

Defending Rural Schools

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Abstract

The benefits and deficits of rural education are under-researched. Clarity, in regards to the quality of education and student experience, is essential to guide future policies at all levels of power. Educators require a deeper understanding of educational research to guide their practice and dispel community misconceptions. Increasing student achievement should be the primary focus for teachers, principals, and upper administrators. Universities need to adapt their practice to prepare teacher candidates for rural teaching positions, and school divisions must increase support to teaching staff for the challenges they face.

The talk of school division amalgamation was front and centre during the last Manitoba provincial election. Education Minister Kelvin Goertzen feels that our education system is lagging, and he wants to examine educational reform in other areas (von Stackelberg, 2019). Universal education demands that similar educational experiences be offered to all students, regardless of their socio-economic situation or location within the province (Harrison & Rouse, 2014). Rural educators and school boards are increasingly being called upon to defend the cost of rural schools. Policymakers often fail to draw on data when formulating future actions, and they are unwilling to accept data that contradicts their current policy (Lopes et al., 2014). “Rural” means being small in physical size, sparsely settled, limited choice for inhabitants, agriculture-based, and located a distance from a larger centre (Monk, 2007). Defending the cost of rural education involves confronting the myths associated with small schools, combatting the issue of quality staffing, and providing recommendations for increased student achievement.

Dispelling the Myths of Rural Education

Improving the quality of rural education requires first acknowledging and analyzing the challenges faced by small rural schools. When school division administrators have the mindset that bigger is better, the positive characteristics of small schools are diminished (Jimerson, 2006). Three myths commonly confronted by rural schools are that homogeneous single-grade classes are superior, there are improved extra-curricular activities in larger schools, and students are more content in larger schools.

Many parents and teachers believe that the single-grade, homogeneous classes offered in larger schools produce better student achievement. When comparing Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) scores among developed nations, there were no urban/rural differences “for almost half of the developed countries” (Sullivan et al., 2018, p. 1), and other researchers have not found large schools to be superior to small ones (Giambona & Porcu, 2018). The research factor most often associated with poor student performance has been low socio-economic status (Harrison & Rouse, 2014). High socio-economic status and the pressure for student achievement by parents with elevated educational backgrounds are more commonly associated with students in urban settings (Bæck, 2015). Research shows that heterogenous student grouping combined with an advanced curriculum produces academic achievement for all students, including all levels of socio-economic status (Jimerson, 2006). This style of early learning was concluded to be beneficial because the students created a culture of high achievement, and these results carried forth into middle and high school years.

A second area often disputed is the availability of extra-curricular opportunities in rural schools compared to their urban counterparts. Parents and staff who coordinate these activities carry an increased level of responsibility, compared to larger schools where the workload can be distributed to a larger population (Adsit, 2011). Due in part to the larger volunteer pool, larger schools offer a wider variety of opportunities, but this does not translate into more student participation (Duyar & Collins, 2008). With a smaller pool of students for the activity, small schools have a higher percentage of their school population participating in the activity. Extra-curricular activities are associated with positive views on learning and increased self-esteem in students (Jimerson, 2006). Often, rural centres are economically depressed and the school supports the economy of the town (Adsit, 2011). Moving sports to larger centres hurts the town's economy, and it also limits parental and community involvement with the addition of time and distance to the event (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Regional teams benefit a small number of highly skilled students, but rural teams benefit a larger percentage of the school stakeholders.

Rural students may believe that they would be happier in a larger, urban school. There is a general perception that the highest achieving students need to leave their communities in order to be successful (Forner et al., 2012). This view may be reinforced by the schools when curriculum and values are created in urban settings by people who live an urban existence (Bæck, 2015). The reality, however, is that many students from small, interconnected schools experience a sense of isolation and loneliness when they enter larger schools (Lopes et al., 2014). Students need to feel a connection to their schools and teachers in order to combat this isolation (Jimerson, 2006). As a rural teacher, I do not purport to have a solution to student isolation, but in my small setting, that student's discontent would be noticed. A contributing factor to student angst would be the number of school transitions that occur with larger schools. With regional schools, K-12 schools would be broken down into narrower grade groups and increase the number of school transitions for students. Each transition means increased anxiety for the student, and there is achievement loss associated with each move (Jimerson, 2006). Schools can be institutions that teach students how to thrive within their communities through the use of community-connected curriculum (Bæck, 2015). High-performing schools and thriving students dispel the myth that rural education is inferior to urban schools.

