Making Rural Education Work for Our Children and Our Future
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Introduction

Rural America is vital to our nation’s well-being. The American story has been informed significantly by rural values and experiences—self-sufficiency, strong family ties, hope, resilience, and ingenuity. The future of rural America will shape the American landscape, particularly regarding broader and deeper economic prosperity.

- **Rural America is essential to national security.** More than 44 percent of the men and women who serve in uniform come from rural communities, even though the overall rural population is around 17 percent of the nation. Approximately 6.1 million veterans live in rural America.
- **Rural America is essential to American ingenuity.** Most of the American-born NASA engineers in the 1950s and 60s came from rural communities, and they placed a man on the moon in less than a decade. Today, across many rural communities, rising entrepreneurs are designing new ways to live in harmony with the land and generate economic value. Creativity often arises from how people handle the demands of scarcity.
- **Rural America is essential to sustainable living.** Farms feed the world, and rural Americans continue to lead agricultural movements that make food safer, more nutritious, and less expensive.
- **Rural America is essential to energy independence.** Rural areas host natural resources that fuel our economy and require smart and careful management. Across a prairie landscape, once dotted with one-room school houses, there are now sleek white blades of wind turbines.
- **Rural America is essential to local, regional, state, and national economic growth.** There’s no question that big cities generate a large percentage of overall economic growth, and conventional wisdom plays up the advantages of population density. However, research also shows that the "long tail" of economic growth in rural areas makes up a significant percentage of our overall Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Some of the fastest growing regions in America are rural-based. Concentration of population and economic activity is not the only recipe for economic success. We must move from a one-size-fits-all strategy to a more place-based approach to unlock the potential of rural regions across the country.

Rural America includes more than 50 million adults and 12 million children. Rural Americans face a greater likelihood of lower incomes, higher poverty rates, declining health outcomes, and lower educational attainment than their urban and suburban counterparts.

Economists describe the out-migration of the best and brightest rural high school graduates as a brain drain that endangers the economic and civic future of many rural places. Demographers warn of the “economic drag” of a “graying” rural America, and the need to attract new wealth and younger people. Global economic forces continue to leave many rural communities behind. Too often, the natural wealth of rural regions is extracted in boom and bust cycles that displace the economic and civic security of small towns. Additionally the changing face of rural America means opening up the circle to more voices and more stakeholders from a broader array of backgrounds.

Parents, educators, and civic leaders in rural communities have heard the calls and understand the need to be college ready, work ready, and future ready. However, these slogans and the demand for an educated workforce often fall on anxious, apathetic, and/or angry ears. Many worry about high school graduates leaving their families and their rural roots. Some have grown apathetic about the prospects of a better life, as the global economy continues to leave too many rural communities further behind, and rural community members have not seen an immediate payoff in local efforts to grow a more educated workforce because the good jobs haven’t materialized. Additionally, more than a few are angry that the playing field remains uneven due to the economic and political power centered in urban and suburban communities.
America needs a bolder and more integrated approach to rural prosperity.

From broadband connectivity, to the need for cleaner and more accessible water, to better sewage and transportation systems, rural communities face many infrastructure needs and choices. These public works projects offer significant wealth creation opportunities for rural and urban America (e.g., jobs, supply chains, etc.). How will these choices be made and by whom? Will places be ready to leverage such opportunities?

In a time of significant government debt and retrenchment, where will political influence come from in the name of a prosperous rural America? We must craft solutions that coordinate policies, leverage collaborative leadership, invest in infrastructure, grow human capital, fit local circumstances, and build broader political support. We must begin with understanding that current rural education policy is incoherent at best and fundamentally flawed at worst. We must recognize certain educational inequities as well as pursue mutually beneficial opportunities.

For decades, educators, policymakers, legislators, and researchers have well understood the special challenges rural communities and their schools face. Population growth rates in non-metro areas have been lower than those in metro areas since the mid-1990s, and the gap widened considerably in recent years, as non-metro counties, as a whole, gained population every year—until recently.

Between 2010 and 2012, rural counties saw their first ever population decline (Cromartie, 2013). Since the 1960s, non-metro areas have always recorded higher poverty rates than their metro counterparts, but the rural–urban poverty gap has increased over the last two years, with obvious implications for the educational attainment and subsequent employment potential of youth living in poverty. Worsening poverty and population losses result in declining local tax bases, which then adversely impact school funding, particularly in states where local property taxes are a significant component of school finance (Kern & Salmon, 2005).

