The Power of Place

RURAL IDENTITY AND THE POLITICS OF RURAL SCHOOL REFORM

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In many regards, rural districts look much the same as urban ones: school boards are democratically elected; superintendents lead and oversee daily operations; teachers, parents, and taxpayers negotiate over resources and programs. And just as reforms to urban school systems live and die on the back of politics, so do rural ones. But how do the political realities rural districts face differ from their peers in big cities? This paper will consider the basic organizing principles for education politics in rural districts and the dynamics of the actors, interest groups, and coalitions that shape what rural districts are able to accomplish.

Over the last two decades, school reform politics has been shaped by teachers unions, the decisions of state and federal policymakers, as well as general government actors like mayors. We show why these actors are less well-positioned to support rural school reform, given the absence of well-organized interest groups, lack of local political leadership, and the positioning of rural identity in opposition to reform strategies developed by urban elites and state and federal policymakers. Thus, while rural schools face deep challenges, the politics of rural communities place strict limits on the extent to which outsiders can lend their ideas and support.

Ultimately, the differences between rural and urban communities—in terms of economic, social, and political identities—are vast and appear to be growing. When education reformers have brought their ideas to rural communities, they have tended to focus on importing urban school reform proposals and aspirations into rural communities, neglecting the possibility that while all parents desire a good education for their children, rural communities may define that differently. The salience of rural identities means that outsiders are especially ill-equipped to support rural education reform initiatives. Advancing educational-improvement initiatives in rural areas requires leveraging the unique civic capacities available in rural communities.
We begin by describing the challenges facing rural school districts, which at once parallel and diverge from those confronting urban districts. We then describe the role of outsiders—urban elites as well as state and federal leaders—in driving the politics of reform in rural areas. We suggest that rural identity often underlies resistance to these efforts, but can also shape local conflict and cooperation among traditional actors in educational politics: local school boards, teachers unions, parent groups, and local businesses. Understanding and navigating this tension between rural insiders and urban outsiders is a key to supporting rural schools.

Framing the Challenges of Rural School Reform

Fixing urban schools has been the guiding focus of district, state, and federal reform efforts for over three decades. Despite the fact that rural districts comprised 53 percent of all school districts during the 2013-14 school year and enrolled a substantial portion of all K-12 public-school students in the country (18 percent), including about 20 percent of all students in poverty,\(^1\) rural schools are typically an afterthought in these discussions. The guiding school-reform fights over the last three decades—for example, mayoral control, state takeovers, and school choice—often leave rural districts untouched.

At first glance, the focus on urban schools to the exclusion of rural ones might appear driven by the relative academic success of students in rural areas. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), rural students outperformed their urban peers and near to levels of children in suburban schools at grades four, eight, and twelve in reading, science, and math.\(^2\) Likewise, rural students graduate from high school at rates substantially higher than students in cities—80.6 percent in 2009-10 compared with 71.1 percent—and very near to the rate attained by students in the suburbs, 81.4 percent.\(^3\)
However, rural schools face a number of significant challenges. In spite of high rates of high-school graduation, young adults in rural areas are among the least likely to be enrolled in any post-secondary program. Gaps in achievement and attainment between female and male students are also growing as rates of post-secondary enrollment for young women in rural areas exceeding those for young men. And like urban schools, rural schools struggle to address persistent educational inequalities that divide low-income families from more affluent ones, and white children from Latino and African American children.

Rural communities have undergone substantial demographic and economic changes, including rising poverty and growing ethnic diversity, which make these changes all the more salient for understanding the challenges facing rural schools. Moreover, high-poverty rural schools are more likely to enroll students of color, ethnic minorities (e.g., Native Americans), and English language learners, adding to the challenges of concentrated poverty.

While cities often tap cultural and economic capital to address challenges in the schools, rural communities are less able to draw upon these resources. Rural communities have long possessed fewer employment opportunities, lower levels of educational attainment, and higher poverty rates. Indeed, the Economic Research Service found that 85 percent of all “persistent-poverty” counties were rural—accounting for 15.2 percent of all rural counties. These trends were exacerbated by the Great Recession, and rural communities were less likely to recover compared to either their suburban or urban peers. Rural communities also face rising health challenges—what Anne Case and Angus Deaton called “deaths of despair”—spurring from drug overdoses, alcohol poisonings, and suicides. As Janet Adamy and Paul Overberg put it in the Wall Street Journal, “In terms of poverty, college attainment, teenage births, divorce, deaths
from heart disease and cancer, reliance on federal disability insurance, and male labor-force participation, rural counties now rank the worst.”

