



**The G.R.O.W. Generating Rural Opportunities in the Workforce™
Report and Probing the Unique Characteristics of Rural Schooling: A
Narrative Inquiry**

James Lane, EdD

ACCESS Program/Panel Validator

Senior Research Fellow

Center for Educational and Instructional Technology Research (CEITR)

Table of Contents

Purpose.....	1
Conceptual Framework.....	2
Methodology	2
Data Resources	4
Results	5
Scholarly Significance.....	7
References	10

Purpose

During Fall 2022, the most recent data available indicated nearly ten million students were distributed across over 23,000 public schools located in areas described as *rural* by the U.S. Department of Education National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2023). Those students comprised 20% of the total U.S. student public school population and occupied 28% of all public schools (NCES, 2023). More than half of those schools, nearly 16,000, were located in areas identified as *rural distant* or *rural remote* by the NCES (2023). Thus, in 2022 about 13% of all public-school students attended *rural distant* or *rural remote* schools (NCES, 2023). The National Rural Education Association (NREA) presents an argument that because of the ways different states demarcate districts, “a more representative measure of rural students in the United States is over 9.5 million—more than one in five students in the U.S.” (Showalter et al., 2023). Regardless of how one parses the specific statistics, it becomes clear that rural schools and their students comprise a significant percentage of U.S. schooling. In addition, the data indicate a significant number of students and educators whose unique circumstances are often overlooked by policy makers and researchers (Showalter et al., 2023; Sundeen & Kisner, 2024; Tieken & Montgomery, 2021). The purpose of this study was to capture significant experiences and insights of current and retired educators who teach or have taught within small rural distant schools to better understand characteristics that make these schools unique fabrics within the American educational tapestry. The study also includes information gleaned from the 2024 *G.R.O.W. Generating Rural Opportunities in the Workforce*[™] report published by the University of Phoenix (UOPX, 2024). The data indicate that rural school educators face challenges of economics and infrastructure as they work to provide unique and enriching experiences for their students.

Conceptual Framework

In analyzing data, I applied an overarching conceptual framework of the ethic of the profession described by Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011). That view combines educational ethics described effectively by Starratt (2012) and Furman (2004). Starratt explains that the ethic of care “focuses on the demands of relationships (in which) each other enjoys an intrinsic dignity and worth” (p. 36). He describes an ethic of justice as a legalistic way of managing “competing claims between the common good and individual rights” (p. 41). The ethic of critique, he explains, “attends to structures and procedures and policies that affect whole groups of people unfairly on a regular basis” (p. 49). It addresses concerns of social justice and injustice toward all marginalized groups. The ethic of community is proposed by Furman (2004). She explains “ethic of community as the moral responsibility to engage in communal processes as educators pursue the moral purposes of their work and address the ongoing challenges of daily life and work in the schools” (p. 2). She continues, “The ethic of community focuses on the community ... as the primary locus of moral agency in the school” (p. 2). The ethic of the profession (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011) adds to these frames three questions for the ethical educator: What does the profession expect? What does the community expect? What is in the best interests of the students? I applied these frames as prisms through which to interpret the stories of participants to better understand distinctive characteristics of rural schooling. Data from the *G.R.O.W.* report (UOPX, 2024) support this focus.

Methodology

I applied an analytic mode of narrative inquiry to probe the significant experiences of educators who work or have worked in small rural distant schools. My purpose was to capture and describe the stories participants tell about their experiences (Clandinin et al., 2006) and then

to analyze that narrative data to identify general themes or concepts (Clandinin et al., 2006). The sample population for the study was selected through a process of purposive snowball sampling (Saldana & Omasta, 2018; Meriam & Tisdell, 2016; Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

Participants represented teachers and administrators from three rural U.S. districts, one located in the Northeast, one in the Midwest, and one in the Northwest. Despite their different locations, they shared several descriptive characteristics. All three districts included fewer than 600 students PK-12. All were located more than 35 miles from an urban area. The student percentages of financially disadvantaged of all three exceeded 70%. In addition, all populations were overwhelmingly White. These features mirror the characteristics of rural communities described in the *G.R.O.W.* report (UOPX, 2024).

