



## Australian and International Journal of Rural Education

### ERASING RURAL MASSACHUSETTS: CONSOLIDATION AND THE URBAN REVOLUTION IN EDUCATION

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#### Abstract

Massachusetts is the least rural state in the US, and its existing rural communities are shrinking. This paper examines the historical processes of urbanization, specifically through industrialization that have come to dominate and erase rural communities in the state. The capitalist mindset behind industrialization has spread to education where the state has a long history of pursuing consolidation as a way to deal with the supposed problems of rural schools. This policy represents a narrow viewpoint of what education should be and does not value the lived experiences of rural youth. These phenomena are analyzed using Henri Lefebvre's *Urban Revolution* in an effort to theorize the way education policy is being used by the state to increase urbanization and erase rural schools and communities.

**Keywords:** rural education, Henri Lefebvre, urbanization, industrialization, Massachusetts

#### Introduction

“Society has been completely urbanized” (Lefebvre, 2003, p. 1). This statement at the opening of Henri Lefebvre's *The Urban Revolution* begins his critique of urban society, noting the inevitable transition towards complete urbanization is “virtual today, but will become real in the future” (p. 1). In Massachusetts, Lefebvre's prediction seems to be coming true, as the least rural state in the U.S. is continuing to become even less rural (Showalter et al., 2017). Lefebvre's critique is not over the growth of cities, or urban centers, but rather the processes of urbanism that abstracts space under the logic of the capitalism rather than the lived realities of those who inhabit it. This notion is the heart of this paper, in which Lefebvre's writings will be used not to analyze how space is created in cities, but instead how the creation of urbanized capitalist space is eliminating rural environments. Lefebvre's work has been greatly analyzed and applied by urban scholars and researchers (Stanek, 2011; Smith, 2008; Harvey, 2006; Merrifield, 2006) and I am attempting to continue that work by examining the urban revolution from the other side, not only the negative aspects of capitalist urbanism that erase rural communities but also the way rural communities are situated and viewed by a completely urban society. In order to achieve this end, I will focus on the state of Massachusetts, a state that still raises memories of idyllic New England farming towns, despite a history of rural erasure through capitalist development (Rothenberg, 1985). More specifically, I will examine the ever-decreasing number of rural schools in Massachusetts, describing the manner in which neoliberal education policy devalues rural life, leading to a closure of rural schools and a hastening of young people out of rural communities. To put it succinctly, Massachusetts has nearly achieved complete urbanization and its education system may be keeping it that way. It is my hope that through an understanding of capitalist

urbanization at work in the state, educators can push for the creation of “differential spaces” (Lefebvre, 1991), spaces of anti-capitalism, that can not only protect rural communities from urbanization, but create differential urban spaces as well, spaces as described by Lefebvre that recognize the lived realities of inhabitants. This movement will require an education that neither devalues nor valorizes either urban or rural, but instead allows young people to understand and critique how space is created, while also understanding their role in how space can be re-created to meet their needs, rather than the needs of capital.

### Theoretical Framework

The main question underlying this paper, is how did capitalism produce Massachusetts, a state with so little lived rural space (i.e., small communities as opposed to empty countryside or space specifically for recreation), and what is the connection between current education policy and this history of capitalist urbanization and rural erasure? This question, of course, assumes that space is produced socially. In pure physical geographic terms, there is plenty of space in Massachusetts that has not been urbanized, but these are spaces that have been intentionally left empty, either for recreation or conservation. Rural spaces for the purposes here can be assumed to be lived spaces, spaces produced through interactions between people and their community. The idea of space as being actively produced within social processes is the crux of Lefebvre’s theories, and allows us to understand and analyze the way capitalist accumulation produces space (Harvey, 2006). Smith (2008) uses Lefebvre to argue that space is not constant, but has been created in a manner that ensures the survival of capitalism. Under this logic, the disappearance of rural spaces in Massachusetts is not a natural occurrence, it is a very deliberate process that is a direct consequence of capitalist accumulation. Smith (2008) describes how capitalism has achieved its constant growth through the occupation and production of space, while the cost has not been fully understood. The loss in Massachusetts is clear, it is the loss of rural space to capitalist urbanization. Smith (2008) also noted that urban needs, again urban defined not as a city, but as abstract urban space, are social needs. Building off Lefebvre, Halfacree (2007) introduces the idea of radical ruralities, places that are embedded within their own environment, decentralized, and self-sufficient. The idea of a radical rural can serve as the basis for the kind of rural education the state needs, one that stands in contrast to capitalist logic, individual schools that though spatially fragmented and possibly isolated can still meet the needs of students within their communities.

