



Cornell University



NEW YORK STATE CENTER *for*  
**RURAL SCHOOLS**  
*building CONNECTIONS, CAPACITY, and KNOWLEDGE*

*On September 26<sup>th</sup> 2008, Governor Paterson signed S-7124/A-10201 creating the New York State Center for Rural Schools. Supported by the Senate, Assembly, the Governor and the Bi-Partisan Legislative Commission on Rural Resources, this Center has galvanized interest across the state. The Center has begun connecting constituents, building capacity for research and programmatic support to schools, and fostering research on timely and important problems facing rural New York State schools and the communities they serve.*

**Research and Policy Issues**

**May 2008**

<b>Brain Gain</b>	<b>School Reorganization</b>	<b>Early Care/UPK</b>	<b>Community Mobilization</b>	<b>Immigration</b>	<b>STEM</b>
Contradicting the commonly blamed problem of <i>Brain Drain</i> out of New York State, researchers are studying the causes of the lack of <i>Brain Gain</i> in 13 counties across the Southern Tier. By interviewing and surveying young adults about future aspirations, educational preparation, and labor market	Population decline, falling property values, and the proposal for a school property tax cap, is stimulating research on fiscal stress and school reorganization in rural New York. Using longitudinal GIS analyses, this proposed study will provide practitioners and...	Reducing achievement gaps and assisting economic development are two goals of the state's early care and universal pre-kindergarten programs. Current research in NY's rural communities has documented the reduced capacity of rural communities to formally serve children ages...	If rural youth are to contribute to the vitality of their local communities, they must graduate from high school and then pursue post-secondary training and education. Young adults must feel sufficiently engaged with those communities to remain or return to them and be active citizens.	Rates of Latino immigration into rural NY has been increasing in recent years. Research is underway to analyze these patterns, the impact of such demographic changes on schools and labor markets, and generate improved projections for Latino growth.	Rural schools must better prepare students for the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). The Center is linking with various programs and Centers at Cornell to provide new resources to often isolated rural schools.
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**Center Activities To Date**

- On March 26, 2009, the Center and the Rural Schools Association of NYS co-sponsored a **Small School District Summit**. All districts serving 500 or fewer students were invited to attend. The goals were to discuss fiscal stress, organizational alternatives, and sources of efficiency.
- Planning is underway for a follow-up to the summit. **Three regional conferences** will take place in the Fall of 2009 to build upon the summit and local initiatives.
- An academic and policy-relevant symposium on **School Reorganization** and its alternatives. A data-base is being created that includes the range of alternatives and strategies for reorganization and shared services.
- Ongoing discussion with Cornell **Faculty** to explore how the Center will operate and to stimulate involvement. As a result, an initial set of research talks has taken place on campus.
- Development of a **web site** to link resources and disseminate information and opportunities.
- Developing proposals to secure **private funding** for Center activities and research. These funds will supplement the ongoing state support.
- Ongoing discussion with a number of potential **partners** in the quest to assist rural schools and the communities they serve. These include 4H, Even Start, WSKG, Cooperative Extension, CaRDI, Pre-K other school leaders as well as researchers at Cornell, other universities in NYS and across the country.
- In the process of building a **database** that draws from various state agencies across multiple years. This data will be made available to researchers and practitioners to facilitate better research and decisionmaking.

interests, this project seeks to understand contemporary upstate labor markets and the policy implications therein.

### Background

New York's southern tier suffers from persistent economic underdevelopment. Even though the region includes several world class universities, and has a high representation and comparative advantage in important industries such as computer manufacture and transportation equipment, the region has experienced prolonged net loss of well educated young adults. Research by the Federal Reserve Bank in Buffalo demonstrates that upstate NY's net loss of well prepared young adults is due to low rates of in-migration, not abnormally high rates of out migration. Hence, Upstate's "Brain Drain" is due to the inability to replace young adults who leave the state.

### Purpose of Proposed Study

This research seeks to examine four main questions. First, where do recent graduates from southern tier high schools prefer to live after completing their education? Second, what community characteristics contribute to these preferences and expectations? Third, what behaviors do recent high school graduates engage in to enhance their ability to live and work where they most prefer? Last, what activities and resources are provided by local communities to retain recent high school graduates, and to attract well educated youth from elsewhere?

