



Printable Edition

Note: This resource includes all articles from the April 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 Children and Poverty

Question: Is a child more likely to live in poverty in a rural or urban area?

Answer: A rural area. Rural child poverty rates in 2012 were 26.7%, compared to 17.8% in urban areas. The percentage of children living in deep poverty was also higher for rural children. More than 12% of rural children (12.2%) and 9.2% of urban children lived in deep poverty in 2012. Poverty is defined as an annual cash income under \$23,492 for a family of four. Deep poverty is defined as an annual cash income that is less than half the poverty level.

(Source: USDA Economic Research Service, March 2014; <http://www.ers.usda.gov/amber-waves/2014-march/poverty-and-deep-poverty-increasing-in-rural-america.aspx#.U1fxriiJXiw>)

Rural Trust Announces the 2014 Rural Leonore Annenberg School Fund Grantees

The [Rural School and Community Trust](#) is pleased to announce that Stewart Street Elementary in Quincy, Florida and Greenville Elementary in Greenville, Florida will receive grants through the [Leonore Annenberg School Fund for Children](#).

The Rural Trust, in partnership with the School Fund, makes the award to rural elementary schools that are doing excellent work and experiencing high need. "We are pleased that we were able to direct this award to Stewart Street and Greenville elementary schools," says Doris Terry Williams, Ed.D., Executive Director of the Rural Trust. "The schools have demonstrated capacity to make inspired and wise use of limited resources. The funds from these grants will enable the schools to continue their good work and serve students with programs that would not otherwise be available."

Stewart Street Elementary will use its grant to restructure the media center and transform traditional classrooms into multimodal classrooms. Greenville will use its award to purchase electronic tablets and applications that will enable the school to expand its visual arts and music curricula.

Principals of both schools expressed appreciation for the recognition and additional funding the grant brings to their schools. "Receiving an award of such prestigious honor sends a message to our community and surrounding counties that our students are academically capable of exceeding expectations and accomplishing even higher educational goals," says Stewart Street principal Lisa Robinson.

Valencia Barnes, principal at Greenville Elementary, says her school was surprised and excited to learn they had received the award. "We are grateful for the opportunity this grant provides us to bring more art and music to our students. The arts provide students new and different perspectives that facilitate the learning process. With this grant we will be able to put a tablet in the hands of every student and build on approaches that we know are helping our students succeed."

Robinson adds that the technology upgrades at Stewart Street will make much more information available in every classroom. "Teachers' use of media instruction in subjects such as science and math will allow students to expand their understanding of complex concepts. We are excited that our students will be afforded opportunities to access technological devices in a manner that encourages and stimulates learning and enjoyment."

The Rural School and Community Trust is a national non-profit organization that addresses the crucial relationship between good schools and thriving communities. Its work addresses both the school-based practices and the policy contexts that support rural schools, their communities, and their students.

The School Fund is one of three programs — the [Leonore Annenberg Scholarship, Fellowship, and School Funds](#) — administered by the [Annenberg Public Policy Center](#) at the University of Pennsylvania. The School Fund resources must be of immediate and direct value to, and use by, students.

Both schools will also participate in a place-based learning workshop provided by the Rural School and Community Trust. The workshop will support school staff to integrate their School Fund projects with ongoing efforts to identify community-based learning resources and connect students' academic work to meaningful outcomes in the community.

Read More:

Leonore Annenberg Scholarship, Fellowship, and School Funds

<http://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/lasfsf/>

Visit the schools' websites:

- Stewart Street Elementary: <http://www.sses.gcps.k12.fl.us/>
- Greenville Elementary: <http://portal.madison.k12.fl.us/joomla/ges/>

Students Lead Poverty Reduction

Students in St. Gabriel, Louisiana had another banner year in their efforts to help reduce poverty in their community.

For the past seven years, students at East Iberville High School in St. Gabriel have staffed the local Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) center. The students must learn tax rules and pass tests to demonstrate their ability to prepare returns of different complexity.

"At first I was scared about doing taxes," says Ebonie Isbell, an East Iberville student who volunteered at the center. "But once I took the training and learned the information, I was more comfortable."

The students staff the East Iberville center and complete tax returns for local residents. Their work includes looking for deductions, Earned Income Tax Credits, and other options that can help lower their customers' taxes or increase their tax refunds, options customers might not have known they were eligible for. The effort has resulted in hundreds of thousands of tax dollars being returned to the community.

Student Kristen Stewart says she enjoyed the work. "It felt good to know that I was helping someone out in the community. To hear them say 'thank you' was such a good feeling."

This year six students worked at the center. The East Iberville center opened in early February and continued operations through the tax season. Students processed 133 tax returns in 2014, totaling \$227,000 in refunds.

