

Learning from Earle: Determining Best Practices for Rural Education Policy

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Introduction/Executive Summary

Implementing successful school reform strategies has been a major focus of education policy. Current research, however, often approaches this topic through a one-size-fits-all mentality (Lavalley 2018). Schools in urban and suburban areas have been the focus of most school turnaround plans, while rural schools often do not receive the most effective policy prescriptions for their particular struggles. In fact, the policy may actually be counter-productive for these schools, in effect exacerbating their existing problems (Lavalley 2018). Through the promotion of good policy, taking into consideration the unique tasks faced by rural schools, and by providing them with the appropriate resources to face these tasks, rural schools will have a much better opportunity for

success. The aim of this report is to provide additional insight into the tough realities rural school districts must address, determine ways to utilize the qualities which can make rural schools successful, and to discover how to support rural schools in the areas where they encounter particular difficulties. To achieve these objectives, this report focuses on the Earle School District in Earle, Arkansas, as a case study to demonstrate how policy can be transformative if applied properly.

The Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) assumed authority of the Earle School District in 2017 due to fiscal violations and inappropriate expenses occurring over the previous two academic years (Arkansas Department of Education 2019).

The audit conducted by the ADE revealed almost \$2 million in improper expenditures of state and federal money and a number of instances of improper management of funds. Earle's challenges, however, go beyond just money. The school district has also been underperforming academically and its student population has been slowly shrinking over the past several decades. Following the state takeover, the ADE installed Dr. Richard Wilde of the ADE School Improvement Unit as the new superintendent for the school district and suspended the authority of the school board (Brantley 2017).

The Department of Education's intervention in Earle illustrates the challenges that many rural school districts face around the country. Further investigation of current and past school reform strategies and their application in the rural context will provide a better understanding of how rural schools can be best positioned to succeed.

To Fix a School

To identify ways to "turn around" schools in rural areas, it is helpful to understand former policy strategies. Beginning in 2001, a major effort was made by the federal government to reform how the Department of Education sought to improve low-performing schools. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) appropriated federal funds to help implement four distinct strategies for improvement: turnaround, restart, closure, and transformation (Lavalley 2018).

The Turnaround Model for a struggling school requires the termination of the principal of that school and at least half its teachers. The Restart Model closes the school and reopens it as a charter school. The Closure Model, as the name implies, forces the school to shut down permanently and send its students to neighboring schools. The final model is the Transformation Model. The least drastic of all, it requires the school to fire its principal and implement policies to improve the school's ability to succeed by adding more school days throughout the year and updating instructional techniques (Rosenberg et al. 2014).

A concern for most of the strategies under NCLB is its focus on consolidation or closure of struggling schools. A study by Jerry Johnson, Craig Howley, and Aimee Howley found that widespread consolidations of schools

would lead to higher levels of inequity among students and lower levels of academic accomplishment for schools (Johnson et al. 2002).

Some cause for concern has also stemmed from the increasing role that charter schools play as an option for reform (Lavalley 2018). Charter schools are allowed to operate once they receive a contract or "charter" from a state. These contracts, granted for 3 to 5 years, describe the mission of the school and its measures for success. Charter schools are unique because they are publicly funded yet are not regulated like public schools. Students and parents are able to "choose" into a charter school and they are given more independence in their organization and management (Lavalley 2018). Charter schools have been touted as an innovative way to establish schools that are supposedly less burdened by the constraints of a public-school system and thus give students greater opportunity for success. Charter schools, however, have been criticized for reinforcing problems of racial segregation in public schools and the actual success of charter schools has varied widely (Lavalley 2018).

Virtual schooling has been promoted by some as a possible reform for struggling school districts as well. Betsy DeVos, Secretary of Education, has been a prominent supporter of this reform method. Virtual schooling provides online courses to students to supplement their current curriculum and offers students opportunities to take advanced coursework or a more diverse array of classes not usually given by the school district (Lavalley 2018).

Schools in rural communities face unique difficulties that challenge the appropriateness of the one-size-fits-all model. That urban schools face a different set of problems from rural schools questions the viability of a model which only seeks to address the needs of the former (Miller and Hansen 2010). The universal success of all of the reform options mentioned above are complicated by the assets and liabilities of rural schools.