1We define rural schools in line with the National Center for Education Statistics’ (NCES) approach. NCES categorizes rural schools into three distinct groups – (a) Fringe—Census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster; (b) Distant—Census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster; and (c) Remote—Census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster.
Rural school consolidation is a constant and common policy refrain (Lawrence, 2001). Rural schools struggle to recruit and retain effective teachers, provide access to a well-rounded education, and offer a diverse array of courses (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Rural schools have narrowed the high school completion gap with urban schools, but college completion rates have worsened as of late (Kusmin, 2012). Enrollment in rural school districts grew by more than 22 percent between 2000 and 2009, while enrollment in non-rural districts increased by less than 2 percent (Strange, Johnson, Showalter & Klein, 2012). By 2010, rural schools were educating 12 million children, roughly 25 percent of the total primary and secondary enrollment in the nation (Aud et al., 2013). “Still, the invisibility of rural education persists in many states. Many rural students are largely invisible to state policymakers because they live in states where education policy is dominated by highly visible urban problems” (Strange et al., 2012).

Other key rural education issues:

• The federal formula for distributing Title I funds for economically disadvantaged students further disadvantages rural schools because the formula allows a “high concentration of poverty” to be determined by either a high number of poor students or a high percentage of poor students. Therefore, a large suburban district, even a wealthy one with a higher headcount of poor students than perhaps its neighboring rural district, but with a very low percentage of poor students, will receive more Title I funding than the poor, rural district with a very high percentage of poor students. Since the total amount of federal Title I money is set, the weighted formula results in money moving from smaller districts to larger districts, regardless of the percentage of poor students in a particular district. For example, Fairfax County, Virginia, with a 6 percent poverty rate, receives more federal Title I funding for each of its economically disadvantaged students than a neighboring public school district in Virginia with a 33 percent poverty rate (Strange, 2011).

• Other funding disparities also impact rural student access to a quality public education. Excluding funds for capital construction, debt service, and other long-term outlays, “most states provide a slightly disproportional amount of funding per pupil to rural districts” (Strante et al., 2012, p. 6). Many state funding formulas leave capital expenditures, transportation, teacher pay supplements, and, in some cases, benefits, for local governments to provide. These realities mean that “low-income rural communities with low property values and low sales tax incomes are at a distinct disadvantage” (Williams, 2013, p. 2). Further compounding this situation is the fact that states are funding schools less than before the 2007–2009 economic recession. Funding for the 2013–2014 year shrank in 34 states, with 13 of these states slashing funding by more than 10 percent (Leachman & Mai, 2013).

• Rural educator salaries tend to be 13.4 percent lower, on average, than those in urban and suburban districts, making the competition for highly qualified teachers, particularly in the STEM fields, a potentially insurmountable burden for rural schools (Jimerson, 2005). No Child Left Behind (NCLB) provisions that include additional teacher professional development and greater academic support for low-performing students, but without the accompanying financial means to do so, will only exacerbate the rural-urban achievement gap.

• Many rural districts do not have the personnel, resources, or opportunity to compete with better-resourced districts for federal funding. Lacking the means to hire professional grant writers, rural districts invariably rely upon principals or superintendents to write grant applications (Ayers, 2011). Competition under such conditions will widen the gap between poor rural districts and other districts. Consequently, it may be necessary not only to set aside competitive funds for rural schools, but also to provide technical support before and during the application process.7 “Making rural matter” in the quest for innovation will require greater attention to the distinct character of rural communities in our society, as well as greater reliance on rural people for their own ideas and for the ways by which ideas from elsewhere might be best adapted to their needs” (Strange et al., 2011, p. 18).

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7There is some indication that the federal government has recognized these needs and intends to address them. See U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development, ESEA Blueprint for Reform, Washington, D.C., 2010.
Together, we must find ways to...

**TURN** the brain drain into a brain gain,

**GROW** rural economies that create new jobs, talent, and wealth, and

**CONNECT** educational, economic, and civic leadership for sustainable impact.

A strategy of “leveling the playing field” across urban, suburban, and rural schools has been pursued for a long time with limited results. Somehow, we need to change the narrative. Somehow, we must remake rural education a vital part of the overall American education system.

We must find a way to simultaneously work together to reshape the rural economy, remake the quality of place, own the future of learning, and prepare rural communities to be successful in a highly competitive, complex, and ever-changing world. Rural schools always have been and should continue to be the real and symbolic cornerstone of their communities. If rural communities are to own the future of learning and benefit from new technologies that enable any person, anywhere, and at any time to grow and improve his or her knowledge and skills, then rural schools must become much more than a place—they must become the driving force where things take place. In addition to being college ready, work ready, and future ready, we must be rural ready.

