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ABSTRACT

This report summarizes discussions held in 1992 at two public forums to examine ways to improve the quality of rural education in Delaware. The forums focused on two goals: building support for quality education and promoting partnerships between families, communities, and schools. Participants discussed expanding schools to become "community learning and service centers," possibly integrating them with social-service agencies as a means of overcoming duplication and fragmentation in services. Problems with this approach include school accessibility, establishing roles and responsibilities, and the lack of existing services. Family and parental involvement was discussed in terms of changing family roles and parental disenfranchisement from the educational system. Participants recommended that schools take a leadership role toward redesigning themselves as learning centers while improving their relationships with social-service agencies. It was also recommended that schools work more closely with parents and communities in decision-making. Other recommendations dealt with the need for professional development and community cooperation. The paper ends with conclusions and reflections of the Delaware Rural Assistance Council, which expressed the view that the ultimate commitment must be reflected in the policies and programs of the State Board of Education and invited the board to work jointly with the council to define a "rural education agenda." (TES)

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REPORT ON THE DELAWARE RURAL ASSISTANCE COUNCIL'S  
PUBLIC FORUMS:

ACHIEVING QUALITY EDUCATION  
AND  
PROMOTING PARTNERSHIPS FOR ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL SUCCESS

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REPORT ON THE  
DELAWARE RURAL ASSISTANCE COUNCIL'S PUBLIC FORUMS:  
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PROMOTING PARTNERSHIPS FOR ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL SUCCESS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Delaware Rural Assistance Council, in collaboration with Research for Better Schools, sponsored two public forums in May and June 1992. The Council is a group of concerned educators and community representatives who are committed to increasing public awareness of the special needs and problems of rural schools and, more specifically, to improving rural schools in Delaware; Research for Better Schools is the regional educational laboratory for the Mid-Atlantic states. More specifically, the Council's four major objectives are to: (1) identify the most pressing needs of Delaware's rural schools and school districts; (2) develop plans for attending to those needs in cooperation with appropriate state organizations and associations; (3) outline an operational agenda that includes suggested resources and responsibilities for carrying out the plan; and (4) establish a network and enlist the assistance of organizations and associations in carrying out the plan.

The forums were based on two of the State Board of Education's goals that are particularly relevant to rural communities: continue building consensus and support for quality education (Goal 6) and promote partnerships between families, communities, and schools to improve the academic and social success of students (Goal 7). The Council felt that in order to enhance informed decision making on the part of state policy makers, it is essential that there be the broadest possible input from the community. A total of 47 representatives from rural schools, communities, and community organizations attended the forums. The report presents these "voices of the rural community" as they shared their major concerns and proposed recommendations for action. Several conclusions and reflections of the Rural Assistance Council also are presented.

The areas of major concern focused mainly on the concept of community, the broadened role of schools and their relationship to social service agencies, family and parental involvement, and -- to a lesser degree -- school-to-work transition and the issue of values.

With regard to community, the participants agreed that although rural communities are no longer as closely knit as they once were, their nurturing role still is extremely important.

The possibly enhanced role of the schools and their relationship to other social service agencies was very much on the participants' minds, i.e., the school would function as a community learning and service center and play a very central role in human and social service integration. Several reasons were presented for developing an integrated approach to service delivery, e.g., to overcome fragmentation and duplication of services, and the lack of communication on the part of service deliverers. However, several specific problem areas were noted, e.g., the relative lack of social services in rural communities, the lack of clarity about and sometimes the conflicts that exist

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regarding who is responsible for what activities (i.e., "turf" problems), and lack of accessibility and transportation. Specific roles and responsibilities of rural schools were discussed, along with such pertinent concerns as the degree of the schools' responsibility for service delivery and the potentially increased personnel and maintenance costs that additional responsibilities would bring. The consensus, however, was that schools are the most logical candidate to play a leadership role because of their central and highly visible position in the community.

With regard to family and parental involvement, many participants felt that there is a great degree of internal fragmentation on the part of some families as well as a sense of isolation, disconnection, and -- in some cases -- economic hardship, all of which result in the lack of family and parental involvement in school affairs.

