

Rural Policy Matters



A Newsletter of Rural School & Community Action

December 2008

Don't Miss the Rural Education Working Group

April 19–21, 2009

**Kanuga Conference Center,
near Hendersonville, NC**

What can rural residents do on their own to revitalize their communities or embrace an influx of newcomers? What might a new administration mean for rural schools and communities? How can adults help more students at risk make it through high school and into good jobs or further education?

These are just some of the issues we will tackle at the eighth annual Rural Education Working Group. We invite you to join us at this special meeting of rural activists from across the United States.

Check the Rural Trust website for more information.

Obama and the Rural Vote

Commentary by Marty Strange, Policy Director, Rural Trust

When President-elect Barack Obama charted a pathway to the White House, he said he would “stretch the map,” meaning he would be competitive in many states that have often voted Republican. He proved to be just that, but he was by no means competitive in all 50 states.

In fact, where John McCain won, he won mostly by large margins. Only in Montana, where his margin was 3%, and Missouri, where his margin was less than 1%, did McCain win a state by less than 7%.

McCain’s margin was much larger nearly everywhere else he won, especially in ruby red states like Oklahoma (32%), Alabama (21%), Arkansas (20%), Mississippi (14%), West Virginia (13%), Texas (11%), South Dakota (10%), and South Carolina (9%).

These are all states with significant rural populations and by almost any measure the rural vote went heavily for McCain. But smattered across these red states are unmistakable clusters of blue

counties, nearly all of them places of high poverty and high percentages of people of color.

They are characteristic rural regions, like the Mississippi River Delta spanning the borders between the states of Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi. There, blue counties are lined up back-to-back along both sides of the river, standing against the sea of red that surrounds them in their respective states. In the Delta, President-elect Obama piled up victory margins of 20, 30, and 40%. In Jefferson County, Mississippi, with the highest percentage of African-American population of any county in the nation, Obama won 87% of the 3,745 votes.

Another of these regions is the Black Belt, cutting through the heart of the Old South’s cotton country, across central Alabama, into south Georgia, and up through the Carolinas in the lowland counties not on, but just removed

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Home Grown Teachers

Bertie County Invests in Local Young People to Get the Teachers They Need

An extensive locally developed and locally funded grow-your-own-teacher program is underway in North Carolina’s Bertie County, the state’s poorest school system in terms of local funding.

This isolated rural school district in the state’s northeast corner serves some 3,300 students, with a free and reduced lunch rate of 89%. Like most high-poverty schools, it has struggled with academic performance and staffing. According to Superintendent Chip Zullinger, “One of our biggest dysfunctions is keeping qualified teachers. Two of every five school days kids have a substitute.”

In this regard, Bertie County’s teacher struggles might be somewhat more severe than other districts, but they mirror those faced by thousands of low-wealth rural schools across the country.

Zullinger explains, “Many of the teachers who have taken jobs in the county only keep them until they are offered a job somewhere else. Sometimes they take another job a few weeks into the school year. When there’s a vacancy in a critical subject area, it can take

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These features available at www.ruraledu.org.

Q: How many states elect the Chief State School Officer (State Superintendent of Education)? Answer on page 4.

Obama and the Rural Vote

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from the coast. In the Black Belt, Obama piled up big margins, often two- or three-to-one.

In the heavily Hispanic rural Rio Grande borderland counties in Texas, Obama gathered as much as 84% of the vote. In the highlands of northern New Mexico, where Hispanic communities are older than the United States, and native communities are even older, Obama routinely got 70–80% of the vote. And on the Indian Reservations scattered across the Northern Plains, his margin of victory was rarely less than 30%. The Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota yielded 89% for him. Nearly every rural county he won in the close Montana race includes an Indian reservation.

There are other rural pockets of blue with majority white populations, including much of Northern New England, the Iron Range of northern Minnesota, the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, and some of the poorest vestiges of coalfield poverty in places like McDowell County, West Virginia.

