

WHAT RURAL SCHOOLS CAN TEACH URBAN SYSTEMS

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One teacher I know likes to imagine a TV game show that would set down its contestants in a McDonald's anywhere in the world and challenge them to name its location before the buzzer sounds. The very difficulty of the task would make a rude reminder, he observes, of what we are losing in our headlong rush to a world economy - the countless, precious idiosyncratic differences that tell us where we are, and who we are, and why it matters what we do together in that place.

In out-of-the-way communities around the country, a steady conversation around that theme is emerging, which challenges conventional wisdom about the relation of school and community, the purpose of academic studies, and the past and future of the nation itself.

And though it has begun in rural places - whose students have long been marginalized, dismissed, or in a few cases scooped into the mainstream of "success" away from home - the ferment has found like-minded friends in central cities, who are struggling with the very same issues.

"When schools focus only on how education benefits the individual, they become the enemy of community," says Paul Nachtigal, who with Toni Haas directs the national Rural Challenge from a mountain perch in tiny Granby, Colorado. "They educate young people to leave, and so fulfill the prophecy that these places are doomed to poverty, decline, and despair."

Through funding a laboratory of living examples that show otherwise, the Rural Challenge intends instead to rally communities to reinvent their schools as engines of renewal for the public good. Launched with a \$50 million matching grant from Walter Annenberg, it has scouted out some of the most forward-thinking activists this country has to offer, in some of its least accessible places.

A school in Howard, South Dakota has created a community resource center, for example, where students and other citizens archive materials on the area's rich history, environment, and culture and take political action to save the region's family farms.

In remote Alaskan villages, tribal elders from five ethnic groups are teaching children and educators how native "ways of knowing" can infuse profound traditions into the study of science, mathematics, social and cultural studies, language, and literature.

Students in Cedar Bluff, Alabama have launched a thriving computer assembly and software development business that takes orders from the public, serves a network of rural schools, and has won a grant to connect the entire county's school system.

People in each of these small communities gathered their resources and organized their schools so as to reclaim rural places and traditions facing economic or political eradication. But in a hard-pressed, ethnically divided section of Brooklyn, the same impulse united students and other residents against a toxic waste incinerator that threatened their neighborhood, and a vital community school grew out of their effort.

In fact, most of the policies and practices that distinguish Rural Challenge sites make perfect sense in urban settings as well. But the philosophy of this initiative goes well beyond the innovative practices common in systems today - multi-age classrooms, site-based management, interdisciplinary studies, peer tutoring, and communities as learning resources - that have long been staples of rural schooling.

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It reaches instead to the heart of cultural survival - the tough business of maintaining identity, autonomy, and pride in any community marginalized by the mainstream. To succeed, the Rural Challenge vision requires school people to join forces with others in the place they inhabit, and work through their disagreements toward the common good. And a look at this vision's six salient elements can shed useful light on other reform efforts, no matter how far from the fields they might be taking place.

SIX LESSONS FROM RURAL SCHOOLS

Small schools boost student learning.

Place in the curriculum connects kids to who they are and why they need to learn.

Civic life is inseparable from the work of schools, and vice versa.

Two cultures often meet in school, and kids need to succeed in both.

School and civic policies can help or harm student learning.

Stories about people make powerful and authentic documentation of school change.

Staying small has profound benefits, country schools have found, for example. Small schools perform better than large schools on most measures - including school grades, test scores, honor roll membership, subject-area achievement, and assessment of higher-order thinking skills - and equal to them on the rest, says a recent digest by Kathleen Cotton of over 100 research studies, published by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory in Portland, Oregon. Along every measure of student attitudes - attendance and graduation rates, extracurricular participation, attachment to school, disciplinary incidents, and more - students in small schools also do better. This holds true for both elementary and secondary students of all ability levels and in all kinds of settings (though many of the studies of the effectiveness of small schools derive from rural schools).

The relative lack of bureaucracy in small school communities supports the Challenge's beliefs about teaching and learning, and the first year of the Annenberg initiative has seen huge comprehensive schools in New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia move toward breaking into small learning communities. They gain a more personal context in which teachers know small numbers of students, often teaching as generalists rather than specialists, as rural teachers in small schools have done for generations.

But even sparsely populated rural communities must struggle to maintain small schools these days; economic pressures for consolidation have affected almost every rural district in the nation, U.S. Education Department data show. Between 1940 and 1990, the number of U.S. elementary and secondary public schools declined 69 percent - from approximately 200,000 to 62,037 - despite a 70 percent increase in the student population. The 117,108 school districts that existed in 1940 have experienced dramatic consolidation, decreasing by 87 percent, to 15,367. And the largest schools can generally be found within the largest districts.