These compounding challenges have helped to accelerate “brain drain” in rural communities. While the educational attainment of people living in rural communities has increased over time, fewer than one-in-five adults in rural areas possess a bachelor’s degree or more.\textsuperscript{13} Out-migration from rural areas and small towns to suburban areas and cities is a century-old trend, but the decline of rural America’s economic base has made it even more difficult for young people to stay in the communities in which they were raised, and two-thirds of rural communities lost population between 2010 and 2014.\textsuperscript{14} This makes investment in rural education all the more challenging because, as Stephan Goetz put it, “Rural areas face the prospect of educating adolescents only to see the better trained ones move away, with the owners of fixed resources incurring most of the local tax burden.”\textsuperscript{15}

These trends have placed increased pressure on rural schools to perform. Like urban schools, rural schools are expected to mitigate gaps in educational achievement and attainment, enable rural students to succeed in college and careers, and simultaneously serve as lead partners in the community revitalization efforts. Yet, because of the status of the rural economy and the lack of employment opportunities, succeeding in these areas may very well spur more out-migration, as rural students seek opportunities in the cities. Indeed, Eleanor Krause and Richard V. Reeves find that rural counties characterized by more outward migration were \textit{more} likely to support intergenerational upward mobility, thereby turning the conventional wisdom regarding human-capital investments on its head.\textsuperscript{16}
“Outsiders” and Rural Identity in School Reform

In the 20th century, political leaders and education reformers who primarily operated beyond rural communities have vacillated between ignoring the needs of rural areas and problematizing them as backwards, in need of modernization. Educational improvement in rural schools is therefore frequently neglected—just 71 of the education-related bills enacted by state legislatures between 2001 and 2016 mentioned rural communities at all. Yet, when rural educational improvement has risen on public agendas, the terms of debate have often been established by urban actors who sought to impose their vision of a good education on rural communities.

Consider the Progressives, widely acknowledged as having transformed educational systems and pedagogical practices throughout the United States during a period of rapid urbanization. While historians have written extensively about the Progressive movement’s impacts on education in cities like Chicago and New York, Progressive reformers in the early 20th century also targeted rural areas. They believed that many urban problems—as well as the larger social, political, economic, and moral decline of America—were rooted in the decay of rural communities, and they distrusted the capacity of rural farmers and laborers to supervise their own school systems. In Tennessee and Iowa, Progressives worked to revitalize physical infrastructure, consolidate schools and districts, and institute home-economics programs.

However, in both Tennessee and Iowa—as well other places around the country—many rural people resented and resisted these efforts. In Tennessee, reformers failed to engage with the extraordinary salience of racial stratification and the exploitative practices of farm tenancy. In Iowa, vigorous opposition successfully stymied many consolidation efforts. Reformers often failed to appreciate the connection between economies, place, and culture; they primarily hailed
from industrialized urban centers and sought to impose the logic of industrial communities on agriculturally-dependent and increasingly marginalized rural communities. Local community identities and inequalities therefore mediated the impact of reform efforts.

An often unrecognized legacy of Progressive-era educational reforms has been a sense among rural communities that education reforms are largely initiated from the outside, with little concern for the particular needs of local communities or for the uniquely prominent position of schools in their communities. This perception lingers and may contribute to feelings of resentment towards outsiders, as members of rural communities perceive local traditions or ways of life are disrespected or threatened. As Kathy Cramer reported in her seminal case study of politics in small town and rural Wisconsin, “[T]here are many people in rural areas who...have strong resentment toward the cities and urban elites. They feel as though they are not getting their fair share of power--no one is really listening to them.”

Rural Resistance and Influence in Education Reform

An irony of these sentiments is that rural communities are in fact powerful sites of resistance to federal and state education reform efforts. Throughout the 20th century, rural communities have flexed their political muscles to slow, weaken, or reverse a number of significant reforms, including consolidation, desegregation, statewide curricula and standards, and teacher collective bargaining. Each of these policy efforts was spearheaded by outsiders, and rural opponents believed they threatened local, community control, represented positions not reflective of rural values, or were associated with unfavorable partisans. Bills favored by urban delegations are less likely to pass through state legislatures than those affecting rural areas and small towns.
Rural communities possess the political clout to resist reform efforts in part because they enjoy a substantial representational advantage in Congress. In 2016, just 17 percent of the population could theoretically have elected a majority in the Senate. This representational advantage is also present at the state level. Up until the 1960s, just 35 percent of American voters elected as many 50 percent of state legislators, due to state-redistricting decisions that favored rural communities in times of growing urban populations. Even as rural legislative clout has been diminished, rural communities have benefited from partisan allegiances that enable them to build winning coalitions with non-rural communities (largely through the Republican Party). As Alan Greenblatt wrote in Governing, rural state delegations “are still able to hit well above their weight in numerous states.”