Rural ready means that we need to rethink rural economic and educational policy at the national, state, regional, and local levels so that deeper, broader, and more persistent prosperity is truly possible (e.g., higher incomes, less poverty, better health, and greater educational attainment). Chairman and CEO of Gallup, Jim Clifton, notes in his book, *The Coming Jobs War*, that 3 billion people on the planet need and want good jobs, and that presently there are only 1.2 billion such jobs. The world faces a 1.8 billion jobs gap problem. This is not a new challenge for many rural communities in America, yet many rural communities have grown frustrated at the lack of real solutions that truly fit their circumstances. They seek a future where college ready no longer means brain drain. Work ready no longer means the lack of local jobs. Future ready no longer means a college-educated son or daughter living in his or her parents’ basement with no job and $20,000+ in college loan debt.

A rural-ready agenda assumes that strong economic growth can happen when local leadership focuses on growing, attracting, supporting, and keeping a diverse and talented citizenry. There is a growing concern about the widening income gaps in American society. A rural prosperity strategy can help America and any state pursue a broad-based economic growth strategy.
Three Basic Moves

So how do we pursue a rural-ready agenda that works for many people and communities in many places? Successful rural prosperity initiatives include three basic moves.

FIRST MOVE: Map the territory

We have the resources to reshape rural education for a more prosperous economy. As we push forward on the work of improving instruction, increasing standards, applying new learning technologies, and accelerating student access to more personalized learning, **we must also help local, regional, and state leaders craft and execute integrated rural education, economic, and community development strategies that people can understand, value, and own.** This involves understanding and connecting current investments, rethinking how we generate and allocate fiscal and human resources, how we define roles and responsibilities of public and private organizations trying to advance rural prosperity, how we move away from a one-size-fits-all approach to problem solving, and how we engage people in serious and catalytic conversations about the future of rural learning, living, and livelihood. We can no longer afford to play the blame game or the grab the credit game.

All states have “pockets of brilliance” where rural education, economic, and community development investments have paid off. However, most states are “program rich and system poor” in terms of their rural prosperity investment strategy. We tend to throw pennies at pilot programs and seldom determine what really works and how to truly tackle the problem of scale. We also tend to get in the way of helping local leadership creatively adapt limited resources for effective solutions. A rural-ready approach starts with mapping the territory to figure out within and across states where and how to invest in integrated and scalable approaches to education, economic, and community development.

The chart below provides a simple but sturdy starting point for national, state, regional, and/or local rural policy leaders—what investments are we currently making in rural prosperity, and what is the payoff?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rural Investment Description</th>
<th>Community Needs</th>
<th>Intended Impact</th>
<th>Funding Source</th>
<th>Actual Impact</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>Economic Development</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Development</td>
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</tbody>
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After mapping the territory, we need to ask four questions:

1. **Impact:** Where do we demonstrably improve rural prosperity outcomes at the same time (e.g., education levels, income levels, and health)?
2. **Sustainability:** Where are places that keep integrated prosperity initiatives going after initial funding runs out?
3. **Scale:** Where are the approaches that have the potential to reach significant numbers of rural Americans?
4. **Leadership:** Where is the next generation of rural entrepreneurs, civic leaders, and educators who can navigate ways for more rural Americans to connect to the regional, state, and global economy?

Scalable and sustainable impact focuses on altering how pivotal institutions set policy, allocate funding, and deliver services at the ground level. Mapping rural education and economic development policies and investments helps us identify where and how we can advance broader and deeper rural prosperity. A rural prosperity plan should not involve a new set of programs. Instead, we need to connect and develop current programs and investments that have proven to make a difference.
SECOND MOVE: Make the connections

The world moves too fast for traditional, adversarial, and hierarchical forms of organization. Real, scalable, and sustainable change comes from robust networks and networking. Rural-ready change happens when collaborative organizations build deep relationships with a significant portion of local community members, and develop a feasible resource base for moving collaborative action forward. How do we take collaborative action that makes a difference? Following is a five-point checklist for building a highly connected and sustainable collaborative leadership initiative.

Checkpoint #1: Mobilize, Engage, and Empower All Stakeholders

- Stakeholders must be identified and invited to participate in designing, resourcing, and implementing a shared strategy.
- Stakeholders must ensure that everyone is meaningfully and smartly engaged. Stakeholders must be empowered by sincere commitment from the highest level of leadership in their respective organizations.
- Stakeholders must have a resource investment (time, energy, or money) to engage. Stakeholder resources should be required and documented. This is particularly true for the member that serves as the collaboration manager.

Checkpoint #2: Agree and Commit to Specific Outcomes

- Stakeholders must be engaged and empowered and be able to articulate a common vision.
- Stakeholders must have agreement on indicators of progress and how these indicators will be measured and reported.
- Stakeholders must determine how much progress is expected and acceptable within a given period of time, and have agreement on short-, medium-, and long-term benchmarks to help navigate the inevitable implementation bumps in the road.

