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A PERSISTENT QUANDARY:
THE RURAL SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PROJECT, 1953-1957
By Richard E. Day, Lindsey N. DeVries, and Amanda L. Hoover

*Still sits the school house by the road,
A ragged beggar sunning,
Around it still the sumac grows,
And blackberry wines are running.¹*

Kentucky's agrarian economy and independent attitudes have long shaped its citizens' perceptions of public education. The amount of schooling needed to plow a field or work a mine was thought to be very small. Kentucky's Scots, Irish, English, and German immigrants were favorably inclined toward education, but as was typical of the people with a transatlantic background, they felt that education, like religion, was a matter of personal rather than public concern.²

From the start, "the scattered position of the population has made the gathering of the children for school purposes a very difficult matter"³ and Kentucky's traditionalistic political culture provided little fuel for the

¹ From "Helping Teacher's Report" Pulaski County, 1946-47, copy obtained from Berea College Special Collections and Archives Berea, Kentucky (hereafter Berea Archives) RG 4, Box 6, file "Charles N. Shutt...Series IX, Folder 2."

² Thomas D. Clark, *A History of Kentucky*. (Lexington, Ky., 1954), 213.

³ Nathaniel Southgate Shaler, *Kentucky: A Pioneer Commonwealth* (New York, 1884), 396.

development of a system of schools. The general disdain for public schooling, by a largely uneducated population, provided little incentive for the General Assembly to worry much about the establishment of schools at all.⁴ As historian Thomas Clark observed, early Kentuckians took the typical backwoods attitude of "wait until we have cleared our forests, and until we have made our fortunes and we will build schools...If it was decided a person needed an education their curriculum was dictated by the role they wished to pursue in life."⁵

These settlers were not necessarily indifferent, when it came to the education of their children, but it was hard to see the relevance of book-learning for the vast majority who would live their days on the family farm. The ability to read the Bible, pen a letter, and enough mathematics to avoid being cheated in the marketplace made for an adequate education. The scarcity of qualified teachers and textbooks made it difficult to build good schools, particularly in rural locations.⁶ But in Lexington, the state's largest city during the first four decades of statehood and a place that came to be known as the "Athens of the West" for its citizens' interest in culture, arts, and education, the

⁴ Ibid., 215-216; Daniel J. Elazar, *The American Mosaic: The Impact of Space, Time, and Culture on American Politics*. (San Francisco, 1994), 235.

⁵ Clark, 215-216.

⁶ Daniel Drake, *Pioneer Education and Life* (Cedar Rapids, Iowa, 1939).

prospects for teachers were good and students enjoyed significant educational advantages.⁷

Following a handful of failed attempts, a rudimentary system of free common schools for white children was established by 1848 - and was effectively decimated by the Civil War. Following the war schools remained a relatively low priority amid the state's numerous problems.⁸

In 1900, Kentucky stood fourth among fourteen southern states in per capita income devoted to education, but had the only compulsory attendance law in the South. In that first decade of the twentieth century, illiteracy in Kentucky was the highest in the South and the state remained beset with the deficiencies of the previous century.⁹ But in Lexington the schools were fast

⁷ James C. Klotter, "Central Kentucky's "Athens of the West" Image in the Nation and in History," in James C. Klotter and Daniel Rowland, eds, *Bluegrass Renaissance: the History and Culture of Central Kentucky, 1792-1852*, (Lexington, 2012), 11-14.

⁸ Day, Richard E., "Each Child, Every Child: The Story of the Council for Better Education, Equity and Adequacy in Kentucky's Schools." Ed. D. diss., University of Kentucky, 2003), 30-43. Available at http://works.bepress.com/richard_day/doctype.html#popular_press ..."

⁹ Thomas D. Clark, in James C. Klotter, ed., *Our Kentucky: A Study of the Bluegrass State* (Lexington, 1992), 286. See also James C. Klotter, *Kentucky: Portrait in Paradox, 1900-1950*, (Frankfort, 1996), 150-153.

becoming the pride of the community and were said to “compare favorably with those of any other city in the country.”¹⁰

The General Assembly responded with the Sullivan Bill (1908), which for the first time, called for the establishment of a high school in every county and provided funds for normal schools to enhance teacher preparation and create a supply of teachers for the state. Thus, after decades of neglect, the state acknowledged its obligation to the rural children in the field of secondary education.¹¹ But following the 1908 session, funding did not continue at an adequate level as other states outpaced Kentucky. By 1920, Kentucky’s ranking had fallen to eleventh in the south. The enduring legacy of neglect drove many of the best and brightest students and teachers out of the state.

The 1920 General Assembly established the Kentucky Commission on Education to report on the condition of schooling in the state. The commission called for more adequate schools to meet the needs of the growing marketplace and the “elimination of educational inequities which arise chiefly from the

¹⁰ Kerr, Judge C., “Massillon Alexander Cassidy,” in *History of Kentucky*, Volume 4. (Chicago, 1922), 329-330. See also, Richard E. Day and Lindsey N. DeVries, “A Southern Progressive: M. A. Cassidy and the Lexington Schools, 1886-1928.” 39 (2012): 107-125.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 205.

differences in the amount of taxable wealth” between cities and rural areas of the state.”¹²

At the time Woodford County, for example, boasted \$7,615 of taxable property per school age child, compared to Wolfe County that had only \$545. The Commission said the legislature was ignoring differences in the quality of the schools and their responsibility to provide equal educational opportunities for all the children of the Commonwealth.¹³

Over the next decade and a half, the total population of Kentucky increased 9.5 percent and school attendance increased 43 percent. Of 7,592 school buildings in 1935 5,367 were one-room schools. 995 were two teacher schools. But only slightly more than half of Kentucky’s teachers had more than two years of college. School data persuaded many school leaders to believe that consolidated schools would produce better trained teachers and higher attendance rates among students.¹⁴

Berea College - a private school already famous for its unusual legacy of racial coeducation – had made its first foray into the remediation of problems associated with public schooling and rural life in 1917 when it organized “the first six-room one-teacher school” at Scaffold Cane, south of the Berea campus,

¹² H. W. Peters, *History of Education in Kentucky, 1915-1940* (Frankfort, Ky., 1939), 37, 117.

¹³ *Public Education in Kentucky* (New York, 1922), 140-141, 202.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

where teacher training occurred under an agreement with the Madison County Board of Education.¹⁵

As this article will outline, over the succeeding five decades Berea would experiment with teacher training schools, improved data collection, study of rural communities and their schools, sharing of instructional materials with impoverished schools, improvement of physical conditions at the schools, and health education. These efforts were best exemplified by the Rural School Improvement Project (1953-1957) which focused on improved teacher quality and stimulated a new interest in teacher supervision. Yet, after a half century of effort, the inequities associated with rural education remained as intractable as always.

Berea College was founded in 1855 for the express purpose of demonstrating that blacks and whites could successfully be educated together. The school suffered greatly throughout the Civil War but was able to reestablish itself and operate in relative calm for a decade or more.¹⁶ But by the late 1880s, Bereans found the support for racial co-education, and

¹⁵ John Adams, "The Berea College Mission to the Mountains: Teacher training, the Normal Department, and Rural Community Development," *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 110 (2012): 24.

