



Louisiana Urged to Fully Fund Mandated Education Program

With barely over 60% of its rural high school 9th graders graduating within four years and the 6th lowest rural NAEP scores in the nation, Louisiana's rural schools clearly need attention. That's what the State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education is giving it, thanks to a report from the Rural Trust that was commissioned by the State Department of Education. The Rural Trust convened three workshops in Louisiana to gather input from rural educators on a plan to support and improve rural education in Louisiana.

Policy director Marty Strange recently appeared before the state board and reported the findings, that include:

- Rural teachers and administrators are paid non-competitive salaries and benefits;
- Increasingly, narrow grade and content area certifications make it difficult for small schools to staff a full curriculum with a small faculty;
- The state's overly restricted standards for "highly qualified" teachers give neighboring states a competitive advantage for the best teachers; and
- The state funding formula fails to fund adequately all of the mandated educational services expected of rural schools.

More generalist subject-area and broader grade-span certifications are essential to the economies of small schools, the report argues, because to succeed, smaller schools must employ teachers who are competent to teach in more than one field and at more than one grade level.

The report also points out that the meager local property tax base in many rural districts and excessive homestead exemptions that erode the tax base even more are aggravated by the fact that the

state also depends more than any other on local sales tax to support schools. Many rural districts have very little local sales tax collections.

The report recommends numerous incentives for teachers to locate and remain in designated "hard-to-staff" rural districts and suggested that wealthier districts be required to pay an induction "rebate" to districts from which they "hire away" fully certified teachers who have completed the state's teacher induction program and have less than five years experience.

It also says it is unclear what services are intended to be covered by the state's foundation aid program and that such services should be "specified and delineated" and "fully funded on a real-cost basis."

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Pay Gap for Rural Educators

Rural school personnel earn significantly less than their urban, suburban, and small town counterparts.

A recent study by the Educational Research Service collected nationally representative data on the salaries and wages of professional and support positions in K-12 education. The study breaks down data by district size and locale.

Rural superintendents make an average of \$87,995 compared to \$106,160 for small town superintendents—the next lowest salary level—and \$171,407 for large urban superintendents.

Rural principals (average salary \$63,638 to \$69,844 depending on grade level) earn about \$11,000 less

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Kids Breathe Bus Pollution—New Meaning to "Kids First"

New research published in the *Environmental Science Technology Journal* indicates that the pollution inhaled by students riding school buses in California's South Coast Air Basin is equal to the pollution from that bus that is inhaled by everyone else in the general population of the Basin put together.

The average student on a bus in that region inhales between 100,000 and 1,000,000 times as much pollution from that bus as does the typical resident of the area. Factors affecting the magnitude of these differences include the age

of the bus and whether the windows are open.

The authors, Julian D. Marshall and Eduardo Behrentz of the Energy and Resources Group, University of California-Berkeley, and Environmental Science and Engineering Program at UCLA, say the results indicate that it would be far less expensive per gram inhaled by a student to reduce emissions from school buses than from the average vehicle. An abstract and a link to the full study are available at <http://pubs.acs.org/cgi-bin/abstract.cgi/esthag/2005/39/i08/abs/es040377v.html>.

Q. How many states fail to graduate more than one of every three rural ninth graders in four years? Answer p. 4.

How to Know if Your School or District is Threatened with Consolidation—and What to Do About It

Participants at a workshop at the Rural Education Working Group conference in Charleston, West Virginia, April 1–3, talked about how to anticipate a threat to consolidate your school before it is too late to stop it, and what to do about it. Here are just some of the notes from workshop leader Robin Lambert, a consultant to the Rural Trust, with a few ideas added later.

Cardinal Rule

- If you are a small rural school or district, you are threatened. So begin immediately to do the things that can strengthen your school and community and will help protect your school when the threat becomes imminent.

Other Signs

- One or more grades have been removed from your school.
- Other small schools in your area have been consolidated (i.e., domino effect).
- Maintenance has been ignored or avoided; your school has a major structural problem or damage.
- There is poor administrative leadership, especially a series of weak leaders assigned by the district, or a strong principal is about to retire or leave, especially if transferred by district.
- District-wide bus routes are changed to draw students out of your school.
- Your school becomes economically vulnerable due to declining enrollment, rapid demographic change in the community (especially an influx of special needs students or a large employer closes, or an anti-tax revolt is being organized by anti-tax or pro-private school activists).
- Your local tax base is weak or your local tax base is strong, but local residents do not have the economic resources to pay high local tax rates.
- You're the poorest or smallest school or politically weakest community in your school district.
- There is high staff turnover, especially if teachers don't want to work in your school.
- Your school "outshines" schools in more politically powerful communities—

they are threatened or shamed by your schools' strong performance.

- Any new legislation or regulation that sets a minimum school or district size, changes the school funding formula to reduce aid to small schools, offers "incentives" to consolidate, or narrows teacher certification making it harder to hire teachers who teach more than one subject.

