



TIME TO INVEST IN RURAL EDUCATION

By Rafael Heller | Nov 29, 2021 | Editor's Note

Writing in *Kappan*'s December 1983 issue, guest editor Jonathan Sher noted that rural children have long been “relegated to the back of the American school bus.” Rural people in general, he added, have been exploited for generations, first as low-paid labor in agriculture, coal mining, and other sectors, and then as low-paid labor lured away to work in urban factories. While political and economic elites have always been happy to celebrate the virtues of rural life (and to buy vacation homes in rural areas), they’ve never been “particularly concerned about — or committed to — helping [rural people] reach their full potential as workers, as citizens, or as human beings” (p. 282). Hence the chronic underfunding of rural schools and the lack of media and policy attention to rural needs.

Thirty-eight years later, rural students — who now make up at least 20% of public school enrollments — continue to be marginalized. In poor rural areas, which generate paltry tax revenues, school districts are often unable to offer competitive teacher salaries, repair crumbling school buildings, and provide important student services. Even so, those districts tend to receive less than their fair share of state and federal funds, and they tend to be overlooked by philanthropies. Further, the education policy decisions made in statehouses and on Capitol Hill rarely take their interests into account at all, much less reflect a nuanced understanding of their local needs.

But if the challenges facing rural education look much the same today as they did in 1983, today’s policy environment looks very different.

A few years after his 1983 *Kappan* article, Sher (1987) went on to argue that if we want to improve rural schooling, then we ought to view educational change as inseparable from economic development. In the 1980s, it had become fashionable among policy makers to link education to the economy, specifically to argue that school reform would allow the country to prevail over international competitors. But, Sher pointed out, while reformers were focused on the nation’s *overall* productivity, there’s no reason rural communities can’t build stronger links between school improvement and economic development at the *local* level, making “the school and community genuine partners in their mutual revitalization.”

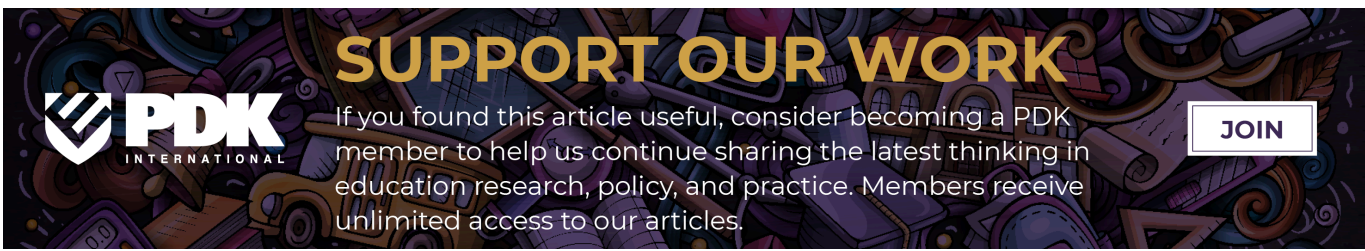
What Sher didn’t know at the time was that as the K-12 standards movement evolved, it would come to embrace the notion that schools themselves must drive their own improvement. According to the logic of the No Child Left Behind era, local economic conditions shouldn’t be used as an “excuse” for poor student outcomes. Rather, educators must step up their game, providing instruction that allows every child to meet high expectations. Today, six years after No Child Left Behind was left behind, policy influencers seem much more willing to acknowledge that student outcomes are shaped by many things that occur outside the school building. And now that the “no excuses” rhetoric has lost much of its punch, perhaps it’s a better time to make the case that education policy makers and private funders should make concrete investments in the development of poor rural communities, not just in their public schools but also their internet services, small businesses, health care systems, and local institutions of all kinds.

References

Sher, J.P. (1983). Bringing home the bacon: The politics of rural school reform. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 65 (4), 279-283.

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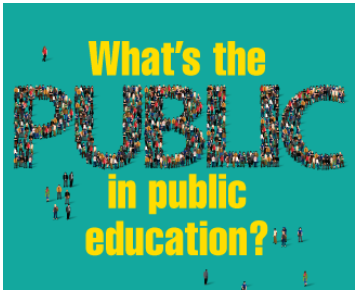
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