¹⁶ Richard E. Day, Roger Cleveland, and June Hyndman, "Berea College-Coeducationally and racially Integrated: An Unlikely Contingency in the 1850s," *Journal of Negro Education* 82 (2013): 35-46.

contributions, waning due to a shift in public sympathies. Berea would soon have to address a financial crisis. At the same time, the difficulties of the region were becoming more apparent as educational opportunities that were advancing in other sections, appeared to be ignored by too many in the eastern mountains. Schools were generally poor and in short supply. William Goodell Frost assumed the presidency of Berea College, in 1892, and a gradual shift of the school's primary mission toward educating the poor in the Appalachian region commenced.¹⁷

Frost was captivated by the anachronistic communities of the region he termed "Appalachia" and viewed the apparent gaps in education in rural areas as an opportunity to alleviate the appallingly low educational level of the region while cultivating future students for Berea College in the process. Frost emphasized the privations of the region, resulting in a newfound interest in establishing Appalachia as a viable and unique culture. Rather than attempting to eliminate or subsume Appalachia into the mainstream American culture, Frost spearheaded the movement to assist the communities in areas of

¹⁷ Richard A. Heckman and Betty Jean Hall, "Berea College and the Day Law," *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society*, 66 (1968): 35-52. See also, Klotter, *Portrait*, 153.

necessity while still preserving the unique crafts, songs, and traditions of the culture.¹⁸

Frost continued to advocate for the mountain people of Appalachia throughout his tenure at Berea College. In 1915, his son Norman authored a statistical study that showcased the educational shortcomings and challenges of Appalachia. President Frost's main concern was the lack of structure characteristic of previous attempts to alleviate the problems plaguing rural Appalachian schools.¹⁹ He chided county superintendents for their tendency to artificially inflate enrollment rates to create the illusion that rural schools in their county were more successful than they actually were. These superintendents typically only agreed to construct new schools or make repairs to existing buildings where citizens requested such improvements, regardless of the real needs within the region. School terms were also extremely short in Appalachian counties. In 1910, the average length of a school term nationwide

¹⁸ Henry D. Shapiro, *Appalachia on Our Mind: The Southern Mountains and Mountaineers in the American Consciousness, 1870-1920*. (Chapel Hill, 1978), 119-128.

¹⁹ Norman Frost, "A statistical study of the public schools of the southern Appalachian mountains," *United States Bureau of Education Bulletin* 11 (1915): 29.

for rural schools was 137 days a year. This was nearly a month longer than the 104 day average term in 98 mountain counties in Appalachia.²⁰

No doubt, geographical hindrances of the region, the practice of students enrolling in multiple schools during the same term, and the lack of available schools also contributed to this problem. Frost reported that, in 1912, there were 17 counties in the state of Kentucky that did not contain a high school, four years after the passage of the Sullivan Bill.²¹ The rural schools that did exist were often run-down and lacking the necessary resources for effective teaching.²² Because state laws requiring schools to provide books for students who couldn't afford them were rarely enforced and school budgets were small, Frost observed that children who lived outside of large cities could only obtain textbooks if they were furnished by their parents.²³

Following Frost's retirement in 1920, Berea's new President William J. Hutchins brought his own love and admiration for the wisdom of the mountain people..." born of meditation and experience quite surpassing the wisdom of the average educated man." But by 1928, the agreement that produced Scaffold Cane School had fallen apart and Berea was left without a facility for practice teaching. Berea normal department Dean Cloyd N. McAllister, who had been

²⁰ Ibid., 13-14.

²¹ Ibid., 11-12, 31.

²² Ibid., 21.

²³ Ibid., 20.

instrumental in establishing Scaffold Cane, set out to form a new rural teacher training facility under the belief that “in a rural setting, practice teachers actually required more knowledge of the mountain customs than did other schoolteachers.” McAllister wanted a rural school where as many as six practice teachers could be sent at one time.²⁴

The impact of rural customs and cultural beliefs surrounding mainstream education is difficult to overstate, and may be one of the most persistent forms of resistance to educational advancement in Kentucky educational history. Rural citizens of the region were wary of individuals from urban areas, including teachers. Decades of war, natural disasters and economic hardship had led to the pillaging of the rural mountains and its residents.²⁵ The consolidation of rural schools throughout Appalachia, an idea whose time had come, invited government intervention, and with it a shift away from the community norms that saturated many mountain schools. Schools were the primary battlegrounds in which the ideas, norms, and values of the dominant culture would challenge pre-existing attitudes of Appalachia and

²⁴ Ibid., 26-30.

²⁵ William E. Ellis, *A History of Education in Kentucky* (Lexington, 2011), 15, 59, 146-158, 153-155.

legitimate the integration of young mountain residents in the mainstream.²⁶ Modern education opened the door to careers that could offer more geographic mobility and more desirable economic conditions than were available in the rural communities. Many mountain residents feared that the allure of industrialization and the erosion of rural norms would inevitably divert young people (who served as important beacons of cultural attitudes and economic resources) from the region. Residents feared that this mass exodus from the mountains would effectively kill the tight-knit communities and ideals of Appalachia.²⁷

In 1929, McAllister secured an agreement with the Rockcastle County Board of Education to take over the school at Wildie for “demonstration and training of rural teachers” with Berea providing most of the financial support. The Wildie Demonstration School was situated in a wilderness swamp, complete with mosquitoes, and a creek bed for a road which practically guaranteed the 60 young scholars would enter the school with wet feet. Hygiene remained a significant concern for the school as well as the broader

²⁶ Roy Silver and Alan J. DeYoung, “The Ideology of Rural/Appalachian Education, 1895-1935: The Appalachian Education Problem as Part of the Appalachian Life Problem,” *Educational Theory* 36 (1986): 51-65.

²⁷ Alan J. DeYoung, “Constructing and Staffing the Cultural Bridge: The School as Change Agent in Rural Appalachia,” *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 26 (1995) 168-192.

community until 1943 when Berea withdrew from the project. The annual income per child in Kentucky was \$1,105 which ranked the state 43rd. Since 1874 the state had also been maintaining separate school systems for white and black children, and was by this time “devoting but 3.54 percent of its income to the support of its school system and ranking thirty-seventh with respect to effort” and Kentucky occupied thirty-eighth place with respect to all-around educational performance.²⁸

Strongly associated with poor local school conditions were concerns over local school sub-district trustees and superintendents who did not always have the best interest of their students at heart. Eastern State Teachers College President H. L. Donovan, who had informally surveyed the county superintendents in 1931, decried the situation in a speech to the National Education Association, in 1933. He told the convention that nepotism, political chicanery, and in some cases “the actual sale of schools to the highest bidder” kept qualified teachers from being hired, while the half-educated “kept school” and led the public to discredit the entire profession.²⁹ The Paintsville Herald

²⁸ Raymond M. Hughes and William H. Lancelot, *Education: America's Magic* (Ames, IA, 1946), in Frank L. McVey, *The Gates Open Slowly* (Lexington, 1949), 282-283.

