

## Policy Brief

### ***Why Rural Matters 2018-2019: The Time is Now: Interview with Authors Jerry Johnson, Daniel Showalter, and Sara Hartman***

TRE editor Erin McHenry-Sorber recently spoke with three of the authors of the biennial report on the status of rural education published by the Rural School and Community Trust in partnership with the College Board and AASA: *The School Superintendents' Organization*. *Why Rural Matters 2018-2019 The Time is Now* examines the state of rural education in each of the 50 states in the United States. The authors describe the significance of the report and its implications for policy and practice.

*Why Rural Matters 2018-2019: The Time is Now* was released in November 2019. The *Why Rural Matters* Report, co-authored by Daniel Showalter, Sara L. Hartman, Jerry Johnson, and Bob Klein, is published by the Rural School and Community Trust in partnership with College Board and The School Superintendents Association (AASA).

The ninth edition of the Report gauges rural education across the 50 states around issues such as: student and family diversity, educational policy contexts, educational outcomes, and college readiness. Using public data to characterize the conditions and contexts of American rural communities and schools, *Why Rural Matters* includes state-by-state analyses as well as a state ranking system for priority attention to rural issues.

The authors note nearly one in seven American students are enrolled in a rural school district, and almost one in five students, over 9.3 million, attend a rural school. The authors also argue in the report, "Nearly one in six of those rural students lives below the poverty line, one in seven qualifies for special education, and one in nine has changed residence in the previous 12 months."

*The Rural Educator* interviewed Jerry Johnson, Daniel Showalter, and Sara L. Hartman about the new report a few days after its release.

**TRE:** *Why should readers of The Rural Educator be interested in the report?*

**Showalter:** The report uses data to show how important rural schools and communities are to the country as a whole and to call attention to the areas of greatest need and attention from policymakers, practitioners, and the public in general. In doing so, the report helps to (1) dispel overly simplistic notions of rural America by illustrating the rich diversity in the families and communities served by rural schools, and (2) call attention to the dramatic differences among states with regard to policies with the potential to make things better or make things worse for rural schools.

**TRE:** *How do you go about compiling the report? What data do you use?*

**Johnson:** The author team looks at the publicly-available data, in conversation with the Rural Trust and its partners, and chooses five gauges related to the health of rural education. Each gauge is then measured by about five indicators.

**Showalter:** A list of these gauges and indicators can be found on pp. 11-12 of the report. The first four gauges have remained relatively stable in recent years (even though some indicators have changed). These include the *Importance* of rural education, the *Diversity* of rural students and their families, the *Educational Policy Context* impacting rural schools and facing rural communities across the nation, and the *Educational Outcomes* of rural students. The fifth gauge, *College Readiness*, remains the same for this report due to its centrality in discussions about the health of education -- the indicators are updated though. For example, in the past report, we measured the percent of rural Juniors and Seniors taking an AP course; this time it was the percentage who actually received AP credit (a better indicator of readiness).

**Johnson:** Once we collect all the data, we filter it to include only rural districts, and then aggregate the data up to the state level. So, at this point, we have a single number for the rural districts of each state on each indicator (except in rare cases where data aren't available). We then rank the 50 states on each indicator, with a rank of 1 being the most urgent or of critical importance. By averaging each state's indicator ranks, we get a gauge ranking, and by averaging the gauge rankings, we get a final priority ranking for each state.

In addition to creating a map for each indicator and a data page for each state, we zoom out and look at the bigger picture of the trends we see in the data. This leads us to write the narrative that makes up the first main portion of the report.

In parallel with this process, we often include a subsection that provides a current literature review on a topic of national importance for rural education. In this report, we included a section on early childhood education.

**TRE:** *What are the biggest takeaways regarding rural education in the new report, including challenge and opportunities?*

**Johnson:** The biggest challenges would include large inequities in (a) instructional expenditures per student, (b) teacher salaries, (c) how much rural districts must rely on local tax bases, and (d) opportunities to prepare adequately for college (especially access to AP coursework). Poverty is widespread, with nearly one in six rural students living in poverty. In every state, academic performance gaps exist between rural students living in poverty and their rural peers who are not living in poverty. Some districts, especially in places where consolidation has occurred, must spend large amounts of their budget on transportation costs. Rural districts in some areas of the country have sizable portions of students changing residences each year.