Another possible reform to improve rural school performance is transitioning to a community school. A community school is an elementary or secondary school which coordinates and works with existing community organizations to provide more resources and services for students in the district (Maier et al. 2017). The larger aim

of community schools is to promote greater engagement and cooperation between the school and the community through joint partnerships between public or private organizations and the integration of services within the school (Williams et al. 2010). The community school model has significant promise as a reform for rural schools because the framework can utilize the unique characteristics of rural schools which have been overlooked by previous turnaround strategies (WestEd 2014).

Obstacles to Success

One of the main obstacles for rural school districts is the distance between the schools and resources which could increase their probability of success (WestEd 2014). Professional learning communities (PLCs) offer valuable resources to teachers and school administrators through workshops and continuing-education programs. PLCs are vital for school districts; however, for many rural communities, they are too far away to be a practical possibility (Lavalley 2018). Losing the opportunity to access workshops and conferences that help teachers collaborate and learn new strategies keeps rural school districts disconnected from new instruction methods or classroom strategies.

Physical distance also prevents rural school districts from accessing the large pools of human capital (personnel) that schools in urban and suburban communities have available to them. New teachers are less likely to accept a position in a community separated from opportunities and perks that would appeal to a young professional (Lavalley 2018). Similar challenges face such districts when recruiting high-quality school administrators.

This challenge means that rural school districts may be “stuck” with struggling principals or failing teachers. Rural school districts sometimes have no choice but to hire teachers with less professional experience or without proper teaching certifications. School districts from larger communities have a greater ability to hire more qualified candidates, further widening the performance gap between their schools and rural schools (Lavalley 2018). Rural schools also struggle to hire professionals in high need areas like special education, foreign languages, and/or math and science. These positions may go unfilled or rely on distance learning, and if they are able to find

teachers in these areas, they are often short-term hires (“one and done”) who leave the district once they find other opportunities (Lavalley 2018).

Additionally, rural schools and their communities are often significantly affected by issues related to poverty. The rate of child poverty in rural counties is 64% compared to 47% for urban counties (Lavalley 2018). Poverty rates are more likely to be persistent in rural communities, meaning it will last for multiple generations, and to be deep, meaning a child’s family income falls below half of the poverty line, indicating severe financial difficulty (Lavalley 2018). High-poverty schools are more likely to have inexperienced and unqualified teachers fill positions, and teachers leave high-poverty schools at a greater rate than the state average (Arkansas Department of Education 2017b).

The rural poverty problem is exacerbated by racial inequality in rural regions. African-American, Latinx, Pacific Islander, and Native American populations living in rural communities are more likely to attend a school experiencing high levels of poverty than white students in the same setting (Krause and Reeves 2017). Notably, concentration of poverty at a school is significant as well. The same low-income child will perform worse at a school with higher levels of poverty than at a school with a higher average income per student household (Krause and Reeves 2017).

Currently, rural schools also face a significant problem with the out-migration of their residents. The current demographic trend has shown that the limited number of economic opportunities in rural communities has led to a growing number of people moving to larger communities that are more likely to provide economic benefits (Lavalley 2018). Rural schools’ place in this phenomenon is challenging because out-migration does hurt schools in rural communities through the loss of potential students and staff. However, good rural schools actually promote further out-migration because as students succeed in their education, they are more likely to leave their rural community, either for higher education or for job opportunities in larger markets. In some ways, improvement of rural schools is self-defeating, inasmuch as it promotes out-migration from these communities (Krause and Reeves 2017).

A final concern for rural schools is the lack of community resources at their disposal compared to their urban counterparts. Rural schools are unable to lean on community partnerships as much as urban schools located in closer proximity to resources like colleges, community centers, zoos, hospitals, and other agencies that could be beneficial to students or school districts. This deficit can have a real impact on what ways teachers or administrators can supplement the traditional learning in the classroom (Lavalley 2018).

Reforming rural school districts has proven difficult. Three of the four models of reform in the No Child Left Behind Act would either require the school to fire most of its staff, reopen as a charter school, or close completely. In rural communities, these options are either not feasible or not desirable (Miller and Hansen 2018). The school district is often the largest employer in the community – firing half of the faculty would deal a significant blow to the local economy. It would also further exacerbate the problem rural schools face when hiring new teachers from a smaller pool of qualified teachers (Miller and Hansen 2018).

