



Printable Edition

Note: This resource includes all articles from the February 2014 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 About "Small" Rural Public School Districts

Question: What percentage of rural public school districts in the U.S. is considered "small?"

Answer: About half of all rural districts are considered small, that is, their enrollment is below the national median for rural school districts.

Source: *Why Rural Matters, 2011–2012*, Rural School and Community Trust, www.ruraledu.org.

Cara Cookson: Rural American Committed to a Rural Future

Cara Cookson says she remembers sitting with a group of students talking about where they were from during her first week at Mount Holyoke College. "I felt proud of my small school," she says. "I got something in my education that the other students didn't get from their big suburban schools."

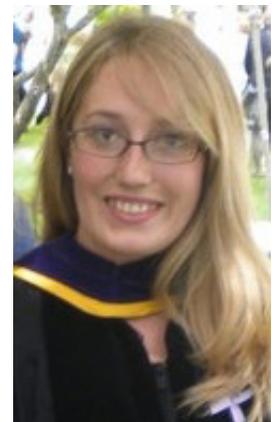
Cookson was one of twenty graduates in the class of 2000 at The Cabot School, one of Vermont's few remaining pre-K–12 rural public schools. "There's something to be said for getting to be a three sport varsity athlete *and* be in the school play, to experience so many aspects of extracurricular life. I also got a terrific education — small classes, teachers who knew me when I was in elementary school. Every single child at Cabot is special. There's a focus on each child and what that child needs to thrive. That's how I ended up at Mount Holyoke. I was the first person in my family to go to college and we really had no idea how to think about the college search process. My teachers suggested I consider Mount Holyoke."

Cookson is currently a staff attorney with the Federal Judiciary in Vermont and a former member of the State of Vermont Human Services Board. She's glad to be back, close to family and community, after several years as a U.S. Senate staffer in Washington, D.C.

"Cabot is part of my heritage, my family tradition," says Cookson. "The school is the center of the village of Cabot, physically and metaphorically."

The school has also made the village central to its work. "Cabot was part of a movement, the Vermont Rural Partnership (VRP), to organize schools around the notion of asset development and place-based learning. It was a cadre of smaller schools that wanted to be innovators," Cookson explains. As part of that work, a Vermont delegation — including Cookson who was in the ninth grade — attended a Rural Rendezvous. Those national gatherings, sponsored by the Rural Trust's predecessor organization, brought together people from around the country who were interested in rural schools and communities

"That was a big deal in my social development," says Cookson. "I was so blown away by the concept of rural being something worth investing in. As a young person you get a lot of pop culture messages that living in a



Cara Cookson of Cabot, Vermont

rural place is less than living in the city, that rural is a place to leave. So even though I had always been proud of my place and my family, it was important to me to have the idea cemented that rural is important, that there's this greater cultural value to it, value that is shared."

At the Rendezvous, Cookson challenged adults to do more to include students and create opportunities through which students could speak for themselves. She was invited to help form a student leadership group and to work with others to establish a national infrastructure around rural education issues. She stayed active with that work and the VRP throughout high school, traveling to South Dakota and Nebraska and hosting rural students in Cabot.

"Having all those experiences helped me develop poise and confidence. It was a wonderful platform for me personally, for finding my voice as a leader," she says.

Recently, Cookson has been involved with an effort to end pressure to consolidate rural schools, including a vote this past spring on the future of the high school in Cabot. (The community voted 322 to 149 to keep the school open). "The rationale for consolidation is that Vermont schools are too expensive," she explains. "It's all about efficiency. If money is the only value up for consideration, we should be running schools like prisons." She adds that most of the consolidation pressures are aimed at schools with dwindling enrollment. "Those schools are losing students because their local economies are struggling. Why would you take away one of the last community resources in that situation?"

This concern about the future of rural communities was also a part of her decision to return to Vermont. "I have the long-range motivation to contribute to making Vermont a better place. Contrary to what popular culture might suggest rural communities are more than just quaint. They are at the root of American culture, economy, agriculture, environmentalism. So many of this country's resources come from or exist in rural places, therefore, we have to preserve them — not in the sense of archiving them or treating them like Disney World, and not just because they are an important part of our history, but because they are our future."

