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Jack L. Larson

Michael R. Penrod

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Interest in rural education has risen sharply

A university response

By Jack L. Larson and Michael R. Penrod

Recently, interest in rural education has risen sharply among Kansas lawmakers, professional educators, and the general public. This is not particularly surprising since only 11 of the state's 305 unified school districts are located in areas that might be considered urban. Of the rest, 225 are located in counties with a population of 30 or less per square mile and 69 are located in counties with large urban centers, such as Sedgwick, Riley, Saline, or Shawnee. These, too, however, serve the rural population located around their urban centers. Obviously, Kansas education and rural education are virtually synonymous and the growing statewide interest in the subject, if somewhat belated, is nonetheless appropriate.

In response to this growing interest the Center for Rural Education and Small Schools was established at Kansas State University in 1977. Mandated by the State Board of Regents, the Center has a twofold mission: first, to study and evaluate rural education in Kansas; and second, to assist in the development and administration of programs designed to help rural Kansas schools continue to meet the needs of their constituency. The Center functions as part of the University's College of Education outreach component and is under the immediate direction of the Associate Dean. This article summarizes the first year and a half of operations and specifically outlines programs and projects currently underway, the results achieved, and previews some possible activities for the future.

Assessing the needs

During the first 18 months of existence, the Center has been directing its efforts towards assessing the needs of rural and small schools. Initial emphasis was placed in

this area for two reasons. First, there was a dearth of information relating directly to the state's small and rural schools, and before the Center could effectively respond to the needs of the state's small schools, those needs had to be identified. Second, in order to forecast future needs, the Center had to design a comprehensive, multi-faceted, long-range needs assessment program which required accurate, baseline data.

As part of this needs assessment the Center conducted two-day long conferences, one in February, 1979, and the other in March, 1980. A select group of rural school administrators were invited to the K-State campus, asked to confer with the Center staff and to identify specific areas where the Center might focus its initial evaluation efforts.

In October, 1979, the Center also sponsored a 2½ day regional rural education conference. The purpose of this conference was much the same as that of the two-day conferences, except that the participants represented a broader population. During that fall conference, a variety of workshops and seminars were held to acquaint rural educators with the resource services available through the Center and to explore selected issues in greater detail.

In the fall of 1979, the Center's staff began visiting small schools across the state. Two separate sets of visits were conducted. The first was to gather more perceptions from students, faculty, administrators, and patrons concerning the needs of rural and small schools. Information collected during these visits was utilized by the staff to develop a multi-media presentation highlighting rural education in Kansas. Currently in the final development stages, the presentation will be made available to interested groups through the Center for Rural Education and Small Schools.

The second set of visits began in March, 1980, and was co-sponsored by the Center and the Mid-Continent Regional Education Laboratory. These visits were made to a third set of districts and were used to gather information on public school program and policy development, as well as classroom practices. Operating on a five-year time basis, this study will not be completed until the spring of 1985. It represents the most extensive assessment efforts yet undertaken and will be refocused and updated as interim data reveals specific areas of concern.

Concerns of rural education leaders

From these various activities, the Center staff has identified those issues expressed by board members, superintendents, principals, and teachers, as being of primary concern to Kansas rural and small school educators.

Perhaps the most significant of these issues is teacher recruitment and retention. For a variety of reasons, including geographic and social setting, pay, advancement opportunities, and workload, the state's rural and small schools are having an extremely difficult time attracting and retaining teachers. With Kansas currently in the midst of a teacher shortage in at least some fields and with projections indicating that this shortage could get progressively worse the state's rural schools face a worsening situation in the next five to eight years.

Teacher preparation and subsequent certification is also of concern among those in rural education. Student teachers are not frequently placed in rural schools because of the time and distance involved in traveling to

and from the state's universities. This creates a lack of people entering the field with pre-service experience in a rural setting. The problem is compounded by current teacher certification requirements which force most students into relatively narrow fields of specialization, such as science, math, or social studies, and does not allow them to develop the generalized background demanded by rural schools.

Another area of concern to the state's rural educators was the problem of image. Many believed that the public, state government, and other educators still perceive rural education to be the one room schoolhouse and the elderly school marm. Associated with this bias is the notion that quality education cannot take place in a rural environment because of limited facilities, materials, and staff, all of which combine to limit the educational choices open to students in small schools.

Lack of adequate time and opportunities for in-service staff development was also seen as a problem. Geographic isolation and time constraints often prohibit effective in-service programs. Also, when in-service workshops are available, they are often too narrow and specialized for the rural school. To be useful, such programs need to have a broad focus and deal specifically with the unique needs of the small schools.

Finally, state and federal regulations were a major source of problems for rural school administrators. Often such programs, while aimed specifically at large urban schools, are made applicable across the board to all schools. Specific programs mentioned were Title IX, mandated special education programs, minority studies, and mainstreaming of handicapped students. All are good in theory but in practice act to put an "intolerable" burden on the small school districts.

Assisting the rural schools

In an effort to help the state's small schools deal with

these problems, the Center for Rural Education has begun preliminary work in a number of areas. We are currently working closely with the Kansas State University Placement Center to develop specific small school teacher recruitment programs. If successful, we will attempt to expand the programs to the other university placement centers around the state. Working in conjunction with the Center for Extended Services, efforts have also been undertaken to revise KSU's in-service workshop offerings so they deal more directly with the rural school problems. Based on input from the Center, efforts are also underway to revise and re-orient the student teaching program to develop an option designed to prepare prospective teachers for the rural setting. The Center is also currently working with a group of rural school districts called Schools for Quality Education, attempting to bring the state/federal regulation problems to the attention of the Department of Education and the State Department of Education.

The Center for Rural Education's needs assessment programs are gathering data in most of the identified problem areas. By the 1980-81 academic year the staff plans to have the preliminary set of studies completed. At that time, tentative plans are to shift our focus away from the evaluation programs and concentrate on the development and implementation of more service oriented programs. Initial efforts in this area will probably be concentrated in pre-service training, in-service training and teacher recruitment and retention.

Kansas State University's efforts in rural education are still in the embryonic stage. However, the Center for Rural Education and Small Schools represents a step, perhaps a small one, in the right direction, and one that, with time, will be of service to Kansas rural educators and may indeed serve as a model for other universities to emulate in organizing education services for their rural areas.