### Research Design

Multi-method approach including informant interviews, focus groups and a survey will be used. Specifically, surveys of recent graduates from four high schools in the Southern Tier will be obtained. One school is located in a metropolitan central city, one in a small city, and two in rural areas. Informant interviews with school superintendents, BOCES directors, high school guidance counselors, and HR professionals in local firms will be conducted. Focus groups conducted with second semester seniors in the high schools where previous graduates will be surveyed and a focus group with freshmen in a local college will be held.

Because young adults are highly mobile and difficult to contact using standard mail and phone survey techniques, the plan is to use the online social networking website Facebook to send sampled individuals electronic messages and links to the survey. Facebook is a social networking website that allows users to maintain a personal profile and to notify friends about themselves. Facebook members often join networks organized by city, workplace, school and region. For this research, Facebook networks organized around high schools will be used.

Preliminary research indicates that 2/3 or more of Southern Tier graduates have Facebook accounts. The plan is to sample graduates of a diverse set of high schools (with respect to size, socioeconomic status, type of area) in each of 4 school districts. A group page on Facebook will be set up where invitations to join the group can be sent out to individuals providing an additional method of contacting them for the survey. Names will be searched either through Facebook networks or by the individual's name in Facebook. If the individual has a Facebook

scholars with state-of the art data and analyses to assist in future decisionmaking.

### Background

For most of the past century school districts have enjoyed a privileged position. Typically they are the sole source educational delivery system within the geographic area defined by the school district boundary. Even today generally less than 2 to 3% of the eligible student population is being educated outside the public schools. On the other hand, the demands placed on schools have increased dramatically. On top of traditional curricula, schools are asked to provide learning in an ever-widening range of topics, placing strains on teaching staff and facilities.

However, the situation is worsening for rural school districts in New York, which may undergo dramatic changes during the next few years. During the past couple of decades, the number of school districts operating in New York State has declined from over 10,000 in 1910, to 737 in 1980, to 698 today. These closures are an outgrowth of a combination of forces at work in rural areas of NY. Declining population in some areas due to outmigration, decline in jobs, and other societal factors likely have contributed to the elimination or consolidation of previously existing school districts. Other motivations for change include developments like the encroachment of suburban build up, industrial re-locations, and the push to gain scale economies, and the healthy desire to improve the range and quality of academic and extracurricular offerings.

School districts *presently* face two further major threats regarding their future financing—both resulting in decreases of revenue streams. The two major revenue sources of school districts' operating budgets are state aid and local property taxes. New York State is vulnerable to the vicissitudes of economic cycles and crises and, like the nation as a whole, must adapt to an economic downturn. On top of these losses, across the US, a third major revenue source for schools has been the state lotteries, and this is true for NY as well. As a recent story in the Wall Street Journal ("State Lotteries Show Big Declines" Dec. 26, 2008, p. A3) highlights that this heretofore "recession proof revenue stream" is undergoing hefty declines.

If the above circumstances evolve, they suggest there will be a period of major reorganization of rural school districts occurring over the next several years. Among the possibilities are closures, consolidations, or sharing of services. Important in the decision-making that rural schools must undertake is accurate information about expected enrollments and tax revenues for the next school year. Yet, many rural school districts do not presently have the capability of making school enrollment projections, estimates of local property taxes revenue, or state aid for the next school year. Below is one proposal for addressing this situation.

### Purpose of Proposed Study

School administrators and their boards *will* face revenue shortfalls during the next several years which bring consequences for services provided, staffing, bussing costs, facility maintenance, etc. Personnel benefit costs, notably health care and

**Brain Gain** Continued from Page 2

account we will send the electronic message to them through Facebook. If, however, selected individuals do not have a Facebook account we will attempt to contact them with an email containing the same electronic message sent to Facebook users. The message sent through Facebook will provide a consent form explaining risks and benefits and confidentiality, and an outline link to the survey.

