



# NEWS RELEASE

## Mississippi's Shaw High School Identified as a Small Southern High School Beating the Odds in Poor Rural Communities

At Shaw High School in Shaw, Mississippi, every student is expected to achieve to high levels as reflected in the high school's motto: Every Child ~~Can~~ *Will* Learn. The school is unmistakably a center of activity for the Shaw community at large. And, the students have made considerable academic gains: for example, in 1999, Shaw students' mathematics performance on the state's Functional Literacy Examination (FLE) trailed overall student performance by 21.5 points. In 2003, Shaw students' average FLE mathematics score (281) exceeded the average for students statewide (267) by 14 points.

Facing challenging circumstances, Shaw High is one of over 50 high schools in poverty-stricken rural areas and small towns in the South that are beating the odds to outperform most other schools in their state. In a new report prepared for the Southern Governor's Association, *Beating the Odds: High Performing High Schools in the South*, the Rural School and Community Trust chronicles exceptional schools in the poorest regions of the rural South and the secrets behind the high quality education they provide.

Compared to others in their state, the identified high schools in rural areas and small towns in nine states (Alabama, Arkansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and West Virginia) are: smaller than median size; higher than average poverty; made adequate yearly progress under the No Child Left Behind Act in all areas and for all subgroups; and scored above the state mean on all mandatory state tests.

The Rural Trust conducted site visits at four other schools in addition to Shaw:

- Frederick Fraize High School, Cloverport, Kentucky
- Sicily Island High School, Sicily Island, Louisiana
- Shaw Phelps Jr/Sr High School, Phelps, Kentucky
- Central High School, Lowndes County, Alabama

The report concludes that the schools are “structurally simple but organically complex.” Throughout the schools, there is a sense of mutual respect and shared expectations. Doing well is less about pedagogy, programs, and professionalism and more about how people treat each other—the human relationships are what make them successful.

The small size of the schools makes possible both those important, close relationships and the larger instructional practices that make them successful—team teaching, consensus building behind clear goals, integrated curriculum, cooperative learning, and performance assessments. Staff and students view their smallness as a blessing, not a curse and think positively about the possibilities their small size affords them.

*Beating the Odds* points out that success begins with good leadership that is positive, flexible, creative, and collegial. Teachers are empowered by principals to make important decisions and work together, and they are given planning time that reflects those values. Teachers serve in roles beyond instructors—they are also mentors, advisors, and counselors.

Importantly, the good work done in these schools is not the work of genius. It is the hard work of caring and competent, but ordinary, people who achieve extraordinary ends because they work in an environment that not only *expects* the best of everyone, but *brings out* the best in everyone.

The report includes policy recommendations for states, among them:

1. Respect and support the advantages of smallness, recognizing the teachers and administrators in small schools play many roles and that high student-teacher ratios in particular are not a sign of inefficiency, but a sign that teachers are serving in multiple roles, some of which are reserved for specialists in larger schools.
2. Compensate for the fiscal disadvantages of smallness by providing a small school adjustment factor in the state aid formula.
3. Modernize facilities by providing access to capital funding that is not based on local wealth, is not biased in favor of large schools, and does not favor new construction over renovation and repair.
4. Improve the professional lives of teachers and administrators in hard-to-staff schools by providing mentors, improving professional development services, and providing more time for planning team teaching and other collaborative approaches.
5. Level the competition for highly qualified teachers by providing incentives, including higher pay, for teachers who teach in small, poor, remote areas.

The report was prepared as part of a Southern Rural High School Study Initiative sponsored by the Southern Governor's Association and funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

*Beating the Odds* is available online at [www.ruraledu.org](http://www.ruraledu.org).

Rural Trust Contacts:

Marty Strange, policy director, (802) 728-4383 or [Marty.Strange@ruraledu.org](mailto:Marty.Strange@ruraledu.org).

Doris Williams, capacity building director, (252) 433-8844 or [Doris.Williams@ruraledu.org](mailto:Doris.Williams@ruraledu.org).

Alison Yaunches, interim director of communications, (703) 243-1487 or [Alison.Yaunches@ruraledu.org](mailto:Alison.Yaunches@ruraledu.org).