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ABSTRACT

This is the first of a series of issue papers that discuss ways in which rural communities and schools can work together to guarantee their students the best education possible. By working together, rural schools and communities can not only improve education, but revitalize the entire community. The Southwest Educational Development Laboratory is helping to establish partnerships in its region through the Rural Development Collaborative Action Team project (RD-CAT) which links school and community development using two strategies. These strategies include building local capacity to work in school and community teams through the CAT process and working with these local teams to plan and carry out activities such as service learning and entrepreneurial training that link school instructional programs and community development projects. CAT's three-dimensional approach employs team building, team planning, and momentum generation. Service learning and entrepreneurial activities teach students valuable skills, connect students to their community, and provide useful services to the community. The RD-CAT in Balmorhea, Texas, illustrates what can happen when the school and community join forces. Sixteen programs have been planned or started, including a successful school-based rural health clinic and a school-based community weather station used for science classes. Accomplishments of other school-community programs in Alabama, Idaho, Minnesota, Nebraska, and North Carolina are briefly described. (CDS)

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(Benefits)²

School Development
Community Development
Economic Development
Youth Development

THE EXPONENTIAL RESULTS OF LINKING SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Southwest Educational Development Laboratory

Issue Number One

Welcome to Benefits²

Connecting Rural School Improvement and Community Development

This is the first of a series of SEDL issue papers dedicated to discussing ways in which rural communities and schools can work together to guarantee their students receive the best education possible. We will show that by working together, rural schools and communities can not only improve education, but revitalize the entire community. Strong school-community partnerships can renew a sense of unity, enhance the overall quality of life, promote the best use of limited resources, and lead to new possibilities in economic development. As we will learn in this series, there are exponential results when communities link school improvement and community development!

It is afternoon in one of the many small towns in the Southwest. School is still in session for the afternoon, so it is quiet. The lunch rush at the Dairy Queen has slowed down to a couple of old-timers talking about the weather and the price of livestock at last Saturday's auction. A few businesses cling to life on Main Street. The nearest large grocery store, medical center, or movie rental place is 40 miles away. A brood of wild turkeys struts down Main Street. The turkeys blink at a lone car making its way around the corner.

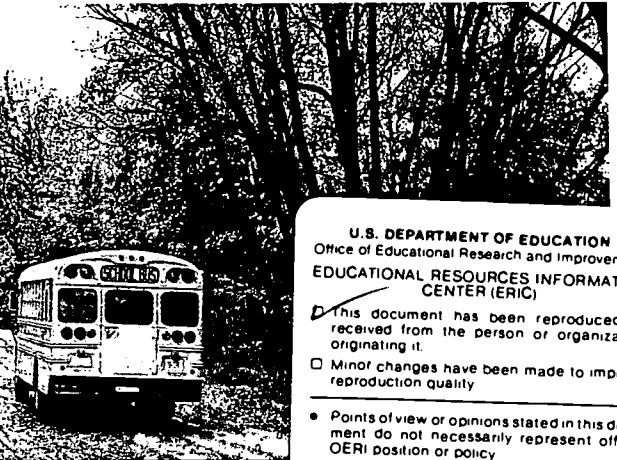
According to the school principal, "This is a good place to raise kids, but we can't keep them here; no way to make a living, you know."

Most of the parents commute to a larger city in the region to work; everyone farms or ranches a little.

Communities like the one described evolved to support the Southwestern region's thriving agricultural and petroleum businesses. For twenty years, however, these rural schools and communities in Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas have been challenged by corporate farming and ranching, the exodus of industry to Mexico and Asia, and the centralization of retail trade in larger towns and cities. Rural communities have also faced reduced state and federal aid for their schools and pressure to consolidate their school districts. The result for many communities has been a diminished quality of life and limited futures for their young people.

Rural schools and communities need each other if they are to be sustainable and viable. A community's quality of life cannot be

This is a good place to raise kids, but we can't keep them here; no way to make a living.



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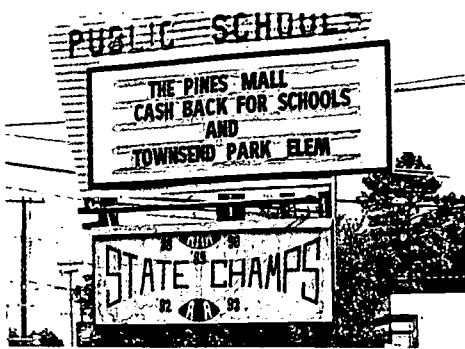
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Many rural schools and communities in the Southwest have been challenged by the loss of industry and the centralization of retail trade in larger towns and cities.

separated from its schools—schools are often the largest employer in the community and the community's center for social, cultural, and recreation activities.

