number of schools), based on the average size of the 9th grade, and figured overall persistence rates as well as persistence rates for African-American and white student subgroups within each quintile. Too few

American Indian, Asian, and Hispanic students were enrolled to provide useful subgroup data.


A clear pattern emerged: as the average size of the 9th grade class increased across quintiles, the persistence rate *decreased*, even though poverty rates decreased as well. The pattern also held for African-American and white student subgroups, with one slight exception

between the largest and next to largest quintiles for African-American persistence rates.

It is important to note that a range of persistence rates exist within each quintile. And, each quintile included schools that are so-called "dropout factories," where less than 65% of students make it to 12th grade.

Here again, however, quintiles with larger schools had a higher number of schools with very low persistence rates.

You can find more information about this study as well as additional data on persistence rates in Alabama high schools in *RPM-Online* at [www.ruraledu.org](http://www.ruraledu.org).



**Persistence Rates for Rural Public High Schools in Alabama**

	Average Persistence Rate	Average Persistence Rate: African-American student subgroup	Average Persistence Rate: white student subgroup	Average percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch	Number of schools with persistence rates below 65%
<b>Quintile 1:</b> Avg. 9th grade = 40 students	79.65%	81.64%	78.35%	59.58%	5
<b>Quintile 2:</b> Avg. 9th grade = 66 students	76.87%	76.42%	76.70%	51.35%	4
<b>Quintile 3:</b> Avg. 9th grade = 96 students	72.21%	72.08%	71.68%	47.32%	11
<b>Quintile 4:</b> Avg. 9th grade = 137 students	68.89%	63.63%	70.98%	45.17%	15
<b>Quintile 5:</b> Avg. 9th grade = 272 students	68.40%	66.41%	69.29%	38.32%	18
<b>All schools in analysis</b>	70.77%	68.25%	71.51%	46.64%	53

## Costs of Dropping Out in Mississippi

Mississippi State School Superintendent Hank Bounds recently calculated some of the costs of students leaving high school before graduating. Although the numbers are specific to Mississippi, the economic impact on individuals who drop out of school and on the states where they live is enormous across the country.

Here are some of the numbers Bounds provided for Mississippi, where about 14,000 students officially drop out

of school each year (for a reported statewide dropout rate of 26%), as reported by the *Clarion Ledger* newspaper:

- Each year, about \$4 billion in lifetime earnings is lost to the 14,000 Mississippians who leave school without graduating.

- About \$1.8 billion would be available for private consumption if all dropouts earned a high school diploma.

- The state would collect about \$85 million more in income tax and \$125

more in sales tax each year, based on the higher earnings of high school graduates, if all dropouts earned a high school diploma.

- The state would save about \$121 million in health care costs for each class of dropouts if they all earned a high school diploma.

- A 5% increase in the rate of high school graduation among male students would result in a savings of more than \$93 million in reduced crime spending and increased earnings each year.

## Building Community Connections for the Success of All Children

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In all, more than 20 study circles were formed in Warren, Halifax, Northampton, Perquimans, and Pasquotank counties. Each circle included eight to 15 participants who met together in four two-hour sessions over the course of several weeks. Every circle used the same study guide, "Helping *Every* Student Succeed," from the Study Circles Resource Center, with discussion questions adapted for the specific needs of the project.

"It was important that every participant had the same materials as every one else, including the facilitator," Johnson said.

In the first session, "What Does a Good Education Mean to Each of Us?" participants talked about their own educational experiences. "In that conversation, people could see for themselves that education and schooling were very complex things in their own lives," Johnson said. "And the study circle process helps draw people back to those complexities."

Heidi Hogan, a participant in one of the Warren County circles, said, "The format doesn't allow anyone to come in with a personal agenda and dominate the discussion."

In the second session, participants looked at data from the schools and community. "Getting that information was important," Hogan said, adding that the perspectives of teens in her study circle changed her understanding of both the schools and the data.

After delving into their own experiences and examining information about circumstances as they exist currently, participants spent the third session of the study circles envisioning and describing a community in which all children can succeed.

"The process is designed toward action," Johnson said. "The question of 'what can we do as community people?' is not automatic. If people are going to answer that in ways that are ongoing and sustained, it has to be in the context of trusted relationships, and the study circles help build relationships and trust."

Hogan explained that the process of building toward action was one of the best parts about the study circles. "Our conversations and recommendations weren't going into the wind, they were building toward something that our community would make happen."

## RURAL SCHOOL FUNDING NEWS

### Washington Salaries Ruled Arbitrary

A judge in Washington has ruled that funding for teaching and administrative salaries is arbitrary, violates the equal protection clause of the state constitution, and must be changed immediately. That could cost as much as \$400 million more than is currently being spent.

*Federal Way v. State* was filed by one of the state's largest districts and supported by a number of small rural districts. Although the state allocates money for staff on a per-pupil basis, plaintiffs claimed that there are inexplicable disparities between districts that are not based on locale, size, or demographics.

Judge Michael Heavey noted that the salary schedules were developed within the context of a 1970s funding lawsuit, but that there was no rational basis for continuing them.

The ruling will likely be appealed.

In further news, a November referendum to change the vote needed to raise local school taxes from a 60% supermajority to a simple majority failed.