Rural influence goes beyond obstructionism. Rural education leaders have worked effectively as advocates, winning reforms to state and federal education policy. While rural schools are not often high on the agenda of most state legislatures, rural communities have leveraged their representational advantage to advance some reform issues. They have played leading roles in school-finance equalization and adequacy cases around the country, including serving as plaintiffs in cases stemming from Colorado, Pennsylvania, Mississippi, New Jersey, and South Carolina and regularly voice opposition to rules advanced by state education agencies. As leaders of the opposition in the move to unionize teachers in the 1960s, rural communities also helped to advance controversial reforms to collective bargaining in Wisconsin that curtailed the influence of unions on rural schools.

In sum, rural communities are major players in education reform, driving a “hidden politics”. Their stories are less central to the debates that dominate federal and state governments and their plights are too often ignored by education-reform advocacy groups and policymakers.
And yet, their influence on education is substantial, leveraging the power of representational advantages and durable coalitions between rural and non-rural Republicans. As the New York Times “Upshot” put it, “Rural America, even as it laments its economic weakness, retains vastly disproportionate [political] strength.”

Rural Identity as a Defining Feature of Rural Education Politics

The tension between insiders and outsiders animates more than reactions to state and federal policy reforms, it is also a central axis of conflict around which local educational politics revolve. Even local actors perceived to be on the wrong side of a debate can be framed rhetorically—and dismissed, silenced, or delegitimized—by painting them as outsiders. In part, the power of this narrative in rural education politics is a result of the particular characteristics and high salience of place-based social-identities in rural areas. These local identities share common markers in that rural communities all over the country are buffeted by the same social, political, and economic forces.

Differences between rural and urban economies help to animate insider-outsider dynamics in rural communities. Rural adults are more likely to report working blue-collar jobs as compared to their urban peers. Likewise, rural residents are more likely to identify as members of the lower and working classes as opposed to the middle and upper classes. That sense of belonging to the lower and working classes appears to have strengthened over time: in 1996, almost 60 percent of rural residents identified as members of the lower or working classes; by 2016, that proportion had risen to 70 percent.

As rural and urban places have followed distinctive paths, rural communities increasingly report disconnection from, and resentment of, cities and urban elites. In 2017, only 29 percent of rural respondents agreed that people in cities shared similar values to their own. Notably, the
sense of separateness is asymmetrical: city dwellers were much more likely to see similarities between themselves and rural people, with almost 49 percent agreeing that people in rural areas and small towns shared their values.35

More than just disconnection, however, people in rural areas express a sense that they have been passed over and disrespected, especially by news media and political leaders who pay more attention and direct greater resources towards urban centers.36 On one recent survey, more than half of rural respondents reported that they believed the government does more to help big cities.37 People in rural communities are also more likely than suburban and urban residents to express deep distrust of government institutions, holding them at least partly accountable for the hardships of recent decades.38

At the same time, there is a pervasive sense of shared values and pride that binds rural communities together.39 The same surveys that reveal a divide between rural and urban peoples also provide evidence that within rural communities there is a strong cohesiveness. When asked if they believed that people in rural areas and small towns shared values similar to their own, 74 percent of those living in rural areas agreed. By comparison, just 57 percent of respondents living in cities felt their values were shared by other urban residents.40

A strong, rural identity is also facilitated by the fact that rural populations tend to share other politically salient identity categories, including race and ethnicity, age, religiosity, partisanship and political ideology. A substantial majority of the people in rural areas identify as white, though as we discuss below, this is both unevenly true and in flux. Rural residents are older on average: nearly a quarter are over the age of 65 versus 21 percent in suburban locales and 18 percent in cities.41 People in rural places are also more likely to identify as Christians (81 percent).42
Conservative political ideologies and Republican Party identification are particularly dominant in rural places. In a time of extreme discord between liberals and conservatives, Democrats and Republicans, these allegiances likely play a key role, both in shaping a sense of belonging within rural communities and perpetuating distrust of urban communities. More rural residents identify as conservative compared with those in suburban and urban areas, and they vote accordingly. Throughout the spring of 2017, rural communities maintained the highest rates of approval for President Trump.

