In Pursuit of Best Practices: A Research Agenda for Rural Education in Illinois

by Timothy Collins, Ph.D.[1]

The key to most of the educational problems of the country is the country school. There is scarcely a single phase of country life in which the country school may not become a vitalizing factor. (Carver 1915, 127)

. . . [T]he country child has as much right as the city child to a training which will enable him to live in the world in which he finds himself and understand his share in it, and to get a good start in adapting himself to it. It is the business of every school to train its pupils to be successful as human beings and as American citizens. (Dille 1920, 291-292)

A rural school whose program is closely geared to the community's needs and problems is peculiarly well situated to teach the wise use of natural resources. Its philosophy requires an accurate knowledge of the community's needs.

Its curriculum and schedule are so flexible that children can take advantage of valuable learning experiences. It has a high quality of leadership that helps people of the community to cope with their problems. (Conservation Education in American Schools 1951)

According to Town Manager Jason Hoch, Littleton, New Hampshire has a lot to be thankful for, especially . . . its children. As Hoch explains, this town of 5,800 has over the last few years adopted an innovative new policy. Almost all its public projects, from rejuvenating Main Street to constructing an educational nature trail to setting up a comprehensive GIS mapping system, use public school students to do a significant amount of the planning and execution. (Samuels 2004, 22)

Introduction

Discussion about the role and meaning of rural schools has simmered for generations. Rural students are clearly in the minority nowadays, but the percentage still is significant in terms of numbers of students and schools. In Illinois, about 13 percent of the students reside in rural communities, conservatively defined as places with 2,500 or fewer residents (Beeson and Strange 2003). Almost 25 percent of the state's schools are in these rural areas. Illinois' rural geographic area is huge, encompassing social, ethnic, economic, and political diversity. Rural areas may be somewhat invisible to many of the state's urban residents, but they are vital to the state's socioeconomic life. Rural

areas are home to people who make vital contributions to their communities, and many of their young residents end up living and working in the state's urban areas as adults.

Long-term sustainability of rural communities and rural-urban interdependence suggest the need for a research agenda to understand how rural public schools can work with their communities to improve student performance while building the community. The proposed agenda offers a direction for the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs' (IIRA) Center for Rural Education Studies. It focuses on the potential strengths of school-community relationships.

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There is a historic basis for the contention that schools can help build communities at the same time they are forming students' skills and talents for high levels of academic achievement. One research approach for IIRA is to find best practices that show how rural schools and communities become engaged in mutual economic and community development efforts that enhance student learning.

Models for Potential Best Practices

The rural education literature suggests at least four models that are not mutually exclusive. Miller (1995) outlines three: (1) school as community center, a lifelong learning center, and a vehicle for delivering services; (2) community as curriculum, emphasizing the community in all of its complexities as part of students' learning activities in the classroom; and (3) school as a developer of entrepreneurial skills. A fourth model (Odasz 1999) suggests the role of new technologies in building and preserving community while linking students to the rest of the world.

Model 1: School as Community Center. The School as Community Center Model means schools go beyond teaching students to become a community-wide resource. Schools can provide public space for meetings and other activities; promote lifelong learning by establishing a learning resource center and offering adult education (GED classes, computer classes, etc.); lead the networking, coordination, and delivery of social services such as daycare and family health services; and provide space for businesses to train employees or help businesses with training or problem-solving. The Mid-Continent Regional Educational Laboratory (1986) suggests opening the school early in winter so people can walk and exercise, sharing kitchen facilities for community food services, and using school buses to transport the elderly.

McChesney (1996) points out obstacles to the model, including funding, turf considerations among agencies and groups, the establishment of effective delivery systems for services, the involvement of *all* stakeholders, and bureaucratic issues. Liability insurance may be another obstacle.

