

## **Resisting the Obvious: State Policy Initiatives for Rural School Improvement Should Not Mean Just Another Round of Massive School Reorganization**

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Conditions are such in many states that we are likely to witness a renewed interest in school reorganization as the sole policy response to solving the rural school improvement issue. This essay advances three main lines of argument that suggest this approach ought to be resisted: the benefits of reorganization are mixed; the strengths of good rural schools are many and ought not to be ignored; and, the demise of the rural school will damage the infrastructure of the large expanses of this nation that are rural.

Rural schools in many states face the gravest threat in their history. And because of this, we may well see the demise of a way of life that has served this country so well for a very, very, long period of time. The threat is broad-based and not likely to go away because well-intended people wish it would, nor will it somehow disappear if we could just get rid of all those folks who, conscientiously or unconscientiously, are bent on harming rural interests.

What I would like to do in this essay is briefly sketch the parameters of this unprecedented set of circumstances facing rural schools and then plead that state policy-makers—reeling as they must when confronted with the heretofore unparalleled challenges that would appear to undermine efforts to implement needed school improvement efforts—resist the obvious and not embark on another round of massive school reorganization plans similar to those launched all across this country in the 1950's and well into the decade of the 1960's.

To be certain, significant changes are occurring in rural America and some reorganization of rural schools is necessary. It would be a mistake to not acknowledge this and automatically resist the need to effect reforms that make good educational sense.

But the temptation to think only in terms of a major round of widespread reorganization must be resisted. So too should efforts to achieve this same objective through cleverly engineered fiscal or programming incentives or disincentives.

These policy responses, that is, the use of mandated school organization and/or a combination of mandated reorganization and a set of incentives or disincentives to achieve larger districts through other means was used extensively by state policy makers in previous eras to deal with the rural education "problem." And effectively so, as shown in Table 1. In the approximate fifty year period

for which data is available, the period 1930-31 to 1982-83, the number of school districts decreased from 127,531 to 15,554. This was achieved not through declining enrollments; the public school population as well as the general population increased substantially during the same period.

As James Guthrie reminds us, the school reorganization push in this nation during the last half century "reflects one of the most awesome and least publicized governmental changes to occur in this nation during the 20th century" [5]. It was achieved in state after state largely by the use of mandates and incentives and disincentives. It was driven by the virtually unchallenged advocates of economic efficiency and instructional effectiveness that were to be found both within and outside the education profession.

It would seem that while the record of advocates of economic efficiency and instructional effectiveness was impressive, they were only partially successful. The use of reorganization to effect changes in state systems of elementary-secondary education proved to be not politically feasible in many states after approximately 1970. As shown in Table 2, there still remain in this nation a large number of districts (over 77 percent) enrolling fewer than 2,500 students in grades K-12. While many districts in the suburban fringes of a number of large urban centers have small enrollments, the majority of these are rural districts.

### **AN OVERVIEW OF THE UNPRECEDENTED CHALLENGES**

As suggested previously, rural schools in state after state all across this country face their greatest threat in history. Let me briefly establish the parameters of a number of the major problems that individually are im-

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TABLE 1

Number of Public Local Basic Administrative Units  
1931-32 to 1982-83

School Year	School Districts*	Public School Systems		
		Elementary Schools		Secondary Schools
		Total	1-Teacher	
1931-32	127,531	232,750	143,391	26,409
1941-42	115,493	183,112	107,692	25,123
1951-52	71,094	123,763	50,742	23,746
1961-62	35,676	81,910	13,333	25,350
1970-71	17,995	65,800	1,815	25,352
1980-81	15,912	61,069	921	24,362
1982-83	15,554	—	798	—

\*Includes both operating and nonoperating districts.

SOURCE: Data compiled from 1983-84 edition of *Digest of Education States*, National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, Washington, D.C. (Table 51, p. 62).

pressive, but, when they are occurring simultaneously as they are today, pose a heretofore unparalleled threat.

