

## Education, Place, and the Sustainability of Rural Communities in Saskatchewan

Terry Wotherspoon  
*University of Saskatchewan*

*Schools which have long been cornerstones of sustainability for rural communities are in danger of disappearing in many areas that rely on agriculture as the primary industry. Many forecasters project the demise of rural schooling and the communities the schools serve amidst global pressures to concentrate and centralize economic production, jobs, and services. Other commentators argue that rural schools can play a vital role in fostering a sense of place that is critical to the development of meaningful social, economic, and cultural opportunities in uniquely situated communities. This paper examines the perceptions about schooling's contributions to community sustainability held by southwestern Saskatchewan residents. In the face of pressures to close and consolidate many community schools, area residents place a high value on the maintenance of extensive local educational services, are generally satisfied with the services available to them, and contribute actively to support schooling. However, schools offer credentials and content that serve urban centres more than local communities. If schools are to remain vital to rural community sustainability, educators, policymakers, and community members must offer strategies that link education with the development of economic diversification, meaningful jobs, and supportive community infrastructures.*

### Introduction

The phenomena of education, work, and community sustainability traditionally act in a complementary manner. The general expectation that formal educational institutions exist to produce the kinds of workers and citizens needed by industrial society has rarely been called into question. However, this close relationship has become unraveled in what has been variously conceptualized as the postmodern era or an intense crisis in advanced capitalism. Schooling has come under sustained public attack for its apparent failure to provide the kinds of training and qualifications required for a globally competitive economy. Longstanding assumptions about pathways from schooling into the labour market have been reconceptualized to take into account what has become a protracted process of "transitions" among formal, informal, and nonformal education and diffuse work settings. Meanwhile, the meaning and nature of community sustainability have become uncertain as a consequence of the interpenetration of local and global influences and shifting notions of communities and their boundaries.

While these issues confront people in virtually all social settings, they are of particular significance to those living in single-industry communities and relatively isolated rural regions. On the one hand, the dynamics of globaliza-

tion and the introduction of advanced communications technologies have made these regions less isolated than once was the case. On the other hand, increasing concentrations of resources and services in metropolitan regions have posed new threats to the existence of rural communities.

This article examines the general significance of education to community life where agriculture is the dominant industry. Particular reference will be made to a region of rural and small communities in Saskatchewan, Canada. First, I discuss significant issues that arise in general debates about the role played by education with respect to the sustainability of rural communities. This is followed by an overview of factors related to recent socioeconomic and educational changes in Saskatchewan. Then I summarize data concerning the public perceptions about, and involvement in, educational services in rural communities in one region of the province. To conclude, I examine implications that arise from the contradictory place of formal education in rural community sustainability amidst wider processes of social and economic change.

### Education, Reproduction, and Community Sustainability

Formal education contributes to social and economic reproduction within defined national, regional and community settings. Sociological analysis of education, from both traditional and critical perspectives, places emphasis on education's functional importance to the maintenance of given social orders. Schooling, understood this way, produces workers and community members, as well as predis-

---

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Terry Wotherspoon, University of Saskatchewan, Department of Sociology, 9 Campus Drive, Saskatoon, SK S7N 5A5 CANADA. (wotherspoon@sask.usask.ca)

positions, that benefit society as a whole (according to traditional functionalist and liberal analysis) or to particular dominant interests (according to more radical and critical analysis; see Lynch, 1989, and Wotherspoon, 1998).

While at a general level these approaches to reproduction are appealing, they contain several limitations that a more systematic understanding of formal education reveals. Among the most important factors to be acknowledged is the reality that education is oriented to a broad and not always coherent range of aims and objectives. The question of "what is being reproduced by education?" cannot be answered in any simple way. Educational processes and outcomes are multidimensional in nature, reflecting in part substantial diversity among teachers and learners involved in education as well as distinct interests held among policy-making bodies and communities served by educational programs. Because educational programs and practices take shape as a consequence of political choices, fiscal resources, and other pragmatic considerations, education is often characterized more by indeterminacy than by any strict reproduction of predictable ends.

In these regards, despite reform agendas that promote a technical vision of education based on commercial or vocational principles, it is important also to recognize that education is an enterprise that involves moral choices (Apple, 1993; Theobald, 1997). Schooling, in other words, is significant for its social and human dimensions rather than just its fiscal and technical merits. This means that what is taught and what happens in schools may be subject to contestation and influence by various groups, including members of the communities in which schools are located. In a rural context, as Theobald (1997, pp. 1-2) argues, schools therefore contain potential "by attending to their place" to build and restore healthy communities rather than leaving them as remnants of the onslaught of global forces.

In social settings that are experiencing significant economic and political changes, educational uncertainty and contradiction are likely to be especially pronounced. Over the past decade and a half, education systems in the advanced industrial nations have been the focus of intense public criticism. Government reports, media scrutiny, and lobbying by business and parents' organizations have questioned the viability and relevance of public education in a socioeconomic environment characterized by the restructuring of employment, technological changes, organizational downsizing, and the growth of service sector employment relative to industrial work (Wotherspoon, 1998). The impact of these shifts is likely to be most pronounced in rural areas that are highly dependent on limited industrial or population bases. Such changes can hasten the process of rural decline, but they may also create possibilities for community revival and sustainability.

