Notes From The Field
The New Mexico Organizing Strategy

New Mexico is a land of beautiful geography inhabited by richly diverse cultures and people. It has stunningly beautiful red-capped mesas, snow-covered mountains, vast stretches of Chihuahuan desert, rivers, and forests. New Mexico is made up of Native Americans (23 tribes call New Mexico home); long-time Hispanic residents, many of whom trace their ancestry directly to Spain; newly arrived Spanish-speaking immigrants, primarily from Mexico; Anglos, many of whom are relative newcomers; and a small percentage of African-Americans, Asian-Americans, and other ethnic groups. Alongside the physical beauty and cultural diversity are striking levels of poverty and inequality; poverty second only to West Virginia’s; and inequality in wealth second only to that found in Arizona.

The New Mexico Organizing Strategy (NMOS), affiliated with the Industrial Areas Foundation, is organizing to mitigate such inequalities, both economic and in the education system. The NMOS is focusing much of its work in western New Mexico and the Four Corners area of the state. The Gallup-McKinley County School District is a border area of the Navajo Nation and is a school district larger than the state of Connecticut covering over 5,000 square miles. Over 80% of its students are on free or reduced lunch. The district loses over 1/3 of its teachers every year (often during the school year), with trained replacements simply unavailable. The Four Corners area, two hours north of Gallup, faces many of the same challenges. While increased funding for public education is not the only answer to better education, it is certainly a key one and would allow rural districts an opportunity for better facilities and much higher retention of teachers.

Because public education in New Mexico is funded at the state level, NMOS is working to develop power through a statewide network. To that end, on Sunday, April 1, 2001, the NMOS held an organizing assembly of 600 leaders representing nearly 100 institutions from various parts of the state. The assembly drew people from diverse cultures and a broad range of institutions that included congregations, synagogues, and other faith-based communities; the public schools, community college and the university; immigrant associations and labor unions.

Those gathered made a public commitment to organize much more deeply in their communities through small group meetings called “house meetings.” The house meetings bring people together around their stories, their issues, and their passion, for the purpose of taking action. They are essential in identifying and training new leaders. At the April 1 assembly, 183 leaders signed commitment cards to host a house meeting.

The leaders also ran an “action” on the invited guests, State Representative Rick Miera, Chair of the House Education Committee, and David Martinez, from the New Mexico Department of Children, Youth, and Families. We challenged Mr. Miera to work with us to get decent pay for our professional educators, emphasizing that we are talking about public education “from birth through higher education.” That is, the organizing work aims to build power and secure resources for all levels of education, encompassing early childhood development to higher education.

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It’s a Rough Road Out There:
Five State Study Documents Student Busing Experiences

Ever heard the old saw, “When I was your age, I had to walk 10 miles to school, barefoot, in the snow, up hill both ways”? According to new research by Craig Howley, Aimee Howley, and Steve Shamblen, some of today’s rural students will be telling future generations, “When I was your age, I had to ride the bus for hours over mountainous, unpaved roads to a school far away from my home.” Sadly, their tale will not be an exaggeration.

In their paper The Experience of Rural School Bus Rides, authors Howley, Howley, and Shamblen examine the bus-riding experiences of rural students compared to those of suburban students in five states (Arkansas, Georgia, New Mexico, Pennsylvania, and Washington). Using surveys of 1194 principals in rural and suburban elementary schools, the authors gathered data on 38 variables. (The authors chose not to include urban schools as urban busing tends to involve a different set of issues.) What they found was that rural students in every state have a very different bus-riding experience from that of their suburban peers.

Although the results varied by state and location, there were five consistent findings: 1) rural elementary students are more likely to ride the bus for more than thirty minutes each way, 2) rural elementary schools are more likely to draw students from areas larger than ten square miles, 3) rural students have a higher percentage of bus rides that are over rougher roads and hillier terrain, 4) rural schools are less likely to be in districts that have full-
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quality educational system is essential to lifting New Mexicans out of their poverty.

Mr. Martinez was challenged to work with us around the issue of early childhood teacher compensation. Most early childhood workers are earning minimum wage in rural areas, with the state reimbursing subsidized children at a lower level in rural areas when in reality expenses are often higher. Even the highest paid childcare workers, usually in the federal fund Head Start programs, are only making $7 to $8 an hour. It is impossible to raise a healthy family on those wages, and the high teacher turnover that results from the low wages is devastating for the young children in the childcare centers.

