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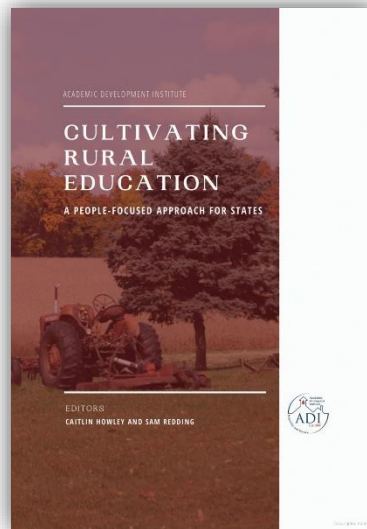
Howley, C., & Redding, S. (Eds.) (2021). *Cultivating rural education: A people-focused approach for states*. Information Age Publishing.

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It is not clear when our nation began to marginalize rural communities, but the COVID-19 pandemic, for all of its devastations, at least made visible a great many things in America that we chose to ignore. *Cultivating Rural Education: A People-Focused Approach for States* uses our re-imaginings post-pandemic to help us see rural America in a new light—or a *first* light. It is an odd duck of an academic book. Short (176 pages), with verse-relevant poetry sprinkled among its chapters, and an appendix that provides a list of “rural movies and novels” apropos of nothing more than a desire to gather-up our nation’s artistic synthesis of this region. The book’s six authors, all who hold academic appointments except for one, help us to understand what “rural-ness” means in 21st century America. All insist that the “rural” moniker offers no more descriptive capacity than “urban” or “suburban,” yet emphasize that a misunderstanding of rural is more problematic than a misunderstanding of the other two. The triumph of this small book—almost a primer that should be required reading for people like me who have only ever lived in suburbia—is its direct and largely unargumentative positioning for the strengths—and plights—of rural America.



In addition to the chance to discover new poems and an opportunity to build out your Netflix queue, *Cultivating Rural Education* offers readers six essays, and a final, detailed “how to” guide for state leaders wishing to understand and assess the needs of rural students and educators in their

region. Each essay stands alone in its cultivation of a particular topic or constituency associated with rural America (e.g., “rural schools,” “rural learners,” “rural educators”). The content of these essays overlaps somewhat, which is understandable, but serves to reinforce central points about a region of America that defies simple description, classification, or narrative. The opening chapter by editor Caitlin Howley, introduces the book’s major themes:

- Rural people, places, and conditions are not homogenous.
- Rurality is not a deficit; in fact, rurality is not an impediment to student educational achievement.
- Rural life offers its people benefits that can add value to an education; as in tight knit communities, where the school is often the focal point of many community-building activities.
- Disinvestment in rural communities has produced systematic challenges for people in such places.
- Novel advantages and assists can overcome these challenges.

She goes on to stress that since only about 19% of the US population live in rural places, “four of five Americans may have little or no recent experience of rural life.” The authors overarching aim for the book is to “share what we know from our own lives, work, and research in the hope that it may help your team support educators, students, and communities” (p. 7).

I am those one of those four of five Americans having little authentic connection to our nation’s rural life and educational structure. Although I represent the third generation of a family that came to California to farm, I’ve never picked produce, herded cattle, or worked in packing plant. *Cultivating Rural Education* demonstrated to me that while I appreciated the general contours of rural America, my understanding is far from complete. For all of the bucolic fantasies of my conjuring, it only ever abstractly occurred to me that rural America was also a desert, a Native American reservation, or out-of-bound neighborhoods that could not be called suburban because they lacked the necessary ranch-style architecture. One of the chief advantages of this book, then, is its description of diversity within a commonality. More importantly, the book demonstrates that the rural images in our mind’s eye should be a great deal less desolate than, say, the final scene of *The Last Picture Show* (1971), and, perhaps, a bit more stable than the lives depicted in *Nomandland* (2020). (That my references to rural America are almost entirely linked to media marginalization is worth considering here, establishing again that your reviewer is starting from a relatively low knowledge base.)