Tracy Warren teaches at East Iberville and works with students in the tax center. "Each year the number of tax returns grows," she says. "And, every year the community looks forward to this service and students look forward to volunteering."

The students also operate the East Iberville Credit Union seasonally. The credit union is important because it provides a way for people who do not have a regular bank account to receive their tax refunds. The credit union also offers a safe place for members to save money and build a cash reserve.

In addition to youth-led poverty reduction efforts in St. Gabriel, four students in the Belfair community of East Baton Rouge also staffed a free VITA center. Those students processed 93 tax returns for a total of \$133,000 in tax refunds.

Community-School Collaborations Improve Outcomes

The Rural Trust is one of nine national organizations that co-released ["Partnerships, Not Pushouts, A Guide for School Board Members: Community Partnerships for Student Success"](#) earlier this month.

The guide makes the case for community-based collaborations between schools and other organizations to help all students thrive academically, socially, and emotionally. These collaborations can provide opportunities and meet needs that schools by themselves cannot. The guide includes questions and action steps to help school boards begin building broad-based, meaningful collaborations. The guide also features examples of schools and districts that are using the approach successfully.

Robert Mahaffey, Rural Trust's Director of Communications, represented Rural Trust at the press event releasing the guide. "Great progress has been made across the country in raising awareness and taking action to address the needs of the whole child and family," Mahaffey said. "Meeting the needs of the whole child is undoubtedly connected to student academic progress and success in life. This guide is yet another extremely useful tool for schools, districts, and communities."

Mahaffey added, "We are particularly pleased that three rural places are profiled. Their experience is informing public discourse and making clear that all children deserve equitable opportunities regardless of geography or the child's zip code."

Personal Opportunity Plans

At the heart of the guide's recommendations is the Personal Opportunity Plan, or POP. The guide describes how POPs work.

"Personal Opportunity Plans are student-centered and student-directed processes that maximize students' academic, personal, and college and career development and foster success in school and life. They are not a one-time activity but an ongoing process by which the student defines, explores, and then refines his or her interests and goals throughout the school system."

POPs are not compliance documents, but rather a vehicle to support collaboration among the student, the family, school staff, and a range of community partners specific to the student's interests and needs.

POPs help students explore interests, plan and achieve short and long-term goals, track their own progress, and experience the school as caring and responsive. POPs help families understand what it will take for their student to be successful, and they connect families to useful resources and opportunities.

POPs also help schools identify and respond to individual student interests and needs with curricular options, community-based experiences, and targeted supports.

By engaging a range of partners, POPs reduce the likelihood that a student will fall through the cracks; they take pressure off teachers to be the sole school support for each of their students; and they coordinate and make efficient use of resources.

Increasing engagement, responding to pushout

Building collaborations between schools and communities is beneficial to all students and schools, according to [Partnerships, Not Pushouts](#). Students who have opportunities to connect their academic work to real-life experiences and to explore their interests in contexts beyond the school walls are more engaged with their own learning. They are exposed to a wider range of experiences and people, which supports social and emotional growth as well as academic connection.

School-community collaborations are especially important for students who experience out-of-school impediments to academic success, including challenges related to poverty, access to health care, and mentoring.

Collaborations also help address negative in-school circumstances that disproportionately affect specific groups of students. [Partnerships, Not Pushouts](#) emphasizes recent research (read *RPM* coverage [here](#)) that documents the realities that certain groups of students have less access to strong curriculum and experienced and well-trained teachers. Those same groups are more likely to be disciplined harshly and in ways that put them in contact with the criminal justice system.

For example, non-Asian students of color, especially African-American students, and students with disabilities are much more likely than Caucasian and Asian students to be suspended from school. Despite evidence that disciplinary infractions vary little across racial/ethnic groups and disability status. These student groups

and students from low-income families also have less access to high-quality preschool and to college.

This combination of in-school and out-of-school factors creates gaps in opportunities, gaps that block important avenues to success and push many students out of school altogether. School-community collaborations can help fill the gaps.

Key elements for implementation

[Partnerships, Not Pushouts](#) identifies four elements — Capacity, Community, Climate, and Cohesion — that are key to effective collaborations. It offers guiding questions related to each element to help a school district prepare for implementation.

[Capacity](#) addresses how the district promotes community partnerships; what professional development and resources it offers staff to build meaningful relationships; and how the district can build on efforts already underway.

[Community](#) examines how the district provides opportunities for students to be engaged with adults in the local community; how community volunteers are involved in school, service learning, and other opportunities; how the district is partnering with community-based organizations and government agencies to address student needs and develop opportunities and supports.

