



## Review of *Rural Education in America: What Works for Our Students, Teachers, and Communities*, by Geoff Marietta and Sky Marietta

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**Keywords:** rural, education, students, communities, teachers

**Date Submitted:** November 9, 2021 | **Date Published:** October 20, 2022

### Recommended Citation:

Davis, C., Jr. (2022). Review of *Rural education in America: What works for our students, teachers, and communities*, by Geoff Marietta and Sky Marietta. *Journal of Educational Research and Practice*, 12, 209–214.  
<https://doi.org/10.5590/JERAP.2022.12.1.15>

### Abstract

Marietta, G., & Marietta, S. (2020). *Rural education in America: What works for our students, teachers, and communities*. Harvard Education Press.

This review evaluates Geoff and Sky Marietta's book, *Rural Education in America: What Works for Our Students, Teachers, and Communities*. As parents, community members, practitioners, and academics, the writers have a unique perspective on rural education. In this book, they seek to dispel the myth of the rural monolith of white poverty and social conservatism, arguing that rural communities and their challenges are far more complex and diverse than is presently reflected in the literature. This review evaluates the authors' approach to providing a more nuanced understanding of rural education and concludes that the book achieves this purpose.

### Review

In their book, *Rural Education in America: What Works for Our Students, Teachers, and Communities*, authors Geoff and Sky Marietta emphatically refute the premise that rural educational systems are unable to generate positive student achievements due to the size of their populations, density, or distance from major city centers. The authors' unique perspective on rural education is deeply rooted in their roles as parents, community members, practitioners, and scholars who have chosen to live and work in rural communities. By challenging commonly held presumptions regarding education that takes place outside urban centers, Marietta and Marietta (2020) integrate their passion for rural America with research that advocates place-based educational approaches tailored to the needs of rural students and communities.

This book contradicts decades of social science research that supports the idea that students seeking to achieve professional success migrate out of rural America. Instead, it asserts that rural communities are valuable educational environments, and policymaking should focus on strategies to deter out-migration. By challenging the false presumptions that underlie the theory of out-migration, Marietta and Marietta debunk the myth that all residents of rural communities are White, socially conservative, earn a low income, and are provided limited professional opportunities. They argue that the educational challenges faced by such communities are more complex and diverse than suggested by the current literature. According to the authors, rural communities are diverse and face all different kinds of circumstances. “We believe that rural life has value and that supporting rural communities should not involve pressuring individuals to move to access career opportunities. Instead, rural education should be seen as a way to build rural communities into thriving places that create opportunity—including the opportunity to stay or go” (p. 185).

This book provides a pioneering perspective on rural education, prompts its readers to reconsider their preconceived notions, and posits that the challenges in rural education cannot be solved using a one-size-fits-all approach. Researchers, educational practitioners, and community members can all benefit from the book’s plain English style, as well as the tools provided by the authors for rural educational practice, which support readers in identifying challenges with their corresponding solutions.

*Rural Education in America* begins with an introduction that lays the groundwork for the nine subsequent chapters, organized into three parts. Part 1, “The Rural Context,” contains the first three chapters and provides a novel definition of the term *rural*. Marietta and Marietta argue that rural communities cannot be delineated according to a census tract or county border, implying that living in a rural area is a daily lived experience. This perspective is informed by the major economic and structural forces that shape rural education, including population stability, economic vitality, and community leadership.

Chapter 1 provides an overall picture of rural communities and education in the United States in the present day. The authors assert that even with the most comprehensive set of statistics and empirical data, it is difficult to fully capture rural life without considering daily lived experience. According to the authors, “life in a rural community cannot be fully captured empirically and is often misconstrued and distorted by those who lack this lived experience, most especially by the media and politicians” (p. 17). The writers’ view of the need for context in addition to empirical data when describing rural life is supported by other researchers (Ajilore & Willingham, 2019; Cromartie & Bucholtz, 2008).

Chapter 1 also summarizes the educational challenges faced by rural communities that contribute to out-migration, including the concept of brain drain (i.e., the movement of rural people to urban areas to take advantage of increased educational or professional opportunities). Rather than providing a statistically rigid definition, Marietta and Marietta (2020) offer a description of being rural. To them, the key elements of rurality are as follows:

1. Walmart and Family Dollar are a part of your daily and weekly routine.
2. You gladly travel more than thirty minutes to try out a new restaurant.
3. Introductions are rarely needed, but in the rare case you “meet” someone new, you spend at least five minutes catching up on shared relatives, friends, and maybe what church you attend.
4. You are part of a close-knit community and proud of it.
5. You don’t lock the door to your home.
6. You have to drive everywhere.
7. The seasons and weather play a big role in your life.
8. Town sports are life, your entire school district was closed when a team went to the state playoffs.
9. You know people by the cars they drive, and everyone waves at everyone.
10. A high school girl was crowned the town queen during your community’s annual festival.