Reopening as a charter school has also been touted as a possible reform for rural schools, because it would give some control over their schools back to the community. Many rural communities, however, have been wary of giving control of their sole school district to independent managers through a charter school system. Additionally, charter schools themselves are less willing to establish new schools in rural communities that are much more isolated geographically and present a tougher task to turn around (Lavalley 2018). These factors should prevent rural communities from holding their breath waiting for charter programs to come rescue their schools.

Finally, virtual schooling has proven less effective in the rural setting. The problem for online coursework in rural communities comes down to access. High-speed internet is not readily available to most rural students. Rural homes lack the broadband which would make online classes reliable and useful for students. Without proper connectivity, virtual schooling is not a viable opportunity for most rural school districts (Lavalley 2018). This section demonstrates some of the limitations that rural schools face and ways in which some existing reforms are not a perfect fit for these communities. Virtual schooling,

charter schools, and larger reform policies, such as those promoted under No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top, cannot be the sole solution for these schools. Rural schools face unique problems and need unique solutions in order to succeed.

Strengths to Utilize

While some of the distinct problems rural school districts must address are apparent, there are a number of assets that rural schools can utilize. Policy reforms and school improvement plans aimed at rural school districts will be most successful when they are best able to tap into these existing resources.

The smaller sizes of rural schools can yield a positive benefit for both students and teachers. On average, rural schools have smaller classroom sizes, leading to a beneficial student-teacher ratio. A smaller classroom usually results in more individual attention to students, allowing students to perform better and learn more in their class. Importantly, research has shown that smaller class sizes and schools can mitigate some of the negative effects that poverty plays on student achievement (Howley and Bickel 1999). As mentioned above, rural schools often have higher rates of poverty, thus smaller class sizes can help overcome some of the particular challenges of an overall student population with more students from lower-income backgrounds.

Even though rural schools typically have smaller communities with fewer resources readily available, these communities can have special perks. A smaller population can mean a more tightly-knit community. While there are fewer individual community members, they are more invested in their school and its students. This commitment can be critical to rural school success (WestEd 2014). Teachers and staff may also be more focused and motivated in their position within rural schools because their efforts will have more impact in a smaller school district. Therefore, they may be more willing to invest greater time and energy serving their students (Williams et al. 2010).

In a rural town, the school district often serves as the center of the community. When residents feel a strong allegiance and connection to their school, they will

want to support the school. If the school district is the center of the community, it is more likely to succeed because it can lean on alumni and community members for support. The two entities become co-dependent in that they rely on each other for their success and survival. Thus, rural towns are willing to fight for their schools because the two are so interrelated (Williams et al. 2010). The community's identity becomes tied up in the school district. If the school fails, so too does the community. A school-centered community will work to support the school district to avoid losing that connection to its identity.

In the previously mentioned study by Johnson et al. (2002), the authors recommend a set of strategies for rural schools to achieve better performance and equity with other schools. Citing the academic advantages within smaller schools and districts supported by their research, they recommend retaining smaller school sizes and even building new schools or dividing larger ones. They recommend focusing on the unique assets provided by rural and small schools, such as greater levels of parental and community involvement in education (Johnson et al. 2002).

Place-based education, another strategy to improve rural school performance, looks to harness both the limitations and assets of the rural setting by utilizing the existing resources of a rural community. In a report published by Megan Lavalley, the author cites a case study in rural Maryland of an elementary school that had recently employed a place-based education framework (2018). The school brought in local community members to teach specific subjects and skills, and schoolwork would often leave the classroom as teachers would lead classes outdoors to learn about the local environment. This particular elementary school has been recognized as one of the highest performers in Maryland, despite a history of higher poverty rates in the community (Lavalley 2018).

Another specific example of school success in the rural context comes from Owsley County, Kentucky, where 44.4% of residents live in poverty, making it one of the poorest counties in the nation (Williams et al. 2010). However, district leaders at Owsley Elementary and Middle School have utilized the community resources at their disposal to create several programs (in part,

through the persistent application for special grants), and have also given parents and community members a more active role within the school. One illustration of the close relationship between the families of students and Owsley is the creation of a family resource center in the school which provides health services to the children and families in the community (Williams et al. 2010).

