Printable Edition

Note: This resource includes all articles from the May 2011 Rural Policy Matters newsletter.
For the latest content updates, please check the issue index for this edition.

Facts and Figures About States With the Highest Salary Expenditures for Instructional Staff in Rural Schools

Question: Which five states have the highest average salary expenditures for instructional staff in rural schools?

Answer: New York has the highest average rural instructional staff expenditures at $74,800 (expressed as full time equivalent/FTE for all instructional staff). New York is followed by Alaska at $74,193 per instructional staff member; Connecticut at $73,632; New Jersey at $65,674; and California at $65,120. The national rural average is $51,111.

Scope of Rural Tornado Destruction Under-Reported

We Are Tushka, Smithville, Maben, Hackleburg, Phil Campbell, Rainsville

Special Report by Robin Lambert, RPM Editor

Editor's note: Links are free and current at time of posting, but may require registration or expire over time.

Dozens of school systems across much of the South cancelled classes for the day; others sent students home early. The National Weather Service had made it clear that conditions were extremely dangerous. Radios replaced iPods; shelters and closets and interior bathrooms were readied with blankets and mattresses, flashlights and police scanners. Southerners don’t mess around with violent spring weather, and this year had already proven especially deadly.

Throughout the day friends and families texted each other, posted updates and warnings on Facebook, made frantic calls urging each other to get in a safe place. Then, mid-afternoon, in a slow northeastwardly march, the texts and posts disappeared and calls went silent as the power grid, phone system, and cell towers were demolished, along with tens of thousands of homes and businesses and eight schools, five of them in rural communities.

By the time the storms were over, at least 318 people had died in tornados, 74% of them in rural communities and small rural towns in a broad swath stretching from Mississippi, across Alabama, and into Georgia, Tennessee, and Virginia.

It was April 27th.

Many people now know it as the day a massive tornado hit Tuscaloosa, home to the University of Alabama.

The same storm system had killed six people on April 24th and 25th in Arkansas, five of them in rural communities.

Prior to the May tornados that struck Joplin and Oklahoma City, the spring of 2011 had already become one of the most destructive and deadly on record. In fact, forty-one people, two-thirds of the annual average for tornado deaths in the U.S., had died in tornados before the April 27th supercell outbreak. Those tornados struck Louisiana, Tennessee, Georgia, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Alabama, Mississippi, North Carolina, and Virginia. Thirty-one
of the victims died in rural counties.

The tornado outbreak of April 14th–16th killed 38 people, including 12 in rural Bertie County, North Carolina. It also destroyed the rural K–12 school in Tushka, Oklahoma. That strike, accounting for the sixth rural school demolished by weather, occurred in the evening and no students were killed.

**Getting the Rural Story**

Misery and loss are no respecters of person. Or of place. And this year’s tornado season has poured out more misery than anyone, or any community, should have to bear.

No community suffered more total deaths than Joplin, where, as of May 31, 139 people were confirmed dead and another 100 people are still missing. One of the city’s hospitals took a direct hit; 30% of the city’s buildings are destroyed, including three schools; and, the 2011 class of Joplin High School walked out of their graduation ceremonies into a nightmare of unimaginable proportions.

In Tuscaloosa, the massive wedge tornado slashed through the middle of the city and across its busiest intersection. The tornado narrowly missed the University of Alabama and DCH Hospital, but it slammed hundreds of businesses, major industrial operations, civic buildings, and more than 5,000 houses. The most devastating hits were to the Cedar Crest and Forest Lake neighborhoods, mixed income and middle-class neighborhoods where many Alabama students lived, and to the low-income neighborhoods of Alberta City, Holt and Rosedale Courts, where three elementary schools, all with free and reduced lunch rates over 75%, were demolished. As elsewhere, schools were not in session and no students died at schools.

The deadly Tuscaloosa tornado continued into Jefferson County (Birmingham), Alabama, where it destroyed much of Pleasant Grove, Pratt City, McDonald Chapel, and Concord, communities only recently recovered from a deadly 1998 tornado.

The rural tragedies have proven harder to catalog and report. In part, that’s because they are so spread out and much more removed from the media spotlight. Covered primarily in local newspapers, websites, Facebook pages, and YouTube videos, rural tornado news has been directed mostly to a local audience.

To our knowledge no national media outlet has attempted to catalog the scope of the tornado disaster as it impacts rural communities. The relative lack of coverage creates the impression that damage in rural communities is more minor and contained than it is. It also suggests a lack of understanding and interest in rural issues on the part of national media, and that makes it more difficult for rural communities to attract the attention and assistance they need.

Even before the Joplin tornado when urban deaths accounted for less than 25% of 2011 violent weather deaths, several reports, like this one in *The Washington Post*, attributed the high tornado death to the tornadoes’ strikes on urban areas. These attributions are, at best, misleading.

**The Rural Impact of this Spring’s Violent Weather**

Altogether deadly tornadoes have struck more than 70 rural communities in 2011, resulting in at least 268 deaths. But even this number is low as it does not include people who died in rural parts of urban counties, nor the four college students from rural communities who died in Tuscaloosa on April 27th.

