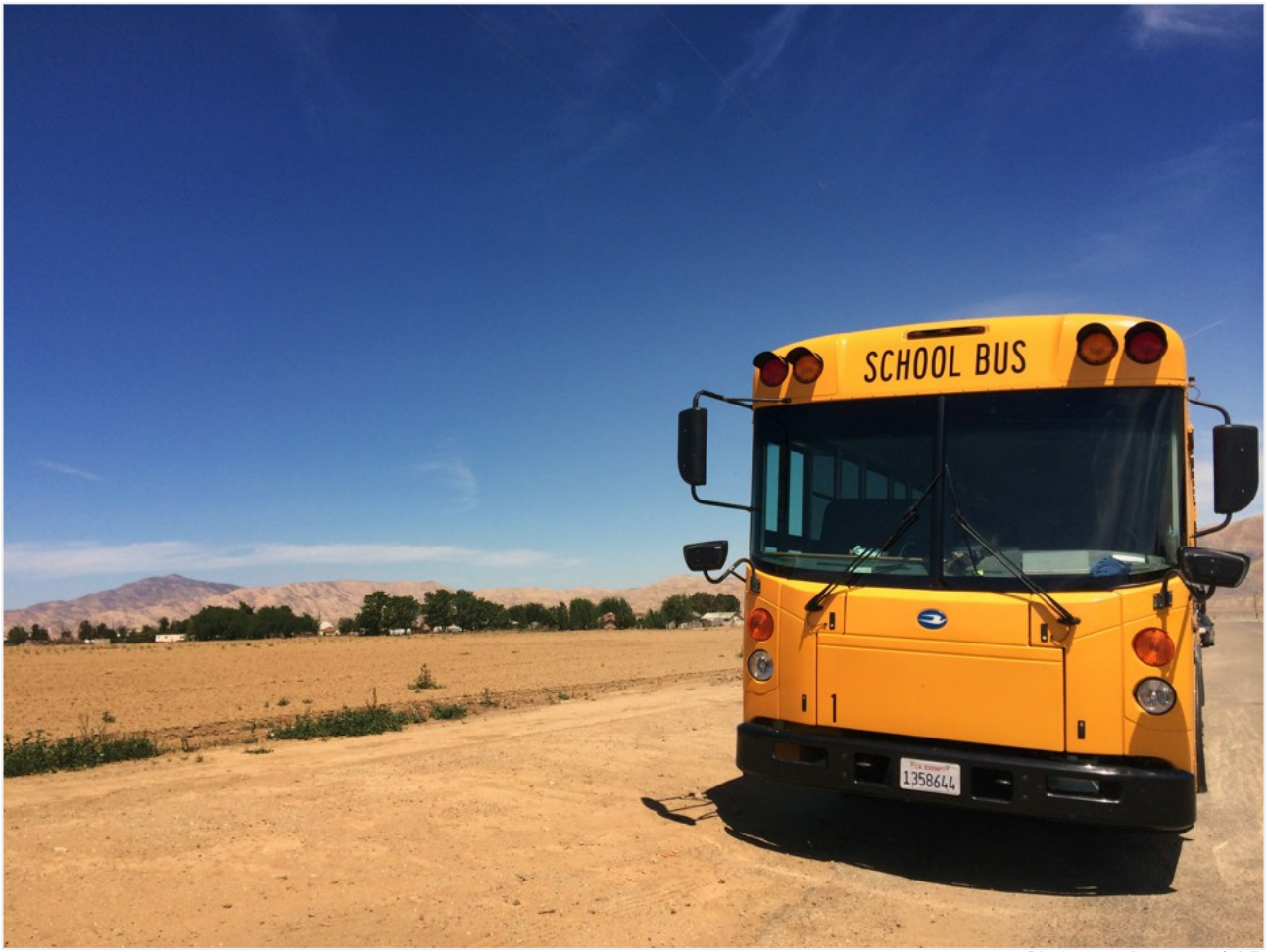
The Atlantic

Salvaging Education in Rural America

Rural towns struggle with widespread poverty, limited opportunity, and low college-attendance rates. What role do schools play in improving the quality of life?



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RACHEL MARTIN | JAN 5, 2016 | EDUCATION

Alvin C. York Agricultural Institute sits in the heart of Fentress County, Tennessee, high on the Cumberland Plateau within spitting distance of the Kentucky border. The area is a beautiful, bucolic place characterized by rising hills and encroaching forests, tumbling creeks and hard-won farmland. It can

also be a pretty bleak place to live.

When teachers, theorists, and pundits analyze America's educational system, they usually focus on urban centers, but rural school systems make up more than half of the nation's operating school districts, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. Like many of their urban peers, children there fight to overcome scant funding, generational poverty, rampant malnutrition, and limited job prospects.