The work before the NMOS is vast, but the recent action painted a colorful mosaic and inspiring portrait of what a statewide power organization could bring: broad sectors of the state’s population, working across class, race, and ethnic lines, to engage in politics in the very best sense of that term. That is, to engage in public discussion around the people’s business and to participate in public policymaking to harness resources and power not just for the few but for the many, who make the Land of Enchantment their home.

— Eleanor Milroy

For more information, contact Eleanor Milroy, the lead organizer of the New Mexico Organizing Strategy (NMOS) at 5500 Villa Canela Ct, NW, Albuquerque, NM 87107, 505.269.2453 or email ejmilroy@aol.com. The NMOS is supported in part by the Rural School and Community Trust.

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time bus supervisors, and 5) rural bus routes are more likely to transport a mixture of elementary, middle, and/or high school students.

To come to these conclusions, the authors asked both rural and suburban elementary school principals to answer questions about what bus rides were like for students in their schools. The survey included questions about the bus ride itself (time in transit, wait times, transfers, etc.) as well as questions about how students experienced the bus ride (terrain, weather, discipline problems, etc.). The authors also gathered basic demographic information and information on the characteristics of the school/district transportation system.

Using a variety of statistical analyses, Howley, Howley and Shamblen found that some rural-suburban differences were consistent across the five states, but that most of the differences were state-specific. Only in Pennsylvania, for example, are rural students more likely than suburban students to experience enroute transfers to other buses. In New Mexico districts, 94% of suburban districts employed a full-time transportation director, compared to 42% of rural districts. Students in rural Arkansas experience the roughest bus rides.

Some findings appeared in more than one state. In Georgia, Pennsylvania and Washington, rural principals are more likely to associate longer bus rides with decreased parental involvement. In Arkansas, Pennsylvania and Washington, larger percentages of rural students ride the bus. In New Mexico and Washington, rural districts are more likely to include bus drivers in IEP meetings and are more likely to have formal policies on bus discipline.

The fact that rural students have different experiences riding the bus than do suburban students does not come as much of a surprise. Many of the findings in this report seem obvious. So why does any of this matter?

What makes busing such a big deal is that it reflects the importance of having schools connected to their communities. Very little research has been done on the impact that busing has on the lives of rural students, their families, and their communities. We know that busing is an integral piece of rural education, but we don’t know the effect of that piece. Every time rural schools and districts are consolidated, schools get farther away from the communities they serve. Kids spend more time on the bus, more money goes to transportation, and little by little, we chip away at rural education.

While there is little empirical evidence (this report notwithstanding), we can assume that busing plays a bigger role in the lives and educations of rural students than most policymakers seem to give it credit for. This research gives us important insights into just how big that role is. It also makes clear how much more research is necessary.

Based on their research, Howley, Howley and Shamblen suggest that discussions need to begin on issues such as how many students are needed in a school to keep bus rides to an appropriate length, the influence of one-campus school districts on the length of bus rides, and the acceptable grade spans for rural schools. They also suggest that the fact many rural elementary school students ride the bus for more than an hour a day should sound alarm bells for policymakers. Yet so far, it has not.

In finding that the rural busing experience differs from state to state and by locale, the authors reinforce the notion that “one-size-fits-all” policies do not work for rural schools. Busing policy, as with other issues, must be developed based on what makes sense for rural schools and communities.

The Experience of Rural School Bus Rides was funded in part by a grant from the Rural School and Community Trust Policy Program.
State Actions

Nebraska’s Rural Education Day

The Nebraska Alliance for Rural Education, a coalition of Nebraska grassroots organizations supporting rural schools and communities, and the Center for Rural Affairs, a non-profit advocacy organization based in Walthill, Nebraska, co-sponsored a Rural Education Day at the state capitol. People from throughout the state crowded into the former Senate chamber (discontinued for use when Nebraska became the nation’s only single-house, or unicameral, legislature in the 1930s) to hear speakers and rally opposition to two school consolidation bills scheduled for public hearing later that day. One (LB 380) would create countywide school districts, shutting down over 400 school districts in the state. The other (LB 431) would create a task force to “reduce and reconfigure” school districts.

Jerry Hoffman, Executive Director of the Alliance asked the gathering why Nebraska would "want to make larger schools when the rest of the nation is beginning to see that what Nebraska has is what they want?" Researchers Jon Bailey and Patricia Funk presented findings showing how the state’s aid formula discriminates against rural schools and taxpayers (see Digging Deeper Into Shallow Pockets, by Jon Bailey and Kim Preston, and Shortchanging Small Schools: Nebraska’s School Finance Policy, by Patricia Funk at the Center’s web site, www.cfra.org).

