

9-18-2020

## Rural Education and Election Candidates: Three Questions

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### Recommended Citation

Brenner, D., Biddle, C., & McHenry-Sorber, E. (2020). Rural Education and Election Candidates: Three Questions. *The Rural Educator*, 41(2), 70-71. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v41i2.1100>

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## Policy Brief

# Rural Education and Election Candidates: Three Questions

## The Editors

As this issue of *The Rural Educator* goes to press, we are just a few weeks away from the 2020 elections, which will be held November 3. Certainly, the election of the nation's president has ramifications for rural education—appointments of the Secretary of Education and to the Supreme Court to executive orders and legislative and budget priorities, the presidential election is an important one. But the presidential election is not the only important race. This year, as is true every two years, there will be elections for one-third of Senators and every member of the House of Representatives. Congressional elections will have an impact on federal education budgets and policies that impact preK-12 education, financial aid, special education, and school nutrition, among many others. State and local elections will also be on the ballot. It is important to remember that only about 10% of preK-12 expenditures come from federal sources, and state and local elected officials are responsible for most of the policies that impact the day-to-day operation of schools—from educator licensure to school district boundaries to curriculum to the response to COVID-19. Eleven states will hold elections for Governor and there will likely be other key races on your ballot this November. Rural educators, and rural education advocates, have important decisions to make in this (and every) election.

Not all policy makers understand the unique needs of rural schools. For this issue's policy column, we thought it might be helpful to provide a short list of questions to consider when evaluating a candidate.

### **Does the candidate say anything about rural?**

Too often, rural places (and schools) are invisible in policy making. Legislators often assume that policies will work equally well or have the same impact in all places. The fact is, rural schools and communities have different needs, different priorities, and different resources that mean that policies are not place neutral. There are many examples of seemingly place-neutral policies that have had a negative impact on rural schools. The Highly Qualified Teacher provisions of No Child Left Behind, for example, required schools to hire teachers with coursework or degrees in content areas, a challenging task in small, rural schools already facing teacher shortages. In

rural communities, characteristics other than content area coursework, such as breadth of knowledge, and respect for community may be better measures of educator quality, but these were not able to be considered under NCLB (Eppley, 2009). Funding formulas based on the number, rather than the proportion, of students in poverty, such as Title I, direct resources away from rural schools (Tieken, 2017).

Rural communities have unique strengths and resources, and unique challenges and needs, that should be recognized in policy making (Johnson & Howley, 2015). If candidates do not know about or understand the richness, concerns, and diversity of the rural places they will represent, they may not serve those places well.

### **Does the candidate view rural as valuable and important in its own right?**

Even if policy makers understand that geography matters and attempt to address rural communities and schools in their positions and policies, it is important to examine whether or not candidates take a deficit view of rural places. Sometimes, the language that candidates use to talk about rural places will reveal an urban bias—candidates may have a plan for rural communities that reveals an underlying assumption that rural places exist to serve urban people—with rhetoric about how rural communities exist to grow food and timber for, provide clean water and fuel sources and serve as recreation destinations for “us”—the people that live in cities. The resulting policies may not benefit rural communities. Elections are based on the total number of votes cast—and it can be easy for candidates to view urban and suburban voters as their target audience, leading to positions and policies that disadvantage rural places and position rural communities, and the people that live there, as resources that exist to benefit the majority.

Rhetoric about the “rural school problem” that positions rural schools as inefficient, ineffective, and backwards has been used to justify policies that disadvantage rural schools and communities (Biddle & Azano, 2016; Theobald, in press). Those of us who live, work, and learn in rural places have value, and deserve policies that benefit and protect us because of

that intrinsic value, and not just as places to visit and sources of food, energy, or low-cost workers.

**Does the candidate understand that rural schools are inextricably linked to the well-being of rural communities?** Rural schools are crucial social economic drivers in small, rural communities (Tieken, 2014). Schools are key employers in some small communities, and travel to and from schools supports local gas stations, restaurants, and stores. Athletic and other school events serve as a social glue and provide recreational opportunities. Career and technical education in high schools and community colleges support local industries. Candidates' views on issues such as education funding, school accountability, teacher licensure, and school closure and consolidation can provide insight about their understanding of the important role of schools in local economic development and to the life of rural communities.

It is also critical to consider whether candidates understand that policies that support rural

communities also benefit local education. Health care providers and local business need increased access to reliable broadband, safe roads and bridges, and other infrastructure. Transportation, health care, and social policies that support diverse(?) rural families and communities also benefit schools. The well-being of rural schools and communities are inextricably tied—these connections may not always be obvious to policy makers.

These, of course, are not the only three questions to consider when you are evaluating candidates for local, state, or national office, but they are a start. We, the editors of *The Rural Educator*, encourage you to learn about the candidates and their positions to determine whether they explicitly address rural schools and communities, believe in the inherent value of rural places, and understand the connections between rural schools and the communities where they are located.

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## Suggested Citation:

Brenner, D., Biddle, C., & McHenry-Sorber, E. (2020). Rural education and election candidates: Three questions. (Policy Brief). *The Rural Educator, 41*(2), 70-71. <https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v41i2.1100>

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