Specific to each of these examples is an approach that gives these schools the power to maximize their own assets. While this argument may not seem groundbreaking, in the past reform policies have not equipped rural schools with the tools they need to access those resources which would lead to higher performance. For rural schools to be given the best chance to succeed, the main goal of reform strategies should be to position schools and districts in the greatest possible way to benefit from their particular strengths. Looking forward, state legislators and policymakers in Arkansas would be well-advised to shape education policy in a similar fashion.

The Rural School in Arkansas

There are only 15 states where over half of the schools are classified as rural – Arkansas is one of them (Williams et al. 2010). In Arkansas, 28.4% of the total student population attends a rural school, 10% above the national average (Showalter et al. 2017). Almost a third of students in the state are impacted by the quality of education in rural school districts and the effect of policies geared towards those schools.

All rural schools, however, are not created equal. There are two types of rural schools in Arkansas. One of those is found in the Ozarks region and upper portion of the state. These school districts have a predominantly white student population. There are also several rural school districts found mostly in the Arkansas Delta region which have a majority black student population (Howley et al. 2002). The communities of both the Ozark and Delta school districts have relied primarily on agriculture to support their local economies in the past. Accordingly, both have been significantly impacted by the evolving nature of the farming industry in both the state and country (Tieken 2014).



The mechanization of agriculture has contributed to the growing level of poverty in these communities. The changing nature of the economy in these school districts has led many community members to look for jobs elsewhere (Tieken 2014). This migration has a significant racial component connected to it. In the Delta region, large portions of the white population have abandoned these communities altogether, leaving behind a black population which often does not have the same opportunity to migrate to more prosperous regions. For those few white residents who remain in the region, their children have pulled out of the majority-black public schools and are homeschooled, placed in private schools, or attend school elsewhere (Tieken 2014). For most of the small towns and cities in the Delta, economic prospects have improved little since the changes in farming practices many years ago. The bleak situation places increased hardship on the schools in the region, and many school districts in the Delta region are some of the lowest academic performers in the state. Crittenden County is encompassed entirely within the Delta region of the state. There are only three public school districts in the entire county: Marion, West Memphis, and the much smaller Earle School District. Through this project, I visited the Earle School District and its community several times in 2018 and 2019 to speak with educators and to observe the school administration and community in person.

Bringing the Community Back

Earle, Arkansas, sits in the middle of the vast Arkansas Delta region.¹ Like so many communities in the region, its past was heavily tied to cotton farming. At its economic height, Earle was home to multiple cotton mills that helped support several businesses in the city. However, with new technological developments in agriculture transforming the way cotton was produced, fewer positions were needed to support the industry (Tieken 2014). Fewer jobs in the community led to fewer businesses, restaurants, and shops. The departure of cotton in Earle has had a devastating impact on the community as a whole. The total population of Earle has been shrinking since 1990. Earle has lost close to a thousand residents since the 2000 census, a decline of about a third of its population in only seventeen years. While the exodus from the region can certainly be tied to economic troubles, there is an underlying racial factor which may be contributing to the changes that the community has seen over the past forty years (Tieken 2014).

Prior to 1970, the school districts in Earle were racially segregated – Earle High for the white students and Dunbar High for the African-American students. When desegregation was finally implemented in the city, Dunbar became an integrated junior high and Earle High the only high school in the city (Tieken 2014). Notably, this period also marks the slow decline of the white population in Earle. Parents pulled their students out of the Earle School

¹ Description of the background of Earle, Arkansas and its school district comes primarily from Mara Casey Tieken's book *Why Rural Schools Matter*.

