



## Poorer Smaller Districts Lose Out in Stimulus

Some \$10 billion for schools in the federal stimulus package is being distributed through formulas that provide less funding per poor student to some school districts than others. Rubbing salt in that open sore is the fact that many of the districts that *get* less actually *need* more support for students because they have higher poverty rates—sometimes much higher—than districts that get more funding.

For example, the Dillon 02 district in South Carolina gets \$1,057 and has a student poverty rate of 38.50%. But Greenville, one of the the largest and least poor school districts in this poor state, gets \$1,467 per eligible student and has a poverty rate of 13.8%.

If the name Dillon, South Carolina rings a bell, it is probably because it is the home community of fourteen-year-old Ty'Sheoma Bethea whose eloquence about the challenges of students in very underfunded schools captured the attention of the media and the president last month when she wrote a letter asking for help to repair her school's wretched facility. That letter earned Bethea a trip to the capitol for President Obama's February address to Congress. But it didn't garner the help for her school that Bethea sought and it didn't change the federal outlay of funding for

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## Give Every Child More Than the Best Seat in the House (Chamber)

Editorial by Dr. Rachel B. Tompkins  
President, Rural School and Community Trust

February 24, 2009

Ty'Sheoma Bethea from rural Dillon, South Carolina, had the seat of honor next to First Lady Michelle Obama when the President recently addressed Congress. Her letter to Congress about her crumbling junior high school provided his closing quote, "We are not quitters."

As the camera focused on her and her mother, I thought of several million children in rural schools across America who say the same thing, "We are not quitters," but who also lament, "Why have so many people quit on us?"

Why is it so hard for them? Why must they, their parents, and teachers be heroic just to get what every child deserves—a high-quality education in a well-built and maintained school in the community in which they live?

In the poorest 800 rural school districts, there are almost 1,000,000 students—24% African American; 20% Hispanic; 10% Native American. More than 70% qualify for free and reduced meals, more than in Philadelphia or Detroit. Ninety percent of these students live south of the Mason Dixon Line from North Carolina to California.

Many attend crumbling schools like Ty'Sheoma's JV Martin Junior High School. They are shortchanged by state school financing systems. And, they are left behind by federal funding policy that is supposed to provide equal opportunities for all children.

President Obama knows about JV Martin because rural people in South Carolina went to court and sued the state to correct inadequate and inequitable funding schemes. To educate the public, a filmmaker produced a documentary on the condition of schools along I-95 calling it the "Corridor of Shame." During the presidential campaign, Congressman

James Clyburn (D-6-SC) brought this disgrace to Mr. Obama's attention.

To date, the only relief from the court is an order to create more early childhood opportunities, which the state has woefully underfunded. The districts appealed the decision. The state's pathetic defense is that poor children, despite all evidence to the contrary, cannot learn no matter what resources are provided. A decision is expected soon.

The stark reality in South Carolina is that unequal funding for rural districts with limited property wealth translates into significant differences in funding for schools. For example, huge disparities in teacher pay, as much as \$8,000 between

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There's more in eRPM  
at [www.ruraledu.org](http://www.ruraledu.org)

**Question: What percent of students who attend school in the 800 poorest rural school districts qualify for free or reduced priced lunches? Answer on page 4.**

# Arkansas Communities Forge Revitalization Process

“Rural schools are losing enrollment because of a lack of jobs and economic opportunity in rural communities,” says Lavina Grandon, speaking about the vexing rural challenge of declining enrollment. Grandon is Policy and Education Director of Arkansas Advocates for Rural and Community Education (ACRE). “In many communities there’s a demoralized sense that decline happens to rural places and there’s nothing local people can do about it.”

That’s where ACRE, a state-wide group of rural residents committed to helping rural schools and communities survive and thrive, took exception.

“We decided to attack the root of the problem,” explains Grandon. This fall ACRE launched a Community Revitalization initiative in partnership with the communities of Eudora, Delight, and Leslie.

## Revitalizing Rural Communities

“Rural communities don’t have the resources or the experiences for community planning and strategic assessment that larger towns do,” says Renee Carr, ACRE’s Executive Director. “So ACRE began formulating a plan and figuring out its capacity to do that kind of work in partnership with rural communities.”

“The process pulls everybody together to take a purposeful look at where we’ve been and where we want to go—with the idea they’re going to do something about it,” Grandon says.

Dorothy Singleton, ACRE’s lead organizer puts it this way: “This approach builds the connection between the health and well-being of the community and the quality of education.”