Although there are many points of convergence between rural and urban regions, there are important differ-

ences as revealed through indicators such as unemployment patterns, crime rates, educational attainment, and participation in community activities (Bolaria, Dickinson, & Wotherspoon, 1995; Bollman & Biggs, 1992). Rural areas themselves are characterized by considerable diversity in locale as well as social and economic circumstances. Regions dominated by resource industries (e.g., agriculture, fishing, and mining) are highly vulnerable to the negative impact of shifts in markets, technological changes, and concentration of capital that are intensified within globalization. By contrast, metropolitan fringe zones and regions that are able to diversify to take advantage of emergent service industries (e.g., tourism) may experience substantial growth or revitalization through the same processes (Miller & Smith, 1997). While remote areas are frequently abandoned under policies of market deregulation and state downsizing, there are prospects for new information technologies and "virtual" enterprises to mitigate some of this isolation. The diversity of social and economic conditions in rural areas suggests that there will be a corresponding array of issues that influence rural schooling and more general patterns of social reproduction.

Several factors, such as commodity markets, employment opportunities, skill and education levels, and state and employer policies, make labour market integration especially problematic in rural areas (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 1995). Rural areas, in contrast to large metropolitan centres, typically are dependent upon a relatively narrow range of resource-based industries in which employment tends to be seasonal or highly sensitive to market fluctuations. High levels of skill and education are not generally required for such work, employers or self-employed workers are often not in a position to offer high wages, benefits, and employment security, and wages are further depressed through periodic labour surpluses. Individuals who possess the highest credentials, or those seeking to upgrade their formal education and skill levels, commonly are forced to migrate from rural to urban areas if they wish to derive the greatest return on their human capital. This, in turn, further weakens a rural area's potential for economic diversification and growth.

These issues are well chronicled in many national settings, as evident in research and policy literature in the United States. Optimistic strategies built upon support for education as a vital component of efforts to revitalize rural communities are pitted against a sense of resignation that rural decline is inevitable in many areas. Haller and Monk (1992) observe:

On the one hand, if rural communities are losing their young people, and if as a consequence they are becoming less "viable," it could follow that heroic efforts to preserve, not to mention strengthen,

local schools within such regions are ill-advised. What is the point of maintaining or enhancing the school in a dying community if the community's condition is utterly terminal? . . . On the other hand, it is possible that the maintenance of a healthy local school is one means by which rural areas can retain or even regain their viability (Hobbs, 1987). And it could follow that state or federal governments are well advised to preserve and strengthen local rural schools as part of a more global commitment to the social and economic welfare of rural America. (pp. 48-49)

With regard to the demise of rural schooling, even some of the most ardent promoters of small schools in rural areas suggest that their main benefit may be the sense of pride that comes with their role as part of a vanishing historical legacy (Cross & Frankcombe, 1994). From this perspective, migration from rural areas, loss of industry and jobs, and the reduction of community infrastructural support make it unreasonable to expect that rural schooling can or should survive.

However, not all evidence supports the conclusion that rural schooling is dead. DeYoung (1991) highlights a variety of diverse strategies and practices that can, albeit with mixed results, stabilize rural communities through improvements in schooling. Nachtigal (1992) argues that when we assess educational quality in terms of processes and performance outcomes (versus inputs like resources, curricular offerings, and size), smaller rural schools can be seen to offer advantages such as opportunities for social interaction, balance among different educational activities, and even an ability to concentrate on core curricular areas. These features, Nachtigal concludes, are especially attractive at a time when conventional urban-industrial models of schooling are being challenged because of their failure to meet emergent needs of students, employers and communities. A prevailing bias to concentrate on cost-effectiveness and other economic factors in the assessment of schooling and community development frequently leads to the devaluation of rural schooling and to school closures or other reductions in the provision of educational services to rural communities. However, as Miller (1995) and Stern (1994) stress, community development is premised on more than economic factors or the posing of a simple choice between development and education. Consequently, we should recognize that schooling and other local services involve significant social, cultural, and environmental contributions to both individual and community well-being. Bryant and Grady (1990) emphasize that the presence of schools, especially if they encourage involvement by local residents, can play a vital role in promoting community solidarity and survival through processes of social inclusiveness and distinction.

Proceeding from these insights, Theobald and Nachtigal (1995; Nachtigal, 1994; Theobald, 1997) emphasize the central role that rural schooling can play in fostering community sustainability by building upon a sense of place. In this endeavour, schools must acknowledge that people's lives are situated in particular sites, encompassing unique social, cultural, and economic relations, even as they are integrated into more global processes. Education must both shape and be guided by a reconceptualization and re-creation of community life. Schools, according to Theobald and Nachtigal (1995), can be central to the reconstitution of rural life by integrating learners into daily community life and providing opportunities for "learning to live well in a community" (p. 135). Consequently, healthy communities require schools that are guided by an ethic of responsibility to the people and the places they are intended to serve.

How does this contrast—between (a) projections that forecast the disappearance of rural schooling and rural communities and (b) assessments that rural schooling can be a cornerstone for the revitalization of local communities—apply to particular rural settings? The analysis that follows provides an opportunity to understand the foregoing assessment of the role that education can play in the maintenance of "place."