At the same time, for the first time in 100 years, rural populations are increasing. Today, some 22,400 rural schools represent 16.7 percent of this country's public school students, more than a third of public schools, and the majority of its districts.

Those students live in isolated areas with few neighbors, and whether they get their schooling close to home or go on a long bus ride to a regional facility can have an enormous effect - not only on their ability to participate in the school-related activities that keep their interest high, but on the character and sustainability of the rural community itself.

The school is often a small town's major employer, for example; when it closes to merge with another, those jobs disappear in a major economic setback. The social setback does just as much harm: schools provide the activity center of most towns, for adults as well as children. Adults in their home town miss the presence of kinds who are bused elsewhere; and they also worry that as ties with their town loosen, young graduates will go elsewhere for good.

Parents in five small Colorado communities grew so concerned about all this that they got permission to convert their elementary schools into a network of five public charter schools, most serving few than 50 children.

"These are all schools 'born and raised' by our communities," says Ginny Jaramillo, who helped launch the effort. "And we all want to return to them some measure of value beyond meeting educational objectives." Townspeople spent thousands of hours, for example, restoring the historic school building in Marble, and old quarry town, for the 21 students in kindergarten through grade seven. That school is now the only heated meeting place in town; students publish the town's only newspaper every month; and the public uses the school's library and networked computer with student assistance.

One way to strengthen students' ties with their rural homes is to root the school curriculum solidly in the community - which is another pillar of the overall Annenberg Challenge vision of good teaching and learning. What Rural Challenge leaders call the "pedagogy of place" connects the intellectual work of students with hometown issues, nurturing their academic skills in a rich cultural and environmental context that incorporates the arts, language, history, economy, natural resources, and citizenship. The approach pays off handsomely in increased student engagement as well as community revitalization, rural schools have learned.

The small community of Big Springs, Nebraska, for instance, galvanized itself to renovate its 1885 Phelps Hotel, a landmark for early pioneer families, railroad workers, and cowpunchers travelling through this prairie town. What began as an architecture project in a school technical drawing class turned into a major town cause over several years, with volunteers painting the building and transforming it into a bed-and-breakfast, café, museum, and gallery. The high schools' Class of 1997 adopted and restored the hotel's Sage Room; other students, staff, families, and business people raised money to fix up the original fire stairs, hot water tanks, even and old "two-bit bathtub", the locked lid of which guests once paid a quarter to open.

Curriculum like this - typically integrated projects that combine research, writing, mathematics and science with hands-on cooperative work - may not look like "schooling", its advocates say. It may take place outside school walls, calling on expert adults who are not formal teachers, or on community agencies that serve children and youth in other ways.

Likewise, such schools serve as resources and centers of learning for people of all ages - places to see plays and exhibits, use research tools, meet visitors, and explore the surrounding area. Just as important, they honor old-fashioned but powerful ways of learning: imitation and practice, stories and legends, even informal watching and doing.

In the Alaskan villages of the Rural Challenge, for example the Northwest Arctic Borough schools have begun restructuring the curriculum to keep their Inupiat dialect and culture alive - starting by organizing school around a native "subsistence calendar" of food gathering, indigenous traditions, and the like. To teach effectively in native Alaskan cultures involves building on this cultural heritage as a strength, observes Oscar Kawagley, a Rural Challenge leader there.

The Yup'ik people, he notes, use the parts of the body as measuring instruments when they make clothing and tools; when they travel, they measure time, terrain, and conditions, not meters or miles. In this cultural context, proportionality matters more than precise numerical accuracy

when children learn mathematical concepts. As Western scientists grow more attuned to interrelationships through the study of fractal geometry, chaos and complexity, Kawagley points out, they come closer to the Native thought-world that rests on pattern and form in space and place. This may help in teaching Native students, he says, who often have difficulty visualizing abstract mathematical concepts and their application to real life.

Pedagogy of Place aims at more than just individual learning or even the use of community resources, in the Rural Challenge view of things. I goes hand in hand with a vital civic life, in which school and community exist to serve each other. Both share the same goals: a sustainable local economy, a clean and safe environment, a rich political discourse, and a quality of life high in tangible as well as intangible ways. And though children are to be nurtured, they are also regarded as citizens with a place and function in their community.

