



## Printable Edition

**Note:** This resource includes all articles from the December 2013 Rural Policy Matters newsletter. For the latest content updates, please check the [issue index](#) for this edition.

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

## Facts and Figures: How Many Children Attend America's Poorest 10% of Rural Schools?

**Question:** How many children attend America's poorest 10% of rural schools?

**Answer:** 1.3 million students attend the 900 poorest rural and small town schools. That's as many as attend school in Chicago, Houston, Philadelphia, Detroit, Boston, Atlanta, Washington DC, Pittsburgh, Columbus, Minneapolis, and Indianapolis combined.

For more information on the "Rural 900" see [www.ruraledu.org/articles.php?id=2279](http://www.ruraledu.org/articles.php?id=2279)

Click here to see a map of the Rural 900: [www.ruraledu.org/articles.php?id=2338](http://www.ruraledu.org/articles.php?id=2338)

## There's Poverty...

There's poverty and then there's poverty.

Geoffrey Canada, founder of the Harlem Children's Zone, said it in his presentation at the Rural Education Summit at Berea College in Kentucky last month. He's certainly said it before. The immediate context in this case was Canada's story of a weekend visit he made as a Bowdoin College student to the home of one of his classmates. The friends had talked often about poverty and its effects, and Canada told the story as if he had been pretty sure at the time that he was the greater authority in the conversation because he had grown up in a very poor neighborhood in the South Bronx.

Then the two arrived at his friend's rural home in the dead of New England winter. There was little insulation and almost no heat. Canada said he was shocked to learn that they would be using the facilities down the path, though the temperature was well below freezing. The nearest neighbors were miles away.

"There's poverty and then there's poverty," Canada said.

The point was not that either rural or urban poverty is worse. Poverty takes a lot of forms, in a variety of places, in varying depths and persistence, all damaging to some degree. The stake of the story, and the conversations at the Rural Education Summit, is that the United States has a problem with poverty and it's time we start talking about and *doing* something about it.

Twenty-two percent of children in the U.S. live in poverty. As American income inequality has hardened, the likelihood that any individual person or family will move out of the economic circumstances into which they were born has fallen. Except for those individuals born into the luckiest families or the highest economic brackets, evidence suggests the long-term circumstances of most Americans, especially young people, are more likely to decline than improve.

But the conversation at Berea wasn't about the declining prospects of the middle class (and there are middle class kids who attend Promise Neighborhood schools). It was about the very real obstacles in the paths of children and youth born into America's deepest poverty.

More to the point, it was about what three rural Promise Neighborhoods are doing to demonstrate that poverty does not have to be a life sentence and that investments in the right comprehensive supports and resources in communities with high percentages of very poor children and youth will pay off—for those young people and their families and for the future of this country.

It's brave work.

To begin with, the premise itself requires acknowledging poverty and its effects and that opens a host of difficult conversations.

Promise Neighborhood is clear that what's missing in poor communities are middle class supports. But within the larger cultural context there is a strong impulse to pin that deficit of supports--and the resultant problems--on residents in those communities rather than on structures and policy decisions whose responsibility is widely shared.

In saying that we will meet the strengths of people living in poverty--the brains and talent and life force of kids, and the desire of parents to see their children flourish, and the will of communities to thrive--with resources to make good on all that potential, we acknowledge both the accomplishments and the yet-untapped reservoirs.

This is where the conversations start. Not with what's wrong in communities, but with what's strong and capable. Then we can begin to address the structural forces that squander so many lives and so much talent.

And to examine those forces we have to look at culture. No, not the so-called *culture of poverty*, that shallow construct of blame, but at American culture and how we as Americans learn most of what we think we know about poverty.

And that take us to another difficult point in the conversation: the face of poverty, a face no one wants projected on themselves, their children, or their community.

In this country, poverty has been characterized and moralized. In a million ways we have all been messaged that people are poor because they are lazy, unintelligent, morally corrupt, deficient in some way and that the appropriate response is blame or pity.

There is within this messaging a long history of turning images that were intended to portray the personhood, dignity, and, yes, suffering of people whose lives are contextualized by financial poverty into degradations of those very people.

Dorothea Lang, Doris Ullman, Walker Evans, and the photographers of the War on Poverty intended to garner awareness and support to end poverty. They knew that putting a face on poverty humanizes its realities in ways that statistics and facts do not.

In many ways they succeeded. Social security, federal food assistance, the mortgage deduction—things that give lots of people more security—can be traced, in part, to the fact that many Americans saw humanity—saw themselves—in the portraits. But that doesn't change the fact that these photos, and others far less sensitive, have been used to subject and demean people.

The complex legacies of iconic 20th Century photographs of American poverty—largely white, largely rural—remain. They sit alongside far more powerful messaging about poverty in mass media. Representations, especially in movies and television, have—by factors disproportionate to any reality—portrayed people who are poor as people of color. The messages aren't very complex. As Canada bluntly stated in his Berea talk: poverty in America has been colorized.