Rural schools and communities throughout the U.S. are discovering that working together in partnerships not only improves overall quality of life, but makes the best use of scarce resources and improves opportunity for young people. Success stories include student-run companies, environmental projects, arts programs, and tutoring projects (see "What Schools and Communities Have Done Together," p. 4). The Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) is helping to establish such partnerships in its region through the Rural Development Collaborative Action Team project, or RD CAT. With RD CAT, SEDL links school and community development using two strategies to address specific economic, social, and

educational conditions facing rural families by:

- building local capacity to work in school/community teams through teaching the Collaborative Action Team (CAT) process; and
- working with these local teams to plan and carry out activities, such as service learning and entrepreneurial training, that link school instructional programs and community development projects.

Building Local Capacity through Collaborative Action Teams

Building capacity enhances the potential of local community residents to solve their own problems and work together to efficiently manage resources for school improvement and community revitalization. However, rural communities may not have the resources for effective local capacity building.

Although residents may be enthusiastic about improving their schools and community and may be willing to devote time to making changes, they may lack the technical or organizational skills needed to build a team, make plans and maintain the momentum to carry out the project. This is where SEDL's staff and Collaborative Action Team (CAT) process can help rural communities.

SEDL assists local teams to develop strong partnerships by teaching training and coaching. Participants in CAT

projects indicate that this assistance provides team-building skills to help the partners bond and build a common vision.

A school nurse who participated in a collaborative action team in New Mexico says, "Without this [SEDL training] we would have really been struggling. They gave us the foundation and the building blocks so we can continue growing. And they helped us celebrate our successes."

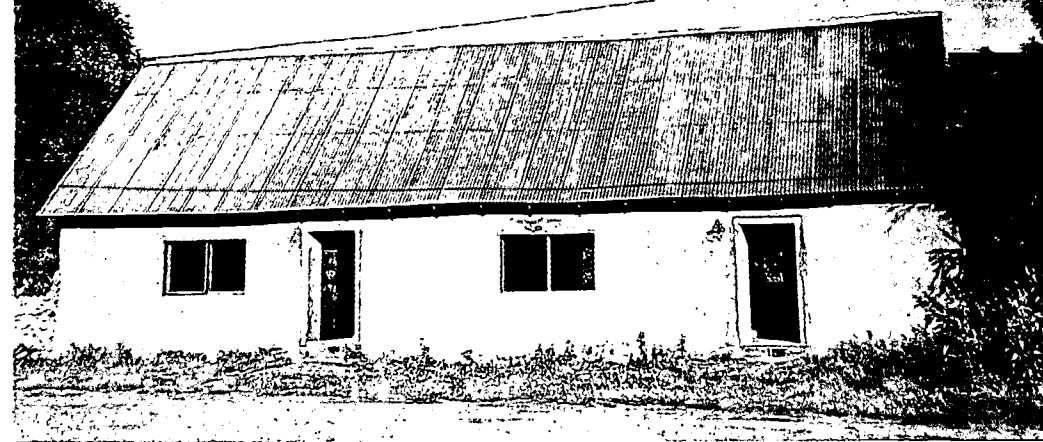
Notes a parent from Violet, LA, a fishing community south of New Orleans that participated in the CAT process:

At the beginning some people were saying, "Well, why would we need help?" They were kind of skeptical [about getting involved with CAT], but now looking back they've said, "Well we're glad we did because it's really helped bring the school together," through communication and with some ideas they brought to us. That has really helped the students, the community, the parents, and the business people come together.

The CAT process uses a three-dimensional approach: team building, team planning, and momentum generation. These three dimensions help members become a collaborative, cohesive team while developing and implementing a plan for making productive changes within the school and community. Through guided

Rural schools and communities throughout the U.S. are discovering that working together in partnerships not only improves overall quality of life, but makes the best use of scarce resources and improves opportunity

for young people.



As a service learning project, students are remodeling this 150-year-old building in Mora, NM.

activities, community members experience and practice consensus-building skills, effective communication, and shared leadership and decision-making. SEDL staff members also help the collaborative action teams evaluate their activities and measure their successes.