Resistance Mounting to North Carolina's Education "Reforms"

Two provisions in North Carolina's sweeping 2013 education "reforms" have met significant legal pushback this month. On February 11, the Guilford County school board voted to sue the state over a law to abolish teacher tenure, referred to in North Carolina as "career status." And on February 21, a superior court judge ordered that distribution of funds in the state's new voucher program be stopped until issues in two pending lawsuits have been resolved.

The abolishment of teacher tenure and the voucher program were among a series of significant changes to North Carolina's public education policy that were implemented during the 2013 legislative session. Other changes included an overhaul of the state's charter school law, allowing rapid expansion of the number of charters and relaxing financial and academic accountability; an end to salary increases for teachers who earn a master's degree; a freeze on teacher salaries; reductions in funding for textbooks and instructional materials; and reductions in the number of teaching assistants. North Carolina teacher salaries have fallen from the national average to 48th. You can read previous *RPM* coverage [here](#).

Teacher tenure

A number of states have reduced tenure protections for teachers in recent years, but North Carolina went much further by eliminating "career status" altogether. The status did not guarantee teachers their jobs, but it did ensure due process if a teacher was terminated or had their salary reduced.

Under the new North Carolina law, career status will not be available to any teacher who has not yet earned it. And, it will be ended for all teachers in 2018. Instead, teachers will be offered one-year contracts that will be tied, in part, to a new evaluation system that is partially based on student test scores.

The law also directs schools boards to identify the 25% of teachers by July 1 and offer those teachers a \$500 bonus and four-year contract if the teacher signs away their career status.

This provision has met with widespread opposition. The [North Carolina Association of Educators](#) (NCAE) is leading a [Decline to Sign](#) campaign to encourage teachers to reject the bonuses and not sign away their tenure protections. In several schools, entire faculties have pledged not to take the bonuses. Dozens of school boards have passed resolutions against the provision, claiming it forces an arbitrary picking and choosing among teachers that weakens morale and that the law lacks guidance in how to identify teachers.

Guilford County is the first, and so far only, school board that has voted to sue the state over the law. The

board argues that career status is a contractually earned right that cannot retroactively be taken from teachers who have already earned it. NCAE has also filed a lawsuit against the state challenging the teacher tenure law.

Vouchers suspended

North Carolina's voucher program directed some \$10 million in public school funds to grants for students to attend private schools of their choice. The funds would cover about 2,400 students and were initially targeted to students eligible for the federal free/reduced-price school lunch program. Private schools receiving vouchers are not required to participate in state accountability programs and are free to accept or refuse students based on the school's own criteria.

Over 4,000 students had applied for the grants, dubbed Opportunity Scholarships and worth up to \$4,200 each. Most students were planning to use the grants to attend religious schools. The state was scheduled to begin awarding the grants in March.

The NCAE and the North Carolina Association of School Boards sued the state (Guilford County Board of Education has also joined the lawsuit). On February 21, Wake County Superior Court Judge Robert Hobgood halted the program until a trial can determine the program's constitutionality. Legislative leaders have claimed they will address constitutionality issues in the upcoming session.

Other states on tenure and vouchers

This month a judge in Louisiana ruled that a controversial 2012 law dramatically reducing teacher tenure protections is unconstitutional. That law, championed by Governor Bobby Jindal, essentially ended due process rights for teachers. Instead, teachers who were dismissed could only take their case to a three-person panel, two members of which were appointed by the Superintendent and/or principal. The panel would make recommendations to the Superintendent, who retained discretionary authority over the final decision.

Louisiana's voucher law was also struck down as a violation of the state's ban on using public school funding for private education. However, lawmakers in that state re-wrote the budget, moving funding for the voucher program out of the public education budget.

Read more:

North Carolina teacher tenure:

www.newsobserver.com/2014/02/13/3619305/guilford-county-school-board-votes.html

www.news-record.com/news/local_news/article_d1943f2e-9372-11e3-9c58-0017a43b2370.html

www.news-record.com/news/local_news/article_a0994e2e-8d5e-11e3-9799-0017a43b2370.html

www.wral.com/ncae-lawsuit-challenges-elimination-of-teacher-tenure/13224414/

North Carolina voucher program:

www.wral.com/judge-halts-nc-school-voucher-program/13416499/

www.news-record.com/news/local_news/article_5c32c04c-9b89-11e3-ad3f-001a4bcf6878.html

Louisiana tenure law

www.nola.com/education/index.ssf/2014/02/parts_of_bobby_jindal_teacher.html

Valuable, Flexible, and Cost-Effective: Making the Most of Small Scale

This article appeared in the February 2014 [Rural Policy Matters](#).