School districts distributed across rural and urban environments are therefore embedded in vastly different partisan political climates, with those differences often reinforced by these other, overlapping identities. During the 2012-13 school year, 75 percent of school districts that were classified as serving a rural area were located in counties where the Republican presidential candidate, Mitt Romney, earned more votes than the incumbent, Barack Obama. By comparison, just 41 percent of school districts classified as serving a city in that year were located in counties where Mitt Romney earned more votes than Barack Obama.

The more distant or remote a school district’s location, the more Republican its voters are likely to be (see Figure 1.1 below). For example, 65 percent of “fringe rural” school districts (near to urban areas) were in counties that supported the 2012 Republican candidate for president, compared with 76 percent of “distant rural” (farther from urban areas) school districts and 81 percent of “remote rural” school districts.

Figure 1.1 Partisanship Divides Rural Communities From Their Urban Peers
Results from the 2016 presidential election, matched to school-district data from the 2014-15 school year (the most recent LEA survey available), suggest that the partisan environment in which rural school districts are embedded may be growing more strongly Republican, and therefore more distinct from the political context in city districts (see Figure 2.2 below). For instance, 91 percent of remote rural districts were located in counties where the Republican candidate, Donald Trump, won more votes than the Democratic candidate, Hillary Clinton, compared with 81 percent in the previous presidential contest.46

Figure 1.2. Divide Between Rural and Urban Voters Growing
For rural communities with specific sets of shared values and closely held social identities defined partly in opposition to big cities, parents and local stakeholders understandably want schools to reflect and validate their values. Schools that fail to adopt culturally responsive pedagogy and curricula will risk alienating students as they strive to prepare children—not for the communities and economies in which they grow up, but instead for more urban communities to which they might one day migrate. At the same time, parents, teachers, and rural community leaders recognize that children will often leave the communities in which they are raised. Nearly 60 percent of rural people surveyed in 2017 said that they would tell their children to leave in search of better economic opportunities when they came of age. Rural education reform must acknowledge and negotiate the tension between preparing children to be successful in the wider world, and affirming the communities in which they are growing up.

**Political Constraints on Rural School Reform**

If rural identity is shaped in part vis-a-vis rural communities’ opposition to reforms advanced from urban elites and state and federal policymakers, then rural school reform hinges
on coalition-building at the local level. Much has been written about the prospects and challenges of assembling broad-based coalitions in support of urban school-reform agendas. This work highlights the importance of “governing coalitions”—unified by a shared understanding of the problems in urban schools, reform priorities, and a system for allocating political power among the many organized interests that dominate cities. These offer the stability necessary for advancing education improvement initiatives but have also proven vulnerable to shifts in leadership. As Frederick Hess discusses, superintendents are incentivized to advance new reform priorities at the beginning of their tenures, but because their terms are typically short (approximately three years), rarely does any reform agenda have a chance at succeeding over the longer-term. In part as a result of this “policy churn,” advocates for school reform have turned towards mayors—who can draw on their longer tenures and stronger political base to advance reform initiatives that are sustained long enough to actually yield results.

Marshalling politics to support educational improvement is never an easy task. Interest groups vie for power and influence, political leaders seek to make their mark, and community members can organize to fight even the most well-intentioned reforms. While rural school districts share many characteristics with their more urban peers, their politics can be especially constraining when it comes to advancing school reform. Surmounting these challenges requires political savvy on the part of local leaders as well as new investments by states and the federal government to attend to the challenges and reform priorities of rural schools.

Rural School Boards: More Alike Than Different

At first glance, rural school systems share many of the same features as urban ones. Rural school boards, like the vast majority of suburban and urban school boards, are elected. Few rural
boards have faced threat of state takeover, which more frequently target large urban districts characterized by patterns of financial insolvency, corruption, and low-academic achievement.49

While urban school boards are often depicted as dysfunctional, with high levels of conflict among board members and between boards and the superintendent, rural boards are more similar than different from their peers in non-rural school districts. Table 4.1 presents evidence on differences between rural and non-rural school boards, based on a nationally representative survey of school-board members conducted by Michael Ford and Douglas Inhrke. Unsurprisingly, given the partisan context in which they are embedded, rural school boards are less likely to host liberal board members and more likely to host conservative ones. However, a plurality of board members in both types of settings identify as moderate or non-partisan, likely reflecting long-standing norms around insulating local school districts from traditional partisan politics.