Herein we see the connection to education policy. Though Lefebvre never wrote anything extended in regards to education, it was a subject he would reference in regards to spatial production and the shaping of everyday life (Middleton, 2014). Not surprisingly, Lefebvre’s critiques of education paralleled his critique of capitalist urbanization, notably through the fragmentation of knowledge, which Lefebvre believed constricted complete understanding (Middleton, 2014), much in the way capitalist space seeks to compartmentalize production and create order often to the detriment of lived space (Lefebvre, 2002). Lefebvre viewed education as something that must be situated in everyday life, whereas he saw educational institutions and educators as placing themselves above our outside everyday life. Essentially, education is something that must begin within lived experiences, rather than an effort to study it from the outside. Lefebvre even warned that making representations of space, the codified, abstract spaces created through capitalist logic, reduced lived experiences (Middleton, 2014) which in turn can lead to an abstraction not only of space, but of the mindsets of students (Cervone, 2017). Lefebvre saw a danger to schools that served as dominated spaces, that is, schools that are standardized through the technocratic logic of economic efficiency. Though he may not have been all that familiar with schools in the United States, his descriptions are no less apt. Describing buildings as replicable products of capitalism (Middleton, 2014), there is a clear parallel with the U.S. educational system that has pursued policies of standardization and economic efficiency

over the lived experiences and an understanding of the needs of young people (Saltman, 2012). In developing a Lefebvrian pedagogy, Middleton (2014) calls for the self-management of learning, a mutual engagement in a critique of everyday life, a centering on the contradictions and moments making that critique possible, and an emphasis on the arts and spatial history. Unfortunately, the way Massachusetts has historically handled its rural schools makes this kind of education impossible, as rural schools are not encouraged to analyze the role of rurality in greater society, and quite the opposite is shown, that being rural is a deficit to be overcome. This is portrayed in the closure of rural schools which have been deemed inefficient by the state. As will be discussed, school policy is just one aspect of a trend in Massachusetts that pursues capitalist economic efficiency at the expense of rural places.

### **The Historical Decline of Rural Massachusetts**

Before delving into the theoretical analysis of urbanization and rural erasure, it is important to establish the historical connection between urban expansion, the loss of rural communities, and the growth of capitalism in the state. For the purposes of this analysis, Lefebvre's (2003) definition of urban will be used. He describes urban society as "*the society that results from industrialization, which is a process of domination that absorbs agricultural production*" (p. 2). In this section, rural will therefore be defined as pre- or non-industrial spaces. However, it is important to note that this is the historical definition of rural, and a new, and much more loose, definition of modern rural society will be discussed later in this paper.

