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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses recent demographic and economic trends in Illinois and nationwide and resulting implications for rural schools and communities. Economic and social trends and their impacts on rural schools over the next decade include: (1) a more diverse school population due to growing numbers of Asian and Hispanic immigrants; (2) a greater percentage of public school students who are poor and living in rural areas; (3) greater utilization of computer technology in schools; (4) an emphasis on students developing critical thinking and other higher level skills; (5) regionalization of national economies that requires schools to prepare students for high-skill, high-wage jobs; (6) a growing gap between educational resources of rural and urban schools that requires public policy to respond to rural demographic and economic changes; and (7) increased crime and violence in public schools. The role of public schools, particularly rural schools, will become markedly different due to these trends. Speculations include that schools will become centers of coordinated social services for children, schools will develop into learning centers for all community members, curricula will become standardized and coordinated with curricula of higher education institutions, traditional comprehensive high schools will disappear allowing flexibility in how students complete their education, fiscal responsibility for public education will shift to state and federal levels, and greater controversy will surround school policies as schools become instruments of social change. (LP)

LOOKING AT RURAL SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES IN THE 21ST CENTURY: THE IMPACT OF CHANGING DEMOGRAPHICS AND ECONOMICS

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Looking at Rural Schools and Communities in the 21st Century: The Impact of Changing Demographics and Economics

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My purpose in this paper is to review recent demographic and economic trends and to explore their implications for rural schools and communities. This effort is appropriate because rural schools and communities often are tied together in ways that schools and communities in urban and suburban areas are not. Indeed, during discussions of rural school consolidation, we often hear that without the school the rural community itself would disappear. The connection is valid, although the cause and effect relationship is not always as clear. Many speculate that the rural school disappears only after the rural community itself has ceased to be viable. Whichever direction the causal arrow points, we do know that rural schools and communities are affected by the same social forces. We need to understand those forces and their implications if both rural schools and rural communities are to survive and flourish.

It has become a cliché to write that American public schools are in a period of rapid change. Some people are amazed to find that the more things change in public schools, the more the schools look like the schools of yesterday. American public schools use a calendar that is a vestige from an agricultural era, a core technology rooted in the factory movement and the industrialization of America in the early twentieth century, an administrative and governance system reminiscent of a bygone era, and an exposed system on which every educated citizen purports to be an expert. Yet, this complex system is expected to meet a broad variety of social needs in a global, information-based economic system and a significantly changing world geo-political system.

Forces for Change in Public Schools

A number of recent social trends will have important effects on American public schools, including rural schools, over the coming decade. Indeed, these effects already can be seen.

The American population is becoming more diverse and that diversity is likely to accelerate.

After a period of low immigration, the past decade has seen a period of rapid increase in both legal and illegal immigration into the United States. Earlier immigrant groups were heavily dominated by immigrants of European origin, but more recent immigrants are far more likely to be Asian or Hispanic. Recent immigrants tend to be younger than the population at large, have young children, and have larger families.

The proportion of the public school population that is Asian and Hispanic is growing, and public schools are facing larger numbers of immigrant children who are often poor and of limited English proficiency. This phenomenon is increasingly a rural one, as well as an urban and suburban one.

America is also maturing. As the oldest members of the "Baby Boom" generation approach the age of 50, it is clear that on the average we are becoming an older nation. This trend is particularly true in rural America. In 1990, some 17 percent of all residents in nonmetropolitan Illinois counties were 65 years of age or older, compared to 11.7 percent of residents in metropolitan areas. As a result, rural communities have a higher dependent population at a time when they can least afford it.

Rural America is experiencing depopulation, which is one reason that the proportion of elderly residents is increasing. Between 1980 and 1990, 70 of the 74 nonmetropolitan counties in Illinois lost population, with many suffering population losses in excess of 10 percent. The same change is taking place to some extent all across the Midwest. In the economies of many rural counties, the production of foodstuffs is now second to tourism, recreation, and retirement. With the influx of service workers in those industries—many of whom are Asian, Hispanic, African-American, or recent immigrants to the United States—the population has quickly become much more racially, ethnically, linguistically, and culturally diverse. These new arrivals are often young and have children. Yes, indeed, the face of rural schools is changing.

The distribution of income in the United States has shifted greatly since the beginning of the 1980s.

Simply put, since the end of the 1970s, the rich have been getting richer and the poor have been getting poorer in the United States. I will discuss some of the reasons later in this paper. Poverty has been increasing, and it is both an urban and a rural phenomenon. In Illinois in 1990, 13.4 percent of the residents of nonmetropolitan counties were poor, as opposed to 11.3 percent in metropolitan counties. The poverty rate in Southern Illinois is over 15 percent.