In developing this study, I considered Coladarci's admonitions to improve rural education research (2007) by "making the rural argument" (2007, p. 1). I understand that to mean tying the salience of the study to a deeper, better understanding of the characteristics of rural schooling. During each interview I posed ten open-ended questions designed to elicit multi-layered responses from our participants. I followed a model suggested by Saldana and Omasta (2018), through which I first recorded and transcribed each interview. I then divided each transcript into groups of one to three sentences. For each unit I coded elements that first reflected any of the ethical frames, as well as the NREA research topics. In addition, I highlighted words or phrases that seemed, per Saldana and Omasta, to "stand out" (2018, p. 13). I coded transcripts separately and then together to establish interrater reliability. As I read and coded, I recorded thoughts in what Saldana and Omasta call "analytic memos" (2018, p. 21). Through recursive iterations of reading, coding, and reflecting, both individually and collectively, I developed characteristics that I believe capture and describe unique aspects of rural schooling.

Data Resources

A cursory examination of statistics might suggest that rural distant schools are typical of larger schools in more populated areas as indicated by common descriptors such as mathematics and reading proficiency rates and percentages of students with Individual Education Plans (IEPs) (NCES, 2024). A closer look, however, reveals challenges distinct to these educators and their institutions. The National Rural Education Association (NREA) has identified ten areas in which rural schools may have deficiencies relative to other U.S. schools. These include access to counseling/mental health/chemical dependence services; meeting the needs of diverse and special populations; closing student achievement gaps; college and career readiness; data-driven decision-making; poverty; community/family relations; teacher/leader preparation, recruitment, and retention; and access to technology (NREA, 2023). The group notes that although these “topics are not uncommon nor are they innovative in the field of educational research,” they warrant further study as they apply specifically in rural settings. Such challenges have been discussed in broad terms by numerous researchers (Brownell, et al., 2018; Gagnon & Mattingly, 2016; Hartman, 2018; Ihrig, et al., 2018; Kettler, et al., 2016; Mette, et al., 2016; Pierce & Mueller, 2018; Preston & Barnes, 2017; Rude & Miller, 2018; Whitener & McGranahan, 2003). The *G.R.O.W.* report (UOPX, 2024) presents a similar description of rural areas, explaining, “In rural economies, where disparities persist relative to non-rural regions, many workers find themselves at a disadvantage” (p. 5). The report notes, “An estimated 41 million Americans, some 12% of the country, live more than 30 minutes’ drive away from the nearest college or university, keeping workers in these communities from not only participating in jobs that require this infrastructure but also the education that will allow them to upskill and therefore advance their role in the workforce” (UOPX, 2024, p. 9). The report describes the barriers that a lack of

technology infrastructure presents to both students and teachers. The *Report* explains, “For many, geography becomes a roadblock, regardless of age or background. In fact, those in the rural workforce are more than twice as likely to feel limited in their employment opportunities versus their non rural counterparts” (UOPX, 2024, p. 10).

Results

I do not claim that the perceptions and themes I identify here are representative of all rural schools. Indeed, I agree with the *G.R.O.W.* report (UOPX, 2024) that the richness and complexities of rural schools lie in their unique representations of their students, their educators, and the communities they serve. I do believe, however, that through the identification of similar incidents, issues, and themes, we come to better understand some overarching characteristics exclusive to rural schools. To discern characteristics unique to rural schools, I probed for positive and negative aspects of rural schooling. The image that quickly emerged through inductive coding is a richer, more complex and multi-layered phenomenon that cannot be effectively presented by simplistic bifurcations. As explained in the *G.R.O.W.* report (UOPX, 2024), the low numbers of staff and students combined with geographic isolation and lack of financial resources interact both negatively and positively to create the unique nature of the schools that this study’s participants represented.

Two major descriptors that emerged, *Narrow student perspectives and world views* and *Limited college and career preparation*, resulted from several factors. The low number of staff surfaced as a key characteristic with multiple effects. Teachers reported frustration for often being the only teacher of a subject or grade level. Low numbers also check the ability of secondary school administrators to provide a challenging curriculum, a range of electives, vocational training, specialized services for disabled students, and varied extracurricular

opportunities for students. This in turn creates the phenomenon one participant described as called “wearing many hats,” in which a single teacher may sponsor several clubs or activities, perceived primarily as a negative element. The overarching effect is fewer opportunities for students, which may result in a more limited world view than if they had more divergent experiential opportunities.