**Showalter:** In addition, growing racial diversity in rural areas is both a challenge and an opportunity. Rural communities also offer supports not found as commonly in other locales, which is perhaps the reason why rural students outscored their nonrural peers on the NAEP in 28 states.

**TRE:** Are there differences between the findings of this report and previous reports?

**Hartman:** The new rural diversity index that we included in this report shows the most racially diverse rural school districts are located in Delaware, North Carolina, and Oklahoma. Also, several states saw substantial jumps in priority status in this edition of the report, including Louisiana, Arkansas, Kentucky, and Texas, while Nevada and Utah had the biggest priority ranking drops.

**TRE:** You mentioned the addition of an early childhood focus in this report. Can you tell us more about what you learned?

**Hartman:** Here are some of the most important early childhood take-aways from this version:

- Recruiting and retaining teachers in early childhood settings continues to be a significant issue in rural areas, both in birth-5 and school-aged classrooms. Of particular concern related to this is the lack of licensure required for all infant/toddler rooms and that only 25 states require a bachelor's degree for teachers working in preschool classrooms. Pay equity is another major issue impacting this issue.
- Children in rural areas are more likely to experience childhood trauma, abuse, and neglect than children in other settings.
- Rates of child poverty continue to be higher in rural areas (22.8%) than in non-rural settings (17.7%).
- Despite some rural areas being major producers of food, rural areas actually experience high levels of food insecurity. Several practices that capitalize on rural strengths are helpful in mitigating this issue.
- Accountability measures place high emphasis on reading and math, often to the detriment of other content areas such as social studies and science. Additionally, readiness assessments have a negative trickle-down effect on curricular practices in both preschool and kindergarten classrooms.

This quote from the last paragraph from the section really sums up what I consider to be really important issues from the early childhood section:

Retaining and recruiting teachers remains a pressing concern for most rural schools. Important suggestions for addressing this concern include requiring bachelor's degrees and pay equity for all preschool teachers and increasing funding for high-quality teachers in infant and toddler settings. Additionally, as a nation, we must advocate for initiatives that increase rural preschool enrollment numbers, encourage justice-oriented practices in rural classrooms, and work together to address current immigration policies that place some of America's most vulnerable children at higher risk for poor child outcomes. Given these challenges, it is imperative that policies, practices, and funding are directed specifically to rural young children.

**TRE:** These really point to a need for policy changes. What would you say are the biggest policy implications of Why Rural Matters?

**Showalter:** Specific policy implications vary considerably from state to state and region to region, and include both (1) implications that support calls for change (e.g., increasing per pupil instructional spending in states that are falling further and further behind in terms of student achievement outcomes—something that could assist in recruiting and retaining high quality teachers and providing them with the resources they need to be successful) and (2) implications that support calls for sustaining and protecting what is already in place (e.g., rejecting wholesale consolidation and keeping the small, locally-operated schools and districts that are prevalent in some states—something existing research indicates is beneficial for students, particularly economically disadvantaged students and students of color).

**TRE:** *How do you hope that readers of the journal (including rural educators and rural researchers) will use the information that is provided in the report?*

**Johnson:** We hope readers will use the report to deepen and enhance their understanding of rural America in all its complexities and nuances. We also hope readers will use the information to identify needs and opportunities—and this is true for both practitioners and policymakers (who we hope they will use this report as a needs assessment that focuses their energy on the areas that demand their attention) and for researchers (who we hope will use the report to guide their attention toward research problems and questions that—sufficiently and appropriately addressed via empirical inquiry—might produce results that inform policy and practice in meaningful, actionable ways).

### Reference

Showalter, D., Hartman, S.L., Johnson, J., & Klein, B. (2019). *Why rural matters: The time is now*. Washington, D.C: Rural School and Community Trust. Available at <http://www.ruraledu.org/WhyRuralMatters.pdf>

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