One of the many tragic aspects of natural disasters is that they tend to hit a contiguous area, whole neighborhoods in urban places, entire communities in rural places. And while smaller tornadoes are inexplicable in the ways they skip up and down, wiping out one building and leaving the next unscathed, the multi-vortex and wedge long-track tornadoes of April 25–27 and May 22–24 are nearly incomprehensible not only for their fury, but for their scale, staying on the ground for dozens of miles and cutting paths of absolute destruction as much as a mile wide in some places.

Such contiguous destruction makes it especially difficult for neighborhoods and communities to recover. In small communities residents share the loss of many common friends and family members, jobs, and homes. Almost everyone is struggling to find the physical resources for the most basic of everyday tasks.

The loss of important community institutions that bind people together compound the misery. That’s the case for the six rural communities whose schools were destroyed by the spring tornadoes: Tushka, Oklahoma (Tushka, K–12, Atoka County) on April 14th; and, Smithville High School, 7–12, Oktibbeha and Webster Counties) Phil Campbell, Alabama (Phil Campbell High, 7–12, with less severe damage to the elementary school, Franklin County); Hackleburg, Alabama (Hackleburg, K–12, Marion County); and Rainsville, Alabama (Plainview School, K–12, DeKalb County), all on April 27th.

In news reports, residents of all these communities have noted the loss of their schools as a particularly heart-
rendering blow to their communities’ identities.

In addition to catastrophic school losses, many more schools in rural communities and small town schools have been significantly damaged by tornadoes this spring, including schools in Rayne, Louisiana (Acadia Parish) on March 5th; and Hanceville, Alabama (Cullman County); Jasper, Alabama (Walker County); Pell City, Moody, Odenville, and Ragland, Alabama (all in St. Clair, County); Ringgold, Georgia (Catoosa County); Trenton, Georgia (Dade County); and Flintstone, Georgia (Walker County) on April 27th.

Many more schools sustained minor damage, and dozens in Alabama and Tennessee were closed for days as a result of damage to the state's electrical grid and/or widespread community destruction that prevented students from attending.

In terms of per capita deaths, the community most hard-hit by this spring’s tornadoes is Phil Campbell, Alabama, a community of about 1,000 that lost 23 people on April 27th. Phil Campbell also lost its grocery store, a gas station, a medical clinic, and several churches as well as the high school. Three more people died in the nearby community of East Franklin, which also suffered widespread property losses.

Hackleburg, Alabama seems likely to be the community with the highest percentage of property losses. The town of 1,500 lost at least 75% of its buildings, including its police and fire stations, a restaurant, its only grocery and dime stores, churches, most homes, and a Wrangler denim plant as well as the school. Eighteen people died in the community. Hackleburg is one of the more isolated communities that took a direct strike, and it was several days before mainstream media learned of its devastation.

Smithville, Mississippi suffered losses on a scale similar to Hackleburg, losing the police and fire station, restaurants, stores, churches, and homes as well as the school. Fifteen people died in the community of about 900 people.

More than 20 people died in the Sand Mountain, Alabama community of Rainsville, population about 4,400. Plainview School is considered a total loss and other property losses were extensive throughout the community and in the nearby communities of Fyffe, Henagar, Sylvania, and Ider.

Tushka, Oklahoma also suffered severe widespread property losses and has been declared a disaster area.

**Why So Much Destruction?**

Tornadoes are rated on the Enhanced Fujita (EF) scale according to the types of damage they do and to the speed of winds inside the tornado. EF-1 tornadoes are often deadly despite being the weakest. EF-5 tornadoes are the strongest, with winds in excess of 216 mph. This spring three EF-5 tornadoes have struck the United States, one in Joplin.

The other two EF-5 tornadoes began in Mississippi on April 27th. It was the first time ever that two such tornadoes hit the same state on the same day. One of those tornadoes hit rural Kemper County where it killed three people. An hour later, the second EF-5 tornado opened up over Smithville. That tornado stayed on the ground for miles, crossing into Alabama in Marion County (which was struck almost simultaneously by a separate E-3 tornado that killed seven people in the rural community of Shotsville) and continuing into Franklin, Lawrence, Limestone, and Madison Counties in Alabama. Altogether this EF-5 tornado killed 86 people. It marked the sixth time Alabama has been struck with a tornado of the severest magnitude, tying Alabama with Texas for the most EF-5 strikes in U.S. history.

Elsewhere in Alabama, 12 EF-4 long-track tornadoes, including multi-vortex and wedge tornadoes, slammed much of central and north Alabama. Among these 12 tornadoes were the Tuscaloosa/Jefferson tornado; two EF-4s in Jackson County, one of which crossed into DeKalb County, Alabama and then into Dade County, Georgia; a separate EF-4 in DeKalb County; and EF-4 tornadoes that tracked through Fayette/Walker and St. Clair/Calhoun counties in north Alabama and Elmore/Tallapoosa counties in south central Alabama. In addition, EF-4 tornadoes hit Bledsoe and Bradley Counties, Tennessee; Catoosa County Georgia, tracking into Hamilton County, Tennessee; and, Smith/Jasper/Clarke Counties in Mississippi. A separate EF-3 tornado also hit Bradley County, Tennessee.