Checkpoint #3: Craft a Place-Based and Evidence-Based Approach

- Stakeholders must determine the level and type of evidence of effectiveness that is necessary to make a commitment to the given approach. How much proof do stakeholders need? What do local communities need to know to secure their commitment?
- Stakeholders must determine how feasible it is to implement the selected approach in the local context, and look closely at the feasibility of the approach within the specific setting and timeframe in which it is to be implemented.

Checkpoint #4: Focus on Your Strengths

- Stakeholders must design for sustainability from the beginning and tap into local assets and commitments.
- All network and/or collaborative members must have documented agreement on roles, responsibilities, and accountability based on what they do well.

Checkpoint #5: Connect Aspiration and Accountability

- Stakeholders must develop and agree on a monitoring and evaluation plan. Stakeholders should use formative evaluations to identify and remove implementation barriers. It is critical to monitor progress early and often.
- Stakeholders must develop incentives and consequences that are agreed upon by everyone, and advance mutual accountability, respect, and benefit.

In addition to an uncanny ability to focus on systemic change, there is one other common thread across highly successful collaborative leadership—the capacity to listen to the people in the trenches to better understand the everyday choices they make and why. When we listen well and often, we can achieve incredible results.
THIRD MOVE: Mobilize for rapid and sustainable scale

Very few pilot programs and collaboration initiatives are actually designed to be truly scalable and sustainable. What often is missing is support for a stage between the pilot phase and widespread adoption phase. What is needed is a “test at scale” approach. For example, we know that many rural students, schools, and communities face real and significant achievement and funding gaps. We also know that they often encounter opportunity gaps due to geographic isolation, low expectations, and student disengagement and/or apathy. Generational poverty, particularly in rural settings, can create an “aspiration gap”—a diminished belief about future potential. Young people growing up in poverty are significantly less likely to imagine themselves going to college, owning a home, or securing a high-skill, good-paying job. There are countless numbers of small and isolated programs and pilots focused on overcoming aspiration and opportunity gaps. So what might be the elements of a “test at scale” approach that could really and truly overcome deep and enduring rural economic and education opportunity gaps for more people in more places?

When we look at Race to the Top states with large rural populations like Kentucky, Ohio, and Tennessee, we see a common strategy for mobilizing rapid and sustainable change—build a collaborative leadership ecosystem from the bottom up around an integrated education, economic, and community development strategy.

These states focus more on breaking down borders and building local capacity that produces four core outcomes:

- Education must pay off for the individual student and the community;
- Students must own their own learning and recognize that effort is the key driver of successful learning;
- Teachers and principals must have the capacity and support to design, deliver, and adapt new learning strategies, systems, and practices; and
- Local leadership must be committed to connecting to schools, jobs, and communities for sustainable rural prosperity.

States that are at the forefront of a clear, coherent, and attainable rural prosperity strategy tend to take the same basic approach first used more than 80 years ago with the use of co-ops to bring electric power to rural America. First, incentivize local ownership. Second, ensure an early and practical payoff. Third, build an infrastructure for sustainable collaboration.
“Let us put our minds together and see what life we can create for our children.”

—Sitting Bull

Broadening and Expanding the Conversation

Good collaboration begins and ends with great conversation. We live in fast and hyper-cynical times. It can be difficult to engage in deep, lengthy, authentic, and hopeful conversations about our individual and shared futures.

The primary purpose of this white paper is to ignite and support conversations that matter around the future of rural students, their families, and their communities. We hope there will be many more papers, conversations, blogs, tweets, partnerships, policies, and practices to come that will move a rural-ready agenda forward.

Rural America is vital to all of our futures, regardless of where we live. It is the place where this nation started, and it will contribute significantly to where this country goes next. Schools have and will continue to be at the center of most rural communities.

There is not a one-size-fits-all approach that works. Needs, resources, and stakeholders look different in each town and region; yet any rural prosperity strategy must confront a small set of similar challenges:

• Decreasing unemployment and advancing job creation in rural communities;
• Aligning local educational offerings with regional industry needs;
• Building infrastructure for connectivity, such as bandwidth, roads, and waterways; and
• Increasing student access to highly effective educators.

For our collective future, every state needs an explicit and coherent rural prosperity strategy based on these four challenges. Few states actually have such a strategy. Now is the time to remedy this situation. Now is the time to make rural education work for children and our future.

To learn more about Battelle for Kids’ rural transformation work and partnerships, visit www.BattelleforKids.org.
References


Battelle for Kids is a national, not-for-profit organization that provides strategic counsel and innovative solutions for today's complex educational improvement challenges. Our mission-driven team of education, technology, communications, and business professionals specializes in creating strategies that advance the development of human capital, the implementation of strategic measures, the adoption of powerful practices for educator effectiveness, and communication with all stakeholders in schools. At the heart of this work is an unwavering focus on accelerating student growth.

www.BattelleforKids.org