State interest in the quality of schooling has resulted in many new initiatives that confront rural schools. Some states have established new and more comprehensive graduation requirements, longer school days or a longer school year, smaller classes in the early grades, new programs for educationally disadvantaged four-year-olds, increased salaries for teachers, stiffer certification requirements for teachers and administrators, new teacher/administrator evaluation requirements, and a host of other requirements. The merit of these new state initiatives is not our interest here. What is, is the indisputable fact that state government has a renewed interest in what goes on in the schools of the state system of elementary-secondary

TABLE 2

Number of Public School Systems and Number of Pupils Enrolled, by Size of System, Fall 1981

Enrollment Size	School Systems		Pupils Enrolled	
	Number	Percent	Number*	Percent
TOTAL	15,858	100.0	29,847	100.0
25,000 or more	163	1.0	10,383	26.1
10,000 to 24,999	457	2.9	6,783	17.0
5,000 to 9,999	1,012	6.4	7,070	17.7
2,500 to 4,999	1,968	12.4	6,856	17.2
1,000 to 2,499	3,533	22.3	5,770	14.5
600 to 999	1,835	11.6	1,439	3.6
300 to 599	2,316	14.6	1,009	2.5
1 to 299	4,270	26.9	537	1.3
None**	304	1.9	0	—

\*(in thousands)

\*\*Systems not operating schools

SOURCE: *Digest of Education Statistics, 1983-84*, National Center for Educational Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, Washington, DC (Table 50, p. 62).

education, as well it should. And in the projections of some, the new state interest of the past few years, that has now tended to level off, will soon accelerate again and do so in more significant ways than in the first round of the school reform movement in this nation. And many post-secondary institutions have recently established new admissions standards as the excellence movement has shifted to higher education.

Major demographic changes also present a challenge. Significant declining enrollments are being experienced by many rural schools. Others are experiencing increases in the percentage of students from disadvantaged backgrounds who require extraordinary assistance.

The teacher shortage in math and science has traditionally been a problem for many rural schools. But now we can add the prospect of a massive teacher shortage in all fields as a result of the projected teacher attrition rate of 50 percent in the next ten years either through early exit from the profession or through retirement. And the data that is becoming available on the quality of recent entering freshmen in teacher preparation programs certainly does not bode well. Compounding the staffing problem is the prediction that approximately 50 percent of existing administrators in this nation will retire in the next five years.

These developments are occurring at a time when a large number of rural schools are confronting fiscal strains caused by the farm crisis. According to one recent report in *Municipal Bondline*, a large number of rural jurisdictions are losing up to 20 percent of their assessed valuations in a one or two year period because of a drop in the value of farmland. School districts are suffering the most because of their reliance on property taxes for a major portion of their revenue.

Neal Harl, from Iowa State University, in a very insightful paper presented last summer in Kansas City, suggested that agriculture is going through the most wrenching adjustment in a half century and suggests that these changes promise to impact substantially both the supply and demand aspects of rural education [6].

Now, throw in this administration's regular insistence that some kind of tax credit or voucher system be established, and that this is being advocated right alongside its equal insistence that the federal role, and federal dollars, be reduced.

Then, add what is perhaps the most pervasive concern of all, dramatic changes in the traditional school support interest groups; that is, the decline in the number of parents having children in school and thus more likely to have a sustaining interest in the welfare of the nation's schools.

What you have is a conflux of circumstances that is indeed unprecedented, that in some ways represents a conspiracy of forces working against rural schools. Rural education is indeed under siege.

These are real problems and no responsible governor or state legislator, or chief state school officer, or other interested stakeholder can simply ignore them. But unfortunately, the response of many has been to think in terms of another round of massive school reorganization

as the exclusive solution to the real dilemma facing rural schools. That this is the reaction of many is pure Pavlovian reflex. Old habits in the policy communities, and elsewhere, die hard.

The establishment of school districts with a minimal enrollment is part of new, usually broad-based, school improvement initiatives in five states. The use of incentives to promote reorganization, such as family choice options, is part of the strategy in several others. I am not referring here to the state adopted cross-district enrollment plans facilitating voluntary transfers designed to reduce racial imbalance enacted by the legislatures of a few states. And major disincentives are part of the new funding formulas in still several more states. Several other states have recently authorized the state education agency to place poorly performing districts under some type of receivership until local officials provide remedy.

Do these policy initiatives represent aberrations or do they represent the front end of a major national movement that might gain its own momentum and plunge this nation into another round of massive school reorganization? I obviously do not know for certain but my suspicion is that these developments are the forerunners of another chapter of efforts to create larger, and presumably better, rural schools.

#### WHY A POLICY OF MASSIVE SCHOOL REORGANIZATION IS UNWISE

There are at least three lines of argument that suggest to me that another round of massive and arbitrary school reorganization must be resisted:

1. the benefits of reorganization are at best, mixed;
2. the strengths of good, solid rural schools are many and ought not to be ignored, especially with the current focus on school effectiveness; and,
3. the demise of the rural school will contribute to the passage of a way of life in rural communities, and by extension, to the loss of the quality of life in this nation.