In addition, seven more EF-3 and seven EF-2 tornadoes claimed lives in other parts of Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Tennessee, and Virginia. (All data from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, May 28, 2011.)

On average, southern states have slightly fewer tornadoes than states in the better-known Midwestern and plains region of tornado alley. But southerners die in tornadoes at higher rates than their mid-continent counterparts. That is due to several factors. Southern states are more densely populated. They are also poorer so more residents live in mobile homes, notoriously vulnerable to wind. And, the high water table across much of the South makes basements and storm shelters impractical in many places, eliminating the possibility of an underground refuge, generally the safest place to be in a strong tornado.
While these factors make surviving a weak or medium tornado less likely, even very well-built permanent structures offer little protection when an EF-4 or EF-5 makes a direct strike.

In the types of tornadoic activity of spring 2011, there was, simply put, nowhere safe for most people to go.

That reality is witnessed by the hundreds of website photos and YouTube videos posted by people from tornado-stricken places. But even these wrenching images, everyone with firsthand knowledge seems to agree, merely hint at the devastation.

Given the number, geographic range, and strength of this year's storms, the question isn't why so many died, but how so many survived.

For many people on the ground in hard-hit communities, survival itself is seen as a miracle — a product of improved warning systems, preparation and vigilance of local residents, daytime rather than nighttime strikes, the wise decisions of school administrators to close schools rather than keep students together in one location, heroic selfless efforts of neighbors and strangers to shelter and rescue one another, and of a kind of grace, a belief in which sustains many people through the incomprehensible.

What's Next?

The re-building of the hardest-hit communities will be measured not in weeks or months, but in years. It will require sustained investment and attention, not just from local residents, but from outside the community, from volunteers and civic organizations and from the shared public enterprise we call state and federal government.

In the short term, residents are pulling together the bits and pieces remaining of their possessions, trying to file insurance when they have it, register for FEMA assistance, bury their dead, graduate their young, figure out how to survive a tornado-destroyed job, find some kind of shelter for the duration, and comfort and encourage each other.

In almost all communities what is most needed immediately is financial assistance, the kind of assistance that can help people get food, medicine, building materials, a temporary place to stay while they deal with the immediate aftermath of absolute disaster. Most communities are asking individuals interested in helping to provide cash assistance and not to send supplies, clothing, toys, or other goods. Many communities lack the space to house such materials and don't have the people to sort and distribute them effectively.

Communities trying to rebuild their schools along with most of the rest of their infrastructure face special challenges, in no small part because their local tax bases, which generate local revenue to support capital outlay, have been decimated.

In recognition of this reality, the Alabama legislature passed a measure pledging to work with the districts to help fill in the gaps in rebuilding costs not covered by district insurance or FEMA assistance. The extent of financial support remains to be seen.

How You Can Help Rural Communities

Individuals interested in providing financial assistance or volunteer labor in response to the disasters have several options, including whether to direct assistance to specific communities.

General Support to Aid Disaster Recovery

- Make a contribution to American Red Cross.
- National Volunteer Organizations Active in Disasters
- Many national faith-based organizations are active in relief activities across the U.S. Please contact your preferred organization to find out about its activities.

Support Targeted to States or Local Rural Communities

People who would like to provide assistance specifically directed to one or more rural communities can find information for the best ways to help in most of the affected counties here. This list includes contact information for local agencies and volunteer groups that are addressing needs directly at the community level.

The 2011 tornado disasters are, to a large extent, rural disasters.

Please remember rural communities, their residents, and their institutions as you consider how you can help.

Local Organizations Providing Disaster Relief
Note: This list is still incomplete and will be continually updated. Check back for more details and additional opportunities to help.

**Alabama**

**State efforts**

The state of Alabama's volunteer [website](http://www.alabama.gov) enables you to make financial contributions to the statewide recovery effort. You can also sign up as an individual or to bring a group to work in the recovery effort. Forty-two of Alabama's 67 counties have been approved for disaster assistance due to tornadoes on April 27 and April 15.

*Because damage in Alabama is so extensive and widespread, there are many organizations working in a variety of ways to provide assistance. Some of the websites below aggregate listings for many different groups. RPM is passing along this information and not endorsing or vouching for any single group.*

- [Alabama Possible](http://www.alabama.org), tornado relief
- [Library Books for Schools](http://www.libbooks.org)
- Multiple Counties/West Alabama
- Multiple Counties/East Alabama
- [Franklin County Disaster Relief Fund](http://www.franklincounty.org)
- [Elmore County Disaster Relief Fund](http://www.elmorecounty.com)
- Lawrence County Disaster Relief Fund
  12467 AL Hwy 157
  Moulton, AL 35650
  c/o Kim Hood

**Georgia: Dade, Catoosa, and Walker Counties**

- Northwest Georgia Chapter of the Red Cross: (423) 615-9324
- Catoosa Organization Acting in Disaster
  P.O. Box 53
  Ringgold, GA 30736

**Mississippi**

**State efforts**:

The state of Mississippi's [website](http://www.ms.gov) includes information about how to make donations and sign up as an individual or a group to volunteer in the recovery effort.

