

Fall 2023

Why Rural Matters 2023: Centering Equity and Opportunity: A Discussion with the Research Team

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Recommended Citation

Hartman, S., Johnson, J., Showalter, D., Eppley, K., & Klein, B. (2023). Why Rural Matters 2023: Centering Equity and Opportunity: A Discussion with the Research Team. *The Rural Educator*, 44(4), 69-71.

<https://doi.org/10.55533/2643-9662.1441>

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Why Rural Matters 2023: Centering Equity and Opportunity A Discussion with the Research Team

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The National Rural Education Association (NREA) is excited to announce the release of *Why Rural Matters 2023: Centering Equity and Opportunity* which can be found at <https://www.nrea.net/why-rural-matters>. Authored by Daniel Showalter, Sara L. Hartman, Karen Eppley, Jerry Johnson, and Bob Klein, the new report shines a light on the condition of rural education across the United States. Since 2000, the *Why Rural Matters* (WRM) reports have highlighted the successes and challenges of rural education throughout the 50 states. The new report centers the way that access to resources, services, and opportunities impact rural education.

Sara Hartman, a member of the *Why Rural Matters 2023* research team and an editor at *The Rural Educator*, discussed this year's report with the four other members of the WRM research team. Their discussion gives insight into the development, results, and implications of *Why Rural Matters 2023*.

WRM History and Development

Hartman: Typically, the WRM report is released every two years. However, due to the challenges of the pandemic, the last WRM was released in 2018-2019. Consequently, it's been four years since the last report.

Johnson: Right. After the last few difficult years in the United States and around the globe, I think this makes WRM 2023 even more timely. WRM is different from other research or data on rural schools and provides an important resource for rural education advocates. While many conditions have stayed the same over the past four years, there are also new considerations and changes that the 2023 report documents.

Eppley: I agree. The report reflects how the different circumstances of rural places make their

strengths and challenges unique, and like rural places themselves, the report has evolved over its history. Sometimes we say, if you've seen one rural place, you've seen one rural place. Readers of *The Rural Educator* are often well-versed in a particular place or set of places most relevant to their work. However, they may not have easy access to statewide data to better understand a specific condition or set of conditions as they manifest more broadly in rural schools. It can be even more difficult to understand a specific condition or set of conditions across states, regions, and the United States as a whole. This report provides a much-needed state and U.S. level bird's eye view of outcomes that are experienced locally and tend to be researched at smaller scale. The kinds of quantitative data in the report are crucial to making state and U.S.-level comparisons to understand the condition of rural schools.

Hartman: Let's discuss the process of developing each report's focus and the selection of special topics.

Showalter: The development of *Why Rural Matters* has been a gradual evolution across decades. For each report, we begin with a planning meeting where we reflect on past iterations and current needs within rural schools and communities. At the initial meeting (or meetings), we brainstorm the areas we feel are most relevant to the health of rural education. After that, we spend a significant amount of time exploring what data exists and which areas we can provide reliable data analysis for. The special topics in each report are not limited by the data sets we choose for the gauges; we choose an expert in each of these topics to research the current situation and discuss next steps. At this point, we delegate tasks to each author according to their interests and abilities and then enter into an iterative creation and revision

process until the report is ready to send off to a graphic design expert.

Klein: For the 2023 report, there are two special topic sections – the first discusses the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic and the second details how WRM 2023 is aligned to the current *National Rural Research Agenda 2022-2027*. For this version, we also added Karen Eppley who brings a wealth of rural education knowledge to our team.

Changes and Consistency in this WRM Report

Johnson: Many of us have been involved in the development of previous versions of the WRM report. This year, for the first time, the report is a partnership with NREA. Several things remain the same in this report, while others are completely new. For the 2023 report, we reviewed the recently revised NREA research agenda and solicited input from representatives of the NREA research committee – in both instances, seeking to align the report focus with priorities and concerns communicated by the larger body of rural education scholars.

Hartman: The current NREA Research Agenda, which can be found at <https://www.nrea.net/research-agenda>, charts a research path for rural education research for the next five years. The agenda centers Spatial and Educational Equity with five interrelated themes – Health and Wellness; Partnerships and Community Relationships; Teacher and Leader Preparation, Recruitment, and Retention; College and Career Trajectory; and Policy and Funding – surrounding the core theme. The current NREA rural research agenda influenced the development of WRM 2023, amplifying the impact of the both documents. The NREA Research Agenda is represented in each of WRM 2023’s five gauges.