²⁹ Donovan, H. L., (July 5, 1933) *Teacher Training for the New Age*, National Education Association, Chicago, Il., obtained from the EKV Archives, Collection

reported eight deaths associated with a shoot-out over local school trustee elections at the Head of Prater Creek in Floyd County. More than \$500 had been spent on the campaign for school trustee, which had responsibility for three teachers' jobs which typically paid \$100 to \$150. When precinct workers beholden to the political faction that was leading by two votes, attempted to close the election before the opposition could vote their last two citizens, a gun fight broke out. On the same Election Day, one person was killed in Breathitt County and three more were wounded in Lawrence County.³⁰ The Courier-Journal reported the indictments of three "of these vampires who are the greatest enemies to education" in Marshall County and told of jobs being sold for "a cow" in Calloway County.³¹ Donovan said that twenty-five percent of the

77A3, Box 101, RG 2 Presidents Office, Donovan Papers, Folder 1; See also Ellis *History*, 205.

³⁰ July 6, 1933, "Prater Creek is Scene of Bloody Battle Saturday Six Others Wounded," *Paintsville Herald*, reprinted from Prestonsburg Community College microfilm available at

http://kykinfolk.org/floyd/News_Clips/Schoolhouse_massacre_article.htm;

See also Ellis *History*, 205.

³¹ Letter from Donald McWain of the Courier-Journal to H. L. Donovan with copy of a C-J editorial, dated August 2, 1932, copy obtained from EKU Archives, Collection 77A3, Box 22, Donovan Papers, General Series, folder "McVey J. M. – Maggard F. A."

county elementary teachers are half-educated and drawing pay for public services they are incapable of performing while many good teachers are unemployed.³²

In 1943, the Kentucky Board of Education invited seven Kentucky colleges to participate in an investigation of inadequate scholastic conditions prevalent in rural mountain communities. President Hutchins of Berea College accepted the invitation and developed a board of directors consisting of faculty members Agnes Aspnes, William Jesse Baird, Helen Dingman, Albert J. Chidester, Lawrence Baker, Charles Graham, Marie Hatcher, Charles Thomas Morgan, Charles Stanford Price, Charles Nobel Shutt, and Louis Smith to launch an experimental project. After interviewing superintendents, and considering Wolfe and Leslie Counties, the board chose Pulaski County as the most likely to benefit from the study and a pilot program was launched within the year.³³ With a grant from the General Education Board and led by education professor and Project Coordinator Dr. Charles Graham, the education faculty of Berea College set out to investigate and ameliorate the

³² *Courier-Journal*, July 10, 1933.

³³ Memorandum of Meeting, September 29, 1943, copy obtained from Berea Archives), Record Group 4, Box 6, File "Charles N. Shutt...Series IX Folder 4"

inadequate quality of life in rural regions of Pulaski County by targeting subpar educational conditions.³⁴

To sufficiently understand the issues facing Pulaski County schools, Dr. Graham moved his home to the county. He found the conditions alarming. Many of the isolated schools lacked quality instructional materials that were critical to student learning. The materials the schools did possess were often outdated, decrepit, and irrelevant to the subjects being taught. In response, Berea College collaborated with the Pulaski County Board of Education to create a “materials bureau” that would provide a cache of paper, books, bulletins, and other educational materials for teachers to access.

The physical condition of the county’s school facilities were also a major concern. Many of the shoddy and dilapidated structures were surrounded by unkempt land that appeared uninviting and was often hazardous. Graham illustrated the details of this neglect in his personal notes, indicating that even the new school buildings were often in poor condition and littered with trash.³⁵ With the help of Berea, schools began to enhance their surroundings by

³⁴ “Cooperative Enterprise in Education: Berea College-Pulaski County 1943-1946,” copy obtained from Berea Archives, Record Group 6.06, Box 6, File 6-20.

³⁵ Charles Graham notebooks, 1-4, obtained from Berea Archives, Record Group 9, Box 20, file “Charles Graham.” These notebooks detailed the Pulaski County school visits.

painting a reported 103 schools, filling gullies in 94 school yards, and building walks at 54 schools.³⁶ In fact, Graham reported that of the 117 schools that he frequented during the duration of this project, only two failed to make noticeable improvement.³⁷

Perhaps the most formidable challenge facing the schools of Pulaski County was the inadequate quality of teachers. In 1945, 53.5 percent of Pulaski County teachers held emergency teaching certificates as did 5,300 teachers statewide by 1947-1948.³⁸ Such teachers were described as having “little preparation and little experience to bring to their work.”³⁹ As Graham detailed in his notebooks: “One boy [at Hickorynut School] did not know how to multiply 42×2 or subtract $85 - 47$ or divide $4 \div 84$. She [teacher] said, “Yes you do,” then showed him, but went on to do something else. The blind [were]

³⁶ “Progress Report of the Educational Enterprise between Berea College and Pulaski County for 1944-45,” copy obtained from Berea Archives, Record Group 6.06, Box 6, File 6-12.

³⁷ “Berea College and its relationship with Pulaski County,” (January 19, 1945), copy obtained from Berea Archives, Record Group 3.5, Box, 45, File “FSH General Education Board...”

³⁸ Wendell Butler, “History of Education in Kentucky: 1939-1964,” *Commonwealth of Kentucky Educational Bulletin*, 31 (November, 1963): 101.

³⁹ Ibid.

leading the blind.”⁴⁰ Statewide teacher availability had been in flux. State Superintendent Robert Martin reported that, “At the time of Pearl Harbor, Kentucky employed 18,800 teachers who met full certification standards at the time and there was a large oversupply of qualified teachers. Before the close of the 1940-1941 school term Kentucky started running out of qualified teachers and issued 164 emergency certificates. The number [of emergency certified teachers] increased rapidly until it reached 5,300 in 1948.”⁴¹

A significant part of the school initiative included an emphasis on teaching hygiene and addressing previously neglected issues concerning health and cleanliness. The general physical condition of Pulaski County students was horrifying. An estimated 44 percent of county men were deemed unfit for induction into military service due to poor physical or mental health. Additionally, only 59 percent of Pulaski students had received the smallpox vaccine.⁴² Berea responded by arranging for local nurses to establish a

⁴⁰ Charles Graham notebook #1, entry dated November 30, 1943, copy obtained from Berea Archives, Record Group 9, Box 20, File “Charles Graham.”

⁴¹ *Advancing Education in Kentucky: Challenges-Processes-Outcomes 1955-1957, 1958-1959*, (Frankfort, KY, 1959), 864.

⁴² Letter from Joseph Lachman, M.D., director of Pulaski County Health Department to Berea College’s President Hutchins, dated March 1, 1945, copy obtained from Berea Archives Record Group 4, Box 6, File “Shutt...Series IX Folder 4.”

demonstration booth at a teacher workshop and discussing health issues with the teachers. The schools soon became a central hub for disseminating all kinds of information throughout the community.⁴³ As Pulaski County health department Director Joseph Lachman disclosed in a letter to President Hutchins, “Superstition, tradition and a lack of understanding of modern health concepts are formidable barriers in our fight for good health.” He wrote that there was an overall lack of knowledge in the mountain communities regarding health practices, but that community members could be reached by bringing such knowledge into the schools. Lachman told Hutchins that many school children went home and told their parents about the tuberculin patch tests that they had received at school only to have the parents request patches for themselves.⁴⁴ Many of the teachers expressed enthusiasm about the knowledge they received and felt that the information was valuable and relevant to their schools. Of the 151 schools in the county, 118 built designated shelves for lunches to avoid contamination, 97 initiated mandatory hand-washing before lunch, 71 had acquired first-aid kits, and 68 had established school lunch programs.⁴⁵

⁴³ DeYoung, “Constructing and Staffing the Cultural Bridge: The School as Change Agent in Rural Appalachia,” *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 26 (1995): 168-192.