**Potential Significance or Findings**

The hope is to identify attributes of local communities and economies that attract and repel young adults. Some of these will be amenable to manipulation, others will not. The work will also identify the behaviors and institutional resources used by young adults during high school and afterwards (including in college for those who attend college) to attain their residential goals after completing their education. Similarly, some of these behaviors will be amenable to being promoted among current cohorts of high school students.

**Early Care/UPK** Continued from Page 1

birth to 4 and the decade long phase of implementation of New York State's Pre-K program.

**Background**

The benefits of early education programs, and pre-kindergarten (pre-k) in particular, are well documented. Yet, despite growing evidence about the importance of early care and education for young children's development and school success, the vast majority of this research has been conducted with urban and/or suburban populations of children. In fact, very little is known about early care and education settings in rural areas of the United States and how these early contexts might impact rural children's school readiness.

In 1997, the New York State Legislature enacted Universal Pre-Kindergarten for four-year olds as part of a bill to improve education. In its first year of operation, 1998-1999, state grants totaled \$67 million allocated to districts based on community wealth and the number of eligible 4-year-olds. Over the next eight years, state expenditures reached \$300 million. In the 2007-2008 school year, New York's program underwent some significant changes. First, a substantial increase in funding (\$146 million) was added to the budget, bringing total pre-k funding to \$446 million. The additional funding made the program available, for the first time, to all districts in New York State with the exception of nine school districts (ineligible high school and special act districts.) Second, the UPK program was combined with New York's Targeted Pre-Kindergarten program (which was established in 1966 and provided pre-k funds for low-income children) to create one pre-k program. Funding levels for the current school year (2008-2009) have been maintained and are currently \$451 million.

**Purpose of Study**

The Rural Early Education Project (REEP) is an ongoing multi-method investigation of a much-neglected area of research in

**School Reorganization** Continued from Page 2

contributions to the NYS teachers' retirement fund, are projected to rise as well.

Important to their decision making is that they have reliable up-to-date information on which to make cogent data driven decisions. This proposed project will engage with the school districts in determining their data needs and provide such information, as well as assist in interpretations and scenario development as they consider alternatives. As well, envisioned herein is a research component that examines the past, current and projected changes in rural school districts and relates them to the wider social, economic and demographic changes in the communities of which they are a part.

**Research Design**

To address these challenges, we are proposing a multi-year, staged, multi-pronged approach, consisting in year one of (1) a period of mutual exploration of goals and expectations between rural school district administrators and Cornell University, (2) generation of preliminary school enrollment projections, and (3) baseline estimation of local property valuations also in year one. In year two we will build the fourth component, production of an on-line, interactive GIS/mapping facility. All of these materials will be made available to rural school administrators

**Potential Significance or Findings**

The projected depth and length of an economic downturn facing New York, as well as the nation as a whole, provides a great opportunity to study and an obligation to assist rural schools adjust to these major fiscal stressors. Here is an opportunity to study the interplay between the schools and their communities as rural school districts adjust to major fiscal recessions and to facilitate improved short and long range planning at the local and state level.

**Community Mobilization** Continued from Page 1**Background**

Youth who have natural mentors (i.e., not in a mentoring program) are more likely to enter higher education; however, youth from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to have mentors. Mentoring relationships develop naturally when youth and adults work together toward common goals.

The Community Mobilization for Mentoring Youth project will encourage natural mentoring, and increase opportunities for more youth to contribute to their communities' vitality and to reflect on and pursue their goals, especially via higher education or training. In turn, the project will increase the youth development capacity of adults and of community organizations, specifically by building opportunities for: supportive relationships, sense of efficacy and mattering, and skill building. It will create new opportunities, including a life stories project and youth/adult community assessment and enhancement that will promote individual youth development, especially connectedness to adults, school, and community; civic engagement; and planfulness. This project will simultaneously develop and test a program that can be disseminated through Cornell Cooperative Extension, conduct evaluation research on

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New York State and across the nation. REEP is believed to be the first research that specifically examines early education in rural New York State. Specifically, this work: 1) documents the capacities and trends in the early education system across New York, but with a particular emphasis on rural areas; and 2) contributes to an understanding of the issues, complexities and challenges with the current early care and education system in rural New York.

