

# INTRODUCTION

THE SCHOOL SITS on top of a hill in a small neighborhood of modest homes, surrounded in every direction by the ancient slopes of the Appalachian Mountains. There is one particularly formidable ridge visible to the south, and it is the same mountain that once blocked westward expansion so completely that it took Daniel Boone on a journey twenty miles to the east to find passage at the Cumberland Gap. The concrete block walls of the school and bright vinyl wraps over the windows speak to a new era, although many would consider a preK–12 school like this one as belonging to an old-fashioned era of education. Inside this building are around eight hundred students of all ages, including preschoolers as young as three walking along the same hallways as teenagers enrolled in high school.

This is Williamsburg Independent School, a Title I preK–12 school in Appalachian Kentucky. The school serves an economically distressed community, and currently more than 70 percent of its students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. We have spent quite a bit of time in this building, getting to know the students and teachers through cake walks and basketball games. We see the

crossing guards in the morning and know that the superintendent greets the preschool students by name as they arrive every day. When the bell rings at three p.m., we see the mixed-age throng of children streaming out, some to cars and buses and others to walk home. But the reasons for this deep familiarity may surprise some. No, we are not researchers who have studied this school, nor are we teachers or educational consultants brought in to lead a strategic improvement process. Instead, we, the authors, are the parents of two boys who go here each day for school. At the time of this writing our older child is in fourth grade and the younger is finishing up his second year of preschool, already gunning for kindergarten in the fall.

If you are wondering why we live in a rural and poor part of the Kentucky mountains, we can assure you it is for the most ordinary of reasons. But first, let's back up and do an introduction. We are Geoff and Sky, and both of us have spent our professional lives thinking about the well-being of rural children and communities. Geoff was born in Hibbing on the Mesabi Iron Range in northern Minnesota. He attended the University of Montana, where a job working overnights at a children's shelter set him on a trajectory to becoming a special education teacher. Sky grew up in Berea, Kentucky, the fifth of seven children in a household that subsisted at less than half the poverty level her entire childhood. She went from public school to Yale University, where she was shocked to learn about the expected outcomes for children like herself. She knew that education had changed her life, so she wanted to be an elementary teacher.

And this is where our lives connected. We both joined Teach for America, sought out a rural placement, and found ourselves working for the Gallup-McKinley County School District on the Navajo Nation in New Mexico. Although we worked for the same district, we lived seventy miles apart. We first met at the Rough Rock Rodeo, where Sky made fun of Geoff for wearing overalls and Geoff

thought Sky was a stuck-up snob from Yale. But over time, and over many, many hours spent compiling our professional teaching portfolios together, those initial bad feelings wore off. When we began dating, Sky was working at the smallest and most remote school in the district, and when it closed due to low enrollment she moved to the town of Gallup. Geoff started off as a high school special education teacher, focused on helping students with emotional and behavioral disturbances, and then was promoted to assistant principal. Shortly after Sky settled at her new school, he was promoted again to a district position helping lead particularly difficult IEP (Individualized Education Program) meetings in a school district that is larger in land size than the state of Delaware.

It did not take long working as teachers and instructional leaders to get frustrated with the resources available to help our students. Poverty is a pernicious issue that our country has been wrestling with for generations, and some rural areas like Native nations and Appalachia have been in and out of the national spotlight for their dire struggles for generations. Although there may be a collective awareness of challenges in rural America, we found that nearly all educational resources for children living in poverty were focused on urban schools. Indeed, “urban school” had almost become synonymous with “poor school.” The specific students we worked with—rural Indigenous students who either had a disability or were learning English as a second language—were particularly absent from the textbooks and articles on education we read as we pursued our master’s degrees. But neither did we see our own home communities—rural towns that followed the booms and busts of the resource extraction industry—represented in the best practices and ideas that were handed out as solutions to educators like ourselves.

And so we went off to graduate school, determined to advance our knowledge and add a rural perspective. Geoff, who had been focused on school leadership, was accepted at Harvard Business

School (HBS). A few months later Sky was accepted to the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE). But first we stopped along the way to get married at Pine Mountain Settlement School, a remote and scenic school campus turned nonprofit in the heart of Appalachian coal country, where Sky's mother had been an elementary teacher. At HBS, Geoff found himself drawn to the initiatives that focused on education, and after graduating ended up joining HGSE for his doctorate. Sky focused on early language and literacy development and began her dissertation research in her native Appalachia. In all, we spent eleven years in Cambridge, and although we did continue to work in Eastern Kentucky, we were mostly immersed in the issues facing urban schools. Geoff led urban district teams through strategic planning processes, as well as worked on ways unions and districts could work together better.<sup>1</sup> And Sky too spent most of her time with urban school leaders, focusing on language and literacy skills, particularly for English language learners.<sup>2</sup>

