AN EVALUATION OF RURAL ACCESS TO EDUCATION

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Abstract
In Kentucky, educators serve over 100,000 students who qualify for special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Given Kentucky’s topography, and the designation of 86 of the Commonwealth's 120 counties as rural, it’s essential to understand how the socioeconomic and geographic qualities of the state impact the students being served. Previous research has indicated that nearly a quarter of children in Kentucky live in poverty, with the highest rates existing in rural Eastern Kentucky counties. This statistic, compacted with the knowledge that high-need children in poverty are more likely than their peers to have a disability and less likely to receive early intervention and special education services, indicates that children in rural Kentucky school districts are exceptionally impacted by the quality and availability of the special education programs and related services provided by their local school districts. This project seeks to assess this impact, as well as mitigating factors, through a review of existing literature and structured interviews.

Keywords
special education, teacher retention, teacher recruitment, rural education
An essential function of any educator is an awareness of the barriers to equal educational access which impact their students, and a willingness to combat these barriers. This function is perhaps even more necessary for special educators, those whose students require not just any education but a highly individualized, evidence-based program. A multitude of factors will impact the quality of the programs that these students engage in throughout their educational careers, not the least of which being the district in which those programs are crafted and implemented. Conventional wisdom has long indicated that not all educational systems—and the services that they can provide—are created equal. While this perceived disparity may affect all students, it is perhaps most impactful in student populations of high need, including those with disabilities.

According to the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA, 2004) and Section 504 of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA, 1990), students birth to 21 are entitled to a free, appropriate public education (FAPE). Major tenets of this “appropriate education” include the provision of a basic floor of opportunity necessary to reach educational advancement and a placement in the least restriction environment (LRE) possible in the learning space. In Kentucky alone, over 100,000 students receive special education services under IDEA (Kentucky Youth Advocates, 2024). These students span Kentucky’s 171 school districts and 120 counties, 86 of which are designated as rural areas (U.S. Office of Rural Health Policy, 2024).

In determining the effect that a district’s rurality may have on the services available to its students, there are several factors that bear consideration. Rude and Miller (2018) identified five specific challenges that rural school districts face in providing students with disabilities with the services that they need to thrive: the context and social identities of rural communities,
influences of poverty and economic decline or stagnation in rural areas, recruitment and retention issues, disparities in resources made available to urban and rural counties, and effects of increasing learning diversity in rural American schools. These challenges, which are often co-morbid and inextricably interwoven, carry the potential to endanger the individualized education which students are promised. In fact, it has been found that students with disabilities in rural schools have lower reading scores and more out of school suspensions (MacSuga-Gage et al., 2022).

Social identity, according to Addis and Grunhagen (2014), can be defined as a person’s awareness of belonging to a particular social category or group. Multiples social identities, which may be constituted by geographic location, socioeconomic status, religion, ethnicity, gender, or other facets of an individual’s life, often intersect in a single person to create a sense of individual identity. In terms of geography, this identity may influence how individuals in rural areas perceive themselves and the role of schools in their communities.

According to Schafft and Jackson (2010), rural schools are often seen paradoxically by the communities that house them as both essential gathering places and a challenge to the local culture in their institutionalized urban values and national-level economic agendas, both of which may be seen as dismissive of the value of rural areas and less industrialized lifestyles. This feeling of conflict between the community and the school system may complicate efforts to serve students, compromising the ability of educators and families alike to collaborate in providing necessary services and supports. This identity mismatch, coupled with sparser populations and greater remoteness from metropolitan areas, may also complicate retention efforts of staff who do not identify with the community norms as those individuals may find it difficult to fully
integrate into the community and form strong rapport with their students, families, and fellow staff.

Socioeconomic status, and the resource disparity it creates, can also impact students’ school experiences. According to the Kentucky Youth Advocates (2024), 21% of children in Kentucky live below the poverty line, with particularly high rates in rural Eastern Kentucky counties. Poverty has repeatedly and consistently been shown to be strongly associated with decreased educational readiness and attainment, with a 2007 study demonstrating a link between higher incomes and better performance across cognitive and academic assessments, behavioral and health measures, and social and emotional skills (Phipps & Lethbridge, 2007). Low socioeconomic status has also been linked to increased prevalence of disability. This is due in part to factors such as food insecurity, poor parental mental health, limited access to mental and physical healthcare, and environmental hazards that may contribute to or exacerbate disabilities (Boat, 2015), especially when such factors limit a child’s access to early and rigorous intervention programs.