Any one of these three rationales is sufficient cause to resist the obvious. Together, these represent a powerful argument for restraint and for proceeding with caution. Let me elaborate briefly on each of these three lines of argument.

##### *The Benefits are Mixed*

As a report of the Clearinghouse on Educational Management reminds us, the traditional arguments of those who favored school reorganization centered on two major claims: that larger administrative units would enhance the economic efficiency of the schools, and that larger districts can offer a more comprehensive instructional program [3].

Contemporary advocates, despite empirical evidence that these earlier traditional arguments are of questionable validity, persist in making the same claims.

I believe I have reviewed just about every major study or dissertation or essay on this topic. There is not time here to critique this literature that both traditional ad-

vocates and the contemporary proponents of school reorganization used or presently use to support their position. What can be done, however, is to remind you that the empirical research portion of that literature is at best clearly mixed.

As Fox [4] reminds us, the issue of economies of size is still unanswered because most of the studies on economic efficiency are conceptually or methodologically flawed. As others who have critiqued the available literature have concluded, even the correlation between student enrollment and per pupil expenditures, which would appear to be an easily quantifiable measure, is difficult to ascertain because of differing or questionable ways that have been used to establish costs [3] or, in some cases, because of the omission of certain costs in the computations, such as transportation [10].

One final example of basic problems with the available literature on the purported economic benefits of larger districts. As the Educational Research Service discovered after reviewing over one hundred early studies, those completed prior to 1970, a variety of approaches have been used to develop classifications of district enrollment size on which economies of scale research were subsequently done. Thus, the answer to the fundamental question of what is a large system or a small system on which to base conclusions of an economic nature varied substantially [2] and has contributed to the mixed, and I add, conceptually and methodologically flawed, results.

On the other side of the ledger, the traditional claims of advocates of school reorganization that larger units enhance the instructional programs available to students is also mixed. The research literature, as well as common sense, does support the contention that larger districts are better able to add breadth and depth to their instructional programs, particularly at the secondary level, can provide for greater specialization of personnel, and can generally have more success in attracting and retaining better prepared staff.

But, as a number of observers have cautioned, great care must be exercised here also. For example, while it is true that larger schools can offer a richer instructional program, that is, can more easily justify more curriculum options and variety, there is counter evidence that more students participate more fully in the full range of school activities in smaller schools and that this increased participation may well be a better indicator of school quality than the number of available curricular or cocurricular offerings [3].

Moreover, it is also generally conceded that many of the earlier studies of the relationships of size and student achievement ignored adequate control for two important variables in the measurement of academic achievement, intelligence and socioeconomic characteristics of students [3].

Further, it seems that we had better be equally cautious about another widespread belief in the profession. That is, there is very little evidence to support the contention of many that the number of specialized personnel, or the number of advanced degrees held by school personnel, or their experience level, is necessarily correlated with stu-

dent academic achievement [3].

And, finally, what are we to make of the concepts and now growing body of work being done by Benjamin Bloom and others that suggest that aptitude predicts the rate of learning, not the level or complexity of learning. As Robinson [9] reminds us, this learning concept holds that all pupils can learn given adequate time and assistance and support. It refutes the notion that there are good learners and there are poor learners and instead treats students as fast and slow learners. The work of Bloom and others represents a major paradigm shift in education. It is at the heart of the emerging and promising school effectiveness research.

Robinson, who is president of the Education Research Service, states that:

The concept that all children can and will learn requires a new and different approach to the assessment and measurement of student achievement. With this concept, tests can no longer be designed and normally curved to rank learners arbitrarily from good to poor. The concept requires objective referenced, diagnostic, and content mastery tests designed to measure and monitor student progress toward specific learning objectives. Such tests are designed not to show how students compare and rank with each other, but to answer the question: How is this student progressing toward his or her learning objectives? [9, p. 16]

I am certainly not an expert on testing. But some of my colleagues suggest that Bloom's work will radically alter our current student achievement and testing programs, the same ones that have been or presently are being used to make the claim that the academic performance of students enrolled in rural schools is inferior to their suburban and urban counterparts. If Bloom's work does not raise one big red flag for the advocates of school reorganization who stake their claims on the line of reasoning that holds that bigger automatically represents better instructional programs, I don't know what will.