The major recommendations for action were to: (1) broaden the role of schools to become community learning and service centers and their relationship to other social service agencies and (2) enhance family and parental involvement. The recommendations are directed to several audiences, but particularly to the schools, school districts, and local school boards.

With regard to schools broadening their roles in order to serve as community learning and service centers, it was recommended that schools become more accessible to the community, both physically and psychologically, and that they consider developing parent resource centers; providing child care services; expanding kindergartens into full-day programs; coordinating community life-long learning, life-skill development, and recreational programs; expanding the involvement of the business community in the delivery of services; and consolidating the use of varied human, technical, and financial resources.

It also was recommended that schools take a leadership role in interagency collaboration and identify a school/community liaison person for this task. The state, in turn, should take leadership in (1) disseminating information about existing human and social service programs and (2) providing the necessary structure to assure the delivery of total services as well as to establish policies and relevant operational procedures.

With regard to enhancing family and parental involvement, it was recommended that schools should value the home and community more thoroughly in their decision-making processes; schools should identify personnel to work on increasing parental involvement; schools should increase the level and nature of communication with families and parents; schools should work with teacher education institutions to train beginning teachers for these new responsibilities; and policy-making groups, such as the State Board of Education, should demonstrate its long-range commitment to parental involvement programs.

Other recommendations dealt with the need for additional time and resources for professional development, broader social interactions and cultural experiences, and greater school and community support for academic achievement.

The Rural Assistance Council concluded that it is evident that the responsibility for action rests on everyone's shoulders, not just the State Board of Education's or local school boards'. Schools, nonetheless, can play a significant and proactive leadership role in revitalizing rural communities and addressing community social and economic needs. However, the participants were most concerned that the State Board reflect its commitment to rural schools by enhancing all types of resources (human, technical, and financial) and by broadening the dialogue to make certain that all constituents are heard. Lastly, the Council requests that the State Board work with it in further defining a "rural education agenda," refining action plans for 1993 and beyond, and implementing specific programs in support not only of Goals 6 and 7 but all of the State Board's goals and visions.

REPORT ON THE  
DELAWARE RURAL ASSISTANCE COUNCIL'S PUBLIC FORUMS:  
ACHIEVING QUALITY EDUCATION  
AND  
PROMOTING PARTNERSHIPS FOR ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL SUCCESS

Forum 1

May 22, 1992

Delaware State College

Forum 2

June 12, 1992

Delaware Technical and Community  
College (Georgetown Campus)

Background

Who sponsored the forums?

The forums were sponsored by the Delaware Rural Assistance Council in collaboration with Research for Better Schools. The Council is a group of concerned educators and representatives of community organizations committed to improving rural schools in Delaware. Its objectives are to (1) identify the most pressing needs of Delaware's rural schools and school districts; (2) develop plans for attending to those needs in cooperation with appropriate state organizations and associations; (3) outline an operational agenda that includes suggested resources and responsibilities for carrying out the plan; and (4) establish a network and enlist the assistance of organizations and associations in carrying out the plan. Research for Better Schools is the regional educational laboratory for the Mid-Atlantic states (Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and the District of Columbia). Part of the laboratory's mission statement reads as follows:

The nation's education system is responsible for preparing our youth to meet the challenges of today and tomorrow. To accomplish this, there is a developing consensus among leaders in education, government, and business that schools will have to modify, or restructure, the way they conduct their activities in order to prepare all students to be skilled workers, lifelong learners, and productive citizens...With collaborating partners in education, government, business and local communities, we believe that we can and will succeed in preparing all students to meet the changing demands of the world (Research for Better Schools, 1990).