Compounding difficulties that rural school districts face in providing services, recruitment and retention of staff is a significant concern for many small, rural districts. The number of educators who seek positions in rural schools has declined in the past decade, as has the number of university students seeking a degree in education at all. Rural administrators report significant difficulty locating qualified candidates for open positions, and when they do successfully recruit personnel, approximately 50% of new teachers in rural districts leave the education field within their first five years (Watts, 2016). Those who do stay often credit a feeling of loyalty to the community in which the schools exists or to the school itself, describing
motivations like having attended the same school when they were a child or having strong family roots in the area (Watts, 2016).

Rural educators often report a lack of satisfaction with their profession, citing negative public perception of educators, a feeling of overwhelm regarding assessments and reporting, and exposure to criticism from public figures and families alike. These issues are aggravated by an abiding disparity in rural and urban school district salaries, with teachers who work in the lowest socioeconomic schools earning one-third less than their counterparts in higher-income districts (Watts, 2016). This combination of challenges often leads prospective rural educators to seek jobs in larger, more urban districts, or to abandon the field altogether.

Just as monetary funds limit the personnel that rural districts can recruit and retain, they also limit tangible resources that a district can provide. In a national survey, Berry and Gravelle (2013) reported rural teachers were happy with the aspects of their job that included instruction, but unhappy with the non-instructional aspects. Programs that provide students opportunities for social, motor, or academic skill development such as sports teams, clubs, and arts education require staff sponsors, which can come with an additional paycheck. Programs that provide professional development opportunities to staff such as specialized training or continuing education allowances often carry hefty course fees.

Physical resources also pose a significant financial challenge to many rural, low-income districts. Technology such as classroom sets of Chromebooks or iPads and Smartboards is becoming an increasingly essential piece of the educational puzzle but can require a substantial investment. This cost, and the risk to it, is increased in districts which participate in non-traditional instruction (NTI) as these programs often require that students without home access to a device with internet capabilities be provided with one. Prior to school closures caused by the
coronavirus epidemic of 2020, 83 Kentucky school districts participated in the NTI program, including many rural and Eastern Kentucky counties (Kentucky Department of Education, 2022). However, this number grew, as many urban districts that had previously abstained from participation began providing NTI materials when faced with extended closures in March 2020. According to the Kentucky Department of Education (2022), the NTI program was used full-time on emergency status allowing districts to have unlimited days through spring of 2020 and the majority of the 2020-2021 school year.

Additional requirements for monetary support include up-to-date facilities and communal material supplies, such as the assistive technology inventories that many school districts maintain. Rural communities often struggle to provide resources (Berry & Gravelle, 2013) and facilities that match those of their urban counterparts in terms of newness, space, maintenance, and aesthetic quality. Some rural teachers report their school lacking staff-specific bathrooms or workrooms, access to supply closets stocked with academic program materials, or the reliability of basic utilities like heating (Watts, 2016). However, each of these resources requires funding that many school districts struggle to find in their own budgets. While rural and urban schools alike may search for adequate funds to support these endeavors, rural school districts often lack the resources and personnel to compete with larger districts for federal grants that may offer funding for these extracurriculars (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

As school districts struggle to recruit qualified educators, and to provide those educators with ongoing training in how to work with diverse learners, they become less prepared to effectively serve student bodies that expand culturally and linguistically each year. One in four students in a rural school is a child of color, and many rural school districts enroll English Language Learners (ELL) at the same rate as their urban counterparts (Rude and Miller, 2018).
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Additionally, rural areas carry their own cultural elements, and teachers who are ill-prepared, unmotivated, or too overburdened to understand the background and values of the students that they teach are unequipped to form the rapport necessary to communicate meaningfully. When a school lacks the necessary staff or adequate training to prepare for a range of student demographics, it can exacerbate existent trends like the disproportionate identification of ELL and African American students in special education, in addition to depriving students who truly do need special education services of additional supports like ELL education or culturally responsive teaching.

In reviewing existent literature on the topic inequity in educational access is a significant concern across geographic domains. However, the issue has by no means gone entirely unaddressed. Numerous programs and pieces of legislation exist which seek to create greater opportunity for rural school districts and educators to provide necessary services to their students and communities.

