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Community Factors Threatening Rural School District Stability

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This paper presents three principles of community that, when compromised, appear to contribute to school district instability. One school district in the state of Nebraska is examined to illustrate how these three principles can be used as heuristics to analyze changes within such school districts. The three principles are: 1) the principle of centripetalism; 2) the principle of inclusiveness; and 3) the principle of distinctiveness. The authors conclude with the implications these principles have for educational policy relative to rural school districts, and pay particular attention to the growing interest in treating education as an instrument for rural economic renewal.

INTRODUCTION

Research in institutional change portrays organizations evolving naturally through a number of cycles (Cada, et al. 1979). Cada et al. identify four periods through which organizations pass: a foundation period, an expansion period, a stabilization period, and a breakdown period. A fifth period, a renewal period, will exist if the organization survives.

Rural schools in the United States are facing pressures that have caused many to enter the breakdown or critical period. Declining rural economies, the expansion of expectations for educational services, the erosion of the population base, the depression of the rural economy, and increased state demands are examples of the pressures compromising rural school survival. The purpose of this paper is to present a systematic exploration of the causes of decline.

One of the signs of organizational breakdown in the critical period is the loss of stability that allows organizations to adapt to external demands and environmental change (Thompson, 1967). From a community perspective, stability is vital to long-term survival. A continuing instability in either internal organizational patterns or in relationships with the surrounding environment eventually leads to extinction. Consequently, an understanding of the forces that lead to instability in school districts is basic to the formulation of public policy aimed at helping them to survive.

Loss of stability may be reflected in high teacher or superintendent turnover rate or in difficulty attracting competent board members (Bryant, 1987, 1988; Bryant and Grady, 1988). It may be reflected in lack of agreement over the core of values that orient the policy decisions of board members, teachers and administrators. In some cases, there may be differing perceptions about the contribution the school makes to the community with an accompanying loss of public support. Stability does not mean inflexibility or unwillingness to change; rather, it means that the organization is imbued with enough firmness and sense of purpose that change is healthy rather than pathological.

There appear to be four primary sources of school district instability:

1. The school organization itself is poorly constructed or operated;
2. School personnel are incompetent and continue to perpetuate incompetence;
3. The wider community has reached a state of instability that reflects itself in the performance of the school district;
4. The demands of state agencies produce particular dysfunctionalisms for the rural school districts.

This study focuses on the third source of instability for school districts. As a heuristic, one small Nebraska school district in a critical period is used to identify the forces in rural communities that intensify decline. Information about the town was gathered through primary source documents and through interviews with residents of the community.

Three general principles of rural organization are examined as a way to explain school stability within rural communities: 1) the principle of centripetalism; 2) the principle of inclusiveness; and 3) the principle of distinctiveness.

The Principle of Centripetalism

The first principle that unifies small rural towns is that of centripetalism, the tendency of various social and economic forces to centralize. In economic terms the small rural town is the focal point of a bounded region. Residents sell, buy, and trade in the town. In rural regions, the town is the center for the townspeople, for small farmers, and for others who live outside the town. Community organizations and groups confer belonging, prestige, and reputation.

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Smith's cumulative town embodies the principle of centripetalism. The cumulative town is one formed by the "gradual accretion of individuals, or, sometimes by rapid but disorderly accumulations of fortune seekers." (Smith, 1966:30). The principle of centripetalism is also exhibited in another type of town, the covenanted town. Here the unifying force is the common belief system held by those seeking to build an ideal community (Smith, 1966). As with the cumulative town, a focal and centering community force is characteristic of the covenanted town.

The forces at work against centripetalism are of three kinds: 1) the decline of a business hub; 2) the erosion of surrounding wealth; and 3) the shifting of social and organizational ties to other communities.

Douglas, Nebraska is a proto-typical small rural town. Its growth and decline as an economic center are depicted in the pattern of business establishment and closing, in population growth and decline, in the anecdotal reports of early newspaper editors, and in the township maps that chart population declines.