⁴⁴ Lachman letter to Hutchins

⁴⁵ “Progress Report,” 3.

Community involvement played a large role in improving Pulaski County schools. Pupils and parents formed committees to plan and execute school activities such as school lunches, picnics, dances, and school beautification projects.⁴⁶ Teachers reported that parent involvement reached an unprecedented level during this time. Community members and parents also mirrored the recent beautification of the school in other community buildings and their own homes. For example, one teacher reported that shortly after community members painted the interior of the schoolhouse she noticed that the nearby church was also receiving a coat of paint similar to that used on the school.⁴⁷ This project also served to unite the numerous agencies in Pulaski County into the school system. For example, a food production competition among the county schools brought participation from well over a dozen community agencies such as the Farmers Livestock Market, Tri-State Butter Company, Standard Oil Company, and First National Bank.⁴⁸

Extremely low enrollment and attendance rates were issues that plagued Pulaski County schools. In the 1943-1944 school year, only 77 percent of school age children were enrolled in school and approximately 13.5 percent of these students eventually dropped out. Enrollment rates dipped even lower as children aged. Only 8 percent of the enrolled students were at the high school

⁴⁶ Ibid., 6.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 7.

⁴⁸ Ibid. "Berea and Pulaski."

level, and of those, 20 percent dropped out. Sadly, this was a more favorable statistic than many of the other surrounding mountain counties. With the initiation of scholastic support from Berea College, enrollment rates rose to 84 percent by 1945. Unfortunately, high school enrollment continued to indicate that three out of four students were not in attendance. However, 82 schools in Pulaski County reported a 100 percent enrollment rate the first year of Berea's involvement. Attendance rates also improved. In 1943-1944 the first, middle, and last month attendance rates for the semester averaged 88.7, 78.7, and 65.4 percent respectively. In 1944-1945 the same measurements showed increases to 95, 83.8, and 73.6 percent.⁴⁹

Despite the Berea project's successes, in 1947, state funding was discontinued and the program was halted. The academic achievement of many rural Appalachian schools still lagged behind the rest of the state. Berea's Appalachian community focus continued and the college remained active in numerous academic improvement projects in eastern Kentucky. These included a supervisory role in the reorganization of Pine Mountain Settlement School in 1949 and assistance in the Rockcastle County in-service teacher training program in 1950.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ "Progress Report," 8.

⁵⁰ "Berea College RSIP Progress Report of third year," (April 12-13, 1956): 8, copy obtained from Berea Archives, Record Group 10, Box 29, File 10.

In 1952, the Department of Education at Berea initiated a survey of education needs in the area.⁵¹ The collected data revealed appalling conditions in many of the schools nestled in the hills of rural Appalachia. In 1949, it was estimated that 65 percent of Kentucky's one-teacher schools were located in these mountain counties. In this single year, twenty-two of these schools never opened their doors because of the lack of teachers willing to relocate to these remote areas.

The investigators noted that teachers in the region were often poorly trained and lacked many of the necessary resources to instruct their classrooms. This was often compounded by a lack of emphasis placed on education in the local community and substandard education practices. Many of the children appeared to be in poor health and lacked access to potable water, nutritional food, and sufficient hygiene practices to maintain good health. Furthermore, inadequate transportation in rural areas often impeded teachers and students from accessing the school house materials, and it interrupted communications. Many of these ill-trained teachers displayed signs

⁵¹ R.V. Buckland, "Rural School Improvement Project 1953-1957 Follow up Report," (1960), 21, copy obtained from Berea Archives, Record Group 10, Box 14, File 14-7.

of stress and fatigue due to the extreme isolation and the demands placed on them as educators.⁵²

The 1950 national census indicated that Kentucky's median educational attainment level was 8.4 years. By contrast, in 44 mountain counties of Appalachia it was 7.6 years.⁵³ The exponentially high rate of illiteracy in the area resulted in more than one third of the young men being rejected by the Selective Service, which was twice the national average at the time. School enrollment in these counties was also significantly below the state average. An

⁵² Berea College, "Educational Conditions in the Mountain Counties of Kentucky: Data to be used in connection with proposal made by Berea College to the Fund for Advancement of Education," copy obtained from Berea Archives, Record Group 10, Box 10 of Study of Colleges in the Southern Mountains, File 10-3, Kentucky General Education information.

⁵³ In 2014, the Appalachian Regional Commission identified 54 Kentucky counties in Appalachia, listed below. Berea's "Educational Conditions in the Mountains of Kentucky" (1953) identified 44 counties (italicized): *Adair, Bath, Bell, Boyd, Breathitt, Carter, Casey, Clark, Clay, Clinton, Cumberland, Edmonson, Elliott, Estill, Fleming, Floyd, Garrard, Green, Greenup, Harlan, Hart, Jackson, Johnson, Knott, Knox, Laurel, Lawrence, Lee, Leslie, Letcher, Lewis, Lincoln, McCreary, Madison, Magoffin, Martin, Menifee, Metcalfe, Monroe, Montgomery, Morgan, Nicholas, Owsley, Perry, Pike, Powell, Pulaski, Robertson, Rockcastle, Rowan, Russell, Wayne, Whitley, and Wolfe.*

estimated 42 percent of mountain county adults had not completed a full year of school.⁵⁴ A 1953 study of Kentucky dropouts - then called “early school leavers” – showed that most students left for work, but many suggested they might have stayed if schools offered specific vocational training.⁵⁵ In 1950-51, Kentucky employed approximately 20,000 teachers only 53.5 percent of whom held a baccalaureate or master’s degree.⁵⁶ Statewide, 5,013 schools (3004 of them one-room schools) housed 532,133 pupils. Of that number, only 122 buildings met US Standards while 2,357 were rated unsatisfactory, many lacking central heat, artificial lighting, and toilets. Between 1951 and 1953, school enrollment decreased by 16,459 children.⁵⁷

In 1953, the Ford Foundation’s Fund for the Advancement of Education sponsored the Pasadena “Conference on Inequalities of Educational Opportunity” to assess nationwide educational needs.⁵⁸ The progressive Ford

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ S.E. Hecker, “Early School Leavers in Kentucky,” *Bulletin of the Bureau of School Service*. (Lexington, KY, 1953), 78.

⁵⁶ Butler, “History,” 101.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 121-122.

⁵⁸ L. Smith, “Some Basic Principles for this Program of Educational Assistance: Data for the Fund for the Advancement of Education,” (1953), copy obtained from Berea Archives, Collection: Presidents, Francis S. Hutchins, Ford Foundation Correspondence and Reports, Record Group 3.5, Box 43, File 5.

Foundation - the wealthiest of the Big 3, along with Rockefeller and Carnegie - funded projects “for scientific, educational and charitable purposes, all for the public welfare.” The Fund for Advancement of Education sought “to promote greater equality of educational opportunity; and to conserve and increase knowledge and enrich our culture.”⁵⁹ Berea College President Francis Stephenson Hutchins, attended the conference and presented the findings of the rural educational needs survey. He inquired about the possibility of a funded project to address the drastic improvements required in the Appalachian region of Kentucky nearest Berea.⁶⁰ The objectives of the Fund and those of Berea College were well aligned, but Francis Hutchins had even more reason to be optimistic about a favorable reception. His older brother (former Dean of the Yale Law School and immediate past president of the University of Chicago) Robert Maynard Hutchins served as associate director of the Ford Foundation and was in a position to direct the Fund’s resources.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Dzuback, Mary Ann, *Robert M. Hutchins: Portrait of an Educator*, (Chicago, 1991), 232; See also History, FordFoundation.org. Retrieved January 9, 2014, from <http://www.fordfoundation.org/about-us/history>; University of Chicago: <http://president.uchicago.edu/directory/robert-maynard-hutchins>.