### Commission Studies Needs of At-Risk Students in Mississippi

The Commission on Children At-Risk has held public hearings and received expert testimony in preparation for

making recommendations to the state legislature on what the state and local districts could be doing differently to meet the needs of at-risk students.

Currently, Mississippi only provides an additional 5% increase (one of the lowest in the nation) over base student funding for each student considered at-risk as measured by poverty. In 16 districts, 100% of students are considered at-risk.

The Commission is charged with studying a variety of programs and services designed to reach students who face challenges to academic success. In public hearings, many advocates cited high quality teachers and teaching as one of the best strategies for supporting at-risk students.

A 2005 study commissioned by the state recommended 114% additional funding for each at-risk student, and last year a House Education subcommittee recommended 43% in additional at-risk funding. But the proposal was ultimately defeated and no additional at-risk funding was added to the 5% that is allocated through the Mississippi Adequate Education Program.

Governor Haley Barbour is suggesting a tax cut and a 2% budget cut for all state agencies.

*For expanded coverage of these and other stories, visit [RSFN-Online at www.ruraledu.org](http://www.ruraledu.org)*

In the fourth session, participants talked about what they can do as individuals and as a group to create the kind of community they want. "It wasn't a finger-pointing activity," Hogan said. "It was 'what can I do, what can you do, what can we do.'"

By the end of the fourth session, each study circle agrees on three or four action ideas to take to a communitywide Action Forum, where concerns and ideas from all the study circles are presented. At the Forum, participants sign up for action groups or task forces around the action ideas. As task forces form and begin to implement the ideas, the process of strengthening the community and sharing responsibility continues to grow.

"In talking to each other, people discovered ways to help each other. We gave

each other a little nudge. There was some accountability to the group to do your part—not in a formal way, but you felt you owed it to the group," Hogan said.

In Warren County a number of people volunteered to get involved in after-school programs or to tutor students. A team was formed to plan and implement a communitywide forum for parents, focusing on student and parent rights and ways to network parents to support each other. Some people have formed partnerships with teachers to support classroom activities and to help connect classroom learning to community life.

Person summed up the process this way: "We've wanted a closer unity between the schools and the community. Now we see that there are a lot of ways to make that happen."



# Rural Policy Matters

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**INSIDE:** *Students of Color Comprise Majority in High Poverty Rural Districts*

## Students of Color Comprise Majority in High Poverty Rural Districts

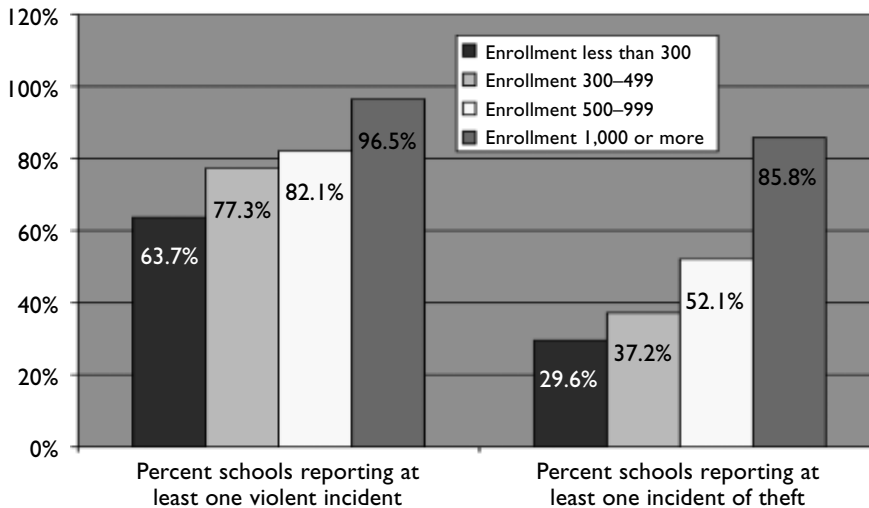
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high percentages. In Alaska, 97% of students in Rural 800 districts are Native Alaskans. In Alabama, 81% are African-American. Rural 800 districts in California are 71% Hispanic. In New Mexico, 90% of students in Rural 800

districts are either Hispanic (47%) or Native American (43%). Arizona has a similar but reverse configuration: 45% of students are Native American and 38% are Hispanic.

Overall, 11% of Rural 800 students are English Language Learners. The highest rate is in Alaska, where 90% of Rural 800 students are learning English, followed by New Mexico and California, where 47% and 43% of students are learning English.

## Smaller schools are safer, according to the National Center for Educational Statistics



Data year 2005-2006. Adapted from Crime, violence, discipline, and safety in U.S. public schools (NCES, 2007). Available at <http://www.nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2007361>

**A: Oklahoma (\$3,591 per pupil); Mississippi (\$3,688 per pupil); Arkansas (\$3,790 per pupil); Alabama (\$3,793 per pupil); and Tennessee (\$3,856 per pupil).**



## Rural Policy Matters

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*Rural Policy Matters* is published monthly by the Rural School and Community Trust. The Rural Trust is the leading national nonprofit organization addressing the crucial relationship between good schools and thriving rural communities. Working in some of the poorest, most challenging rural places, the Rural Trust involves young people in learning linked to their communities, improves the quality of teaching and school leadership, advocates for appropriate state educational policies, and addresses the critical issue of funding for rural schools.

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