The Rural Assistance Council believes, as do many observers of rural education, that rural schools often have been overshadowed by the more publicized needs of urban schools. As a result, the public is less informed regarding a segment of the education enterprise that educates 6.6 million students. There is a deeper understanding on the part of the general public of the problems associated with urban schools (e.g., high drop-out rates and the concern for the physical safety of both students and staff.) The public generally is unaware of the problems faced by rural schools. The picture of rural schools that many people have often is a reflection of a limited personal experience with rural issues. There is little understanding of the wide diversity in the types of rural schools which, nonetheless, are affected by limitations imposed by their size and location and are steeped in cultural -- and community -- traditions.

## Why were the forums held?

The forums were based on two of the Delaware State Board of Education's Goals for the 1990s (1991) that are particularly relevant to rural communities:

Goal 6: Continue building consensus and support for quality education.

Background statement: At the state and local levels, public support is the cornerstone of American public education. This support must be developed and maintained if progress is to continue. The State Board of Education believes that by systematically reviewing public education, establishing this set of goals and providing the leadership to improve the schools, the community at large will be assured that the system is being efficiently managed and deserving of support and adequate funding. Public consensus and support for Delaware's schools will be fostered by increasing the public's understanding of Delaware's educational system, its strengths and areas needing improvement, addressing the values of Delaware communities, business, and parents in the educational system (emphasis added).

Goal 7: Promote partnerships between families, communities and schools to improve the academic and social success of students.

Background statement: A comprehensive family involvement program recognizes the connections that link family involvement, student success and school curricula. It is based on the research supporting the positive outcomes of greater home/community/school collaboration and the research that clarifies the link between student success in school and long term family support. Families are changing and growing numbers of students come from single parent homes, families where both parents work or homes in which the primary care giver is not the biological parent. Schools recognize and respect the cultural and language diversities that exist in different kinds of families and build on the strength of the families and their diverse, multicultural communities. Families are viewed and treated as invaluable partners in the education of their children (emphasis added).

When the members of the Rural Assistance Council reviewed the "Goals for the 1990s," Goals 6 and 7 appeared particularly related to the Council's four objectives. Hence, by means of the two public forums, the Council sought broad-based input for addressing its objectives. Similarly, Research for Better Schools recognized the relevance to its mission of school improvement by collaborating with partners in education and the community. The discussions focused on the following questions:

- What are you or your organization currently doing to enhance the objectives of Goals 6 and 7?
- What special insights have you acquired as a result of your activities?

- What are the unique contributions rural communities might make in addressing Goals 6 and 7, including the roles they might play and the responsibilities they might take?

and particularly....

- What are the unique concerns of rural communities with regard to Goals 6 and 7?
- What are your recommendations for action plans which would assist rural schools, districts, and communities in meeting Goals 6 and 7?

In the invitation to the forums, the Delaware Rural Assistance Council (1992) wrote that --

We believe these discussions are highly pertinent to your interests, since they come at a time when the educational community is bursting at the seams with various thought-provoking visions of schools and schooling in the Year 2000 and beyond....Those of us in rural schools simply wish to make certain that our rural schools and communities are not overlooked in this flurry of activity. Although in some cases we may be geographically apart, we trust it is not an issue of 'out of sight, out of mind.' Therefore, we plan to examine two proposed educational goals in light of the rural context, that is, through the rural prism....In order to enhance informed decision making on the part of state policy makers, it is essential that there be the broadest possible input from the community, particularly since state policy affects such a large number of rural districts in the state.

#### Who were invited to attend?

The Rural Assistance Council invited representatives of organizations as well as interested individuals who have a vital interest in making certain that the unique values and strengths of rural schools and communities are addressed, maintained, and enhanced. These included a total of 47 representatives from rural schools, communities, and community organizations. (See attached list of attendees.) Court stenographers were used in order to capture the entire discussions verbatim, as is noted by the many direct quotations throughout the report. The complete transcripts are available for review.

#### What happened after the forums?

In preparing this report, Research for Better Schools documented, and the Rural Assistance Council reviewed, the ideas and insights put forth and the recommendations proposed. The Council emphasizes that it does not speak for the rural community but rather is the conduit through which communication passes. The voices of the rural community are presented in this report which the Council is transmitting to the State Board of Education and the school boards in the rural school districts in Delaware. The report includes the



following three sections: (1) major concerns of the rural communities, (2) recommendations for action, and (3) conclusions and reflections.