⁶⁰ Fund for the Advancement of Education, “Conference on Inequalities of Educational Opportunity: Pasadena, California,” (January 3-4, 1953), 9-10, copy obtained from Berea Archives, Record Group 3.5, Box 46, File 2.

⁶¹ Dzuback, *Hutchins*, 231.

The Hutchins family had a long tradition of Protestant evangelical works in the Social Gospel tradition where ministry and education often intersected. From Whig, abolitionist stock, the family valued strong character, held a belief in common schools to teach literacy, and provided family connections to a substantial social network. Robert believed in the progressive notion that experts should be brought together to solve societal problems. He believed that model programs and centers had produced the greatest advancements in education and science. But by 1952, some of his board members were expressing resentment that “half of the foundation’s disbursements were going to the...programs he oversaw,” and that a number of “grants were provided for his friends.”⁶² He would soon add family to the list.

Encouraged by the interest he was shown at the Pasadena Conference, Francis Hutchins constructed a grant proposal to fund the Rural School Improvement Project (RSIP). The proposal emphasized the concept that “better teachers in the classroom will make an immediate improvement in the current situation” and hypothesized that qualified and enthusiastic teachers would join the cause, if promise and support were secured in these areas. Hutchins stated that Berea would achieve this goal by selecting 30 recent college graduates who would be qualified to meet the teacher’s certificate requirements to instruct in these classrooms. These teachers would be supervised and monitored on a regular basis by experienced teaching supervisors in addition to becoming active members of their respective county teachers’ associations. In return for

⁶² Ibid. 3-7, 232, 238.

their service, the teaching fellows would be awarded a \$750 stipend each summer after the successful completion of each academic year. This stipend would be earmarked for furthering the teacher's personal education and travel, which was seen as both an incentive to RSIP fellows, and as a means of broadening the teacher's knowledge and enriching the classroom. Hutchins also suggested that the program last four years, adding approximately 15 new teachers each year and new locations as Berea College saw fit.⁶³

Hutchin's four-year grant proposal for the Rural Schools Improvement Project was accepted in April of 1953 for a total of \$221,000.⁶⁴ Education department Chair, Dr. Luther M. Ambrose, was selected to direct the project. Ambrose was a member of the NEA's Department of Rural Education along with Berea education Professor Charles C. Graham, and soon-to-be-named RSIP supervisor Mabel C. Jessee.⁶⁵

⁶³ Berea College, "Proposal to the Fund for the Advancement of Education," copy obtained from Berea Archives, Collection: Presidents, Francis S. Hutchins, Ford Foundation Correspondence and Reports, Record Group 3.5, Box 46, File 1.

⁶⁴ Clarence H. Faust correspondence to Hutchins, (April 9, 1953), copy obtained from Berea Archives Record Group 3.5, Box 46, File 3.

⁶⁵ Robert M. Isenberg, ed., *The Community School and the Intermediate Unit: Yearbook*, (Washington D.C., 1954), 239.

Ambrose began recruiting qualified individuals and gathering resources for the 1953-1954 school year; just four months away. Three target county's needs were assessed to determine which would qualify for initial participation in the project. The most important factors Berea College took into consideration were the number of one-room schools and emergency teachers, the inadequacy of teacher salary, and the prevalence of families living in poverty.⁶⁶ Once county needs were assessed Berea College chose to extend the invitation to participate in the project to schools in fairly close proximity to Berea College, and whose administrators who expressed willingness to cooperate with goals and objectives such as improving education within rural areas, educational opportunities for teachers, and health education of the RSIP.⁶⁷

Four master's-level area supervisors were selected by Berea College due to their familiarity with a particular area of the region, upon recommendation from the State department of education. Each supervisor was responsible for making planned and unplanned visits to each project school, maintaining contact with each teaching fellow through group and individual conferences,

⁶⁶ "Berea College Rural School Improvement Project Sponsored by Berea College-Financed by Fund for Advancement of Education: 1953-1957," copy obtained from Berea Archives, Record Group 10, Box 1, File 1-1.

⁶⁷ R.V. Buckland (Ed.), *Rural School Improvement Project: Report 1953-1957*. (Lexington, 1958), 30-31, copy obtained from Berea Archives, Record Group 10, Box 5.

and assisting with teacher training. With the passage of time each area expanded to include more schools and accommodate more children.

Area 1 was centered in Pine Mountain, Kentucky and supervised by Mr. Charles Kincer, a native of Letcher County, who oversaw approximately 12 fellows in Harlan, Leslie, Letcher, and Perry counties. Mrs. Mabel Jessee of Pike County supervised 13 teachers in Area 2 which was centered in Beattyville and included Clay, Owsley, and Perry counties, until her departure in 1957 for a UNESCO educational mission to Thailand. Area 3, centered at Berea, was the smallest of the areas. Supervised by Berea education professor Dr. Pat Wear (who eventually came to direct the RSIP in 1955), this area consisted of only two teachers in Rockcastle county. Area 4 was centered in West Liberty and included eleven teachers in Elliott, Morgan, Breathitt Counties, and in 1954, Wolfe County, all under the supervision of Mr. Warren Robbins of Bell County.⁶⁸

The selection of teachers for the project proved more difficult than the selection of supervisors. The plan called for the selection of 24 recent graduates as fellows for the first year of the project, but there was a shortage of qualified young teachers. Contributing greatly to this shortage was the allure of higher salaries and more preferable living arrangements for marriageable young

⁶⁸ Ibid. Buckland Report; P.W. Wear, "Rural School Improvement," *The Berea Alumnus*, (March, 1957), 3-4, copy obtained from Berea Archives, Record Group 10, Box 21, File 21-2.

women in the larger cities.⁶⁹ Extreme haste accompanied the vetting process since there was a small time frame between receiving the grant and the beginning of the fall school year. This resulted in only 19 teaching fellows being selected for the program in its first year of operation and revisions to the pre-existing recruiting procedures, specifically the requirement that teachers be “young” and the acceptance of husband and wife pairs (there were 6 pairs of husband-wife teams, with one husband that was an area supervisor and not a fellow). To further expand the reach of RSIP, project leaders also offered educational opportunities and travel benefits to teachers within the immediate region that were not RSIP fellows. Teachers varied in age between 21- and 48-years-old with a median age of 33. Ultimately, a total of 63 teachers - 49 women and 14 men – would take part in the Rural School Improvement Project over the four years it was in place.⁷⁰

Despite difficulties launching the initial year of the project, RSIP fellows reported tangible results including feeling more competent as educators and benefiting from frequent supervision. Nineteen fellows began work toward obtaining a degree while involved with the project and forty-four (83 percent of the fellows) attended college after the project.⁷¹ Those fellows who took advantage of the summer stipend for traveling purposes reported that the

⁶⁹ Butler, *History*, 129.

⁷⁰ Ibid. Buckland, *Report*.

