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# The Rural School Leadership Dilemma

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**The Rural School Leadership Dilemma**

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### Abstract

The idea that rural schools and communities, indeed, even rural people, are somehow substandard or second-class has deep historical roots. The goal of this essay is to reveal that history so as to render stereotypical conceptions all things rural less powerful and more easily dismissed by rural school professionals. Consequently the focus is on one dilemma every rural school leader faces: when to speak up in the face of rural denigration.

While this entire issue of the *Peabody Journal of Education* endeavors to assist rural school leaders by offering new perspectives and research-based insights into the myriad problems they face on a daily basis, this article focuses on merely one dilemma. It is intended to help rural school leaders decide when to exercise their voice, when to speak up in the face of cultural and stereotypical characterizations of rural life and living and therefore, by extension, cultural and stereotypical characterizations regarding the worth and quality of rural education. We'll begin with the use of actual conversations that take place regularly, to which most rural dwellers can relate; these conversations reveal the subtle and sometimes not-so-subtle insults that come with living a rural life and building a rural school career. A brief historical discussion will then demonstrate why the bias against rural people and places remains prevalent in the twenty-first century. We conclude with analysis intended to help rural school leaders muster the courage to challenge the status quo, to address shallow stereotypes, to lead with integrity, and to positively affect the lives of rural students and the well-being of rural schools and communities.

### ***All-Too-Frequent Conversations***

If you live and work in a rural place, you have heard similar comments, similar conversations. Thanks to cable television and the many “reality” shows designed to generate laughs at the expense of stereotypically rural people, even non-rural dwellers can easily identify the phenomenon. All of the following incidents emerge from the experience of both co-authors. Despite their anecdotal nature, anyone connected to rural education will harbor no doubts about their veracity. Indeed, they could easily share similar stories.

- A few years ago I met a seemingly quite dignified individual who is now a high-ranking state leader in Nebraska. When I explained my background to him, his

comment cut like a knife. I told him I was a superintendent of a small rural school district in northwestern Wyoming, nestled between two mountain ranges, with six bus routes and 150 children in grades K-12. His comment, “I guess you can say you were a superintendent, then.”

- A former high school principal who became a state policymaker and I were having lunch one day, talking about one of the graduates of our doctoral program who landed a job as a principal in a suburban school. The new principal was a young man who had served under this individual’s leadership. The ex-principal remarked, “This [suburban] district was lucky to get him so that they didn’t have to hire someone from a ‘hick’ town.”
- One time, while interviewing for an administrative position in a suburban school, I was asked what I thought I could offer the district when the only place I had worked was rural schools.
- Another encounter was with a suburban superintendent who commented about a student in our program, “She must be pretty good since she is moving from small schools to larger districts.”
- At a convening of school stakeholders in rural western New York, “role-alike” groups shared their conversations with the large group. The student speaking on behalf of their group commented, “We are well aware that we don’t have the best schools, we don’t get the best teachers or the best education. We know that we’re going to have to catch up when we go to college.”
- The late Paul Gruchow, then a resident of a small Minnesota town and married to an attorney, received a frantic call from a town resident whose son had committed

a serious criminal offense. Paul tried to calm him down. Before ending the call, perhaps remembering that Paul's wife was an attorney, the caller said, "Of course for something like this we'll need to get an attorney from the Cities (Minneapolis/St. Paul)."

- While sitting in a teacher's lounge waiting to observe a student teacher in a high school serving a community of 10,000, a teacher threw down the local paper in disgust. It contained a story about an innovative curricular project in a small school district some 20 miles distant. The teacher remarked, "All of those little places should be shut down."