Can't picture this map?

Take a look.

Oops, my mistake. That's not a map of the rural counties that voted for Obama. That's a map of the 800 rural school districts with the highest poverty rates. Well, never mind. It's pretty much the same map.

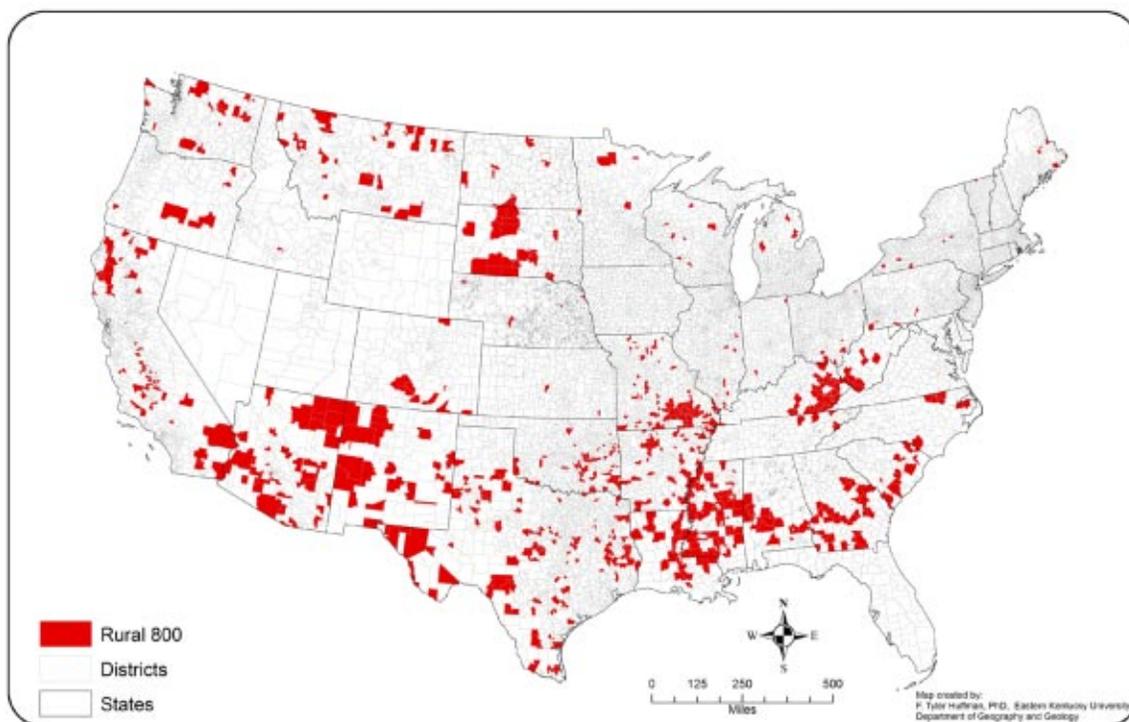
If you want to see the presidential vote by county, take a look at the last few

maps in Mark Newman's website (www-personal.umich.edu/~mejn/election/2008/). Newman is in the Department of Physics and Center for the Study of Complex Systems at the University of Michigan.

What is most interesting about Newman's maps is that when the colors "red" and "blue" are blended into various shades of purple that reflect the relative proportion of each county's vote that went to McCain or Obama, the

hope their votes are not in vain in the Obama presidency. He should remember those who voted for him in states that did not.

He should be sure, for example, that the infrastructure rebuilding that almost certainly will be part of his economic stimulus plan deliberately and specifically includes high poverty rural areas—new schools, new bridges, new roads. He should remember these high poverty rural places by changing the way Title I



brightest spots on the map—that is, both the reddest and the bluest—are in rural areas. This is especially true in those states where the bright red outmuscles the bright blue—that is, in the rural states that went heavily for McCain. In these states, almost invariably, both poverty and large percentages of people of color are concentrated in the rural blue zones.