Team Building. Team building is the process of how teams work together as a unit. The activities of team building allow the group to develop skills for exploring and eventually settling on ways of working together effectively. During the process of building a team, the group will find common ground, initiate networking opportunities, encourage new individual roles and responsibilities, and practice collaborative teamwork.

According to SEDL program manager Catherine Jordan, who oversees the RD CAT projects, "The CAT process gives people some structured opportunities to begin listening to each other, to learn to respect other perspectives, and to build trust. In small rural communities where

everybody knows everybody and may have long-standing prejudices about each other, the CAT process can be a valuable tool for establishing trust and respect necessary for communities to grow and change together for the common good."

Team Planning. This is the nuts and bolts of defining and implementing the projects that address the concerns of the school and community identified by the team. This includes agreeing on a vision and a mission, setting goals and objectives, determining roles and responsibilities, and outlining tasks and timelines to accomplish the work.

Momentum Generation. For some communities, this is the most difficult part of the CAT process. Momentum is created when the team carries out tasks and moves forward toward achieving established goals.

According to SEDL program specialist Jerry Elder, who trains members of the CATs to serve as facilitators, "We discovered that in collaborative action teams where all their time was devoted to just

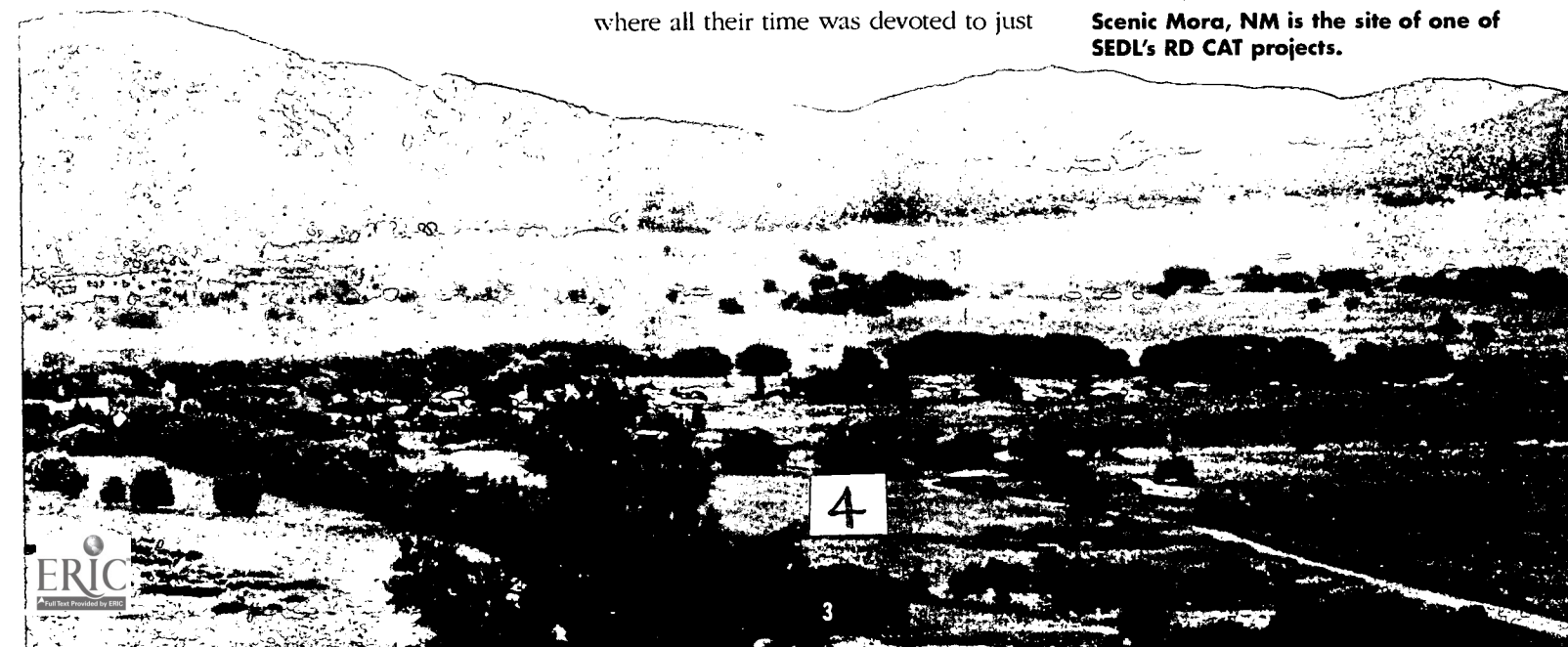
Both service learning and entrepreneurship can increase students' feelings of self-worth and accomplishment.



action planning—such as developing goals and objectives—and where they saw no results, the team membership dropped. On the other hand, in CAT sites where they developed some intermediate short-term projects, participation remained steady. These early short-term projects generated energy and enthusiasm of members that were needed for the development of on-going efforts."