⁷¹ Buckland, “Follow up,” 6-7.

experience broadened their horizons and served as an additional teaching resource in the classroom. It was not uncommon for the instructors to return from their exotic journeys with stories and materials that would be incorporated into lesson activities and shared with the remote communities. Each community was small in size, ranging from under 100 people to less than 2,000, and opportunities to travel were quite limited by meager incomes and impassable roads. One fellow who had traveled to Europe reported, "I have shared my travel experience of last summer (to Europe) with the Kiwanis Club, the Women's Club, members of the Baptist Church, and with others living in this county as well as others from the neighboring county."⁷²

RSIP fellows were also influenced in the progressive ideology that children should be active participants in the education process. One teacher expressed "I have recognized that the maladjusted, the slow, as well as the bright children, will be our citizens of tomorrow and that as a teacher I must put forth every effort to help these children to find their place in society so that they will be good citizens."⁷³

During the project numerous individuals from the local communities were enlisted as resources for the schools as bus drivers, school board members, 4-H club workers, Bible teachers, and other school personnel.⁷⁴ The

⁷² Buckland, *Report*, 92.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 62-63.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 123.

progressive ideology facilitated community involvement and ownership in the local schools and greatly increased the frequency of community visitors who discussed their trades or occupations with the class. Aside from local merchants, farmers, and professionals; health officials and interested observers often visited the schools to observe the progress of the project. Parents of the pupils were also encouraged to be more involved in the schools through parent nights, educational movies, and the establishment of parent-teacher groups in many locations.⁷⁵

Parents were surveyed to track their satisfaction with changes brought by the RSIP. This resulted in child care classes and increased community involvement in school and community improvements including painting schools, installing water lines, building or repairing roads, and planting flowers and trees near the schools. Out of a total of 311 outlined objectives for the Rural Schools Improvement Project, 282 were completed, 12 were not completed, and 17 were partially completed. Parents were also consistently rated as being highly responsible for the improvements made by pupils and teachers. Although these communities were poverty stricken, it is important to note that there was not a single occurrence community groups failing to make some type of contribution towards school or community improvement.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Ibid., 111.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 85-89.

Perhaps the most discernible change in project pupils was observed through records of physical growth and health. Geographical isolation, poverty, and a lack of hygiene and nutritional education were exacerbated by the scarce medical and dental services. The poor physical condition of the schools also contributed to substandard student health. Records indicate that potable water, proper heating, and cleanliness were woefully inadequate. Teachers reported that children were often dirty, tired, and underweight. With community help, structural deficits and sanitation issues were addressed in the schools which aided in alleviating poor health conditions. Other important steps taken by the project included establishing school lunch programs, nutrition and hygiene awareness in schools.⁷⁷

RSIP teachers met with local, state, and federal health agencies, a practice also used in Breathitt County, to assure that fellows understood the latest health practices.⁷⁸ Fellows attributed much of their health conscientiousness to project programs such as the annual Health Day in which nurses educated the teachers about the relationship between physical well-being and learning. Teacher fellows related the health lessons to the students and taught a simple scientific method by monitoring certain aspects of student health. One of the more notable classroom lessons involved an experiment in which the students would feed two rats different diets over a period of time and

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Isenberg, *Community*, 83.

monitor the rats' weight and physical appearance. One rat was given the appropriate foods for a rat and the other was given cake, soft drinks, candy, etc. The students used skills in mathematics, writing, and art during this project and reached the unanimous decision that nutritional health was indeed important and resulted in happier and healthier subjects. Similarly, teachers reported improved skin coloration and healthier weight for pupils following health instruction.⁷⁹

Academic advancement in the project schools included modifications in curriculum, instruction, organization, school administration, and classroom relationships which resulted in transformed schools. Prior to project involvement, the typical curriculum was rigidly adhered to without consideration for individual needs. Students learned the material through rote memorization, repetition and drills with limited community involvement. Group work was limited and the teacher was viewed as the commander of the classroom who acted as the absolute authority in all decision-making situations. Furthermore, the lack of teacher oversight and emphasis on the learning process often led to ambivalent educators and students.

In reaction to these deadening instructional practices, RSIP schools conceived learning as a journey and emphasized cohesion, democracy, and creativity. Academic subjects such as English were expanded to include creative writing, mechanics, and practical usage. Rather than teaching each subject in a delineated block of time, project instructors would apply concepts

⁷⁹ Buckland, *Report*, 49-52, 55.

of English, Mathematics, Art, and History into any applicable lesson. Lessons were also expanded outside the classroom as students went on field trips, and had frequent outside speakers. Field trips encompassed everything from nature walks to train rides into urban areas to visit banks, telephone companies, and other industries. Foreign visitors to the project schools came from 44 different countries including Afghanistan, Thailand, Kenya, Ireland, Greece, India, and Honduras and provided the students exposure to an uncommon diversity of professions, cultures, and ethnicity.⁸⁰ Many of these visitors were students at other universities who had heard of the program and wondered if the innovations brought by the RSIP could be applied to the education problems facing their native countries. In the past, outside visitors had been rare, viewed with skepticism, and students learned about solely from textbooks. Teachers reported that students were often shocked by how similar they were to the “foreigners” who would visit the schools and that these outside learning experiences led to better understanding of subject material and increased tolerance.⁸¹

Student work groups were reorganized by ability level and need of further instruction to facilitate more efficient learning. Fellows engaged the classes in group discussions, decisions, and shared responsibility to reinforce a sense of ownership and pride in academia. One teacher expressed that the community

⁸⁰ Ibid., 163.

⁸¹ Ibid., 106, 61.

and student attitude toward the school shifted during the project from “the school” to “our school.” Students took newfound leadership roles in planning and maintaining the classroom. Previously drab and austere classrooms morphed into colorful places of learning adorned with books and completed student assignments. Statewide attendance rates and academic achievement rose to unprecedented levels following the institution of a school reform measure called the Minimum Foundation Program, which sought to equalize school funding between urban and rural areas beginning in 1954.⁸² The Rural Schools Improvement project report indicates that it was not uncommon for a pupil to triple or quadruple their reading level in a single year. One teaching fellow described the change in attendance as being attributed to student investment in the school: “[C]hildren came to love school and to regard attendance as a pleasure rather than just something to be done or not to be done as their ‘whelm’ struck. Our average attendance was almost 90 per cent and would have been higher except for unfavorable weather conditions.”⁸³ This is an incredible improvement given that most of the schools in counties served by RSIP had attendance rates well below the state average.⁸⁴

⁸² Butler, *History*, 148. See also, *Kentucky Encyclopedia*, John E. Kleber Ed. (Lexington Ky., 1992.), 641.

⁸³ Buckland, *Report*, 60.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

Before the RSIP classroom learning materials had been scarce. Periodicals and illustrated materials were rarely displayed; student-made instructional materials were undervalued and scarce, and locally available learning materials were underutilized. But RSIP's innovative approach to learning materials brought exciting new worlds to the students and contributed to academic success. Teaching fellows introduced outside learning materials in the classroom. Fellows augmented scant audio-visual resources with movie projectors, and phonographs. The RSIP also encouraged the use of a wide variety of news articles, illustrative materials, and child-crafted learning materials to supplement traditional texts. Teachers were expected to read a wide variety of professional literature to expand their knowledge.⁸⁵

The isolation of rural communities made it difficult to obtain new learning materials. County libraries in the region were rarely close to the schools themselves and the limited holdings were rarely appropriate for children. The RSIP fellows overcame this handicap by bringing the Berea College traveling libraries and State Extension Library bookmobile services directly to the communities. Records indicate that the number of books read during each year of the project grew impressively from 24,310 books in 1952-1953; to 38,920 books in 1953-1954; 69,320 books in 1954-1955; 65,100 books in 1955-1956; and 47,870 books in 1956-1957.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Ibid., 43, 77-78, 140.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 57-60.