### Areas of Major Concern

The primary concerns of the rural communities in Delaware, as reflected by the participants in the two public forums, focused mainly on the concept of community, the broadened role of schools and their relationship to other social service agencies, and family and parental involvement. To a lesser degree, concerns regarding school-to-work transition and the issue of values also were raised.

#### The Concept of Community

The community representatives at the forums had several general but very penetrating insights in this area, as indicated in the following four points:

First, "a mythology of rural communities" appears to exist that conveys the notion "that everything is perfect in the State of Denmark (read Delaware), but the old values appear to be breaking down." "There are some pockets of the old values that are very strong, and that is wonderful. But there are some pockets that are strong in communities other than rural." In short, the consensus was that rural communities are not as closely knit as they used to be, mainly because of the relatively high degree of mobility, both inward and outward. "Fifteen, twenty years ago, our rural communities had a different image; they were pretty stable, the families had been there a longtime...but now they have changed."

Second, school/community relations are a major concern in some places, "even though some of the literature (on rural schools) seems to indicate" that such relations are better in rural areas. "(It appears to be) an over-generalization that rural schools and rural communities have a closer relationship." Some do; some do not. In general, rural schools offer a number of advantages; because of their relatively small size, they appear to be "very responsive to change."

Third, there is a certain "richness that we have in the community, if only we go around and ask." Yet, we must "make certain that the voice of leadership (representing the community) is a voice of reason."

Fourth, together, the public schools and communities "need to address... our own failings, instead of trying to cover them up or refocus the attention elsewhere." Total responsibility, however, does not fall on the shoulders of the schools or any one social agency since "it takes a whole village to raise a child, whether you get that village all thinking in the same direction or not is the challenge."

#### The Broadened Role of Schools and Their Relationship to Other Social Service Agencies

As the Rural Assistance Council noted in the invitation to the forums, "the educational community is bursting at the seams with various thought-provoking visions of schools and schooling in the Year 2000 and beyond." All

of these calls for change or restructuring, in one way or another, seek to alter the rules, roles, relationships, and the ensuing results or outcomes in each of the school's major environments, i.e., programs (curriculum and instruction), policies (system managing and governing), and partnerships (school/community collaboration). The possibly enhanced role of the schools and their relationship to other social service agencies was very much on the minds of the participants of the forums, as indicated in the following five major points:

First, as one participant stated, "One of the major aspects...of restructuring is looking at schools, particularly rural schools, with a broader vision (of) the schools serving as a community learning and service center....It's a broader role.... a changing role....the ultimate vision is that some day (it would be) impossible to tell where the school door ends and the community door begins and vice versa." The schools, in this vision, would become an extension of the community. The consensus was that this would be a "most reasonable approach" in that, as a number of participants reiterated, the school is "the natural gathering place for the population...what better place to put it?"

Second, in exploring the many aspects of the school serving as a community learning and service center, the focus quickly turned to the related issue of the school's role in social service integration. "The resources that we're talking about are already out there; let's concentrate and make these resources funnel through one particular agency." "We need to find out how we pull all of these agencies together" in delivering such needed services as child care (a major concern of rural communities) and nutrition and health care, e.g., schools serving as "wellness centers" (several of which were described).

Third, a number of reasons were presented for developing an integrated approach to social services, including the need to overcome fragmentation and duplication of services; the lack of communication ("...four agencies involved with one family, yet they don't talk to each other"); the lack of knowledge and awareness of available resources ("...so many people doing so many good things....there are now over 1,000 non-profit organizations in Delaware...something has to be done to...coordinate all the resources that we have"); and the need for "outreach" programs that would connect people "with the many free and good services that are out there."

