



Improving Rural Educational Attainment

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Issue Brief
Challenges for Rural America in the Twenty-First Century

For years, residents in rural areas could count on jobs in agriculture, manufacturing, or extractive industries that often required little education beyond high school. Now, many of these jobs have been lost to global competition, a declining agricultural base, and other economic and policy changes.

Given this fundamental restructuring, a foremost challenge for rural communities in the new economy is to attract, create, and retain high-quality jobs. The ability of rural communities to be active participants in the new economy will be closely tied to improvements in the educational status of their local labor force. Certainly, a key cog in the promotion of an educated workforce is the presence of a high-quality, high-performing school system.

More often than not, policymakers focus on school-based strategies to spur improvements in the educational progress of students. The 2002 No Child Left Behind Act, which demands greater school accountability for student performance, is a case in point. Yet, what happens in the classroom is only part of the story.

In fact, as Lionel J. Beaulieu, Glenn D. Israel, and Ronald C. Wimberley show in their chapter in *Challenges for Rural America in the Twenty-First Century*, family characteristics have from 5 to 10 times as much impact as school characteristics on reading and math scores of rural U.S. eighth graders.¹

What happens in the classroom is only part of the story. Family characteristics have from 5 to 10 times as much impact as school characteristics among eighth graders.

In addition, community characteristics have as much impact as school characteristics on test scores, although both community and school characteristics tend to be more important in geographically isolated rural areas than those adjacent to metropolitan areas. Clearly, helping rural youth succeed academically is the collective responsibility of families, schools, and communities.

Rural Educational Achievement in the 1990s

Although rural areas historically have lagged behind metropolitan areas in educational attainment, gains in the 1990s began to narrow that gap. For the nation overall in 2000, the proportion of rural adults aged

¹ David L. Brown and Louis E. Swanson, editors, *Challenges for Rural America in the Twenty-First Century* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003). This brief draws on the chapter 21, "Promoting Educational Achievement" by Beaulieu (Southern Rural Development Center, Mississippi State Univ.), Israel (Univ. of Florida), and Wimberley (North Carolina State Univ.).

25 and older with less than a high school education was virtually identical to metropolitan areas (13.8% rural, 13.9% urban). The increase during the 1990s in rural adults who earned some college credentials in community or technical colleges or other postsecondary institutions was greater than among metro adults (50% versus 34%), resulting in slightly more than one-fourth of both populations completing some college. Rural adults, however, still lag behind urban adults in obtaining bachelor's degrees or higher (19.5% rural, 28.8% urban).

Despite these general gains, pronounced disparities by racial-ethnic groups remain. Rural Latinos—a rapidly growing proportion of the rural population—continue to be entrenched in the lowest tier of the education ladder. In fact, the percentage of Latinos with less than a high school education has not improved in 10 years (44.6% in 1990 and 45.1% in 2000). Only 7.1% of rural Latino adults hold a bachelor's degree or more.

Although rural African Americans have reached parity with whites in the lower ranks of education (high school degree and some college), only about one in five held a bachelor's degree in 2000 compared with about one in three whites. The proportion of rural African Americans completing a college degree did not progress at all during the 1990s, and still lags the college attainment of urban African Americans (8.1% rural, 19.5% urban).

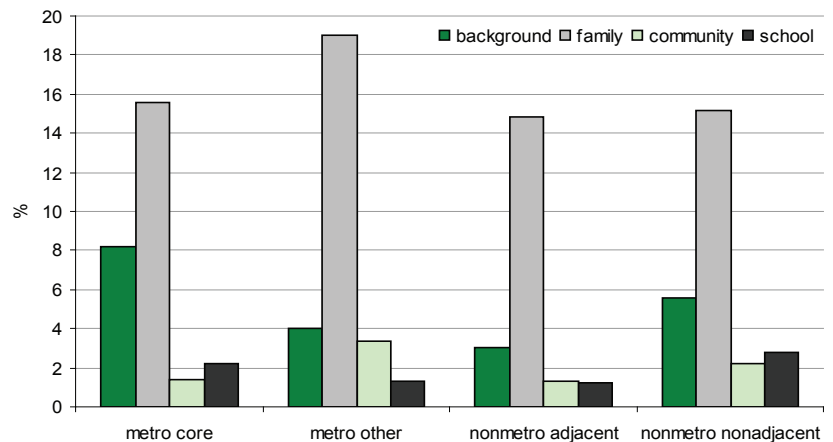
What Creates Educational Success?

