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THE ROAD TO INNOVATION IS PAVED WITH EXPERIENCE

EXPANDING EDUCATION INNOVATION AND OPPORTUNITY IN RURAL AMERICA

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Chronicles of our first-hand research & experiences

By The Center for Education Reform

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Introduction

The challenges of Rural America have never been more prominent in the public square. From JD Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy*, to Tara Westover's *Educated: A Memoir*, numerous books, TV shows, and movies have explored how and why rural families seem to have as much or often more dysfunction than urban communities. No matter what the source or focus, however, all the exposes and research include one major factor in documenting cause and effect - education.

Long before it was a “popular” topic, the work performed at CER to help parents and children gain more influence within their schools often took us to rural communities. We learned much over the decades about the plight of rural schools, and worked hard to establish the same kinds of pro-student policies that were being launched successfully in cities and states around the country. But rural policy makers often reject measures to open and expand educational opportunities - regardless of political party - because, as they typically explain, they see no reason for sparse communities to have more than one option for schooling. Said one Kentucky lawmaker as we fought for charter schools, “We barely have running water and you want us to think about charter schools?”

Granted, charter schools are not the answer to all that ails rural communities. But they are at the heart of what can restore them, starting with stemming the brain drain when those who achieve resolve to leave.

What we said to that lawmaker was that expanding education opportunity is the key to solving problems from running water to lack of jobs, and that vesting oneself in one traditional, antiquated school system doesn't do anything to open up the endless possibilities that exist across the globe to even the smallest of communities.

There weren't millions of people in pre-Roman times that caused the earliest tribes to create the aqueducts and sparsely populated areas aren't an excuse to stay stuck in reverse. Necessity is the mother of invention, but if we do not open up the minds of the children in rural America to what is possible, they will never have the opportunity to be the next engineer or entrepreneur that solves the problems in their local community that too many policy makers believe are simply a lack of resources.

To begin to turn this narrative around, CER launched a unique initiative to revolutionize rural education. The premise is bold but simple: if diverse groups of citizens and leaders from all sectors of life come together to expand and enhance educational opportunities in rural communities, school quality will improve, student outcomes will improve, and increasingly impoverished and desolate communities will be able to revive their once productive economies.

Starting With School: A New Jobs Strategy For Rural America

Poverty persists in a vicious cycle: Lack of industry leads to a decline in population, as the well-educated leave low-education communities to pursue job opportunities in urban centers. When the well-educated leave a community, schools and other institutions suffer. There are fewer qualified teachers, and it becomes difficult to attract outsiders to a community that has poorly resourced schools and few economic opportunities. The less educated and skilled the population becomes, the less incentive businesses have to put down roots and/or keep roots in a community. Stagnant local economies don't help businesses grow, and an unskilled workforce means that to be successful, businesses would have to make investments in education and training, something they don't have to do in better-off urban and suburban communities.

Interrupting this downward spiral can seem impossible, but there is a way: rural, low-education communities need a strategy for turnaround. **That strategy starts with schools.** Not the model we've become accustomed to, but a new approach.

CER envisions a new school-to-career strategy for rural communities that suffer from low educational attainment. It's a five-pronged approach that supports existing school structures by building an ecosystem of education innovators, businesses, investors, philanthropists, and institutions of higher education. In this ecosystem of supports, participants leverage technology to provide high quality education and training opportunities. Those opportunities are critical to putting people to work and reinvigorating local economies.

We believe that if we expand and enhance educational opportunities in rural communities and expose them to the best in ed-tech and innovation, we will improve the schools and restore the economic climates of increasingly desolate communities. We must take a "SWAT team" approach to bringing educational innovations and technologies to communities that desperately need and want them by bringing together a diverse group of stakeholders eager to partner with rural communities. These include educational technology innovators, school leaders across pre-K through career related offerings, investors, philanthropists, and local, state and federal policy makers. Our growing collection of committed partners also includes grassroots leaders and local advocates in targeted communities.

From the inception of our Rural Education Initiative Work in 2017 to present, CER has convened and met with more than 60 leaders from across these sectors. We have hosted rural ed-focused events at major ed-tech conventions as well as on the

ground in communities with great potential. Our plan articulates key ingredients that need to be connected as we build a new ecosystem to deliver education to children, families, and communities. These ingredients, if mixed properly, can come together to create a new construct for children from birth through age 18, as well as young adults in industry and university settings. Such a construct would break down existing silos, creating a mind set and goal for each child so the outcome is not passing an annual test, but rather, succeeding in life.