This is how we found ourselves on a path toward careers as academics, studying primarily urban problems and urban-focused strategies. But this is where the story also shifts. Geoff was getting ready to graduate from his program and was entering the job market. Sky, who had been working as a postdoctoral fellow and lecturer at HGSE, was pregnant with their second child and looking for jobs as the trailing spouse. But at the same time Sky's mother, back home in Kentucky, was dying of bone marrow cancer. When the position of executive director of Pine Mountain Settlement School came open, it was a wild-card option, but it also represented an opportunity to go back home and spend precious remaining time with Sky's mom. The two of us looked at the organization and decided it needed Geoff's skills the most. He put in an application, and our advisors and family were surprised when we decided that this small educational nonprofit would be our next step, turning away university positions to immerse ourselves in the day-to-day needs of rural Appalachia.<sup>3</sup>

Exactly one month before Donald Trump announced his candidacy for president in 2015, we loaded up a sixteen-foot U-Haul and moved from Harvard Square in Cambridge, Massachusetts, to Pine Mountain Settlement School in Harlan County, Kentucky. The campus sits on the north side of Pine Mountain, a 125-mile-long mountain that is crossed by roads in only seven places in its entire stretch. This was the very heart of Appalachian coal country, a place of high mountain walls and narrow valleys where you have to be careful if you leave trash out or you will attract bears. It is also a place where the opioid epidemic, chronic poverty, and poor health outcomes have devastated communities for decades. Still, we found a lot to love about our new home. It is situated in one of the most biodiverse places in the Northern Hemisphere, a temperate rain-forest where there are hundreds of species of blooming plants, and where mountains form in endless waves of blues and greens. Not only was there incredible natural beauty, but we also found tight-knit communities where folks hunted for meat, planted their own vegetables, and cared very deeply about those around them. When Sky's mother died less than a month after we moved, we were overwhelmed by how our grief was softened by a communal ownership of the loss, including people who wept openly with us.

In a different political era, our return to our roots under these conditions would probably not receive much attention. Instead, as the 2016 presidential election unfolded, a new dialogue emerged about rural America, and the coalfields of Appalachia in particular. Suddenly, this part of America that had sacrificed tremendously to provide coal-fired energy to our country became an easy target for ridicule and contempt. These narratives about rural America confused us and conflicted with what we knew and had experienced, both in our childhoods and in our current experience as professionals and parents raising our children in the region. But this national dialogue on urban-rural divides also seemed unimportant given the problems we were trying to solve every day. All around us were

families who were desperate for work, who loved their children and wanted the best for them, but were trying to overcome the terrible circumstances that arise under the great pressure of poverty.

For community members who did not have access to clean water, the spigot at our campus was the place they filled up their containers. When we saw a young mother out walking as a prostitute, we gave her a chance to get clean and set her life on track. When a staff member faced certain harm at home, the campus became her shelter. We did not see voters or political parties; instead, we saw people and families and children. And those people were smart, resilient, and far more diverse than what we saw represented in the public narrative.

We believe that rural America has been greatly misunderstood. Not only by news media and pundits, but also by policy makers and politicians, and even, at times, the scholars who turn their eye on rural people. Appalachia is only the very tip of an iceberg of misperception and confusion. Collectively, rural America represents a dizzying array of people and circumstances. In fact, the very diversity of rural America may be its core feature. Not only does that diversity emerge in race and social class, in rural towns both rich and poor, but in the very complexity of the rural experience.

We certainly bring our own lens as community members and practitioners, but living in rural America is a constant reminder that the myth of a rural monolith of white poverty and social conservatism is wrong. We have dear friends who are immigrants, who are people of color, who are trans and gay, and who have different sets of abilities. We spend our days with so-called bleeding-heart liberals and staunch conservatives alike. Our children have some friends who live with grandparents because their parents are locked in addiction, as well as other friends who own conspicuously fancy homes and take expensive vacations. Every type of variation you see in the country is often visible and compressed within rural communities, where you cannot always attend a different school

to separate yourself from differences that might be uncomfortable. We don't pretend that we can speak to all of these multifaceted and complex experiences, but our goal in undertaking this book was to provide a broad survey of rural education—one that looks across the nation at all kinds of rural challenges and makes them plain; and also one that empowers rural practitioners to embrace evidence-based solutions and helps them tailor their efforts in the ways that have proven to be most successful. It is our intention that the book include rich examples and compelling details that will be familiar to education leaders, yet geographically and demographically diverse. Most important, we want rural educators and those who work with them—community leaders, policy makers and funders—to walk away with a more complex understanding of rural schools, and which educational efforts work best.