The denigration of rural communities, schools, and people is a part of American culture. There is a history behind this phenomenon to which we will turn next. For now, however, it is important to recognize that there is a utility to this denigration that goes well beyond the advertising revenue generated by commercial slots surrounding reality TV shows that make fun of rural people. By defining rural residents as backward, by defining rural schools and rural school professionals as second-class, our culture legitimates rural outmigration and promotes the idea that successful people reside in urban/suburban places. Some have suggested that one of the few lasting lessons delivered in rural schools is that talented rural youth will "go far," quite literally. This cultural dynamic feeds and directs all manner of policies that affect rural lives and livelihoods, agricultural and educational policy most prominently. In agriculture, it legitimates policy that tends to create ever-larger farms. In education, it legitimates policy to create ever-larger schools, i.e., school consolidation.

The daily conversations here help to solidify cultural assumptions about rural communities and schools—a circumstance that makes them much easier to exploit by

corporations and suburban-dominated state legislatures. One quick example of this is in order before turning to the history that created these cultural conditions. In the state of Nebraska a battle has ensued over what has come to be called the “Keystone Pipeline,” a TransCanada project that would use the rural Great Plains to transport tar sands to refineries owned and operated by Saudi Arabia and the Netherlands on the Texas coast. There is very little about the proposed project that benefits the United States in any way—beyond the creation of jobs, many of which would be temporary. While not directly benefitting Americans generally, it will greatly benefit American investors in these foreign corporations, which explains why there is any support for the project at all. The path of the pipeline conveniently avoids urban areas, meaning it will only affect rural dwellers (unless there are major spills, which history suggests is almost inevitable). Because there are so few rural dwellers they don’t matter in political terms. Politicians count on the support of urban and suburban dwellers and often do not hear the voice of rural dwellers, who according to conventional wisdom, are living in the past.

### *A History Lesson*

Like it or not, good or bad, we are a product of the eighteenth century. Victorious over England and a thousand years of monarchical and aristocratic power, we declared to the world that here feudalism would end. Here there would be no king, no aristocracy, no super-tight connection between church and state, no mechanisms for passing inherited wealth through the generations. Every individual would rise or fall based on his or her own merits. Here liberty and justice would reign. Everyone is familiar enough with this story. It’s a good one, as far as it goes. But in order to increase our leverage over why rural decline has become so predictable in the United States, we need to go a little deeper.

Who were the opponents of feudalism? Who did our founding fathers turn to for ideas about what a non-feudal world might look like? The answer was that they looked to men like Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jean Jacques Rousseau, David Hume—all individuals from families locked out of the feudal power structure. Given technological developments that enabled the age of exploration, a new population segment emerged in feudal society. This new class owned industrial factories, banks, insurance houses; and they participated in highly skilled crafts like watchmaking, compass-making, and silversmithing. This new group of urban dwellers emerged with money, but without political representation. The contest between urban and powerless merchants/industrialists on one side, and powerful rural aristocrats on the other, unfolded over the course of a couple of centuries. But the denigration of rural England, as one dimension of the contest, seems to have developed over a much shorter period. In fact, England's fiery agrarian journalist, William Cobbett, declared that he witnessed the denigration of rural dwellers emerge and grow within his own lifetime. He claimed that rural people went from being the productive class to being the "lower orders," and every urban shopkeeper, even those merely working for a low wage behind a counter, began to share the sentiment that rural dwellers were fundamentally backward, living in the past, not worthy of holding the reins of power (Hammond & Hammond, 1912).

Americans were not immune to this contest. Anyone familiar with the divergent careers of Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson ought to be able to recognize the tension between urban commercialist and rural agrarian visions for the new nation. The main catalyst to the creation of our Constitution was a law passed by a Boston-led majority in the Massachusetts legislature stating that it was no longer permissible to re-pay debts with farm commodities; they had to be re-paid with gold. In response, west Massachusetts farmers led by Daniel Shays took



up arms and descended on courthouses to stop the foreclosure proceedings the law produced. Boston merchants were furious and demanded that our Congress under the Articles of Confederation put an army in the field to put down the insurrection. Congress called for men and dollars from each state, but many, those most distant from Massachusetts especially, refused to comply.