Conventional wisdom suggests rural boards are characterized by lower levels of conflict compared to their peers in non-rural settings, due to the close knit communities that characterize small-town life. But we find no evidence that rural districts are much different than their non-rural peers. Board members in both types of settings were not likely to report high levels of conflict or personal disagreements among board members or that conflicts often resurfaced over time. Both types of board members were only moderately more likely to agree that school-board coalitions tended to form along predictable lines.

Indeed, the most significant distinguishing feature between rural and non-rural school boards is the fact that rural board members are much more likely to run for their seat unopposed. This feature could offer rural boards some advantages over their non-rural peers, given that high
levels of board turnover can disrupt initiatives that aim to improve schools and increase the likelihood of conflict between the board and superintendent.\textsuperscript{50}
Table 4.1. The Politics of Rural School Boards

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Item</th>
<th>Rural Districts</th>
<th>Non-Rural Districts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>14.3 %</td>
<td>21.6 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>40.2 %</td>
<td>27.3 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate/Non-Partisan</td>
<td>45.4 %</td>
<td>51.1 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% board members running unopposed</td>
<td>45.3 %</td>
<td>36.5 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Perceptions of Conflict (Mean Response, 1=Strongly Disagree, 5=Strongly Agree)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perception</th>
<th>Rural Districts</th>
<th>Non-Rural Districts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conflict among some board members is high</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagreements between board members personal</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School board coalitions tend to form along predictable lines</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>During board negotiations, prior</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
conflicts often resurface

Source: Michael R. Ford, University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh, and Douglas Ihrke, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. 2014 National School Board Member Survey

Fewer Interest Group Groups, Fewer Opportunities to Develop Reform Coalitions

At first glance, rural places may seem well positioned to escape the political conflicts that emerge between interest groups in big cities. While little data exists on the geography of interest group politics, the neglect of rural communities in the interest-group literature offers suggestive evidence that rural places are not the primary sites of interest-group organization. Rural communities, by virtue of their lower population densities, weaker economic base, and historically limited demographic diversity, are likely to face few of the same interest-group pressures that big, city school systems do.

But district superintendents and school-board members in rural communities do have to confront one of the most formidable forces in education politics: teachers unions. According to the 2011-2012 Schools and Staffing Survey, 50 percent of rural school districts had a collective bargaining agreement with a teachers association or union. While many rural districts have a collective bargaining agreement, evidence suggests that rural teachers unions are less powerful than their peers in big cities. Teachers working in rural districts have the lowest teacher salaries, are less likely to be offered health, dental, or life insurance benefits, and access fewer pay incentives (e.g., National Board certifications). As Campbell Scribner describes, rural communities “cast statewide teachers’ unions as the instigators and primary beneficiaries of rural school consolidation,” thereby solidifying the position of small-town America as the primary
opponent of the organizing efforts of teachers unions, with long-term consequences for public-sector labor law.\textsuperscript{54}

The weakness of teachers unions in rural communities may seem like a boon for reform-minded superintendents and school boards, as many advocates for change in America’s K-12 system attribute the failure to realize their goals largely to unions. But this perspective misses the fact that a weak opposition is neither necessary nor sufficient for ambitious new initiatives to be seeded and take root.

And perhaps more problematically, rural communities face their own set of entrenched business interests, which can limit prospects for new programs to gain the requisite political support. Rural communities tend to reflect specialized economies, typically relying heavily upon the agriculture, manufacturing, or energy industries. According to the Economic Research Service, 70 percent of rural counties in the United States are considered “dependent” on particular industries.\textsuperscript{55}

Industry concentration creates two types of challenges for rural education. One relates to the need for skilled labor: to the extent that the main source of employment in rural communities relies upon labor that does not require a college degree, the business community may not be a strong source of support for initiatives that seek to prepare students for post-K-12 educational opportunities. The second relates to a foundational challenge in rural communities: the lack of financial resources to support new initiatives. To the extent that rural communities rely upon property taxes to fund schools, the concentration of particular industries, like agriculture, which often qualify for special tax exemptions and rely upon large and valuable tracts of property, limits opportunities to make investments in rural schools. In a number of cases, including Midwestern states like Minnesota and Ohio, statewide conflicts over funding for schools often
pit rural communities—as represented by agricultural interests—against urban communities, which seek to raise taxes to support additional funding for schools.  

Racial Politics Presents Both Risks and Opportunities for Rural Schools

Race has long acted as a potent political force in rural communities, as it has in urban ones. But whereas in cities, racial and ethnic minorities have gained political influence through efforts to organize historically disenfranchised communities and secure positions of power in city government, rural ethnic minorities historically have been less well-positioned to seed effective political coalitions in support of rural schools.