CER's Theory Of Change For Rural Education

Ingredient #1 Embrace personalized, student-centered learning approaches that make competency and mastery of subject matter the primary goal.

This goal requires schools to be set up around learning, instead of “fixed” lessons. It also requires schools to leverage the best education technologies to increase the reach and impact of great teachers, while filling holes with great instruction in rural communities that do not have access to enough great teachers.

Rural communities are often wonderful because they lack crowded living conditions; however they face challenges for the same reason - often they don't have the “critical mass” required for innovation. This double-edged sword has become more apparent as we are living through a historic migration in America from rural to urban communities.

The great news is that education technology has advanced enough in the past 20 years to allow us to take away the negative edge: rural communities can thrive without heavy concentrations of people by leveraging technology to expand the reach of a single, great teacher to impact more children.

How to supply this ingredient:

There are a number of entities that provide excellent, adaptive content in all major subjects via technology that well-trained educators are able to deliver directly to students.

Given the wide availability of top-notch programs, assessment tools, and instructional guides, even the least resourced schools can make available great education with the aid of technology. For example, Edmentum provides over 400 challenging, engaging course options that cover a diverse range of subject areas, allowing schools to offer elective options in districts where hiring specialty-subject educators may not be feasible. Programs like this and others allow educators to individualize learning for every student through research-based digital curriculum, interim assessments, and educational services. In situations where communities do not have access to enough teachers or options, partnering with companies like Edmentum to offer fully online courses with state certified teachers can be a flexible, cost-effective alternative to expand course catalogs and give students the specific courses they want.

Ingredient #2 Build new teacher pipelines that provide sustainable talent and ensure students have the quality instructors they need to be set up for success in school and life.

“Great teaching and more of it.” When asked what makes a great school, this is one of the more simple and popular answers. While simple, it is easier said than done, especially in rural communities that suffer from a small and shrinking workforce to staff the schools.

At CER we are working with many institutions to develop new approaches to recruiting and training students to become teachers, while at the same time working to help schools access the best teachers, no matter where they live or work, with the help of technology. Our goal is to spur the creation of programs in higher education to expand the teacher pipeline that involves innovative and accelerated recruitment, placement, and training of new educators.

How to supply this ingredient:

Innovative higher education institutions are looking for ways to expand their reach and adapt teacher recruitment and training more iteratively to the needs of schools, without the requirement for future teachers to enroll full-time in an education program.

Accelerated teacher training “boot camps” can be created to allow individuals to be trained while working at schools that need them. . For example, Tulane University and Boston College, which offer online education classes, may be enticed to partner with a local institution in a rural community, like UNC-Pembroke, to bolster local courses and allow education students to teach while they learn.

The Thurgood Marshall College Fund (TMCF) represents public Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). TMCF’s Center for Advancing Opportunity seeks to expand the work of HBCUs to ensure that education opportunity is a primary focus of their graduates. Working with these institutions in targeted rural communities (such as Fayetteville State in NC) to create accelerated teacher pipeline programs can improve recruitment of new education students, and build interest in serving rural communities. There are numerous models that allow individuals that are not on a traditional course to join the teaching force. We must accelerate these pathways.

Ingredient #3a New School Models that expand opportunities for rural students and teachers.

Great schools are increasingly finding new ways to accelerate learning. They have the luxury of resources and time to explore what works best for each class, student and school. There is no one key to helping students catch up who are substantially behind, but it's crucial that new school models that are working for students in similar communities nationwide be introduced to those that do not currently have access to successful models.

The goal of a new school model is to tear down the silos between early childhood, primary schools, middle schools, high schools, and post-secondary schools. Education reform efforts for the past 25 years tends to focus on one silo at a time, with the belief that creating great early learning centers, or great high schools, or any other silo, can overcome the dysfunction found in the other areas. This model must be designed to support children from their earliest years not just through high school, but through post-secondary education and/or career training, transforming the school into a PreK-20 model. We want to help position rural communities to be the pathbreaker in this new endeavor.

How to supply this ingredient:

Charter schools and their networks can work together to develop innovative, personalized schooling models that can be built up swiftly in communities that have lost schools to shifting enrollments and have excess facilities and land. Collaboratives that include local and national school management organizations that work together on one cluster of new schools to create new educational pathways serving students pre-K through career are ideal for rural communities.

Charter schools are already working with ed-tech organizations to streamline program content, improve delivery and results. They are nimble, bringing investment and experience in starting new schools to the table, and are looking for ways to share best practices with local entities and other charter providers to address rural education challenges.