From the state's 17<sup>th</sup> century colonial beginnings, up until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Massachusetts was predominantly rural and agricultural. What would be viewed as typical urban society was limited mainly to Boston, the home of the state's colonial, and then state government. The rest of the towns and villages in Massachusetts mirrored the ideal of New England, small, homogeneous, agricultural or fishing communities centered around a church, or a large, wealthy, extended family (Brown, 1974). At this point it is necessary to explain that the term "*ideal*" is used not to describe rural communities as they should be, but to describe the romanticized past of rural towns. In reality, these towns tended to be dominated by patriarchal, religious conservatives or wealthy rural landowners, much as they are today. Communities sought out homogeneity, often shunning even the slightest difference in culture or religion (Zuckerman, 1970). Following the American Revolution from the late 1700s to early 1800s, this insulated view of community became obsolete, thanks to the introduction of electoral politics as the state established its government (Brown, 1974). Connecting to the rest of the state and urban centers became an asset rather something to be avoided. Around this time period, not only was civic participation increasing, but so were communications. The Postal Service was expanding, as well as the number of newspapers in circulation. It was becoming possible to live an urban lifestyle without having to be in Boston (Brown, 1974). As such, towns began to grow as typically urban professions, such as lawyers, and printers were able to make a living outside of the major cities. Consequently, some rural villages grew into towns, and towns into small cities. With the changing demographics, so too changed values. The urbanization of rural Massachusetts came with an urbanization of beliefs. Many of these new residents saw urban society as superior to rural, they believed themselves to be better educated, and the typical rural farmer or fisherman was backwards and ignorant. Many rural residents accepted these beliefs as well (Brown, 1974), ingraining in their own minds the notion of rural as deficient. None of this should be read as a value judgment on the changing beliefs, however, the issue at the core is the creation of this notion that urban is both modern and inherently superior, not whether one could lay claim to morality.

The existence of urban growth alone is not enough to support the notion that it is specifically capitalist urbanization that is erasing rural Massachusetts. Rather, it must also be established

that it is specifically urban-centric capitalism that is leading to this erasure. As rural communities began urbanizing in terms of social structures and population, commercial development was also increasing (Brown, 1974). Agriculture was becoming less profitable, and industrialization was on the rise, and rural communities provided abundant cheap, open land attracting urban industrialists and manufacturers (Rothenberg, 1985). In the 1830s, manufacturing was becoming the dominant economic engine of the state. Textile mills proliferated in rural towns, mostly in the southern parts of the state (Prude, 1983). At the same time, a “*regional capital market emerged in Boston’s agricultural hinterland; it mobilized the supply of agricultural savings and channeled them toward new investments on the cutting edge of growth*” (Rothenberg, 1985, p. 806). Essentially, agriculture was outdated, and the new financial elites coming from Boston were looking for modern ways to grow their capital, specifically through manufacturing. Wealthy rural landowners were also able to take advantage by selling land to be used for mills, or opening mills themselves. Small towns that had previously served as agricultural centers turned to manufacturing and industrialism soon replaced agriculture as the dominant economic practice as industrialists were easily able to buy up rural land as their wealth grew exponentially in comparison to rural farmers (Rothenberg, 1985). It is at this point when the wealth gap began to expand as capital became concentrated into the hands of the factory owners (Prude, 1983). Small towns that had previously served as agricultural centers turned to manufacturing. Combined with the mindset that urban equals modern and progressive, any who still valued a rural life were seen as backwards and regressive. This mindset of urban as better, along with the economic reality that one could no longer support themselves financially in small-scale agriculture, began a migration of rural Massachusetts citizens into the growing towns and cities in search of employment, beginning the erasure of the state’s rural communities (Kett, 1971).

Lefebvre (2002) describes these same processes in *The Urban Revolution*:

*(Agricultural production) is no longer the principal sector of the economy, nor even a sector characterized by any distinctive features (aside from underdevelopment). Even though local and regional features from the time when agricultural production dominated haven’t entirely disappeared, it has been changed into a form of industrial production, having become subordinate to its demands, subject to its constraints. (p. 3)*

The urbanization of Massachusetts has not led to the creation of a megacity. Agriculture still exists though according to the agricultural census conducted by the University of Massachusetts, the total amount of farmland and the size of individual farms has decreased in the past 40 years. The census also shows that over 80% of farmland is owned by operators who are over 45 years old, meaning that it is possible to see a dramatic loss of farmland in the not too distant future if there is not a large enough population of young people prepared to take over operations.