Poverty affects all racial/ethnic groups in the U.S and is growing among all groups. Larger numbers of white children are poor; much larger percentages of African-American, American Indian, and Latino children are poor. Stereotyping and the racial subtext of poverty reinforce misinformation and complicate the conversation. The inequality playbook has many tactics to block common cause.

So the work of Promise Neighborhood to talk straightforwardly about poverty in a way that casts a human face, a *child's* face (even if the face is not the face of any particular Neighborhood child), as a reason people who aren't poor could care is important albeit risky business. Finding ways to talk that don't activate stereotypes and rain down stigma on kids and communities is path-clearing work not for the faint hearted.

There are other challenges as well. For the first time in history, the United States has the ability to collect huge amounts of computerized, searchable data on our kids, much of it in school. This academic data can be a real boon to teachers because knowing exactly where an individual child is having trouble makes it much easier to target instruction and supplemental supports to that student, helping the student excel quickly.

But who's to say what will happen with that data in the future, how private it will be, how it will be used or misused. Doing this work requires a tremendous amount of data collection and management, data that's needed for making decisions and targeting resources, data that will be used to demonstrate what outcomes result from significant investments in children born to families with limited financial resources.

It's a lot of pressure on the data. The questions need to be the right questions, the measures the most reflective. And once the data is generated, there are challenges getting people to respect its findings. Belief can be stubbornly resistant to evidence.

And there other tight wires. The sciences of brain development, nutrition, the psychology of stimulation and nurture, the physiology of stress are helping to build the case that investment in supports to optimize children's development is both protective and generative for body and brain. But we have to be careful that advocacy for these investments are not co-opted into arguments to write off kids, and the adults they become, who have not yet been fortunate enough to get all that is optimal.

We have to be equally thoughtful about using the word "generational" as a modifier for the word "poverty." When the term *generational poverty* is used to denote the economic, educational, and social structures that decrease economic opportunity and mobility, it can be a useful construct. When it implies that poverty is inherited like an intractable gene, it's a mean and dangerous lie.

We would do well to remember that a sizeable percentage of Americans who are doing financially well today had grandparents who were poor. The vast majority moved into financial security, not by an enormously lucky break or gargantuan personal effort, but because they lived in a place with good schools, decent available work with wages high enough to free some human and capital resources for the kids, and affordable college. These now middle-class families are the generational beneficiaries of public and social investments that make a difference.

And that brings us back to policy and where we make our public and social investments. We have to talk about it, about poverty, about what we are going to do about it. The conversation must include people who live in and with poverty everyday. Promise Neighborhood is an important part of that conversation with a lot to say about what it means to invest in kids and communities.

### **Read more:**

National Poverty Center at the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy at the University of Michigan

- [www.npc.umich.edu/poverty/](http://www.npc.umich.edu/poverty/)

"Harder for Americans to Rise from Lower Rungs"

- [www.nytimes.com/2012/01/05/us/harder-for-americans-to-rise-from-lower-rungs.html?pagewanted=all&r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/05/us/harder-for-americans-to-rise-from-lower-rungs.html?pagewanted=all&r=0)
- [www.cbsnews.com/news/80-percent-of-us-adults-face-near-poverty-unemployment-survey-finds/](http://www.cbsnews.com/news/80-percent-of-us-adults-face-near-poverty-unemployment-survey-finds/)

## **All Children Everywhere**

Joey seemed to be doing fairly well in fifth grade, but his school's academic specialist, Ms. Smith, noticed he had a high score on a state assessment tool to predict risk of dropping out. She dug deeper and discovered that Joey had done poorly on several classroom math tests and that he'd been absent before each test. So Ms. Smith suggested that Joey spend his in-school study time with a computer-based math tutorial targeting the specific skills he needed. The classroom teacher was thrilled because it helped Joey quickly catch up.

Joey's parents were involved in the school's Families and Schools Together program. They agreed that Joey might enjoy a new club that pairs students with adult mentors for fun activities, career exploration, academics, and character education. Everyone noticed Joey trying harder at school.

Things got even better when Joey's grandmother, who was taking care of his cousins Jayce and Aubry, joined

a program just for grandparents raising children. She found a lot of support from others in similar situations—and she learned how to navigate Facebook. That summer, the kids took a canning class with their grandmother and when they finished, they were able to keep all the equipment. Now Joey's entire family is enjoying more vegetables along with pride in their accomplishment.

Joey, Jayce, and Aubry are fictional students. But the initiatives described in their story are very real components of the Berea Promise Neighborhood. Berea College is the lead agency in the initiative, which includes schools in Clay, Jackson, and Owsley counties in Kentucky. It is one of twelve Promise Neighborhoods in implementation stage nationally, and the first located in a rural area.

