

# How We Can Help

For the past year, *Progressive Farmer* has researched and published a five-part series on rural education. Like our readers, we had watched with growing concern as our nation's schools received failing marks time and time again.

In our series, we gave people involved in country schools a place for their own report card. We focused on schools that had found creative solutions to typical problems.

## Dollars Making Sense

Lack of money is the biggest problem rural schools face. In many cases, financial woes can be pinned on unequal funding at the state level. For example, every member of the Texas Supreme Court recently declared the state's public education funding system unconstitutional.

In challenging the system, several Texas school districts claimed that low property value prevented them from raising local money on par with that of wealthier districts. Spending per student ranged from \$2,000 to \$19,000 per year in the districts.

Texas is the 9th state to have its financing system declared unconstitutional in recent years and the 11th to be involved in a legal battle. Equalizing funding among districts appears fair and democratic.

However, critics say this action will only fund mediocrity by lessening local involvement.

We talked to many school officials who had supplemented their state financing with grants.

But getting grants for use in rural schools is tough because of the competition, says Susan Raftery, a rural sociologist with the Southeastern Educational Improvement Laboratory. The lab in Research Triangle Park, N.C., is one of nine established by Congress to study rural education.

"Right now," says Raftery, "the Ford Foundation is doing quite a bit with rural communities. But it can

only fund so many major projects around the country."

Schools that want an edge in this arena may consider sending their best writer to a workshop to learn how to write winning grant proposals. (These workshops are often advertised in education journals.)

"I'm one to go to the Ciba-Geigys or the Pioneer Hi-Breds and say, 'Would you like to get involved with the communities that are still out there actively involved in your business?'" says Raftery.

For most rural schools, financial foraging is their common denominator. Carnivals, candy sales, field days, and other fund-raising events often are vital for the survival of a rural school.

Money alone, however, has never been the sole solution in education. Money spent on education increased by nearly 60% from 1980 to 1984—

from \$86 billion to \$126 billion. Per pupil, the cost rose from \$1,917 to \$3,173. Yet during this same time, reports continued on the decline of our schools.

So what else does it take to make rural schools work well? Teachers are at the top of the list.

## Rural Teachers Need Support

Many teachers may be overworked and underpaid, but they don't have to be underappreciated as well.

Oglethorpe County High School in Georgia has a built-in system that gives teachers a say in running the school. A committee consisting of the principal and teachers meets monthly to decide policy matters. When a school can't increase salaries, giving teachers more power over their responsibilities seems at least an appreciated alternative.

First-year teachers especially need



support. At Aberdeen Elementary School in Mississippi, principal Jannette Peugh tries hard not to overload the new teachers with chores that the more experienced teachers don't want.

The Aberdeen community helps attract teachers by organizing church singles and career classes and by paying taxes for salary supplements.

### Creative Teaching Tools

Technology lets rural schools offer the "luxury" courses available at larger schools. Some schools use satellite links or cable hookups; others use microwave or fiber-optic lines; still others use video or computer equipment.

In one case, vans visit schools that are taking part in a University of Alabama-based honors program for rural children. The vans are filled with sophisticated equipment that

transforms these country classrooms into DNA labs.

But as Allen Boyd, a parent in Aberdeen, Miss., reminded us, "Teachers can't do it all."

### Community Involvement: The Essential Ingredient

When asked why a neighboring town's school was consolidated while her community's school was spared, a newspaper editor replied: "They just rolled over and played dead, but this town did not."

Thriving rural schools are found where people recognize how important the school is to the town's survival. Community members can show they care in many ways.

For instance, in Jamestown, Tenn., many parents were encouraging their children to quit school and go to work. So the school's administration had each teacher develop a

community relations program, along with a General Equivalency Diploma (GED) program, to get the parents back into the classrooms.

Before the teachers' campaign was launched, the school had seven people attend open house. After the community relations program was put into place the following year, 600 showed up.

At one school in Wilmot, Ark., the problem was first-graders with low standardized test scores. So the school showed the parents how to help their children learn shapes, colors, and simple numbers before the kids started school.

"It's the simple things that work," says Raftery. "It's getting community people to take some kind of vested interest again in what happens in those schools."

By NANCY DORMAN-HICKSON with photo by VANN CLEVELAND



## Sources on Rural Education

### Appalachia Educational Laboratory\* (AEL)

Terry L. Eidell, Executive Director  
Box 1348  
Charleston, WV 25325  
1-304-347-0400

### Arkansas Department of Education

Janita Hoskyn  
#4 Capitol Mall  
Little Rock, AR 72201  
(Has begun, with the Governor's office, several programs to improve the reading and analytical capabilities of preschool and school-aged children.)

### NASA Teacher Resource Center

Deborah Harris  
Southern University  
610 Texas St., Suite 307  
Shreveport, LA 71101  
(Broadcasts programs covering scientific subjects to urban and rural schools.)

### National Education Association

Director of Communications  
1201 16th St. N.W.  
Washington, DC 20036-3290  
1-202-833-4000  
(Covers general education issues, especially political concerns, and focuses primarily on teachers.)

### National Rural Education Association

Joseph Newlin  
230 Education Building  
Colorado State University  
Fort Collins, CO 80523  
(Involved with issues pertaining to rural schools.)

### Program for School Improvement

G-9 Aderhold Hall  
University of Georgia  
Athens, GA 30602  
(Offers technical assistance and ideas to

a number of rural Georgia districts on such problems as high dropout rates and alternative curriculums.)

### Southern Rural Education Association

Bill Clauss  
School of Education and Psychology  
Western Carolina University  
Cullowhee, NC 29723  
(Involved with issues pertaining to Southern rural schools.)

### Southwest Educational Development Laboratory\* (SEDL)

Preston C. Kronkosky  
Executive Director  
211 East 7th St.  
Austin, TX 78701  
1-512-476-6861

### Southeastern Educational Improvement Laboratory\*

Susan Raftery  
200 Park Offices, Suite 200  
Research Triangle Park, NC 27709  
1-919-549-8216

### STAR Schools Grant Program

Frank Withrow, Director  
U.S. Department of Education  
Room 502A  
555 New Jersey Ave. N.W.  
Washington, DC 20208-5644  
1-202-357-8200  
(Program awarded \$19 million in 1988 for distribution among four original partnerships to be used for such technology as satellite links in rural schools.)

\*One of several regional laboratories that provide technical and financial aid to rural schools. They help in implementing such promising practices as school-based businesses and dropout prevention programs.