As the Southern Education Foundation announced last January, a majority of the schoolchildren attending the nation's public schools now come from low-income families. The implications, for rural, urban, and suburban children alike, are serious. Students who come to school hungry often find it difficult to focus on learning. Students without computers or Internet access may have trouble with their homework. Students who are homeless or need clothing or lack medical care can develop behavioral problems.

Compared to students in urban or suburban schools, students in rural areas and small towns are less likely to attend college. Part of this is because of financial concerns. In Fentress County, close to 40 percent of children live in poverty. According to the Obama administration, it's one of 301 rural counties (compared to 52 non-rural ones) in the country that suffer from "persistent poverty," meaning poverty rates have exceeded 20 percent in every census since 1980. In the 2011, 65 percent of children in the county qualified for free or reduced lunches, a key marker of childhood poverty. That is 18 percent higher than Tennessee's average. The community has some of the highest rates of premature death, sick leave, and injury-related deaths in the state. Thirty-eight percent of the county's adults are obese.

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grandparents have disappeared.

Rural students in Fentress County and elsewhere also have limited opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities (another factor that boosts a kid's chances of graduating from high school and attending college); many of them simply live too far away to stay after school for practice or club meetings. One bus from York drives over an hour-and-a-half and then drops off a handful of kids at a car, which takes them the rest of the way home.

Another reason for their low college-attendance rates is that rural students come from places where higher education traditionally hasn't been of much use. Previous generations could find good jobs in factories or agriculture, which is part of the reason why in Fentress County only 58 percent of adults have a high-school diploma. Just 8 percent have a bachelor's degree—by some estimates, remove teachers from that calculation, and only 1 percent of adults have graduated college.

These days, however, many of the jobs that used to sustain students' parents and grandparents have disappeared. The coal mines, once important employers in the area, have petered out. Logging and paper manufacturing corporations are shutting down; Bowater, once one of the largest newsprint producers in the nation, is selling or giving away its land for preservation, recreation, and residential development. "The largest job market … is the local Walmart, the local hospital, and the school systems," reported AdvanceED, an education consulting firm, in 2010. The county's farms struggle to compete with corporate agribusinesses.

As in rural communities across the nation, Fentress County is the sort of place talented, educated young people flee as soon as they can. While urban populations are growing by 2 million people a year, rural populations continue to fall. Might York Agricultural Institute and other rural schools be part of reinvigorating their dying communities?

In Fentress County, the local government has been trying to draw new firms to the area, but the new businesses need workers versed in modern manufacturing techniques and able to use new technological innovations. Some of these industries have been partnered with York Institute to try to train a new generation of employees.

The World War I hero Alvin C. York—who only had nine months of schooling—funded and built the institute because he wanted to prove Tennessee's rural youth could accomplish anything given a proper education. In 1937, he donated the building, along with almost 400 acres, to the state. Its students have become politicians, business leaders, and educators. The astronaut Roger Crouch went there.

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For the last few years, York Institute has been fighting to exist. In the spring of 2010, the state unceremoniously announced it would turn the school over to Fentress County to fund, and all 94 employees received termination notices. "No type of transition, no 'this is in the works,' nothing," Fentress County Director of Schools Mike Jones said to a Knoxville news station. "It bothers me." The school only managed to stay afloat when, that summer, funding was restored on a nonrecurring basis. Every year, the school faced the same instability until this most recent budget cycle when the state finally announced they would continue to manage and fund the school, but the school's budget was cut severely. Times are still tough.

I met with York Institute's superintendent, Phil Brannon, the Wednesday before Thanksgiving. "Thirty days 'til Christmas," read a whiteboard beside

the desk of the school's office manager, who was decorating for the holidays. Brannon is tall, white-haired, and bearded. He would be an imposing figure if not for his ready smile; instead, in keeping with the season, he reminded me of Santa Claus.

Brannon graduated from York Institute in 1978 and then earned a degree in animal science at Tennessee Tech University. He returned to Fentress County planning to farm the land his family has cultivated for eight generations, and he supplemented his income by substitute teaching. After a year, he decided to teach full-time and farm part-time. As soon as he was certified, he was hired to teach remedial classes at York. "I would have English, math, and science, all in the same period" he told me. All but one of his students passed. He gradually rose through the ranks until he was tapped for the superintendent position a decade ago. The students call him Dr. Phil. "I tell them, I'm not a doctor; I just have a [Education Specialist degree]," he said. "They're not changing."

During the 10 years that Brannon has led York, No Child Left Behind has died; the Common Core and Race to the Top have arisen. College- and career-readiness have become popular catchphrases to explain the need for the latest round of education reform, leaving educators, parents, and students to work out what this will look like in their classrooms.

