

Heading Back to School in Rural America

By Tracy Taylor Grondine

It's that time of year again. New school supplies and school clothes, as well as SpongeBob and Miley Cyrus lunchboxes, are on the minds of most youngsters.

But, as the new school year quickly approaches, thoughts of sharpened pencils and three-ring binders are being outweighed in rural schools by more pressing issues like teacher retention and updated classroom technology.

In Washington, D.C., lawmakers currently are at odds over federal funding formulas and rules on teacher credentials. But in rural communities, the heart of the matter is not about policies, formulas and rules; it's about community, opportunity and equality.

To many rural residents, the local school plays a significant role in community development. In fact, a rural area tends to revolve around its school. American Farm Bureau Director of Rural Affairs Sabrina Matteson perhaps said it best recently in her rural community building blog (<http://ruralcommunitybuilding.fb.org/>):

“Town meetings occur in the auditorium or the school cafeteria and the library often serves as the local library. Residents attend the local school's sporting events, cheering for the kids they know, which tend to be all of them. A school play is an opportunity for the entire town to roll out its support and to visit with all their neighbors. And because of its economic and social implications, the loss of a school is often greeted with all the enthusiasm of a funeral,” according to Matteson.

A major hurdle facing rural America's classrooms is the hiring and retention of teachers. The inability to attract and keep teachers is due to lower salaries in rural school systems, geographic and social isolation, requirements to teach multiple subjects and grades, and lack of professional development opportunities.

According to Thomas Farmer, director at the National Research Center on Rural Education Support at the University of North Carolina, rural school districts often have difficulty finding and retaining highly qualified teachers, particularly in the areas of special education, English language, and secondary math and science.

Further, according to the June 2010 issue brief, *Grow Your Own and Other Alternative Certification Programs in Rural School Districts*, as many as 84 percent of rural school districts reported some difficulty filling teaching positions.

Another challenge facing rural schools is that of access to technology. Affordable broadband access is a real concern for rural educators. While many children living in urban areas have the opportunity to click online and have the Internet pop up within a matter of seconds, rural students are often faced with “wait-and-see,” dial-up Internet connections.

For rural schoolchildren to have the opportunity to be competitive and educationally on par with urban students, it's important they be brought online and equipped with the same technological learning advantages. Incentives and funding for teachers to relocate to rural areas is just as crucial.

Sharpened pencils and new lunchboxes may be important. But, making sure all of the nation's kids have the same educational opportunities is imperative.

To learn more about challenges facing rural education, as well as other rural development issues, please visit AFBF's Rural Community Building Blog at <http://ruralcommunitybuilding.fb.org/>.