11. You went to school with kids from eight other small towns.
12. When people ask you where you are from, you mumble your tiny town's name then automatically tell them what larger town it is near. (p. 26)

Although those who choose to live in rural communities face certain challenges, the writers assert, “we know from our own lived experiences and those of our children that rural communities are places of unique assets and opportunities” (p. 35). Growing up in a rural community, I believe that rural communities are not economic liabilities, as each community is unique and owns assets (Ajilore & Willingham, 2019).

Chapter 2 focuses on the strengths of rural communities from the perspective of the residents. The authors argue that rural communities offer many advantages to families, “particularly in terms of education and how it shapes the perspectives and outcomes of children” (Marietta & Marietta, 2020, p. 38). This assertion is supported by other researchers such as Chetty (2014), who, in his seminal study on intergenerational social mobility in the United States, determined that children from rural communities had a better chance at upward social and economic mobility than their suburban and urban peers.

The authors further believe that another benefit of living in a rural community is the quality of the schools. They argue that if scores on state or national norm-referenced tests, such as reading and math scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress are the measure of school success, rural schools consistently outperform schools located in urban and suburban communities. However, more than 80% of the students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches, such as in eastern Kentucky, where the authors reside. This argument is supported by relevant research. For example, Tieken and Williams (2021) state, “rural students graduate high school at rates higher than the national average. Rural students also outperform nonrural students on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in both reading and math, and rural Black students' NAEP scores are higher than those of Black students attending city schools” (para. 5).

In Chapter 3, the writers identify three forces that shape the educational opportunities and needs of rural communities. One of them is population stability, a metric that considers large population swings and how their effects are amplified in rural communities. According to Marietta and Marietta (2020), “rural schools can easily become overwhelmed and stressed with the increase or decrease of only twenty students, let alone one hundred fifty” (p. 54). Another force that can influence educational opportunities in rural communities is economic vitality. Over the last forty years, globalization has had a tremendous impact on the economies and educational systems of rural communities; their response to these shifts has affected their economic vitality. The economic vitality of a community involves metrics such as the unemployment rate, median household income, availability of job opportunities, and diversity of industries. The writers assert:

[E]conomic vitality impacts students' beliefs and behaviors toward educational attainment, future job opportunities, and whether to stay or leave their rural community. For decades, the dominant narrative in rural communities at the intersection of economic vitality and education has been the concept of “brain drain,” or the idea that promising young adults leave rural communities to find better opportunities in cities. (Marietta & Marietta, 2020, p. 61)

As I grew up in a small rural community, I found that the economic vitality of the area ultimately influenced my life and my future. Due to limited educational and professional opportunities, I was forced to relocate from the community that I loved to a larger urban area that offered more career possibilities.

A third force affecting rural communities and education is community leadership. The authors argued that rural schools play a larger role in their communities than their suburban and urban counterparts. Consequently, the strength (or weakness) of school leaders has an influence that extends beyond the walls of the school. Their action (or inaction) shapes the economy, health, and resilience of the community.

The authors argue that these three forces are present in all rural communities and can mediate the strengths mentioned in Chapter 2 as well as shape educational efforts and programs. The authors suggest that each educator and community leader should consider these forces while designing, implementing, and evaluating educational initiatives and programs.

Part 2 (Chapters 4–7), “Meeting the Needs of Rural Students,” discusses in greater depth the educational requirements of rural students in early childhood education, college, and vocational training. Chapter 4 addresses the quality of early childhood education in rural areas and identifies best practices. The authors assert that early education centers have made a significant difference in the lives of children in both urban and rural areas; however, there is a lack of access in some rural areas: “There is no question that early childhood and care are less accessible in rural America than it is in urban and suburban communities. Fifty-nine percent of rural communities are what can be considered a ‘childcare desert’” (Marietta & Marietta, 2020, p. 77).

In Chapter 5, the authors address the literacy and language development of students, especially those who are bilingual. The authors seek to articulate a clearer understanding of the literacy development of culturally and linguistically diverse student populations. Furthermore, they contend that reading difficulties are not a given for rural communities; if the right approach to teaching reading is followed, rural students can master the fundamentals of literacy.