Larger consolidated or urban schools can offer multiple tiers of the same class, so students can choose whether to take general education or college preparatory classes. Some students are even able to get into Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate courses. Rural schools don't have the teachers or classrooms needed to maintain these programs, so they have to rely on community partners for help.

At York Institute, that aid has come from Roane State Community College, which maintains portables across the street. For years, a private benefactor paid students' tuition so they could begin taking dual-enrollment classes while still in high school, but after his death, the institute couldn't afford the

$52,000 tab. The school compromised: It covers the cost of the first class and half of it for the second, while students foot the bill for the third one. This fact surprised me because Tennessee's governor has promised every graduating high-school student two years of community college or vocational education. Turns out, the money is not available until after high-school graduation, but York's dual-enrollment classes are how they can offer their students college-preparatory classes without overloading teachers.

Brannon and the other educators understand that college-bound students might not be able to stay in Fentress County. So he's developed vocational opportunities for the teens who may want to stay, working with local industries to establish programs that will lead them to good local jobs. Students in the health-sciences program, for example, graduate eligible to take the Certified Nursing Assistant exam. With that, they can either go straight to work or continue their education to become registered nurses. Other students who focus on auto mechanics or welding have jobs lined up before they graduate. Another business is partnering with the school to set up a pressed metal production workshop.

It's been a bit more of a challenge to integrate technology into York's classrooms. By next semester, the school should have 300 Chromebooks, a set of servers to replace the 10-year-old ones the school currently uses, and a new wi-fi system that won't crash from overuse; ultimately, the goal is to equip each student with a computer. Brannon worries that without that daily computer use, his students will fall behind their urban and suburban peers. Plus, technology is economical. According to Brannon's calculations, the school spends almost $80,000 a year on textbooks, but e-books are a third that cost.

The school is lucky because the local service provider in Fentress County used the Recovery Act to wire the community, so Brannon just needs the hardware. This is one place York has an advantage over some other rural districts. According to a recent study by *Education Week*'s Benjamin Herold, rural

districts pay up to 2.5 times as much as urban schools for internet service, and then it is too slow for teachers to use in their classrooms. This means 21 million students lack access to adequate Internet service.

And while technology isn't, as Herold told me, "an automatic panacea for rural schools," experts say access to the Internet can offset rural students' disadvantages through dual-enrollment classes, adaptive-learning software, distance learning, and access to communities of educators.

The country is in an era where educational analysts look at numbers not anecdotes.

Early in my research, I made an unannounced visit to York Institute. I parked behind the school. A teacher stuck her head in the car window. "Can I help?" she asked. She attended the school in the 1970s, and she gave me a tour of what the campus looked like then. She pointed out where a green used to be. "I tell my students there was a smoking area and a smoked up area," the woman, dressed in an oversized school T-shirt and large khakis, said, apologizing for her appearance. It was testing week, and she had three students who weren't in exams. Today, they'd washed the maintenance vans. Tomorrow, they would pick up trash.

I drove back out. A group of kids planted flowers in front of the school sign; another set cleaned out the health sciences department where three dummies lay splayed on stretchers set on the sidewalk. At first, I thought they were napping kids, but everyone was busy and self-directed. "We resemble a junior college more than high school," Brannon said. "It's expensive to run, but we manage to do it on a smaller budget than what we must have."

Still, the country is in an era where educational analysts look at numbers not anecdotes. York Institute's test scores are at or just above average for the state of Tennessee. Compared to the nearest high school, however, the students score a whopping 42 percent better in algebra and close to ten percent better in English. By the numbers, then, they may be onto something up there in Fentress County.

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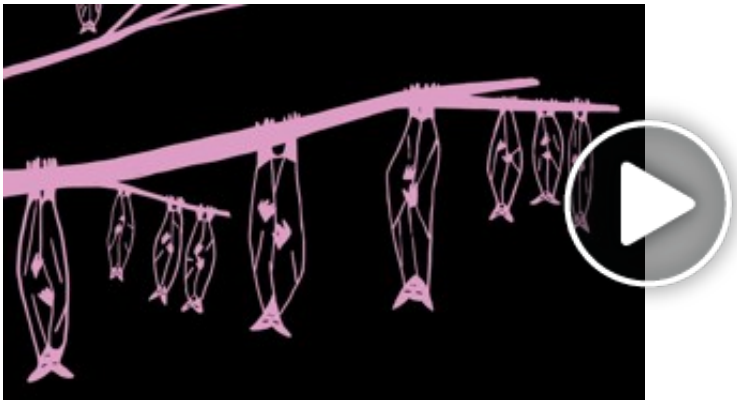

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

RACHEL MARTIN is a writer based in Tennessee.