The federal [Promise Neighborhood](#) grant program, modeled on the [Harlem Children's Zone](#), envisions that all children and youth in the neighborhood have "access to great schools and strong systems of family and community support that will prepare them to attain an excellent education and successfully transition to college and a career." The program aims to build a complete continuum of cradle-to-career solutions by increasing capacity of partner organizations, developing local infrastructure and resources, and integrating programs and support in distressed communities.

### **Investing in place: Integrated child and family supports, cradle to career**

"The heart and soul of Promise Neighborhood—and what attracted us to it—is its holistic approach," says Ginny Ann Blackson, Director of the Promise Neighborhood initiative at Berea College. "Promise Neighborhood is explicit that what happens outside the 8:00–3:00 school day impacts students' ability to learn."

The long-standing commitment of Berea College to the region is a deep resource. The liberal arts college was founded by abolitionists and incorporated in 1855. It serves high-achieving students with financial need, most of whom live in the region. Students receive the equivalent of a full scholarship and participate in the College work program. You can read more about Berea College and its mission [here](#).

President Lyle Roelofs says the College is very pleased to be involved as a Promise Neighborhood. "We have Eight Great Commitments that guide the College, one of which is to serve the Appalachian region primarily through education. The ethical value of that commitment is unique and it strengthens our enterprise. It's good for the region and its economy and makes it more likely that young people will go to college. Federal grants give us more leverage in the work."

Berea College actualizes its commitment to the region through their [Partners in Education](#). Dreama Gentry serves as Executive Director since the program was formed. "The program reflects the College's commitment to serving Appalachia. We design programs focused on increasing educational outcomes in an eighteen county region in eastern Kentucky. We seek federal and private dollars to support these programs."

Many of Berea's prior grants have been focused on college access and readiness. "The Promise Neighborhood work has allowed us to expand the work into new areas—like early childhood and health and nutrition. We are learning lessons in this work that inform practice and have impact in other communities and initiatives as well," says Gentry.

As the lead agency, Berea partners with child services programs, local public libraries, county extension offices, Somerset Community College, the Jackson County Family Court, Eastern Kentucky Asset Building Coalition, Grow Appalachia, the Governor's Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership, Kentucky Arts Council, the Owsley County Action Team, and other organizations. The three school systems are primary partners. "In our rural communities, schools are the primary institutions, they have the facilities and the staff to do these programs," says Gentry.

### **Family and community engagement + Health, wellness, and safety + Academics**

"So many previous efforts have focused on grade levels, specific activities or subjects, or particular challenges," Blackson observes. "For example, dropout prevention or getting elementary schools to grade level. We need to make sure that we are addressing dropout risks for elementary students and getting children to kindergarten ready to learn. It all needs to happen within the context of all other issues that impact children."

Promise Neighborhood's emphasis on place reflects a new direction in federal policy, one that addresses specific local challenges and creates more opportunity to build on the strengths and assets of a place and its culture. Rural Trust has developed and advocated for place-based strategies as part of its mission since its inception.

### **Family and community engagement**

A core strategy of all Promise Neighborhood Initiatives is family and community engagement. "Research is clear that when families, parents, caring adults are involved with their student's education and school, it's a

win-win situation,” says Rochelle Garrett, Director of Family Partnerships for Partners for Education.

For this reason, engaging and responding to families is prioritized throughout the Partners for Education work. In addition, a variety of initiatives reach out in support of families and to welcome their involvement with school.

Garrett explains: “Our work is focused at the macro level on the things all families need; at the micro level we do specific programming responsive to the unique circumstances and interests of local communities.”

At the macro level, for example, Partners for Education collaborates with the [Eastern Kentucky Asset Building Coalition](#), which helps families build financial assets with savings plans, college planning, tax preparation, and other financial tools. Partners for Education also works with schools to implement the [FAST—Families and Schools Together](#), an evidence-based program to support and strengthen families and help kids succeed in school and in life.

At the micro level, programming occurs in collaboration with the local parent engagement coordinator. “Each community is very different, so these programs reflect what those communities want,” says Garrett. For example, Jackson County has a canning program for families in partnership with the County Cooperative Extension Service. Owsley County set up a group to support grandparents raising their grandchildren.

“It’s all about relationship building, connecting families to other families, building bonds, and breaking barriers that may be creating problems for families,” Garrett emphasizes. “It goes back to the idea that it takes a village.”

You can read more about the extensive family and community engagement activities in [Family Engagement: Lasting Positive Impact](#) in this edition of *RPM*.

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### **Health, wellness, and safety**

Children cannot thrive in school or life without necessary conditions to support overall well being.

Promise Neighborhood bears a mandate to provide those conditions for all children. But that can be challenging. Blackson notes that physical education teachers, and even recess, have been cut from many schools. “There aren’t gyms or formal sports activities in communities. Kids have long sedentary bus rides, so they can’t stop by the park on their walk home from school. In some schools more than half the students are obese.”