### GUIDING PRINCIPLES

This book not only challenges the presumptions about the bedrock of rural America—its education system and the children it serves—but also presents a framework to understand the complexity of rural education in America. We argue that “rural” is not a binary description that can be determined purely by population size, density, or distance from a major city center. Instead, we need to understand that the rurality (i.e., size, density, geographic distance) of a community interacts dynamically with its wealth and the in-migration/out-migration of its members. For example, a small town in Iowa that has seen an explosion of in-migration when a meatpacking plant opens faces very different issues than a town of the same size in Vermont known for its winter skiing. We then blend research and examples from rural communities across the United States to illustrate effective approaches along the trajectory of a rural student's educational experience from early childhood through postsecondary school. We show how efficacy is determined

by the degree to which instruction, interventions, and programs address the needs and strengths of each unique rural community. Efforts that are placed-based, responsive to the current economic needs, and promote collaboration beyond the school walls have the greatest chance of succeeding.

We acknowledge that rural communities have been left out of the dialogue on educational policy and improvement over the last two decades, as much of that discussion has been centered on market-driven approaches that focus on competition as a means to improve school quality. Even reliably measuring student progress year-to-year can be difficult in areas with a small population of students, let alone creating enough demand for charter schools or teachers with higher evaluations. Moreover, we are in an era of data-driven decision making, when very few studies have been conducted on rural students. Rural students have been missing, in part, because we do not capture demographic data with enough nuance to understand the dimensions of rural inequality, and also because the sample sizes are not conducive to statistical analysis. There are many students who are almost completely absent from our empirical knowledge base, including migrant students, rural racial minorities, and rural students with disabilities.

This book also steps away from decades of social science research that has been focused on relocation. We take the stance that rural communities have value, and solutions should fit the sociocultural and historical reality of the community, rather than proposing strategies that fundamentally support out-migration. Moreover, we will address the problematic notion that rural America is simply those left behind after a “brain drain.” The notion of brain drain is deeply troublesome, in that it suggests that the only human capital that requires thinking and critical analysis belongs to certain professions associated with a specific type of academic training. Moreover, rural communities need a circulation of talent, so that residents who leave can realistically return and bring their



professional training with them, as we did. Very often, those who have left and returned to rural communities are key drivers of community revitalization. It may be an effective strategy to send young adults off for postsecondary education, but with plans and incentives to return home at the right moments in their professional career or personal lives.

Ultimately, we want to take an approach to rural education that is both strengths-based and critical. We will share fifteen years of research that we have conducted in rural communities, much of which is previously unpublished. But because the vast majority of educational research has been conducted in urban centers, we take a grounded approach. That means we incorporate educational research, but also speak to our own experiences and the lived experiences of rural educational practitioners, policy makers, community leaders, and funders. If we are to serve rural communities, we need to take a nuanced approach that fits their sociocultural realities and needs.

## HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book, first and foremost, is for people like us who choose to live in rural communities and use education as a tool for community development. It is about the type of topics that kept Sky up at night when trying to teach reading to kindergartners and first graders on the Navajo Nation, and about the challenges Geoff faced as a high school administrator who wanted to help his students get to college. But the book is also for a wide array of practitioners. It also touches on the topics Sky works on now, as the director of a program to help first-generation and Appalachian students succeed at the University of the Cumberland. It is about the issues Geoff faced both when leading a tech start-up and now, in building an entrepreneurial ecosystem to create jobs and opportunity in a rural region where access to broadband and data is limited.

Depending on the lens you take, you may want to read the entire book through, or focus on specific chapters that are most relevant to your work. *Rural Education in America* is organized into three sections: Part I, “The Rural Context,” defines what we mean by rural and overviews strength and challenges. Part II, “Meeting the Needs of Rural Students,” is about successful rural educational initiatives along a cradle-to-career continuum that are especially critical for the future of rural students and their communities. Part III, “Moving to Action,” gives strategies and tools for educators who are planning new initiatives and improvement efforts as well as recommendations for policy makers and private philanthropy.

In part I you will find a discussion that will help you understand what is meant by rural and the major economic and structural forces that are shaping rural education. Chapter 1 provides a survey of the demographics of rural America today; it also tackles the issue of brain drain and whether or not rural people are moving (or should relocate) to urban clusters. Chapter 2 takes a research-based approach to identifying the strengths of rural communities, including good schools and increased social and economic mobility compared to urban areas. The third and final chapter in part I is about the forces at play in rural communities that shape educational opportunity and needs.