**Smithville (Monroe County)**

- [http://smithville.monroecountyweb.com/](http://smithville.monroecountyweb.com/)

**Tennessee**

- Bradley County Resource Staging Center; please call 423-559-5531 for information about what is most needed.

**Read more:**

**Alabama**

- [http://blog.al.com/spotnews/2011/04/alabamas_small_towns_reel_in_s.html](http://blog.al.com/spotnews/2011/04/alabamas_small_towns_reel_in_s.html)
Arkansas


Georgia

- www.georgiatornadoes.com/

Kansas

- www.noanews.noaa.gov/april_2011_tornado_information.html

Louisiana

- www.msnbc.msn.com/id/43057699/ns/weather/t/tiny-school-big-symbol-louisiana-flooding/
- www.thetowntalk.com/article/20110513/NEWS01/105130326
- www.aolnews.com/2011/03/05/tornado-slams-rayne-louisiana/

Mississippi

- www.foxnews.com/us/2011/05/06/mississippi-businesses-close-rising-water/

Missouri

- www.semissourian.com/story/1725953.html

Montana

- www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1389891/Americas-disaster-Western-floods-snowpacks-melt.html

North Carolina


Oklahoma

- www.msnbc.msn.com/id/43159213/ns/weather/?GT1=43001

Tennessee

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Federal Office of Rural Education Policy Proposed

Editor’s note: Links are free and current at time of posting, but may require registration or expire over time.

Eight U.S. Senators have joined Max Baucus (D-MT) and Jay Rockefeller (D-WV) as co-sponsors of legislation to create an Office of Rural Education Policy within the U.S. Department of Education.

The proposed legislation, Senate Bill 946 (SB 946), introduced May 11, would establish the Office, headed by a Director, who would “advise the Secretary on the characteristics and needs of rural schools and the effects of current policies and proposed statutory, regulatory, administrative, and budgetary changes” on State and Local Education agencies that serve rural schools.

Senator Baucus calls the office a “one stop shop” that will enable rural schools to focus on students rather than on adapting to education policy developed for urban areas. He writes: “…our rural schools serve as community centers and economic hubs. They face unique challenges that deserve a unique approach.” Baucus also notes the “growing trend toward unfairly funneling federal dollars to urban education centers at the expense of our rural students.”

Senator Rockefeller notes that in establishing the Office, “We are letting [rural] students know that we believe in their futures and will give them the support they need to achieve great things in their lives.”

The Office of Rural Education Policy Act does not commit additional taxpayer dollars to the Department of Education, but would fund the office and its activities from existing resources within the Department.

Duties and Responsibilities of the Office

In justifying the need for a federal-level education policy office, SB 946 cites data from the National Center for Educational Statistics, the General Accounting Office, and research by the Rural School and Community Trust. Specifically, SB 946 notes the “paucity of rural education research in the United States,” (Rural Trust, “Taking Advantage,” 2011); the increase in rural enrollment, especially the increase in the percentage of rural students of color (Rural Trust, “Why Rural Matters, 2009”); high poverty levels in many rural schools; low rural teacher salaries; high use of distance learning technology by rural schools; and the unintended consequences of policy measures that are uninformed about rural schools and their needs (Rural Trust, “Taking Advantage,” 2011).

The proposed legislation, which is modeled on the Office of Rural Health Policy in the Department of Health and Human Services, outlines seven specific responsibilities for the office. These include establishing a clearinghouse for collecting and disseminating information on teacher and principal recruitment and retention; access to and use of technology and distance learning; student achievement, including achievement of low-income and minority students; innovative approaches, higher education and career readiness and high school completion; access to and quality of early childhood development; access to and partnerships with community-based organizations; professional development; federal and other grants and assistance specifically geared and applicable to rural schools; school finance.

In addition, the office would identify research (and gaps in research) as well as demonstration projects of importance to rural schools; coordinate activities with the Department that relate to rural education; provide information to the Secretary and others on the activities of other Federal departments and agencies that relate to rural educating, including housing, agricultural services, transportation, economic development, health care, disability services, and mental health; coordinate with the Bureau of Indian Education, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the Department of the Interior; provide technical assistance; and, produce an annual report on the condition of rural education.

The Office would serve rural schools with Locale Codes 41, 42, or 43 and small town schools not located near a major urban area with Locale Codes 32 and 33. (Click here for more information on Locale Codes.)

Gaining Traction

Joining Senators Baucus and Rockefeller as co-sponsors of SB946 are Senators Mark Begich (D-AK), Michael Bennet (D-CO), Al Franken (D-MN), Kent Conrad (D-ND), Tim Johnson (D-SD), Amy Klobuchar (D-MN), Patrick Leahy (D-VT), Barbara Mikulski (D-MD); Bernie Sanders (D-VT), Jon Tester (D-MT); Mark Udall (D-CO), and Tom
Udall (D-NM).

The bill was read twice and referred to the Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions, where it will be debated.