That settled it for America's burgeoning industrial/commercial classes. They demanded that the Articles be amended so that an occurrence like Shays Rebellion could never happen again. A few months later, delegates from each state met in Philadelphia to amend the Articles. Of course, they really had no intention of doing so. As soon as the convention began, they threw them out and started from scratch, with Alexander Hamilton and James Madison leading the entire effort. Thomas Jefferson was conveniently sequestered in Paris as America's Ambassador to France, meaning there was no champion there in Philadelphia for a rural agrarian vision, despite the fact that the overwhelming majority of Americans lived rural agrarian lives.

So we ended up with a Constitution that deeply distrusts the will of the people, with many safeguards built in to insure that policymaking would rest in the hands of the elite. John Jay, the country's first Supreme Court Justice, defender of the Constitution, and co-author with Hamilton and Madison of the Federalist Papers, boldly proclaimed that "those who own the country ought to govern it." In point of fact, the Constitution creators in Philadelphia didn't want the people to decide much of anything. They were allowed to come out and vote once every two years, but only for representatives in the lower house—and they could only vote for those if they owned a sufficient amount of property. There was no direct election of U.S. senators, and no election of Supreme Court justices. And, as we all know, even to this day, the people do not elect the president of the United States.

America's urban, commercialist class won a big victory with the creation and subsequent ratification of the Constitution, but that didn't mean they had clear sailing. From time to time a rural agrarian vision surfaced and enough Americans jumped on board to affect the control of Congress and even to take the presidency. Thomas Jefferson, after all, became our third president in 1800. In a move loaded with symbolism, one his first executive orders was to abolish the national bank created by Alexander Hamilton. The nation's farmers looked upon the bank as a tool used by America's urban elite to keep their profits high and the income of farmers low. When Madison took the Oval Office after Jefferson, he reestablished Hamilton's national bank. Years later, however, another rural hero would ascend to the White House and, like Jefferson, Andrew Jackson would to close the bank.

Even more than Jefferson, Jackson had immense popular appeal. He was a frontiersman and a war hero. Polite urban society on the East Coast was repulsed by his rough rural manner. Playing off his nickname, Old Hickory, they re-popularized the use of an English expression, calling Jackson's supporters "hicks," a derogatory term that lingers to this day. In a timeframe not much different from what Cobbett witnessed in England, the denigration of America's rural population had begun. Keep in mind there is no evidence, nor has there ever been any, to suggest that rural people are backward, poorly educated, uncouth, or deserving of the many reality TV shows that currently mock them. Nor is there any evidence to suggest, as Cobbett pointed out, that living always in one place renders one ignorant.

Accusations of this sort have long been a vestige of the rural-urban divide in this country, and that divide is a piece of the Enlightenment itself, pitting an emerging urban middle class against a well-established rural aristocracy. The U.S. was born in the midst of this struggle and it has remained a part of the American experience as a result. Examples abound. On the fast-

moving streams of New England, early industrialists built dams for various mills, in the process creating great hardship for area farmers. Who did the courts side with? It isn't hard to guess—a circumstance that prompted Henry David Thoreau to write, “I wonder what a crow bar might avail against that dam.” When the Civil War ended, the nation's commercial and banking interests were eager to return to the gold standard. Why? So they could collect loan repayment in dollars' worth 100 cents after having loaned farmers' dollars' worth something closer to 50 cents.

A skeptic might ask about the Homestead Act; wasn't that a piece of pro-rural policy? Didn't that give free land to farmers? And while it was and did, it was accompanied by a huge government land give-away to rail corporations. Most Americans don't realize that the federal government gave 49 million acres to these corporations, and they used the revenue from this largesse to undercut local cooperative efforts put together by farmers (Vogeler, 1991).