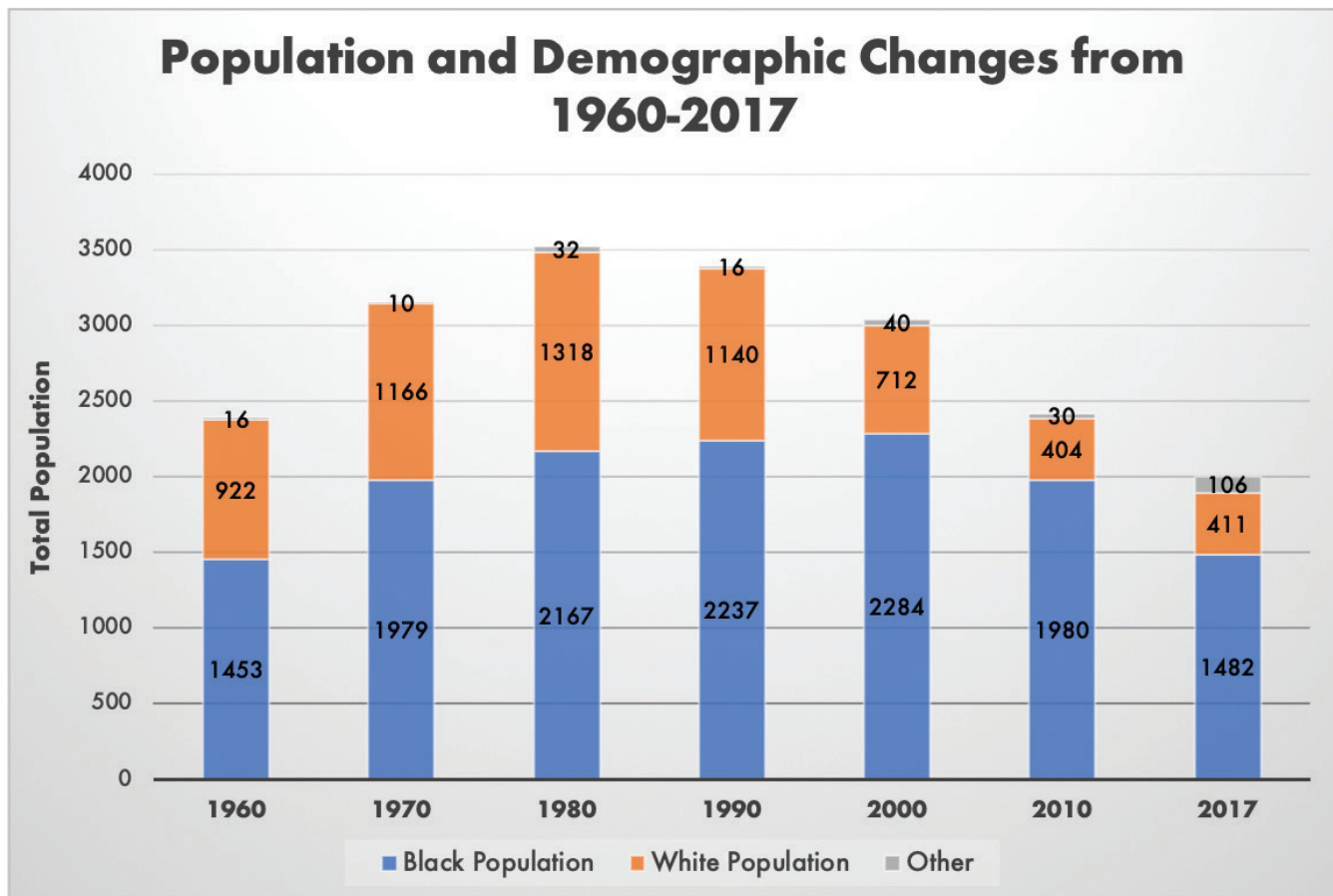


Figure 1 - Earle Over the Decades > Source: www.census.gov/prod/www/decennial.htm

District and placed them in neighboring, predominantly white school districts. In the 1990s, this gradual migration led to another change in the school community: leadership positions began to transition from white to black. Residents claim this caused another migration of white students whose parents did not want their children to attend a school led by a black administration and school board (Tieken 2014).

Tieken claims this development prevented the hopes of integration from being fully realized in Earle (2014). “The schools, once carrying the promise of ‘an association of the peoples,’ now reflect – and maintain – the racial segregation that has always been so thorough in Earle,” Tieken explains, “they have become one more wall dividing black from white.” (2014). The two communities remain separate, if not more so, due to the abandonment of Earle by the white residents. The school district is now almost entirely African-American. The high school has an African-American population around 97% and the elementary school is over 99% African-American (Arkansas Department of Education 2017a).

