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National Rural Education Association Research Agenda–2022-2027: A Closer Look at the Research Priorities

Sara L. Hartman

Ohio University, hartmans@ohio.edu

J. Kessa Roberts

Utah State University, kessa.roberts@usu.edu

Sarah Schmitt-Wilson

Montana State University, sarah.wilson14@montana.edu

Erin McHenry-Sorber

West Virginia University, ecmchenrysorber@mail.wvu.edu

Pamela J. Buffington

Education/ Development Center

See next page for additional authors

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Authors

Sara L. Hartman, J. Kessa Roberts, Sarah Schmitt-Wilson, Erin McHenry-Sorber, Pamela J. Buffington, and Catharine Biddle

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Catharine Biddle

Rural schools in the United States serve more than 9.3 million students (Showalter et al., 2019), often possessing strengths and facing challenges that differ from their metropolitan and suburban counterparts. To attend to the unique context of rural schools and to encourage rural education research in key areas, the National Rural Education Association's (NREA) Research and Higher Education Committee is pleased to present the *National Rural Education Association Research Agenda – 2022-2027*. The central goal of this agenda is to present major priorities for current and future rural education research in order to support the efforts of rural education practitioners, administrators, and school board members as well as advise the policymakers, community leaders and activists, nonprofit organizations, and funding organizations who contribute to the vitality of rural schools and communities. In this article, we provide a more detailed description of the 2-page pdf version of the 2022-2027 research agenda that is available on the NREA webpage and in this issue of *The Rural Educator*.

To ensure the agenda is responsive to and reflective of the diverse people that the rural United States represents, a wide variety of stakeholders - including rural PK-12 practitioners, rural education researchers, and members of rural serving organizations - across the country were invited to provide their perspectives on the strengths and needs of rural schools. A comprehensive research project that utilized surveys, interviews, and focus groups guided the direction of the agenda, from which spatial and educational equity emerged as the most common theme.¹ With spatial and educational equity at the center and supported by five additional themes—policy and funding, teacher/leader

recruitment, retention, and preparation, college and career trajectory, community partnerships and relationships, and health and wellness—the 2022-2027 agenda emphasizes the importance of viewing rural research priorities in an intersectional and holistic manner. It is the hope of NREA that this agenda will increase educational equity and opportunity for rural students across the United States while highlighting the many strengths that rural schools and communities possess.

Conceptual Framing

In defining NREA's second national research agenda, we confronted several conceptual challenges. Problem formation and definition is at the heart of research (Kuhn, 1962; Maxwell, 2013), and so our first dilemma was identifying and framing educational challenges related to rurality while resisting framing rurality itself as an educational challenge. Deficit ideology, or a way of framing problems that attribute them to the deficiencies of marginalized people and places (Gorksi, 2010), has been applied to rural communities and their schools for almost as long as scholars and reformers have written about them (Biddle & Azano, 2016). In this way of thinking, rural educational problems are often attributed to the shortcomings of rural places: a lack of economic development (Garcilazo, 2021), a lack of human capital in rural communities, parochialism, and the overall unattractiveness of rural communities as places to live and work (Azano & Biddle, 2019). However, as rural education researchers, we know that rural communities and schools have many unique assets and strengths that are often not leveraged appropriately by the "modern" school system (Schafft, 2016).

agenda is forthcoming in a special issue of the *Peabody Journal of Education*, to be published in 2023.

¹ A full-length empirical article that fully details the research project that guided the development of the

Rural schools, educators and students face educational challenges that are the result of forces beyond the community's direct control - forcing them to adapt and be resilient or flounder - and those that are the cause of community-level struggles for control over educational resources and outcomes (McHenry-Sorber & Schafft, 2015). This complexity was certainly present in the data we collected to inform the agenda, and we have attempted to hold this complexity around rural educational problem formation as we structured the research agenda. To do this, we have combined our asset-based and systems-informed approach to problem formation with attention to the intersectionality of the diverse issues affecting rural schools, school systems, communities, and places.