As relevant in the *barrio* as it is at a barnraising, this viewpoint can galvanize any small community around actions that naturally involve its student members. "Our school doesn't exist to create high school graduates," declares Luis Garden Acosta, co-director of El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice in Brooklyn, New York. "It exists not to meet state academic standards but to create leaders for our community in a democracy. We succeed when our students share our goals - peace and justice, collective self-help, creating community, safety, respect - and can develop the tools they need to get there: yes, literacy and academic mastery, but also unity, creativity, mentoring."

School should not follow the social service model of treatment and rehabilitation of problems, Garden Acosta argues. It should center instead on community development, which depends on trust and respect for humans' ability to live on common ground.

In Chicago, the exterior walls of James Johnson Elementary School are scrubbed clean of graffiti and the neighboring park is safe and clean, thanks to years of elbow grease, phone calls and dogged legwork by principal Mattie Tyson and her team of teachers and community supporters. With busloads of parents and kids, Tyson and the neighborhood priest, Michael Ivers, petitioned the city to tear down and abandoned building next door and let them start a Child-Parent Center for younger children. Trained parent mentors go into homes to help families with early learning, and Tyson is hoping to extend her students' small-school experience by building an alternative high school on an adjacent lot.

"It's not a bag of money that'll leave this community better off," she says, noting that Challenge funds are used to support teachers working together on improving their practice. "It's the human resources that get us working together to create a gleam of hope. Annenberg helps that happen."

Far from the cities, rural activists are mobilizing around the same philosophy - notably, in the work of the Texas Interfaith Education Fund, which trains community organizers and which the Rural Challenge helps support.

In the Rio Grande Valley near the Texas and Mexico border, for instance, civic and school life today is largely led by the Hispanic people who make up most of the population. Still, teachers and administrators alike describe a childhood of fragmented identity, in which they were punished for using their Spanish language in school - and those attitudes have died hard in schools. ("Did we not exist then?" asked one Mexican-American student after studying the school textbook's treatment of the Civil War.)

Now the small towns of Elsa, Edcouch, and La Villa are uniting to reclaim their history and create new opportunities for success close to home. Teachers are revising curriculum to explore and preserve the cultural complexity of the South Texas heritage and experience. And a matching

effort through a Federal Empowerment Zone grant has already helped launch a health occupations program to address a sore shortage of medical services.

Such a shift involves a fundamental rethinking of the purpose of school, these organizers concede. But when parents and community members take on educating roles as opposed to thinking of themselves as "clients" of the schools, Challenge stories show places building new strength in every way - economic, political, and cultural.

People who work, play, grieve, and celebrate together develop "communities of memory," as sociologist Robert Bellah calls them. When they regularly meet to work out their differences, "public engagement" - that elusive school reform goal that smacks of ad campaigns and focus groups - becomes as natural as a Saturday afternoon ball game on the school field, a barnraising, or a New England Town Meeting.

Building on the strengths of their local or indigenous cultures marks many Challenge sites, both rural and urban. But another kind of "biculturalism" also shows up when rural school people must balance their home culture's need to sustain itself with the need to teach students to succeed no matter where they go after graduation.

"We have to create more opportunities at home, and we have to prepare our kids to make intelligent career choices when they find themselves elsewhere," says Scott Barton, who leads an isolated school district in vast Schleicher county, Texas. The region's oil and agriculture businesses have collapsed in recent years; the county seat of Eldorado is 150 miles south of the nearest city, Abilene.

With Rural Challenge support, beleaguered residents are meeting here to dream up ways they can thoughtfully sustain their community - hydroponics? emu processing? a polling business? - without brining in smokestacks or a boom-bust industrial economy.

Against this reality, which is based on a culture of farming or manual labor, kinship, personal relationships, and geographic stability, places like Schleicher County must also balance a very different industrial or academic reality, based on large institutions, standardized success measures, abstract information, impersonal bureaucracies and communications systems, and geographical mobility.

Schleicher County is proud of its record: its schools are strong and innovative, with high student scores on Texas achievement tests, stable leadership, and community support. But its bicultural mission to prepare students for success in two worlds shows up vividly here, echoing the biculturalism of people who honor an ethnic heritage while succeeding in the dominant culture.

Policies that affect rural schools - on the district, state, and national levels - often present the ultimate obstacle to change efforts, just as they do in urban systems. To survive and thrive, rural schools need a support system that will tailor its policies to their unique needs, such as small populations spread over long distances, or the scarcity of high paying jobs. And school policies are not the only problem. Like their urban cousins, rural schools and communities often also need to reverse the political, social, and economic circumstances that sapped their strength to begin with.