Model 2: Community as Curriculum. Miller (1995) suggests that a community- or place-based curriculum can be a bridge between the classroom and community development. Developing a place-based curriculum involves listing community assets that can be used in the classroom as a springboard for positive partnerships and actions. A place-based curriculum also can help the community build a "culture of education," so both students and adults become lifelong learners, with the school at the center of those activities. Student learning extends beyond the classroom into the community to embrace ecological,

economic, and civic involvement; spirituality; and living well in the community (Haas and Nachtigal 1998).

Place-based curriculum is already used in several communities, with funding and guidance from the Rural School and Community Trust (Tompkins 2003). The organization's website, **www.ruraledu.org/topics/placebased.htm**, de-scribes how schools implement place-based curriculum and provides research on outcomes.

Place-based curriculum plays out differently in each community. In Iowa, the Sense of Place Symposium noted that the essence of a curriculum of place framework is based on a partnership of the school, community, and students to develop stewardship for the area, empowerment for the future, and an appreciation for heritage. The curriculum can enhance students' skills by building awareness, understanding, and appreciation of their area. It also can help students understand their community's place in the larger world (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory 1995). Following the symposium, Iowa educators developed a curriculum framework to guide the development of specific lessons that reflect the uniqueness of each setting. The lessons that evolved are based on the interests/needs of the learners, research resources available, community resources/needs, and the educational environment (*Prairie Voices . . . Sense of Place* 2005). A curriculum outline is available at *Prairie Voices . . . Iowa Heritage Curriculum* (2005).

Model 3: School as Developer of Entrepreneurial Skills. Miller's (1995) third model places rural schools in the role of developing students' entrepreneurial skills. Hobbs (1987) suggests that small businesses, including knowledge-based enterprises, can create new jobs, especially if they find the right market niche. It is essential to create new networks and partnerships to support the strategy. Rural schools must provide sound basic education, train students to be innovative, teach multiple skills, and enable students to work as teams of problem solvers. School entrepreneurial education programs are based on the premise that students who learn to earn their keep in the community are less likely to out-migrate. Entrepreneurial programs can be part of place-based curricula. Collins (1999) notes that entrepreneurial students may become prosperous adult

business owners in the rural community. They could create a new segment of a revitalized local middle class (not necessarily farm-based) that supports lifelong community education and development while building economic diversity.

One school-based entrepreneurial program was developed out of Sher's (1977) research and advocacy. Sher helped develop the Rural Entrepreneurship through Action Learning (REAL) model in the early 1980s. REAL is an experiential course implemented in local schools, community colleges, and through community organizations. REAL students explore small business ownership by assessing their personal abilities and goals, analyzing the community, identifying business ideas that meet local needs, writing plans for a chosen venture, and opening their own enterprises (REAL 2005).

Model 4: Schools and Technology. The complex relationship between technology and the uneven distribution of resources across the landscape are the bases for discussions about the "digital divide." Despite a decade or more of infrastructure development, rural areas tend to have less access to the latest information technology than cities and suburbs. There is also the local context, where technology adoption is hardly uniform among teachers and students.

Whatever the problems, technology offers rural schools several opportunities. Hobbs (2004) notes that distance learning using two-way television can help rural schools deal economically with teachers' professional development; teacher shortages; curriculum expansion and allowing for year-to-year flexibility; and meeting the requirements of the federal No Child Left Behind Act. The World Wide Web offers opportunities for distance education, entrepreneurship, community networking, and community development. Understanding the web could help rural youth to become technological leaders in their communities. They could teach each other, their teachers, and other adults how to use computers and the web (Odasz 1999).

Howley and Howley (1995) warn that new technology is not a panacea for rural areas. If Odasz (1999) is correct, however, new technologies could help improve rural schools and communities by broadening the curriculum and letting students open locally based businesses with potential global markets. Then, it will be possible to face the challenge posed by Howley and Barker (1997)—determining the best way to use technology so that it serves locally defined purposes without sacrificing the good things that rural communities and schools have to offer.

Why Engage the Community?