"This has been a priority for the Rural Trust for many years," said Robert Mahaffey, Director of Communications and Marketing. "It's great to be at this point. We want to thank Senators Baucus and Rockefeller and their staffs."

Mahaffey acknowledged that there is still a road ahead to reach passage of the measure, but he added, "We are confident the benefits the Office will provide for rural students, schools, and communities across the country will convince Congress to pass the law and the President to sign it."

If the Committee chooses to refer the bill to the full Senate, the Senate would vote on the legislation. A companion bill would be introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives, where the same process would apply. If the bill passes both houses of Congress (or is incorporated in other legislation), it would go to the President to be vetoed or signed into law.

Members of the Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions are Tom Harkin (D-IA) Chair; Michael Enzi (R-WY), ranking member; and Lamar Alexander (R-TN), Michael Bennet (D-CO), Jeff Bingaman (D-NM), Richard Blumenthal (D-CT), Richard Burr (R-NC), Robert Casey, Jr., (D-PA), Al Franken (D-MN), Kay Hagan (R-NC), Orrin Hatch (R-UT), Johnny Isakson (R-GA), Mark Kirk (R-IL), John McCain (R-AZ), Jeff Merkley (D-OR), Barbara Mikulski (D-MD), Lisa Murkowski (R-AK), Patty Murray (D-WA), Rand Paul (R-KY), Pat Roberts (R-KS), Bernard Sanders (I-VT), Shelton Whitehouse (D-RI).

A number of organizations around the country have formally expressed support for the Office of Rural Education Policy, including:

- American Association of School Administrators (AASA)
- American Association of Community Colleges (AACC)
- Alliance for Excellent Education (AEE)
- Association of Educational Service Agencies (AESA)
- Center for Rural Affairs (CFRA)
- Children's Defense Fund
- Coalition for Community Schools
- Council for Opportunity in Education
- Montana Rural Education Association
- Montana School Boards Association
- Montana School Superintendents Association
- National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE)
- National Association of Development Organizations (NADO)
- National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP)
- National Association of Federally Impacted Schools (NAFIS)
- National Education Association (NEA)
- National Congress of American Indians (NCAI)
- National Farmers Union (NFU)
- National Forest Counties and Schools Coalition (NFCSC)
- National Indian Education Association (NIEA)
- National Rural Education Association (NREA)
- National Rural Education Advocacy Coalition (NREAC)
- National School Board Association (NSBA)
- National Telecommunications Cooperative Association (NTCA)
- Organizations Concerned about Rural Education (OCRE)
- Public Education Network (PEN)
- Rural School and Community Trust
- Save the Children

Let your senators know how you feel about the creation of an Office of Rural Education Policy Act, particularly if you live in a state represented by a member of the Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions.

Read more:

The full text of SB 946:


Information from the website of Senator Max Baucus:
Leonore Annenberg School Fund Grants Awarded

Editor's note: Links are free and current at time of posting, but may require registration or expire over time.

The Rural School and Community Trust in partnership with the Leonore Annenberg School Fund for Children has awarded grants to Dermott Elementary School in Dermott, Arkansas and St. Helena Elementary School in Greenburg (St. Helena Parish), Louisiana.

The grant program is designed to provide resources “of immediate and direct value to” children in select elementary schools. To be eligible for the grant, schools must have stable leadership, high need, and a vision of how a resource such as the School Fund could make a difference for all the children in the school.

“We are very pleased to work with Dermott and St. Helena schools,” said Doris Terry Williams, Executive Director of the Rural Trust Leadership Council. “These grants are intended to make a lasting difference in the lives of children. These two schools have exhibited the vision and commitment to work with limited resources to improve the education and well-being of their students.”

Dermott, in Chicot County, received $100,000 that the school will use for a mobile computer lab, science lab equipment, library books, and literacy materials.

St. Helena Elementary School (K–4), in St. Helena Parish, received $100,000 through the grant program. The school will use the funding to provide Smart Boards in all of its classrooms.

In both schools, funds will also be used to purchase library books and to support a place-based learning institute and follow-up by the Rural Trust.

The Leonore Annenberg School Fund grants are specifically targeted to urban and rural elementary schools in which at least 90% of children receive free or reduced-price school lunches. The Fund partners with the Rural Trust to identify rural schools that meet its criteria.

The Rural Trust selects schools among the “Rural 900,” the 10% of rural and remote small town school districts with the highest poverty rates. Together these districts enroll almost 1.3 million students and have an average student poverty rate higher than that of high-poverty urban districts, including Philadelphia, Chicago and Baltimore.

The Rural Trust invites four to five schools to apply to the Fund and works with two or three of the applicants to develop their ideas and a proposal. The Rural Trust visits the school to make sure teachers and school leaders are aware of award guidelines and implementation.

Awards are presented annually.

Read more:

• http://thenewrural.org/communities/dermott/

Rural Innovations Webinar Series: New England Network for Personalization and Performance (NETWORK)
In the third Rural Innovations webinar, held May 11, staff of three rural New Hampshire high schools that participate in the New England Network for Personalization and Performance (NETWORK) shared their experiences re-structuring their schools around student-driven learning and assessments that require students to demonstrate complex knowledge and thinking.