Lefebvre (2002) continues “*Economic growth and industrialization have become self-legitimizing. As a result, the traditional unit typical of peasant life, namely the village has been transformed. Absorbed or obliterated by larger units, it has become an integral part of industrial production and consumption*” (p. 3). Small towns surrounding the major cities of Boston and Worcester have been enveloped by the sprawling urban fabric. The state’s Rural Policy Advisory Commission reports that the rural population of Massachusetts is on the decline, and the few towns that do see an increase are generally due to second homes being purchased by the wealthy. The space itself still exists, the town names and many residents, but rather than being distinctly rural, these spaces are now “*growths of dubious value*” (Lefebvre, 2002, p. 4). Lefebvre provides an excellent description for this sprawl: “*Large cities exploded, giving rise to suburbs, residential conglomerations and industrial complexes, satellite cities that differed little from urbanized towns. Small and midsize cities became dependencies, partial colonies of the metropolis*” (p. 4). Perhaps the best description Lefebvre provides that can be applied to urbanization in Massachusetts is of

the urban fabric. “*Urban fabric does not define the built environment of cities, but all manifestations of the dominance of the city over the countryside. In this sense, a vacation home, a highway and a rural supermarket are all part of the urban issue*” (pp. 3-4). Much more can be written in regards to urban development, capitalist growth, and rural erasure in Massachusetts, and I recognize that what is provided here is only a cursory history of the current situation. However, the purpose of this paper is to examine erasure within an educational context. In the subsequent sections, I hope to provide a conceptual analysis of the urban fabric in terms of education, specifically how urban dominance of education is shaping and ultimately erasing rural schools.

### **Capitalist Urbanization and Erasure of Rural Schools in Massachusetts**

As noted above, Lefebvre’s critiques of education often echoed his critiques of industrial urbanization. In the same vein, the history of rural education in Massachusetts follows a similar ideology as the history of rural communities in general. The *Berkshire Edge* reported in June of 2015 that the Massachusetts Association of School Committees (MASC) convened, in order to discuss the issues that they saw as most urgent to education in the state. The main issue on the agenda was Berkshire County’s declining and aging population. Berkshire County is on the western end of Massachusetts, bordering New York, and is predominantly rural. School enrollment has been steadily decreasing in the county, while the costs for funding schools were increasing. MASC director Glenn Koocher spoke of the pressure on the districts from the state level to justify the continuation of these schools with low enrollment. One State House representative from Berkshire County, William Pignatelli, encouraged the districts to seek out consolidation options as the only economically sustainable model, otherwise the state would need to step in and enforce their own policies. Pignatelli has also been an advocate of sharing services, wherein districts could combine administrative costs, such as sharing superintendents, and cut down on district level overhead. Of course, the biggest issue on the table was to redraw district boundaries to create larger, regional schools, despite this long being an unpopular idea in most of New England, where local control has long been important (Carleton, Lynch, & O’Donnell, 2009). While this meeting represented only one county, it is representative of numerous rural communities in western and southern Massachusetts who are also facing pressure from the state to justify their existence. *Commonwealth Magazine* in April of 2017 explains that Berkshire County is home to 19 school districts of roughly 16,000 students and has witnessed an overall decline in school enrollment of 20% since 2000. One of these districts, Adams-Cheshire Regional, has closed two elementary schools. Another, Southern Berkshire Regional is predicting a 38% decline in enrollment in the next decade. The county’s largest district, Pittsfield Public Schools was expected to cut the equivalent of 73.5 full time positions in 2018. Consolidation plans proposed to merge the 19 districts into only three. The *Worcester Telegram* reported in April, 2017 that in central Massachusetts, the Quabbin Regional School District is in undergoing a similar situation, and has recently concluded a two-year effort in partnership with UMass Boston to come up with a number of consolidation plans. Among the suggestions will be to close schools. Many of these districts were created as a result of previous consolidation, and are now being asked to consolidate further.

According to a report from *MassLive* in March, 2015, Massachusetts governor Charles Baker has only increased the pressure on rural schools as he has cut the education budget by \$18 million, with the funding left available going to districts on a per-pupil basis, leaving small districts facing a disproportionately larger funding cut than urban and suburban districts. Baker and the DESE have a history of supporting consolidation, and there is a belief amongst rural educators in the state that if they do not act on their own, the state will step in and force consolidation upon them, as reflected in the article. It is telling that main conflict that stemming from the current situation is who will determine the best way to consolidate districts. Any public outcry against

consolidation in general has not been reported, as the neoliberal logic has seemingly become accepted as the only way to improve. School officials and rural representatives are not questioning whether or not economic efficiency should be the purpose of their school districts, or whether their communities will actually be better off without a school.