Intersectionality, or attention to the ways in which experiences of inequity, oppression, and marginalization of various social identities intersects with spatial inequity was a key component of how we understood the work of framing research problems out of participant experiences of rural education and their own framing of its challenges (Banerjee et al., 2021; Crenshaw, 1991; Rodo-DeZarate & Baylina, 2018). This approach also allowed us to hold space for the complex ways in which participants called attention to issues of spatial and educational equity along multiple lines of race, socioeconomic status, gender, ability, sexual orientation and gender presentation, as well other social identities as they live, work and study in rural places.

Methodology

The research study utilized a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2021) to collect data from a broad representation of rural education stakeholders, including teachers, school leaders, researchers, and policymakers. Theoretical sampling was utilized to allow the research team to remain open "for discovery" while exploring agenda ideas from multiple perspectives (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 137). First, a survey was distributed to NREA's membership to determine participants' ratings of the priority items found on the 2016-2021 NREA Research Agenda (NREA, 2016). Survey participants were also given the opportunity to respond to open-ended questions that asked them to reflect on their choice of priority items. A total of 353 completed surveys were analyzed using descriptive statistics (Gravetter & Wallnau, 2017).

Following survey distribution, nine semi-

structured interviews and six focus groups were conducted. Interview and focus group data were coded to reveal recurrent themes and patterns (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2021; Patton, 2015; Saldaña, 2021). Data analysis included open and axial coding of interviews, focus groups, and open-ended survey responses as well as the use of *a priori* codes drawing upon NREA's previous research agenda's ten priority areas (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Data were individually coded by two researchers and then were dual coded by the same researchers to ensure a high degree of trustworthiness. Through this process, six major codes emerged. Researcher pairs then constructed initial analytical memos, from which a core category emerged: Spatial and Educational Equity. A core category "is the main theme, storyline, or process that subsumes and integrates all lower-level categories in a grounded theory, encapsulates the data efficiently at the most abstract level, and is the category with the strongest explanatory power" (Madill, 2008, p. 131). Once the core category was determined, the research team constructed a conceptual summary memo and integrative diagram. From this methodological process, the research team collaboratively constructed NREA's 2022-27 Research Agenda.