Berea Promise Neighborhood has focused its health and wellness work on nutrition, exercise and safety. Jeanelle Sears is Associate Director of Health and Safety and coordinates that work, some of which builds on initiatives already underway. “Several schools work with a chef to develop healthier meals that appeal to kids. They do surveys and get student feedback,” she says. Owsley County has a strong program of buying local produce, and Jackson developed its canning project. “Promise also supports and strengthens the work of partners such as [Grow Appalachia](#) in expanding school and community gardening, farm-to-cafeteria programs, and agriculture-related entrepreneurial opportunities,” Sears adds.

In order to expand opportunities for student exercise, Promise Neighborhood has purchased materials and supplies promoting physical activity and offered professional development in schools without physical education teachers. This includes the internet-based Brain Breaks program that gets kids moving within classroom settings. It also created JumpStart for kids whose buses arrive early. “The goal is to get kids moving during a time when they might otherwise just be sitting in the gum,” says Sears. “Teachers in many of our elementary schools are paid to coordinate and lead these activities, which vary by school.”

Promise Neighborhood sites received funding through the Department of Justice to address climate, crime, and in- and out-of-school safety issues. “This program provides evidence-based programming and curricula related to dating violence, sexual assault, stalking, and domestic violence prevention and response,” says Sears. “Students have been involved in defining topics and choosing curricular responses.

The program has also reached out to families. “A lot of parents are stressed about how to monitor their student’s social media activity and phone, or what signs to look for that their student might be experiencing some kind of violence,” says Sears. “We’ve been able to partner with family engagement efforts and to bring families and schools together on some of these issues.”

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### **Academics**

The ultimate goal of Promise Neighborhood is to ensure that all children and youth have supports to succeed in school and life. And that circles back to academics.

“Berea’s strength in the Promise Neighborhood initiative was our experience around college access,” says Gentry. “We had the relationships with schools, and experience placing staff in schools that has made it easier to do the academic work.”

At the elementary level, in-school staff include an Academic Specialist responsible for coordinating data, student services, and Promise Neighborhood activities within the school. Promise also partners with Save the Children on early childhood programs including home visits and Parent Child groups.

At the middle and high school levels, academic supports include a ninth grade career exploration class, Advanced Placement programs, and partnerships with public libraries. The Berea College Improving Rural Middle Schools with College Coaches program, supported by a grant from the Rural Trust, has placed staff in Promise Neighborhood middle schools to help families understand their middle school student’s college readiness level, emphasize the importance of rigorous course taking in high school, and engage parents in the college planning process.

Post-secondary specialists in middle and high schools focus on students’ success after graduation. Blackson describes some of their work: “Post-secondary specialists help students explore their career interests and successfully navigate the college transition. They each spend a day each week at Somerset Community College, where 70% of our students start college. They meet with students to help them make the transition successfully. We also take students on college trips and to Washington DC. That experience has proven very important and motivating to students.”

In addition, Promise Neighborhood has established after-school programs and coordinates professional development. Specialists in math, language arts, early childhood, and arts and humanities work directly with schools.

### **Innovation**

In its first year of implementation, Berea Promise Neighborhood offered a variety of demonstration projects in schools. “It was important that we not just do data gathering and planning that first year,” says Blackson. “We wanted to show schools the kinds of things that Promise Neighborhood could make available.”

The Promise Neighborhood funding has also made it possible for schools to try out ideas they are interested in. Gentry explains: “Promise Neighborhood gives schools a safe way to pilot ideas they’ve invented or try things they’ve wanted to do. They can explore and refine the ideas and decide whether to reallocate permanent resources. It takes a lot of the risk out of those decisions.”

Two new programs are an Arts and Humanities initiative and a Recovery Coaching program, described below.

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### **Arts and Humanities**

“Arts teachers and programs always seem to get cut first when there are budget problems, even though research demonstrates arts improve skills in all subject areas,” says Natalie Gabbard, Promise Neighborhood’s Content Specialist for Arts and Humanities. “Arts empower students and generate creative thinking and other 21st century skills. If we want innovation and creative thinking, it is critical that kids have opportunities to create, and to explore and experience the arts while they are young.”

Like many rural places, the communities in the Berea Promise Neighborhood are deep with cultural resources but they lack funding for teachers who are arts specialists, especially at the elementary level. “We live in a place rich in cultural tradition. We have artists, including people who practice a traditional art or craft like quilting or blacksmithing, living in all these counties,” says Gabbard. “Yet there haven’t been many ways to connect them to schools or students.”

In response Berea Promise Neighborhood developed an arts residency program that places Teaching Artists affiliated with professional arts organizations and Local Artists in schools. Gabbard explains how the program works: “In the spring of 2012 we called a meeting for anyone living in the community who practices an art or craft they were interested in sharing. About 30 people came—woodworkers, quilters, storytellers, musicians, others. We worked with each person to determine their interests and collect work samples. After we ran the background checks, we paired the Local Artists with KAC Teaching Artists to



*Student and Local Artist making a quilted pillow top as part of an arts residency connected to math. Photo*

begin developing preliminary lesson plans.”