### Research Design

In the three years of this research on early care and pre-k in rural New York, the Rural Early Education Project (REEP) used both quantitative and qualitative methods to examine early education issues in rural settings. First, using data from the New York State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS), the New York State Department of Education, and the US Census, the study examined the availability of early education, capacity, and patterns across New York State, with a special emphasis on rural school districts and counties.

Following this initial capacity study, bi-variate and time-series analyses of state-wide pre-k participation trends from 1997-2008 were conducted. Specifically, these analyses examined district and community factors related to school district pre-k participation.

Finally, the project also conducted five case studies of rural school districts. Districts were high-need (4 districts) or average need (1 district), were geographically diverse, varied by experience with implementing pre-k (from a district in the pre-k planning stages to a district with more than 20 years pre-k experience) and varied by experience partnering with community-based organizations (CBOs). Data were drawn from in-depth interviews with school district administrators, teachers, parents and community based-program directors on topics such as challenges and successes to implementing pre-k, quality of early education programming, school readiness, and partnerships among local early care and education providers and programs.

### Findings & Future Study

This work has highlighted the strategies used in rural areas to implement Universal Pre-K. REEP has offered policy recommendations to the NYS legislature. These recommendations include offering increased flexibility in how districts may spend the state grant, technical assistance for creating partnerships and financial planning, targeted transportation aid, and increased fiscal investment from the state. Additional study in this field points toward the following areas. 1) To continue to monitor the implementation of pre-k in New York State, especially in times of fiscal stress. Once pre-k programs are established in schools or through subcontracting, how well do they survive budget cuts? 2) To continue to explore the nature of school district/CBO partnerships and arrangements in light of broader community and county collaborations. 3) To assess the impact of pre-k programming on Kindergarten and early grade indicators and outcomes. 4) To explore the relationship between pre-k implementation and long-term special education costs. Does pre-k programming lead to reduced special education participation or more children who participate in special education for longer periods of time?

the program itself, and conduct basic research on how natural mentoring relationships form and foster youth development, and how to mobilize communities.

### Purpose of Proposed Study

The project is based on the hypothesis that youth are more likely to make and follow rewarding life plans, succeed in secondary school, and engage in their communities when they have opportunities to work alongside adults to learn about their communities, make plans and take action to improve them. Such goal-directed activities are optimal for fostering natural mentoring relationships. By interviewing adults and then creating and communicating their life stories youth will simultaneously learn about how adults have made satisfying lives in their communities and create conditions for developing enduring relationships with the adults whose stories they hear and then communicate to others. The life stories will also provide important information for use in joint planning and action to make communities more supportive of youth.

### Research Design

Secondary school youth and adults in participating rural communities will engage in two distinct types of action research. When students work on Life Stories, Phase 1, they are doing humanistic social research on a local level. The Community Action Plan (assessing community opportunities), Phase 2, and Community Opportunities (e.g., service learning projects, internships, jobs), Phase 3, will incorporate additional local research. Because the adult and youth participants in the project will conduct this research and will be able to shape its design, methods, and reporting, and because it is done as a basis for taking action, it can be classified as participatory action research. Formative program evaluation, including focus groups, youth interviews, and school records, as well as observations of program activities, will yield findings that have value for improving the program. Summative findings on outcomes will be of interest to participants, and to researchers and practitioners, especially in the field of youth development. This research is designed and conducted primarily by the project investigators with the involvement and consent of the partners. Our intention is to involve participants as much as we can in both conducting the research and in interpreting the findings and re-shaping the methods and the activities. We plan on reporting findings quickly, if tentatively, to inform participants and guide next steps. Participants will be invited to help interpret these findings.

### Additional Information

The Community Mobilization for Mentoring Youth project received Hatch and Cornell Cooperative Extension annual funding for three years, starting October 1, 2008. Mary Agnes Hamilton, Family Life Development Center is PI; Co-PIs are Stephen Hamilton, Human Development; David Greenwood, Anthropology; and Thomas Hirschl, Development Sociology. The South Seneca high school and community participated in a pilot of the Life Stories this past spring. Negotiations with additional project partners are under way. Please contact Mary Agnes Hamilton [mah15@cornell.edu](mailto:mah15@cornell.edu) for more information about possible additional openings to join the project.