Family Social Capital—Schools remain the prime engine for educational performance, yet children are influenced by many other factors, perhaps none more important, the authors show, than the family and the strength of its social capital.

The authors calculated the cumulative effect of several family, community, and school characteristics and found that family social capital explained about 15% of the variance in test scores among rural youth—by far the largest effect among the various influences examined (see Figure 1).

Family social capital captures key features of the family, such as the number of children, the number of parents in the home, and income level, as well as elements that indicate the quality of interaction and supervision between parents and their children, such as the degree to which parents discuss school

Figure 1. Influences of Social Capital on Math-Reading Composite Scores of 8th Graders, by place of residence



Metro core: counties with a city over 50,000.

Metro other: metro suburban counties.

Nonmetro adjacent: rural counties adjacent to metro counties.

Nonmetro nonadjacent: other rural counties.

matters with their children, supervise their children after school, limit their children's television viewing, and, most important, have high educational aspirations for their children.

Individual Characteristics—Personal background characteristics, in contrast, such as race and gender, accounted for just under 6% of the variance among youth in rural areas not adjacent to metro areas and even less (3%) in adjacent rural areas.

School Social Capital—Per student expenditures, school size (enrollment), parental involvement in the PTO or PTA, and a nurturing environment created by teachers—all elements of school social capital—accounted for only 1.6% of the variability in test scores for rural eighth graders from areas adjacent to metropolitan areas, and about 2.5% for those from more geographically remote areas. Interestingly, the size of the school enrollment had little bearing on student achievement when controlling for all other factors.

Community Social Capital—Among rural students, community social capital, such as community capacity (in terms of the economy and social organizations), residential stability, and student involvement in the community, has the largest effect on the test scores of those living in nonadjacent rural areas (2.2%). Community factors account for only 1.4% of the variability in test scores for students living in rural areas adjacent to metro counties.

Interestingly, the residential stability of some rural areas is associated with lower performance of rural students.

Such areas, the authors speculate, may offer limited attraction to people living elsewhere, and without the infusion of people with new ideas, educational expectations on the part of the community remain low.

Equip parents with the skills to engage in positive discussions with their children about school matters, alert them to the importance of parental monitoring, and help them to realize the key role their aspirations play in shaping their children's long-term educational plans.

Recommended Strategies for Boosting Rural Educational Achievement

Given the important roles that family and community play in educational achievement, the authors suggest four strategies for focusing on families and communities as well as schools in increasing achievement among students. These policy suggestions can widen the spotlight to shine on factors outside the classroom that can help improve educational success for rural youth.

Focus: Parents as Educators—First, help rural parents understand the vital role they play in shaping the academic progress of their children. This is particularly important when parents have limited education, given that they are less likely to emphasize the importance of education. A concrete set of programs is needed to help parents participate in their children's school lives. This includes equipping them with the skills to engage in positive discussions with their children about school matters, alerting them to the importance of parental monitoring, and helping them to realize the key role that their



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aspirations play in shaping their children’s long-term educational plans.

Focus: Parent and School Interaction—Schools must create additional mechanisms to involve parents in their children’s school lives. For too many parents, contact with schools only occurs as a result of their children’s misbehavior or academic problems. Finding positive channels for meaningful parental involvement is important. At the same time, teachers must nurture and guide students inside and outside the classroom in a positive and sustained manner.

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Focus: A Welcoming Environment for Learning—Rural communities have higher mobility, and children who have been uprooted from their schools and communities each time they move are at risk of doing poorly in school. Communities and neighborhoods must find ways to effectively integrate new families and children into the life of their schools and communities in a timely fashion.

Focus: Adult Mentors—Rural communities can play meaningful roles in promoting the educational success of youth by ensuring that children have access to adult mentors and are engaged in activities that can develop their skills to be productive citizens, workers, and entrepreneurs.