Many participants testified to the legislature’s Education Committee later that day, and neither consolidation bill was advanced to the full legislature. The session is not scheduled to end until after this article appears, but chances of the bills advancing at this late date are slim. For more information, contact Jerry Hoffman at the Nebraska Alliance for Rural Education, 8011 Meredith Street, Lincoln, NE 68506, 402.483.6037, jhoffman@neb.rr.com, or Kim Preston at Center for Rural Affairs, Box 406, Walthill, NE 68067, (402) 846-5428, kimp@cfra.org.

Pennsylvania’s www.studentsforachange.net

The Pennsylvania School Reform Network has launched a web site for kids who want to get involved in the continuing political debate in that state over school finance and other education issues. Visitors to the website can get basic information about how the legislative process works, background on current bills, links to organizations and background information on issues ranging from testing to finance to free speech, a chat room to exchange ideas, a mountain of statistics and other facts about education in Pennsylvania, and a handy directory that gives you information about your elected officials and a direct link to their email addresses. If you know where you live, you can connect to your State Senator or Representative instantly. Check it out: www.studentsforachange.net

Vermont Children’s Forum Promotes Equity Funding

In 1997, the Vermont Legislature passed its landmark Equal Education Opportunity Act (EEOA or Act 60) which shares the property wealth of the entire state to finance the education of all of the state’s children and allows residents to pay property taxes based on their income. The new system of funding has generated vigorous opposition from people in property wealthy towns. Property tax payers in most rural communities in Vermont have benefited but opponents in wealthier towns — so-called “Gold Towns”— have protested loudly. But the rural folk are getting organized, thanks to efforts of the Vermont Children’s Forum, which is monitoring legislative activities and implementing a public education and media campaign about the issues. Hearings by the Senate Finance Committee in April (after press time) were a crucial opportunity for rural people to take a stand. For an update, contact Barbara Postman at 802.229.6377; bpostman@together.net.

Connecting the Dots: Facilities Network Grows

What is only a few months old and has over 100 members in 36 states and the District of Columbia? The answer is, of course, the Rural Trust’s growing facilities network. People participating in the online discussion represent a wide range of perspectives. We have school board members, principals, teachers, superintendents, parents, community members, community organizers and activists, policymakers, legislators, officials in state and federal departments of education and other agencies including the education laboratories, USDA, and the US DOE; architects, engineers, community planners, people in foundations, and many others.

Several members have commented that the email discussion has already been interesting and helpful. For example an architect told us, “the value...appears to be increasing daily. The quality and experience of participants has led to some compelling dialogue.” A member from a rural community said “I really enjoy reading the information you send to me daily. I am trying to sort through and determine how I can use this to help our situation in Southwest Virginia,” and a person with a government agency said, “This is potentially an extremely valuable forum for sharing practical ideas and experiences about how things can be done differently.”

Members have been discussing issues including consolidation, the sustainability of small communities, the value of small schools, legislation that supports small schools and limits the size of schools, a successful renovation project that renewed a school in Greenfield, Ohio, as well as sources of funding for projects and many other topics.

We hope you will join us by sending an email expressing your interest to the facilities coordinator: barbara.lawrence@ruraledu.org.
Global place-based education?  
World-Class Standards and Local Pedagogies: Can We Do Both? by Thomas J. Gibbs and Aimee Howley (December 2000) is an ERIC Digest that compares and contrasts the underlying commitments and practical implications of standards-based versus place-based education reform. “A growing movement to ground school curriculum and instruction in local geography, ecology, culture, economy, and history — often referred to as place-based education — is capturing the attention of many rural educators across the country. Some see this approach as a way to address the decline of many rural communities, including the out-migration of young people, by preparing students to live productive and fully engaged lives in their home communities. However, this view of education seems to put its proponents in conflict with the national movement to adopt academic standards and accountability measures.” The Digest is available at http://www.ael.org/eric/digests/edorc008.htm.

Re-opening isolated rural schools in Montana

The Montana Legislature has enacted a bill that revises the procedures for opening or reopening an elementary school in isolated rural areas of the state. New provisions include lowering the number of parents required to initiate a petition for a school opening or reopening. Schools can apply to be classified as isolated. Applications must include “a description of conditions affecting transportation such as poor roads, mountains, rivers, or other obstacles to travel, the distance the school is from the nearest open school having room and facilities for the pupils of the school, or any other condition that would result in an unusual hardship to the pupils...if they were transported to another school.” The full text of HB 358 can be found at http://data.opi.state.mt.us/bills/2001/billhtml/HB0358.htm.