#### Rural Education in Saskatchewan

Despite steady declines in its rural and farm populations, Saskatchewan continues to have a strong rural and agricultural base. About half the province's population lives on farms or in rural communities with fewer than 10,000 residents, and just under one in five participants in the province's labour force works in the agriculture sector (Stabler & Olfert, 1992). Saskatchewan's education system is characterized by a small number of concentrated urban school divisions and a large number of small rural districts. About 60 of 110 school jurisdictions in the province are rural divisions, and another 25 divisions contain only one or two schools (Saskatchewan Education, Training, and Employment, 1994). A longstanding issue, whose importance has intensified in the present environment of deficit reduction and restructuring of state services, has been how to accommodate rural needs while taking into account fiscal and practical considerations that enter in the operation of complex education systems.

These issues are not unique to Saskatchewan, of course, as much of the above has revealed. OECD (1994), in a summary of rural educational issues of concern to its member nations, has identified two contradictory considerations that guide educational planning in rural areas: (a) the desire to strengthen rural communities and maintain local social ties while introducing children to relationships that transcend the local context, and (b) the need to control costs while

providing an adequate range of curricular and extracurricular opportunities. These tensions, along with the fiscal ability to meet local demands for educational services, have found expression in varied forms throughout Saskatchewan's educational development.

In Saskatchewan, like other Canadian jurisdictions, public schooling has served from its inception as an impetus to foster social stability and community development. For example, the establishment of local school boards not only provided community input into educational decision-making, but it also ensured that there would be a cohort of community members dedicated to the advancement of educational causes. Schooling served the local community in several regards, such as providing basic training for children and youth, extending skills for work and leadership, and offering a focal point and physical infrastructure for the social and political life of the community. As Saskatchewan communities were settled and developed, particularly in the early part of the 20th century, schools were crucial agencies for producing social stability. Social reproduction was relatively unproblematic: local and regional economies driven by labour intensive agricultural practices could absorb most new labour market entrants, while educational foundations were laid for the few individuals who would leave to pursue a profession.

By the middle part of the 20th century, farm mechanization and increases in the scale and importance of commodity production were contributing to a growing labour surplus, and to an awareness that rural life required an overall plan, or at least some degree of external management, if it was to remain viable and relevant. In Saskatchewan, the state formally acknowledged these transitions through the striking of a Royal Commission on Agriculture and Rural Life, which released a massive plan for the reshaping of rural life (Province of Saskatchewan, 1957). In the area of education, the commission emphasized the need to respond to the dual demands to produce more highly trained agricultural workers, and to ensure that youth who migrated off farms and rural communities had the skills to equip them for living and working in urban industrial environments.

Despite the commitment to the needs of both rural and urban society, the latter would prove to be the dominant factor in subsequent educational development. This tendency is consistent with more general trends in various national settings in which rural development has come to be a cornerstone for industrial expansion and the production of human capital to serve national and global economies (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, 1980). Scharf (1974) reported that, while there were no significant differences between Saskatchewan students from urban and rural schools in levels of educational attainment, achievement, and adjustment to university (regardless of size), rural schools were plagued by problems such as inadequate support staff and resources,

limited program offerings, and teachers who were unprepared for work in a rural context.

Over the 20 two decades, serious doubts have emerged over agricultural sustainability and the viability of rural communities. The impact of globalization, particularly through pressures for trade liberalization and market deregulation, has affected the Prairie agricultural sector in much the same way as it has comparable economies in other nations. Share, Lawrence, and Boylin (1994), in their overview of the Australian experience, could easily be describing circumstances in Western Canada: the prevalence of competition in export markets, rising farm costs relative to farm income, the dismantling of protective tariff structures, reduction of state involvement in agriculture research and development activities, declining services and populations in rural and farm areas, the centralization of work and services in metropolitan centres, and capital intensification in agriculture and other industries. In Saskatchewan, the total rural population declined by 16.1% between 1971 and 1991, and the farm population decreased by 31.5%. During the same time the urban population increased 27.1%. Between 1986 and 1996, average farm size has increased from 1,036 acres to 1,152 acres, while the total number of farms decreased from 63,431 to 56,995 (Province of Saskatchewan, 1997).

The family farm, which was the cornerstone of the province's economic base for much of this century, is struggling for survival. Strategies that farm families have adopted to maintain their economic viability—engagement by various family members in off-farm wage labour, diversification of commodities and land uses, and incorporation into larger farming units—are also associated with the possible disappearance of small family farms. Rural depopulation and the reconfiguration of Prairie communities is hastened by a two-way population flow, produced through migration from farms and smaller communities to larger towns and cities in the same region, and out-of-province migration. Between 1971 and 1991, while the total provincial population experienced a modest increase of 6.8%, the urban increased by 27.1%, the rural population declined by 16.1%, and the farm population decreased by 31.5% (Province of Saskatchewan, 1997).

Between 1986 and 1991, about 12,000 young people left Saskatchewan each year to seek work in other provinces, while many others left farms and small towns to pursue educational and occupational opportunities in Saskatoon and Regina, the province's two major cities (MacArthur, 1992). State policy and corporate practices exhibited in such processes as abandonment of branch rail lines, changes in central transportation and grain marketing policies, and concentration and centralization of grain terminals in larger communities, have further weakened the infrastructure in many rural communities. Public services are also imperilled through recent policies promoting the closure of rural

hospitals and the amalgamation of health districts into larger units, a move that has been met with considerable protests from residents in many rural centres.