The enduring legacy of the Great Plains to the history of this nation is that it was there that American farmers rose up and said “Enough.” Urged by Kansas populist Mary Lease “to raise less corn and more hell,” the Populist moment was born. Nebraska's William Jennings Bryan warned the nation that it dare not hang the nation's farmers on a “cross of gold.” Farmers declared that they would fight the power of corporations by joining together and demanding justice, demanding democracy, and building a cooperative commonwealth. And it wasn't just talk. They became the first states to allow women to vote. They became the first states to allow women to serve as school administrators; they became the first states to pass laws requiring school districts to provide free textbooks for every student; they became the first states to allow tenant farmers to vote at school district meetings and in school district elections (Theobald, 1995). From Kansas through the Dakotas, these states defined democracy for the nation.

These rural states fought the last battles against what by the end of the nineteenth century could fairly be called an urban corporate elite, industrialists like Rockefeller, Carnegie, and Vanderbilt. The presidential election of 1896 symbolically depicted the essence of the long-standing tension (since the nation's founding) between rural and urban interests. Populists and democrats threw their support behind Nebraska's William Jennings Bryan, while republicans selected the Ohio industrialist William McKinley. This also happened to be the election where Mark Hanna demonstrated that corporate campaign giving could affect election results. Hanna raised nearly \$7 million for the McKinley campaign, while Bryan was able to raise only \$300,000. A historical footnote for better than a century, Hanna's contribution to the successful election of McKinley in 1896 has been rediscovered due to the circumstances set in motion by the 2011 Supreme Court's decision, *Citizens United*.

Bryan's defeat marked the end of any real hope that the nation's rural interests might put an advocate in the White House or acquire a majority in Congress. To be sure, there have been presidents and congresses that demonstrated genuine concern for rural dwellers, but the dream of an agrarian state, a cooperative commonwealth, was gone. After the election of 1896, the nation's rural dwellers were at the mercy of urban, industrial, and commercial interests that dominated virtually every policy arena. The end result of this circumstance was that the "unsettling of America," as Wendell Berry referred to it (1987), began in earnest in the first years of the twentieth century. Early on, school consolidation would be a favorite policy choice among urban-dominated state legislatures.

The emergence of school professionals, individuals like Ellwood Cubberley, who served as the superintendent of San Diego schools and later became the dean of the School of Education at Stanford University, urged states to encourage the consolidation of rural schools. In 1914

Cubberley chastised rural school board members who opposed consolidation for failing to embrace “the inevitable urbanization of rural life” (Cubberley, 1914, p.3).

In most areas of the country, agricultural and educational policy worked in unison. Agribusinesses maximized their income by creating ever-larger, ever-more powerful equipment. Small farmers who managed weeds and pests through crop rotations, who refrained from investing in ever-larger equipment or various chemical inputs, were obstacles to agribusiness profits. They had to be removed. And through a variety of policy initiatives, including price supports that made farmers everywhere covet their neighbor’s land, the percentage of the nation’s population engaged in farming dwindled to the present-day level of two percent, the lowest percentage of any nation on earth. Recalling the famous 1972 admonition by Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz, “Get big or get out,” should render this circumstance something short of surprising.

As the twentieth century progressed, state legislatures put incentives in place to encourage school consolidation. While agricultural policy created larger farms and fewer farmers, educational policymakers responded with consolidation legislation to close ever-smaller rural schools. While this trend is most apparent in farming neighborhoods and farming states, other typically rural economic ventures, such as fishing or mining, experienced similar dynamics. Increasing profits translated into decreasing labor inputs. The typical response when someone protested the resulting community decay in rural America? “It’s the price of progress.”

Who could be against progress? The “price of progress” response is intended to squelch any further questions. It’s played as a trump card designed to end all conversation on the topic. We will next turn to the dynamics involved in speaking up, in challenging the predictable

rationalizations undergirding negative conceptions of all things rural. But first it is important, we think, to re-state the deep historic roots beneath the lingering urban-rural divide.