Herein can be seen the connection between capitalist urbanization and education policy. The only driver behind consolidation efforts is an economic one, the policy recommendations that are explored in this section are based on efforts to save money and reduce costs, with the underlying assumption that bigger, more efficient schools will produce better outcomes on standardized assessments. Lefebvre (2002) described this kind of “*totalizing ideology*” (p. 48) as leading to an elimination of space “*through absorption of social development into industrial growth*” (p. 48). The state’s logic in regards to rural schools can be described with what Lefebvre termed “*neo-dirigisme... an emphasis on planning which promotes the intervention of specialists and technocrats, and state capitalism*” continuing on that it “*leaves a certain amount of space for the public sector and activities by government services*” (p. 48). The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) has long pushed for consolidation of rural schools, viewing small, locally controlled schools to be economically inefficient. In fact, this is the only solution to the supposed problem of the cost of small schools that the state has pursued. DESE has released several reports outlining the apparent benefits of district consolidation (Carleton et al., 2009) along with plans that districts can take to begin the process (DESE, 2009). The Rural School and Community Trust notes that only 5.5% of Massachusetts schools are considered rural, and half of those districts enroll fewer students than the national median for rural enrollment. Only 10% of the Massachusetts population lives in communities defined as rural, and that number has been shrinking over the past decade (Showalter et al., 2017; Johnson et al., 2014). Whether or not there is an intentional move to erase rural communities in Massachusetts is not a simple question. It is unlikely that there is an actual anti-rural contingent setting policy, but in viewing policy there is the mindset that rural, particularly rural schools, have no place in the modernized, capitalist, global economy. Perhaps it is from good intentions that erasure occurs, but the intentions are not the issue. Rather, it is the deficit mindset at the state level that positions rural as inferior to urban. This mindset is belied by a constant push to expand districts and increase population. That the policymakers are housed in Boston, the state’s capital and a metropolitan area that encompasses half of the state’s total population is a key factor. Termed “*urban paternalism*” by Lefebvre (2002, p. 43), a geographic hierarchy is very much in place in Massachusetts and it has become incumbent on rural towns to modernize to meet the needs of the urban, even if that means pursuing economic ends ensuring their erasure.

Pedagogy of Erasure is a term discussed by Eppley (2011) to indicate an educational practice that ignores, intentionally or unintentionally, cultural contexts, thereby eliminating the presence of an other. Eppley’s writing describes the ways in which standardization eliminates the lived experiences and realities of students in rural schools. This concept will be expanded in order to portray how education policies put forth by the state are not only ignoring rural context through urban-centric standardization, but are actively erasing rural schools, and by extension rural communities through physical standardization through consolidation. It is not the intention to claim the state is purposely attacking rural schools, but the actions of DESE have placed rural schools in no less danger of erasure. The neoliberal ideology at play at the state level is seemingly informing all policy decisions, unable to see the purpose of education outside of a narrow economic viewpoint wherein running with economic efficiency is more important than understanding a larger purpose for education and the role of a school in a community.

Erasure can be summed up in Corbett’s (2016) writing that “Institutional education moved human populations out of areas of capital contraction and into areas of capital expansion” (p.

143). He explains that space is not innocent, but produced through capitalism. Rural schools are generally more vulnerable to economic coercion as their size, limited political power at the state level, and lack of a large tax base leave them under tremendous pressure to follow state or federal directives. As seen in Massachusetts, this pressure often leads to consolidation which is often presented uncritically as the solution to economic inefficiency (Howley and Howley, 2006). Under consolidation, not only is the rural school itself erased but it can often result in community erasure as well. Lyson's (2002) study found a strong connection between schools and communities, noting that the presence of a school in a small community is often an indicator of numerous social and economic benefits. While regional schools may have shown an impact in raising student achievement as based on standardized testing—which is not necessarily an indicator of a strong education on its own—there is also a negative impact on the health of the community. Lyson's study showed that the existence of a community school was an indicator of a strong civic infrastructure that produces a higher quality of life for residents. For many small communities, the school district is a source of employment, and it can damage the livelihoods of many people when the schools close down. These effects of consolidation lay the blueprint for the erasure of rural communities: take away the control of the community over their young people's education, give that control to a state or regional body, standardize the curriculum to devalue local place and values, and close down what may be one of the main employers in the community (Biddle and Azano, 2016; Lyson, 2002).