Ingredient #3b Local or State entity to start new school.

What came first, the low-performing school or the highly regulated, bureaucratic education system? While an interesting debate, it is clear that being able to have a blank canvas to start new schools or restart existing schools can eliminate unnecessary variables that impede successful implementation of new school models.

Many rural communities try without success to reform or restructure their schools and decades later have further lost market share and enrollment. It's important to turn to new local or state authorities to create new schools. States with significant numbers of rural communities, such as North Carolina, have created entities like the Innovative School District, which has authority to take over or reconstitute failing schools. If districts are not able or willing to create new entities to allow for innovations, these policy structures can act as parallel school developers, helping to give life to new schools, either out of existing schools or starting from scratch.

How to supply this ingredient:

Innovative or emergency school districts, university authorizers for charter schools, willing departments of education, or even districts under pressure to improve or be taken over by quality providers can and must adapt to the immediate needs of students in underperforming schools.

In Texas, for example, school districts now face similar improve-or-be-closed accountability measures to what charter schools have always faced. If a school district has a single campus that is rated as underperforming for four straight years, the school board has a final year to improve the school or close it. If neither happens, then the state has the right to remove the school board and appoint a new board. Such possible consequences are motivating school districts to innovate and try new approaches that they otherwise would not do. Texas is not alone in having more high stakes accountability measures on both school districts and charters. Restructuring or approving new schools and new providers is a critical first step.

Ingredient #4 Building a new pathway for workforce and higher education to ensure the new school models actually map directly into a clear and successful course for life.

Education reform must embrace a complete reinvention of schooling inside and outside instructional ‘walls’ and across all levels of learning and career. If we recreate higher education and fuse the outcomes with career and lifetime learning, we will create vibrant communities where citizens and their young people have access to more choices in life, both in their own communities and beyond.

A new federal tax credit scholarship proposal we have worked on for nearly two years and introduced in February 2019 in Congress also will provide incentives for new training efforts and new choice opportunities in private and non-traditional schools. As part of the president’s 2020 budget, the tax credit would be capped at \$10 billion annually. One-half of the allocation would be set aside for job-preparation initiatives for adults (apprenticeship initiatives, career and technical education, and workforce development), with the remaining half targeting education preparedness scholarships for K-12 students.

How to supply this ingredient:

Companies with workforce needs and training are increasingly looking for partnerships with higher education and innovative providers of skills-based programs, such as the coding bootcamp General Assembly, to ensure their needs are met. They can also invest in school-based programs at earlier ages to entice interest in their industry. In some states where we have worked, rural City Councils and mayors are looking to combine education, workforce and higher-ed into one seamless pathway. Burning Glass Technologies, a company that analyzes skills in demand and labor trends can help map the needs and the requirements to guide the development of these pathways. There are literally thousands of opportunities to make a seamless pathway in any community if there are willing partners.

Ingredient #5 Attract new capital into Opportunity zones to take advantage of the federal incentives for investment in communities that need those investments the most.

Opportunity zones are designated by the states, focusing on underserved communities, where there are tax credit incentives for investing in projects in those communities. The longer the investment is in place, the greater the incentive. This incentive can provide industry with an additional reason to remain and/or relocate into a rural community to take advantage of the financial incentive, while taking part in the workforce initiatives as well. We also see the potential for Opportunity zones to incentivize new school development and innovative teacher training centers, among just two concepts we have explored.

How to supply this ingredient:

Businesses and investors who are looking to build significant developments through the use of Opportunity zone funds can be persuaded to include education facilities in or near their projects. There are also specific opportunity zone funds that can be created exclusively for education, and that can underwrite new school construction or renovation, teacher housing, training centers, and more.

Why Is CER Committed To Revolutionizing Rural Education?

Rural America's communities are fragile, their educational offerings often lacking, and opportunities for post-secondary learning and success in a global economy dismal. The US Department of Agriculture Education Research Service (ERS) classified 467 counties across the U.S. as low education counties where "20 percent or more of adults age 25 to 64 do not have a high school diploma or equivalent." 70% of low-education counties are rural and residents of those counties are more likely to live in persistent poverty. 40% of low-education counties in the U.S. have had poverty rates of 20% or higher since 1980. Clearly something must be done.

Improving rural education seamlessly fits CER's mission - to expand educational opportunities that lead to improved economic outcomes for *all* Americans, particularly our youth, ensuring that the conditions are ripe for innovation, freedom and flexibility throughout U.S. education.