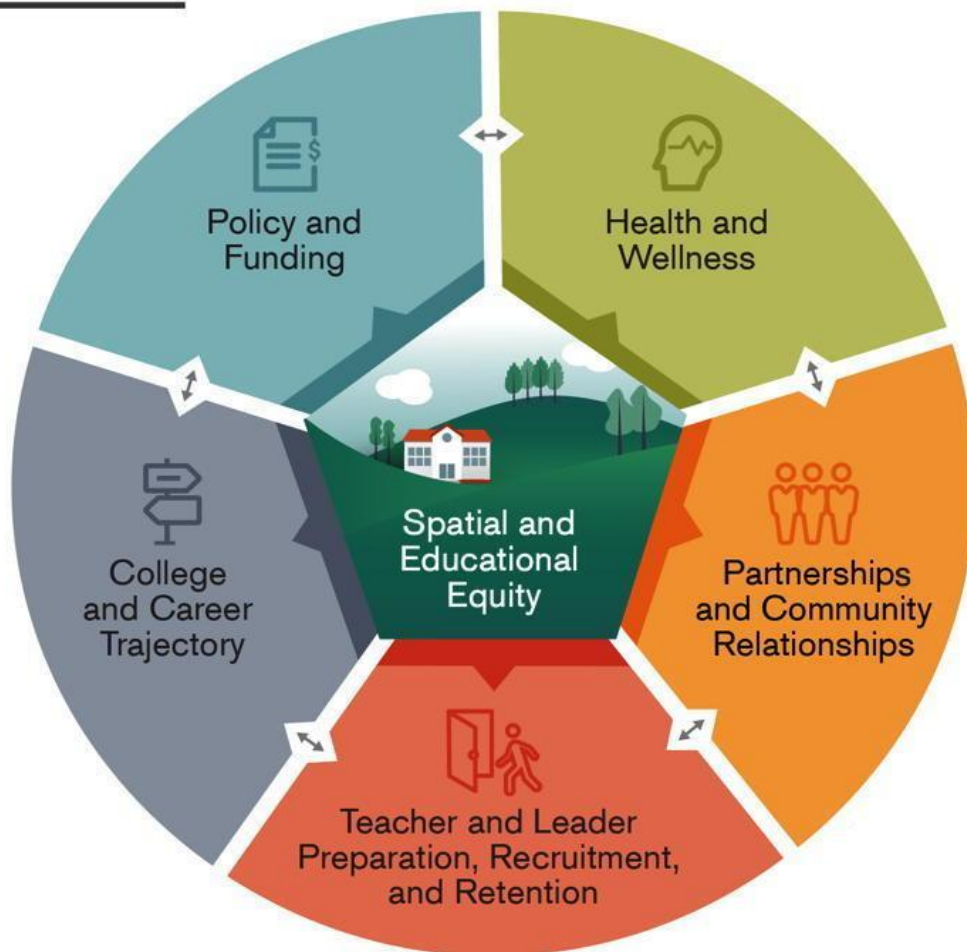
Findings

The 2022-2027 Rural Research Agenda centers Spatial and Educational Equity with five additional interconnected themes—policy and funding, teacher/leader recruitment, retention, and preparation, college and career trajectory, community partnerships and relationships, and health and wellness—circling the core category (Figure 1). The new agenda calls attention to the intersectional nature of the five themes and their holistic connection to Spatial and Educational Equity.

Centering Spatial and Educational Equity

Spatial and Educational Equity became the central category of this agenda as the construct intersected with all other categories that emerged in the data analysis. The agenda conceptualizes Spatial and Educational Equity in two major forms: (a) spatial inequity, or how equity challenges are related to place and (b) how equity, or rather, inequity related to diverse identities and social circumstances present within the rural school and community. Spatial equity refers to the ways that access to

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resources, services, and educational opportunities are impacted by place (Azano & Biddle, 2019; Azano et al., 2021; Lobao et al., 2007; Roberts & Green, 2013). Educational equity is inextricably connected to spatial equity through the intersections of place, diverse identities, and social circumstances.

While participants discussed spatial and educational equity in terms of inequitable challenges, some also shared particular strengths attributed to their school or community that serve to mitigate inequities or create greater equity in a given place. Several participants across data sources explicitly described approaches to research they felt would be beneficial, and these discussions most often focused on strengths-based research. Between 2022 and 2027, based on our findings, we suggest that lines of

inquiry focus on:

- Research from intersectional perspectives
- Attention to power within and across communities
- Effects of remoteness/isolation
- Effects of deficit portrayals of rural people and places
- Dynamics of white supremacy/identity

Five Interconnected Themes

Policy and Funding. Policy inequities are at the heart of many challenges experienced by rural schools and communities. Rural education settings remain difficult to define - indeed their heterogeneity is often one of the qualities that is used to describe them. This diversity across contexts creates a lack of

fit and attention to rural contexts when creating policies, especially in relation to standards and assessments. Additionally, policy is impacted by inequitable funding formulas that are perceived by stakeholders to advance or hinder more equitable practices for historically marginalized groups of rural children and their families (Theobald, 2022; Tieken, 2017). Policy also influences school consolidation efforts, access to dual credit and early learning opportunities, and other issues related to politics and local governance within rural schools. Currently, contentious school board meetings and discussion of what and how teachers are “allowed” to teach dominates policy discussions in many rural schools. These considerations create a theme that is rich with research opportunities to explore issues that range from inequitable funding to local and state governance to adoption of policies that are attentive to the strengths of rural educational settings. Between 2022 and 2027, based on our findings, we suggest that lines of inquiry focus on the following:

- Achieving funding formula equity
- Identifying nimble policy/funding responses to changing student racial and linguistic demographics
- Articulating the impacts of school consolidation
- Promising approaches to rural educator salary equity
- Policies related to early childhood education access and system building

Teacher and Leader Preparation, Recruitment, and Retention. Preparing, recruiting, and retaining quality educators and leaders was identified as a pressing issue for rural schools across all data sources, a need that participants believed was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. In describing the problem, respondents used words such as critical, severe, extreme, and catastrophic. Shortages are most prevalent for STEM teachers, special educators, and specialists, but the needs also extend to school leaders and other support staff (e.g. bus drivers). Research that addresses these issues is important for both recruiting new teachers and leaders but also for retaining the teachers that have already chosen to work in rural schools. Additionally, educator preparation programs have a role in preparing teacher candidates and school leaders who are both highly qualified for and interested in working in rural schools (Azano et al., 2021; Hartman et al., in press; McHenry-Sorber, 2021; McHenry-Sorber & Campbell, 2019). Between 2022

and 2027, based on our findings, we suggest lines of inquiry focus on the following:

- Defining the scope and impact of rural teacher/leader shortages across content areas and contexts, such as the disproportionate impact of teacher/leader shortages on certain subgroups of students and families (i.e. disabled and linguistically diverse learners)
- Identifying approaches to addressing rural teacher/leader recruitment and retention
- Promising models for contextually relevant rural teacher and leader preparation
- Centering equity and justice in rural teacher and leader professional development and pre-service preparation
- Approaches to recruiting and retaining more racially and linguistically diverse teachers and leaders to the rural education workforce

College and Career Trajectory. A college and career trajectory starts in elementary school and extends to and through middle school, high school, and post secondary schools and careers (Schmitt-Wilson & Byun, 2021). It captures opportunities and experiences necessary to make choices about pathways to careers and professions available now and into the future (Roberts & Grant, 2021). In the rural context, respondents who completed the survey or participated in interviews or focus groups identified multiple issues for inquiry including 1) low expectations of educators and low aspirations by students for postsecondary education or career training, 2) access to high quality information and offerings such as dual enrollment and AP courses, advanced courses, 3) a discrepancy between learning pathways and credential attainment aligned with the local labor market and technically sophisticated high wage careers, and 4) the importance of understanding what happens after rural learners leave their local schools and classrooms. Between 2022 and 2027, based on our findings, we suggest lines of inquiry focus on the following:

- Access to college and career information across diverse rural contexts and communities
- Identifying deficit ideology imposed by adults in college and career processes (e.g. racism/classism)
- Promising pathways and supports for post-secondary education
- Understanding both secondary pathways and local labor markets

Partnerships and Community Relationships.

The Partnerships and Community Relationships theme identifies the richness and strengths found in rural educational partnerships while also recognizing the tensions that sometimes complicate community relationships (Zuckerman, 2019). Data in this theme highlight the need to a) pursue collaborative endeavors with multiple stakeholders; b) explore and identify strategies for mitigating partnership challenges; c) share examples of innovative partnership practices that may be applicable in other rural settings. Data suggest that participants believe research about collaboration between schools, communities, universities, and other entities is pivotal to addressing inequities and building upon strengths that are found in rural educational settings (Bevan et al., 2017). Between 2022 and 2027, based on our findings, we suggest lines of inquiry focus on the following:

- Identification of transferable partnership qualities
- Interdisciplinary teams working with multi-sited partnerships or networks
- Bi-directional partnership establishment with mutual benefit
- Conditions for access to diverse partnership opportunities
- Understanding partnership power dynamics
- The ways that public and political discourse on contentious topics shape relationships between communities and school/district leaders

