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## Rural Critical Policy Analysis: A Framework for Examining Policy Through a Rural Lens

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## **Rural Critical Policy Analysis: A Framework for Examining Policy Through a Rural Lens**

**Devon Brenner**

As this issue is going to press in February of 2023 many state legislatures are in session, and elected officials are debating new laws and distributing state funding. In Mississippi, where I work, legislators in the 2023 session have proposed bills related to mandatory video surveillance cameras on buses, to change the definition of absenteeism for students with disabilities, to allow for a modified school calendar so districts can move to year-round schooling, to expand the teacher preparation loan forgiveness program to include alternatively certified educators, and to allow districts to reward teachers for perfect attendance, among many, many others. Few of these bills will make it out of committee to be voted on but any of those that passed would impact rural be detrimental to the well-being of rural schools. Rural educators and education advocates should use a rural critical policy analysis (RCPA) to evaluate policy proposals or to communicate about the impact of policies on rural schools and districts. Described in more detail in the *Bloombsbury Handbook of Rural Education in the United States* (Azano, et al., 2021). RCPA (Brenner, 2021) is a framework for thinking critically about the intersections of policy, place, and equity. Rural policy analysis examines whether and how a policy will work or impact rural places (e.g., Brenner, 2016; Gagnon, 2016). Rural *critical* policy analysis goes beyond questions about whether a policy will “work” in a particular place, to examine the impact of policies on rural places. RCPA recognizes that policies represent the allocation of values—and that policy analysis cannot be separated from views of right and wrong. RCPA asks us to consider policies from a position of advocating for people who have often been disenfranchised or disempowered by policy. This means recognizing two things about rural policy— (1) that for centuries, policies have positioned places as in service to urban places—a perspective that assumes that rural places exist to provide urban centers with resources that can be harvested or mined (food, forests, energy, recreation opportunities) and, (2) accompanying this metro-centric belief is often an assumption that rural places

are deficit or deficient—lacking in resources, out of step with the “modern” world, and unable to care for themselves. Rural critical policy analysis (RCPA) moves beyond what works and, instead, asks for whom while examining geographies alongside race, class, gender, and other demographics.

### **RCPA and an Assumption of Neutrality**

Most policies are meant to be applied the same across all contexts. A requirement to increase after school programming or an accountability system that rewards districts for offering more advanced coursework in STEM, could, on the surface, be seen to be place neutral—to be applied and implemented the same in every school no matter the location. But we know that not all places have the same resources. RCPA asks: *Does the policy assume all places are the same to the detriment of rural schools?* A policy requiring after school programming may be more of a challenge in a rural district where the ride to and from school takes over an hour and or where weather concerns regularly affect transportation. Accountability systems based on access to advanced coursework may disadvantage rural schools that struggle to recruit math and science teachers. Policies that seem to be “place neutral” often do not fully account for the variations and unique contexts of rural districts.

RCPA may help explain how policies that seem to be “neutral” on the surface may in fact inflict harm on rural communities, particularly rural communities whose residents have been marginalized or disenfranchised (Eppley, 2009; Cervone, 2017; Shahjahan, 2011). Policies that assume the presence of particular resources—from broadband internet to a staff of grant writers ready to apply for competitive federal funding—may never work in rural schools and may have powerful negative consequences in smaller or more remote rural schools. Purportedly neutral policies can be particularly problematic when they fail to take into account the ways that rurality interacts with historical (and ongoing) legacies related to race, class, gender, and other forms of

marginalization, legacies that can be seen, for example, in underrepresentation of rural minority students in gifted education (Hemmler et al., 2022).

