

Education as a Rural, Public Good: Preparing Maine's People, Families, Schools and Communities for the Opportunities of Tomorrow

by Catharine Biddle and Ezekiel Kimball

As one of the few remaining public social institutions in many rural places, schools are typically the primary engines of human capital development for those communities (Schafft 2016). They are also often one of the largest local employers and a key factor in determining community affordability and local migration patterns (Casto and Sipple 2021). Furthermore, in the context of national policy that increasingly privatizes risk for economically vulnerable families (Ferragina 2024), many rural schools have embraced a new role in poverty mitigation, health-care access, and social service provision to ensure readiness to learn in an era of increased accountability for student achievement (Depaepe and Smeyers 2008). As a result, the well-being of the school and the well-being of the community are deeply intertwined (Tieken 2014).

Nonetheless, the relationship between rural communities and their schools is often marked by an ambivalence that few outside of these communities can fully comprehend. While schools form the backbone of rural communities, the education that they provide also prepares students for lives and livelihoods located elsewhere (Bernsen et al. 2022). Rural school administrators, teachers, and school board members must constantly navigate this tension in their work (Irdam et al. 2023). Corbett (2007) has argued that this duality of rural schooling derives from the needs of global

capitalism and the necessity of cultivating mobile, reserve laborers who can respond to the ways in which economic markets quickly expand and contract in the 21st century. Too often, this means focusing rural schools on global learning standards, rather than situating them within a vibrant local development ecology (Budge 2010; Corbett 2016). While this problem has sometimes been referred to as brain drain in the academic literature (Petrin et al. 2014), this label fails to capture the associated challenges that go beyond student decision-making around their long-term residential and educational aspirations to the implications for curriculum, student support, and larger questions about educational trajectories from preschool through graduate studies for Maine students specifically.

Education informed by and linked to rural community development will be an essential strategy for creating the adaptive, transformative change required to turn the challenges of the future into the opportunities of tomorrow. Looking toward the future, Maine faces many wicked problems—complex, policy-based problems that are hard to solve—which will require innovative, human-centered solutions (Rittel and Weber 1973). Without such a response, climate change, an aging workforce, housing shortages, widening geographic opportunity divides, growing economic inequality, and other pressing challenges threaten the state's

long-term economic prosperity. Without explicit attention to rural communities, the work Maine schools do will not meet the needs of rural communities, and as we pursue solutions to adapt to a rapidly changing world, those solutions may fail to be sufficiently rural-centered unless they are rural by design. By default, far too many conversations in academia, in public policy, and in the public sphere are geography neutral (Brenner 2021), which means that many of those conversations do not meet the needs or interests of rural communities.

WHAT IS A RURAL, PUBLIC GOOD?

In discussions related to economics and public policy, a public good is one that cannot reasonably be provided privately, such as fire protection or national defense. Moreover, one person's use of a public good does not typically diminish another person's ability to enjoy it, such as a public broadcast or a scenic vista in a state park. Educational scholars generally accept both of those premises and add a third, which is that a public good is also a good in the public's interest (Hazelkorn and Gibson 2019). A well-educated citizenry prepared both for the demands of the workforce and for democratic citizenship are commonly cited ways that a high-quality public education meets this third test, while also satisfying the first two. For this reason, many educational researchers have argued that public education benefits society to a greater degree than individuals (Noddings 2013). An investment in education is an investment in the future.

As an illustrative example, consider the University of Maine. Founded

in response to the Morrill Land Grant Act, the University of Maine has always offered a practical education in the service of the state of Maine. The namesake of the Land Grant Act, Senator Justin Morrill of Vermont, framed the philosophy as follows: “Be accessible to all, but especially to the sons of toil” (Benson and Boyd 2015 77). Gendered language aside, this idea is exceptionally important in the history of accessible access to higher education. Until the Morrill Land Grant, most students who pursued higher education came from backgrounds of considerable advantage; higher education did not typically create opportunity for those who pursued it but rather solidified the opportunities already available to the students who pursued it (Sorber 2018).

Just as we do today, people in the first half of the 19th century grappled with fundamental questions about health, economy, the natural world, and the nature of scientific progress. A higher education that had the capacity to be of use in addressing these real-world problems but turned away from them instead did not meet the moment (Sorber and Geiger 2014). The Morrill Land Grant Act aimed to change that in a sweepingly dramatic way. Rather than offer training in the classical humanities, colleges founded in response to the Morrill Land Grant Act taught the practical arts including engineering and agriculture (Sorber 2018). They taught in a language accessible to the students that attended and aimed to take what happened in classrooms and apply it in the real world. That commitment was further solidified by the Hatch Act of 1887, which provided funding for agricultural experiment stations, and the Smith-Lever Act of 1914, which funded cooperative extension (Cohen 2012). These acts, which were clearly rurally inflected given both the focus on the identified

needs of rural communities and the insistence that higher education institutions look beyond their campuses, made it an explicit responsibility of land grant institutions to engage in extension, outreach, and engagement work that continue to define their purpose to this day (Sorber 2019).

Drawing on the example of the Morrill Land Grant, it is possible to see that a rural public good, broadly defined, would be (a) prohibitively difficult or impossible to provide privately; (b) undiminished or enhanced by collective enjoyment; (c) more beneficial to the public than individual people; and, perhaps most importantly, (d) rural by design. This last principle emphasizes the extent to which policies, programs, and practices can be shaped by the needs of rural places, undertaken in partnership with rural people, and enacted for the benefit of rural communities. Sadly, however, this fourth condition is rarely met: policies, programs, and practices most often reflect the worldviews of those who create them and those people most often come from places of geographic centrality in a rapidly modernizing and changing world.