Rural America is frequently assumed to be home to few ethnic minorities. This, of course, has never been true. But unlike cities, where America’s vision of an ethnic “melting pot” was borne, ethnic minorities in rural communities tend to be fragmented.  

As Daniel Lichter explains, “America’s rural ethnic minorities are often geographically and socially isolated from mainstream America and easily forgotten or ignored. They live on Indian reservations, in southern rural areas and small towns in the so called black belt, and in the Colonias along the lower Rio Grande Valley.” Compared to their peers living in cities, rural minorities are much more likely to be poor.  

To date, rural schools have struggled to incorporate ethnic minorities, especially immigrants. Rural schools typically lack specialists who can support Latino immigrants’ language needs and may lack strategies for engaging families whose immigration, language, and educational status all pose barriers to stronger engagement (and representation) in local school systems. Rural white families are significantly more likely than rural African American and Latino families to rate their local schools as “excellent” or “good.”
While the challenges presented to rural schools through immigration are relatively new, rural schools have long faced difficulties addressing gaps in educational opportunity for rural African-Americans, the vast majority of which live in the South. As of 1990—more than three decades after Brown v. Board—rural blacks had the lowest educational attainment: lower than urban blacks and both rural and urban whites. In theory, Brown sought to improve the educational prospects of blacks in the segregated South. But, ironically, the most immediate effect of the decision was the loss of black educators—with 38,000 African-Americans losing their jobs as teachers and administrators between 1954 and 1965.

But rural communities have faced unprecedented demographic changes that have the potential to shift the political dynamic around rural school reform. Between 1980 and 2009, rural ethnic diversity increased by nearly 40 percent, and in the last decade, diversity has increased more rapidly in rural counties than anywhere else. A UCLA study of racial and ethnic segregation in schools identified rural systems as the locations where integration was, on average, moving forward, compared with suburban and urban schools where integration has stalled or reversed, partly as a result of population change.

These shifts—driven in large part by patterns of Latino immigration associated with business investments in rural communities—have reinvigorated debates over immigration and community, even as they have brought new life into “dying” towns with declining populations. These conversations have potential to shift the politics of rural education in significant ways, since Latino immigrants are younger and more likely to have children, compared to white residents in rural communities. How this plays out in terms of support for school levies, representation on local school boards, and educational outcomes for Latino students is central to understanding the future of rural education.
State and Federal Reforms: More Hindrance Than Help

Rural schools have not been central to the policy reform efforts launched by states and the federal government in recent years. But that does not mean leaders in rural communities cannot leverage this work to benefit their own schools. As Paul Manna discusses, policy entrepreneurs in a federal system often use the justifications and capabilities of other levels of government in order to advance an initiative. Thus, we observe state and district superintendents hitching their coattails to ambitious reform priorities launched from elsewhere.

But rural districts are rarely well-poised to capitalize on these efforts. Rural communities often express distinctive reform priorities that challenge basic precepts of the ideas embraced by urban elites and Washington. Public-opinion data suggests residents of rural communities and small towns are less likely to embrace either private schools or charter schools, the main types of school choice that states and the federal government have sought to support. And when national reform leaders like former Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, called on all schools—rural included—to launch ambitious turnaround plans that included firing teachers and principals, many rural school districts balked.

Even when considering the lofty and seemingly uncontroversial ideas about what public schools should strive for, rural communities differ from their urban peers. Less than half of rural school superintendents believe that college attendance is an important measure of public school effectiveness, compared to 61 percent of superintendents in city or suburban school districts. Ideas like school choice, charter schools, teacher evaluation, and school closures may have a place in rural communities, as some argue, but they are too often divorced from the challenges that rural communities face, leaving local leaders to “go it alone” as they carve out their reform agendas.
Rural Superintendents: Constraints and Opportunities for Influence

The urban superintendency has been described as an impossible job for good reason. Urban superintendents are expected to perform superhero functions: raise achievement for all; close achievement gaps; keep the peace with unions and other school employees; and respond to myriad other demands stemming from states and the federal government. They do not control their own agendas but instead are “whipsawed by the demands of competing power centers within the system.”

However, there is little question that the political environment that rural superintendents face is simpler than those that exist in big cities. Teachers unions are less formidable, school-board members less ambitious, and interest groups mostly lacking the strength or diversity that exists in urban areas.

Yet, rural superintendents are more professionally isolated, and this presents a distinct challenge. As one superintendent confessed in a study now almost three decades old, “You know, everybody always thinks the city districts are so difficult to manage. But when you’re a superintendent in a small district and all by yourself, you have a lot of the same tasks. Not the numbers, of course, but the same tasks...And you do it all by yourself.”