*courtesy of Berea College.*

Promise Neighborhood staff worked with schools to match Local Artists and KAC Teaching Artists to the interests and needs of the schools and place artists with classroom teachers for residencies. Everyone worked together to align lesson plans with curricular goals for the grade and subject.

In addition, residencies have been integrated with after-school and family engagement programs. “When students see connections from their own culture, it can help them understand something they know about as art. It opens doors for broader cultural understanding and helps them think differently about what they can be when they grow up,” says Gabbard.

So far about 35 artists have been involved, some in multiple residencies.

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**Recovery coaching**

“There are families that are falling apart because of substance abuse or other mental health issues,” says Gentry. “So if we can help deal with issues and reunify families, indicators for kids can improve.”

To this end, Promise Neighborhood used its Department of Justice funding to form a partnership with Jackson County’s family court to create a Recovery Coaching program. The Court refers highly motivated parents to the program, which pairs participants with a trained peer coach. The coach works with the parent to set and reach individualized goals in their recovery process.

“The model uses strength-based and motivational interviewing,” explains Sears, who coordinates the program as part of the health and safety initiative. “Coaches help parents break their goals into doable steps. There is usually a complex set of issues involved, so coaches help identify and address some of those obstacles. They might, for example, help a parent figure out what to do if their phone is not working when they expect to get a random call to report for required testing.”

At its core the new program is about supporting the parent toward recovery, which in turn supports the children and the rest of the family. “It ties back to kids and their outcomes,” says Gentry.

The program has already produced positive outcomes. “There is a stronger relationship between the schools and the court system,” says Gentry. “We had been in a situation where kids were in multiple systems, but those systems were not connecting. We’ve been able to work out careful confidentiality agreements so that the systems can work together. This helps everyone pull in the same direction with students at center.”

**Strengthening infrastructure**

Berea Promise Neighborhood is seeing evidence that it is succeeding in building and strengthening infrastructure for supporting children and youth. Collaborations have been formalized and are growing. Partners are involved in an integrated planning process to tailor programming to specific communities and make it self-sustaining.

The investment of significant federal dollars in place has built capacity. For example, several Local Artists have organized a county Arts Council. Some local artists have been juried on to other teaching artist rosters and are finding new ways to generate income through arts while living in their own communities.

Less formal infrastructure is also important, including the growing web of relationships among families and a burgeoning sense of pride. “We want students to feel pride in the place where they are from,” says Gentry. “Pride is important for making those connections for learning and success. It’s also a fact that many students will have to leave to go to college and to find a job. We want them to feel good about where they are from and to think about returning when they are able. We also want them to feel good about investing in their communities, even if they don’t wind up living in them. Philanthropy is a long-term commitment. This is another way of sustaining the place and opportunities here over the long term.”

**Implications: Challenges and opportunities**

Promise Neighborhood is intended to address some of the most entrenched challenges in American education—ensuring that all children have access to the supports they need to thrive. So it is no surprise that the work itself faces challenges. One of those is transportation. In rural areas distance confounds attempts to make



*A scene from the original play “Home Song,” based on local stories and history that was developed as part of an after-school arts residency. Photo courtesy of Berea College.*

buses available for all activities and presents barriers to families for whom time and/or a reliable car and gas are limited resources. Distance and all its costs and contingencies must be considered in rural Promise Neighborhood programs.

Forming partnerships and figuring out sustainability can look different in rural communities as well. "Each partner brings experience and expertise," says Gentry. "The lead agency has to think about its own entry point and how to scale up for the whole spectrum. It is not possible to develop all the competencies in the pipeline, they have to be blended across the partners."

In smaller communities there are usually fewer formal organizations with which to partner, so partners may have to do more capacity building. And small communities are rarely home to institutions and businesses with the capacity to make or garner significant financial investments, magnifying the challenge of sustainability. Uncertainty over sequestration and future budget cuts hasn't helped.

But some of these challenging rural realities are also strengths. Fewer organizations can mean more people are personally vested in students and their outcomes. And, community residents can more easily see themselves as relevant to the school. Students are loving many programs, especially the arts residencies.

The challenges also underscore the value of the investment. In just two years, Berea Promise Neighborhood has seen measurable outcomes: test scores have risen, in some cases dramatically. Two elementary schools have achieved Distinguished status in Kentucky's accountability system. The percentages of families engaged in some aspect of their children's schooling has also increased significantly.

"Berea College will still be here honoring its commitments to the region when the Promise Neighborhood dollars gone," says Gentry. "And those dollars have helped forge new partnerships, build capacity, and demonstrate what is possible when children's well-being is prioritized."

Ginny Ann Blackson underscores the point. "These kinds of supports make a real difference. They should be available to all children everywhere."