Despite this difficult and tenuous situation faced by the town and school district, there remains a strain of optimism among the remaining residents. While the white population has largely abandoned the community, many members of the black community are still invested in both Earle and its schools. Teachers, parents, and school administration remain hopeful for the future of their community. “This hope is deeper; it is a deep and abiding faith,” writes Tieken, “[a faith] in the ability of the schools, in the abilities of their leaders and teachers, their students and families” (2014). Although many have left, those who remain do so because they have a vested interest in the revival of the community and the eventual success of the district and its students. They do not view the decline of Earle as permanent; rather, through a commitment to transforming the schools in Earle, they hope to bring the community back and achieve some of the deferred promises of the integration era.

Room for Growth

The Arkansas Department of Education cited financial distress as the main factor leading to the state takeover of the Earle School District in 2017. There were around \$400,000 worth of unpaid invoices during the 2016-2017 school year and several unallowable expenditures over the past two school years (Brantley 2017). While financial difficulties have been and still are a concern for the school district, it certainly is not the full extent of its problems. A study of the school district showed a number of deficiencies in its facilities as well. Most notably, the elementary school building has been in desperate need of updates for years. Fortunately, a new elementary school building is under construction and is scheduled to be open at the start of the 2019 school year (Arkansas Department of Education 2019).

Another challenge for the school district is that approximately half of the high school teaching staff at Earle were hired under a special licensure exception provided by the Arkansas Department of Education (ADE). However, when the ADE assumed authority of the school district, it became evident that several teachers on staff were not qualified to be in their current role even with the special waiver from the department. The study of the school district also noted a high turnover of certified staff at Earle compounding the difficulties for the school in filling teaching positions (Arkansas Department of Education 2019).

Finally, the 2017-18 School Performance Report Card given by the ADE gave both the elementary and high school in Earle poor marks overall. The elementary

school was given an “F” and the high school received a “D” from the ADE (2019). For the 2016-17 school year, the ADE also provided statistics for student achievement in math, literacy, and science based on educational level (Arkansas Department of Education 2017a). Notably, in 10th-grade mathematics, 50 of the 64 high school students at Earle were rated as “in need of support” and only four 10th-grade students were rated as “ready” or “exceeding expectations” based on their math scores. At the elementary school level, zero of the 36 students were ready or exceeding in 5th-grade science and thirty students were in need of support. There were some brighter spots in the report, however. In 6th-grade math, 21 of the 34 students were ready or exceeding, and in 6th-grade literacy, 19 out of 34 students were rated as ready or exceeding (Arkansas Department of Education 2017a).

The district has also been struggling to meet state standards on college admissions tests. The average ACT (American College Test) composite score for the school was 16.41 in the 2016-2017 academic year, more than three points below the state average (Arkansas Department of Education 2017a). Importantly, a composite score of 19 on the ACT is required to receive the Arkansas Academic Challenge Scholarship (commonly referred to as the “lottery scholarship”) for Arkansas students. Being unable to access this scholarship can pose a significant financial barrier for students who want to pursue higher education after graduation.

Since the state takeover in 2017, the district and superintendent have had to report updates to the Arkansas Board of Education on the status of the school



and significant developments made after its takeover (Howell 2018). In these reports, Superintendent Wilde has highlighted improvements that are being made by the school district, especially those made to bring the financial situation of the district under control. The ADE has also provided training to both of the business office employees at the school district and closely monitors the accuracy of financial accounts managed by the schools (Earle School District 2018).

The district has highlighted three strategies to help improve overall school performance. The administration plans to focus on standards-based instruction, development of professional learning communities, and formative assessments to increase the quality of instruction at the elementary and high school (Arkansas Department of Education 2019). Dr. Wilde, however, has also noted that progress within Earle will be an on-going and extensive process. Presently, the Earle School District remains classified as a school in fiscal distress. The ADE provides support and consultation to schools in this category to assist the district and administration to ultimately reestablish fiscal stability (Howell 2018).