**Immigration** Continued from Page 1**Background**

Recent national-level analysis by Diaz-McConnell (2003) and Diaz-McConnell and Guzmán (2003) demonstrate that the population estimates of the entire U.S. Latino population vary significantly in Census 2000, American Community Survey, and Current Population Survey results. Their analysis of the varying estimates on the total size of the Latino population attests to the need to further specify the data shortcomings and conduct better, fine-grained analyses of Latino populations in their local contexts. Due to the comparatively small rates of Latino in-migration to upstate New York (as compared to more prominent new immigrant destinations in the South, Midwest, and Southwest), it is important to gather and assess measures of the potential future growth of the Latino population. School enrollment data offers a unique glimpse into the composition of future generations of local communities.

**Purpose of Proposed Study**

The study will examine the quality of school data in further specifying high-growth Latino destinations and provide a more in-depth understanding of specific Latino school population characteristics and its validity and relevance for future total population projections. The purposes of the study will be to: utilize current school enrollment data to construct informed

total population projections for upstate New York rural counties, determine the scope and of intensity of Latinization in select rural New York counties by examining school data, empirically examine the migration patterns of Latinos residing in rural New York and associated measures by comparing US Census and public school data sources, compare the experiences of rural New York with overall national trends in the geographic dispersion and social stratification of the Mexican origin population, utilize the different levels of analysis (individual, county, urban, regional, and national) to more fully elucidate the Latinization phenomenon, through the New York State Center for Rural Schools, Cornell Farmworker Program and CARDI, provide a set of research briefs and reports to make the conclusions publicly available.

**Potential Significance or Findings**

The examination of school data will offer a glimpse into the future of the upstate New York population and allow for a new methodology to estimate future demographic trends at the local level. In particular, a rapid in-migration of Latinos to rural regions that would otherwise be experiencing a decline in total population has become a recent demographic trend that scholars are only beginning to uncover in places such as rural New York.

**STEM** Continued from Page 1**Background**

This research and intervention conceptualizes the knowledge children have acquired in places outside of school. These places include family settings, places of play and work, community events and organizations (firehouses, rescue squads, sportsman clubs, etc), local environments (streams, farms) and other environments where these children have gleaned science and engineering knowledge understandings in the context of their rural life. Previous research has shown that poor rural children have acquired significant science and engineering understandings outside of the traditional school setting, including the home environment. In addition, it has also demonstrated that children, unless explicitly questioned, do not make connections between the science/engineering they have learned outside of school and the science/engineering taking place within the school science classroom. Consequently, a student population that could potentially become society's future technicians, scientists, and engineers goes untapped and devalued.

**Purpose of Proposed Study**

The working hypothesis is that when teachers employ a more place-based or contextualized pedagogical approach to instruction they will be better able bridge the gap between the science and engineering knowledge children have learned outside of classroom science, thus improving the children's engagement in science, attitudes about science, and their performance in school and on current reform measures (standardized tests). This approach will only come as a result

of teachers' increased awareness and understanding of the places outside school where children learn and their students' local rural knowledge (LRK).

**Research Design**

The proposed study will take place in two phases. During phase one, home-site visits will be made to document the instances of how and where the children learned what they described during the initial photo-documentation interviews in the original study. The goal of this phase is to document LRK in action and to provide teachers with the context and insights into how and where children learned science and engineering concepts. Phase two involves data collection from additional participants integral to cultivating children's LRK: family, school staff, school administrators, community members and community organizations.

**Potential Significance or Findings**

As a result of implementing both phases of the research, this study will document, classify and capture the places where children develop their LRK. It will also enhance local teachers' abilities to utilize this knowledge in the classroom as a result of the collaboration between the researchers and the participants. Through these efforts, the study seeks to uncover the mechanisms necessary to help bridge the gap between LRK and classroom science. In so doing, a population of students that have been previously marginalized and unsuccessful in science may now begin to have increased engagement in science and increased access to and success in science.

For further information on the Center,  
potential collaborations, or any of the  
research described herein, please see  
<http://NYRuralSchools.org>

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