Through the efforts of the Missouri Pacific Railroad agents, Douglas was formed as a population center in 1888. For many years Douglas was the hub of the surrounding region called Hendricks Precinct (Brugman, et al., 1988). As a proto-typical town, Douglas had its champions who espoused community development. One in particular, Walt Rogers, editor of the Douglas Enterprise, wrote:

> Well, if you have made up your mind to live in a town, then stand up for it, and if you know of no good of it, then silence is golden. Do all you can to help along a man who is engaged in a legitimate business. Do not send away for everything nice. The success of your townsmen is your success.
>
> (Douglas *Enterprise,* Vol. IX, No. 4, 1897)

That spirit of local support, of focusing inward, lasted for many years. While it lasted, Douglas was a town of vitality and stability. In 1892, the local weekly newspaper, the Douglas *Enterprise,* carried advertisements for the following twenty-four local businesses:

> H. Hostettler, M.D.; F. Childs, Attorney; E. Harp, Contractor; McGinley Cigars; Broekmea Furniture; Ross Harness Shop; Hastie Livestock and Grain; Beck Blacksmiths; Walker Brothers Lumber; Malcom the Butcher; Haas and Page Clothing; Clark Pharmacy; The Bank of Douglas; Sharp Brothers Woodworkers and Wagonmakers; Brunell Pumps and Windmills; Garnett Painting and Hanging; Broyles Brothers Well Digging; Fisher Groceries and Goods; Hull Grains; McGinley Livery; Douglas Steam Elevator; Gooch Livery; Wren Real Estate; and Castleman Barbwire.
>
> (Source: Douglas *Enterprise*, Vol. IV, No. 14, 1892)

By 1910 the list of businesses had changed as new entrepreneurs emerged. But, many of these new businesses were located in Lincoln, a growing city thirty miles northwest. Douglas and Hendricks Precinct residents had began to travel to Lincoln for goods and services. By 1940 the list of local businesses had diminished to fifteen and included two gas stations and two garages. Presently six businesses operate in Douglas: a cafe, a gas station, a bank, a cabinet shop, a small farm supply and a mail order catalogue business (Brugman, et al., 1988).

The decline of business heralds the diminishment of centrepetal force. Douglas residents used the automobile and better roads to shift their activity to new centers. The surrounding countryside underwent profound changes. Douglas is slightly north of the center of the political subdivision Hendricks Precinct. As Table One indicates, the population of Hendricks Precinct has declined steadily for most of this century.

TABLE ONE
Population of Douglas and Hendricks Precinct

Year	Douglas	Hendricks Precinct	Total
1980	207	392	597
1970	175	368	543
1960	197	425	622
1950	213	539	752
1940	234	675	909
1930	233	733	966
1920	242	831	1,073
1910	305	863	1,161
1900	253	850	1,103
1890	n.a.	634	634
1880	n.a.	396	396

Source: Census Data, 1880-1980

The population decline of the surrounding area and the corollary decline in economic base bears further comment. As with many small towns, one of the more attractive career options for young people was farming. Typically, one worked to learn the craft of farming and eventually acquired some land of one's own (Hatch, 1979). This resulted in a rich system of small holdings reflected in the greater population numbers prior to 1940. The density of small holdings provided something of which the small rural town could be a center.

This density changed in ways that population statistics do not capture. Table Two presents the present pattern of agricultural holdings.

A significant portion (between 65% and 80%) of the region around Douglas is no longer inhabited and is now leased and farmed. Senior residents of Douglas describe their youth when there were families and children "all over the prairie." A network of now abandoned rural country schools once operated. Large crowds attended Saturday market days and the streets of Douglas thronged with local inhabitants.

TABLE TWO
Categories of Agricultural Holdings by Section
in Hendricks Precinct
1988

Category	Number	Percent
House lived in by owner Land farmed by owner	26	15%
House lived in Land leased Land farmed	27	15%
No livable house Land leased Land farmed	82	46%
Never a house Land leased Land farmed	12	7%
Never a house Never farmed	2	1%
House rented Land not farmed	2	1%
Informant not sure	24	14%
Total Holdings	175	100%

(Source: Local Resident, A. Brugman)

Douglas is typical. Historically, World War II marks a change in the fortunes of small rural towns (Hatch, 1979). The war had a dramatic impact on farming and thus on the social and economic fabric of rural areas. The needs of the country during the war inflated the price of agricultural goods. In turn this drove up the value of agricultural land. As a result, those farmers who established themselves during the war or entered the period already established attained a level of wealth hitherto uncommon in rural areas (Hatch, 1979:116-122). The increase in the value of agricultural land did several things to the cumulative town.

First, farming as a career option became less possible for young people. Second, a wealthy elite of large landholders was created. Third, the wealthy elite tended to farm from afar—thus removing their wealth from the local community.

