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ABSTRACT

There are five basic types of rural communities as far as school issues are concerned; rural schools vary not only to the extent that they are small, but also according to the type of community in which they are located. "Stable rural" communities are our classic rural community--prosperous, peaceful, traditional, and mostly white. In "depressed rural" communities economic insecurity abounds, outmigration is high, local economy is often undeveloped, and there is a moderate to high minority population. The "high growth rural" community faces problems inherent in rapid growth: inadequate school facilities, housing, and services coupled with problems which existed before a "boomtown" came into being. "Reborn rural" communities attract a refugee population from the city seeking a rural lifestyle; they are converts to that lifestyle, and they are zealous defenders of many traditional rural customs and institutions. "Isolated rural" communities have many characteristics of the other types, but isolation leads to separate problems (transportation, commerce, and cultural activities are all affected). Each rural type has its own set of strengths and problems. In order to improve rural schools, equal educational opportunity must be established and a strategy or combination of strategies most appropriate to unique local situations must be found. (AH)

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May 3-5, 1982

by Tom Gjelten
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Berkeley, California

(NOTE: These remarks were the last half of a joint presentation with Faith Dunne on "The Rural Condition: Demographics and Characteristics")

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Although we are discussing research findings, I must emphasize that our interest in rural education is not academic. My work in this field derives from my belief that rural education deserves special attention. I first became convinced of that as a teacher and principal in a tiny school on an island off the coast of Maine. Both our problems and possibilities were unique, but we could never find the assistance and advice that we so urgently needed to make the best of our situation. Since leaving North Haven four years ago, I have focused exclusively on rural education issues, and I am as convinced as ever that rural needs deserve special treatment. Having listened to the remarks of these rural educators who preceded us this afternoon, I can see that others share this view. I assume that is why we are all here for this conference.

Our study of small rural schools has focused on the goal of learning exactly what it is that is unique about rural education. We have tried to identify the particular ways in which "smallness" and "ruralness" raise unique educational issues. As Faith has already mentioned, our highly restrictive sample allowed us to look at "smallness" intensively. We thought we could reach the clearest understanding of what it means to be small by concentrating on those schools where smallness has forced some modification of conventional approaches to education. We have learned a lot from that exercise, as Faith has just explained.

But as you all know, there is more to rural schools than smallness. Rural schools are intimately connected to their social and economic settings, and those settings vary tremendously across rural America. Rural schools vary (among each other and in comparison to urban schools generally) not only to the extent that they are small, but also according to the type of community in which they are located. It has often been observed that rural schools are more tightly connected to their local community than urban schools. Since rural communities are even more varied than urban communities, rural schools are a highly diverse lot. That, too, was confirmed by the previous panel. Between the schools of Greystone, Colorado, Perry County, Alabama, Mount Desert, Maine, and Lohrville, Iowa, it is just about impossible to draw generalizations.

So there is one big problem with the idea that looking at just the smallest rural schools will help us understand all rural schools: It doesn't permit us to understand how different types of rural communities have different types of educational problems and possibilities. As Faith said, looking at really small rural schools means looking at rural schools which serve mostly white students in mostly stable, affluent communities, west of the Mississippi and north of the Mason/Dixon line. But that blinds us to the diversity of rural schools.

To get around this problem, we did case studies of rural schools, in addition to the survey. For the case studies, we made a special effort to go to places which weren't so well represented by the survey data. On the basis of those case studies, as well as other case studies I have written on other occasions, I am ready to suggest a typology of rural school settings. I think that a typology is one of the best ways to represent diversity; it's clear, easy to understand, and it's organized.

Five types of rural communities

It seems to me that there are five basic types of rural communities, as far as schooling issues are concerned. If we were interested in economic or political or cultural issues, we might find another typology to be more useful. Here I am grouping rural communities in ways that highlight the educational problems associated with different types of communities.

The first type could be called stable rural. This is our classic idea of a rural community: prosperous, peaceful, and traditional. Change happens slowly in these communities, largely because people are quite satisfied with their lives and accustomed to regularity. Social or class conflict is minimal, and poverty and unemployment are not major problems. Most typically, these are the communities of the Farm Belt in the Midwest -- almost exclusively white and relatively affluent.