The public school clientele is increasingly poor. In 1978, 18 percent of American children under age six came from families in poverty, but by 1990 this percentage had increased to 25 percent and it is still increasing. Children from families in poverty are more likely to suffer from learning problems associated with low birth weight and inadequate prenatal and postnatal health care, from nutrition problems, from inadequate family support, and from problems of domestic violence, neglect, and dysfunctional families.

We see this income disparity in many rural communities, where those associated with management in production agriculture are often fairly affluent, while others are experiencing declining incomes.

Rapid changes in communications technology and continuing advances in fiber optics and other new technologies are revolutionizing the way we conduct our daily lives.

Every day I sit down at my computer in Champaign, Illinois, and engage in instantaneous communication with colleagues across the United State, Canada, and even Australia, some of whom I have never met face-to-face. This same set of communica-

tions advances has had a profound effect on business and industry. We all know that we have the capability to sit at home and trade shares on stock exchanges 24 hours a day in all parts of the world over a computer network.

Rapid changes in computer technology also have changed the way schools operate and provide instruction and have changed the demands on student outcomes and performance. The introduction of computer technology into instruction programs of schools has clear implications for funding for equipment, teacher preparation and education, and professional development. New education demands of high technology workplaces and recent developments from cognitive science are revolutionizing the public school curriculum and instructional approaches.

One positive aspect of these changes has been distance learning for rural schools, but no one should think that this phenomenon has no negative aspects, especially in light of the inability of many rural schools to provide equal educational opportunities. Distance learning may be only a stop-gap measure, and emerging research has pointed out its limitations. As I discuss below, techniques such as distance learning may not prove to be good ways of educating for symbolic analysis.

Possession of intellectual property is becoming more important for economic well-being than possession of land or capital.

U.S. Secretary of Labor Robert B. Reich, in research conducted when he was a Harvard political economist, found that the source of wealth for many people in the upper one-fifth of the income strata was in what he called "symbolic analysis." Republican analyst Kevin Phillips has found the same phenomenon in his research. Symbolic analysts derive their income from the manipulation of verbal, numerical, and visual symbols. They are highly skilled at this type of work because of the education that they have received.

The education of symbolic analysts begins with learning to read, write, and do calculations, but it does not stop at basic skills and the accumulation of facts. It focuses on building the capacity for abstract and critical thinking, encourages experimentation and risk-taking behavior in learning and in symbolic analytic work, involves discerning cause and effect patterns and seeing connections in complex systems, and requires collaboration and cooperative work with people of different abilities, skills, viewpoints, and specialties. The education of symbolic analysts stresses quality, excellence, and mastery —attributes and dispositions that business and industry also hold in high regard. Symbolic analysis and total quality management are closely related.

A small group of American schools provide education for symbolic analysis, but most do not. Most rural schools fail in this regard. Rural Americans, like all other Americans, must realize that their future depends on investing in and cultivating their intellectual property, not their land or physical capital. Our schools must be prepared to produce symbolic analysts. Not everyone can become a symbolic analyst, but everyone should have the opportunity to experience the type of education that leads to symbolic analysis.

Our economy is more and more affected by a regionalization rather than a globalization of the world economy.

The recent passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was not the beginning of the regionalization of the North American economy, but the result of public recognition of a regionalization that had already taken place. The days of "low-skill, high-wage" jobs began to disappear as the world economy became more competitive after 1973 and as the comparative advantage that the U.S. economy had enjoyed since the second World War disappeared. Many decades ago, people who left the farm found economic salvation in high-wage, unionized factory or railroad jobs, but this route is now closed. Similarly, our future cannot lie in low-skill, low-wage jobs. Low-skill, low-wage jobs are no better for the future of rural America than they are for urban America. Rural schools and rural communities must recognize and understand this new reality. As we see greater regionalization of national economies we will see affluent communities side by side with "third world communities," and this situation will be all the more evident in rural areas of the United States. Our only hope is high-skill, high-wage jobs. To be competitive in the North American regional economy, we must invest in the kind of education system that will support such jobs.

Fashioning effective public policy responses to these demographic and economic changes depends in part on gaining a better understanding of political realities.