Local residents of Douglas speak of trains and trucks as symbols of what happened to farming. First, the railroads stopped transporting goods. Thus, the small farmer's access to markets was hampered and the role of the local granary became obsolete. Second, trucks began hauling grain directly from farms to large central elevators. The local base of agricultural wealth disappeared with the increase in absentee landholding, with the loss of the train, and with the advent of the truck.

Evidence of this is found all across the plains states. One comes across a clump of farm buildings gathered together around a yard light. The barns and sheds are in good repair. The house either no longer exists or is unused. At night the yard light is on but the buildings are deserted. In the local village, the train tracks are rusted and the elevators quiet.

These changes in farming serve the requirements of economic organization. But they enervate one of the fundamental requirements of social organization—the presence of human beings. These changes were accompanied by a shifting of social and organizational ties that compromises the second principle of small town organization, that of inclusiveness.

The Principle of Inclusiveness

The principle of inclusiveness may be indigenous to small towns and works to hold residents together. In contemporary America this principle forms the basis for "getting involved," a guiding ethic of those who seek community revitalization (Bellah, et al., 1988). In the traditional cumulative town, local organizations extend membership privileges widely to members of the community. This is in contrast to larger communities where membership in prestigious community organizations is exclusive (Blumenthal, 1932; Goldschmidt, 1946). If a major town event is a fall festival, many people are able to participate in that activity. This inclusiveness provides the foundation for what Coleman recognizes as "social capital" (Coleman, 1987).

The principle of inclusiveness provides an essential ingredient for small town life. It accommodates the human need to establish position in the local social hierarchy, a necessary step in creating social identity. Unlike life in a larger city, social identity is a community matter; in a larger city, social identity tends to be established in an individual's private sphere of operation. In the rural town, one's social identity is established in the public sphere.

This is one of the messages of Bellah, et al. in *Habits of the Heart.* "Associational life in the modern metropolis does not generate the kinds of social responsibility and practices of commitment to the public good that we saw in the associational life of the strong and independent township" (Bellah, et al., 1985:177). One of the factors that appears characteristic of the breakdown or critical period is the loss of "associational life."

Events in Douglas illustrate this. Efforts are made to maintain old time community events in spite of a declining population. A fall festival is held. There are a number of Methodist church dinners and socials. The volunteer firemen have an annual fundraising dance.

But, like many communities, Douglas faces an old family/new family problem. This old versus new is exacerbated by age stratification. The old families are senior citizens and are declining. The new families are young and growing in numbers. Ways to include new families in the events of the old families are limited. The

diversity of events has declined. The old families tend to keep to themselves.

Three avenues for participation exist. One is through the two churches, but these are dominated by old families. The second is through a growing adult athletic league, but this attracts little notice from old families. A third is through the school, one of the few common grounds for old and new families to meet.

The importance of the high school in Douglas can not be underscored enough. Social activities, particularly athletics, provide an opportunity for a community event that all community members can (and do) attend. A girls high school volleyball game at the state tournament draws virtually all of the inhabitants of Douglas. Thus, presently, the principle of inclusiveness is served primarily through the medium of the school district. Only through various school functions can all residents find access to community "associational life."

The Principle of Social Distinction

When the residents of a town are no longer able to distinguish their town from others, a fundamental principle of social organization is violated. Hatch writes of the town he studied "the community of Starkey was a small-scale network of interpersonal relations of which a prime constituent was the competitive system of social evaluation" (Hatch, 1979:110). The residents of rural towns will distinguish themselves from the residents of other rural towns by religious, ethical and/or ideological values. These religious, ethical, or ideological standards are used by community residents to establish a social frame of reference. When that ability to distinguish the character of one's town from another is lost, community instability results.

Events in Douglas illustrate this well. In August of 1977, the Douglas Chapter of the Order of the Eastern Star and the Masonic Brothers of Douglas, organizational vestiges of an earlier time when there were many clubs and societies, consolidated their chapters with ones in other towns (Brugman, 1988:145). Hitherto, these organizations provided residents with ways to earn social ranking and social definition.

Interviews with local residents provided a faint approximation of what this network once was. One of the visible groups in Douglas is a group of senior citizens held together through the leadership of one person. This group meets daily and participates in organizing a number of church and community functions. Members of this group were able to provide answers to the question of what distinguished Douglas from other surrounding communities. Newer residents would answer this question with generalities about rural life. Specific answers to the unique properties of Douglas were identified by senior citizens.