Changes in school administration, organization, services, and teacher supervision attended the Rural School Improvement Project. In the years leading up to the project, teachers spent little time planning activities and the time that was allocated to instructional planning was used to rigidly teach each subject matter. When meetings were conducted, the principal would typically dominate the conversation and stifle the discussions of pedagogy.⁸⁷

The administrative structure of RSIP schools permitted teachers to spend considerable time planning class lessons. RSIP teachers saw planning as a chance to incorporate materials from broader areas of interest. Staff meetings became more democratic in nature and served as an opportunity for teachers to share and discuss their successes and their concerns. Community members were granted a role in planning school functions for the first time in many schools. Changes in the structure of lunch periods also influenced the success of the project. Lunch periods were organized in a manner that facilitated incidental teaching opportunities to reinforce lessons concerning proper manners, hygiene, and nutrition. Project fellows believed that organized play would lead to increased self-esteem by reinforcing ideas of fairness. Play periods that followed the lunch time for students were well supervised and organized. Cumulative records and standardized assessments were also established for each pupil. These records were taken in accordance with observations of student behavior to determine individual strengths and

⁸⁷ Ibid., 45-46.

weaknesses and personality differences that may have affected learning in the classroom. This academic evaluation assisted in identifying specific student needs rather than the previous practice of “labeling” students according to familial background or history.⁸⁸

Consistent supervisory support for teachers also played a large role in the success of the project. Little direct supervision of teachers existed before the RSIP, which contributed to feelings of isolation, lack of ownership, pride, and direction. RSIP Supervisors oversaw fellows through planned visits where supervisors and fellows would collaborate on specific materials or lessons that would be included during the visitation period. Unplanned visits also took place if a planned activity was cancelled at one school and another school was readily accessible. These visits would generally be used for general observation periods and to provide support for teachers. RSIP fellows also participated in visitations to various other schools, in and outside of the project. Individual conferences between fellows and supervisors served as a time to focus on difficulties experienced in the classroom. Group conferences would also serve as a forum for brainstorming and support. In-service education trainings were typically formal and designed for specific purposes such as pre-school

⁸⁸ Ibid., 42-47.

conferences, education association business, the Christmas institute, or summer travel-study program.⁸⁹

Annual pre-school conferences at Berea College for all RSIP teachers allowed time to plan activities and curriculum for the upcoming school year. Sessions at these conferences addressed formal academic planning, budgets, supplies, ideas for fundraisers, and dissemination of ideas for extracurricular activities. Area group meetings were conducted on a monthly or bi-monthly basis. These meetings were small enclaves of teachers and supervisors that would discuss common frustrations, planning, and evaluation within their communities. RSIP fellows belonged to the National Education Association, the Kentucky Education Association, and local education associations, along with associations for Student Teachers, and the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.⁹⁰

The RSIP Christmas Institutes included a guest lecturer who would present on a relevant topic and facilitate large discussions. Special lectures included “Problems of the Small Rural School” by Dr. Kate Wofford and Dr. Kimball Wiles from the University of Florida in 1953, “How to Understand

⁸⁹ Ibid., 65-74; RSIP Notes of Follow-up copies obtained from Berea Archives, Record Group 10, Boxes 9-13.

⁹⁰ Buckland, *Report*, 72-73; “First Annual Institute for Teaching Fellows of the RSIP of Berea College,” (December 28-31, 1953), copy obtained from Berea Archives, Record Group 10, Box 1, File 1-3.

Children as Persons” by Dr. Daniel Prescott from the University of Maryland in 1954, “School and Community Relationships” by Dr. Edward G. Olsen of the Chicago Region of the National Conference of Christians and Jews in 1955, and “What is a Good School?” by Dr. Pauline Hilliard of the University of Florida in 1956. Each Christmas Conference stressed classroom content, method, and tutorials central to RSIP goals. For example, in the first year of the RSIP, tutorials emphasized pupil welfare via structural improvement to academic facilities and relationship building among teachers, supervisors and others central to the project. In the second year tutorials focused on developing parent-teacher groups, school lunch programs, and the proper way to utilize community resources. In one institute fellows broke into small groups to problem-solve issues related to dealing with troublesome students and parents, as well as how to motivate students. Evaluations of project success began taking place at the 1954 Christmas Institute and continued through the duration of RSIP, becoming more specific and focused each consecutive year.⁹¹

The summer travel-study aspect of the program served as an incentive for both project administrators and teaching fellows. By requiring that teachers travel or study for each summer following the completion of an academic year, administrators provided teachers with a broader knowledge base and respite from the routine of the classroom that they believed would enrich rural classrooms. RSIP fellows were permitted to request the nature of the study or

⁹¹ Buckland, *Report*, 72-73.

travel and the estimated cost to essentially anywhere they desired. Portions of the project grant were then allocated after the proposal was considered by the project director, the relevant area supervisor, members of the Berea College Department of Education. RSIP members traversed the 48 states in the United States, Cuba, Hawaii, Canada, Mexico, and Europe. The teachers that chose to use project funding to advance their education attended a wide variety of colleges including the Universities of Kentucky, Wyoming, Maryland, Colorado, Southern Illinois, Western Carolina, Duke University, Peabody College, Boston University, and Temple University, among others. At the closure of the project the number of academic degrees held by project teachers had increased from 53 to 70.⁹²

While the Rural Schools Improvement Project seems to have produced positive changes in the rural schools of Eastern Kentucky the raw data reflecting changes in student grades and academic performance that occurred during the project are not available. Self-report surveys were largely used as a method of collecting data to reflect the changes that students, teachers, and parents observed during the duration of the RSIP.

Teacher evaluations of the project were highly valued. RSIP fellow ratings of professional and college course experiences reflected that 28 percent of the teachers thought that the these opportunities were excellent, 32 percent believed they were good, 16 percent rated the experience as fair, and 8 percent

⁹² Ibid., 136, 47-48.

believed their coursework was poor. Fellows gave the lowest rating to their experiences prior to student teaching while the off-campus student teaching experiences and conferences with supervisory teachers was rated the highest. Seventy-nine percent of teachers reported that the content of their college education courses was superior, excellent, or good. Content was rated highest in courses about teaching mathematics, physical education, and children's literature. Courses regarding instruction of music and art were considered to have the poorest subject content. Methods courses were rated the highest in physical education, children's literature, and instructional science. The lowest ratings were reported for teaching methods in mathematics, language arts, and hygiene. In general, the majority of the fellows reported that their experience in the project was helpful, valuable, and they were proud of their participation.⁹³

Another important aspect of the project was the improvement to the rural schools and the progress on RSIP objectives. In the four years that the project took place, 282 of 311 objectives were completed toward school and community improvement with \$22,656 being contributed directly by the schools and community members. Only 12 of these objectives were not completed at all and the other 17 were viewed as being partially completed at the end of this endeavor.⁹⁴ The most commonly mentioned physical improvement reported by parents, teachers, and students were playground equipment, maps, bulletin

⁹³ Buckland, "Follow up."