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

Don't miss "[It's Complicated... Why What's Rural Matters,](#)" and "[Going Two Ways at Once: Distance as a Defining Rural Characteristic,](#)" installments 1 and 2 in this series.

It seems obvious that the characteristic most defining of rural is low population density. After all, rural places, unlike urban places, just don't have a lot of people. But, it is this very characteristic that is often the most confounding to policymakers.

The issue is that low population density translates into smallness: institutions and organizations in rural places are, of necessity, smaller than their counterparts in more densely populated places. Policy made in a one-size-fits-all fashion — which is most policy — is typically intended for a large, metropolitan areas and doesn't fit well anywhere else, in part because it generally assumes a scale and reach only appropriate in densely populated places.

As a result, policy created for large places can create a lot of bloat and unnecessary superstructure (translate that as expense) in small places. Or, conversely—and more frequently, it fails to adjust for the different circumstances of small places and constricts opportunity by providing too little support. Just as importantly, policy created for densely populated areas cannot respond to and develop well the resources and opportunities that exist in less populated places. Rather than recognizing the policy as flawed, policymakers often view small places and their institutions as the problem. (We'll let our readers draw out the fashion analogy here.)

Throw in doses of American bigger-is-better dogma and urban-is-superior cultural bias and you get some predictable outcomes. The first is that small organizations and service provision in rural places are considered "too expensive," so funding is reduced or eliminated. Then, as underfunded rural organizations struggle, the policy response is usually to let the organizations die or to trigger their closure with some kind of policy mechanism.

This basic trajectory — present in both public and private policy — is a primary reason that the number of schools, post offices, mainline churches, clinics and hospitals, libraries, emergency assistance providers, and other organizations has dwindled in rural places. As a result, many rural communities have been gutted of infrastructure and opportunity, accelerating population loss and depriving the nation of an important source of its economic, cultural, and innovation wherewithall.

So what should policymakers know about smallness and how should the realities of smallness be met in policy? The answers lie first in realistic assessments of the opportunities presented by small scale and the costs that small scale entails.

Smallness: costs, benefits, and opportunities

Rural places and institutions face two significant issues when it comes to figuring costs. One is per unit cost. At its simplest this means that per unit costs — measure units as production, operation, delivery — are usually higher at smaller scale. A one-off designer dress shirt costs a lot more to produce than the same shirt replicated a thousand times. Deliver the thousand shirts to five-hundred locations and the delivery costs are much higher than delivering all the shirts to one place.

There is no question that low population density incurs some costs associated with small scale. As illustration, a pre-school home visitation nurse in a rural county may see three families in a day, while her urban counterpart might see seven. The rural nurse has a higher per-family cost. The rural nurse will also have higher travel costs. (See "[Going Two Ways at Once](#)" for more exploration of the costs of distance in rural settings.) The nurse's valuable services, proven as good investments for the future, will simply cost more in a rural setting.

Policymakers have dealt with these rural and small-scale *costs* in different ways. Historically, lawmakers designated some functions of government and some private services as so essential that making them available throughout the entire country has been prioritized, not so much as a matter of fairness, but as a matter of national interest. It cost more to bring electricity, telephone access, and postal services to rural areas, and investments to make these essential services available in rural places have paid off with big national gains in innovation, productivity, opportunity, and economic development.

Often, however, policymakers have taken a different tack, requiring rural places to operate as if they were urban places, with similar per unit budgets and the same standards of delivery. The problems with this approach for rural places are twofold. First, as we have seen, some things simply cost more in rural places. As a result, rural organizations often cannot do all that is expected or they must shift funding from other budgets, creating problems elsewhere. Secondly, requiring small rural organizations to use urban standards of delivery can create serious inefficiencies, compromise rural assets, and miss rural opportunities.

The treat-rural-as-minature-urban approach to small communities and their small organizations threatens many of America's greatest economic, physical, environmental, and cultural resources. And, it threatens the sources of innovation and development that are rooted in those rural resources and the relationships rural people have with each other and with their places.