Life is not so bucolic in the depressed rural community. Problems of economic insecurity abound. There is often a feeling that it is a "dead-end" town, without opportunity for a comfortable future. Not surprisingly, there are high rates of outmigration, as the young people leave to seek their fortune elsewhere. The local economy is often undeveloped. Poverty and unemployment are widespread. Frequently, there is a moderate to high minority population.

A third type is the high growth rural community. Since 1970, most new jobs in the United States have been created in rural communities. But that only tells part of the story, because rural economic growth has not been uniform. Frequently, it is concentrated in pockets of development activity. Thus, there is a whole new type of rural

community, where the major fact of life is rapid growth. The best examples are undoubtedly the "boomtowns" of the West, where energy development is taking place at such a rapid pace. But there are many other examples as well, in every region of the county. These communities could previously have been either "stable" or "depressed", but once growth begins to take place, their differences are minimized and their common problems and characteristics become paramount.

The movement of disgruntled city-dwellers to the countryside has created another type, the reborn rural community, where urban values have had a strong influence. These are mostly in the scenic and tranquil rural spots, where there is much to attract a refugee population from the city. Stockbrokers, executives, artists, musicians, factory workers, and tradesmen are all going "back to the land" in a Rural Renaissance. Most bring their city ways with them, but they are also enchanted by the country, and as converts to the rural lifestyle, they are among the most zealous defenders of many traditional rural customs and institutions.

Finally, there is the isolated rural community. These places may have many of the characteristics of the above types, but in all of them one single factor, isolation, overrides all others and makes this a distinctive type of its own. These are the communities where barriers of water, woods, mountains, or grassland separate the town from the rest of the world. Transportation, communication, commerce, and cultural activities are all affected.

The associated educational issues

Each type of rural community has its own set of strengths and problems, and they may well be independent of how small their schools are. In order to reach a clear understanding of rural educational needs in general, we need to consider each type of rural community separately.

1. Education in the stable rural community

Perhaps the most important thing that can be said about education in this case is that it's usually pretty good. These communities have strong independent identities, and they tend to support their schools steadfastly. Students in these communities usually score well above average on achievement tests and are more likely to go on to higher education than are their urban counterparts. Indeed, the biggest educational challenge in these communities is that of maintaining quality. In many cases, education is good because the communities are willing and able to pay for it. Small, community-oriented schools have been kept open even when it was a costly proposition to do so, because the local tax revenues were sufficiently high to cover the budget.

Problems began to arise in these communities only when school finance equalization measures were introduced. With their revenues limited by state law, prosperous rural communities soon began facing severe fiscal crises where school operations were concerned. As a consequence, many of these communities have been forced to make severe cutbacks in their school funding, and they are now facing pressures to reorganize small schools into larger, more efficient, ones. Consolidation may be a dead issue in some places, but in these communities, it is an issue that is

coming back to life. The fear of those who oppose consolidation is that the end of the small community school will mean the end of quality rural education.

2. Education in the depressed rural community

In contrast to stable rural communities, depressed rural communities are often burdened with severe educational problems. Many of the problems stem from political and economic factors. When people suffer from economic insecurity, for example, they are far less able to give support to their schools, either financially or morally. The task of survival takes priority over other concerns. In many cases, there is a gap between those who control the local school system and those who are to be served by it. The "clients" of the school system may lack either the economic resources or the political clout to ensure quality education.

Not surprisingly, schools in these communities are often staffed by less talented teachers and administrators. The curriculum may be lacking in both breadth and depth, and facilities and resources are often inadequate. Without a strong constituency for school improvement, the situation only gets worse. Undoubtedly, the major educational problem in these communities is that many children do not have the opportunity of receiving an education equal in quality to what other children in the nation are receiving.

But there is another schooling issue in these communities which is not often discussed. Depressed rural communities, like stable ones, often have a strong community identity; but the continued existence of the community may be less certain. A threatened community, in fact, may pin its hopes for survival on the community school. This may put the local school in a difficult position, as it may have to decide whom it

ought to be serving. Should it serve the individual student, equipping him or her with the skills and knowledge to leave the community and find a more secure life in some other area? Or should it serve the community at large, assisting in the task of development such that the community will become a better place to live? To an extent, it may be possible to do both, but the time inevitably comes when a choice has to be made.