Geographic isolation combined with *poverty* also emerged as contributors to these key characteristics, as both limit cultural exploration. In addition, geographic isolation was seen as a negative influence on teacher and administrator recruitment and retention, which can also negatively impact instructional quality. Finally, the student populations of the districts represented in this study are overwhelmingly white, with one district reporting 12% racial minorities, another other reporting six percent with no African American students, and the third reporting no racial minorities. Although they were not numerous, participants reported disturbing examples of racial and sexual preference discrimination. While these incidents may or may not be representative of other rural districts, the stories did support a broader descriptor of narrow perspectives.

Despite these negative elements, however, participants shared perspectives of their rural school experiences that they believed at least mitigated and often overcame the negative elements of their schools. *Care* emerged as a key characteristic. Study participants believed that the low numbers of students enabled them and their colleagues to apply individualized attention to their students and enabled them to overcome many of the liabilities described above. Most also believed that the *many hats* phenomenon allowed them to get to know their students better as they worked with them in a variety of roles beyond their classrooms. They also believed that

the low numbers of staff and students allowed all to know each other better and enabled students to gain self-confidence and improve their social skills.

Community and family also emerged as a significant characteristic. This was manifested both with the school as a learning community and the school as a center of pride within the external community. Although community businesses and financial resources were few, teachers and administrators reported that local businesses strongly supported school activities and needs. This helps account for the resistance within both communities to district consolidation, offered by many as a solution for the problem of limited curricular and extracurricular options. Participants reported technology and virtual learning as opportunities their districts provided for students to expand their choices. The possibilities for technology to help improve rural access to education are described in the *G.R.O.W.* report (UOPX, 2024), which argues for an approach that “should strive to improve technological infrastructure and local access to career pathways, while expanding networking and educational opportunities” (p. 11).

Viewing participants’ responses through the lens of the ethic of the profession uncovers rich evidence of *care* and *community*. The *ethics of justice* and *critique* were reflected negatively by limited resources and narrow world views of the students and community. Participants believed consistently and strongly that they were responding effectively to the demands of the community, their profession, and the best interests of their students. Data from the *G.R.O.W.* report (UOPX, 2024) support data interpretation through these ethical lenses.

Scholarly Significance

Rural schools often mirror their non-rural counterparts in areas such as levels of individual student achievement and percentages of students with disabilities (NCES, 2023). The similarities of broad statistics, however, may often cloud the differences between rural and urban

populations. These distinctions are discussed in the demographic characteristics of the rural and urban populations described in the *G.R.O.W.* report (UOPX, 2024). First, rural and urban populations are racially disparate. Rural populations are more racially monolithic than urban populations. Rural areas are comprised of 79% White (UOPX, 2024, p. 33), compared with 63% of urban areas (UOPX, 2024, p. 34). With that, rural areas reflect 8% Black and 5% Hispanic/Latinx, versus 13% and 16% (UOPX, 2024, p. 34), respectively, in urban populations. Another difference between rural and urban composites lies in their generational concentrations. Nearly 80% of rural residents describe themselves as Millennial or Gen X, with only 10% as Boomer (UOPX, 2024, p. 33). Conversely, those in urban areas are spread more evenly across those categories UOPX, 2024, (p. 34). At the same time, fewer rural residents than urban are employed full time, UOPX, 2024, 46% vs. 52%, and the incomes of rural households is collectively lower than those of urban households. Sixty-four percent of rural households earn less than \$50,000 annually (UOPX, 2024, p. 33), as compared to 41% of urban households (UOPX, 2024, p. 44). Perhaps most significant, 31% of rural households earn under \$25,000 annually (UOPX, 2024, p.33), compared to 17% of urban households (UOPX, 2024, p. 34). The disparities in income are reflected in levels of school matriculation, with a third of rural residents stopping at high school graduation (UOPX, 2024, p. 33), compared to a fifth of urban residents (UOPX, 2024, p. 34). Thus, urban residents tend to earn higher levels of education and report higher levels of income.

These data reflect the differences between economic and educational demographics of those who live in urban and rural settings. Moreover, they highlight the unique characteristics of rural areas. Therefore, a study that describes insights into the collectively unique schooling experiences these institutions and teachers provide may be of value to those who lead rural

schools, those who train and prepare rural educators, and those who shape public policies that impact these groups.