For centuries, power resided in the countryside among a landed aristocracy. The ultimate success of those who challenged rural power, the growing urban industrial/commercial classes, was at least partially due to the rhetorical war they campaigned against “backward” rural interests, against those who chose to “live in the past.” This urban-rural schism was present at our nation’s founding—and this explains why it remains a predictable feature of twenty-first century society. It is this historical legacy that makes all the reality television shows denigrating rural residents possible. It is this historical legacy that has kept the utility in the term “hick” in play, and in our vocabulary, for close to 200 years.

### *All-Too-Infrequent Conversations*

What does it take to challenge the denigration of rural communities, rural people, rural schools, rural teachers, and rural school administrators? Understanding the history of rural denigration is a key component. But it isn’t sufficient. One should also recognize the difficulties created by ascendant knowledge paradigms of longstanding. All of the individuals who made the list of all-too-frequent conversations believed that what they were saying was accurate. But there is a lingering insecurity regarding these views, an insecurity that stems from the fact that while they believe that their characterizations of rural people or rural schools are accurate, they don’t *know* that they are. This is particularly true in the case of rural denigration, for there is no evidence to suggest that anything said in the list of all too frequent conversations is in any way accurate. To compensate for the lingering insecurity, individuals will use several rhetorical devices. They will make their remarks in such a way as to render them difficult to refute. The

parent who worried about his son prefaced his remark to Paul Gruchow with *of course* they will need a lawyer from the Cities, as if it were such an absolute certainty that no one would dream of contesting it. “I guess you can say you were a superintendent, then.” How does one respond to that without returning an insult?

The dynamic is similar to what Thomas Kuhn (1962) observed among scientists who during their working careers bought into ascendant theories. When those theories were challenged, it was for them like confronting an act of intellectual violence. To get out in front of such an act, you must state your beliefs in ways that make it very difficult for anyone to challenge them in a collegial way. Remarks are often made as if it’s just conversation between two colleagues or two friends. The camaraderie makes it difficult for one to challenge stereotypical views held by the other.

So how does one challenge these rhetorical strategies? What does one say to the individual who insists that a person must be good because he or she left a rural school and successfully acquired a job in a suburban school? What do you say to the individual who claims that it’s in the nature of things for suburbanites to enjoy the fruits of progress while rural people must pay its price? Admittedly, it isn’t easy. There’s one more piece, we believe, that needs to be in place. In addition to understanding the history of rural denigration, it helps, too, to know the results of the latest research regarding the performance of rural schools.

### ***Knowing Your Stuff***

While rural schools are exceptionally challenging, they are also powerful places to learn, and the small size has a lasting impact on students. Adults in rural schools typically know every child by name. There is far less competition for leadership roles among students. Rural leaders

need to accept the challenge of leading schools by building on the assets that are available within the school and the community. Schools can be a source of hope and possibility for sustaining and improving life in rural communities.

Accountability develops through relationships (Lawrence, 2006). Positive relationships help us thrive in many ways. Students, teachers, and administrators in small settings are able to form strong relationships because of the frequency of contact. Small schools have a positive impact on children marginalized by poverty. Researchers have applied multilevel modeling techniques to a sample of nearly 15,000 students in 84 schools using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. The results of this study were clear. Increasing school size was associated with decreasing student and teacher attachment to school and student extracurricular participation (Crosnoe, Johnson & Elder, 2004). Further, increasing size weakens social cohesion within schools, hampering the formation of strong bonds among students, parents and school personnel interrupting academic performance, student participation, normative control and transmission of social capital (Johnson, Crosnoe, & Elder, 2001; Elder and Conger, 2000; Stinchcombe, 1964). This argument reinforces that schools should be small enough for students and staff to know each other and interact regularly. The importance of examining the relationship between school size and interpersonal climate goes beyond its potential role in explaining the academic effects of school size. This same study documented that smaller schools may be able to break down social barriers that have alienated minority students and promote social integration of minority students within the educational system (Crosnoe, Johnson & Elder, 2004).

