Chapter 8
Education and Rural America: Interconnected Problems

Joseph Albert Cernik
Lindenwood University, USA

ABSTRACT

Rural America has a number of problems that cannot be addressed by simply thinking in abstract and superficial liberal versus conservative terms. Rural schools need high-speed internet, and oftentimes telecommunication companies have little interest in bringing high-speed internet to rural areas since the potential for profits are not there. In addition, Medicaid is important to rural schools since the funds from this program can go a long way toward helping students in rural schools stay in school and graduate. While it is often heard that “self-reliance” reflects the views of rural America, government programs (both federal and state) are needed. As high-speed internet goes through technological changes, many rural areas, specifically rural schools, will be further left behind, which increases the need for government help.

INTRODUCTION

Country music has a number of songs that extol the virtues of small-town America. Justin Moore in “Small Town USA” (Maher, Moore, & Stover, 2009) sings that, “everybody knows me and I know them and I believe that’s the way we were supposed to live” (track 2). Carrie Underwood in “Thank God for Hometowns” (Gorley, Laird, & Linsey, 2012) belts out, “Thank God for the county lines that welcome you back in when you were dying to get out” (track 9). Charlie Allen in “American Farmer,” (Allen, 2012) sings out, “There’s new ways of harvesting / Same crops bigger machines,” and then he adds, “Working hard is an everyday thing / That’s the way it will always be” (track 1).

Behind the songs, there are severe problems in small town and rural America—and a great deal of it is linked to education. A high percentage of rural counties are losing population, where the death rate is higher than the birth rate and people moving elsewhere, usually to more urban areas, is higher than those moving in. Those rural counties that are not part of this larger trend can credit the lack of decline, or even growth, to job creation. One demographic study stated, “Places that have somehow brought

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some high-tech industries to their boundaries have not done as poorly” (Kight, 2018). The belief that there are jobs for those who want them, is not exactly accurate: Training and skills matter in order to qualify for many jobs.

One economist calls it the “Great Divergence” which began in the 1980s (Moretti, 2012). Income inequality is associated with education. As this economist states, “Geographically, American workers are increasingly sorting along educational lines” (Moretti, 2012, p. 1). The presence of many educated workers concentrated in an area has an impact on that local economy; the lack of a high percentage of educated workers also matters too. A 40-year old worker who has just a high school diploma is going to be making 8% less than their father, who had the same high school diploma and how much he was making in 1980. Rural areas are going to have a higher proportion of workers with only high school diplomas so income inequality will only grow worse in these areas. Of course, rural areas are also more likely to have a higher percentage of high school students not finishing to receive their high school diplomas.

Broadband internet access can go a long way toward helping many rural counties that are struggling, one way in particularly is by offering courses online that cannot always be available through local high schools. Ironically, the Obama Administration program known as the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act was beginning the process of bringing broadband to many rural areas but funds from that program stopped several years ago. Private companies may not always see the economic incentive to invest in the infrastructure to bring broadband access, which by default requires state governments and the federal government to step in fill the gap, once again. One study estimates that approximately 2,000 schools do not have fiber-optic connections and three-fourths of those schools are located in rural areas (Herold, 2018). President Donald Trump signed an Executive Order in January 2018 titled, “Presidential Order on Streamlining and Expediting Requests to Locate Broadband Facilities in Rural America,” however, an executive order is one thing, usually good for some momentary political optics, actually carrying out and implementing a policy is something else.

Beyond the issue of broadband access, there is the problem of a “Brain Drain” where younger people growing up in rural areas are often encouraged to move elsewhere, usually more urban areas. As one study states, “thousands of towns find themselves twenty, ten, even five years away from extinction because there are too few taxpayers, consumers, and workers to keep going” (Carr & Kefalas, 2009).

Limited education also relates to health problems: The lower the education level of parents, the greater the likelihood of the children suffering from obesity. This problem is not exclusive to rural areas only, but one study noted that while 4% of urban men were classified as obese, 10% of rural men were and while 8% of urban women were classified as obese, 14% of rural women were, almost a doubling of the problem in rural areas (Bois, 2018).

Rural areas have a lower rate of high school graduates who go to college. One education writer stated, “Rural students have sort of been invisible. When people think about who needs help and convincing when it comes to going to college, they typically focus on non-white, urban students” (Baumhardt & Hanford, 2007). Preparing or encouraging more rural high school graduates, however, may not necessarily always be an answer or path to stopping problems in rural America. Kentucky put college and career-path (often thought of as vocational) on the same footing. Schools cannot have lower standards for vocational training then for academics. Training to be a machinist requires high schools to accept academic standards (Felton, 2018).

Identifying problems that confront rural America and tying those problems to education is much like the song, “Dem Bones,” (Waring, F., 1947) where the lyrics go, “[the] Thigh bone connected to the