In the midst of these changes, there has been an undeniable erosion in the size and quality of life in rural communities to such an extent that some have forecast the demise of rural Saskatchewan (see, e.g., Stabler & Olfert, 1992). Nonetheless, there are also countervailing forces through which possibilities for future rural sustainability, if not growth, emerge. Diversified agricultural crops, new technologies, industries like biotechnology, and the emergence of a strong Aboriginal economic sector, along with a resurgence in some resource industries, have created favourable conditions for a strong economic base in some regions. There is continuing state investment in various rural development initiatives, while rural residents are subsidized through a variety of transfer payments and equalization schemes. There is a political risk associated with policies that contribute to the degradation of rural communities and quality of life, as the provincial government discovered in the face of resistance to its efforts to centralize the administration and delivery of health care services.

Education plays a contradictory role in these processes. Despite the absence of explicit recent policy guidelines to promote administrative centralization, the consolidation of schools and school districts in the province has been ongoing since the 1940s due to changing demographic patterns in both rural and urban areas, the closure of smaller schools or those in declining communities, fiscal considerations, and administrative pressures towards centralization. Similarly, school districts are funded on a cost-sharing arrangement between the province and local school divisions, teachers' salaries are established through a grid which is collectively bargained between teachers and trustees on a province-wide basis, and curricula have become increasingly directed through central policies.

The implications of these arrangements for rural schools are mixed. On the one hand, funding equalization, provincial curriculum standards, and teacher salary scales have provided some assurance that rural schools would have sufficient baseline resources and stability to maintain quality educational programming. School consolidation, under these guidelines, ensured that larger comprehensive schools with full programs could be maintained in most regions, although it also meant that many smaller communities would have only elementary schools or no schools at all (Saskatchewan Education, 1981). Schools have also become rallying points at the core of community life and vitality. School buildings offer facilities for meetings, sports and recreational activities and often serve as centres to attract and house continuing, extension, and post-secondary educational programs. As one analyst of social trends in the province observed, "Small towns can lose their hospital

and post office, but if the school goes, the town is about to die" (MacArthur, 1992, p. 45).

Residents in small towns and rural areas, and residents in the Prairie provinces in general, are more likely to give higher grades and report improvement in the quality of education than those in large cities and other regions of Canada (Williams & Millinoff, 1990). However, there is an underlying tension about the future of schooling in many communities. The provincial government, clearly uncomfortable with educational costs and declining enrollments in many communities, has signalled its desire to reorganize the school system through such measures as administrative restructuring, amalgamation of school boards and districts, and cost containment strategies (Saskatchewan Education, 1997). Nonetheless, due in large measure to the public outcry following the recent initiatives to reorganize health care administration in the province, the provincial government has been hesitant to act so decisively in the area of education. So far, the educational restructuring process has been left largely as a voluntary series of consultations and guidelines for communities and education stakeholders to consider.

While it is evident that the provision of at least basic educational services is important to rural communities, the issue of how appropriate or responsive those services are to the communities they serve is more problematic. The general tension expressed earlier—that schools may sacrifice attentiveness to local demands through transitions that take the learner out of the community—is particularly apparent in Saskatchewan. Substantial proportions of the rural youth population leave their home communities after high school. While the full extent of migration patterns has not been documented, during the 1990s about one-quarter of students completing grade 12 in rural areas and towns with populations under 10,000 have attended university in the province's two largest cities of Saskatoon and Regina (calculated from University of Saskatchewan, 1996). Many others moved within the province or left Saskatchewan to attend other post-secondary programs or seek employment,

These trends have raised fears that the education system may be more successful in its ability to provide youth with dispositions and tools to leave rather than those that are likely to contribute to community revitalization. In Canada, 19% of rural youth aged 20-24 moved to urban centres between 1986 and 1991. Because those who migrated from rural areas have higher labour force participation rates, lower unemployment rates, higher rates of educational enrollment and university attainment, and higher incomes than those who remain in rural areas, "it appears that rural areas are losing their 'best and brightest youth'" (Fellegi, 1996, p. 6).

Not all the evidence indicates that rural areas in the Prairie region are being failed by educational services that promote migration and integration into urban contexts. Lam

(1996), analyzing schooling in Manitoba, reports that in addition to their symbolic value, schools provide economic and market benefits that are critical to the infrastructure of rural communities. Fellegi (1996) observes that there is an urban-to-rural population flow among those aged 25-29 who have similar characteristics to those in the younger cohort who left rural areas. Schools, too, can provide some support and resources that are oriented to specific rural concerns. Jooristy (1995), in a study of how Saskatchewan schools have dealt with agricultural crisis and farm stress, observes that a few schools have contributed facilities for fundraising activities, developed curricula sensitive to local concerns, and encouraged staff to foster community health by offering guidance and support to deal with family and farm stress. However, such responses, if they appear at all, are highly localized.