Fourth, a number of problem areas surfaced regarding integrated services. These included the fact that rural communities often "don't have a lot of social services" to begin with; the fact that many organizations and programs "come and go...they shut down because of funding, you get new ones, something changes its name;" and the lack of clarity and sometimes the conflicts that exist regarding who is responsible for what activities, i.e., the perennial "turf" problems. (As one participant graphically suggested, "we ought to take a rototiller and destroy a lot of turf because there is way too much turfmanship.")

In addition, two other problem areas were identified: accessibility and transportation. One participant indicated that "my concern is equal accessibility and services for all children in the district." Another raised this question: "Are there are not agencies already out there that all we need

to do is identify the problem and make sure that student is gotten to the right spot?" Still another participant stated:

...rural poverty is just so much different than city (poverty). I mean we're in Wilmington, too, but they have access to many other social services....we're serving people out in trailers...we go wherever they are; we don't (avoid making) a visit because it doesn't look like a pleasant place to be; we're serving kids in places where they don't have electricity, there's no running water, they're sharing their electricity through an extension cord to the next trailer.

Similar concerns were raised with regard to transportation: "The biggest problem that I've had to contend with is transportation or the lack of it"; "(rural students) are further away from social services. I think rural is a place that's been forgotten"; and "(In) Sussex County, people are so spread out...."We're doing home-based services, one of our providers travels 40 miles between some homes sometimes...we're trying to serve children and spending an hour on the road in between visits. That's a big problem."

Five, the major concerns regarding service integration, however, are the specific roles and responsibilities of rural schools. "Who is going to take the responsibility of pulling together the resources? Teachers? Administrators? Somebody else? How can (educators) deal with all this?" Although "rural communities have to provide more services, there (are) smaller staffs available (in rural schools) to provide those services." Moreover, there is what one participant called "the full-plate syndrome," indicating that rural school personnel already have many responsibilities that keep them busy well before 9 a.m. and often long after 5 p.m. In fact, a strong voice was raised which disputed "the assumption that the schools are going to be responsible for this. I don't think that's a foregone conclusion. I mean, if we're looking at community resources, why don't you look at some of the successful administrators in business and say, 'OK, Come on. Help us.' Why should it have to be school administrators? That's not their business." As another participant stated, "we're reinventing the wheel. All we've got to do is rotate the tires. We don't have to do the whole thing."

Other barriers exist with regard to schools assuming greater roles in social service delivery. Although schools would function primarily as catalysts and facilitators, some of the concerns dealt with increased personnel costs ("taking on another coordinator"); added maintenance costs of having the schools available beyond their normal hours and months ("air conditioning for a year-round school" and "heat in the winter"); and additional time demands on teachers and administrators which also can be translated into cost figures.

The issue of responsibility is perhaps the most critical. The consensus appeared to be that while responsibility rests with many social agencies including schools, someone has to assert a proactive leadership role. The schools seem the most logical candidate because of their central and highly visible position in the community. If responsibilities are to be shared, rural schools appear willing to play their part. The question is, will they be able to perform them?

## Family and Parental Involvement

Many participants agreed that "there are many families in trouble." "When parents or mothers are struggling just to survive, it's very hard for them to give the kind of nurturing (needed for) their children." As one person observed, "from what I see, the biggest problem in the school system today has nothing to do with the school. It has to do with the fragmentation of the family. Many children, from the time they can crawl to the time they get in school, lack discipline and role models. Without those, they are lost."

Several terms were used to describe the concerns of the participants. Many "parents are disenfranchised...for the most part, they're really not part of the community. They don't feel welcome when they come in (schools)." "I see a real feeling of isolation on behalf of a lot of students and parents and it's very scary." "Isolation and disconnection are very real problems." "Most of the parents, the great majority that I talk to, care about their children very much; they love their children, but in many ways they feel intimidated by what goes on in the school." "There are many parts of the rural community who know no one, who are totally isolated and totally alienated."

For many rural families and parents, the root of the problem is economic. For example, as one participant stated:

In many low income families, the concern is primarily survival. They have to wrestle with getting by from today to tomorrow and a lot of energy is spent on this. They don't have very much energy to spend on some of the other things that have to be done to promote survival and success in school...we need to understand what life is like at the bottom of the economic ladder.