***Read more:***

U.S. Department of Education Promise Neighborhood website:

- <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/promiseneighborhoods/index.html>

Berea College Promise Neighborhood Initiative:

- [www.berea.edu/esp/programs/promise-neighborhood-program/](http://www.berea.edu/esp/programs/promise-neighborhood-program/)

Berea College Partners for Education:

- [www.berea.edu/esp/](http://www.berea.edu/esp/)

Berea College

- [www.berea.edu/](http://www.berea.edu/)

Harlem Children's Zone:

- [www.hcz.org/](http://www.hcz.org/)

## **Family Engagement: Lasting Positive Impact**

"This work is really all about relationship building," says Rochelle Garrett, Family Partnership Director at [Partners for Education](#) at [Berea College](#). Garrett coordinates family engagement efforts across the College's preK-12 federal grant programs, including the Promise Neighborhood initiative. "It is all about building relationships, and when we have activities and events surrounding family engagement, then families will participate and attend once that relationship has been established," she adds.

Promise Neighborhood prioritizes family and community engagement and support as key to creating the conditions that enable children to thrive in school and in life.

Garrett describes the work as spanning both macro conditions and micro contexts. At the macro level, it works to support opportunities for all families to strengthen their financial awareness and asset building, and to

become more directly involved with their children's schools. At the micro level, the work reaches into communities with activities, parent groups, and programs that respond to the interests and needs of local families. The family engagement program also reaches out to establish relationships with families and collaborates with other Promise Neighborhood initiatives to integrate family engagement strategies across all aspects of the work.

## **Macro level family engagement work**

### ***Financial asset building***

Partners for Education collaborates with the Eastern Kentucky Asset Building Coalition. "That program helps families build financial assets with savings plans, college planning, and tax preparation," Garrett explains.

### ***FAST—Families and Schools Together***

The evidence-based FAST program is a multi-faceted approach to supporting and strengthening families and helping kids succeed in school and in life. "FAST is something we do in most of our schools," says Garrett. "Any family can participate and, it is a fun way to get the whole family engaged. The number of families participating and continuing through all eight sessions indicates participants find it meaningful and enjoyable."

In Phase 1, a team including parents and school and community-based partners identify interests and needs of families in the communities. They use this information within the FAST framework to create content for Phase 2. At the middle and high school level, student leadership roles are encouraged and supported, and students are very involved in planning and selecting topics.

Phase 2 is an eight-week family centric program for any interested family. The whole family gets together at the school once a week for an evening meal and the FAST program. That program includes family activities and breakouts for caregivers, students, and siblings. Adults talk about what's happening at school, strategies for supporting children, strengthening communication within the family, and specific topics of interest to the group. This parent support group takes place without school partners present. Built into the program are avenues to eliminate challenges families encounter with participation. For example, a family meal together and child care are provided, and there are children's activities, family time, and reciprocation activities. In parent group, caregivers are given an opportunity to do some social networking and to realize how much value they have as people, as well as parents.

"FAST programs build bonds within families and with other families and the school," says Garrett. "We have had *some* FAST parents who decided to go to college themselves or to get their GED as they began to realize what a difference it could make for their children's future."

In Phase 3, participants continue to look at data, including Phase 2 surveys and feedback, and plan next steps.

Phase 4, FASTWORKS, an acronym for World's Opportunity to Raise Kids **S**uccessfully, is a culmination of the relationships established in FAST at the school, placed in a communal setting, giving the power to the families in uniting and giving back to their communities. "The participating family and FAST child commit to coming together every FASTWORKS session for at least 15 minutes of dialogue," explains Garrett. "The idea is to continue to build the skills and habits of communication and bonding that a family carries into the future. FASTWORKS groups choose what they want to do as a group, be that community service projects, movie nights, educational workshops, or college visits with their children. "

### ***Governor's Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership (GCIPL)***

Partners for Education parents have the opportunity to participate in a six-day training offered through [GCIPL](#), a program that provides opportunities for "parents to develop their school leadership and advocacy skills. "Parents learn about policies like Common Core standards and [READY KENTUCKY](#) to understand school testing and interpreting results. It also breaks down communication barriers, allowing them to learn the vocabulary used by school-based staff and get a handle on school lingo," says Garrett.

"The parents also create a grant funded project. They choose a program that incorporates three mandatory items: one, it creates a lasting impact for sustaining change in the school community; two, it involves other parents; and, three, it is based on improving student achievement. Parents are given ownership for what they would like to see in their school and take the lead for creating and implementing it." The program has been very successful in building parent leadership within local schools.

## **Micro-level family engagement work**

"Community engagement work at the micro level can look very different across communities because every community is different," says Garrett.

Each Promise Neighborhood County has a Family Engagement Specialist. That person develops specific programming in response to community interests, coordinates with other aspects of the work, and does outreach with families and other partners.

As an example, Owsley County developed a group just for grandparents raising their grandchildren. "There are a tremendous variety of issues presented to grandparents in this situation, and school is so different than when they were raising their children," says Garrett. The popular program offers support and fun ways to help grandparents learn school information and pop cultural references. For example, a game styled after *Jeopardy!* includes categories like School Social Club Acronyms and Teen and College Slang.