## The Partners

Talitha Hardin is project leader for the Leslie community revitalization effort. “ACRE is an outside group that has nothing directly to gain, so it can be trusted by everyone. They guide us, but it will be our community that accomplishes the work.” Leslie, population 482, is located in Arkansas’s Ozark Mountains.

Eudora’s project leader Erma Toney also emphasizes the importance of extra-community support. “ACRE is an outside

group that trains, encourages, and motivates you, but they don’t do it for you. It’s a learning process for everybody and everybody has opportunities to take

some 30 foreign exchange students—enrollment has fallen just below the critical 350 mark for two years. “We know we have to do something,” says Carol Hale, project leader. “We don’t want the community to die. If we don’t do something, it will be too late. ACRE is a partner with us and we are part of ACRE.”

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—Talitha Hardin, Leslie community revitalization effort

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advantage of it. Together Everyone Achieves More-TEAM!” Eudora, in southeast Arkansas, is the newest community to the revitalization process and the largest with 2,800 people.

Carol Hale is project leader in Delight, population 311, located in the timberlands of southwest Arkansas. “We know we have to do something,” she says, emphasizing the reciprocal relationship, “ACRE is a partner with us, and we are part of ACRE.”

Despite efforts to raise its enrollment—the community has recruited

## The ACRE Process

The year-long ACRE process brings together critical components of successful community revitalization: a process, opportunities for everyone in the community to shape and implement the plan, external resources, and ongoing formats for community residents to share ideas, build skills together, celebrate accomplishments, and continue moving forward.

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## Bill to Limit School Size in New Mexico

Under legislation introduced in the New Mexico legislature, state funds could not be used for new construction of any school with more than 900 students and a school district could only consolidate schools if it determines “that the consolidation is in the best interest of students served by each of the schools proposed to be consolidated.”

SB 255 is part of an initiative by Think New Mexico, a respected independent think tank that wants New Mexico schools to be smaller.

If the bill passes, it will set grade-level caps and prohibit use of state funds to construct new schools with enrollments above those caps.

To carry out a school consolidation, a district would have to prepare a study

showing a wide range of likely effects of the consolidation on the students and the community, hold hearings in each community affected, and get the approval of the state Secretary of education.

The bill also imposes size restrictions on any use of state funds to enlarge an existing school, unless it will be broken up into smaller schools-within-schools, and it gives funding priority to new school construction projects that integrate the use of existing “community educational facilities” such as gymnasiums, athletic facilities, swimming pools, performing arts facilities, or libraries located within ten miles. **RPM**

# Rural South Carolinians Help District Rethink Consolidation

“An agenda of consolidation and making mega-schools is a virus across the country, and there’s no exception here,” says Calvin Morris of Wadmalaw Island, South Carolina. “To rural communities, it’s a death knell.”

Residents of Wadmalaw and Johns Islands were on the front lines this winter when the county-wide school superintendent put forward a series of proposals to eliminate or reconfigure a number of African-American community schools in Charleston County, which encompasses both the urban center of Charleston and many rural areas and islands.

“Wadmalaw has one school and everything revolves around it,” says Morris. “You fracture and segregate an entire community when you take the school out.”

Morris is a minister and also serves on the St. John’s Constituent Board of Trustees, District 9, which includes both Wadmalaw and Johns Islands. Although the county-wide “consolidated” school board governs schools in the entire county, eight “constituent districts” have a board of trustees with some governance and administrative authority over district schools.

Among the schools slated for closure were Frierson Elementary on Wadmalaw Island and St John’s High on Johns Island, one of the east coast’s largest islands and home to more than 11,000 people.

Consolidation proponents cited budget pressures and claimed that closing schools would save money and improve programs.

The dubious claim (rarely proven after the fact) that consolidation saves money is often met with skepticism by communities.

Long-standing tensions in coastal South Carolina freighted the issue even more than usual. There were concerns that charter schools, which may selectively admit students and are not required to provide transportation, drain community schools of resources and enrollment.

Further, development of the islands has encroached on the fishing and basket-weaving economies of local

communities and driven up property taxes. Many long-term residents, especially African-Americans, have felt singled out to defend their property titles, the existence of their communities, and their right to live on the islands their families have made home for generations.

As is often the case with consolidation proposals, there were rumors and

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— Calvin Morris, *Wadmalaw Island, South Carolina*

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misunderstandings, incomplete media reports, and a history of distrust.

“The school district had given a vague picture of what was being planned,” says Morris. “So the first thing you must do is educate the community to what’s really going on.”