All three schools offer students opportunities for real-world, inquiry-based learning with a community component. The schools report improved student engagement, greater integration between the community and school, and more efficient use of school resources. The webinar describes how the schools are using the approach and how it is changing their schools.

NETWORK is a group of some dozen schools committed to re-designing the high school experience on the premise that "students who participate in inquiry-based learning experiences tied to performance assessments will experience success in school and be better prepared for college and/or career experiences." Much of the approach draws on the work of the New York Performance Standards Consortium.

Presenting were Chris Geraghty, a social studies teacher at Kearsarge High School in North Sutton; Steve Beals, principal of Laconia High School in Laconia; and John Freeman, Superintendent of Pittsfield Schools in Pittsfield. The webinar was introduced by Joe DiMartino, President of the Center for Secondary School Redesign, Inc. and moderated by Robert Mahaffey of the Rural Trust.

In the first segment of the webinar, Geraghty describes how his students form research questions that frame much of their learning; students also develop plans for how they will demonstrate what they have learned.

New Hampshire state standards require students to demonstrate mastery of skills and competencies for each course. Students can earn carnegie units (credit recognized by colleges and universities) for successfully demonstrating mastery in lieu of "seat time" in a traditional classroom.

Kearsarge’s inquiry-based approach promotes student engagement with content and ties learning directly to course competencies.

From a teacher’s perspective, Geraghty says that one of best things about the approach is that it challenges students to "own" their own learning. Students are not just the recipients of knowledge. Rather, they are developing research, doing work with consequences, and becoming critical thinkers.

Geraghty also reports that this approach addresses the critical idea of relevance. "Students see that they are building the ability to use real-world skills that prepare them for the kinds of interactions they will have after graduation, regardless of whether they choose college or work," he says.

Finally, when students do inquiry-based work with authentic assessments it creates opportunities for students to become engaged in the community and for local residents to become more involved in the school. At Kearsarge, community residents are involved as students do their work and also in the assessment of student work. The process connects students and the school with community resources.

It also raises the stakes for student work. Community residents who participate in student presentations are part of the assessment team and students know they will have to defend their research and present their work in a way that meets both the academic standards of their classroom teachers and the expectations of community residents.

Principal Steve Beals describes how his school has used Exxtended Learning Opporunities (ELO) as a vehicle for authentic student work. ELOs create learning opportunities outside the traditional classroom. Beals says the restructuring of the school around Extended Learning Opportunities capitalizes on work the school was already doing to create more performance-based learning opportunities, including apprenticeships and performing groups. The shift toward providing more of the curriculum through ELOs, which in some cases replace classroom courses, also has supported a shift in school culture.

Laconia's ELOs, which are mastery-driven and community-based, have four components.

Research: students choose their topics, which leads to more student engagement. Teachers work with students to identify required competencies and help develop a plan for how students will demonstrate mastery.

Reflection: students write journals, participate in discussion groups or find other ways to reflect on and integrate what they are learning.
Personalization: ELOs have a heavy aspect of personalization, a relationship component between student, teacher, community partner. In this way learning may be independent, but it is also connected.

Product: students must figure out how they are going to translate their learning in to a tangible piece of evidence about what they did.

Presentation: ELOs require that students present what they have learned — their research, product, and reflections — in a community-led process that includes other students, parents, teachers, and community residents.

Teachers work with students throughout the process. Progress is monitored by the teacher and by the community partner. Credit is only awarded upon successful conclusion of the presentation piece.

Beals claims the integration of ELOs into the school's curriculum has led to greater student engagement and achievement and a lower dropout rate. He says it took about a year to cement the new school culture.

Most teachers were supportive of the plan from the beginning. But even so, Beals said it took about a year to cement the change in culture. Because students are so motivated they push teachers, something of a reversal of the days when teachers pushed students.

Superintendent Freeman describes how the approach in Pittsfield grew out of a process to re-vision the school through a series of forums with community residents and teachers.

In those meetings it was clear that everyone wanted the same thing for students: a personalized education that supported young people to be curious and adventurous, adaptable, responsible, and self-directed and self-reliant.

But they did not see attaining these ends in a traditional high school.

Pittsfield was also facing other challenges. Their graduation and college-going rates were low, and the district was facing reductions in funding and staff. The school was challenged to do more than "nibble at the edges" by cutting programs and to instead completely re-think high school in the community.

So they visited schools and refined their vision.

Freeman says this work is effective because it engages students and prepares them for their post-secondary lives. "What students are doing compares easily to college work," he observes.

The school's membership in the NETWORK provides teachers with long-term support and collegial interaction, which makes it easier for teachers to support the kind of work students are doing.

Freeman says staff and community residents agreed that they wanted the school's environment to promote "dynamic learning, personalized, monitored, and adjusted ro promote growth in each and every learner."

The school wanted to ensure that its graduates possess direction, solid academic skills, an ethic of hard work and committed citizenship, and a thoughtful plan for the next stage of life.