Or to put it perhaps more poignantly, in the words of another superintendent from the same study, “I was working 15 to 17 hour days...All I was doing was oil tanks and asbestos. In a larger district, you could delegate [that stuff]. In a small district, you do it all.”

Leaders of rural districts are expected to perform the same superhero functions as their urban peers with far fewer staff, but also with more limited community resources. Rural schools typically possess less funding, lower teacher and principal salaries and fewer benefits, more out-of-field teachers, and fewer specialists trained to address gaps in learning. Compared to urban and suburban districts, rural districts are less able to offer instructional and other kinds of support.
to struggling teachers and principals, due in large part to their weaker economies of scale. And rural communities struggle to support students’ out-of-school health and social needs, given weaknesses in county and municipal government.

Rural superintendents also have to wrestle with a unique dimension of rural politics. What may be lacking in terms of organized forms of political mobilization can be more than made up by personal conflicts with the friends and neighbors, many of whom will either work for the superintendent or send their children to schools in the district. While big-city superintendents routinely make changes to their staff—executed through depersonalized human resources departments—rural superintendents regularly confront the fact that a demotion or termination can be undertaken at significant personal costs.72

Rural superintendents who want to press for change quickly find out just how fraught such efforts can be. A recommendation to deny tenure to a struggling teacher, a proposal to implement a new curriculum, or a discovery of fraud in the business office can quickly foment discontent among the community and between the board and the superintendent. Because rural superintendents have fewer political allies to rely upon, these conflicts can result in boards overruling the superintendent or, worse yet, forcing the superintendent out. And while urban superintendents also face organized political challenges, rural superintendents struggle because the communities of which they are a part are so tightly knit.73 As one rural superintendent noted, “You have to know who’s on your chess board, who the kings and queens are, and who the players are...They’re not always the people who have been elected or appointed to any position. It’s the informal system [too].”74

One way the rural superintendent can expand her power despite these constraints is to leverage their position to influence policy developments in the state legislature and SEA. In a
number of states, rural school-district associations help to coordinate efforts to pressure the state legislature, the courts, and the state education agency on new initiatives, and it is not uncommon for these efforts to find success.\textsuperscript{75} Opposition from rural superintendents can also stymie progress on state reforms, including proposals to expand school choice and put in place new funding formulas.\textsuperscript{76}

At the same time, many rural superintendents are not well positioned to advance their causes in the statehouse. Superintendents of small rural districts confront limits on their capacity given tiny administrative staffs. Moreover, they face collective-action dilemmas in coordinating among hundreds of other small districts. As “jacks and janes of all trades,” superintendents of small rural districts are often overwhelmed with leading their districts, much less monitoring and lobbying state legislatures. Among states where rural districts are larger—due to countywide district boundaries—and the number of rural districts is small, the rural superintendent may be better able to press for reform in the state legislature or with the SEA.

When rural superintendents lack the connections, experiences, or capacity to influence state political processes directly, they must rely upon other avenues. Most salient for many rural superintendents is their state representative. But these can prove fickle allies in the work of school reform. State legislators may care about local schools, but they are also accountable to voters on other matters and face lobbying pressures from business interests and citizens who may resist the efforts of a reform minded superintendent.

Perhaps not surprisingly, many rural superintendents leave their jobs for greener pastures.\textsuperscript{77} Jason Grissom and Stephanie Anderson find that superintendent turnover typically results in superintendents moving from smaller districts to larger ones and from rural districts to
suburban ones, adding one more dimension to the “brain drain” that rural communities confront.  

Looking Forward: Advancing School Reform Through Politics

The conventional wisdom suggests that urban school systems are “ungovernable” due to the entrenched patterns of political conflict that dominate cities. As we have shown in the preceding pages, while rural schools do not face the same types of political challenges, politics very much informs what local, state, and federal policymakers can hope to accomplish in their efforts to improve rural education. As in cities, politics serves as a constraint on rural school reform. The power of rural identity means that state and federal reform efforts must tread carefully in rural places—or be cast aside as yet another “outside” initiative to improve rural schools. While rural schools lack a few of the same kinds of interest groups that make big city school districts so political, they too are shaped by the whims of organized interest groups and the personal convictions of vocal community members.