A Community School Model

Community schools have been receiving increased attention as a method of improvement due to their focus on connecting the school to existing services in the community. The United States Department of Education defines a community school as a school that works with “community-based organizations, nonprofit organizations, and other public or private entities to provide a coordinated and integrated set of comprehensive academic, social, and health services that respond to the needs of its students, students’ family members, and community members” (Williams et al. 2010). Key features in community schools are increased learning time and opportunities for students, greater community engagement with parents and families, and an integration of services from the community. Each of these principles aim to develop greater engagement between the community and the school. Community schools have also been effective in areas struggling with a history of racism and poverty (Maier et al. 2017).

Extending learning opportunities for students has been shown to increase their chances of success and is beneficial

to underperforming school districts (Maier et al. 2017). Community schools focus on providing services offered by organizations outside of the school. These summer and after-school programs extend student learning beyond the classroom and remove some of the strain on teachers, who are usually responsible for providing extra-curricular activities to students if they are offered at all. Community schools emphasize that these extended-learning programs are “school-affiliated, but community-led” and they usually focus on skills vital to student success after graduation (Williams et al. 2010).

Improving engagement between schools and the community usually includes creating an atmosphere within the school that is friendlier to parental involvement and activity in school events (Williams et al. 2010). The focus of this approach is to work with community-based organizations to bridge the gap between educators and parents and to remove any obstacles to parental engagement.

Finally, community schools support the co-location of services within the school. Co-locating saves what are often valuable community resources by integrating a community service that may have its own separate facility elsewhere into the school facilities. Consolidating services offered by the community, especially health services, within the school transforms the school district into an even more essential part of the community (Williams et al. 2010).

Community school solutions are just as effective in rural settings. The focus on extended learning time building stronger relationships among the family, community, and the school is just as applicable to rural schools as it is to its urban or suburban counterparts. For example, to solve the challenge of finding qualified teachers to fill positions in rural schools, community schools recommend offering community educator certification programs that would place skilled community members in the school under the supervision of more qualified teachers within the school district (Williams et al. 2010). This policy would bring members of the community into the school district and help fill vacancies in the school staff with effective teachers.

Co-locating community services and school facilities can also be beneficial in a rural setting because rural communities often struggle with the costs of construction

and maintenance of new facilities. Consolidating community services within school facilities can be of great benefit to rural schools because they allow the community to offer more services to its members and increase access to those services by putting them all in one location (Williams et al. 2010).

Moving Forward

Transitioning to a community school model could be beneficial for both Earle's school and community. In a recent survey, ForwARd Arkansas and the Rural Community Alliance, a regional rural grassroots organization, spoke with community leaders in Earle and the Earle School District to compile the current resources and relevant services available in the area (2018). The findings of the survey have important implications for the role a community school might serve within the city and whether it could actually succeed in the smaller and more rural Earle.

Current school programs and services in Earle at the time of the survey include a Pre-K program and daycare service. However, the community lacks an after-school program, tutoring services, and summer programs (Williams and Barnett 2018). Additionally, the Pre-K associated with the school district has limited availability for students. Research has found that Pre-K programs are vital for developing school readiness and can have an especially important impact on racially diverse students and children growing up in poverty (Winsler et al. 2008). A viable Pre-K program can reduce the burden placed on K-12 teachers to get students "caught up" with the curriculum and helps to overcome the readiness gap between students of different socioeconomic backgrounds (Winsler et al. 2008).

While there is a school library and the community has access to a public library, the availability is again limited (only three days a week) and there are no current reading programs or summer programs offered in coordination with the public library and the school. Also, while Earle has a youth mentoring program through the Earle Youth Activities Association and a partnership with Arkansas State University-Mid-South for career training, there is no Boys & Girls Club in the community, no programs with the parents and families of students, and no joint-use agreements with the school and the community.

Program or Service	Offered by the Community?
Pre-K Program	✓
Day Care Program	✓
Tutoring Programs	✗
After-school Programs	✗
Summer Programs	✗
Parent Programs	✗
School Breakfast Program	✓
Boys' and Girls' Club	✗
Book Program	✗
Community access to school or public library	✓
Community Access to computer labs at school or library	✓
Joint-Use Agreement	✗
School Student Support Services	✓
Career Training Opportunities	✓

Figure 2 - Earle Community Assets Survey

Source: ForwARd Arkansas & The Rural Community Alliance

Additionally, the survey found that there are no school-based health services in Earle (Williams and Barnett 2018). For the students of the Earle School District, the absence of some of these programs has severe implications for their learning experience. No tutoring, after-school, or summer programs means fewer extended learning opportunities outside of the classroom. Losing that vital breadth and depth of learning significantly impacts their performance and the performance of the school district as a whole (Williams and Barnett 2018). Furthermore, the absence of current co-locating of services through school facilities means that the limited resources in the community are not being as efficiently and adequately used.