The consolidated school stands as an antithesis to Middleton's (2014) description of a Lefebvrian pedagogy. Students in consolidated schools generally received less individual attention from teachers, larger class sizes, longer days due to longer bus rides, and less time to participate in extracurricular and co-curricular activities (Howley, Johnson, and Petrie, 2011). A Lefebvrian pedagogy, with its emphasis on self-learning, and mutual engagement with students and teachers would require time, small classes, and individualized attention between teachers and students, as well as between students and other students. Though the research does not use Lefebvrian concepts of spatial production, Post and Stambach (1999) described that families struggled to maintain and define their communities in the wake of consolidation. This echoes the importance of a school to a community, wherein students are able to engage with their communities understanding how they are shaped historically, and how they can continue to be shaped in the future.

The push by the state to erase rural schools grew along with industrialization and the erasure of rural towns and villages, though the effects were not as immediate. Consolidation began in 1882, when the state mandated that only municipal governments could operate schools, thereby closing down schools that had been run by groups of families within communities. Of course, this did not immediately shut down small schools as the state still had 351 distinct towns and cities, with most choosing to operate a school system (Carleton, Lynch, & O'Donnell, 2009). In 1949, the state passed the Regional Schools Act, which defined regional school districts as independent entities that would also legally be able to run schools. The hope was that this act would encourage consolidation, although the number of school districts actually increased up until the 1970's (Commission on School District Collaboration and Regionalization, 2011). In 1974, the state began offering additional financial incentives for districts to consolidate, but even that only saw a decrease to 329 total districts from the 390 that existed previously by 1993, when the Massachusetts Education Reform Act was passed, eliminating the incentives for consolidation. From 1993 until 2010, only one additional regional district was created (Commission on School District Collaboration and Regionalization, 2011).

In 2008 and 2009, the state introduced a number of planning grants in order to push districts to explore consolidation. As will be explained, these policies stem from the longstanding belief in

the state that urbanization is modernization, and to be modern things need to be scaled up and measurable. These grants supported studies in 58 communities to research the feasibility of creating regional school districts (Commission on School District Collaboration and Regionalization, 2011). The results of these grants included a list of supposed advantages to consolidation as well as a description of the challenges. These advantages reflect the manner in which capitalist ideology and neoliberal policy are mediated through the state and become ingrained in state-level educators (Seelig, 2017). The advantages are as follows:

1. *A single school committee with cohesive educational policy for all K-12 students*
2. *A single administration with potential for more efficient and economical operations*
3. *A coordinated curriculum, kindergarten through grade twelve*
4. *A single salary schedule and a single teacher unit for negotiation purposes*
5. *A single budget, administered to take advantage of efficient, centralized purchasing techniques and coordinated transportation*
6. *Expansion of critical mass to gain economies of scale and aggravated purchasing power of goods and services*
7. *Fuller utilization of teachers and all school facilities*
8. *Opportunity for more administrative capacity at the district and school level*
9. *Opportunity to redirect leadership time and energy to educational programs through a reduction of duplicative effort in business procedures, reporting and negotiations*
10. *Opportunity to offer more programs and enrichment within school curriculum*
11. *Opportunity to expand athletic programs and extracurricular activities*
12. *Coordinated program of testing, guidance, health services and school adjustment work*
13. *Expanded offerings could lead to decreased student loss under school choice (DESE, 2009)*