These issues and problems suggest that rural education is sufficiently complex and dynamic to warrant continued research. I now turn to research findings that expand upon, in a modest way, the general trends outlined above by adding a sense of how rural residents understand the place of schooling in their communities. They emerge from a survey of rural residents in southwestern Saskatchewan regarding two sets of issues: perceptions about the nature and level of educational services in their community, and their involvement in different dimensions of education.

#### Method

The findings below are drawn from a small component of a larger interdisciplinary, community-based research project exploring questions related to the sustainability of the semi-arid prairie ecosystem. The Prairie Ecosystem Study (PECOS), funded by the Eco-Research Program of Environment Canada's Green Plan and the Tri-Council Secretariat, was initiated to address questions related to the sustainability of agricultural production, the ecosystem, and communities in the southwestern corner of Saskatchewan. The research area constitutes a region of 15,177 square kilometres with a population of 28,670, one quarter of whom are between the ages of 5 and 19). The area is known for its diverse but fragile ecosystem, and viable but threatened agricultural enterprise. Questions about sustainability in the area were explored through three main focus groups, concerned with the relationship between land use patterns and rural community structures, the impact of pesticide use in agriculture on health status, and the health of the land and its biota.

The results reported here were drawn from the education and work component conducted within the first of the three groups. Data were collected through a telephone survey of 1,000 area residents. Because of the extensive nature of the survey, the questions pertaining to education were necessarily limited in scope, therefore making it im-

possible to explore in depth the issues discussed earlier in this article.

The random probability sample was stratified to reflect key sociodemographic factors, including gender, occupation, and location of residence. Representative of the general population in the study area, 51% of respondents were male and 49% were female, 49% lived in the area's only city (Swift Current, with a population of about 15,000) while 51% were distributed throughout farms and small towns in 14 rural municipalities, and 30% were farmers.

The study area encompasses all or parts of seven school divisions, containing about 50 schools. Most of these are small elementary schools (kindergarten to grades 8 or 9) or composite schools (kindergarten to grade 12) located in towns with populations in the mid to low hundreds. About half of the schools have enrollments of fewer than 100 pupils while only Swift Current Comprehensive High School, with an enrollment of about 1,000, has more than 400 pupils. It is not uncommon for pupils, especially in the high school grades, to travel long distances by bus to school each day. Within the region, selected community college programs and university extension credit courses, as well as a range of adult education courses, are available in Swift Current. Persons living in other communities, if they wish to participate in post-secondary education, have the option of driving as much as 2-3 hours or more to Swift Current or larger centres outside the study area, or taking courses through distance learning.

#### *Research Findings and Discussion*

Consistent with research reported elsewhere (Williams & Millinoff, 1990), respondents placed high values on education and indicated generally high levels of involvement in and satisfaction with the educational services available to them. They were somewhat more mixed in their views about specific dimensions of education.

Respondents participated in educational activities in various ways. Seventy-two (7.2%) of the respondents indicated they were taking educational courses for credit (with only 11 of these, or 15%, attending on a full-time basis) and another 12 (1.2%) were taking noncredit courses at the time of the survey. Among those taking credit courses, 34.7% were enrolled in university courses, 30.6% in community college courses, 9.6% in vocational programs, and the remainder in various upgrading programs. When asked to provide reasons for their enrollment in these courses, respondents cited most frequently the need to upgrade credentials (58.3%), interest (33.3%), and job requirements (23.6%). Women were more likely than men to be taking credit courses (7.8% of female respondents compared to 6.7% of male respondents were enrolled in credit courses). In terms of locale, 11.0% of Swift Current residents, com-

Table 1  
Residents' Involvement in Activities to Support Local Schools (Percent of Total Respondents)

	Total <i>n</i> = 984	Urban Total <i>n</i> = 485	Rural Total <i>n</i> = 499	Farm <i>n</i> = 301	Rural Nonfarm <i>n</i> = 198
Involvement in parent-teacher organizations					
Yes	19.8	20.6	18.6	20.3	16.2
No	80.2	79.4	81.4	79.7	83.8
Service as a volunteer for school activities					
Yes	34.3	34.6	34.1	33.6	34.8
No	65.6	65.4	65.9	64.3	65.2

pared to 3.8% of those who lived in rural areas and 4.7% of farm residents, were engaged in credit study.

Overall, 39.4% of respondents had children who attended school at the time of the study. However, Table 1 reveals high degrees of commitment to education in the study region in the extent of participation by respondents in activities to support education. Nearly 20% indicated that they were involved in parent-teacher organizations, while roughly one third engaged in volunteer work at schools. The results show nearly identical patterns among those who lived on farms, in small towns, and in the city.

The data in Table 2 provide support for arguments that schools are important, through their symbolic or physical presence, or both, to the sustainability of rural communities. Ninety percent of respondents indicated that students should have access to schooling up to at least secondary levels in their communities. Only 5.4% indicated that elementary schooling was sufficient for community viability. Rural residents, especially those living on farms, were much more likely than city residents to express a desire to have high schools in their local communities. This finding is noteworthy in a context in which a sizable proportion of respondents live in or near communities that do not have high schools and where even the future of their elementary schools is threatened. In the current climate in which educational amalgamation is under consideration, these responses are likely to reflect a political statement meant to signal residents' rejection of any possible moves to close smaller community schools, as was being proposed at the time in other districts in southern Saskatchewan. Indicative of the relatively greater expectations that accompany life in larger centres, over one third of residents of Swift Current, compared to fewer than one in five rural residents, indicated that post-secondary services were essential.