Protecting Your Small School/District from the Consolidators

- **Don't wait until your school is directly threatened. Build a strong school and community now:**

- Work with the school to create a "place-based" curriculum that engages students directly in improving quality of life in the community, strengthening the local economy, and actively engaging people from across the community in the school. An engaged school gets and deserves public support.
- Get involved with your school board, budget decisions, and parent/community groups. If they have to ask who you are when you show up to object to a plan to close your school, your chances of prevailing are greatly reduced.
- Support good teachers and quality school programs. If teachers leave the school, find out why and try to prevent more of the same.
- Establish a strong interactive distance-learning network with other schools to strengthen your curriculum. Create other inter-district networks that might include sharing of administrators or music teachers.
- **Realize that the consolidators already know that you don't want your**

school closed, and that you will oppose their plans. So, don't rely on testifying about how good your school is or what it means to your community. They don't believe, or they don't care, or both. Instead, strategize, organize, multiply, and get the buzz and energy in your region on your side. School boards and other public officials need to understand that the people who want strong schools in local communities are prepared to act to keep their schools.

- **Figure out what's really behind the consolidation initiative and challenge it on its own terms.** If unsupported claims are made about saving money or offering more courses, challenge the consolidators to defend the claims in writing. If they offer "research" supporting their claims, analyze it for contradictions, false assumptions, and illogic. There is nothing more damaging to consolidators' plans than to be contradicted by their own words. Provide examples of consolidation failings from other states.

- **Offer alternatives that address legitimate concerns.** Consolidators often build on legitimate concerns, such as high operating costs, declining enrollment, crumbling buildings, or outdated technology. You can't win by denying these issues. You need to make the case that there are better alternatives to consolidation that address these concerns effectively. If you do not, neutral people who recognize these as legitimate concerns will be driven to the arms of the consolidators by default. Role up your sleeves and invite people to help find better choices. Those might include: more inter-school or inter-district cooperation, more distance learning, stronger parental/community involvement, changes in the state's school aid formula. This wins over the neutral parties, and gives the pro-consolidation interests a way to change their mind or back down and still save face.

- **Make friends, better yet alliances, with other small school communities and with the larger communities where your students would attend if your school were closed.**

- Don't let consolidators pit you against other small school communities. Too often, communities are told they won't be consolidated if they lay low or if they let another school be closed. Very often those schools do, in fact, get consolidated anyway within a few years.
- Help larger communities who won't lose their schools to understand

that they and their students and communities will suffer from consolidation, too, through higher drop-outs, more competition for limited student activities, more discipline problems, more unhappy students, and weaker local economies.

- **Be FOR something good and CREATE A POSITIVE BUZZ.** Be for strong schools and communities for everyone. Have a good plan for what you want. Go on the offensive and keep your message strong and clear. Don't get backed into a corner and portrayed as just trying to save your own school (or worse, your sports teams!)

- **Get the facts.** Back up your claims with research. Use national studies (you can find a large library in plain language at www.ruraledu.org), but also get as much information as you can locally. Figure out exactly what the costs will be and where they will come from. Document

the real harm to children and the local economy. Put your findings in strong easy-to-understand language and formats that appeal to most people's desire to protect children.

- **Use or create media to help get your message out.** If you don't have local media or if local news outlets favor consolidation, create your own media by making and distributing flyers and radio spots. Create fun public events that spread your message. Go door-to-door to talk to people about what's going on and what you want.

- **Don't rely on a local law suit.** Local law suits can be a tool in a larger strategy, but they are rarely enough alone to stop consolidation. Too often there is little or no legal basis for anti-consolidation lawsuits. Unless you can prove that there's obvious malfeasance on the part of the school board or gross violation of procedural laws, you probably can't win,

or at best can only delay consolidation. Worse, you might even cause the pro-consolidation activists to "hurry up" their plan. Even communities that have demonstrated substantive harm to students often find that the court is sympathetic but has no basis on which to rule for the small school.

- **Always be ethical, but don't be afraid to fight.** Communities have an ethical right to educate their children in schools that are healthy for them. It's not wrong to fight, so figure out where you can put pressure on local officials and power brokers and then show that you will exert pressure if you need to. But always act legally and ethically.

- **Don't quit or get discouraged.** Even if you lose your school you have shown your children that you will fight on their behalf and if you keep fighting you might get your school back.

- **Run for school board or for the legislature.** Nothing gets their attention like making them defend their views at the ballot box!

Got a school consolidation story to tell—do's and don't's of fighting to keep and improve your small rural school? Share it with the Rural Small Schools Forum by emailing robin.lambert@ruraledu.org.

And Making It Happen in Arkansas

Organizing continues apace in rural Arkansas as more and more rural people concerned about school consolidation are asking to join Advocates for Community and Rural Education (ACRE).

Spurred by threats of more consolidation and proposed legislation to create county-wide districts, parents from schools like "Rural Special" in Stone County are organizing to keep the community's most treasured asset. And they have a statewide group to support them.