In 1965, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was signed into law as part of the “War on Poverty,” a multi-faceted legislative movement to reduce the high rate of families living below the poverty line. The primary function of ESEA was, at the time, to direct greater federal funding towards areas in which a disproportionate number of children lived below the poverty line. The act has since been reauthorized numerous times, most recently under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 (NCLB) and the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA). The most recent iteration, ESSA, includes several provisions that placed greater emphasis on rural educational resources and achievement (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

One such component of ESSA is the Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP), which consists of two primary programs that supply grants specifically for small and low-income
rural school districts. One, “The Small, Rural School Grant Program” awards funds directly to local educational agencies (LEAs), while “The Rural and Low-Income School Program” awards funds to state educational agencies (SEAs) to disburse among rural public schools. Both programs require that the funds be used by LEAs and SEAs for specific purposes, which include improving basic programs, supporting teachers with instructional aids or teacher intern programs, creating or improving ELL programs and positions, implementing emotional and academic supports for students, and establishing 21st Century Community Learning Centers that provide after-hours enrichment activities (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

Further efforts to support rural school districts come in the form of volunteer-seeking programs like AmeriCorps’ “School Turnaround” and, more notably, “Teach for America” programs, which nationally serve seventeen areas described as rural. These programs, which typically recruit young, altruistic individuals and require a commitment of two years, place college graduates in under-resourced public schools. Regardless of their degree field, all Teach for America members are required to work towards their teaching certifications to help fill teaching positions, provide mentors to students, and spark an enduring interest in the education field that will help to mitigate the challenges posed by a shortage of students seeking education degrees (Teach for America, 2019).

Additionally, several states have implemented incentive programs in which educators are provided with monetary or educational encouragement to work in a rural school district for a set period. However, while such measures may increase immediate interest in open positions, there is little evidence that they aid in retention. In Arkansas, new teachers in rural districts were offered a $20,000 signing bonus spread over their first four years of teaching in the district. However, less than 40% of teachers hired with the bonus remained for the full four years (Watts,
In other states, graduates are offered loan forgiveness, funding for board certifications, or educational grants when they sign-on to teach in a high-need rural area. These incentives are often especially awarded to, or increased for, individuals who fill much-needed special education or science education positions.

**Contextualization: Experiences of Kentucky Special Educators**

In contextualizing the implications of rurality on the experience of special education students in Kentucky, it is essential to understand the circumstances related to Kentucky and include the voices of current Kentucky special educators and special education administrators. Kentucky holds a somewhat unique position in that a significant portion of its rural counties are also designated as Appalachian by the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC), and therefore receive additional funding and support through programs that specifically target this region. Some of these programs, like Ohio University’s “Choose Appalachian Teaching” program, are privately sponsored by non-profits or educational institutions and provide some form of financial incentive linked to service in the region (Appalachian Regional Commission, 2020). Others are extensions of AmeriCorps and other federal programs in the region, often providing living stipends or education allowances in exchange for a time commitment.

To include the voices of current Kentucky special educators and special education administrators, the first author, an undergraduate student, completed this manuscript as a component of an Honor’s Thesis. Institutional Review Board (IRB) permission was sought after data was gathered with a request to publish the results but was deemed unnecessary by the university IRB (personal email, August 27, 2021).

**Method and Participants**
A phenomenological approach was selected to emphasize the shared stories of the research participants. This approach allowed the researchers to fully explore the experiences of the participants while recognizing the biases the researchers and participants bring to the experience (Creswell, 2013).

Purposeful sampling was used; districts were selected due to their rurality. Potential participants were selected due to their job status in the selected districts. Participants were recruited by word of mouth. A follow up e-mail was sent to secure participation. A set of standard questions was developed that aimed to address both the difficulties and benefits of working as an educator in a rural Kentucky school district. The questions addressed three general topics, gleaned from the literature (see Figure 1).

The questions were supplied to each interviewee via e-mail or in-person, with the caveat that they should not feel limited by the scope of the questions and should feel free to provide any additional relevant information as they see fit. The questions aimed to address both the difficulties and benefits of working as an educator in a rural Kentucky school district.

Responses were analyzed to identify any themes and trends. Thematic analysis was used with an inductive approach where the responses determined the themes (Creswell, 2013). The open-ended format of the questions allowed the respondents to provide additional information.

Five special education professionals (i.e., two administrators and three educators) from rural Kentucky districts provided interviews regarding the challenges that they face in providing an appropriate public education. These individuals responded with their experiences, with several echoing the frustrations detailed in the literature.

Results

Adequacy of Staff
When asked to describe challenges in finding adequate or qualified staff for special education positions, all respondents reported that it was a significant issue in their district. One administrator lamented,

Yes! We used to have so many applicants for positions that we had to narrow down who even got an interview. Now, especially with speech therapists and psychologists, sometimes we have no applicants… Qualified applicants usually have already accepted other positions.