Rural considerations in policymaking

Policy that is sound for rural small places will provide basic operating equity, open opportunity for communities and their residents, and develop and use the assets of small size and rural location. By focusing on place and on strengthening community, policy can expand the contributions and achievements of rural places in ways that translate within and beyond those rural places. We explore some concepts for thinking about small size in policy.

Economies and diseconomies of scale The theory of economies of scale asserts that savings occur in larger operations. It explains why producing a thousand shirts is less expensive per unit than producing one shirt. But simplistic approaches to economies of scale make sense for some kinds of production and not for others. For example, an Intensive Care Unit needs more staff per patient than an outpatient unit.

The notion of economies-of-scale is powerful in the American mindset. It is the argument that has most driven the consolidation of schools and school districts, even though research has consistently demonstrated that promised savings almost never materialize.

One reason savings don't always happen with increased scale is that larger size can also incur *diseconomies* of scale. These diseconomies often come about in the forms of increased need for management and administration, higher transportation costs, and loss of productivity.

We can see the economies-diseconomies of scale continuum in rural education. Smaller schools often have higher per-pupil instructional costs than larger schools. But closing the small school and sending the rural kids to town won't likely save money. Instead it will shift funding from instruction to transportation. In other words, it turns an investment in something productive (instruction) into a cost for something non-productive (longer bus rides). Likewise, smaller rural schools may have higher per-pupil costs, but research has demonstrated they also have lower *per-graduate* costs. In these cases, economies favor smaller scale.

Policymakers must examine economy-of-scale arguments in rural settings in light of diseconomies of scale that will occur in that setting by answering questions like: how will this policy shift funding from one area to another; and will this policy turn a productive investment into a non-productive cost?

Specialists and Generalists Smaller settings mean fewer people, which, in turn, means that many individuals will be called upon to perform a variety of functions. For example, medical, education, and legal professionals in rural and small town settings must usually be competent on multiple fronts. Working in a more generalist way requires a mindset that can make it easier to see connections between things that might not be obvious. A group of teachers with broad subject concentrations might find it easier to integrate content across the curriculum, and a physician might be more likely to catch a connection between one symptom and another illness.

However, there are limits to how much skill and information a small group of people can master, so specialists are sometimes needed. Small communities, especially those that are also distant, need mechanisms that provide access to specialists on as-needed bases.

Policymakers must recognize the reality that smaller places will rely more heavily on generalists than urban areas will by providing training and support for generalist practitioners and by providing mechanisms for extending specialist knowledge and skill to rural places when it is needed.

Depth and Breadth: it's personal Depth and breadth of opportunity and relationship often look very different in small rural and large metropolitan settings. Here again we can illustrate the issues in school settings.

One argument for larger schools (once the economy-of-scale lead has been debunked, at least when it comes to rural consolidation) is that they can provide a broader range of curricular and co-curricular opportunities. Further, it is argued that students can get deeper exposure in subjects that interest them. In other words, students can take marine biology and astronomy *and* physics II. In an apples-to-oranges comparison, these arguments are often true.

Small schools offer a different kind of breadth. Their students are more likely to participate in a greater variety of activities and curriculum. Sports and arts, vocational and college prep classes. Moreover, a broader range of *students* take part in activities. Instead of 20% of students who are natural athletes playing sports, a small school might need 80% of its students to fill their teams. Small size creates opportunities for students who would not have it in a larger setting.

Small schools also provide a different kind of depth. They may lack the staffing to offer Physics II, but their smaller size makes it possible to personalize student opportunity and learning in ways difficult to achieve in large schools. It's apples to oranges.

Comparing what's available within the walls of a small school in a rural community and a large school in a suburb is also apples and oranges. It is more appropriate to compare what is available in small and

consolidated *rural* schools. And, here the differences are not so wide in terms of offerings. Consolidated rural schools rarely offer significantly more than was available in the small schools that were closed. Further, those former small school students may find their opportunities limited by longer bus rides and more competition for available slots. ([*Going Two Ways at Once*](#) addresses these considerations.)

Further, the days of comparing schools on the basis of what is available within their walls are waning. The advantage may go to smaller, more personal schools. That's because technology offers means to bring breadth of curriculum while preserving the personal advantages of small settings.