When asked about a town to the north, the seniors reported that a "lot of 'em are okay but they don't participate." Participation in the community is one of the standards that these seniors use to evaluate a person. A related value for this group of seniors is that of duty. Residents are expected to care for each other. This sentiment was voiced years before by W. Rogers who said, "if you have made up your mind to live in a town, then stand up for it." Seniors describe their town as like a "big family." They described in heroic terms a team of men who set up a night watch in the attic window of a hardware store in an attempt to catch a group of vandals.

This spirit of watchfulness also characterizes the expectations these seniors have for community residents. People from a town just north are a "different class of people" and "don't mix with each other as much as we do in Douglas." As one put it, "they don't holler hello" to each other up there. A sense of security is one of the benefits that these seniors find in this shared value system that distinguishes Douglas from other communities.

However, that security wobbles on a community foundation that has entered the breakdown period. Douglas is in danger of losing its school and its seniors are decreasing in numbers. What will emerge to take their place? Will Douglas continue as a community with a new network of social organization or will it be a collection of homes with no particular unity?

Implications for State Education Policy

At a basic level, state policy making is a process of allocating resources to the people of a state. State leaders have three primary resource allocation choices relative to rural development:

1. adopt a laissez-faire stance that reacts non-systematically to local need (this is the common policy strategy pursued in many states);
2. pursue a strategy of selective assistance to rural regions and communities (this is a growth center strategy);
3. adopt a systematic strategy of assistance to all rural regions and communities (this is a pro-active orientation adopted by a few states like Minnesota).

Depending upon which of these three alternatives state leadership favors, rural educational policy will vary. For example, a laissez-faire state policy orientation typically requires education to produce a viable workforce for the state's economy; schools are not expected to help the state sustain its rural communities. From such an orientation, consolidated school districts are clearly more efficient institutions when it comes to providing an array of vocational and educational resources. Thus, a laissez-faire rural development policy will by default yield the policy arena to short-term economic interests and these tend to force school consolidation.

The second strategy of growth centers or triage also yields consolidation. Pursuing such a strategy, the state selects particular rural areas for development as commercial centers (Daniels and Lapping, 1987). Such a strategy promotes particular communities at the expense of others with the ultimate objective of sustaining the infrastructure of rural regions by concentrating resources in particular areas. School consolidation is consistent with such a

strategy because it concentrates educational resources in a selected community.

Consolidation is not the only consequence of particular strategies toward rural regions. The first two strategies are compatible with an undifferentiated state education policy for all schools, *i.e.*, small schools and large schools are subject to the same accreditation standards and regulatory requirements. The first two will value the contribution of the individual school to the labor needs of the state more than they will value the role of the school in local economic development. In other words, educating students out of the smaller communities into the broader state economy will be the explicit goal of the state educational system.

The choice of the third strategy for rural development would lead to significantly different state educational policies. School consolidation would not be a desired end although it might take place quite naturally in some areas. Rather, efforts would be made to help the rural communities sustain themselves by helping them maintain and improve their schools. Rather than seeking to hold small rural schools to the same organizational and curricular requirements as larger school districts, state policy would be permissive and would provide special assistance in helping small schools.

An illustration of this potential state role is emerging in the way that states are developing distance teaching learning capability. In some states, the conventional approach to bringing educational resources to isolated school districts is through satellite systems that provide some limited interactive communication. Such a system is often centrally controlled in that programming decisions are not made at the local level. New fiber optics systems and coaxial cable or microwave technologies offer greater flexibility in that local school districts can develop and share their own curricular resources. Under such a system, local school districts have great flexibility to develop and plan according to their own local needs without being dependent upon a central source. When using the former technology, the state often provides resources in order to help schools meet state requirements. Under the latter technology, the school develops its own resources to meet locally (or possibly state) defined needs. The latter is more compatible with a rural development strategy that seeks to sustain rural communities.

This third strategy is essentially characteristic of many states in the midwest and Great Plains region during their settlement after the Civil War. Schools were very much a part of the promotional package used to attract the settler from the east. The rural school was an essential part of state and federal rural development strategy in those years. One of Nebraska's governors during those years said, "I'll not rest until we have 10,000 school districts in Nebraska" (Manley, 1988).