Local parent engagement groups have held kindergarten picnics for incoming children and their families. They've opened up conversations and formed study groups. They regularly collaborate with nutrition and wellness programs and in arts residencies. They keep an eye on progress and new challenges to measure the impact of their work, and they project where the next steps need to go.

Garrett notes that these transportation challenges are ongoing. Due to geographic conditions, "Parents may be working in another community; kids don't get home until 4:30; everyone's tired. Maybe the vehicle is not in good working order or gas is low. It takes a strong amount of commitment and resources to get in the car and drive 25 minutes or more to school and back. We do try to address transportation challenges, sometimes with vans or buses for special events, like our annual all grant Family Event, or sometimes with other arrangements if they can be worked out."

Parent engagement can require an intense amount of time and genuine relationship building. But the payoffs continue to multiply. "I love parent engagement work," Garrett says. "It's very rewarding, and it's one of the best ways to create lasting positive impact for students and families."



*One of the games developed for the grandparent group as part of the school's family engagement program. Photo courtesy of Berea College.*

## **Promise Neighborhoods: Promising, Challenging, Exhilarating**

Three organizations have received rural Promise Neighborhood grants and begun the challenging work of ensuring that all children in their districts have the comprehensive cradle-to-career supports they need to succeed in school and in life.

The highly competitive Promise Neighborhood grants are awarded to colleges, universities, or non-profits that serve as lead agencies in partnership with school districts and other community-based organizations in distressed communities.

[Berea College](#), the first recipient of a rural Promise Neighborhood grant, is finishing its second year of implementation with three counties in eastern Kentucky. [Delta Health Alliance](#) is wrapping up its first year of implementation in Indianola, Mississippi, and [Renewal Unlimited, Inc.](#) is completing its planning work and applying for implementation funding in Adams County, Wisconsin.

Ginny Blackson is Director of Berea Promise Neighborhood, which is part of Berea's [Partners for Education](#). That program has for the past 15 years implemented federal preK-12 education grants in the region. "Our strength was in college and career readiness and family engagement," says Blackson. "We have a lot of experience with middle and high school and with academic programs."

Berea Promise Neighborhood has expanded its college and career readiness programs and built on its family engagement experience as the basis for expanded academic work with schools. It has formalized partnerships, set up its data system, built out its work into elementary schools and implemented early childhood partnerships, and piloted a variety of programs, in health, wellness, safety, and arts and culture.

Josh Davis is Vice President for External Affairs at Delta Health Alliance, (DHA), which has extensive experience providing health interventions and education in the Mississippi Delta. "Delta Health Alliance has a strong track record reducing infant mortality and low birth weight with health care, home visitations, and other work with expectant and new mothers," says Davis. "It starts with getting them here healthy."

DHA Promise Community expanded pre-birth through five supports and led efforts to have Indianola certified as an [Excel by 5](#) community—

meaning it has achieved standards and provides supports to reach the goal that all children are ready to learn in school at age five.

It also formalized partnerships (you can see a chart of initiatives and partnerships [here](#)) and began working directly with the Indianola school district and other partners to establish and expand after school programs.

It devoted significant effort toward the infrastructure to collect and manage academic data in a way that also directly supports student learning. In addition, DHA worked with the district to create extended learning periods in every school.

Lisa Curless is Project Director at Adams County Promise Neighborhood. Renewal Unlimited, Inc. brings extensive experience coordinating pre-school programs, Family Resource Centers, and other family and education programs in a five county region of central Wisconsin.



Click graphic for a larger image of this chart.

Curless says that interest in becoming a Promise Neighborhood grew out of the 4Cs Committee (Community Children’s Concerns Committee), a community-based non-profit. “The Committee was formed in 1992 to bring attention and coordinated response to issues affecting children and youth. The Committee read Geoffrey Canada’s book, *Whatever It Takes*, about the [Harlem Children’s Zone](#) and decided to pursue a Promise Neighborhood grant,” Curless says. Renewal Unlimited is an organizational member of 4Cs.

**Differing circumstances, common ground**

The circumstances of the three rural Promise Neighborhoods are in some ways very different from each other. Berea is a college with a long deep history in the region, and Partners for Education has a well-established record working directly with schools. The traditional economies of the three counties include a mix of small farming, coal mining, and light manufacturing. Those economies were never lucrative for most residents and are quickly evaporating.

Delta Health Alliance has a network of university partners, significant infrastructure for data management, and grassroots connections to the region. Indianola, in the heart of the Mississippi Delta, has about 12,000 residents. The community supports two distinct school systems. The public system is overwhelmingly attended by African-American students, while the private academy is overwhelmingly attended by white students. The traditional agricultural economy of the region that depended on the denial of quality education to suppress wages has been largely mechanized, leaving behind few work prospects of any kind.



Ginny Ann Blackson, Josh Davis, and Lisa Curless at the Rural Education Summit. Photo courtesy of Berea College.

Renewal Unlimited is closely tied to the local community and has experience in federal grant administration. Adams County, with a population of about 20,000, retains an agricultural economic base, supplemented with light manufacturing.