Regardless of the status of their community schools, respondents were highly likely to indicate their satisfac-

tion with education in their communities, as summarized in Table 3. The strong ratings—over 80% of the entire sample indicated they were satisfied or very satisfied—are apparent across all independent variables and categories of respondent. Generally, differences among groups are very slight. Women, for instance, were marginally more likely than men to express extreme positions of satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Small town residents expressed somewhat less satisfaction than farm and city residents with the educational services available to them, perhaps as an indication of uncertainty over the long-term survival of schools in their communities. Most notably, people with closest ties to the education system, including those taking courses themselves, those with children enrolled in schools, parents who took an active role in schooling, and respondents with higher family incomes, expressed the greatest degree of satisfaction. The finding that the strongest advocates for education were those who relied on it the most is neither new nor surprising. More importantly, their support for education was widely shared with nearly all segments of the community in the study area.

Table 4 shows that views are more mixed regarding the question of the quality of education over time. With respect to elementary and secondary schooling, relatively equal proportions of respondents felt that the quality of education had either improved or worsened over the past 10 years, while the most prevalent sentiment, shared by about one third of respondents, was that the quality had remained the same. By contrast, the proportion of respondents who felt that the quality of post-secondary education had improved was about ten percentage points above those who felt that the quality had declined, although the magnitude of the former was close to comparable levels for elementary and high school education; over one quarter of respondents did not express an opinion one way or another. Reflecting the urban basis for most post-secondary oppor-

Table 2

*Minimal Educational Services Viewed by Respondents as Necessary in Order for a Community to Remain Viable (Percent of Respondents)*

Minimum Necessary Level of Education	Total <i>n</i> = 983	Urban Total <i>n</i> = 484	Rural Total <i>n</i> = 499	Farm <i>n</i> = 301	Rural Nonfarm <i>n</i> = 198
Elementary School	5.4	5.6	5.2	4.0	7.1
High School	62.1	52.1	72.1	73.8	69.7
Post-secondary	27.9	37.8	18.4	19.3	17.1
Don't know/no response	4.6	4.5	4.2	3.0	6.1

tunities and issues, 31% of respondents living in Swift Current, compared to 23% living on farms and only 12% of those living in small towns, felt that the quality of post-secondary education had improved. In the latter cases, the dominant expression was that the status quo had been maintained. For all residential groups, however, respondents were more likely not to express an opinion than to indicate that the quality of post-secondary education had declined in recent years.

Further study is necessary in order to determine fully the reasons people had for their mixed views about the quality of education. It is likely that the heavily promoted agenda for educational reform for global competitiveness has been accepted, at least in part, among wide segments of the population. There can also be little doubt that many people, especially in rural areas, feel that while schools are doing the best they can with limited resources, the quality of education has been adversely affected by funding cutbacks, inability to attract and retain teachers committed to their communities, and restricted program offerings. There is a sense of satisfaction that smaller communities can retain schools and school programs, but at the same time people recognize that the cost of maintaining those schools is the perpetuation of gaps in the range of curricular offerings and services relative to those available at schools in larger communities.

In short, the views expressed by southwestern Saskatchewan residents concerning educational services demonstrate a strong overall commitment to education as well as an appreciation of its value to their own communities. People regard the maintenance of access to educational services, including those beyond the most basic levels, as an essential component of community integration and survival. They are willing, whenever possible, to sacrifice programming depth and to provide voluntary services and offer support in other ways in order to preserve their local schools. They may sometimes be frustrated or unhappy with specific school practices or features, but their greatest dissatisfaction is likely to be expressed with the prospect that those schools would be subject to closure. Their responses

indicate that, despite the difficulties associated with farming and life in a region with a limited economic base, they are committed to keeping their communities alive and they regard schooling as a vital element towards that end. Schooling may not be doing all it can to benefit local residents, but the fact that it is there at all provides a sense of stability and hope over and above the tangible outcomes it offers.

#### *Implications for Community Sustainability*

Perhaps even more than grain elevators and rail lines, schools have come to represent the lifeline of rural communities in Saskatchewan. Schools provide educational services, employment, facilities, and activities that enrich those communities. Additionally, their significant dividend is what they represent as a form of investment in and hope for the future. Rural residents place high degrees of satisfaction in their schools and educational services, and are loathe to criticize them. Ironically, escalating demands for educational credentials and the integration of formal education into global realignment have created conditions in which educational success means that youth must leave their communities in order to pursue opportunities for higher education and meaningful employment. Consequently, the institution that communities look to as a guarantor of their futures is, in fact, the gateway that channels valuable human resources out of those communities and into urban centres.