Rural development policy should have an impact on state educational policy. Recent rural development initiatives portray the school as a mechanism for assisting the local economy in developing its entrepreneurial potential (Bryant, 1989; Sher, 1988; Wall & Luther, 1988). Frequently, however, state educational policy is inconsistent with these rural initiatives. Consolidation, undifferentiated regulation, and inadequate state services continue to impede the ability of the rural school district to play any role in assisting with rural economic development. It is clear that state educational policy need not be configured as an impediment to rural development. But often it is.

The three principles outlined earlier—the principles of centripetalism, inclusiveness, and social distinction—can serve as a guide to re-orient state educational policy toward rural school districts. If these principles were better accepted as essential to community development, there would be better coordination between economic and educational policy.

Centripetalism

The principle of centripetalism challenges the rationality of school consolidation trends. Many state educational policy leaders argue that the proper response to declining rural enrollments is consolidation. This strategy requires the blending of various community schools into one district deemed to be of sufficient size. Often this district or school is located equidistant from the participating communities. The removal of the school means it can no longer add to the forces of centripetalism. The consolidated school may have a regional impact. But its role in the particular community will be diminished.

One clear policy implication arising from this principle is that school consolidation as an educational strategy may be inconsistent with revitalization as an economic strategy. If state leadership has no particular plan for dealing with rural community needs and allows school district consolidation forces to randomly take place, it is quite likely that there will be places where the two state functions of education and economic development will work at cross purposes.

If state leadership seeks to selectively promote economic development by pursuing a growth center strategy, state leaders need to place a moratorium on consolidation pressures until that triage strategy is completely developed.

If state leadership seeks to develop a policy protecting small communities, it needs to provide assistance to small school districts so that they can begin to adapt to changing pupil demographics and changing educational expectations. For example, Minnesota state education leaders have consciously sought to help rural school districts establish cooperative distance learning projects by providing technical support and funding local initiatives. In this way, the schools are able to remain in their communities as viable educational entities.

Inclusiveness

The rural school provides local residents a means of establishing an associational life that is inclusive. It is of importance to note that typologies of rural communities are emerging. Some fit Smith's description of the cumulative town. But rural bedroom communities close to commercial centers where housing is cheap and jobs

available are taking shape in the Great Plains states. Other communities are following specialized economic strategies in the sense that they have only one major commercial or recreational attraction that draws people. The town that exists to serve a single employer (an outlet store, a destination resort, a mill, a packing plant) illustrates the former. And, some communities are becoming retirement villages where the dominant population are the elderly.

Where once a variety of organizations provided opportunity for inclusive participation in the social life of the community, now it is often the case that the school and a few celebratory gatherings provide the only mechanism for inclusive association. When the people of a community lack the ability to interact together, the creation of social identity is compromised. If this proceeds long enough, individuals will go elsewhere to satisfy the very human need for social identity. The lack of a stage for social interaction will erode feelings of loyalty to the community. And, if there is no way to establish the social identity of the community members, there will be no way to identify community leadership, a vitally important part of rural development activities (Heartland Center, 1986).

This principle argues against the tendency to create consolidated districts and locate schools outside of villages. To promote inclusiveness, the school needs to be a magnet that draws all people together on a fairly regular basis.

Social Distinction

A school provides a means whereby local people are able to distinguish themselves from their neighbors. This need for social distinction is evident in school athletic rivalries. The intensity of feeling can be measured by the size of the local crowd that turns out for particular contests between high school athletic teams.

It is fairly clear that when a larger community absorbs a smaller one, that which distinguished the smaller community is gradually lost. Residents eventually are unable to distinguish themselves from residents of the larger community. It is also clear that when the population of a town declines below a critical mass of inhabitants, the ability to describe particular characteristics of the remaining residents is either lost or rendered insignificant. What is accepted as a community characteristic for many people becomes idiosyncratic for just a few people.

The local school is one of the primary socialization mechanisms available for a community to use to maintain its unique characteristics—those factors that community members perceive as distinguishing themselves from the members of other nearby communities.

CONCLUSION

If rural revitalization means sustaining the small town character of rural regions, the three principles of centripetalism, inclusiveness, and social distinction are heuristics for understanding essential organizational forces. If the rural schools are to play a role in helping communities sustain themselves, then state educational policy needs to support these institutions in that expanded local role. Without a clear understanding of the relationship between economic development and educational policy, it is improbable that rural educational and rural economic revival will assist each other.

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