[Climate](#) explores how the district works to promote positive learning environment in its schools; how it promotes the well-being and development of the whole child, including social, emotional, ethical, and civic skills; how the district encourages student engagement; and, how data collection and accountability practices measure the degree to which efforts are addressing student engagement, well-being, and non-academic learning.

[Cohesion](#) considers whether partnered groups are focused on promoting all aspects of student learning and development; whether operational plans and budget provide the necessary programs and resources to be successful; and, how the district negotiates and coordinates resources and services among partners.

Community schools framework

The guide also explores the concept of community schools as a framework for successful collaborations and for implementing POPs. The [Coalition for Community Schools](#) (CSC) is one of the nine co-sponsors of [Partnerships, Not Pushouts](#).

CSC is an alliance of state, national, and local organizations working across the spectrum of K–16 education, community development, health and human services, family support, philanthropy, government, and school networks. It defines a “community school” as both a place and a set of partnerships between the school and other community resources.

Community school models take a variety of forms and share a common set of principles: fostering strong partnerships, sharing accountability for results, setting high expectations, building on the community’s strengths, and embracing diversity and innovative solutions.

In addition to his work with Rural Trust, Robert Mahaffey is Vice-Chair of the CSC Steering Committee and President of Organizations Concerned about Rural Education, which has been a strong supporter of the community schools concept.

“In reality, many rural schools are the heartbeat of their communities and provide a variety of support services for children and families,” Mahaffey said when asked about the impact of the community schools movement in rural America.

Mahaffey also notes that rural residents often cite the tight connections between their local school and place and refer to the school as a community school, whether or not the school is formally affiliated with the community schools movement.

See [“Community Schools Concept Gaining Ground”](#) (also in this issue of *RPM*) to read about the CSC National Forum and the growing role of rural schools in the Community Schools movement.

Examples of collaboration

[Partnerships, Not Pushouts](#) concludes with examples of schools and districts from around the country that have created successful community school collaborations. These examples include elementary and secondary schools located in urban and rural settings.

Other partners in the development of [Partnerships, Not Pushouts](#) include the Alliance for Excellent Education; the American Federation of Teachers; the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL); the Coalition for Community Schools, the National Education Association, the National School Boards Association, Opportunity Action, and the National Opportunity to Learn Campaign.

Read more:

Coverage of the release of [Partnerships, Not Pushouts](#)

- <http://www.otlcampaign.org/blog/2014/04/22/partnerships-not-pushouts>
- http://www.communityschools.org/partnerships_not_pushouts_a_new_guide_for_school_board_members_on_community_partnerships_for_student_success/
- <http://nhlabornews.com/2014/04/as-part-of-coalition-aft-releases-blueprint-for-school-community-partnerships/>

"Community Schools" Concept Gaining Ground

The [Coalition for Community School's](#) 2014 National Forum was its largest yet. Held earlier this month in Cincinnati, “Community Schools: The Engine of Opportunity,” attracted over 1,400 participants.

Those participants work in preK–16 education, youth development, health and human services, family services and supports, neighborhood and community development, business, organizing, philanthropy, all levels of government, and related fields. They represented 37 states, the District of Columbia, and five countries.

The Coalition for Community Schools (CCS) is an alliance of organizations that work in and promote the community schools concept. Those schools foster collaboration among schools and community partners around a common set of principles including setting high expectations, building on the community’s strengths, sharing accountability for results, and embracing diversity and innovative solutions.

The 2014 National Forum offered more than 135 workshops as well as plenary and networking sessions for participants to learn and share approaches and ideas. The Forum also provided opportunities for participants to visit 17 Community Schools that are part of the Cincinnati Community Learning Center Initiative.

Cincinnati’s work is featured in the recent report, [“Partnerships, Not Pushouts, A Guide for School Board Members: Community Partnerships for Student Success”](#) (See *RPM* coverage of the report [here](#).) Cincinnati also received the 2013 Award for Excellence from the Coalition for Community Schools.

[success.](#) (See *KRM* coverage of the report [here](#).) Cincinnati also received the 2015 Award for Excellence from the Coalition for Community Schools.

Robert Mahaffey, Vice-Chair of the CSC Steering Committee and Director of Communications at the Rural Trust, participated in the event. "This is a time of growing recognition that the proposition at the heart of community schools — that schools must be centers of the community where educators, families, and community partners work together — is vital to the success of our young people, especially our most vulnerable. Participants left with energy and new networks and ideas to implement and deepen this work in their communities."

The next CSC National Forum will be held in Albuquerque, New Mexico in 2016.

Read more:

Highlights of the 2014 Community Schools National Forum

www.communityschools.org/aboutschools/highlights_2014_community_schools_national_forum.aspx

Coalition for Community Schools website

www.communityschools.org

Thirty-one Rural Teachers Awarded Travel Fellowships

Thirty-one rural teachers have been selected for the 2014 class of Rural Trust Global Teacher Fellows. The awards, totaling nearly \$200,000, will enable Fellows to travel to Africa, Asia, Australia, Canada, Central America, and Europe.