And there are other reasons for using caution in the exclusive use of even the most conceptually rich and adequately designed tests to measure quality. I want to be clear that I support the two central themes of performance and outcome measurements that are driving the current reform movement in this nation. However, I also support the contention of others who say that the use of tests *only* to measure effectiveness is questionable public policy for a number of reasons. For example, good schools, not all schools, but good ones, whether urban, suburban, or rural, provide many, difficult to measure, wholesome experiences for students, and these by extension, make important contributions to the community, the state, and the nation. This is so obvious that it isn't even arguable. It says, yes, test, hopefully using good tests, but do not just use the results only in assessing quality. In this sense, good teaching isn't any different from good doctoring, or good lawyering, and good ministering.

### *The Strengths of Rural Schools are Many*

Questioning the infallibility of the economic efficiency and increased instructional programming argument is

but one, albeit a powerful, line of argument that state policy makers ought to resist the obvious and not promote another round of massive school reorganization.

The second line of argument has to do with an old adage that reminds us that in public policy debate, as in other endeavors, we ought not to "throw out the baby with the bathwater."

The application of this useful adage to the complex topic we are discussing here goes like this. We have today a more meaningful, solid research base on teaching and learning than at any point in history. Most of this research has been completed in the past ten years. It goes by the label "effective schools research."

A number of good syntheses of this research are available. I personally prefer the meta analysis done by Purkey and Smith [8]. These authors, after a careful review and critique of a larger number of school effectiveness studies, constructed a portrait of an effective school that has nine organization-structure characteristics and four what they labelled process-form characteristics.

The themes of the organization-structure characteristics are:

1. considerable autonomy at each building level in determining the exact means by which the school will address the problem of increasing academic performance;
2. leadership necessary to initiate and maintain improvements;
3. staff stability;
4. curriculum articulation and organization that suggests that at the secondary level a planned, purposeful diet of courses is better than the smorgasbord approach of many electives and few requirements; that at the elementary level, the curriculum must focus on basic skills, there is sufficient time for instruction, and there must be coordination across grade levels;
5. staff development that is system-wide, closely related to the instructional program, is incremental and long-term, and that flows from the expressed needs of teachers;
6. parental involvement and support that is likely to positively influence student achievement;
7. school-wide recognition of academic success that encourages students to adopt the norms and values of honoring achievement;
8. maximized learning time; and,
9. district support that is necessary to implement many of the previously cited organization-structure variables.

As Purkey and Smith remind us, these nine interrelated characteristics are of consequence on their own. They take on added importance, however, because they set the stage for what they define as the school's culture and climate; that is, the four process-form characteristics of an effective school:

1. collaborative planning and collegial relationships among teachers and between teachers and administrators that encourages a kind of intellectual shar-

- ing that promotes consensus and a feeling of unity;
2. a sense of community, the sense of being a member of a supportive and clearly perceived group;
  3. clear goals and high expectations commonly shared; and,
  4. order and discipline.

Now, lay this list alongside a list of the widely acknowledged consensus strengths of good rural schools. What one would find, in my judgment, are a great deal of similarities. Both historical and contemporary observers of rural schools consistently cite these strengths of good rural schools: small classes, individual attention, low dropout rates, safe orderly environment, development of student leadership qualities, strong faculty identity and commitment, strong parental interest in the schools, and strong community support for the schools.

One might ask, are these features peculiar to rural schools only? The answer is, of course not! Then, a second question, are these features that have been judged to be essential hallmarks of effective schools within the reach of rural schools only? The answer is again, of course not, and the hope is that all schools, large and small, urban, suburban, and rural, will strive to create similar environments and conditions, for the future welfare of this nation depends on it.

But this is not a debate comparing urban schools with rural schools. Nor should it be. The intent is to remind the state policy community of the presence of many school districts in their midst who already possess many features of what the exciting last decade of research has established are characteristics of effective schools.

So part of my argument that state policy planners and decision makers ought to be extremely careful in putting all their eggs in that school reorganization basket is that they very well might "throw out the baby with the bath-water."

What ought to occupy the attention of the policy community are ways to promote the attainment of the characteristics of effective schools everywhere. If this were the focus, then it seems reasonable that they would come to the same conclusion as I have—that is, good rural schools already possess many of the effectiveness characteristics. Therefore, we ought to be thinking about how we can use these strengths as building blocks for a more effective statewide system of elementary-secondary education. And in thinking about this in a serious way, we ought to be very cautious in tinkering with part of the state system that already possesses much of what we are attempting to create.

### *The Demise of the Quality of Life in Rural America*

Thus far, I have suggested two lines of argument that call for restraint on the part of many state policy makers who seem bent on making exclusive use of the reorganization strategy to effect school improvement in rural areas.