It is important to note that some of these short-term projects were fairly simple, such as refurbishing a sign in front of the school to announce activities or holding a family picnic to increase parent involvement. Successfully completing small projects can help build team confidence.

Scenic Mora, NM is the site of one of SEDL's RD CAT projects.



What Schools & Communities Have Accomplished Together

Across the country there are several large-scale programs that work with schools and communities to improve their capacity to link school and community development in unique ways.

- In Alabama, through assistance from the PA-CERS program, 19 schools have set up school-owned, student run companies that publish community newspapers. The combined distribution for these newspapers is 25,000, surpassed only by the state's top for-profit newspaper.
- In Idaho, an isolated rural school received a grant from the Foxfire Fund for a music and arts program. The school holds monthly art shows for their community where students perform, read poetry and display artwork.
- In Minnesota, 60 small rural districts received grants and consultation from the University of Minnesota Center for School Change. The communities and schools implemented programs that involved students in converting empty buildings into community centers; operating



SEDL's Collaborative Action Team process brings together community members, parents, students, teachers and school administrators to develop plans for school improvement. In Fabens, TX, SEDL program specialist José Velasquez (center) works with Mary Eble, a social worker with the Kellogg Community Partnerships, parent Maricela Barrientos, and principal Enrique Pérez.

businesses such as grocery stores, hardware stores, and ice cream parlors; and conducting thousands of dollars of research on water quality.

- In Nebraska, schools have used grants from the School as the Center Project to clean up a lake and develop a recreation area, to conduct in-depth studies of a major nature preserve, to build affordable housing and operate a community's history center.
- In North Carolina, through the help of REAL Enterprises, during the past

six years schools provided entrepreneurial training for young people and adults that resulted in 342 business startups and expansions and \$5.2 million in new revenue.

We will discuss these successful community/school development programs in future issues of *Benefits*², and discuss how schools and communities in the SEDL region can draw upon their experiences. These programs have withstood the test of time; all have been in operation from eight to twenty years.

Activities and Programs that Link School and Community

There are two types of programs that link school improvement and the community that have proven to be very successful in rural areas across the nation: service learning and entrepreneurship education. Schools involved in SEDL's RD CAT process will incorporate these two types of projects to bring school improvement and economic development together.

Service learning and entrepreneurial activities are integrated into academic curriculum and allow structured time students to talk, write, or think

about their experiences in the activity. The activities provide students with opportunities to use newly acquired skills and knowledge in real-life situations and enhance what is taught in school by extending learning beyond the classroom and into the community. Students gain experiences in many career areas, as well as practice and skill reinforcement in problem solving, critical thinking, self-improvement, collaboration, and conflict resolution. Many researchers believe that the alienation of youth is a major problem in our society, and suggest that discipline problems decrease when children begin to feel important to others. Both service

learning and entrepreneurship can increase students' feelings of self-worth and accomplishment.

Service Learning. Service learning is an activity where students learn and develop through organized service experiences that meet actual community needs. Service learning is based on the philosophy that the most effective learning is active and connected to experience. It uses the community as part of the curriculum and helps students to learn to value their community.

Examples of service learning include the community health clinic in Balmorhea, TX, through one of SEDL's

Balmorhea Team Connects It All!

The Rural Development Collaborative Action Team (RD CAT) at Balmorhea, TX is a great example of what can happen in a community when the school and community join forces. Currently the RD CAT has plans for or has started

16 programs, including a very successful school-based rural health clinic. Miles from the nearest doctor, the community joined forces with Texas Tech University Medical School and Dr. Lawrence Voesack. The clinic is run by the school nurse. Students man the phones and schedule appointments. Dr. Voesack comes once a week. So far the clinic has been seeing 15-25 patients a day.

Another example of Balmorhea's

effort to integrate the school and the community for mutual benefit is the community weather station recently set-up at the school which can be used for science classes. When the school library was remodeled, it was constructed to double as a tornado shelter.