Smaller schools and communities also offer a different kind of breadth and depth in relationship. One recent rural school graduate who is now a student trainer for a Division I university sports team in an urban state put it this way: "The kids from [the state's largest metropolitan region] did go to high school with kids from more ethnic backgrounds than I did, and the other parents practiced a wider variety of professions. But everyone they know is upper middle class and pretty much like them. They've never spent the night in a friend's mobile home or given their lunch to someone whose mom was just arrested. They don't know anyone who died because the family didn't have health insurance. I think when it comes down to it I know and appreciate more kinds of people because my school couldn't separate us. Everybody mattered. And we got to know each other as friends, not as types."

It is this personal nature of smaller settings that is their biggest advantage. People are known, individuals matter, everyone is needed, opportunities are spread around. These experiences are protective for young people, part of why small schools graduate larger proportions of their students, and one reason rural communities usually fight hard to keep schools in place.

Policymakers must recognize that small and large, rural and metropolitan are different, neither better nor worse than each other. Policies should enable institutions in all settings to make best use of their inherent strengths.

Policy solutions and alternatives

Rural communities are located at a distance from large population centers and are by definition small. Smallness has benefits and costs, both of which vary greatly by context. Public policy can capitalize on rural resources and opportunities afforded by small size if it recognizes and accommodates difference.

Flexibility Public infrastructure and core services should be funded in rural areas in ways that cover true costs and provide equitable access. Funding mechanisms should accommodate the reality that rural places have fewer means through which to generate revenue and that yields are lower. Some of these restrictions are a matter of public policy that local communities cannot address.

Policy should also recognize that small organizations in rural places generally lack the capacity to compete for public and private grants and that competitive grants advantage places with the most resources and opportunities. Alternative ways of seeding innovation and meeting basic needs must be developed for rural communities, especially those that have high levels of poverty or are in isolated locations.

Flexibility Small and rural organizations need flexibility in use of operating funds, staffing, allocation and development of resources, and opportunities to collaborate and share services between organizations with different missions. Smaller organizations are generally lean and can operate nimbly if given flexibility to do so.

Technology investment and broadband access Rural schools and communities have been innovators in technology, especially when it comes to expanding curriculum and sharing staff between schools and districts. Opportunities to continue to innovate, however, will need new streams of support and access, starting with reliable high speed internet for rural schools and communities. High quality technological infrastructure can provide rural and small places with access to specialists and specialized content in a variety of fields in a cost-effective manner.

Shared services Ensuring cost-effective and productive programs — of all kinds — in rural areas can often best be achieved through collaboration. This means breaking down institutional barriers, enabling flexibility among budgets, and developing appropriate accounting and personnel management policies that enable a variety of institutions and organizations to join forces to make rural communities and their institutions strong, healthy, and unique to their own place. New investments in facilities, infrastructure, training, and staff should explore ways to maximize benefits across the community.

Tap the potential of rural schools The potential of rural schools has been severely compromised by public policies that have forced them to operate like big suburban schools. This includes things like unnecessarily specialized teaching certificates, minimum enrollment requirements, facility restrictions, discrete and rigid curriculum requirements, forced consolidations that achieve few if any equity outcomes, and inadequate funding. In most states rural schools receive less funding for operations and facilities than schools in

suburban and urban areas; nationally, rural teachers and administrators early significantly less than their counterparts elsewhere. Policymakers can mitigate these historical problems with thoughtful policy that addresses the following:

- Funding sufficient to need, including funding for salaries, facilities, and technology;
- Pre-service and in-service teacher education and supports geared to the realities of small rural schools, including multiple or generalist certifications, place-based teaching/learning, opportunities to network with other rural teachers, and grow-your-own teacher training models;
- Technology and technology training;
- Flexibility in meeting curriculum requirements, including multi-disciplinary courses, multi-age classrooms, shared services/teachers, and support for technology;
- Flexibility in use of facilities, including buses, cafeterias, and school grounds to enable greater collaboration across agencies and organizations and to strengthen community economic and social infrastructure and opportunity;
- An end to forced consolidation of schools and districts except where consolidation can be proven to achieve an equity outcome for students and communities that cannot be met otherwise.

More from the Rural Trust

[RPM Special Edition
on School Violence](#)

[Consolidation
Fight-Back Toolkit](#)

[Global Teacher
Fellowship](#)



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