Many concerns focused on aspects of family and parental involvement or, as several participants remarked, the lack of it. For example:

- "We have no problem getting parents involved in kindergarten, first, second, third, fourth, fifth grade, but then it starts to tail off." "We have to educate parents that there is a place for you in the school, but your role changes as your child advances. Just because your children go off to high school doesn't mean they don't need you there or need you to know what's happening."
- "I'm an outsider. I come from the Mid-West so I still make comparisons. I don't know if that's fair or not, it probably isn't, but I was distressed by what I saw there; I'm even more distressed by what I see here. I see much less parent involvement."
- Somehow we need "to find ways of regrouping and pulling the family, the parents back into the...process." However, "parents are not going to get involved unless they see the results and (an) excellent education being produced for their son or daughter." But we have "to start early." To date, we seem to have been doing "a marginal job," "a poor job overall." Several participants used the term "facilitate

partnerships" to describe the type of "support systems" needed to overcome the "still existing schism between the school and (at least) a portion of the students and their parents."

- Several participants were concerned about attitudes: "(some) teachers and principals have stereotypical attitudes about certain sub-group parents, and that's an area we really need to address."
- Several participants were also concerned about teacher education: "part of the problem is that teachers have not been trained adequately to work with parents; they don't know how. (Although) there are some teachers who could do it naturally, (there are some) administrators who have their own problems about parents being in the building."
- One participant appeared to touch at the heart of the issue when she observed, "You're asking the parent to be involved and (you are) making decisions about what goes on in the classroom, rather than explaining to the parent what goes on in the classroom so that the parent is an active partner. As we look how we want parents to be involved, we truly have to sit back and say, are we willing to give up some of our own power to empower parents to be actively involved in the situation?"
- Lastly, on a highly positive note, one participant described the work of a community/school liaison person who is making a difference.

In one particular...very impoverished area, she has taken teachers to the home to help parents understand how to do fractions with their children, and that's very powerful. These are parents who would not otherwise come to the building, but she took the teachers to the home with apples and oranges, something parents can relate with. (She) sat with them and let the teacher do the talking while she kind of was a mediator because those parents would not allow that teacher to come in their door without (the community/school liaison) being there to intervene. And they did a lesson in the home, using apples and oranges. What better way to do it? Of course, after the lesson was over, the parents and the kids ate the apples together. So that's the primary way of helping children be successful, helping parents to feel empowered. They have to trust you first; you have to build up that bond of trust. I just keep going back to that, because some parents feel disconnected to the schools.

#### School-To-Work Transition

Although it was not central to the dialogue, a concern about school-to-work transition was raised. For example, there is a notable "gap between the workplace and the school." As one participant noted, "I'm telling you teachers, and folks here who are in education can attest to this, we're working hard on the invisible curriculum; we're talking about responsibility

and punctuality. The kids are getting it, but they're not doing it because they don't see the school/business connection."

### The Issue of Values

Lastly, although it too was not a major topic in terms of discussion time, the issue of values came up, particularly in the discussion on substance abuse. For example, "You read about those drug stops in Salisbury, up and down Route 13, but it doesn't stop, it keeps going, and there's no appreciable decrease. If there's anything, there's more traffic as time goes on. What I'm saying is if the school people would get behind and demand something. We just don't demand enough. I have no answer. But it is a tremendous problem." Another participant agreed: "So we (rural residents) don't want to delude ourselves into thinking that we are some pristine little group sitting out here. We have drug problems, alcohol problems, problems with the races. We have all the same problems that they have in the Philadelphia school district. We've got all the same problems." Another participant: "The schools could help the local municipalities in some fashion, I think, because we have problems with the school communities, the students, in things outside of the school. And the problem is always raised (by the students), 'Well, we have nothing to do.'" Two participants concluded in this fashion. One wondered, "there are some advantages to being rural, to being small, (nonetheless), does everybody have a common value?" The other's answer was, "not anymore."

