Rurality and School Choice
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School choice, the ability of families to enroll their children in a variety of public or private schools, has been lauded by advocates for its ability to foster innovation in schools and promote best educational practices (Fuller & Elmore, 1996). While the claim that school choice programs have a beneficial effect on school quality and student educational attainment has not been brought to bear by the research, the premise of school choice nevertheless largely rests on a set of assumptions that only fit cleanly in urban or suburban contexts (Cowen & Creed, 2017; Wells, 1993). Rural school districts, however, present realities that do not mesh with the underlying rationale of school choice and the supposed benefits that it brings. School choice policies, and the economic theory that undergirds them, are not viable solutions for many struggling rural school districts which face budgetary and geographic constraints that necessitate targeted policy intervention. This paper will begin with a look at the assumptions of school choice, followed by a discussion of the disadvantages rural school districts face in the context of inter-school competition, and will end with suggestions for alternative policy interventions.

The Assumptions of School Choice

Since its inception, school choice has come with a set of assumptions about its mechanism of action that do not always translate to reality. Central to school choice proponent’s argument is the idea that free market competition between schools will bring out the best in those districts which will then have to compete for their students (Wells, 1993). Following this line of thought, parents will choose to send their children to the school that will provide them the best educational outcome, thus promoting the best practices of the most successful schools and placing pressure on those with dropping enrollment numbers to innovate or close their doors (Fuller & Elmore, 1996). Issues have been raised with these
basic assumptions on the grounds of parental decision-making often not taking into consideration school quality data or being influenced by racial factors, but for rural contexts, even more fundamental problems arise (Wells, 1993). If school choice policies work by pitting schools against one another, rural districts are at an inherent disadvantage versus their urban and suburban counterparts. With regard to competition between urban and rural schools, since most school choice programs operate within districts, family choice in this case would be exercised via residential moves away from rural school districts.

Disadvantages Faced by Rural Schools

Through the lens of free market competition, rural schools, before taking into account any other factors, are immediately disadvantaged when trying to attract teachers by their inability to provide a competitive salary. According to a study conducted by David Monk looking at teacher salaries for the 2003-2004 school year, teacher salaries in the smallest rural schools (at both the primary and secondary level) were 16.5 percent lower than the national average (Monk, 2007). Additionally, the number of teachers who report having more than one job is higher than the national average (Monk, 2007). For many teachers, there is clearly an economic disincentive to working at a rural school, especially small, rural schools which often struggle the most to provide beneficial educational outcomes for their students. For comparison, starting salaries for teachers in urban areas are 21 percent higher than in rural areas and 35 percent higher if the teacher has a master’s degree (Monk, 2007). Rural schools, then, have not just a problem with attracting teachers to their school but also with retaining a highly experienced teaching staff. Even if a rural school is able to hire an experienced teacher, there is little that the district can do to keep them on staff if they are offered a more lucrative position elsewhere. The turnover and lack of teaching experience of the staff at rural schools can have dire consequences for school quality as a whole, thus further disadvantaging the district.
The student population of rural schools can also be a deterrent for teachers. In agricultural regions, migrant farmworkers and their children can create a highly mobile student body that teachers struggle to educate. This mobility problem can also extend to families who are forced to move often because of the sometimes unstable nature of the rural economy (Monk, 2007). A highly mobile student body is detrimental for teachers who can find themselves frustrated with trying to catch up the highly mobile student(s) with the rest of the class, leaving less time for normal instruction. The pressures of educating these students leads to teacher burnout and resignations, exacerbating the staffing issues of rural schools (Crowley, 2003). Additionally, more pressure is placed on teachers who provide special services such as English as a second language programs and special needs education. Schools struggle to provide these kinds of services due to the small student population and outsized cost of providing such programs to a small number of students. As is often the case, if a district is unable to provide services, the teacher is forced to pick up the slack in the regular classroom. Such situations serve to make teaching in rural districts an even less attractive option compared to larger urban or suburban districts with well-funded programs for students with special needs.