It is easy to read the through the catalogue of challenges facing rural schools in light of these political constraints and lose hope in the prospects for meaningful improvement. But rural communities do possess advantages that are lacking in big cities and which may offer a path forward. Schools are uniquely positioned in rural communities to serve as community anchors. The personal relationships and “smallness” that add challenges to a rural superintendent’s job also enhance opportunities for problem-solving. In a time in which debates over education and other policy issues in state legislatures and Congress break down in the face of ideological polarization and contempt for those who voice dissention, personal connection just might be the most powerful strategy for negotiating conflicts and identifying shared values.
Rural schools also stand out in terms of the connections fostered between schools and the larger community. Parental involvement and support for local schools is generally higher in rural places than it is in cities. And rural schools are central players in community life, with schools sometimes offering the only dedicated space for community gathering—whether at a Friday night football game or a local theatre performance.

Approaching the work of rural school improvement through the lens of politics suggests that progress hinges on assembling a strong base of support. Doing this work in rural communities will look different than it does in urban ones—where powerful actors like mayors can intervene to unify fragmented interest groups. Rural superintendents have essential roles to play, as their position affords them prestige and opportunity for influence; but, as our account of their challenges reveals, superintendents cannot do this work alone.

States and the federal government also have crucial roles to play in supporting local improvement initiatives. But to ensure these efforts help, rather than hinder, this support must recognize that rural communities derive much strength from the positioning of their identity in opposition to the inclinations of urban elites and state and federal policymakers. Recognizing this requires a new conception of the role of state and federal policy in the work of rural schools—one grounded in supporting local initiative-taking, rather than suffocating it. As Jeffrey Henig and Clarence Stone observe, “the best [state and federal governments] can do is to tilt the pinball machine in a direction that makes positive outcomes more likely.”

While this paper has offered some ideas and evidence on the politics of rural education, we have not given sufficient treatment to the variability in the challenges and traditions that shape rural schools and community life more generally. Rural places can vary as much with one
another as they do with big cities. This variability has important implications for understanding the particulars of politics in rural education: the problems, interests, and prospects for reform. As this paper cannot provide answers to all the questions regarding the politics of rural education, it can serve as a call for others to treat rural schools as serious subjects of inquiry. If rural education is an afterthought in the conversations of state and federal advocates working in education, it is a footnote for education researchers. But as we have shown, rural schools offer fresh opportunities to understand public education and its politics. Perhaps more importantly, they are likely to shape American education in the years to come.

4 Note: In 2015, young people in rural areas (ages 18-24) are less likely to be enrolled in any post secondary program - 29.3 percent compared with 47.7 percent in cities, 42.3 percent in suburbs, and 41.2 percent in towns. See: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, “Table B.3.b.-1 Percentage of Persons Ages 18-29 Enrolled in Colleges or Universities, by Age Group, 4-Category Local, and Sex: 2015,” 2015, https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ruraled/tables/b.3.b.-1.asp.
5 Ibid.


Ibid.


Ibid.

Ibid.


24 Scribner, “Beyond the Metropolis.”
31 Scribner, “Beyond the Metropolis.”
32 Badger, “As American as Apple Pie?”
33 Reynolds, There Goes the Neighborhood.


41 Ibid., 3-4.

42 Ibid., 19-20.


45 Note: Author calculations. Data are from the NCES Local Education Agency Universe Survey, for the 2012-13 School Year. Presidential Vote Share at the county level is based on data collected by the *Guardian*. Only regular school districts, and local components of supervisory unions that serve at least one operational school are included here. Charter schools and other special institutions are excluded from the tabulation. Both Hawaii and Alaska are excluded from the analysis; presidential election returns for Alaska are not reported at the borough level (county equivalent).

46 Note: Author calculations. Data are from the NCES Local Education Agency Universe Survey, for the 2014-15 School Year. Presidential Vote Share at the county level is based on data gathered by Townhall.com. Only regular school districts, and local components of supervisory unions that serve at least one operational school are included here. Charter schools and other special institutions are excluded from the tabulation. Both Hawaii and Alaska are excluded from the analysis; presidential election returns are not reported at the borough level (county equivalent).


49 Note: While rare, states do sometimes intervene in rural school districts, most notably in the southern states like Mississippi and South Carolina.

50 Howard L. Fuller, Christine Campbell, Mary Beth Celio, James Harvey, John Immerwahr, and Abigail Schumwinger, *An Impossible Job? The View from the Urban Superintendent’s Chair* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2003).


54 Scribner, “Beyond the Metropolis.”


63 Lichter, “Immigration and the New Racial Diversity in Rural America.”


70 Ibid.
72 Ibid.
74 Tallerico and Burstyn, “Retaining Women in the Superintendency.”