Educational planners and policymakers must confront several issues if they are committed to the sustainability of rural communities. They must discern what it is about schools that residents value so highly, and work to integrate this into educational decision making. This means, consistent with the literature I outlined earlier, that decisions about school closures and amalgamation of educational services must transcend narrow cost-benefit analyses and take full account of the significance of schools to towns and their surrounding rural areas. This local responsiveness must include, as much as possible, increasing access



Table 3

*Overall Satisfaction with Educational Services in Local Communities, by Selected Characteristics (Percent of Respondents)*

	Very Satisfied	Satisfied	Dissatisfied	Very Dissatisfied	Don't know/ No response	n
<b>Residence</b>						
Farm	10.3	75.1	9.3	1.3	4.0	301
Rural nonfarm	6.6	71.7	12.1	1.5	8.1	198
Rural total	8.8	73.7	10.4	1.4	5.6	499
City	12.6	68.8	12.6	0.6	5.4	484
<b>Gender</b>						
Male	9.3	72.9	11.1	0.8	5.9	506
Female	12.0	69.7	12.0	1.2	5.1	492
<b>With children in school</b>						
Yes	17.3	67.3	12.7	1.8	1.0	394
No	6.3	74.0	10.8	0.5	8.4	604
<b>Involvement in School Activities</b>						
Active	20.2	67.7	12.1	1.2	5.1	198
Not active	8.3	72.3	11.4	1.3	6.9	800
<b>Attending an Educational Program for Credit</b>						
Yes	16.7	68.1	12.5	0	2.8	72
No	10.2	71.6	11.5	1.1	5.6	921
<b>Educational Attainment</b>						
< High school	4.9	72.0	10.8	0	12.3	268
High school grad	8.9	73.6	11.1	1.4	5.0	280
Some post-secondary	14.2	70.9	12.4	0.7	1.8	282
<b>Post-secondary</b>						
Degree/certificate/diploma	19.5	64.7	10.5	3.0	2.3	133
Not specified	6.3	75.0	18.8	0	0	32
<b>Family Income</b>						
<\$15,000	7.4	68.5	14.8	0.9	8.3	108
\$15,000-\$39,999	8.2	74.5	9.0	1.3	6.9	377
\$40,000-\$59,999	11.2	71.2	14.6	0.5	2.4	205
>\$60,000	17.0	68.1	9.8	0.5	3.9	204
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>10.6</b>	<b>71.2</b>	<b>11.5</b>	<b>1.0</b>	<b>5.7</b>	<b>1000</b>

to post-secondary and continuing educational programs as well as elementary and secondary schooling, but it needs to be tempered with sensitivity towards the kinds of opportunities (or barriers) that accompany new levels of educational attainment.

In all these respects, an overview of the place of, and residents' perceptions about, schooling in southwestern

Saskatchewan reinforces the view that education is significant for its contributions to moral and cultural practices as well as to economic and technical factors. This is reflected most strongly in residents' strong commitment to the maintenance of schools in their communities despite fiscal and political pressures towards closure or consolidation. Schooling does retain potential to change people's outlook and

Table 4

*Perceptions About Changes in the Quality of Education at Various Levels in Local Communities Over the Past 10 Years (Percent of Respondents)*

	Total <i>n</i> = 984	Urban Total <i>n</i> = 485	Rural Total <i>n</i> = 499	Farm <i>n</i> = 301	Rural Nonfarm <i>n</i> = 198
Elementary schools					
Improved	27.3	26.2	28.7	28.9	28.3
Remained the same	33.4	33.2	34.3	32.9	36.4
Worsened	24.6	24.5	24.2	26.9	20.2
Don't know/no response	14.7	16.1	12.8	11.3	15.2
High schools					
Improved	22.4	22.9	22.2	20.6	24.7
Remained the same	37.4	38.1	36.5	38.5	33.3
Worsened	23.1	21.0	25.3	27.9	21.2
Don't know/no response	17.1	17.9	16.0	13.0	20.7
Post-secondary education					
Improved	24.9	30.9	18.4	22.9	11.6
Remained the same	32.4	30.2	34.9	32.2	38.9
Worsened	13.8	14.4	13.6	14.6	12.1
Don't know/no response	28.9	24.3	33.1	30.2	37.4

character as well as to provide them with credentials and other tools for economic competitiveness.

However, further assessment is required to determine the extent to which public support for rural education is oriented toward particular kinds of schooling and educational outcomes, as opposed to dominant ideologies that convey the importance of education for global competitiveness, especially given the likelihood that most students are likely to be pursuing education, careers, and social opportunities outside of those rural communities (see Butler, 1997). Posed another way, it remains unclear as to whether the "sense of place" that rural residents wish to see conveyed in their schools is determined more fully by global concerns (especially through a notion of education as a social good that must be relevant to market-driven vocational and economic plans) or local concerns (as a cornerstone for the rebuilding and redefinition of sustainable rural communities, as posed by Theobald, Nachtigal, and others).

In order to fulfill the promise of schooling as a well-rounded contributor to economic development and rural sustainability, educators and community members alike will need to be sensitive to ways in which curricula, programs, activities, and services can serve alternatively to support or to undermine local issues and community requirements as they confront centrally- or globally-driven agendas. Ul-

timately, however, while educational institutions that take these factors into account can do much to contribute to community sustainability and vitality, they cannot succeed unless educational planning is integrated into broader strategies to promote sustainability of local places in rural areas. In particular, it is essential that rural communities are supported with policies that will encourage the complementarity of economic diversity, supportive community infrastructures, and the provision of meaningful work opportunities sufficient to retain a stable population base, especially among youth who are committed to education-driven development.