⁹⁴ Buckland, *Report*, 108.

boards, and chairs being added or repaired in project schools. Parents, teachers, and students most frequently reported improvements observed in health and sanitation as evidenced by changes to toileting and hand washing facilities and refrigerators and freezers. In relation, the replacement of broken window panes, faulty roofs, and repairs to floors and walls were rated with the highest frequency as safety improvements. Beautification of school grounds through painting of buildings, repaired flag poles and curtains, the addition of books and book shelves, and landscaping improvements were seen as very important to the community.⁹⁵

In 1960, Berea College conducted a follow-up study of the project and found that 68 percent of RSIP fellows remained in Kentucky after the RSIP and 25 of 36 respondents were still teaching in their former project counties. The former fellows who transferred out of state most commonly mentioned higher salaries, promotion opportunities, and husbands transferring, as the reason for leaving their RSIP teaching positions. However, these teachers continued to contribute to public education in their new locales. Nineteen teachers also report that the education they received through RSIP funding had contributed to advancement in their career endeavors. But, 23 of the 53 respondents to this follow up survey stated that their experience in the RSIP was of no special

⁹⁵ Ibid., 140-144.

value to them. Only 21 individuals described RSIP as valuable (9 respondents did not reply to this question).⁹⁶

Another follow up report authored by Berea faculty member Maureen Faulkner documented her visits to former RSIP schools in the 1960-1961 school year. Faulkner found that former RSIP schools were either closely abiding by the philosophy of the program or they had abandoned it altogether. In other words, there were no “in between” schools observed. Three former RSIP schools were viewed as exceptional according to the author. Not surprisingly, former RSIP teachers (or those who were project supporters) were still involved with these schools and maintained the philosophy of sound teaching methodology through inventive lesson plans, and warm relationships in the classroom and in the community.⁹⁷

In contrast, the equipment and facilities of the struggling schools showed neglect from the RSIP era. One example of this given by Faulkner is that in several of the schools the indoor sinks that were provided by the project were either absent or rusting. Three of the ten inadequate schools still had ties to the RSIP through a school principal or a former fellow. Feelings of ambivalence, nostalgia, and disappointment about losing the desirable project salary were

⁹⁶ Buckland, “Follow up,” 3.

⁹⁷ Maureen Faulkner, “Report of 1960-’61 Visits to Former RSIP Schools” (June, 1961), 1, copy obtained from Berea Archives, Record Group 10, Box 14, File 14-8.

reported by these individuals as their schools relapsed to pre RSIP levels.⁹⁸ The seven schools which no longer possessed an affiliation with RSIP former members were described as even more appalling. In addition to the blatant neglect of facilities, many of these schools appeared filthy and unkempt. Teaching methods had digressed to rote memorization and repetition in many subjects.

Community relations were also difficult to ascertain. Faulkner found that existing teachers viewed the community's relationship with the school as unimportant or unavoidable. She attempted to decipher the current state of community involvement in the schools by questioning residents in the community in small shops and a few residences. Few individuals could produce differences in the schools during and after the project but many of the older students who had project teachers expressed that they had attempted to keep in contact with their former instructors.⁹⁹

From the start, Berea found itself short on time, but more critically, short on qualified young teachers who might form a cadre of progressive educators to serve the region for years to come. Faulkner found that the educators who remained in Kentucky were either older, or they had family ties in the region. The former project teachers who remained continued the mission of the RSIP in their classrooms while most of their younger counterparts

⁹⁸ Ibid., 3.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 7-8.

tended to migrate to more populated areas; attracted by desirable salaries and eligible bachelors.¹⁰⁰

Faulkner concluded that the rapid withdrawal of supervision at the end of the project resulted in a decline in academic expectations, and consequentially, produced a substandard level community-scholastic collaboration in the schools. School district commitment to continued supervision would have helped turn the RSIP into a self-sustaining county program.¹⁰¹

Berea College presented the Fund with an unsuccessful grant extension request for the 1957-1959 academic years. Robert Hutchins was no longer in a position to direct funds having moved on to Ford's Fund for the Republic in 1954. Under the school's proposal, Berea would have focused on pre-service teacher training, the development of a five-year experimental supervisory education program for current teachers, assessment of curriculum content, and a study of the effectiveness of certain teaching methodologies in the rural schools.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 14.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 15.

¹⁰² Berea to Ford Foundation, Untitled grant extension request for RSIP to the Ford Foundation, copy obtained from Berea Archives, Record Group 3.5, Box 46, File 2; See also Robert Maynard Hutchins, UChicago.edu. Retrieved

In the final analysis, the Rural School Improvement Project worked directly with more than 5,000 children and 63 teaching fellows in 38 different schools over 13 counties, and one independent school district, involving 10 county school supervisors. Project estimates claimed an indirect impact on approximately 45,000 children within the RSIP school districts.¹⁰³

The RSIP represented the current thinking of national leaders of rural education who promoted improved administration of the schools combined with an active community engagement program based on “full respect for human personality” and “shared judgments.”¹⁰⁴

Following so many decades of poverty and isolation, it is no easy task to gauge the impact of a program like the Rural School Improvement Project on the children and communities of southeastern Kentucky. Like the progress-minded projects that came before it - and those that would come after - the seemingly intractable challenges attending the Appalachian region kept educational equity at bay. Indeed, it would take another thirty-two years before the landmark Kentucky Supreme Court decision in *Rose v Council for Better Education* would declare the state’s inequitable and inadequate school system

January 9, 2014 from <http://president.uchicago.edu/directory/robert-maynard-hutchins>

¹⁰³ Buckland, “Follow up,” 119.

¹⁰⁴ Isenberg, *Community*, 34-38

to be unconstitutional.¹⁰⁵ “Sixty-six” property poor, and mostly rural, school districts had sued the General Assembly citing the abiding fiscal inequities which had grown to as much as an 8:1 ratio in per-pupil expenditures when compared to Fayette County. With the passage of the Kentucky Education Reform Act, in 1990, the General Assembly provided substantial funding equity to rural schools - before returning to its historical pattern of periodic attention amid chronic neglect.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Richard E. Day, “Bert Combs and the Council for Better Education: Catalysts for School Reform” *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 109, (2011): 27-62. See also, Richard E. Day and Jo Ann G. Ewalt, “Education Reform in Kentucky: Just What the Court Ordered” in *Kentucky: Government, Politics and Public Policy*, James C. Clinger and Michael W. Hail, Eds. (Lexington, Ky., 2013), 259-274.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. Day, “Each Child,” 219, 354-364. My 2003 study chronicles the activities of the Council for Better Education from its inception in 1984 through the Supreme Court's landmark ruling in *Rose v Council for Better Education*, and as Kentucky sought to implement a new system of common schools under the Kentucky Education Reform Act of 1990. The oft-repeated number 66 is somewhat legendary. The number of actual paid member districts at the time of the trial was 60. “Sixty-six” represented a level of philosophical commitment from school districts willing to sue the state more than it did actual membership. There were several districts that were

sympathetic to the cause but could not afford to join. They were incorporated into the count which was given to Bert Combs (in an effort to persuade him to represent the group) and that number was repeated in numerous news accounts.