Creating and Maintaining Great Teachers

Staffing any school is a complex task; staffing a rural school has added difficulties. Teachers who spend their careers in rural schools make that choice due to community connections or because they cannot find employment elsewhere (Monk, 2007). While there are advantages to working in rural schools, there are often additional responsibilities and pressure from the community (Glover et al., 2016). In an effort to improve rural education, the issues of teacher preparation, teacher retention, and ongoing education for teachers require examination.

The reality of rural education does not match the expectation and training that many new teachers receive. New teachers are expected to teach multiple grades and subjects outside their specialization, and to take on multiple committees and roles within the school (Glover et al., 2016). Multi-grade teachers in rural schools do not feel that their university training adequately prepared them for this challenge (Raggl, 2015, p. 131). Teachers who thrive in multi-grade classes need training, good organization skills, and a variety of resources. Rural teachers may experience similar student needs, but they will not have the same level of specialist support found in larger schools (Monk, 2007). To combat this deficit, teachers need to develop their own professional networks and learning opportunities (Raggl, 2015), and principals need to implement mentorship for new teachers (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). When completing teacher practicums, school divisions should match teacher candidates with master teachers in their rural schools. This partnership would better prepare those candidates for the reality of a career in a rural setting. Teacher candidates need to realize the value of understanding the community and connecting students' reality to their literacy and numeracy programs (Clarke & Wildy, 2011).

Starting a career in a small school is very overwhelming (Raggl, 2015), and teachers will be more successful if they embrace the community outside the school.

Teacher retention in rural schools is a worldwide concern (Sullivan et al., 2018). Despite teachers reporting job satisfaction and increased autonomy, rural schools experience difficulty attracting and retaining specialist teachers (Monk, 2007). Results include teachers working outside their areas of training and those with the highest levels of training leaving small schools. Schools may hire candidates with ties to the community over more qualified teachers (Monk, 2007). A better option is to be more cognizant of the needs of high-performing teachers and remove underlying difficulties. As previously mentioned, matching new teachers, or those new to a subject area, with a master teacher, encourages teacher growth (Monk, 2007). School divisions could also offer incentives for teachers to expand their knowledge in new subject areas by covering the cost associated with upgrading their training. The United States has offered increased salaries to teachers who work in schools that are difficult to staff (Monk, 2007). Alaska has created statewide initiatives to help place teachers in rural schools. Programs similar to the Program for the Education of Native Teachers (PENT) at Brandon University could be used to upgrade educational assistants to teachers or to attract candidates to positions within their own rural communities. There are many logical solutions to teacher retention problems.

Quality professional development is essential to increase the skillset of existing teachers and to maintain successful rural schools (Hunt-Barron et al., 2015). Rural teachers receive fewer hours of professional development related to a specific content area or literacy/numeracy outcomes than urban teachers (Glover et al., 2016). Teachers in schools with fewer than 150 students are less likely to take part in peer collaboration, mentoring, and upgrading their qualifications at a university (Glover et al., 2016). Lack of opportunity can be connected to geographic isolation, lack of release time due to substitute teacher shortage, and lack of available mentors on staff. One method of overcoming isolation is for rural teachers to take advantage of online professional development opportunities. Many universities and organizations offer webinars, and these may be particularly helpful for rural high school teachers who may not have subject-area colleagues in their building. The most successful professional development is ongoing, linked to the curriculum, and collaborative (Hunt-Barron et al., 2015). A hybrid delivery model integrates a face-to-face learning session with an online community and resource bank for support. The Manitoba Rural Learning Consortium (mRLC) is an example of this principle in practice. The mRLC creates learning networks of educators across the province and assists schools by assigning a mentor to help guide school-based literacy and numeracy projects (*Manitoba Rural Learning Consortium*, n.d.). Technology and commitment to rural education has improved the professional development opportunities of rural educators.