Even though the votes of these rural regions did not sway the Electoral College where the state's winner takes all (except in Maine and Nebraska), let's

funds are distributed so that these places are no longer discriminated against, as they now are. He should be sure when he amasses an army of new teachers, as he says he will, that the best among them will serve the poorest communities, including the poorest rural communities.

We hope that in President-elect Obama's stated quest to earn the support of those who voted against him, he visits a state like South Dakota, where he lost by a 3–1 margin. When he does, he could take the time to visit Shannon County, on the Pine Ridge Reservation, where rural people gave him 89% of their votes.

RPM Note: In Vermont, demographically the most rural state in the nation and the first state to be called for President-elect Obama, he won all but 4 of 250 towns, and piled up the widest margin for president of any candidate since Favorite Son Calvin Coolidge in 1922—67% to 32%. **RPM**



"Attendance at REWG allowed me to open my mind to different perspectives and to see how rural education is so similar across the country and how it is so unique."

Heather Perry, Superintendent of Schools for School Union 60 (Greenville, Maine) and MSAD 12 (Jackman, Maine).

Find out more at www.ruraledu.org

months to fill—those classes stayed open an average of 90 days this year.”

In addition to vacancies, teachers are out on the usual sick and extended leaves and for another increasingly common reason: teacher training. As state and federal accountability pressures mount, teachers who work in high-poverty or “low-performing” schools across the country are required to attend a variety of workshops aimed at getting student scores up.

“North Carolina requires teachers to spend enormous amounts of time away,” says Zullinger. “There’s a huge problem in how we treat teachers.”

He continues, “A rural setting exacerbates these challenges. You have to value the quality of life offered in a rural community. If you’re looking for an urban lifestyle, you won’t be happy in Bertie County.”

All these challenges led Zullinger to think about other ways to get good teachers into the school system and keep them there.

The Teacher Cadet Program

Last spring, Zullinger approached the school board with an idea to build up the district’s teaching force by supporting recent Bertie graduates to become teachers in critical subjects. The program would cover college tuition and books and it would hire the participants as full-time employees of the school system, pay them a professional salary, and pair them to work with the district’s strongest teachers throughout their four years in college. In exchange, the participants would agree to teach a critical subject for five years in Bertie County. The Board agreed and began looking for ways to use local funding to support the idea and for an institutional partner, which they found in Shaw University.

The program selects students during their senior year through an application and interview process. Students must have a strong academic record, demonstrate a desire to remain in Bertie County,

RURAL SCHOOL FUNDING NEWS

Oklahoma Spending Likely to Go to Statewide Ballot

A group hoping to raise education spending in Oklahoma to the regional average submitted 238,000 signatures, about 100,000 more than required, to put a constitutional amendment on the ballot in 2010. Helping Oklahoma Public Education led the petition drive for the measure, called State Question 744. Oklahoma spends about \$6,900 per student, while surrounding states spend an average of \$8,300 per student. The measure would require the state to meet the regional average and would cost about \$850 million.

The measure is controversial even among education supporters. In Oklahoma, tax increases must receive three-fourths support in both the House and the Senate or go to a statewide vote. Unless a tax increase passed this steep threshold, State Question 744 could force the state to divert money from other essential services.

For links and additional Rural School Funding News, see RSN-Extras in eRPM at www.ruraledu.org. RPM

and commit to becoming a teacher in math, science, or English. “These are great kids,” says Zullinger. “They want to be here and they are passionate about making this a better place.”

The program aims to hire 20 “teacher cadets” each year; eight students are participating this fall. Shaw University is creating a campus at one of the county’s closed schools where participants take classes after the regular school day.

During the day, the cadets work directly with the district’s strongest teachers in math, science, and English. “The teachers have high pass rates on the state’s end-of-course exams and are successful at understanding and motivating their students,” says Zullinger.