An educator responded similarly, describing challenges to staff both certified and classified positions:

Yes, finding adequate staff is a problem we face every year. Especially finding paraprofessionals for the classroom. Paraprofessionals make minimum wage here, which is very difficult for a family to live off of. There is a growing need for more special education teachers in this area with the rise in the number of students needing special services. Often highly qualified teachers move to larger areas with more available resources. Even if there is interest in a position the board often says there is not funding to fill the position.

When asked to describe what measures their district was undertaking to account for these challenges, one administrator described hiring contractors from external agencies for related services like speech and physical therapy. Another listed actively pursuing candidates and recent graduates through job fairs and maintaining contact with nearby university teacher education programs. Two of the teachers also described their district’s relationship with universities as supporting the search for candidates, while the third shared the following:
Often when there is an issue it is just dealt with by making things work with what we already have. Most of our teachers are over capped with our numbers and caseloads and are told to make it work the best we can. So often we have to get colorful and imaginative with our scheduling for ourselves and our students.

It should be noted that Kentucky caseload limits range from six to twenty students, depending on the setting of the class (resource or collaborative) and the disabilities of the students being served. In some cases, districts may apply for waivers to exceed the caseload by a maximum of two students. However, in expanding a teacher’s caseload, the educator in question becomes responsible for designing specialized instruction as well as overseeing student records such as the Individualized Education Program (IEP) and regular progress reports for each additional student (White, 2019).

**Recruitment and Retention**

The respondents were next asked to describe their perceptions of how staffing issues may be influenced by the location of their district. Additionally, they were asked to consider how the rurality of their district may affect turnover, particularly as it applies to losing staff to larger, more urban school districts. One administrator responded,

> Yes, we sometimes are able to attract applicants for teaching positions from [nearby university] since they are close by, and teachers who are originally from this area will sometimes stay. We have a large amount of staff that has left for higher paying positions in a larger more urban district nearby, however. We can’t compete with the salary they offer.

Another responded that they didn’t feel the rural location was a hindrance but did suspect that their district had lost existent or prospective staff members to nearby urban districts which offer
Higher salaries. These responses were largely repeated when asked to describe challenges
funding programs and positions, with the greatest challenge reported being funding competitive
salaries for special educator and para-educator positions.

In addition to responding to several of the same prompts as the administrator respondents,
educators were asked to consider their own experiences with recruitment and retention in their
districts. All three described the culture of their district as a significant selling point, describing
their rural districts as, “family-oriented,” “a strong community,” and, “more trusting,” than urban
districts. One educator elaborated:

In our areas we usually have a lot of control over educational decisions for our classroom
and have more of a laid-back trust in our expertise…However, I feel like in urban areas
administration also does not fully respect the expertise of their employees.

All three educators also cited salary and resource considerations as the most significant challenge
of their districts, with one educator citing salaries for her position in a neighboring county that
exceeded her own by over $10,000. Another stated that she often feels challenged by the “lack of
personnel, resources, and often administrative support,” going on to say that she and her
colleagues feel overworked and ill-equipped to cope with the demands placed on them.

However, it is worth noting that each of the three rural educators stated that they would not
consider trading their current school system for a larger, more urban one.

**Adequacy of Funding**

Finally, administrators were asked to assess the degree to which they were aware of other
school districts finding adequate funding and qualified candidates to staff and maintain strong
special education programs. Both administrators responded that surrounding counties were also
experiencing these challenges, citing a dearth of special education graduates and competition
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with other school districts for candidates as some of the greatest hurdles to filling available positions.

**Discussion and Implications for Future Work**

The results of the interviews with rural Kentucky special educators and administrators support previous findings indicating that disparities do exist in the adequacy of qualified staff, recruitment and retention, and funding. Those interviewed indicated that regarding hiring and retaining qualified staff they often find themselves behind the larger districts that have more financial incentives to offer. Further, retention continues to be a concern. While the teachers indicated they liked the culture of their district, they were well aware of neighboring districts having more funding. However, the most pressing issue seemed to be the dearth of special education graduates. Nationally, programs like REAP and Teach for America attempt to bridge the gap between rural and urban educational access, but the reality is that a gap remains. Administrators struggle to recruit and retain special educators, and special educators struggle to access the resources and support that they need to be successful. Given these challenges, it seems nearly impossible for schools to provide each student with the floor of opportunity that they have been guaranteed.

