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Introduction to Rural Educational Leadership

Jeanne L. Surface
University of Nebraska at Omaha, jsurface@unomaha.edu

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University of Nebraska at Omaha

AUTHOR BIO

Jeanne L. Surface received her Ed.D. in Educational Leadership from the University of Wyoming in 2006. She served as a Superintendent in the rural and very remote Park County School District #16, next to Yellowstone National Park. Previously, Jeanne served as Elementary Principal in Ogallala, Nebraska and High School Principal in Wakefield, Nebraska. She is now an Associate Professor at the University of Nebraska at Omaha in Educational Leadership and teaches School Law and Principal Preparation courses. She is a fierce advocate of rural schools and communities.

Without going too deep into theoretical perspectives regarding social and organizational change (as with, say, Hegel's dialectic), it can fairly be argued that change occurs when the center doesn't hold, or said another way, when the status quo no longer serves most people. It is at that point that different ideas take root and begin to direct the process of change. And where do the different ideas come from? Wendell Berry (1987) argued that they come from the periphery, which in the context of the 21st century, is the countryside.

America's educational system is not improving, and hasn't been for decades. Despite the fact that the system flat-lined with the advent of the standards and testing movement, the creation of standards and tests has reached a kind of fever pitch—with few stopping to question whether teaching to standards, teaching the same material to all students everywhere, makes any kind of sense from a learning standpoint. The fall-out from our standards/testing fetish has been well-documented. A narrowing of curriculum, inhibited curricular imagination among teachers, a deadening drill/kill experience for youth that has contributed to a spiking drop-out rate. And then there is the more insidious fall-out, for a standards/testing milieu enables those interested in privatizing and corporatizing America's educational efforts to use predictable test failures to squeeze their way into the educational arena—putting the very concept of "public" schools at risk.

In short, the center is not holding, schools are not serving most students well. Where are the ideas that will replace those that drive the status quo? Where will they come from? This issue of the *Peabody Journal of Education* will argue that Wendell Berry was right, that change in the educational system will come from the countryside, from rural educational leaders with a deep commitment to true education in their particular place on earth.

In this issue we will highlight the critical needs and special conditions that effect rural education and we will highlight the possibilities that exist for improving the conditions that exist in all schools. Rural school leaders need to decide when to exercise their voice, be bold and confident in 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. The article by Surface and Theobald, "The Rural School Leadership Dilemma" begins with actual conversations that reveal the subtle and sometimes not-so –subtle put-downs that come with living a rural life and building a rural school career. This will be followed by a short history lesson that demonstrates why bias against rural people and places remains prevalent in the twenty-first century. The article ends with helping rural school leaders muster the courage to challenge the status quo by calling out stereotypes and celebrating the strengths of rural schools.

Rural schools can be very difficult places to lead. Despite the perception that they are harmonious places, rural communities are in reality spaces often fragmented along class lines, with political factions promoting competing values and interest regarding the purpose of schooling. Sorber-McHenry in her article "The Power of Competing Narratives: A New Interpretation of Rural School-Community Relations" painfully illustrates the ways in which opposing groups consolidate political power around competing narratives in the community. The goal is the realization of a hegemonic narrative of community, in which one group is socially excluded and the other gains the political power necessary to influence school district decision-making.

The Common Core movement reflects a historical tension experienced in rural communities over power and privilege. The prominence of neoliberal political philosophy on

discussions impacting rural communities has affected rural communities in the past and is undergirding philosophy about current educational reform initiatives. In "School Leadership in the 21st Century: Leading in the Age of Reform" Butler defines neoliberalism and connects past policy decision affecting rural communities with the current reform efforts. He addresses how the neoliberal-influenced agricultural policies of the mid-20th century parallel current education reform. Last, he discusses the impact of Common Core on rural school leaders and school districts.

Canadian scholar, Michael Corbett addresses how the concept of community has been central to the discourse of rural education for generations and at the same time, how community has been and continues to be a deeply problematic concept. The article, "The ambivalence of community: A critical analysis of rural education's oldest trope" will interrogate the idea of community and look at the ways it has been used historically in rural education. He argues that effective rural education policy today needs to problematize the idea of community and develop it in ways that avoids playing into nostalgic and retrogressive notions of the rural. This argument is based on a conception of place that keeps in focus multiple and complex understandings of emerging post productivity rural places.

The school district is the fundamental administrative unit of schooling in the U.S. and the superintendent the lead official. The nature and challenges of this position, however, vary across the landscape. In "Three Contemporary Dilemmas for Rural Superintendents" Howley, Howley, Rhodes and Yahn discuss the challenges that typically bedevil the superintendents overall. From this vantage, they theorize such challenges, and illustrate the theory with three episodes: (1) the continuing threats of school and district consolidation; (2) the arrival of ethnic diversity in all-

white rural places; and (3) the leasing of school lands for mining, with a focus on hydraulic fracturing ("fracking").

One of the major obstacles to successful educational efforts in rural areas is overcoming the widespread acceptance of cultural assumptions regarding the worth of rural America. A number of rural two-year colleges today are under siege, just like so many of their rural PK-12 counterparts. In "The War: The Story of One Rural College's Battle for Survival" Mills discusses the movement to close and consolidate rural schools. Legislators and policy makers who live in urban or suburban areas have been working toward what they like to call "efficiencies" in education. For these folks, efficiency means closing down and consolidating small schools to free additional funding for large ones. For the numerous rural communities that would be negatively impacted, the challenge is nothing less than a political "war" that they must now wage to protect the quality of life they cherish.

A case study " Putting Foucault to Work: Understanding Power in a Rural School" written by Freire and Eppley uses the work of Michel Foucault to examine the complex power relations of a school and community in the midst of a closure/consolidation and subsequent reopening as a charter school. The use of Foucauldian tools, governmentality, disciplinary power, and ethics, informed the analysis of interview data from teachers, community members, and the school principal. The tools are used to examine the power relations within the school and community and the school and community's relationship with governmental systems in order to rethink common sense understanding about school leadership in order to differently understand its current forms, possibilities, and constraints.

Innovations associated with gas and oil drilling technology, including new hydraulic fracturing and horizontal drilling techniques, have recently led to dramatic boomtown development in many rural areas that have endured extended periods of economic decline. The Marcellus Shale region is one of the world's largest gas bearing shale formations, lies beneath about two-thirds of Pennsylvania, including

some of the state's most rural areas. Spurred by a policy environment favorable to unconventional gas extraction, drilling activity in the last five years has increased exponentially, with often profound impacts on communities, both positive and negative. Several decades of scholarship on boomtown growth has examined the community effects of rapid economic, demographic and social change. Kai Schafft and Cat Biddle address boomtown development through the analytic lens of schools in "Dilemmas of Educational Leadership in Gasfield Boomtowns: The School and Community Impacts of Hydraulic Fracturing within Pennsylvania's Marcellus Shale Region." Using data from interviews and focus groups with educators and community stakeholders in Pennsylvania's Northern Tier, they examine the effects of boomtown development on rural schools, as well as the multiple organizational and fiscal dilemmas school leaders face as they confront decision-making in the context of incomplete information and rapid and unpredictable community change.

In this issue we will highlighted the critical needs and special conditions that effect rural education and we will highlight the possibilities that exist for improving the conditions that exist in all schools. We hope that you enjoy this issue and develop a stronger understanding of what rural schools communities face in the United States.