#### References

- Apple, M. W. (1993). *Official knowledge: Democratic education in a conservative age*. New York: Routledge.
- Bolaria, B. S., Dickinson, H. D., & Wotherspoon, T. (1995). Rural issues and problems. In B. S. Bolaria (Ed.), *Social issues and contradictions in Canadian Society* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed, pp. 419-443). Toronto: Harcourt Brace & Company.
- Bollman, R. D., & Biggs, B. (1992). Rural and small town Canada: An overview. In R. D. Bollman (Ed.), *Rural and small town Canada* (pp. 1-41). Toronto, ON: Thompson Educational Publishing.

- Butler, J. (1997). *The transition from school to work in the age of globalization: A southwest Saskatchewan youth perspective*. (Unpublished master's thesis, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada.
- Bryant, M. T., & Grady, M. L. (1990). Community factors threatening rural school district stability. *Research in Rural Education*, 6(3), 21-26.
- Cross, W., & Frankcombe, B. (1994). *The small rural school: An exceptional experience for the teacher-administrator*. Vancouver, BC: EduServ Inc.
- DeYoung, A. J. (1991). *Struggling with their histories: Economic decline and educational improvement in four rural southeastern school districts*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Company.
- Fellegi, I. (1996, September). *Understanding rural Canada: Structures and trends* [On-line]. Ottawa, ON: Statistics Canada. Available Internet: [www.statcan.ca:80/english/IPS/Data/21F0016XIE.htm](http://www.statcan.ca:80/english/IPS/Data/21F0016XIE.htm)
- Haller, E. J., & Monk, D. H. (1992). Youth migration from rural areas. In J. G. Ward & P. Anthony (Eds.), *Who pays for student diversity? Population changes and educational policy* (pp. 48-70). Newbury Park, CA: Corwin Press.
- Hobbs, D. (1987, October). *Learning to find the "niches": Rural education and revitalizing rural communities*. Paper presentation at the National Rural Education Research Forum, Lake Placid, NY.
- Jooristy, G. (1995). *Farm stress and school practice* (SSTA Research Report #95-12). Regina, SK: Saskatchewan Association of School Trustees.
- Lam, Y. L. J. (1996). *The economic and social impacts of public schools on rural communities* (Rural Education Research Series No. 8). Brandon, MB: Rural Development Institute, Brandon University.
- Lynch, K. (1989). *The hidden curriculum: Reproduction in education, an appraisal*. London: The Falmer Press.
- MacArthur, M. (1992, October 8). Schools play major role in survival of small towns. *The Western Producer*, p. 45.
- Miller, B. A. (1995). The role of rural schools in community development: Policy development and implications. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 11, 163-172.
- Miller, K., & Smith, S. M. (1997). The changing economic structure of the nonmetropolitan northeast: What happened to traditional rural industries? *Rural Development Views*, 5, 1.
- Nachtigal, P. M. (1992). Rural schooling: Obsolete . . . or harbinger of the future? *Educational Horizons*, 70(2), 66-70.
- Nachtigal, P. M. (1994). Political trends affecting nonmetropolitan America. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 10, 161-166.
- Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development. (1994). *The educational infrastructure in rural areas*. Paris: Author.
- Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development. (1995). *Creating employment for rural development: New policy approaches*. Paris: Author.
- Province of Saskatchewan. (1957). *Royal Commission on Agriculture and Rural Life: Rural education: A summary*. Regina, SK: Queen's Printer.
- Province of Saskatchewan. (1997). *Economic review 1997* (Number 51). Regina, SK: Saskatchewan Bureau of Statistics.
- Saskatchewan Education. (1981). *Rural education, options for the '80's: A discussion paper*. Regina, SK: Author.
- Saskatchewan Education. (1997) *Structuring public education for the new century: Ensuring quality education for Saskatchewan students*. Regina, SK: Author.
- Saskatchewan Education, Training and Employment. (1994). *Saskatchewan school divisions: Statistical information based on 1992 calendar year*. Regina, SK: Author.
- Scharf, M. P. (1974). *A report on the declining rural population and the implications for rural education* (Report No. 17). Regina, SK: The Saskatchewan School Trustees Association, SSTA Research Center.
- Share, P., Lawrence, G., & Boylen, C. (1994). Educational policy and the Australian rural economy. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 10, 58-67.
- Stabler, J., & Olfert, M. R. (1992). *Restructuring rural Saskatchewan: The challenge of the 1990s*. Regina, SK: Canadian Plains Research Center.
- Stern, J. D. (1994). *The condition of education in rural schools*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.
- Theobald, P. (1997). *Teaching the commons: Place, pride, and the renewal of community*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Theobald, P., & Nachtigal, P. (1995). Culture, community, and the promise of rural education. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 77(2), 132-135.
- United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization. (1980). *Education in a rural environment* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Paris: Author.
- University of Saskatchewan (1996). *Statistics volume XXII, 1996*. Saskatoon, SK: University Studies Group, University of Saskatchewan.
- Williams, T. R., & Millinoff, H. (1990). *Canada's schools: Report card for the 1990s*. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Education Association.
- Wotherspoon, T. (1998). *The sociology of education in Canada: Critical perspectives*. Toronto, ON: Oxford University Press.