Of these supposed advantages, they all operate under the mindset that standardization on its own is a benefit, and that economic efficiency should be the goal of education policy. Looking closer at individual advantages, it is unclear why a single school committee and single administration along with a coordinated curriculum would provide a benefit. If the end goal is a state-wide standardized curriculum, then of course it makes sense to have everyone teaching the same thing, yet there is little to no research that shows a standardized curriculum coming from the state level provides a benefit to rural students or rural communities at large. Standardization also stems from an urban-centric position that is born of an industrialized worldview that seeks to educate students for a globalized world rather than one that values rural knowledge and values (Theobald, 1997). This vague idea of the preparing students for the global economy is pervasive in education in the United States. This kind of education hurts rural communities by driving young people away through academic stratification and instilling a resistance to education in those who value rural life (Corbett, 2007; Haas and Nachtigal, 1998). The supposed advantage of “fuller utilization of teachers and facilities” reflects a troubling underlying logic, particularly in the equating teachers with facilities. While there may not be harmful intentions behind this suggestion, it does lead one to question what is the full utilization of a teacher? It would not be a stretch to believe this means a more efficient use of personnel by having fewer teachers perform more tasks. The deeper issue here is the reframing of the role of the teacher, where the teacher is now being framed more as a support staff on par with a classroom or piece of technology rather than a professional educator. This dehumanization through policy underlies much of neoliberal policy, where quality of life is pushed aside for economic efficiency. There are also deeper issues in the advantages that claim greater opportunities for programs and enrichment. The stated belief is that larger schools with larger staff can provide more classes or activities than small schools with small staffs, but again this implies a that more options will lead to better education rather than a re-examination of what kind of education should be provided and whether that is simply met with more electives.



In addition to the apparent advantages of consolidation, this report also lists the challenges that will be faced during the consolidation process:

1. *Unwillingness to share control with neighboring towns*
2. *A feeling of loss of local pride*
3. *Loss of positions for local school committee members*
4. *Potential change in administrative leadership and staff*
5. *Loss of town control of state aid when funds are distributed directly to the regional district*
6. *Loss of budget control and control of school buildings*
7. *Potential for closing town school buildings*
8. *Concern for job security (DESE, 2009)*

Aside from listing the challenges and noting that they are fairly common amongst all communities facing consolidation, the study does not refute them nor try to explain ways they can be overcome, or even why they should be overcome. The challenges are presented almost as a for your information, something that one will face and must be defeated in their consolidation efforts, when a closer examination shows the main challenge to be the very existence of the rural school. Returning to Halfacree's (2007) idea of radical ruralities, the existence of small rural schools is simply not acceptable by capitalist standards.

Consolidation parallels Lefebvre's critique of capitalist urbanization nearly perfectly, as a consolidated school represents the ultimate in spatial abstraction. Aside from the supposed economic benefits of consolidation, the movement also grows from the positivistic belief in standardization and allowing for quantitative measurement. Small, locally run rural schools are extremely difficult to standardize and track when compared to simply having all the students from numerous communities come to one building and received the same education (Cervone, 2017). Beyond the issue of capitalist logic being the driver of rural education policy, consolidation is also facilitating the erasure of rural Massachusetts.

### **Toward a Rural Strategy**

Lefebvre made certain to specify that urbanization in general and the urbanization resulting from industrial production were not the same. Urbanization was an inevitable result of industrialization, the dominant mode of production, but is not inextricably linked. Rather, urbanization is a process that can occur with or without capitalism, but capitalism produced a specific kind of urbanization. In this vein, urban growth on its own does not need to be stopped or reversed if rural Massachusetts is to survive. Lefebvre's (2002) ideas for reclaiming urbanization from industrialization can also set the basis for ensuring rural survival. One of these ideas is through the critique of everyday life, "*we need to envisage the mutation through which so-called industrial society becomes urban society*" (p. 138). Lefebvre also describes the need develop a science of the urban phenomenon, a radical critique of the forces of production.