### **RCPA and Distributive Analysis**

Rural advocates might also examine a policy, particularly a policy that includes funding, by evaluating its impact in rural and non-rural places. A distributive analysis would allow you to compare the impact of a new funding formula in districts that are considered urban, suburban, small town, or rural to see if rural districts will be disadvantaged. Distributive analysis often includes mapping to create a visual representation that will allow advocates to evaluate whether policies have an equitable impact in particular rural regions—such as mapping schools with staffing issues or districts according to accountability results. Representing the impact of policies in maps can allow policy makers to determine whether current policies have a different effect in more metropolitan areas compared to rural areas—and can be particularly revealing about how the impacts of policies interact with race and poverty. For example, distributive analysis of school consolidations and school closure have shown the ways that place, race, and socio-economic status are combined in decisions to close rural schools in ways that contribute to greater segregation and inequality (e.g. Jimerson, 2005; Tieken & Auldridge-Reveles, 2019; Williams, 2013). RCPA allows advocates and researchers to investigate spatial inequality in education as it intersects with race, poverty, immigration status, and other demographic considerations.

### **RCPA and Policies to “Fix” Rural Education**

Some policies are specifically intended to address a particular need in rural schools. For example, the federal Rural Education Advancement Program (REAP) provides a limited amount of funding to rural schools that are small or that serve low-income students and may help alleviate additional costs such as transportation that are realities of rural schooling. Rural-specific policies that address real needs of rural schools or that are requested by rural districts may be supportive or beneficial—for example, following the leadership of superintendents, some states are increasingly allowing districts to offer four-day school weeks, a policy that may help rural districts recruit and retain teachers (Turner et al., 2017).

However, often times “rural” policies are conceived and implemented by metro-centric policy makers who aim to fix what is deficit or lacking in rural schools, whether or not rural educators and families see the issue as a challenge, have the resources to implement the policy, or in ways that ignore the realities of rural contexts. A policy that allows rural districts to add a stipend to teacher salaries in order to address teacher shortages may not be practicable if rural districts don’t have the tax base or funding to implement, or encouraging small rural districts to provide advanced math and science coursework via online or virtual instruction may not work if broadband is slow or unreliable. For over 100 years reports about failing, backwards, and backwoods schools have laid the groundwork for policies built on a deficit perspective of rural places (Biddle & Azano, 2016; Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999; Tieken & San Antonio, 2016). RCPA asks *Does the policy explicitly address something about rural education—and if so—does it assume a deficit perspective about rural places?* When a policy has a stated focus on rural or is ostensibly intended to help rural schools, it is important to examine whether the policy addresses a real need in rural places, whether it is based on recommendations from rural practitioners, or, at the very least, whether rural educators and families have been consulted about whether new ideas will work in their contexts.

### **RCPA and Definitions of Rural**

Another consideration for a rural policy analysis is how rural is defined. A rural focused policy will typically provide a concrete definition of rural to determine how resources will be allocated or which schools a rule applies to. Distributive analysis comparing outcomes in rural and non-rural districts must be based on a particular definition of rural. However, there are multiple definitions rural, generally based on factors such as population density and distance from metropolitan areas, and these definitions are continually changing. A policy that is intended to help rural schools but that only applies in communities that have fewer than 2,500 students may miss many small towns in relatively rural settings. A mapping analysis that defines rural according to a federal definition based on a population of 50,000 may not adequately capture the nuance of how a policy plays out in a state’s smallest schools or schools based in remote areas. Another factor is the unit of analysis or classification—a policy that applies to rural districts may miss rural schools that

are part of larger urban or suburban districts, for example, or an analysis based on rural counties may underrepresent rural communities located in counties that also have large metropolitan areas. Rural education researchers and advocates have written previously about multiple definitions of rural and ways to consider those. For example, Longhurst (2021) discusses the implications of definitions of rural. RCPA asks stakeholders to consider not only how rural is defined but also how the implications of that particular coding system.

### Conclusion

Rural Critical Policy Analysis invites rural stakeholders to dig deep into policy and to examine

the ways that policies impact rural education, even those that seem to impact all places the same or intended to address a need in rural schools. RCPA also asks advocates to implications of policy for how it will impact students of color, Indigenous communities, families with inequitable access to resources, immigrant families, and communities where girls and LGBTQ students live. Rural places are often not considered carefully in state and federal policy making. They should be, and as we work to make sure rural is considered, we also need to make sure that policies serve the diverse people and places that are rural in ways that are supportive and equitable. RCPA is an invitation to engage in that important work.

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