The rationale for engaging rural schools and communities emerges from a literature that helps put rural communities and their schools in a larger context of globalized rural-urban relationships. Locally, this suggests a need to understand how rural community schools cope with statewide resource disparities, including education levels, taxation, and income and wealth. In a global context, it is virtually impossible for rural communities to halt the impacts of world events. Yet, these communities can institute inclusive local discussions about their schools, develop agreed-upon policies, and pursue educational activities inside and outside the classroom. In so doing, they can meet or exceed state and federal standards while preserving the community.

Underfunded rural schools often must address both educational and social issues. This may not be a desirable condition (cf. Schorr 2000), but rural schools historically are central community institutions. Education reforms, such as the federal No Child Left Behind Act, which purportedly are based on higher standards and stricter accountability, have placed many resource-strapped rural schools at the brink of a historic moment that challenges their survival.

Pressure for school consolidation from state governments, intended to improve school quality and efficiency, has put additional and, locally, often unwelcome pressures on schools. In addition, the erosion of the surrounding community's social, physical, and economic infrastructure threatens schools (cf. Collins 1999). Although impoverished communities lack financial resources, they often possess a relatively untapped wealth of human resources (Collins and Dewees 1999). Engaging broader community resources and networks can bring significant benefits for both the community and the school.

The proposed research agenda, with its focus on rural Illinois schools, also assumes that the relationship between rural communities and their schools is vital to both community and school sustainability. Schools can improve instructional techniques and learning in ways that help the school's chances for survival while building the overall quality of life in the community (cf. Lawrence 1998). There is a clear relationship between healthy schools and healthy communities, where children are valued for their potential future contributions rather than prepared

for low-skill, low-wage jobs or out-migration. Sher (1977) was probably the first person in almost a generation to suggest that rural schools were vital to local economic and community development (cf. Howley and Eckman 1997). Haas and Nachtigal (1998) tap into the deep historic and philosophical roots of education, environment, and community when they suggest students need to learn to live well, incorporating knowledge of the ecology, civic involvement, economics, sense of spiritual connection, and community living. Their holistic approach assumes schools are intended to serve the community by helping to improve the lives of students in their communities.

Some Examples of the Models in Illinois

Model 1: School as Community Center. Community Unit School District #3 in Cuba (Fulton County) lets senior citizens walk in the elementary school; provides public Internet access in the school and to the community library; shares parking with a nearby church; puts on a community fair; and lets community members hold meetings, dinners, and fundraisers in the building. In exchange, community members approved a bond issue to build a new "green" high school with solar and geothermal facilities. When the new school opened, community members provided trucks and trailers to move the contents of the two buildings to their new homes. The old elementary school building is now home to the county's Head Start program. For more information, contact the superintendent's office at (309) 785-5021.

Model 3: School as Developer of Entrepreneurial Skills. Agriculture business management students at Central Community Unit School District #4 in Clifton (Iroquois County) set up a cooperative to sell animal feed, pet food, and greenhouse plants. Students organized the cooperative and sold 10,000 shares of stock valued at $100,000 to raise capital to build a feed store, warehouse, and greenhouse. The students handle the day-to-day operational issues with the expectation that they will pay dividends to stockholders. For more information, contact the Central High School Agricultural Education Department at (815) 694-2321, ext. 2114.

Concluding Thoughts

Gardner (1995) suggests several reasons for focusing on schools as tools for community and economic development. First, schools are involved in the common task of educating children for the future, an objective that people can rally around. Second, schools are present in communities and are a common experience for everyone. Third, schools can be an important place to instill a sense of community, especially during children's early years. These propositions have important implications for an IIRA research agenda to seek out best practices that can be emulated in rural Illinois. Such schools marshal community resources to provide quality education for children. They also provide the community with resources for community and economic development. The research approach is chiefly qualitative, focusing on case studies that allow a deep understanding of school-community interactions.

The literature suggests rural schools can become engines of community and economic development while meeting state standards. Identifying and researching Illinois schools that have adopted some form of place-based education can provide opportunities for other schools to consider different ways to be more effective in providing the best possible education with the long-term goal of ensuring community sustainability.

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