The RD CAT is planning and implementing a summer recreation program, a mentoring program which will connect older and younger students and community members with students, a drug education program, and a parent involvement center. The parent involvement center will provide a place on campus for parents to come to network. Educational programs are planned for parents including a technology program.

The RD CAT is enthusiastic about increasing tourism in the area as well. Balmorhea State Park, situated on San Solomon Springs, has long been an area attraction. The park touts one of the largest man-made swimming pools in the U.S. The spring-fed pool covers 62,000 square feet. The group is now sharing ideas for tourism projects and examining ways these could be integrated into the school's curriculum.

Below is a photo of the pool at Balmorhea State Park, one of the area's tourist attractions.



RD CATs. Students help run the community health clinic which is now located at the school. Students greet patients and schedule appointments; some have learned to take the patients' temperatures. The clinic, which serves an average of 15-20 patients a day, is a part of the school's vocational health curriculum. At another RD CAT site in Mora, NM, students are helping refurbish a 150-year-old adobe building, an activity that can be integrated into history, math, and vocational curriculum.

Some proponents see service learning as a way to help students develop an ethic of service and social responsibility; others view service learning as encouraging the learner to think about systematic solutions for societal problems. Both of these views have merit, and the two do not necessarily produce mutually exclusive outcomes. For example, a service learning project to help the homeless might begin with a study of the local housing situation. Services to the homeless may be provided as a charitable activity, but

there is a different kind of reflection and research necessary to understand why homelessness exists, and, perhaps, to develop solutions. Other themes for service learning might include issues of health and the environment. In one project, children tested water for phosphate levels and investigated acid rain and ozone depletion. The children used math skills to graph data and writing skills to compose letters to legislators. They put the principles of democracy into action when they drafted an "Environmental Bill of Rights" and sent it to their state legislators. Experiences help children learn that changes can begin at the local level, but grow to affect the legislative process.

Entrepreneurship Education. In most existing school entrepreneurship programs, students own or operate businesses under the guidance of the school and perhaps community partners. Many school entrepreneurial enterprises are highly successful—as businesses and as laboratories for

learning. Schools and students operate restaurants, child care centers, summer camps, rental libraries, word processing businesses, hardware stores, and grocery stores. They provide odd-job services, tennis coaching, and computer training. They publish magazines and newspapers. They build houses and community centers. They conduct agricultural experiments, energy and safety audits, and market research. A study of entrepreneurial programs suggest that such programs increase self-reliance and self-awareness, and help students recognize opportunities and take initiative. They also help teach students the skills necessary in business planning and operation. Ideally, school entrepreneurial projects meet needs that are not being met by privately owned businesses and thus benefit the community as well as the students.

Both service learning and entrepreneurial activities can improve community involvement with schools and thus increase networking and cohesiveness. The community benefits through such



A mural in the Mora school reflects the heritage, culture, and natural resources of this peaceful agricultural community in Northern New Mexico

programs as the one at Balmorhea where the school links social services and families and the community by allowing greater access to health care. Other projects may involve increasing the economic base of a community through tourism development or new industry. The community also receives the long-term benefit of the students being educated to be good citizens with stronger community ties.

The advantages for students through service learning and entrepreneurial activities are many. They have the opportunity to learn skills that are valued in the workplace, such as organization, communication, and

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decision making.

decision-making. These activities also allow students to develop meaningful relationships with adults in the community and to realize they are valued in the community. These activities also provide learning experiences that may not be provided in a regular curriculum and tend to be more hands-on, student-centered, multidisciplinary activities.

Conclusion

We believe that the local capacity building of the CAT process coupled with service learning or school entrepreneurship can help improve instruction in schools while improving the quality of life in small rural communities, thus helping sustain both rural schools and communities. We hope this issue paper has sparked your interest in the RD CAT project. In future briefing papers, we will focus in depth on school entrepreneurship and service learning, and look at what policy changes and commitments are required for rural schools and communities to integrate development for improved results. In other papers we will describe the collaboration process that encourages school improvement and community development and provide highlights of SEDL's RD CAT sites and other exemplary rural community programs across the nation.

SEDL

Wesley A. Hoover, Ph.D.
President and CEO

Joan Buttram, Ph.D.
Vice-President and COO

Catherine Jordan, M.A.
Program Manager, Program for Refining Educational Partnerships

To learn about the Rural Development Collaborative Action Team project, visit our website at <http://www.sedl.org/prep/ruralcats.html>.

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