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Educational and Cultural Opportunities Similar for Gifted Students in Rural and Suburban Schools

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THE COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

In the Spotlight

UNIVERSITY OF MAINE

Educational and Cultural Opportunities Similar for Gifted Students in Rural and Suburban Schools

ORONO, Maine -- Gifted students in rural schools report just as many opportunities to participate in enriching extracurricular activities as their suburban counterparts, but there is a large range of availability among rural schools. Rural students in schools without gifted programs tend to have fewer other options for activities than do their rural peers in schools with gifted education programs. The conclusions were reached by researchers in Maine and Virginia who conducted studies to examine differences in opportunities and resources for middle level gifted students.

Lack of opportunity is not inherent in rural life, according to Jonathan A. Plucker, University of Maine assistant professor of educational psychology, and Jay A. McIntire, a policy specialist at the Council for Exceptional Children in Reston, Va.

In his national study of rural/suburban differences in the availability of cultural and extracurricular activities, McIntire found that rural gifted seventh and eighth grade students reported attending more musical and athletic events than their suburban peers. Suburban students reported more opportunities to participate in instrumental music, drama and dance activities, as well as school-sponsored trips. Although these differences were found, they were so small as to have little practical importance.

"The data don't support the theory that rural students have less access to opportunities," says McIntire.

The results are consistent with other research showing that rural students have somewhat fewer choices, but have higher participation rates. Follow-up studies should determine whether or not the opportunities for rural and suburban students differ in quality, McIntire suggests. Another valuable study would examine any differences in the access of rural and suburban gifted students to technology.

Approaching the opportunity question from a different direction, Plucker examined the disparity of resources among rural school districts in Maine. Schools with programs for gifted students also had more up-to-date computers, library books, and athletic and co-curricular activities. Thus, rural Maine schools that provide programs for the gifted also appear to provide more enriched environments for all children.

The existence of gifted programs seem predominately a financial matter and not the result of differing opinions about the educational appropriateness of such programs, according to Plucker. There really isn't one rural America, one rural Maine, or a typical rural school, he says in cautioning against preconceived notions and stereotypes of educational advantage and disadvantage.

"Collectively, the studies tell us that the average rural and suburban experiences aren't much different with respect to opportunities, but among rural schools, even in homogeneous states, there are great disparities of resources," Plucker concludes.

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