"We should be accountable for more than getting kids to high school graduation," says Freeman.

Click here to listen to the audio and download the visual presentation.

Many Highest Poverty Districts Would Be Better Off If Congress Had Not Tried to Help Them

Nearly one in four of the schools districts with the highest student poverty rate would be better off if the formula for distributing federal funds for the education of disadvantaged students made no effort to target that funding to high-poverty districts.

Funding for disadvantaged students is provided under Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The formula contains a weighting system designed to artificially inflate the count of disadvantaged students in school districts that have “high concentrations” of student poverty. The purpose is to increase the share of the funding that goes to these school districts.

But the weighting system is flawed by a provision that inflates the student count on the basis of the sheer number of Title I students in a district, no matter how small that group is as a percentage of the total student population. Another weighting system based on percentage of disadvantaged students is also used in the formula.
The student count for every district is calculated using both approaches — “number weighting” and “percentage weighting.” The higher of these two student counts is the student count used for that district to determine its share of Title I funds.

In general, the “number weighting” system as designed is so much more powerful that the “percentage weighting” system that funding is reduced in smaller districts no matter how high their poverty rate and increased in larger districts no matter how low their poverty rate.

That means that districts with large numbers of Title I students soak up a bigger share of the Title I funding, reducing the funds available for small districts, even those with higher poverty rates.

Analysis done by the Rural School and Community Trust using 2009 data from a Congressional Research Service study indicates that only two of the 340 school districts with the highest disadvantaged student rate nationally benefit from the number weighting provision. In fact, 281 of these highest poverty districts would be better off if all districts had their student eligibility count weighted using only the percentage and not the number of disadvantaged students. Fifty-seven districts merely break even with the addition of number weighting.

But what is truly astonishing is that 83 of the 281 highest poverty districts who are hurt by the presence of number weighting in the formula are hurt so badly that they would be better off if there were no weighting system at all — neither number weighting or percentage weighting. These districts would be better off if Congress had not tried to target districts with “high concentrations” of poverty.

Visit the Formula Fairness Campaign to learn more about the problems of number-weighting in the Title I formulas and what you can do to help make them fairer to high-poverty small and mid-size school districts.

Rural Trust Office Moves

The Rural Trust's National Office has relocated to Washington, DC. Please note our new address and phone numbers.

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Idaho's Declining Enrollment Safety Net Survives Another Year

Editor's note: Links are free and current at time of posting, but may require registration or expire over time.

Somewhat lost among the many education policy reforms that were debated in the Idaho legislature this session was a protection for schools experiencing declining enrollment that Idaho schools chief Tom Luna had hoped to abolish.

Previously, schools in Idaho were guaranteed 99% of state funding for students, based on the previous year’s enrollment figures. This protection provides some cushion from the blow of declining enrollment, a cushion particular helpful for small and rural school districts.

Luna had proposed eliminating that funding completely, and offering instead a 10% severance package to any teacher whose position was eliminated due to declining enrollment.

Both the 99% declining enrollment cushion and the 10% severance provision were eliminated in a senate bill that was signed by Governor Butch Otter. But a follow-up House bill re instituted a 97% guarantee for state funding based on prior year enrollment. That measure, however will sunset after one year. Otter let the bill become law without his signature, saying that he didn’t think the move was necessary, but he recognized its importance to
rural Idaho legislators.

Much of Superintendent Luna’s “Students Come First” agenda has passed, including three major policy initiatives: providing laptops to every Idaho high school student and changing requirements for electronic learning; teacher pay system changes; and expansion of school choice programs. Each of those three main bills included an emergency clause to speed up implementation. There is movement in the state to repeal the new legislation. Over 335 bills have become law during this session.

School funding reform per se has not been a part of the legislative priority this year, although Students Come First has been touted as a way to reduce costs at the local level. State education funding was cut for a third straight year this year, as lawmakers adhered to no-new-tax campaign promises. Local districts are responding with levy increase elections, some of which have been approved by voters.

Idaho removed some school support from the property tax in 2006 and implemented a penny sales tax increase. But the state has not increased its share of education funding as promised at the time of the tax swap.

Read more:

Coverage of declining enrollment support:

Coverage of Luna’s “Students Come First” Agenda and response:
- [www.ktvb.com/home/Boise-students-petition-against-Lunas-plan-for-online-classes-114322344.html](http://www.ktvb.com/home/Boise-students-petition-against-Lunas-plan-for-online-classes-114322344.html)
- [http://voices.idahostatesman.com/2011/05/10/idahopolitics/foes_idaho_k12_reforms_say_theyre_nearly_half_way_signature_goal](http://voices.idahostatesman.com/2011/05/10/idahopolitics/foes_idaho_k12_reforms_say_theyre_nearly_half_way_signature_goal)
- [http://voices.idahostatesman.com/2011/05/17/krichert/idaho_politics_luna_resorts_fear_tactics_says_recall_group](http://voices.idahostatesman.com/2011/05/17/krichert/idaho_politics_luna_resorts_fear_tactics_says_recall_group)

Coverage of school funding shortfalls:
- [www.idahostatesman.com/2011/05/20/1655904/a-funding-train-wreck-years-in.html](http://www.idahostatesman.com/2011/05/20/1655904/a-funding-train-wreck-years-in.html)

Maine Funding Formula Under Scrutiny

*Editor's note: Links are free and current at time of posting, but may require registration or expire over time.*

Communities in rural Maine that have experienced dramatic changes in property valuation are seeking help in dealing with shrinking state support. They want the state's funding formula changed to better address their needs.