### Recommendations for Action

The recommendations focused primarily on (1) the broadened role of schools and their relationship to other social service agencies and (2) family and parental involvement. To a lesser degree, recommendations also were presented regarding professional and staff development, social interactions and cultural experiences, and support for academic achievement. The recommendations are directed to several audiences, but particularly to the schools, school districts, and local school boards.

#### Recommendation #1: Broaden Role of Schools and Their Relationship to Other Social Service Agencies

The following specific considerations relate to Recommendation #1:

Schools should be redesigned as community learning and service centers. "Anything which impacts on the education of the student should be able to be addressed, or the problem addressed, or the sources found, through the school. Now that does not mean that you turn the school itself into the substitute agency, but that the school has access or knows where to go and can bring in the expertise to address the problems." Since schools are "the focal point of the community," we should "open the schools up" and take advantage of the "leadership" of educators and other "strategic people" in the community. The key is to make schools "more accessible" (both physically and psychologically) so that when residents call to ask "do you know where I can get this (service) and can you help me (find it)?", answers are provided affirmatively, swiftly, and efficiently.

Schools as community learning and service centers should consider the following activities among their broadened roles. These include: developing parent resource centers; providing child care services (perhaps by using supervised high school students); expanding kindergartens into full-day programs; coordinating community life-long learning, life-skill development, and recreational programs; expanding the involvement of the local business community; and consolidating the use of varied human, technical, and financial resources. Also, schools should coordinate the use of retired persons serving as volunteers, and, conversely, students serving as volunteers in nearly senior centers.

Schools as community learning and service centers should take a leadership role in what often is termed interagency collaboration, service integration, or more simply, "bringing together all of these different agencies in one central place." As one participant suggested, "the key is concentrating those (social and human) services in the schools and targeting your program and energy on your facilities and resources. Stop looking at ways that it can't happen."

In order to implement this reconception of the schools' role, "there needs to be a grass roots person who could be in the school ideally to coordinate those services that are available." [Note: Some districts apparently are effectively using a school/community liaison person and are beginning to consider the use of "community outreach programs," literally, using "outreach vans" to address the transportation issue.]

In addition to a school/community liaison person, there also should be a comparable expansion of facilities in order to accommodate the added programmatic and staff responsibilities.

The state should take leadership in gathering and disseminating information about existing social and human service programs. If such information is already available, it should be disseminated more widely throughout the schools and communities. Although the state is embarking on an interagency collaborative initiative (now in its second year), the program does not appear to be as well-known to the general public and to potential clients as it might be. In this regard, the state also should provide the necessary structure for such collaborative efforts in order to assure the delivery of total services as well as to establish policies and relevant operational procedures.

#### Recommendation #2: Enhance Family and Parental Involvement

The following specific considerations relate to Recommendation #2:

Schools should value the home and the community more thoroughly "in their decision-making processes and truly make those groups partners in the overall education of our young people." Although the ultimate "responsibility still must be on the part of the family and parent," there must be a truly joint responsibility on the part of the home, school, and the community.

Schools should create positions at all school levels "whose sole purpose is to work on parental participation." Moreover, school personnel should "go into the (student's) homes" in order to enhance family and parental involvement, establish parent support groups, and, particularly, work more closely with families and parents at the critical "transition" between the elementary and middle school and the middle and high schools.

Schools should increase the level and nature of the communication with families and parents. "(We should) start highlighting some of the positive things that are going on in schools, let people in the community know about that 95 percent of the things that happen in school are positive, but we don't get that information home to the parents; what they hear are the 5 percent negatives." Teachers should call parents to convey other than "bad news;" they should call to say, "your daughter or your son is doing a good job." One participant even recommended that "maybe we can get something going in reaching more people via teleconferencing." Other recommended lines of communication included greater linkages with "the PTAs, the Grange, the Farm Bureau, and the churches in our rural communities."

Schools should work more closely with teacher education institutions to implement programs that train beginning teachers in parental involvement strategies and parent/school communication. Moreover, schools should establish and/or enhance parenting programs to assist mothers, fathers, or guardians in understanding their roles in the teaching/learning process.