Another one of the significant aspects of rural schools is related to the performance of students academically. The impact of this is documented repeatedly. In a study conducted with



data from the Public-Use-Micro-Sample of the 1980 US Census, the effects of changes in school and district size, as well as related changes in the share of education funding from state government, had an impact on student labor market outcomes, and educational attainment. They found that students born in states where the average school size increased during the period obtained lower returns to education and completed fewer years of school than did earlier cohorts born in the same state. They found that the effects of school consolidation on labor-market outcomes confirm that students from states with increasingly large schools earned substantially lower wages later in life. Further, they found that both school size and district size exhibit a statistically significant relationship with the estimated returns to education. These results indicate that increasing school size was associated with a decline in the return on education (Berry and West, 2010).

Bickel and Howley conducted eight statewide analyses on the interaction of school size and school performance. Their consistent findings in these states are the interaction between socioeconomic status and school size in the production of achievement: as school size increases, school performance decreases for economically disadvantaged students. In short, as schools get larger, children living in poverty do not perform as well. Additionally, empirical research about school size is negatively associated with conventional measures of educational productivity. This includes measures of achievement levels, dropout rates, grade retentions rates and college enrollment rates (Bickel & McDonough, 1997; Fowler, 1995; Fulton, 1996; Mik & Flynn, 1996; Huang & Howley, 1994).<sup>2</sup> The research on school size and poverty interactions had substantial geographic scope. The same school-level interactions were found in California (Friedkin & Nocochea, 1988); West Virginia (Howley, 1995, 1996);<sup>3</sup> Alaska (Huang and Howley, 1993); Montana (Howley, 1999);<sup>4</sup> Ohio (Howley, 1999); Georgia (Bickel, 1999; Bickel and Howley,

2000) and Texas (Bickel, 1999). The essential message from this line of research is deeply significant. All schools do well with the children of wealthy parents. That isn't difficult. All schools struggle with the children of poor parents; but those schools that do the best with children of poverty are small and rural. In most instances they can generate better results than a student's SES status would predict. One would think that this circumstance would cause policymakers to question the wisdom of rural school consolidation. But it has scarcely produced a dent. Consolidation has been connected to the twin goals of 1) saving money, and 2) improving academic performance for at least the last 100 years. Yet it has only been within the last 10 years or so that researchers decided to explore whether or not these long-held assumptions were accurate. The results are very telling.

Christopher Berry and Martin West (2010) were quite surprised to discover that the graduates of small, unconsolidated schools went on to college at a greater clip, had a higher graduation rate in college, and posted higher lifetime earnings than the graduates of larger consolidated schools. Studying consolidation policy in Indiana, Spradlin, Carson, Hess and Plucker (2010) challenged the assumptions that consolidation saves money and improves the educational process. Their results were highlighted in *Newsweek*: "Researchers crunched testing and budget data to conclude that of the Hoosier state's 292 districts, the 49 with fewer than 1000 students are, on average, the top-performing and most efficient." As far as saving money and improving educational outcomes are concerned, "consolidation failed on both counts" (Dokoupil, 2010).

### ***Conclusion***

Though conventional cultural wisdom is against you, research is on your side. Speak up. Challenge vacuous stereotypes. School leaders must be aware of the positive aspects of small schools and should champion the outcomes. Small schools do make a difference and schools have a significant impact on rural communities. Small rural schools are worth fighting for. To echo the words of Wendell Berry (1987), if change is to happen in education, it might well happen in the periphery, in the places inhabited by citizens of a vulnerable locale known as a rural community. At the center of such places you will often find a school. A positive relationship between the school and the community is the most significant key to the survival of both. If those who argue that change will likely occur in the margins or on the periphery are correct, perhaps rural schools offer hope for a better tomorrow in the world of public education.

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