Rural Special parent Renee Carr recently contacted ACRE founder Lavina Grandon to ask about joining. Her community started a group called "Rally for Rural Special." The Rural Special and Timbo Districts were forced to combine with the Mountain View District under Act 60, the new law requiring districts with fewer than 350 students to consolidate.

Since Act 60 assured that all schools in closed districts would remain open for at least year, some rural Arkansans are only now beginning to feel the true effects of the law. Most of the school boards of the newly consolidated districts have only one—or in some cases no—representative from the districts forced to

close. Those consolidated boards are now beginning to vote to shut down schools in the closed districts.

At a lively meeting to discuss saving the 202-student Rural Special school, talk focused on how to attract more students. With very high ACT scores, a strong distance learning program, and solid sports teams (where everyone can play), it should not be too hard to sell this school. However, people know that being good never guarantees survival in education politics.

Among the ideas for increasing enrollment were to have exchange students, to offer free housing to large families who move to the area, and to offer distance learning classes to home school students.

The Rally for Rural Special group plans to continue meeting, bring in new participants, attend school board meetings, and monitor legislation that may affect their school.

As they do this, they will have the support of ACRE which assists similar groups across the state. ACRE now has over 900 activists in 127 districts in every corner of Arkansas. For more information about ACRE, contact Lavina Grandon by phone at 870-429-6543 or email lavinagrandon@hotmail.com.

Pay Gap for Rural Educators

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than their small town counterparts and as much as \$27,000 less than their large urban counterparts.

Rural teachers make an average of \$39,816 compared to \$45,363 earned by small town teachers and \$54,211 earned by suburban teachers, the teachers with the highest average pay. Instructional aides in rural schools earn an average of \$9.92/hour compared to \$11.08/hour in small towns and \$12.96/hour in suburban districts.

In fact, the only categories in which rural school employees were not the lowest paid were the categories Public Relations/Information Specialist and Typist/Data Entry Clerks. In both cases, these positions—relatively rare in rural districts—earned slightly more than their small town counterparts.

Salaries for workers in schools districts with fewer than 2,500 students were also lower in every job category than salaries in larger districts.



Rural Policy Matters

18 Merchants Row
Randolph, VT 05060

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INSIDE:

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From What We Gather—

A *North Carolina* judge says small schools are part of the antidote to “academic genocide.” Judge Howard Manning recently ruled the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School District (CMS) had committed “academic genocide” against at-risk, low-income students in low-scoring high schools, adding he had similar concerns about other North Carolina school districts. Judge Manning urged state officials to work with educators, foundations, and community groups to “fix the high school problem.” The judge pointed to the high dropout rate in many North Carolina high schools as evidence that schools are not educating students as required by the Constitution. The judge noted several strategies that could work to improve high school student outcomes, including smaller schools.

South Carolina Gov. Mark Sanford’s plan to give tax credits to parents who send their children to private schools died without debate on the floor of the State House of Representatives. What had been expected to take hours was over in a few minutes. In addition to the tax credits, the bill would have given tax breaks to parents transferring their children from public schools. The credit could have been used to pay tuition at independent schools, for home-schooling, or

to transfer to other public schools. Don’t expect this issue to go away.

Montana has asked the U.S. Department of Education for flexibility to include all the state’s schools in an accountability process it has developed for small rural schools. The process incorporates five year plans, district trends, and other long-term benchmarks, which Montana maintains provide a better way than tests alone to assess all schools, not just those too small for test-based accountability systems. Federal officials have not said when they would give Montana an answer.

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Finally, the Rural Trust report urges rural districts to organize themselves for their common welfare in state education policy matters.

The Board enthusiastically received the report and “retained” it, requesting the State Department of Education to respond to issues raised in the report in future board meetings. You can find the full report with 29 recommendations at <http://www.ruraledu.org>.



Rural Policy Matters

July 2005

ISSN 1537-4696

Rural Policy Matters is published monthly by the Rural School and Community Trust. The Rural Trust is the leading national nonprofit organization addressing the crucial relationship between good schools and thriving rural communities. Working in some of the poorest, most challenging rural places, the Rural Trust involves young people in learning linked to their communities, improves the quality of teaching and school leadership, advocates for appropriate state educational policies, and addresses the critical issue of funding for rural schools.

Comments, questions, and contributions for *Rural Policy Matters* should be sent to:

Policy Program

Marty Strange, Director
18 Merchants Row
Randolph, VT 05060
Phone: (802) 728-5899
Fax: (802) 728-2011
E-mail: policy.program@ruraledu.org
<http://www.ruraledu.org>

New Address: National Office

1530 Wilson Blvd., Suite 240
Arlington, VA 22209
Phone: (703) 243-1487
FAX: (703) 243-6035

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Editor: Marty Strange
Design: Gerry Cervenka, Editype

Printed on Recycled Paper

A. 14 — South Carolina (50%), Georgia (50%), Arizona (49%), Florida (46%), Alaska (42%), North Carolina (42%), California (41%), Tennessee (40%), Alabama (40%), Louisiana (39%), Mississippi (38%), New Mexico (37%), Hawaii (34%), and Kentucky (34%).