Another arena in which rural high schools struggle, in part due to the lower quality of their teaching staff, is Advanced Placement (AP) courses. AP courses, at their best, can provide students a head start on their college careers by allowing them to earn college credit by taking a class at their high school and passing an exam on the material. Educators who teach these classes must attend extra trainings and design AP curricula that pass an audit process before the school is allowed to offer AP courses. Perhaps not surprisingly, out of all rural districts in the United States, only 51.4 percent enroll at least one student in an AP course, over forty percentage points lower than suburban and urban school districts (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2016). Additionally, success in AP courses lags behind for rural students compared to their urban and suburban coun-
terparts even when other factors such as poverty and race are controlled for (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2016). Since AP classes require both additional training and the development of AP level curriculum, the lack of an experienced teaching staff could be a contributing factor to the lack of AP programs in rural schools. For those rural districts that do offer AP coursework, the lower quality of such programs could also be partly accounted for by the quality of the staff. An unsuccessful or nonexistent AP program in a school could only serve to further disincentivize more experienced teachers from accepting a position at a rural high school, thus sustaining the scarcity of quality college prep courses offered.

The reality of low-quality or non-existent AP classes in rural districts also serves to highlight the incongruity of applying free market competition ideals to schools with regard student’s college outcomes. An important measure of high school quality is the attainment of post-secondary education, a measure that is at least correlated with high performance on AP exams (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2016). For the large number of rural high schools that are not able to provide quality AP courses, students are disadvantaged in both the college admissions process and their ability to complete college level coursework. Though not a direct result of AP coursework (or lack thereof), rural students are less likely than their suburban or urban counterparts to attain any kind of post-secondary education. Moreover, rural students were about 20 percent more likely to attend a two-year college instead of a four-year university (Koricich, Chen, & Hughes, 2018). For parents who value a post-secondary education for their children, these statistics could be an important factor in ruling out a rural school district in their decision making process.

Perhaps the most direct disadvantage faced by rural schools is the property tax-based manner by which most public schools are funded. On average, rural school districts serve a predominantly low-income and property tax poor area which translates to fewer dollars being available for the school budget. Difficulties raising adequate school funds in areas with low property tax values still exist despite frequently higher tax rates com-
pared to areas with higher property values (Jordan, Chapman, & Wrobel, 2014). Though this particular funding model has been modified in recent years across states in an attempt to equalize school funding, disparities remain prevalent. The inequalities in school budgets can translate to decreased academic outcomes for students whose schools struggle to pay for things like AP classes, teachers salaries, or even up-to-date textbooks. Since schools do not start from the same baseline level of funding, it is ludicrous to expect rural schools with low property tax values to be able to compete fairly with suburban and urban districts.

Thus far the discussion has focused on how rural schools are at a disadvantage versus urban and suburban districts in the competition that drives the rationale behind school choice policies. The points raised have assumed that competition between schools is possible for rural districts. However, for parents who do not have the option to move their family to an urban or suburban school district, the rural districts in which they live are often so isolated and the student body so dispersed that school choice is not really an option. The first factor that constrains parent’s options in this case is the reliance of the vast majority of people living in rural areas in their vehicle. On average, “rural households cover 38% more mileage per person per day than urban households” and this pattern extends to distance from schools (Pucher & Renne, 2005). The difficulty traversing large distances every day is compounded by the acute lack of public transportation options. Unfortunately, 38% of people living in rural areas have no access to public transit of any kind (Pucher & Renne, 2005). The result of these rural transportation realities is that rural families must rely heavily on their personal vehicles. For many families though, sending their child to another school district is not a viable option because the distance from home to school is just too great. The cost of gas, the time involved in taking children to school, or providing a teenager with their own vehicle to do so are real obstacles that parents have to consider when deciding if they should exercise school choice. These very tangible obstacles may be the primary concern of parents over and above that of school quality.
considerations, a reality that does not align with the school competition model. If parents are more concerned with distance to school than the features of the school itself, then the mechanism for school improvement would not function as there would be little pressure on the district to innovate and improve its academics.