The third line of argument that I will give prominence to here is perhaps the most pervasive of all. I additionally urge caution for the reason that the removal of the

school from a rural community may very well lead to unanticipated consequences that I find to be frightening, and in many ways unnecessary.

Powerful forces are operating that together promise to destroy the quality of life for many in this country who by choice or necessity choose to live, work, and raise their families in a rural setting. Some of these forces are international in scope or are beyond reach of any given state or community.

Others are controllable, or, their negative consequences can be substantially lessened, especially if one is certain that the "problem" is properly defined.

What I'm trying to briefly suggest is that the "problem" facing the policy communities is not what to do about rural schools, but rather, what is to be done about the quality of life in the large expanses of this nation that are rural.

My shifting the "problem" this way reveals my value system and I readily admit this to be so. For no discussion of a policy problem, especially one on the scale of the one we have been discussing, is or can ever be, as Dunn reminds us, free from the influence of values for all forms of inquiry are ultimately based on beliefs about the dignity of man, the role of government, knowledge itself, and other beliefs [1].

The attempt to eradicate bias in research, especially social sciences research, by trying to isolate and then eliminate the values themselves is a hopeless effort. There is no way that I know for excluding bias in policy research. In the public policy issue of school reorganization, the best way to make values explicit is to include them as part of the discussion, and to do this up front.

But establishing one's value system up front is not only the ethical thing to do, it is also an absolute prerequisite to another important step in public policy decision-making. That is, the need for the proper definition of the problem that is being debated.

The most critical aspect of policy analysis is problem structuring. As many observers have commented, most policy analysis fails because analysts solve the wrong problem rather than because they provide the wrong solution to the right problem [1].

Now, it is very seldom that major policy problems can be decomposed into independent, discrete, or mutually exclusive parts. For example, it isn't very fruitful to discuss the rural housing "problem," or the rural health care "problem," or the rural transportation "problem," or the rural economic development "problem," or the rural education "problem" as though they exist in a vacuum. Doing so is not only likely to result in confusing the causation or correlation of conditions but may also contribute to the creation of new, unanticipated problems. Or, one does so at the risk of producing the right answer to the wrong problem [1].

The "problem" of rural education requires a holistic approach. One must view rural education as an inseparable part of the infrastructure of rural life. Damage to the system of rural education through the use of indiscriminate mandates or a cleverly packaged system of incentives or disincentives will virtually insure the demise of rural America.

So, the debate raging in the halls of state government all across this land, that is obstensible about school reorganization should be changed. It actually is a debate about the quality of life in rural America, and by extension, the quality of life in this nation.

As Alan Peshkin reminds us, rural schools provide a "structure of meaning" in the lives of the community [7]. Given their centrality to all other aspects of rural life, they ought not to be treated with anything but the utmost care. At a minimum, we ought to expect that the discussion about them be part of a much larger public debate. Some major adjustments in rural America will no doubt occur in the years ahead. But we ought not to use the schools as the policy instrument to effect these changes.

### CONCLUDING COMMENTS

In conclusion, what I have tried to do in this essay is suggest that there are three lines of argument that should dissuade state policy makers from embarking on another massive rural school reorganization effort.

The rural school problem is not, in the words of Churchill, a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma. Yes, it represents a dilemma and a much, much deeper one than was true thirty years ago. I suspect some states will have great difficulty in solving the dilemma. However, these are different times from thirty years ago and there now are resources available to help solve the dilemmas that were not present in earlier times.

Reminders of the rich resources already in place in most states to help resolve the dilemmas posed by the new conspiracy of forces impacting on rural schools would put me pretty close to offering recommendations of policy choices that are available to help resolve the rural education problem. That is not my intent nor my task here. All I'm trying to suggest is that in most states, today, on the eve of the microelectronic era, where the potential of laser disc technology for instruction and management uses in schools is just one example of the exciting possibilities just around the corner, most states have more than a good chance of winning. And winning here, for me at least, is quite simple. All one has to do is make certain one defines the problem correctly. And for me, at least, the problem facing the policy community is how best to preserve the quality of life in rural areas that have been a source of strength for so long. Surely there are

few, if any, who would challenge this goal. All the people of a state, those who reside in its urban centers as well as the smaller county seats must recognize, if they do not already, that they have a vital stake in this issue. This being the case, it is important that the centerpiece of rural life, the rural school, is alive, healthy and available.

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