3. Education in the high growth rural community

Rural communities in a phase of rapid economic growth have many advantages over other communities. The infusion of new money and people into the community means that there will be new resources and opportunities which can work to the benefit of the educational system. But high growth communities also have unique problems. Many of the problems are associated with the task of managing the growth. Adequate program planning, for example, is virtually impossible when student enrollment is increasing at a rate of 30 per week, as it is in Parachute, Colorado, the site of the new oil shale development by Exxon.

And there are other problems as well. As the community grows, its social and cultural character will change rapidly, and conflict will inevitably develop. It becomes increasingly difficult to maintain the kind of cooperative spirit that characterizes many rural communities. Social and class conflict will result in new problems at school, as children struggle to find their proper role. For teachers who are not accustomed to such problems, it will be a time of great frustration. The economic changes in the community will mean that new skills and knowledge need to be taught in the school. But with the changes occurring as rapidly as they do, the school may find it difficult to keep pace. Old familiar ways will no longer prove adequate.

4. Education in the reborn rural community

Like the high growth community, the reborn rural community faces a mixture of problems and opportunities as a consequence of the changes that are taking place. There are some special considerations in this case, however. The new people who are moving in have probably chosen the community and therefore are likely to bring with them a positive attitude and a level of enthusiasm that may easily overshadow the spirit of the long time residents. Converts make the best zealots. If this energy can be harnessed to work for the betterment of the school, and it often can be, amazing improvements can happen. Many of the newcomers have talents and skills that can be put to good use in the school, whether the people work as paid teachers or as unpaid volunteers.

The influx of urban refugees may also be a force for educational improvement in other ways. Many of the newcomers are middle and upper class, at least in their outlook, and have high expectations for schools. The pressures they put on the educational system may be just what is needed to get it moving on a course of improvement. But "urban" values can also create problems in traditional rural communities. In some reborn rural communities, there may develop a schism between the natives and the newcomers. There may even be two separate communities, each with its own set of values and ideas. As conflict develops between the groups, communication may diminish, and people may associate only with each other. In such cases, the school frequently becomes the battleground, as the natives and the newcomers have conflicting ideas about education. When this happens, the school can become a focus of tension, and education invariably suffers.

5. Education in the isolated rural community

Isolated communities may be rich or poor, growing or declining, but they will always have problems which distinguish them from other rural places. One of the most severe is the problem of access to resources and services. Vocational education, special education, interscholastic athletics, staff development, and other routine aspects of school business can become enormously problematic when the nearest town is an hour or more away.

Isolation, of course, also brings with it advantages. An isolated community is typically a strong community, and the school/community bond is often tighter than it would be in other settings. If teachers and administrators make use of this bond, they will find that they have access to many resources that other educators do not enjoy. But isolation also means that education must focus on some issues that are not as urgent in other places. In an isolated community, there is often no middle ground between staying and leaving. At the end of high school, students must choose whether to get off the island, come out of the woods, or come down from the mountain. Yet they may be singularly unprepared for such a profound decision, since they are less familiar with the outside world. If the school is to assist the students in this process, it will mean that some special curricular approaches will be necessary.

Summary and recommendations for rural school improvement

Communities, of course, do not always fit neatly into a type. In any particular case, a community may straddle two or more of the five categories I have laid out. But that fact does not defeat the purpose of establishing this typology. The point to be understood is that rural educational problems differ widely according to the community setting; generalizations about the quality of rural schooling are mostly invalid, because of the wide diversity of rural communities. Recommendations for improvement, therefore, must be made carefully and thoughtfully.

It seems to me that there are two ideas which could serve as a starting point. The first is that any comprehensive strategy for rural educational improvement must recognize that rural children in the United States do not at this time enjoy equal educational opportunity. If we are truly committed to a well-educated citizenry, then the top priority of rural education reform efforts must be the establishment of equal educational opportunity for all rural children. Until that goal is reached, "excellence" will be achieved in only those cases where privileged children enjoy great advantages over less privileged ones.

The second point which follows from this discussion of the diversity of rural communities is an obvious one: With such a variety of educational needs and educational possibilities in rural America, no single strategy -- be it local control, outside intervention, technological innovation, or community involvement -- will work in all cases, at all times. The key is to find the strategy or combination of strategies that is most appropriate for the unique local situation.