Cultivating Rural Communities, published just last year, is also timely. The COVID-19 pandemic brought to the forefront to the rest of the nation the essential connectedness of rural regions with the well-being of the rest of the country—even if that connectedness is not especially pastoral. Karen Eppley, in her chapter on strong rural educators, asserts that:

A 2020 global pandemic and racial reckoning has now repositioned rural schools and communities in the eyes of the public. It is clear to even the most casual observer of current events that rural places are integrally connected to suburban and urban communities both socially and economically. Rural communities are a critical source of natural and human resources, the site of the nation's factory food production systems, a receptacle for the nation's garbage, and the location of its prisons. (p. 43)

As the striking statistics shared in this volume indicate, students attending rural public schools represent a sizeable constituency, but one that is often invisible. About one in five public-school students live in rural regions of the US. In 13 states rural students constitute at least a third of all public-school enrollments. This constituency is overwhelmed, however, by policymakers who are more likely to live in suburban or urban locales. Sheneka Williams in her essay on strong rural learners, notes that since rural students are so many fewer in number compared to students in urban and suburban areas, the effect on policymaking is significant:

Not only are rural education and therefore rural students studied less frequently and included less often in policy discussions, *when they are addressed*, it is through the perspective and values of metropolitan academics and policymakers. (p. 83, my emphasis)

The result of this policymaking myopia is that urban and rural areas are often viewed as having the same set of challenges (e.g., greater numbers of people in poverty, less access to essential services). This may be true, but it misses the point since different solutions may be required for rural vs. urban communities. For example, as educators across the country sent their students home because of the COVID-19 pandemic, remote learning became a special challenge in rural areas. Accessing on-line education in urban settings—at least in theory—is more probable because of the presence of cell towers, adequate broadband fluidity, and fiber-optic cable. (This is not to imply that low-income, urban households are adequately linked to cyber technology, but that's another essay.) In rural areas, connection to almost anything, up to and including satellite phones, was an “iffy” proposition. Although rural elementary and secondary schools might be linked well to the Internet, the COVID-19 pandemic kept students at home, where access to devices and broadband might be a doubtful but essential connection.

The contributors to *Cultivating Rural Education* identify additional challenges in serving rural educators and students. For example, although rural students tend to graduate from high school at higher rates than nonrural students, they are less likely to enroll in and graduate from college. One solution, of course, is to expand the ubiquity of distance-learning solutions, especially for students in regions where brick-and-mortar colleges are too far away or too expensive. However, if we are to see education as a

panacea for the challenges that rural students face, Jennifer Seeling's essay highlights the significant problem of rural "brain drain:"

Particularly in remote, low-density communities, educational policies that promote school practices disconnected from the local economy can strain the ability for these remote communities to survive.... To this end, rural schools become complicit in the decline of their communities through the depletion of a primary resource for local sustainability: people. (p. 24)

Sons and daughters who leave their hometowns are not unique to rural America, but it may be more likely if the economy is not diverse enough to provide them with employment that offers a family-sustaining wage. (It is also interesting to note the idiom incorporates the rural locale only; we never say offspring leave their "home cities.")

Here again, however, we draw conclusions for this region at our peril. Not all rural communities conform to easy, traditional, or Norman Rockwell-like narratives. Although most rural areas lack within-community ethnic or racial diversity (Whites comprise about 80% of all rural areas), Erin McHenry-Sorber's essay on strong rural communities, reveals, for example, that Hispanics are the fastest growing rural demographic; that Mississippi has the highest percentage of rural African Americans in the country; and that small towns across America are especially welcoming to immigrants who find it difficult to find affordable housing or jobs in urban areas.

Cultivating Rural Education will be especially helpful to state leaders charged with assessing the specific requirements of rural educators and students. Indeed, the final chapter offers a step-by-step needs-analysis framework, the goal of which is to "help state leaders...choose and support strategies that focus on the people who make rural education happen—rural educators, rural learners, and rural community members..." (p. 131). The book will also be of interest to other kinds of influencers, such as foundations and community-based organizations, that wish to amplify the voices of rural educators, whose accomplishments on behalf of students serve as reminders to the necessity and power of schooling in challenging settings.

Despite its modest treatment of a topic that otherwise covers an astonishing cultural and analytical distance, *Cultivating Rural Education's* consciousness-raising success is in its description of the unheralded *assets* that define small towns and rural places. The authors' generosity in their analysis of rural schooling is neither sentimental nor simplistic. Instead, it is a welcomed equanimity that engages the reader in ways that more traditional academic publications often do not. Reason enough to add this book to your reading list.

About the Reviewer

Stephen J. Handel, Ph.D. is a senior program officer with the ECMC Foundation and the immediate past chief admissions officer for the University of California system (although opinions expressed in this essay do not necessarily represent the official positions of those organizations). He is also the co-author (with Eileen Strempel) of *Beyond Free College: Making Higher Education Work for 21st Century Students* (Rowan and Littlefield, 2021).



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