The current deficiency in several of these programs and services is possibly representative of the limitations for community schools in the rural context. Moving to a successful community school model requires effective coordination and communication between the school and potential partners in the community. To make better use of facilities through the co-location of services,

the community and the school must negotiate with each other, and the local government has to actually consider the school as a possible host for these services. Furthermore, it can be challenging to overcome the belief that the school facilities greater only and not for the community as a whole.

Another challenge for the community school model in Earle is encouraging engagement from the community's relevant stakeholders. To make a community school successful, it is vital to have engaged parents and engaged community members. The creation of the programs and the participation of the students in these programs require both forms of engagement for their long-term viability.

Community school strategies would attempt to connect the school with community-based organizations which could provide these services. With that type of collaboration in mind, the community asset survey by ForwARd Arkansas and the Rural Community Alliance also identified several potential partners that would make a community school model in Earle possible including the Earle Youth Activities Association (EYAA), the Earle Public Library, and the Earle Health Center.

Working with the Earle Public Library may lead to the creation of summer programs aimed at improving literacy rates and reading levels. The survey noted an interest in the Dolly Parton Imagination Library, which may be offered to the community through a partnership with the public library. Not only would this service provide students at Earle with greater access to reading programs, but it would also augment a community resource which would benefit from renewed interest and are for the school participation. Similarly, Total Deliverance provides food pantry services for the Earle community. Coordination with the school district would help launch more effective food distribution to families of Earle through the creation of services such as weekend backpack food programs that help ensure that hunger will not have an impact on learning.

Co-locating services within the Earle School District would be an effective means to further establish a community school model. The assets survey described the lack of school-based health services. Through the Earle Health Center, the school could offer access to health

services for children and families. The school could also benefit by partnering with programs like the Alliance for a Healthier Generation, which works to develop healthier lifestyles for students.

Establishing a family resource center similar to the one in the Owsley School District previously mentioned would also benefit the school district and community. Parents of children at the school could volunteer at the center, which would provide counseling, clothing, food, and other assistance to students and parents (Williams et al. 2010).

Additionally, community schools would coordinate with various faith-based organizations as well as civic groups in Earle to provide more community integration opportunities with the school district. For example, working with existing community organizations such as the EYAA could supplement the offerings of the family resource center. Bringing the community into the school district would give Earle students greater opportunities within their learning experience and transform the community into an active and involved stakeholder in the success of the school district.

Unfortunately, the success of a community school model is not a given. Some missing elements in the Earle schools may not be able to be completely supplemented through the Earle community as is. Ultimately, the transition to a community school model will require hard work by both the school district and the community. Both entities have to be motivated and committed to enacting the changes necessary for developing a thriving community school.

Conclusion

Rural schools have often been left out of consideration when drafting and enacting school reform. This exclusion has compounded the obstacles which rural schools must overcome to succeed. New strategies must consider the assets of rural schools and use those assets to improve the learning experience for students in rural schools.

One framework which offers a more inclusive approach to school reform is the community school model. Community schools seek to expand learning opportunities for students and increase family engagement with the school by integrating the school

and the community. Following the state takeover of the district in 2017, transitioning to a community school model would be particularly meaningful to Earle residents as an opportunity for the community take full ownership of the school and become more invested in the success of its students. The community school model in Earle would supplement the more limited resources provided through the school with those offered by the community and parents. It would expand special programs within the school, provide more opportunities for students to learn, and increase engagement between family members and the school.

In 2014, Mara Tieken described the optimism and commitment of those residents in Earle who had remained after the struggle of integration and the following years of economic hardship. In my own visits to the school and the town in 2018, I found a similar motivation, which some may consider odd within the context of its shrinking community. That prevailing commitment to the future success of Earle and the schools, however, will be immensely useful during the potential transformation to a community school model, and can help bring about the success and bright future long deemed lost in Earle.



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