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## Commentary: Times Article on Rural School Misses Half the Story—Educational Success

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## *Policy Brief*

### **Commentary: Times Article on Rural School Misses Half the Story— Educational Success**

**Mara Casey Ticken  
Sheneka Williams**

*Despite lack of funding, rural schools can serve as sites of learning, community, and excellence. We need to understand both the problems and opportunities to make good education policy. This commentary was originally published in the October 6<sup>th</sup> edition of The Daily Yonder.*

Rural schools have often been depicted as troubled institutions: dilapidated, mismanaged, failing. This is the story told by Casey Parks in her recent article “The Tragedy of America’s Rural Schools” for *The New York Times Magazine*. In it, she describes the Holmes County Consolidated School District, a district serving mostly Black students in the rural Mississippi Delta. Its schools are understaffed, its teachers underpaid, and its classrooms under-resourced. A recent consolidation closed several of its schools, and now, its low test scores put it at risk of state takeover.

Parks highlights the inequities facing rural schools. The story she tells is critical, and we wish more policymakers would listen. But it isn’t the only story of rural education, and, as scholars studying rural Southern schools, we also know rural schools to be sites of learning, community, and excellence. This story is also often overlooked—and that overlooking can have tragic consequences.

Research shows that rural students graduate high school at rates higher than the national average. Rural students also outperform non-rural students on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in both reading and math (Showalter, et al., 2019), and rural Black students’ NAEP scores are higher than those of Black students attending city schools (Lavalley, 2018). What explains these results, when so many rural schools—especially schools serving rural Black students—face such limited resources?

When we talk to rural students and staff and parents about their school, we hear one word again and again: care. Students tell us about teachers that won’t let them fall behind and principals that ask about their pets. Parents share that teachers visit for dinner and that, during P.E., children cheer for the very last kid over the finish line. Teachers talk about

parents chaperoning school dances and local businesses donating materials for class projects. Principals describe fundraisers to support struggling families and lunch ladies that pay a student’s bill. all say: in this school, we care about each other.

We can see this care, too. We see it in after-school tutoring sessions, overnight field trips, and art shows held in cafeterias. We walk through hallways where announcements boasting college acceptances and scholarships hang under generations of senior class photos. We attend basketball games and graduation ceremonies in gymnasiums crowded with community members screaming for “our kids.” We see principals spend their Sundays hopping from church service to church service, just to see their students. We watch administrators devote holidays to crunching state test data and applying for grants and figuring out how to get the Internet to all of their families.

And we see how these rural schools do more than provide education. We know that the school district is often a community’s largest employer, and that school boards provide residents with political voice. These schools serve as hubs for community events, from holiday concerts to family reunions to funerals. The school, residents tell us, is “our center,” “the heart of the community,” “like family.”

In her article, Parks speaks important truths about the conditions facing rural schools, especially those serving Black communities. But the story she tells reminds us of the story told about segregated Black schools before desegregation. Operating in the Jim Crow South, these Black schools were woefully underfunded—most taxpayer revenue went toward white education—and textbooks were outdated, teachers were underpaid, and schools often lacked cafeterias and gymnasiums. Despite this, research shows that they were important sites of growth and

education (Walker, 2000). In these schools, Black teachers and administrators nurtured students' academic skills and sense of civic responsibility. Through high expectations and loving care, they developed Black scholars and leaders.

But, during desegregation, this excellence and care were overlooked, and limited resources became the story of Black schools. That story then became the justification—or, perhaps more accurately, the cover—for closing Black schools. And these closed schools devastated rural Black communities. Black students and families were forced to attend white schools where they were often not welcome, and Black teachers and school leaders were often demoted or fired. The Black teacher labor force was destroyed through desegregation: the number of Black educators teaching Black children still has not recovered. And Black communities were decimated through school closures, as they lost their social and cultural centers. This loss continues to reverberate in

many rural Black communities today, including Holmes County: it is seen in teacher shortages, resegregating schools, and struggling economies.

These stories—the story of desegregation, the story that Parks tells, the story of under-resourced rural schools—are true, but they're partial. And these partial stories are dangerous, because, no matter how good the schools are, no matter how well they get by on so little, these stories often get used to take over and close schools in rural Black communities. These schools were closed during desegregation, they were closed more recently in Holmes County, and they're closing (Tieken, 2020) in rural Black communities across the South (Office for Education Policy, 2010).

The tragedy, both during desegregation and today, isn't rural schools: these schools are, quite often, places of strength, learning, and leadership. Like it was during desegregation, the tragedy is one of policy—policies that punish under-resourced schools for the effects of under-resourcing.

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