Health and Wellness. In rural communities, the connection between personal wellness and overall community health is closely linked to accessible health resources and services (Crumb et al., 2019). The Health and Wellness theme is divided into two major subthemes: mental health and chemical/drug dependency. Participants talked about mental health challenges as an inequitable challenge within schools and communities. They more often discussed chemical dependency as a challenge affecting the whole community. Within these subthemes, participants discussed a related issue: lack of access to services - a spatial equity issue affecting the whole community or rural communities more broadly. Some shared positive interventions and implications for research focused on understanding successful responsive practices. Between 2022 and 2027, based on our findings, we suggest lines of inquiry focus on the following:

- Models for supporting rural student, family,

teacher and leader mental health

- Models for supporting access to specialized staff - both those that serve diverse student populations as well as those who are the sole provider of health and wellness services in their district (e.g., bilingual staff, school psychologists, counselors, and/or nurses)
- Identifying interrelationships between community health and environmental health
- Factors mediating access to diagnosis and early intervention supports for young children
- The long-term effects of COVID-19
- Identifying access and equity issues related to chemical dependence and substance use recovery

Why It Matters

This bold research agenda is a call to action. With approximately 20% of students in the United States growing up in rural places, it is imperative that rural schools and communities receive equitable access to educational expertise, services, and resources. Rural education stakeholders recognize that rural schools experience both context-specific and common equity and access challenges, along with unique strengths that are helpful in addressing them (Means et al., 2016; Williams, 2021). The research findings that guided the development of this research agenda call for research that sheds light on the triumphs and challenges of rural education.

It is important to note the influence of context on the development of the current and previous NREA research agendas. Data for this second NREA research agenda were collected during an ongoing pandemic, a divisive political climate, and in the wake of continued racially-motivated acts of police brutality. With the convergence of these issues, equity and access were central concerns to both practitioner and researcher participants. The interconnectedness of the themes represents another shift from NREA's preceding research agenda. Participants spoke strongly to the connections between themes, thus, this research agenda's construction highlights the relational nature of the priorities.

Beyond its utility for rural education researchers and practitioners, this research agenda also signals to the wider field of education that rural educational settings serve a diverse population with needs that are both similar and dissimilar to other educational settings. Further, the interconnected nature of the research priorities suggests the potential for

successful interdisciplinary research and the importance of research-practitioner partnerships within and across contexts. Participants emphasized the need for research from a wide range of designs and methodologies - from qualitative case studies of a single rural school to the development of large data sets used for quantitative analysis, highlighting the importance for many types of research to be valued by researchers and funders alike. As a field, clear intention to support rural schools and communities is essential. Finally, although the *National Rural Education Association Research Agenda – 2022-2027* is, at its core, a research agenda, this work is further intended to inform the efforts of practitioners, policymakers, community leaders and activists, nonprofit organizations, funding organizations, and school board members. Stakeholders who are invested in rural schools have long recognized that rural school contexts possess their own discrete set of strengths and struggles that necessitate rural-specific research to address spatial and educational equity. This agenda calls for all educational stakeholders to seize the opportunity to support rural students and communities.

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Authors:

Sara L. Hartman is an associate professor in the Department of Teacher Education at Ohio University. Contact: hartmans@ohio.edu

J. Kessa Roberts is an assistant professor of Instructional Leadership in the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services at Utah State University. Contact: kessa.roberts@usu.edu

Sarah Schmitt-Wilson is an assistant teaching professor in the Department of Education at Montana State University. Contact: sarah.wilson14@montana.edu

Erin McHenry-Sorber is an associate professor of higher education administration in the School of Education at West Virginia University. Contact: ecmchenrysorber@wvu.edu

Pamela J. Buffington is the Director of Rural Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics in the US Division of Education Development Center. Contact:

Catharine Biddle is professor of Educational Leadership at the University of Maine. Contact: catharine.biddle@maine.edu

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