He continues, “You have to be proactive, not reactive because once something’s done, oftentimes it can’t be undone. Many times the real information is not publicized, so you have to get it out yourself. We held community meetings, large and small, and went door to door. We generated written materials to put in people’s hands. That’s important, but people need to hear it, too. You have to get community people interested and involved so they can carry the message.”

The South Carolina Rural Education Grassroots Group lent their support to Charleston County’s rural communities and along with the Rural Trust helped prepare research information about school size and consolidation.

The consolidated school board held a meeting in each constituent district

to discuss the proposals. In most places, those meetings were heated.

But residents of District 9 had done their own work. “When they came to our community, instead of an emotional yelling match, we had people with facts and figures who knew how to present calmly and precisely,” says Morris.

The District 9 community put forward an alternative plan, already agreed upon within the community’s own series of meetings and discussions. That plan called for keeping the schools on Wadmalaw and Johns Island.

Local residents continued to organize within their communities, to raise questions about the proposals, and to share with school board members and the media research on consolidation and facts about the proposals.

Several weeks later the county-wide board voted to keep all the District 9 community schools in place.

“When people at the grassroots come together, become active, learn policy, understand what’s really happening, and get organized, they can bring about change,” Morris says, quickly adding, “But it’s ongoing, you can’t stop.”

Now the schools must stabilize enrollment and raise achievement levels. “We’re continuing to work,” he explains. “You have to make folks mindful that it’s not a one-shot thing. They have to keep attending meetings, not just parents, but everyone concerned about the students and the community. And not just community meetings, but caucuses and school board meetings. And you have to keep educating people; you can’t rely on the media because it’s often not accurate or complete, or it’s slanted.”

He continues, “You have to sort through all the data and the double-talk and not be afraid to ask questions or to act. Things change when grassroots folks put themselves out there.”

Community meetings now are focused on how volunteers and local businesses can become more involved in schools, in helping to bring up achievement especially for struggling students, and in making sure all the schools have a thriving enrollment.

“This is something the people are doing,” Morris concludes. “It’s not about any specific individual, it’s about the people doing things for our children.” *RPM*

## Arkansas Communities Forge Revitalization Process

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The local ACRE chapter begins the process by completing an application to participate. The chapter picks a project leader, forms a steering committee, and secures the support of local elected officials. The steering committee helps coordinate each step in the process. Those steps include:

**Community Survey.** “The steering committee puts together a survey appropriate for their community by choosing questions from a large data base,” explains Carr. They distribute the surveys and tally the results.

**Outside Resources.** “We knew we were going to need coalition partners,” says Grandon. So ACRE staff began approaching resource agencies. “The agencies have been very responsive. They can come into a community already committed to doing something without having to initiate the process.”

**Community Forums.** The steering committee coordinates the first community forum, explain the process, and present the survey results. Participants begin to discuss their hopes for the future and then break up into focus groups where the real community work begins. Representatives of resource agencies participate in the forums and each community’s state legislative delegation are invited.

**Focus Groups.** “The surveys showed that all the communities had similar interests,” says Grandon. The focus groups reflect those themes of education, economic development, community services, environment, town beautification, and arts and heritage.

The focus groups meet regularly and come up with at least five ideas and strategies for community revitalization initiatives, which they present at the second community forum.

“The declining situation seemed inevitable to a lot of people,” says Hale. “Now there’s a ray of sunshine. We sit at the table in focus groups and it’s ‘what can we do?’ And then we get up and do it.”

Toney says the process “helps us define and focus on the directions we want to go.”

“Our community has always been one where a lot of people said, ‘someone should do something.’” says Hardin.

“Now there’s been a shift from ‘someone should’ to ‘we will.’”

**Second Community Forum and Follow Up Meetings.** At a second community-wide forum each focus group presents their five top ideas and strategies. Community residents vote on the ideas that they want to pursue. The steering committee then puts together a strategic plan and community residents begin working together to implement the plan.

“The final year-end meeting will be a chance to evaluate, celebrate, and re-calibrate,” says Carr. “Communities can start their next round of planning and focus groups. And ACRE will be ready to start the process again with three new communities.”

### Lessons Learned

ACRE staff and community project leaders are beginning to identify key aspects of the process. These include:

- A credible outside partner organization that is diverse and inclusive of rural people is important.

- A good process helps political leaders, resource people, and citizens get past old mindsets and work past old barriers toward common goals in a productive and transparent “back and forth” that both enables communities to pass on their accumulated knowledge and acquire new knowledge together.