The single-school character of rural school districts and their limited busing ability are also an impediment to implementing school choice policies. The smallest rural districts, unlike their urban and suburban counterparts, often only have a single school at each level of education, meaning that a school district has only one elementary school, one middle school, one high school (the smallest may not have a middle school). Therefore, if a parent is dissatisfied with the school that their child is currently attending, they will have no other choice but to explore options outside of their home district. Due to the large nature of rural districts, the nearest high school is frequently located in the next town over, frequently several miles away. As previously mentioned, this distance can be an insurmountable barrier for families and there is little that the transfer school can do to accommodate them. Within a district, schools are obliged to provide busing for the students in their catchment area but for students outside district lines this is often not the case. Rural school districts that are already working with constrained budgets do not have the resources to provide transportation to their transfer students who can live many miles away from the existing bus routes. The isolated nature of rural districts makes competition incredibly difficult because even if a school wanted to “compete” for the student body of another school in the area, it would not have the infrastructure to ensure that it could continue to enroll those students due to significant transportation barriers.

Policy Interventions

To improve rural schools, the focus should not be on how to promote school choice so that the competition between schools will force them to improve. Rather, targeted policy that meets the particular needs
of rural school districts and improves their quality of education needs to be created. A vital place to begin helping rural schools is the reworking of funding models for public education across the states. To provide equity in school funding, local property taxes need to be at least partially decoupled from school funding so that property poor school districts are not hamstrung in their ability to craft a budget. This equity should extend also to the tax burden; rural residents should not have to shoulder a heavier tax load for lower funded schools. A good example of a system that accomplishes these tasks is the funding formula of Arkansas. Since the conclusion of a lawsuit in 2003, Arkansas has been forced to rework its school funding system, which was based primarily on property tax revenues. The new system set a baseline of funding for each school per student, increased the state share of funding, and provided “categorical funding” for students with specific needs. In addition, the ruling of the lawsuit mandated that the tax effort be evenly spread so a minimum local contribution to education funding was set (Jordan et al., 2014). A decade after the new system was put in place, school funding for property-poor districts has increased significantly and the tax burden on these areas has been considerably lessened (Jordan et al., 2014). School funding policies like the one implemented in Arkansas are a boon for rural school districts and help to reduce budgetary constraints that create problems for school quality.

Targeted policies should also be crafted that incentivize teachers to work in rural school districts. As previously mentioned, rural schools are unable to offer their teachers competitive salaries which inhibits their ability to staff quality, experienced educators. One way to offset the economic pull towards wealthier school districts is the repayment or forgiveness of student loans for teachers who work in rural areas for a set number of years. Mississippi, for example, offers an interest-free loan for teachers going into areas of critical need and a loan repayment program for teachers who work in rural areas (Monk, 2007). This could make working in a rural district a more economically viable solution for teach-
ers shouldered with significant amounts of student loan debt. A further step could also be the state providing stipends or increased salaries to teachers working in rural areas, though this option could prove to be prohibitively expensive. As with school funding, the state needs to take a more proactive role in incentivizing teachers to work in rural districts because those districts do not have the resources to do so on their own.

Efforts should also be made toward increasing college accessibility and performance of rural students. More funding should be allocated to rural schools with AP programs whose students perform well on the standardized AP exams. Additionally, a system should be devised for rural schools to share information about how they created their AP curriculum so that other rural schools can follow their lead. For schools where full AP classes are not an option, alternatives such as dual enrollment in nearby colleges or online AP coursework should be supported. By introducing AP or dual enrollment courses into rural schools, students can become familiarized with the expectations of college level coursework and earn college credit, ideally setting them up for future success in their post-secondary education. Another aspect of college preparation that such policies should not ignore is the incorporation of test prep for rural students. Providing test preparation materials for college admissions exams is especially vital for these students because many are from low-income families who would not be able to purchase it otherwise. Moreover, by promoting test preparation in schools, students whose families may not have attained a high level of education can be informed of its benefits and use it to increase their chances of obtaining admission to college.

Conclusion

Rural school districts face challenges and constraints that render the supposed competition mechanism of school choice at best infeasible and at worst unfair and harmful to students whose families are unable to choose their way into high-performing schools. To best serve struggling rural schools, states need to implement focused policies aimed at amelio-
rating particular disadvantages in the realm of school budgets, teaching quality, and college preparation. School choice is a policy that does not benefit rural school districts. Rural students deserve targeted education policy that provides them with an adequate educational environment in which they can succeed.
References