The Rural Trust Global Teacher Fellowship supports rural teachers to develop an independent learning experience that broadens their own personal perspectives and teaching approaches. This year's group of Fellows are investigating such diverse topics as alternative energy, art and architecture, the historic effects of various wars, and environmental issues; they are exploring a range of intercultural and language experiences and learning about the schooling and curricular approaches of other countries.

The 2014 Fellows, some of whom applied as teams, represent 21 rural schools around the U.S. In addition to the travel fellowships, the Fellows will participate in place-based learning workshops provided by the Rural Trust.

Teachers Feel More Stressed and Disregarded Than Other Workers

Teachers feel more stressed at work than other workers, according to Gallup's State of America's Schools Report released this month. They are also more likely to feel that their opinions don't count.

The report, released earlier this month, found that nearly half of teachers report feeling "a lot" of daily stress at work. That was the same percentage as nurses and more than physicians, sales workers, managers and executives, and business owners.

A little over half (56%) of teachers reported feeling "not engaged" in their work. Teachers were slightly more likely to feel "not engaged" than the average American worker, where 52% of total workforce reported feeling "not engaged."

However, teachers were less likely than the average worker to report feeling "actively disengaged" (13% of teachers compared to 18% of total workforce). And, 31% of teachers, compared to 30% of the total workforce, reported being "engaged" at work.

The report also surveyed 600,000 students in grades five through twelve on their feelings of hope, engagement, and well-being. Student engagement and student success are strongly correlated.

Nearly half of students reported feeling disengaged at school. Nevertheless, students who reported having at least one teacher "who makes me excited about my future" and students who reported that their school is "committed to building the strengths of each student" were 30 times more likely to report being engaged at school.

These findings point to the impact of teachers and school climate on student outcomes and the need to create school environments in which teachers feel their work matters, their ideas and initiatives are heard, and that they are respected and given autonomy to do their work and to collaborate with each other.

Recognizing strengths brings better outcomes

The report emphasizes the importance of "strengths development and engagement in the classroom" and argues that "unless U.S. schools can better align learning strategies and objectives with fundamental aspects of human nature, they will always struggle to help students achieve their full potential."

The report calls for personalizing students' education with strengths-based strategies that focus on enabling students to discover and develop their strengths and interests and use them during the school week.

It also recommends three steps to improving teacher engagement: asking teachers "important questions about curriculum, pedagogy, and schedules" and incorporating feedback "into the decision-making process;" partnering the most engaged teachers and administrators with new teachers; and helping disengaged teachers invest in what they do best with continuing education and by removing barriers to their engagement.

Administrators have a significant impact on teacher engagement. Teachers who responded positively to three workplace questions had higher overall engagement levels. These questions were: In the last seven days, I have received recognition or praise for doing good work; In the last six months, someone at work has talked to me about my progress; and, At work, my opinions seem to count.

The Gallup report attributes many of the issues with teacher and student engagement to the national emphasis on standardized testing. It argues that major reform initiatives of the past 20 years have had "an overwhelmingly remedial focus" that has "delineated a rigid set of education standards" and resulted in a focus on shoring up "areas of weakness." This negative focus has neglected the importance of recognizing strength and accomplishment and offering praise.

The report notes that specific, meaningful, public praise has strong positive impact on students' academic outcomes and motivation. It argues that the current

testing regime leaves teachers with little time and latitude to tailor instructional approaches to individuals or to make sure their praise of individual students is "personal and meaningful."

The emphasis on testing and accountability in American schools also takes a toll on teacher initiative, intellectual engagement, and opportunities to collaborate at work. "Not thinking of teachers as talented professionals is one of the systemic flaws holding back the U.S. education system. Discounting teacher talent is doing a great disservice to this country's educators -- and, more importantly, to its students."

Read more:

Order the report:

- <http://products.gallup.com/168380/state-education-report-main-page.aspx>

Media coverage:

Education Week:

- http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/living-in-dialogue/2014/04/john_thompson_gallup_poll_find.html?qs=gallup+state+of+america's+schools

A College Dean's response:

- <http://www.mills.edu/news/2014/newsstory-04112014-KathySchultzGallupReport.php>

More from the Rural Trust

[RPM Special Edition on School Violence](#)

[Consolidation Fight-Back Toolkit](#)

[Global Teacher Fellowship](#)



Rural Policy Matters is a monthly newsletter which provides news of interest to citizens and community groups working on state-level policy issues affecting rural schools. For subscription information visit www.ruraledu.org/getrpm.html.

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