- Young people appreciate the efforts of adults to make the community a better place with more economic opportunities, one where they can live and work in the future if they choose. By participating in the process, young people gain skills and confidence and a sense of ownership and responsibility for the community.

- Deliberative civic processes help rural residents articulate the policy changes their communities need and become more comfortable interacting with policymakers.

You can learn more about ACRE’s revitalization project at its website ([www.aracre.org/](http://www.aracre.org/)) and in eRPM at [www.ruraledu.org](http://www.ruraledu.org). **RPM**

## RURAL SCHOOL FUNDING NEWS

### Alaska Still Denying Rural Students in Struggling Schools

Superior Court Judge Sharon Gleason has ruled that the state of Alaska is continuing to deny students in struggling rural schools the education they are guaranteed under the Alaska Constitution. The ruling is part of the ongoing lawsuit *Moore vs. State of Alaska*.

Gleason found that the state should provide pre-kindergarten and more oversight and assistance to underperforming school districts. She also wrote that difficult community conditions do not “diminish the State’s constitutional duty.”

Governor Sarah Palin and the Education Department are asking for an additional \$2.8 million for preschool programs.

### Arizona ELL Case to Go to U.S. Supreme Court

The U.S. Supreme Court has agreed to hear the long-running *Flores* lawsuit on appeal from legislative leaders in Arizona and the state’s Superintendent of

Public Instruction, Tom Horne. The original class action lawsuit, brought in 1992 claimed that the state was violating the Equal Educational Opportunities Act (EEOA) by failing to provide sufficient funding for Arizona’s programs for English Language Learners (ELL).

Plaintiffs won decisions in 2000 and in 2007, and were recently upheld on appeal.

Plaintiff lawyers have expressed concern that the Court’s decision to take the case could mean it plans to modify or reverse the Circuit Court’s decision, possibly weakening the EEOA.

In the meantime, Superintendent Horne has recommended cutting \$32 million of the \$40 million currently budgeted for ELL students, claiming that immersing ELL students in language classes four hours per day dramatically decreases the time it takes them to learn English. Critics say that funding is too low to meet standards and that this immersion approach prevents older ELL students from earning high school credits in other subjects and pushes them to drop out.

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districts, means poorer districts cannot compete for teachers and are too often forced to rely on teachers not prepared in their assigned subjects. Quality teaching is directly tied to student achievement, so funding inequities are educational inequities.

Unfortunately, the stimulus package reinforces similar inequities.

For example, the \$39.5 billion for school fiscal stabilization must be used first to replace cuts in education state aid. This will soak up most of it. With what is left, local school officials may—but are not required to—use funds for modernization, renovation, or repair of public school facilities. It is unlikely that many schools, including those in the “Corridor of Shame,” where the list of needed renovations is long, will benefit from this stimulus provision.

Perhaps an even more significant problem is that another \$13 billion in the stimulus is to be distributed through formulas used to allocate federal Title I

funds for the education of disadvantaged students.

These formulas use a system that “weights” student counts according to the absolute number of disadvantaged students not just the percentage of disadvantaged students. This often has the perverse effect of sending more money per poor pupil to large districts with lower poverty rates than to smaller districts with higher poverty rates.

Ty’Sheoma’s Dillon school district, for example, has a poverty rate that is double that of the one of the largest districts in South Carolina, Greenville County. But it gets 34% less Title I money per poor student. The same unfair story can be told in every state.

Rural people understand they must do their part. In Dillon, residents passed a tax increase that will enable them to replace JV Martin. But the state and federal government need to do their part as well.

Local people understand court battles rarely help solve inequitable funding

issues. Rural activists are organizing for a long haul fight defending their children and communities. The South Carolina Rural Education Grassroots Group, including a representative from Dillon, focuses on issues of facilities, low graduation rates, and school quality.

For the President to be serious about helping students like Ty’Sheoma, he must:

- Fix the Title I formulas;
- Continue to invest federal dollars in school construction and target it to communities with the greatest need and fewest resources;
- Insist states meet their constitutional mandates to provide adequate and equitable state funding.

I have little doubt that Ty’Sheoma Bethea will succeed. She isn’t a quitter! Others will succeed despite inadequate support. But children in small towns and rural communities deserve their fair share of education resources. All children should get a lot more than the best seat in the House and a favored quote. They should realize the promise of good schools and good teachers. *RPM*

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## Poorer Smaller Districts Lose Out in Stimulus

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schools, and their students, struggling in the most desperate conditions.