Eppley: It’s important for readers to know that the report is organized around gauges and indicators. WRM 2023 has five gauges:

1. Importance
2. Student and Family Diversity
3. Educational Policy Context
4. Educational Outcomes
5. Access to Supports for Learning and Development

Each gauge uses five indicators for a total of 25 indicators that are equally weighted in the report’s calculations.

Showalter: Selecting data sets to inform the gauges is always an important consideration for each WRM. We have used several data sets over the years, but we always stick to national public-use data in order to have consistency across states and to allow our results to be replicated and checked. This year, our primary data sets are those created by the National Center for Education Statistics, the Census Bureau, and the U.S. Department of Education. As mentioned before, indicators and gauges have changed over the years.

Klein: They definitely have. In the more than twenty years since the first WRM was released, there have been a lot of changes. In this year’s report, some gauges and their indicators have changed, while some have remained the same. For example, in WRM 2023, we added an entirely new gauge – Access to Supports for Learning and Development. This new gauge examines rural children’s access to resources, services, and learning opportunities. Indicators include the ratio of rural students to school counselors/psychologists, household access to broadband, percent of rural girls who are receiving gifted services, percent of rural children who are uninsured, and enrollment in public preschool.

Strengths of Rural Schools in WRM 2023

Hartman: The new Access to Supports for Learning and Development Gauge was developed in response to the NREA Research Agenda and is a really important new gauge – one that speaks directly to the impact of spatial equity. Moving beyond achievement scores, this gauge considers rural children’s wellness and access to learning opportunities. We found some examples of extreme need but were also able to identify areas of rural strengths. For example, across the United States, 31.5% of all children are enrolled in public preschool, as compared to 34.1% of rural children. Twenty-eight states reported rural child enrollment in public preschool *above* the U.S. average. Since public preschools offer increased access to early intervention services, greater access to preschool opportunities for families with financial barriers, and the greatest chance for equitable pay and benefits for teachers who work with the country’s youngest children, this was positive news in many states.

Johnson: In terms of other bright spots to celebrate and build upon, results show that (1) rural school districts are more effective than non-rural

school districts at mediating the effects of poverty on student achievement, and (2) that students in rural districts, on average, are more likely than non-rural students to graduate from high school.

Key Take-Aways

Hartman: Let's discuss some of the key takeaways from the report. What are some of the most important or surprising findings from this year's report that we would like readers to know about?

Johnson: Perhaps the most important takeaway is that no matter how we change specific indicators and gauges to look at rural education in different ways, certain states continue to rank as the highest priorities for attention. What those states have in common, generally, is unsupportive and even counterproductive policies that make challenges worse, not better for rural children and families. States that prioritize addressing educational and spatial inequities are most likely to illustrate examples of rural strengths in the report.

Eppley: The report also offers some surprises. For example, some states are doing well on particular gauges, even when they are not doing as well on others. The report is an opportunity to shine a light on these bright spots and leverage successes to work

toward more wide-spread improvement. Mixed results also highlight the complexity of rural education, especially the way that rural schools and communities are connected. States that do well across multiple gauges are typically those that historically have demonstrated state-level commitments to just and equitable education across locales.

Klein: I think I speak for all of us when I say that we really hope that readers will read the report for themselves. On NREA's website, you will find a detailed summary of the report as well as stand-alone pages for each of the 50 states. The report creates an opportunity for rural education to make changes that address current challenges, as well as the chance to continue building on areas of strength.

Showalter: Ultimately, we strive for the report to be nonpartisan and objective, so that it maintains a high level of respect and trust by all types of stakeholders. The data and findings can be used to inform conversations, debates, political action, research, media releases, and other uses, but the overarching goal is that they will ultimately be used to improve the health of rural education across the United States. We believe this report will be valuable to NREA members and rural education advocates across the United States.

Reference

Showalter, D., Hartman, S.L., Eppley, K., Johnson, J., & Klein, R. (2023). *Why rural matters 2023: Centering equity and opportunity*. National Rural

Education Association. <https://www.nrea.net/why-rural-matters>

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