In Chapter 6, the writers focus on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics education in rural settings. According to Marietta and Marietta (2020), rural communities have always lagged behind urban and suburban communities while implementing new technology, which is still true today:

Not only are rural communities falling behind in access to the internet, but they also must meet the challenge of educating students for a technology and health-care-driven services-based economy. This has put tremendous pressure on middle and high schools to educate students in the areas of science, technology, engineering, and math. (p. 111)

Chapter 7 discusses college and career models that have been applied to narrow the achievement gap between students from rural communities and their urban and suburban counterparts. According to Marietta and Marietta (2020), although the attainment of postsecondary degrees has risen over the last few years, rural communities still lag significantly behind urban and suburban communities. Empirical studies have concluded that rural students exhibit lower college enrollment rates and degree completion rates than their nonrural peers (Pierson & Hanson, 2015; Wells et al., 2019). The writers of *Rural Education in America* believe that the reasons for the relatively poor performance of rural students are complex and that no single solution will be absolutely effective in increasing the number of rural students pursuing postsecondary degrees or certifications. According to Marietta and Marietta (2020),

If you just consider proximity to a nearby campus of public higher education, more than twelve million rural Americans live in physical deserts. Indeed, rural counties cover 96 percent of the United States, but are home to only 14 percent of the nation’s colleges and universities. And even when a rural community does have an institution of higher education nearby, it is often a lower resourced community college or state school branch. (p. 136)

Part 3 (Chapters 8–9), “Moving to Action,” concludes the book and exhorts the reader to take action. Chapter 8 details an educational self-assessment framework that includes resources and tools that can be used by readers in rural communities to identify place-based problems in their towns or regions. The writers assert, “part of our mission in writing this book is to inspire rural educators and to take the lessons of what’s working in rural communities for students and families and apply them to their contexts” (p. 147). The comprehensive self-assessment involves the following four major steps:

1. Understanding the sociocultural history of schools in your community
2. Understanding the forces at work in your community (i.e., economic vitality, population stability, community leadership)
3. Mapping your strengths
4. Evaluating programming already in place.

According to Marietta and Marietta (2020), following the completion of these four steps, the reader (rural community member) will be positioned to undertake a school improvement process. The authors suggest that readers consider using the Public Education Leadership Project (PELP) Problem-Solving Framework, which was co-written by Geoff Marietta. The framework integrates best practices from the worlds of business and educational leadership.

While I was serving as a district leader in a large urban school district, it was decided to send a district team to attend a week-long PELP Summer Institute at Harvard University. The institute involved several large urban school districts from across the United States. Its purpose was to train district teams to use the PELP Framework in order to develop and sustain high levels of academic performance by formulating and executing strategies to address both current and future problems. It was an exceptionally valuable experience for the team, and I believe that it led our district to be eventually designated as “exemplary” by the state department of education.

To provide better understanding of how the educational disadvantages affecting rural communities can be exacerbated by national decisions and policies, Chapter 9 depicts how educational initiatives are currently implemented in the United States. The writers state:

We have mentioned approaches that try and push rural youth to move out to find professional opportunities in urban areas, whether or not that aligns with their aspirations or goals. We have noted education reform efforts that take a market-driven approach and explained why they do not work in rural areas without the population density required for programs like charter schools and vouchers. We have touched on the fact that testing is often unreliable in rural areas, where there are not enough children to make for clean statistical models. (Marietta and Marietta, 2020, p. 169)

The writers argue that they wish to convey the voices of community members and practitioners who represent rural education, which is rarely represented in the literature.

Marietta and Marietta (2020) identified three purposes for the book: (a) to provide a broad survey of rural education that examines and explains the challenges faced by rural communities across the United States; (b) to empower rural practitioners to embrace evidence-based solutions and tailor their efforts to maximize their effectiveness; and (c) to equip rural educators and other stakeholders (e.g., community leaders, policymakers, and funders) with a deeper understanding of rural schools and the educational strategies that work best in such contexts.

This review has primarily focused on the first and third purposes of the book. It can be concluded that the first purpose was achieved: the authors articulate the key barriers facing rural educators and the communities they serve. These barriers include a weak economy, funding inequities, low-quality infrastructure, and poor health outcomes. The authors also successfully achieve the third purpose, as the content of this book is relevant to those interested in rural education. For people looking to deepen their knowledge on the subject, the book provides in-depth and up-to-date information.

Although the authors supported their arguments with empirical research, the data are described in an engaging and nontechnical manner that is accessible to all readers. The authors drew on both rural and nonrural educational research to prove that children educated in rural communities achieve comparable



results to those of their peers. For example, as previously mentioned, the authors noted that children from rural communities have a better chance at upward mobility than their urban and suburban counterparts. Another study cited by the authors found that students in rural schools consistently outperform those in urban and suburban schools on state and national tests. Although these statistics are publicly available, the authors' collation and presentation of the data encourage readers to reconsider their preconceptions about rural education. This unique perspective distinguishes this work.

Overall, the authors of this book provide a novel perspective on the definition of rural education as well as its constructs and inputs. They argue convincingly that rural education cannot be reformed using a one-size-fits-all approach. Moreover, it is a worthwhile exercise to attempt to identify problems and solutions using the assessment tools in the book. These tools provide those who live and work in or otherwise engage with rural communities with a framework to address educational disadvantages. Marietta and Marietta's (2020) insights are highly credible since they chose to live, work, and raise a family in a rural community. The information in the book is presented in a clear manner, and practitioners, community members, and researchers who are interested in strengthening the educational outcomes of rural students will obtain valuable insights from this work.

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