Financial incentives may be effective in persuading educators to apply for and take teaching positions in rural districts, but do not seem to aid in teacher retention. Rather, teachers who continuously renew their contracts for positions in these areas cite more personal, intrinsic motivators including familial bonds, a connection with the local community, stronger relationships with students and families, and greater support and leeway from administration (Watts, 2016). It stands to reason, then, that encouraging the formation of these intrinsic motivators is where the greatest focus in rural special educator retention should lie.
Some of the connections that educators express feeling with their school district are inimitable. For example, school districts cannot replicate for out-of-area applicants the kind of bond and sentimental goodwill that some rural educators feel towards their particular school due to their own tenure as a student there. However, this is not to say that schools cannot still facilitate meaningful relationships between their staff and communities that serve to tether new educators to the area and encourage their retention.

The connections that many veteran rural educators describe feeling are two-fold and must be addressed as separate and equally valuable tenets of retention. The first regards a feeling of community within the school itself. Many rural educators describe their school as a “family,” with the same trappings of loyalty, affection, and care-taking applied to the more conventional sense of the word. They view their fellow teachers not only as coworkers, but as teammates and friends, and enjoy engaging with them. They describe the school’s role as meeting not only their financial and professional needs, but social and emotional as well, expecting that their colleagues help them to feel, “nurture[d]…welcomed, valued, accepted, and respected.” (Watts, 2016, p. 94). This connection, once made, dissuades educators from leaving their district as vacating a position in which they work so closely and contentedly with colleagues feels akin to leaving family.

In fostering this sense, administrative support is essential. Phillips (2015) refers to this factor as the “climate” of a school and its district and emphasizes the need for rural administrators to remain aware of the climate in their own district and make steps to ensure that this climate is positive and supportive. Improvements in climate through relationship-building between administration and staff, networking opportunities for educators to connect with each
other, and genuine interest in educators’ personal well-being can quickly strengthen a school’s ability to retain educators who may otherwise seek other opportunities (Phillips, 2015).

The second aspect of creating staff-retaining connections in a rural district relates to the community in which the school is placed. Many rural educators cite familial ties, a increased sense of safety, a preference for a more rural lifestyle, and the opportunity to form stronger relationships with their students and families outside of school as primary motivators to remain employed in a rural district (Zost, 2010). Furthermore, many educators believe that they experience fewer behavioral issues and greater familial support in addressing these issues in rural districts than in urban ones, citing the prevalence “high morals and standards” in smaller, close-knit communities (Watts, 2016).

While school districts are perhaps not able to entirely shape the community in which they teach, they can make efforts to make these communities more appealing and accessible to prospective employees by serving as a conduit between new educators and the families and organizations that surround the school. Facilitating opportunities for teachers to connect with families outside of an academic context, organizing staff retreats to attractions in the area, and drawing on community members’ expertise and activities to provide trainings and social events can all help to build a strongly place-based support system that encourages educators to renew their commitment to the region each year.

Rural districts pose unique challenges to the educators who choose to work there. Lack of funding, economic conditions in the surrounding area, geographic isolation, and a limited capacity to fill open positions and retain fellow staff complicate efforts to meet the needs of each student, especially those with high needs and a greater reliance on individualized instruction and specialized materials. However, educators who continue to persist in these districts despite the
challenges cite merits of rural regions that may serve as enticing and effective recruitment strategies in alleviating these pressures through the enlistment of highly qualified, motivated, and dedicated educators. Long seen as a hindrance or liability, it is becoming increasingly clear that perhaps the greatest weapon these districts wield in the fight against teacher attrition is their own communities, communities that have the potential to draw special educators intent on forming bonds with the areas they serve. In true adherence to the spirit of education, and special education in particular, research demonstrates that it is not financial incentives that motivate these professionals, but the opportunity to be at the heart of a meaningful organization.
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**Figure 1**

*Questions for Respondents*

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<td>Adequacy of Staff</td>
<td>Have you experienced challenges finding adequate or qualified staff for</td>
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<td>special education positions during your tenure?</td>
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<td>If so, how do you address these challenges?</td>
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<td>Recruitment and Retention</td>
<td>Do you believe that your district’s ability to staff positions is</td>
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<td>influenced by its rural location? Have you lost staff/faculty to a</td>
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<td>larger, more urban district?</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Adequacy of Funding</td>
<td>Have you experienced challenges adequately funding special education</td>
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<td>programs and related positions? If so, can you provide an example of</td>
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<td>Are you aware of the degree to which other districts also face challenges</td>
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