One of the major challenges to be overcome is to redefine rural in a non-capitalist sense. Rural is often defined as a place where things are produced, a definition that locks it into the capitalist mode of production. Halfacree (2007) calls for a development of potential rural futures that think beyond productivism. This kind of thinking does not call for an end to agriculture, or other forms of production, but to find a way to balance production with lived spaces, ensuring that rural space does not exist purely to provide an engine for urbanization.

Herein lies the need for a Lefebvrian pedagogy that allows educators and students to critically engage with their own lived experiences and understand how much of what they do is bound to capitalist ideology that is not of their own making. For a rural student, this involves

understanding how capitalism views rural spaces, what it needs rural spaces for, and how it shapes rural spaces in order to meet those needs. Consequently, rural youth must engage with their communities to reclaim the productive forces and determine what the future of those communities should be. Of course, this means nothing when students and teachers are bound by state and federal requirements and standardized assessments. However, as these restrictions are placed on schools in all settings, urban, rural and suburban, there is a need for educators to push for place-relevant education across the board.

Lefebvre provides the groundwork for political strategy, describing the need to introduce the urban problematic into political life, a form of generalized self-management for urban areas, and the development of a right to the city. Rural communities in Massachusetts should be following the same formula. Currently, there is very little discussion of rural issues at the state level, and with such a small population, very little incentive for the state to bother with rural issues at all beyond closing down the schools, thereby eliminating the rural issues all together. The future of rural Massachusetts is bleak, one could even make the claim that rural Massachusetts has no future. With an aging and dwindling population, the state could become completely urbanized. However, what that actually means is unclear, and it does not seem as if that is a question that can be answered. Policymakers at the state level must recognize that small schools are able to provide a good education, regardless of whether they have the same number of offerings as urban schools. If there is to be any hope for rural Massachusetts it may lie in the schools. Lefebvre's urban strategy can be translated to rural education.

Rural educators must begin by pushing back on the capitalist form of education that pushes them to operate with economic efficiency. Schools themselves can serve as political actors simply by remaining open and exposing their students to a critical rural education. Fortunately, Lefebvre's condition that a science of the urban phenomenon must be created, has been taken up by rural scholars examining the rural phenomenon. Corbett (2016) writes "*We need to support ways about teaching in rural contexts that are non-standard and that directly address persistent and pressing rural problems such as: population loss, resource industry restructuring, resource depletion, environmental and habitat degradation and land use policy, etc*" (p. 147). Biddle and Azano (2016) call for a reevaluation of "*education's relationship to marginalized places and spaces in a holistic and inclusive way*" (p. 316) explaining the need to understand specific geographic realities in relationship to the greater global context. Theobald (1997) has pushed back on standardization, claiming it is an urban-centric ideology born of an industrialized worldview, and what rural students need is an education that includes rural knowledge and values.

Rural educators need not do this alone, as the push against standardization is not an inherently rural issue, quite the contrary; it is the basis for much of the grassroots political action by educators in Massachusetts. The Massachusetts Teachers' Association (MTA, 2018), for example, the statewide teachers' union has long advocated for students and teachers to refuse standardized testing, as well pushing back against state takeovers of schools, which generally occurs in urban schools deemed to be low-performing. The MTA, or a similar democratically-controlled statewide group of educators could provide rural educators a voice at the state level, if the group were willing to take up rural issues.

Perhaps the response to rural erasure is building on the knowledge of rural educators and students in the creation of a right to the rural. This is based of Lefebvre's vague notion of right to the city, a broad focus on societal needs as decided by the residents of the city. Like Lefebvre's right to the city, a definition of right to the rural must remain vague, as it is up for the individual communities to define for themselves. It is the responsibility of educators to prepare rural youth to take action within their communities and stand up to the forces of production that are shaping

rural spaces. Through a critical and political education, educators can work with youth to determine what a rural community means in regards to the rest of the world, and what kind of community can be created that meets the needs of rural populations. For Massachusetts, the right to the rural can begin in schools. Young people and educators in the state can push back on the consolidation efforts and reclaim democratic control, deciding for themselves what the future of rural Massachusetts will look like, and how education can be shaped to meet that future, rather than allow the future to be shaped through capitalist efficiency.

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