References

- Brownell, M. T., Bishop, A. M., & Sindelar, P. T. (2018). Republication of "NCLB and the demand for highly qualified teachers: Challenges and solutions for rural schools." *Rural Special Education Quarterly*, 37(1), 4-11. doi:10.1177/8756870517749604
- Clandinin, D.J., Huber, J., Huber, M., Murphy, M. S., Orr, A. M., Pearce, M., & Steeves, P. (2006). *Composing diverse identities: Narrative inquiries into the interwoven lives of children and teachers*. Routledge.
- Coladarci, T. (2007). Improving the yield of rural education research: An editor's swan song. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 22(3), 1-9.
- Creswell, J. W. & Creswell, J. D. (2023). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. SAGE.
- Furman, G. C. (2004). The ethic of community. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 42(2), 215-235. doi:10.1108/09578230410525612
- Gagnon, D. J., & Mattingly, M. J. (2016). Advanced placement and rural schools: Access, success, and exploring alternatives. *Journal of Advanced Academics*, 27(4), 266-284. doi:10.1177/1932202X16656390
- Hartman, J. J. (2018). See the connections? Addressing leadership and supervision challenges to support improved student achievement in a small rural school. *Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership*, 21(3), 36-47. doi:10.1177/1555458917741172
- Ihrig, L. M., Lane, E., Mahatmya, D., & Assouline, S. G. (2018). STEM excellence and leadership program: Increasing the level of STEM challenge and engagement for high achieving students in economically disadvantaged rural communities. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, 41(1), 24-42. doi:10.1177/0162353217745158

- Kettler, T., Puryear, J. S., & Mullet, D. R. (2016). Defining rural in gifted education research: Methodological challenges and paths forward. *Journal of Advanced Academics*, 27(4), 245-265. doi:10.1177/1932202X16656896
- Mette, I. M., Biddle, C., Mackenzie, S. V., & Harris-Smedberg, K. (2016). Poverty, privilege, and political dynamics within rural school reform: Unraveling educational leadership in the invisible America. *Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership*, 19(3), 62-84. doi:10.1177/155545891665712
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2023). Public High School Graduation Rates in Rural Areas. *Condition of Education*. <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/lba>.
- National Center for Education Statistics (2024). Common core of data: America's public schools. <https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/>
- National Rural Education Association: The Voice for Rural Schools (2023). *Research Agenda 2016-2023*. https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B6jy-_ymJ6lPcEhlbmXpZU5XLtg/view
- Pierce, C. D., & Mueller, T. G. (2018). Easy as A-B-C: Data-based guidelines for implementing a multitiered system of supports into rural schools. *Rural Special Education Quarterly*, 37(3), 183-191. doi:10.1177/8756870518777850
- Preston, J. P., & Barnes, K. B. R. (2017). Successful leadership in rural schools: Cultivating collaboration. *The Rural Educator*, 38(1), 6.
- Rude, H., & Miller, K. J. (2018). Policy challenges and opportunities for rural special education. *Rural Special Education Quarterly*, 37(1), 21-29. doi:10.1177/8756870517748662
- Saldana, J. & Omasta, M. (2018). *Qualitative research: Analyzing life*. SAGE.
- Shapiro, J. P., & Stefkovich, J. A. (2011). *Ethical leadership and decision making in education: Applying theoretical perspectives to complex dilemmas (3rd ed.)*. Routledge.

Showalter, D., Hartman, S.L., Eppley, K., Johnson, J., & Klein, B. (2023). *Why rural matters 2023: Centering equity and opportunity*. <https://www.nrea.net/why-rural-matters>

Starratt, R. J. (2012). *Cultivating an ethical school*. Routledge.

Sundeen, T., & Kisner, L. (2024). Rural online learning during COVID-19: What we learned and what changed. *Theory & Education Practice in Rural Education (TPRE)*, 14(1), 1-29.
<https://doi.org/10.3776/tpre.2024.v14n1p1-29>

Tieken, M. C. & Montgomery, M. K. (2021). Challenges facing schools in Rural America. Challenges facing schools in Rural America. *The State Education Standard: The Journal of the National Association of State School Boards of Education* 21(1), 6-11.
<https://www.nasbe.org/equity-in-rural-education/>

University of Phoenix. (2024). *G.R.O.W. Generating Rural Opportunities in the Workforce™ Report*. <https://www.phoenix.edu/career-institute.html>

Whitener, L., & McGranahan, D. (2003). *Rural America: Opportunities and challenges*. Amber Waves. <http://www.ers.usda.gov/Amberwaves/Feb03/features/rural-america.htm>