The leaders of the three rural Promise Neighborhoods have remarkably similar things to say about the work.

They point to people—students, families, staff, and communities—as a strength. “The resiliency of people, the number of people who have a sense that things can get better, even without much evidence that they will, are our strength,” says Davis.

They also note that combating hopelessness is a challenge.

The leaders point to data collection and management as both a strength and a challenge. “The data is key. It drives what you do, tells you how to target supports to students and what is working,” says Davis. “Yet, putting the systems in place to get the varieties of data that you need without overburdening the schools and the partners is definitely a challenge. And,” Davis adds, “Once you start getting the data, you have to respect the data, that’s another challenge.”

Getting partners collaborating, growing capacity, and seeing things improve for students as a result is

gratifying. "This is a systematic analysis of programs, of what is and isn't working, and what needs to be done instead to get the best educational experience possible for our students," says Curless.

But that does not mean it is always easy. "Change is hard," says Blackson. "And, by nature, this work is constantly changing. Some people want more certainty about what they will be doing than is possible."

The leaders entered the work, however, because they understand the difficult circumstances of students and they want to improve them; they know that's difficult work. "Within the broader community of Promise Neighborhood there is a real sense of how unique, how extremely different Promise Neighborhood is," says Davis. "To be part of showing through data that investments in poor children have return if you nurture and do the right things, that's exhilarating."

## Rural Education Summit at Berea College

Some 100 participants gathered late last month for a national Rural Education Summit in Berea, Kentucky. The two-day Summit was sponsored by Berea College through its Partners for Education program, which received the nation's first rural Promise Neighborhood grant.

Day One of the Summit addressed issues surrounding rural poverty and the need for rural-centric responses. Day Two offered tours to sites in rural Kentucky to see the Berea Promise Neighborhood in action.

Dreama Gentry is Executive Director of Partners for Education at Berea College. She says the Summit was a way to bring attention to rural concerns. "When you do work that connects to a national context you see that the rural piece gets very little attention. As the first rural Promise Neighborhood, we want to highlight the work and the need to invest in rural places. We think it is important to show these initiatives to get people interested and attract a greater share of funding."

As Director of the Berea Promise Neighborhood Initiative, Ginny Ann Blackson says policymakers and funders often don't understand the needs or contexts of rural schools and communities and that relatively little grant funding is directed to rural places. "Many people are not aware of rural concerns or they make assumptions that are not accurate. And many grant requirements simply do not fit rural conditions," she says. "We want funders and policymakers to pay more attention to rural America."

The Summit included presentations on rural poverty, conversations about rural policy needs, perspectives from higher education and from regional funders on their work in rural communities, panel discussions with staff doing rural Promise Neighborhood planning or implementation in Wisconsin, Mississippi, and Kentucky, and a talk by Geoffrey Canada, founder of the Harlem Children's Zone on which the Promise Neighborhood model was based.

The tours to school and community sites demonstrated ways programs are building on community strengths and focused on early childhood, college and career readiness, and integration of health, wellness, arts and humanities, and parent engagement.

"The level of interest and participation in the Summit demonstrates the need and the high level of work being done by the Partners for Education staff. I am proud and honored to be a part of it," Berea College President Lyle Roelofs said.

## Applications for 2014 Global Teacher Fellowship Program Now Open

The Rural Trust's [Global Teacher Fellowship](#) program will be awarding up to 25 study/tour fellowships in 2014 to support the professional and personal development of rural teachers.

The awards (up to \$5,000 for individual teachers and \$10,000 for a team of two or more teachers) support teachers' participation in self-designed summer learning experiences and a two-day place-based learning institute in the fall following their summer experience. This fellowship is a stand-alone grant not meant to supplement other grant funds for larger projects.

Teachers are encouraged to center their learning in an **international travel and study experience**, out of which they develop interdisciplinary, place-based learning curricula aligned with their specific state and local

content standards.

**Eligibility:** Any K–12 teacher working full-time and teaching at least 60% time in a rural community can apply for the fellowship. Counselors, media specialists, and other school personnel working in a teaching setting for at least 60% of their paid work time may also apply. Teachers must have completed four years of teaching experience by the start of the fellowship.

The Rural Trust defines a rural community by National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) locale codes: 32 (Town, Distant); 33 (Town, Remote); 41 (Rural, Fringe); 42 (Rural, Distant); or 43 (Rural, Remote). If your school is listed in one of these locale codes and you meet the criteria above, you are eligible to apply. If your school or district is REAP eligible, you may also apply. **For more details on eligibility, [see the FAQs page](#)**

**Application deadline is January 30, 2014.**

You can learn more about the Global Teacher Fellowship program at [www.globalteacherfellowship.ruraledu.org/](http://www.globalteacherfellowship.ruraledu.org/). You can read about the most recent Global Fellows and in [2013 Global Teacher Fellows Share Experiences](#).

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