That’s because the portion of the stimulus funding targeted to the lowest-income students, Title I funding, is distributed through just two of the four Title I formulas. Those two formulas, the Targeted formula and the Education Finance Incentive Grant (EFIG), “weight” a district’s student count. That is they provide additional money to districts with larger total *numbers* of poor students.

Smaller districts with higher *percentages* of poor students often get less per student because there are simply a smaller total number of those students.

While rural districts shoulder much of this inequity, they are by no means the only districts affected by it. Take these districts, for example: Reading, Pennsylvania’s schools get \$1,653 per poor student and Philadelphia’s gets \$2,469. Think Philadelphia’s schools are poorer? Think again. Almost 35%

of Reading’s students live in serious poverty, compared to 31.7% in Philadelphia.

That story plays again in Fresno, where 32.4% of students are poor and the district gets \$1,341 for each of them in Title I stimulus. But in Los Angeles, where 23.1% of students are poor, each one gets \$2,053 in Title I stimulus.

In one of the more striking contrasts, Chicago gets \$1,960 for each poor student, but schools in East St. Louis, Illinois get just \$810 even though 44% of students live in serious poverty in East St. Louis compared to 26.9% in Chicago.

The poorest 800 rural districts enroll almost a million students and have an average poverty rate of 35.52%. They get a little over \$1,200 per poor student in Title I stimulus. Among the seven urban districts with the largest enrollment of poor students, only Detroit has a higher poverty rate than the rural 800 and all seven get more per poor student in Title I funding—in both

the regular federal budget and the stimulus package.

It hasn’t always been this way. Number weighting was only implemented with the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 2002 (the same reauthorization that instituted the No Child Left Behind requirements).

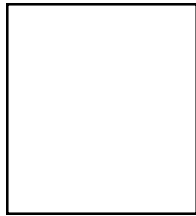
Per-pupil funding can be problematic for small districts because their relatively small numbers of students mean they often don’t accumulate enough funding in any category to cover their costs. In addition, poor rural districts have very few ways to raise revenues locally and they face serious economic challenges that predate, usually by decades, the current recession, so Title I funding is a life line.

Smaller districts deserve as much support as any other district for their most significantly challenged students. It’s time the Title I inequities were resolved, not replicated. *RPM*



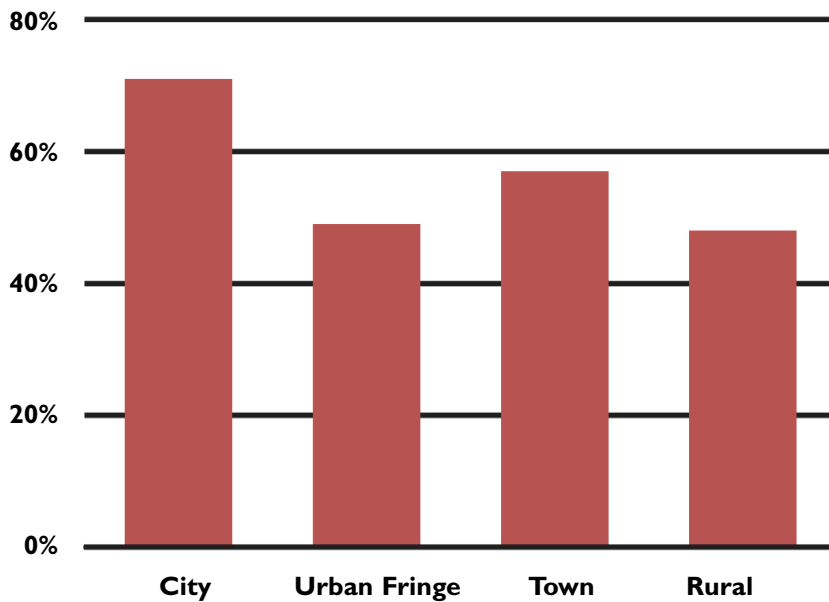
# Rural Policy Matters

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**INSIDE:** *Poorer Smaller Districts Lose Out in Stimulus*

## Percent Schools with Formal After-School Programs\*



\*This includes Fee-based stand-alone daycare, stand-alone academic instruction/tutoring program, 21st Community Learning Center, and other types of formal stand-alone or broad-based after-school programs.

Data source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Fast Response Survey System (FRSS), "After-School Programs in Public Elementary Schools," FRSS 91, 2008.

**Answer: 72.1%. Poverty rates in these districts exceed those of most of the poorest urban school districts in the U.S.**



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