Representatives and school leaders from places such as coastal Jonesport and other small towns along the Atlantic say that the Essential Programs and Services (EPS) formula does not recognize that high property values do not always correspond with high incomes. They argue that high local property values should not automatically relieve the state of its responsibility to support local school districts. Property values in many coastal communities have risen dramatically. But incomes of many long-time and full-time residents have not increased.

These communities argue that sudden drops in state funding triggered by rapidly rising local property values are extremely harmful to local district operations.

A number of bills proposing changes to the EPS were introduced this session. But the Maine Department of Education has only publicly supported one that directly addresses the valuation issue. Legislative Bill 1274 would allow small districts to vary their required staff-student ratios by 10%. The MDE recommends a comprehensive examination of the EPS rather than piecemeal change.

Other legislators have cited the recent Education Law Center national report, “Is School Funding Fair?,” which awards Maine an ‘A’ on education spending relative to income but only a ‘D’ on its distribution method. The EPS formula has been criticized almost since its inception, but reform proposals have largely failed. One sponsor of current legislation has said that EPS is “an urban formula foisted on a rural state.”

Read more:
Alabama School Funding Trial Wraps Up

*Editor's note: Links are free and current at time of posting, but may require registration or expire over time.*

Last month, *Lynch v. Alabama* was heard by Federal Court Judge Linwood Smith. The state's tax law is being challenged, and both sides made extensive presentations related to the state's history, with emphasis on the circumstances and motivations behind the creation of Alabama's tax structure.

As reported in March RSFN ([www.ruraledu.org/articles.php?id=2676](http://www.ruraledu.org/articles.php?id=2676)), plaintiffs from Lawrence and Sumter Counties are asking that the court suspend portions of the Alabama tax code and to order the Legislature to rewrite that code. The plaintiffs claim the portions they are challenging are racially discriminatory.

The 1901 Alabama State Constitution places severe limits on property taxes and taxes to fund education. In the 1970's, "lid bill" amendments further limited property tax options for local governments. They also allow the option of 'current use' valuation for farm and timber property. This valuation (which rarely applies to small farms and timber holdings) yields very low reveues and applies to a high percentage of rural land. As a result tax lids and the "current use" provision, it is impossible for most rural counties to generate significant funds for schools. Alabama's property tax rates are the lowest in the nation as are its per capita property tax collections.

Presentation of evidence took four weeks, and the trial temporarily moved to Birmingham to accommodate witnesses, including retired governors and state and U.S. legislators from Alabama.

Among the former officials who testified were former Governor Albert Brewer and former state legislator Rick Manley, who is known as the "Father of the Lid Bill." Governor George Wallace was a major focus of some of the testimony, which described how his desire to protect segregated education in the state was manifested in his support of the lid bills.

Defense witnesses disputed that there was any discriminatory intent in the laws, but several admitted under cross-examination that smaller rural school systems could see increases of up to 35% in property tax revenues if rates for farm and timber property were increased. Several witnesses for the state testified that although the tax system represents bad policy, it was not created for racially discriminatory purposes.

Past and present representatives of the Alabama Farm Bureau and Alabama Forestry Association were involved in the passage of the lid bills and actively support their continued use today. Those AFB and AFA leaders who testified claimed that their organizations' actions were economically motivated to prevent high property taxes and had nothing to do with race.

By one witness' estimate, the "current use" assessment on farm and timber property averages $460 per acre, but fair market value of that land is closer to $1600 per acre.

Several leaders in the state legislature testified that even if the judge did strike down the system, it would be unlikely that elected officials would vote to raise property taxes. However, on cross-examination, they amended their positions to say that if the current tax system were found discriminatory, they would not continue to support it.

One of the plaintiffs' attorneys, James Blacksher summed up the case this way: "These big Black Belt landowners used white hostility to black education to place in the 1875 and 1901 state constitutions and in the 1971 and 1978 Lid Bill amendments provisions that undervalue their property assessments and restrict their millage rates... These restrictions still impoverish public schools in the Black Belt. But they also have hurt rural school systems everywhere in the state and have reduced the state school revenues available to urban school systems."
Sumter County Schools Superintendent Dr. Fred Primm describes the impact of the tax laws on his district and others: "in rural areas — and most of those rural areas being minority populated — it has really stacked the decks. We're working with very little local revenue. Basically you have no money to do anything creative or innovative."

A ruling is not expected for at least several months.

Read more:

Local coverage:

- www.wbhm.org/News/2011/LynchVsAlabama.html

Court documents in the case:


Percent K-12 Students Qualifying for Special Education Services, By School Locale

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Rural Policy Matters is published monthly by the Rural School and Community Trust.