

A Viable High School in a Small Rural District

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There is a wide range of enrollments in school districts in Minnesota. This same dynamic is present in many areas of the United States. With each size of school district there are advantages and disadvantages. The intimacy of small schools cannot be duplicated in large settings. The sophistication of curriculum presented in larger schools is difficult to duplicate in schools where there are only a small number of students.

There is a changing dynamic in many rural areas, which will result in many schools becoming smaller in size than they have been in the past. Because of a declining birth rate and a shift of economic opportunities, the populations in rural areas continue to age and the number of young people continues to diminish. This trend has been underway for some time and will now accelerate profoundly over the next 10 to 15 years.

Small towns require a spiritual "center." In this context, the spirit is not associated with a higher power. Rather a centered community can come together through the public schools as the community concentrates on the development of activities for their youth. Would it not be better that a effective small school be provided in nearly every small town, than to have students bused large distances so that they can be assembled in larger numbers for group instruction?

For the most rural areas of our nation, this brings educational leaders, and their communities, a set of difficult choices. Analyzing, discussing and acting on these choices will require significant courage on the part of leaders over the next several years.

One Choice - Consolidation:

One choice for rural areas is to enter into another round of school consolidation. As numbers of students drop off, and where funding remains tied to the number of students, small schools will have a difficult time surviving. There have already been two excruciating rounds of consolidation in Minnesota and in many other areas of the country. The first occurred in the 1960's as the rural country schools were pulled into the consolidated independent school districts. The second round came during the 70's & 80's as many small towns consolidated with each other, combining the students into workable sizes. The result was that some communities no longer have schools.

Second Choice - "Program Funding":

A second choice is to operate school districts which are very small in size by relying on "program" funding rather than a per pupil funding formula. These schools would still be organized in grade level and class size configurations, but with only a few students at each grade level. While this is an attractive local option, it may be a relatively inefficient financial option when viewed from the state level and by competing educational interests in the urban areas.

Third Choice - Reconfigure Schools:

A third choice involves a reconfiguration of schools as they exist today with an abandonment of the grade level and classroom model of organization. If schools were organized around a combination of a project approach to learning and individualized

instruction, it would no longer be necessary to assemble students together in sufficient numbers to make up a traditional classroom of students who are of the same age. Utilizing virtual learning through technology, teachers as facilitators and abandonment of a compartmentalized teaching force, this model could be effective at the local level in rural areas and effectively financially.

This third model wouldn't quite bring us back to one-room country schools. However, very small country schools, well connected to the internet, taught by teachers who accept the role of working with children of multiple ages, may be a viable alternative to the first two choices articulated in this article. This model may work better for children being schooled from early ages through adolescence. In some areas, larger regional secondary schools may be required to provide expertise in teaching advanced subjects. These regional centers may also enhance the economic development of a region. This begs some possible reorganization of the administrative units of schools with much of the day-to-day educational leadership at the lower levels left to be handled by teacher/administrators in the small settings.

As thought is given to this new model of presenting education, possibly states should consider incentives for school districts and communities to encourage smaller school settings that provide for a more individual, technologically connected and project-based learning approach.

Reconfiguration may be a reasonable alternative as opposed to another round of excruciating consolidation of our small schools and the resulting loss of the spiritual centers of our communities.