For this work the students receive a salary of \$25,000, full benefits, and they

participate in the retirement system. “Good jobs with benefits are almost unattainable in this area,” Zullinger explains. These students will have a continuous growing income and their presence will help build the community and the local economy.

The partnership with Shaw University grew from contacts through school board members. Shaw had historical connections to the area and research interests that needed rural linkages. Many local residents graduated from Shaw and the

college presence is viewed as positive in the community.

“Shaw has come in with incredible commitment,” says Zullinger. “They want to become a very involved partner in creating better opportunities for people in this region. Where some colleges look at Bertie County and see problems, Shaw sees opportunities. This is a deep partnership, not just a teacher preparation program.”

Local Investment

The approximate cost of each cohort of 20 students is \$670,000, all funded from local tax revenues. In order to find the money, the district re-visited their funding priorities. They left some positions open as staff retired and looked for ways to combine functions, reduce costs, and free up local dollars. “We pitched this in economic development terms,” says Zullinger. “If this is a top strategy, then it has to be resourced.” Unlike the endless use of school funding to recruit teachers who are not likely to stay, “we’re keeping county money in the county and investing in our own young people.”

There are other payoffs as well. “So many times kids don’t see a future out the other end of high school,” says Zullinger. “This is having an impact on our younger high school students.”

The teacher cadet program is just one way the district is using its resources to build on its rural strengths.

“The future will come back around to rural ways,” says Zullinger. “There’s been a stripping out of rural communities’ capacity by so many forces. This is bringing capacity back.” RPM

“These are great kids. They want to be here and they are passionate about making this a better place.”

— Chip Zullinger, Superintendent of Schools, Bertie County, NC



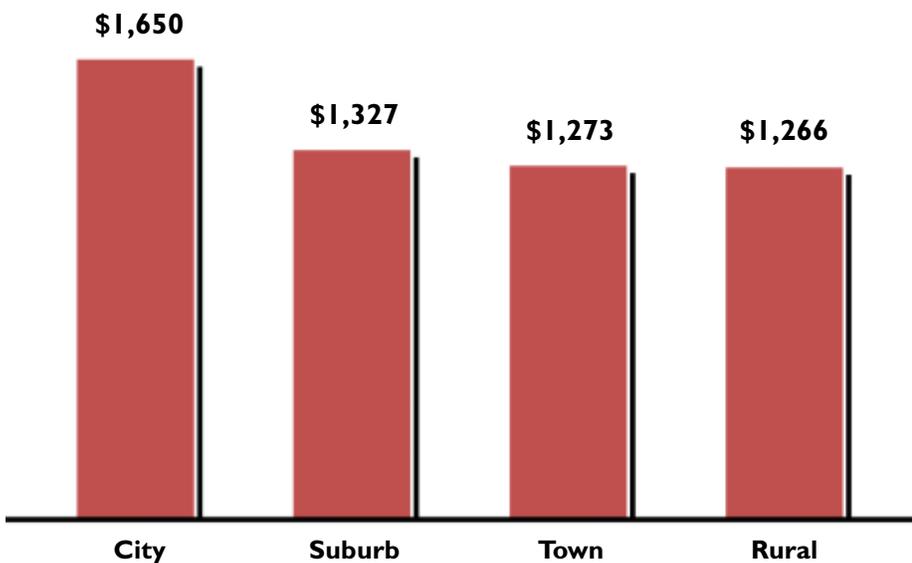
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INSIDE: *Obama and the Rural Vote*

Total Title I Funding per Eligible Child, 2008–09 School Year



Rural students receive, on average, less funding per eligible student through the federal Title I program, which is intended to provide additional educational support for very low-income and seriously at-risk students. Several streams of Title I funding were re-directed from high-poverty small and rural districts to lower-poverty larger districts when changes to the formulas by which Title I funding is distributed were implemented with *No Child Left Behind*.

Data Source: U.S. Department of Education, Revised SY0809 Title I Allocation data file.



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