Schools should extend their use of computers and other current technologies to help students learn about science and social studies. If this were the case, "we would be more excited and would be able to get our parents more interested in school because we would have more (and better things) to tell them...and it would be easier to get parents involved in school activities."

Although more than one participant spoke of "commitment," perhaps no one summed it up as well as one person who concluded:

I would like to take this (dialogue) a step higher and (recommend) that the State Board develop formal policies that clearly show their commitment to home and school partnerships and parental involvement, and that these policies are written, and that they are stated clearly to every principal and every teacher that parent involvement becomes an integral part of the educational process and not just a supplement.

#### Additional Recommendations

Schools must acquire additional time and resources for professional and staff development in order to be able to plan and implement the recommendations to enhance their roles as learning and service centers and in promoting family and parental involvement.

Schools should attempt to broaden both the social interactions and cultural experiences that occur with students, their families and parents, and the entire community.



Schools and communities should demonstrate support for academic achievement as they do for athletic accomplishments. They should be "student boosters" and "academic boosters" for the "total student population and not just for the things that sell very easily." ("Why don't you get the bands to escort the kids to the English class? Why don't you have an outdoor arithmetic rally?")

Conclusions and Reflections  
of the Rural Assistance Council

The participants at the forum, as one of the attendees stated, "certainly stand behind all of the State Board goals," as does the Rural Assistance Council. It is evident that the Board, the Council, and the rural community want to make certain that all students -- rural, urban, and suburban -- have the same advantages and are "running on an equally level track."

It is evident, too, that the responsibility for action rests on everyone's shoulders, not just the State Board of Education or local school boards. Quality programs and equal educational access are the joint responsibilities of policy makers as well as schools, families, and communities. Nonetheless, someone must take the lead and, as reflected in these forums, the schools themselves, as focal points of the community, are in the best position to do this. Schools can play a significant leadership role in revitalizing rural communities. As Bruce Miller (1992) of the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory recently wrote, "By default, the (rural) school sits at center stage, providing the community with a sense of identity...."

The African proverb, "It takes a whole village to educate a child" is only one part of the equation. At least one question is inherent in that common sense proverb, namely, who or what exists to help educate the village? Schools and communities are inseparately connected. As it was so succinctly stated in a report of the Center on Families, Communities, Schools, and Children's Learning which was cited by the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (1992), "In these times, if you care for the child, you have to care for the family. If you care for the family, you have to reach out to the community. We can't reach our academic goals unless we help our community address social and economic needs."

Although the responsibilities for quality education are to be shared, there seems little doubt that the ultimate commitment must be reflected in the policies and programs of the State Board of Education. It is interesting to note that the participants said little about increased levels of funding, although the topic obviously came up more than once. The participants appeared more concerned that the State Board reflect its commitment to rural schools by enhancing all types of resources -- human, technical, and financial -- and, most importantly, by broadening the dialogue to make certain that all constituencies are heard. It also is interesting to note that the recommendations, for the most part, are not directed solely to the State Board of Education but also to schools, school districts, and local school boards. The State Board, however, defines the visions, establishes directions, sets parameters, and -- obviously -- ascertains the goals.

The Rural Assistance Council's invitation to the State Board of Education is simply this: work with us as we jointly define a "rural education agenda," further refine the Council's action plans for 1993 and beyond, and begin to implement specific programs which we believe will support not only Goals 6 and 7, but all of the goals and visions for education in the State of Delaware. As we stated at the outset, the Council's major objectives are to (1) identify the most pressing needs of Delaware's rural schools and school districts; (2) develop plans for attending to those needs in cooperation with appropriate state organizations and associations; (3) outline an operational agenda that includes suggested resources and responsibilities for carrying out the plan; and (4) establish a network and enlist the assistance of organizations and associations in carrying out the plan. We hope the State Board of Education will work with the Rural Assistance Council as we jointly address issues of vital importance to rural schools and communities.

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