ACTUALIZING EDUCATION AS A RURAL, PUBLIC GOOD

The tension that educational institutions face in addressing the complexities of our contemporary and future challenges while also preparing young people for the uncertainty of their own futures is not easily resolved. As Anthony Giddens (Giddens and Piers 1998) observed, in our current age, human existence is both an embodied, local experience and a globally connected phenomenon. However, there are promising models of practice at both the K–12 level and in higher education that may serve to bridge these

realities. Place-based education, empathy-based design, convergence science, and other models that center learner agency within a developmental and transdisciplinary context all have potential to recast education as a public good for rural places.

For rural K–12 schools, this work means repositioning schools as catalysts for local community development and inviting students into that work as its leaders. Too often, when asked how they would describe their communities, rural Maine students say that they live in the “middle of nowhere.” This framing, bogged down in the deficit mindset about rurality that plagues almost all popular discourse about rural places (Azano and Biddle 2021), suggests that in order to start their lives, students need to prepare to navigate to “somewhere” instead. While outdoor education, service-learning, or career-focused externships are all approaches that schools currently engage in, these approaches often fall short of deeply engaging students in assessing the assets and challenges of the rural collective, helping them to understand economic, social, and environmental factors that shape the present and future of a place. Furthermore, opportunities framed around individual skill development or short-term assistance do not necessarily help students to leverage local assets in unusual ways to solve pressing challenges or to cultivate local expertise that builds community capacity towards a more sustainable future.

School and community leaders who wish to rewrite the relationship between rural schools and their communities should look for opportunities that (a) meet a locally defined community need; (b) center students as leaders of change; and (c) leverage external connections or partnerships to support long-term, sustainable work on these

issues. Doing so can help create policies, programs, and practices that are rural by design. This work could look as straightforward as engaging students in a community garden project to address food insecurity in partnership with a local gardening club or as complex as the school district acquiring the local hardware store in partnership with an economic development agency to ensure its continued operation and to give students an opportunity to gain experience in business, entrepreneurship, sustainability planning, and customer service.

For rural-facing universities, it means a return to the principles of land grant work across the research, teaching, and service mission. A key part of land grant education has always been stewardship—an approach to partnership that connotes working with people and communities to pursue their interests. Land grant institutions are at their best when they are both expert and accessible rather than expert and elite. The denizens of today’s land grant universities know a lot, but we do not know better. The expertise that exists in academia is best leveraged working in concert with the communities that higher education institutions were designed to serve. For an institutional form that has always been intended to be “accessible to all” and most especially to the “[children] of toil” that means working with rural communities most of all.

One example of this from our own work is found in the Center for Applied Research on Education and School’s Rural THRIVE project. One of the most prominent challenges facing rural schools and stymying their ability to engage in the kind of educational redesign practices that rewrite school-community relationships is teacher recruitment, retention, and turnover (Hartman et al. 2023). The Rural

THRIVE project started from the premise of empathy-based design in partnership with teachers. Rather than assume that we, as educators of educators, know what teachers need to feel satisfied and fulfilled by careers in teaching in rural places, we invited preservice and mid-career teachers and school leaders to describe the strengths and challenges of rural teaching in their own words and engaged them in a codesign process that centered their goals and professional growth needs to animate our programming.

The outcome of this process has been programming that looks quite different from what we might have designed as researchers working on our own. While some elements, like the convening of virtual communities of practice, are components that we could have predicted, others were quite innovative such as the piloting of DIRIGO days (Discussions In Rural Innovation and Guided Observations). Teachers wanted the opportunity to observe innovative practices happening in other rural communities and to engage with teachers and leaders at their schools to consider the ways in which these innovations could transfer to their own communities. These convenings, which now happen once a semester, invite rural teachers from all over the state to visit a rural community, to observe teachers in that school, speak with students and community members, and consider the opportunities and challenges to piloting a similar practice in their own community.

Similarly, as we discussed the types of programming that teachers wanted with their district leaders, we heard the feedback that schools would have difficulty finding substitute teachers, even for a single day, to provide coverage for participants’ classrooms. To respond to this need, we worked with districts to assist our

undergraduate preservice teachers in navigating the substitute teaching application process and provided incentives (additional pay and travel costs) to our students to cover THRIVE participants’ classrooms on these days. For our undergraduates, we book-ended these experiences with discussions and reflection on rural teaching and learning. Feedback from our pilot suggests that for several students, this early opportunity cemented their commitment to the profession and gave them the opportunity to continue to substitute teach for their assigned district.

As the examples above demonstrate, this work is not scalable in the modern sense of rolling out a preformed model in different communities to achieve identical results; rather, it requires reclaiming the possibility of public education for the benefit of specific communities in specific places. The imperative, then, across each place, is to continue to engage with the moral principles that ensure that these activities will enhance access to opportunity and well-being for everyone and not just for the privileged few.

Looking toward the future, Maine faces many wicked problems that will require innovative, human-centered solutions. Without such a response, climate change, an aging workforce, housing shortages, widening geographic opportunity divides, growing economic inequality, and other pressing challenges threaten the state’s long-term economic prosperity and more importantly the futures of Mainers. We believe that the promise that education informed by and linked to rural community development will be an essential strategy for creating the adaptive, transformative change required to turn the challenges of today into the opportunities of tomorrow.

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