Part II focuses on key issues in rural education that follow a developmental timeline, from early childhood to college and career opportunities. Chapter 4 discusses early childhood education, sharing best practices as well as wrestling with access to and quality of early education and care opportunities in rural communities. Chapter 5 addresses literacy and language development, including that of rural students who speak a language other than English at home. Chapter 6 focuses on science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) education, including how rural schools can overcome the digital divide and help students imagine themselves in technology careers—even if they have never met someone from

that profession. The final chapter in this section discusses college and career access, including innovative models that have narrowed the educational attainment gap in rural communities.

Part III puts ideas into practice. In chapter 8, we provide resources and tools to help readers undertake a self-assessment of their own school or district and identify a challenge to tackle. A cycle of continuous learning is supplied that is specific to rural educational contexts. The final chapter tackles the current way that educational initiatives are rolled out in rural America—including pitfalls and challenges—and then provides guidance for policy. Before making any more investments or policy decisions, we must understand some of the pitfalls of this work and the steps needed to be responsive to the complex educational needs of rural communities.

### WHY RURAL EDUCATION MATTERS NOW MORE THAN EVER

It has never been more critical to pay attention to the unique needs of rural education than now. The divide between rural and urban America exposed in the 2016 election did not happen overnight. It was the result of decades of rapid global and technological change. Over the last fifty years, there has been seismic shift in the global economy, resulting in tremendous negative effects on rural communities in the United States. From 1970 to 2015, the percentage of employment in the US services sector more than doubled, while the proportion of jobs in the predominantly rural industries of agriculture, forestry, fishing, and mining fell more than 50 percent.<sup>4</sup> Rapid technical advances and mechanization in resource extraction exacerbated these job losses. Although the United States made some investments in education, training, and re-skilling in rural communities, these efforts were fragmented, undersized, and, as we will explore more in chapter 9, poorly implemented.<sup>5</sup> The

introduction of prescription pain killers in the late 1990s and early 2000s exacerbated the spiraling economic woes of rural communities. Nowhere were these issues more pronounced than in the Kentucky and West Virginia coalfields of Appalachia, where the rapid decline of the coal industry left tens of thousands jobless.

Unemployment in the coal-producing counties of Eastern Kentucky and West Virginia stands well above 10 percent, nearly triple the national average. Even this figure is misleading as it excludes those who are permanently disabled; in these counties more than 20 percent of adults under sixty-five have that designation.<sup>6</sup> The proportion of children living in poverty is above 40 percent. Perhaps most strikingly, people in this region of the United States die eleven years earlier than the average citizen. In every economic report that links quality of life with geography, from the “Opportunity Atlas” dataset to predictors of lifespan to percentage of deaths from opioid overdose, these are some of the hardest hit areas of the country.<sup>7</sup>

After decades of neglect, rural America now faces dual intertwined urgent challenges requiring significant investments in both education and economic development. So, we must not only completely evolve the educational systems in rural America to catch up to the twenty-first century, but also understand what opportunities exist in growing economic sectors that align with the strengths of rural communities. This book directly addresses how to design educational systems in rural America that not only improve academic and social outcomes, but also prepare students for dignified careers that do not force them to leave their home communities.

Now more than ever it is imperative that we make significant educational investments in rural communities. Increasing inequality and the perceived lack of future opportunities have left many people in rural communities justifiably discouraged, angry, and worried—the direct result of which has been social and political destabilization, and policy suggestions that are ever more rigid and

polarizing. We have written this book at an unprecedented time in American education, when the Coronavirus pandemic has closed schools across the country and our children finished out the school year at home. Urgent issues such as lack of access to broadband internet now loom as barriers to even the most fundamental educational experiences. We look at our own five-year-old and wonder what kindergarten might look like if schools are still closed in the fall. How will his classmates and friends learn to read? Even more, we are heartbroken to see how the virus has devastated the Navajo Nation, and worry that other rural communities might face this level of devastation. Inequality was already a problem, and we worry deeply about what the future holds. What gives us hope is the rapid way that educators have adapted. We will need all of our creativity and collected wisdom in the years ahead.

We are glad to be tackling these topics in an era when the national mood on rural communities is mixed, and sometimes quite negative. We believe that the first step in healing a rural-urban divide is better understanding. Providing a quality education to all children is a universal value that connects our entire country, whether a person lives in the Massachusetts Bay or among the hollers of the Appalachian Mountains. At the same time, the infrastructure and supports in place for rural communities can be vastly different. Until we begin to better understand the needs of rural communities, our rural schools will continue in the shadows, expected to implement education in a way that was designed for urban realities. We can do better than that. After all, we know from history that our country is the strongest when all groups of people are thriving.