The Copper Basin of rural Tennessee looks like a moonscape today, for instance, from massive environmental damage wreaked by generations of copper mining. Since the mines closed in 1989, the economy has plummeted; but local, state, and federal agencies are working together to reclaim the land and stabilize the local community. The region's schools, with help from the Rural Challenge, play a key role in that effort, by creating curriculum that both builds on the local situation and develops students' abilities to contribute usefully to it.

Economic jolts such as plant closings have repercussions in both rural and urban communities, touching off a pattern of inter-generational poverty that digs in as those with money migrate. Then social and economic structures adapt in ways that accelerate downward mobility, such as attracting industries looking to exploit cheap labor or land. This pattern seized rural communities on the heels of the firm crisis, argues Osha Gray Davidson in his 1996 book *Broken Heartland: The Rise of the Rural Ghetto* (University of Iowa Press). And how a community reacts - by accepting the downward spiral or resisting it through community action - sends a powerful message to the children who will either stay or leave after graduation.

School consolidation provides one example of how policy can aggravate this cycle of deterioration. But other common policies - on school accreditation, on teacher certification, on curriculum standards, on testing, and more - can also harass or support a community attempting to educate its children in an authentic local context.

Nebraska's "School at the Center" project stands out among rural Challenge sites because it involves the entire state system in a comprehensive, long-term effort to support community-based education. Schools and communities from all over the state are working together to develop plans that include economic development (especially entrepreneurship), housing, community-based science, distance learning, and local heritage.

In addition, they are piloting an alternative accreditation process for small, remote schools. They are analyzing how the state's curriculum frameworks fit with the kind of community-based work Rural Challenge schools are doing, and working with other large curricular initiatives such as that of the National Science Foundation. And with two state universities, they are revamping teacher education to suit the needs of rural places.

Even with all this momentum, School at the Center people reflect soberly on the enormous task that faces anyone trying to change a whole system. At every level, they note, people must care enough to help with the job. Few communities have a clear idea of how to go about planning together. Getting those in power - the school superintendent or principal, the local economic development people, the cultural leaders - to share their power is not always easy. And finally, students themselves have little experience with taking real responsibility as citizens.

How will we know, years from now, whether the Rural Challenge vision did help create the powerful learning for which it aims? In a poignant article addressed to his fellow Native educators, Oscar Kawagley of the Alaska Federation of Natives asks them to assess the school change effort itself in a way that honors their cultural heritage - rooted in long and patient observation, the spiritual wisdom of elders and the balance among all aspects of life.

Indeed, the Harvard University team charged with evaluating the Rural Challenge has designed its work to do just that. Using local research collaborators from the communities involved, they are collecting and analyzing not mere numbers but the stories of people - through photographs and films, student portfolios and exhibitions, observations, interviews, and documents. In the communities they study, they hope to leave behind people ready to continue the work of thoughtful research well after the five-year Challenge grant.

In June 1997, when its first participants gather to swap stories and reflections in the Colorado mountains, the Rural Challenge will demonstrate how country people humanize the work of change in schools. Around the country, the rest of us will do well to put our fingers to the wind, and listen.

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WHO'S REALLY RURAL? TEN WAYS TO TELL

As America's landscape absorbs and reflects the urban influences of television and a global look-alike economy, definitions of "rural" that are based on demographic data alone tend to falter. (If a place has under 2,500 people or lies away from major population centers, the U.S. Census calls it rural.) An informal survey of those who are thinking and writing about rural issues turns the following large and small indicators of whether a place is "genuinely rural"*:

1. Has the local newspaper started to charge a fee to run obituaries?
2. Do the resources of the surrounding landscape provide a sufficient level of living to its inhabitants? Does the food on the table come from nearby?
3. Are patterns of relationship in the economic community based on intimacy and trust, not just mere convenience? Can you get a loan in town to start a business there?
4. Does shame still serve as a social mechanism for enforcing behavior?
5. Is there a volunteer fire department and ambulance squad? (Are students on it?)
6. Does the school serve as a primary gathering spot for local events?
7. Does the community foster events that remind inhabitants of its collective past, so that the common culture may inform their cooperative actions in the present? (Is there a parade on the Fourth? An ethnic festival?)
8. Do local people work with a county extension service? Is there a 4-H? A grange?
9. Do people still meet face to face in work groups, town meetings, or other civic structures to discuss and solve the problems of the community?
10. Do people stay in the community? What percentage of residents still represents several generations of local kin?

* Note: You're really rural if you say no to number 1, yes to 2-10.