Improving Student Achievement

Schools are increasingly asked to justify their expenses in relation to student achievement. For example, comparing the Southwest Horizon School Division to a number of urban school divisions, a trend of higher rural mathematics performance and higher urban English Language Arts performance on the grade 12 provincial exams emerged over a nine-year period (Manitoba Education and Training, 2017). It is important when examining these results to acknowledge and prepare for the changing needs of our rural communities. Increases of students with limited English language skills and poor socio-economic conditions in rural areas are associated with agriculture and meat-packing industries (Monk, 2007). There has also been an increase in transient, low socio-economic families leaving the urban areas for cheaper housing in rural communities. These trends have occurred in my home community of Hartney, Manitoba. As rural Manitoba school divisions respond to these changing conditions, both teachers and administrators need to put improving student achievement first when making decisions.

Rural teachers possess advantages to improve student achievement, and drawbacks can be overcome with institutional change and support from administrators. Small schools are more

agile and can implement change more efficiently (Raggl, 2015). There is an increased level of collective responsibility for student success and happiness in small schools (Jimerson, 2006). It has already been stated that small school and class sizes benefit students from lower socio-economic backgrounds and those who require additional support (Adsit, 2011). Literacy, numeracy, and English as an additional language supports could be realized through teacher networking or shared specialists provided to a cluster of schools (Clarke & Wildy, 2011). Teachers can be supported by student service experts in the hybrid model of face-to-face visits and interactive television support to cut costs (Monk, 2007). Student achievement data needs to be routinely collected, analyzed for areas of concern, and interventions put in place (Forner et al., 2012). Once an area of weakness is identified, there needs to be a constructive confrontation on how that particular skill or area can be improved. Rural school personnel often shy away from confrontation due to the interconnectedness of the school, but the focus on academic improvement trumps the risk of temporarily hurting someone's feelings (Forner et al., 2012). Low-performing students are paired with appropriate supports and low-performing teachers are paired with mentors or peer coaches. Rural schools possess the expertise to improve student performance; it needs to become the guiding principle in our decision making.

Principals and upper administrators need to put student achievement at the forefront when making budget, staffing, and structural decisions. The best rural principals focus on teacher performance, meeting the needs of stakeholders, and high student performance (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Principals often have to balance these goals with establishing relationships, the demands of maintaining the school, and developing their own practice and coping strategies. Larger schools have the advantage of additional staff to lighten the task load for principals. Rural principals have to rise above the tasks that need to be completed, but do not directly impact student achievement (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Delegation of tasks can facilitate the primary goal of ensuring quality programming and meeting the needs of underachieving students. Upper administrators have to make the tough decisions and withstand the temporary discontent when changes are to be made (Forner et al., 2012). Financial commitments must support divisional goals. If student achievement is the focus, then resources must be placed where the greatest need presents. Change is never easy, but support is built when the goal of student achievement is ever-present and administrators have direct conversations with the staff whom the change affects most (Forner et al., 2012). All levels of the school, and support by upper administrators, must maintain the same primary focus to augment student achievement.

Conclusion

Economic efficiency continues to be an issue for rural schools. There is little political will to close schools, because they sustain a rural community (Harrison & Rouse, 2014). Rural schools provide small, multi-age classrooms where all students can flourish. More students take part in extra-curricular activities in rural schools and this, in turn, benefits the economy of small towns. Students in rural schools are better connected to staff, which benefits vulnerable populations. Staffing issues in rural schools can be improved through better training of teacher candidates, better use of mentor teachers, and a commitment to continuous quality professional development. Rural schools do not consistently lag behind urban divisions according to the data, but they must be ready to adapt to their changing demographics in order to ensure maximal student achievement within the context of their other advantages over urban schools.

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