Widening income disparities in the United States, an increasing poor and nonwhite school population, and the concentration of political power in the affluent combine to increase the gap between those who pay for public education and those who benefit from public education. This phenomenon has provided the basis for increased calls for vouchers, school choice, and other forms of privatization of education. This gap has made it more difficult to equalize resources among school districts and to increase funding for public education. It also has tended to place rural schools at a disadvantage in relation to both suburban and urban schools. Rural communities must forge stronger political ties to nonrural interests, which may mean building stronger cultural ties as well.

We must be conscious of the emotional issues than have an impact on our schools.

Crime and violence in public schools will continue to occupy the public mind and will plague public schools over the coming years to the extent that they may overshadow other school issues such as student performance. One effect of this trend will be that affluent families, particularly in large metropolitan areas, will continue to abandon the public schools and to increase segregation in schools by social class.

Meanwhile, particularly in rural communities, we must anticipate resistance to these changes in culture because of perceptions that they are not changes for the better. Such resistence often manifests itself in book-banning, demands for prayers at school functions, and the like. These issues are important for many people, but we should not let them become distractions that keep us from more critical issues.

A Vision of the Future for Public Schools

Clearly, the public school of the future will look markedly different from the schools to which we have become accustomed. Below are some speculations on the form that these differences might take:

1. The public school of the future is likely to be the center of a variety of coordinated social services for children. The school not only will be concerned about the education of children, but also will coordinate the work of a number of public and private agencies providing services to children in areas of social welfare, health, nutrition, family preservation and support, and the like. Rural communities may well form the vanguard in this movement. It is especially important that all social agencies in rural communities join in developing plans for coordinated social services for children. This goal will require unprecedented interagency cooperation and coordination and will mean that many historic barriers will need to be removed.

2. The public school of the future is likely to become a community center linking children, families, and communities. Programs of the public school will expand downward in age to include a wide array of coordinated early childhood services in both the birth to age three and age three to five categories. Likewise, the public school will become a community center for adults and will provide programs for the elderly that parallel those for children. Public schools, public libraries, and public park and recreation programs will be more greatly integrated, possibly resulting in the consolidation of public agencies in these areas. A movement in this direction could be in the future for many rural schools. However, if we wait until the community deteriorates past the point of no return, efforts in this direction may become futile.

3. The curriculum of the public school will become more standardized as decision-making becomes more centralized. The public school curriculum will become more articulated and coordinated with the curriculum of the community college, other institutions of higher education, and the training and education programs of both private sector and public sector organizations and agencies. The influence of the federal government and national organizations will become stronger in the area of curriculum. The role of four-year colleges and universities is not clear. We must develop and sustain the capacity to offer an educational program that will prepare all students for symbolic analysis. The skills used in symbolic analysis are the new "basic skills." I believe that for rural schools and rural communities, strong community colleges and strong intermediate education agencies will become increasingly important.

4. The traditional comprehensive high school will likely disappear. Some influential national groups have called for a certificate of mastery that would be awarded as early as the completion of grade ten, if the student can so qualify. We may see increasing flexibility in how the last two years of high school (as we currently understand them) are structured, with many students completing those years in a community college, a four-year college or university, or in a workplace-based training and education program. Large high schools may be broken up into smaller sub-schools, many of which may resemble "specialty shop" schools. These changes will have a profound effect on the structure

and curriculum of middle and even elementary schools. We may need to rethink regional high schools in rural areas and their relationship to community colleges and four-year institutions of higher education.

5. The responsibility for financing public schools will shift increasingly to the state and federal levels as the importance of public education both to economic growth and development and to realizing national social policy goals becomes clearer to policymakers. What is not clear is (1) whether this trend will give public schools a greater advantage in the competition for resources, or (2) whether it may increase the competition for resources between public schools and other public agencies, such as colleges and universities. Renewed and very sophisticated political advocacy by rural communities and broad political alliances will be important to maintain fiscal support for rural schools.

6. Public schools may be seen as instruments of social policy as they are used to attain goals such as equity and social justice. To the extent that the public schools are involved in such efforts, public school policymaking will become more contentious and controversial, especially in metropolitan areas where large clusters of affluent families and significant concentrations of poor families live in close approximation. However, as rural communities become more diverse, similar political battles will be waged in these areas as well. What we now see as "urban" school politics soon may appear in rural communities. Likewise, public schools could become battlegrounds in the struggle between corporations focused on capital accumulation and workers interested in income security and increased quality of life.

The late French historian Fernand Braudel felt that the human race was too caught up in the events of daily life to recognize and understand the sweeping trends of history. The trends I have discussed are not so much speculations on the future as they are the recognition of trends that are already with us. We must ask ourselves whether we want to ignore these trends or use them to fashion a better future. The choice is ours.

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