

# The Poor Little Rich District: The Effects of Suburbanization on a Rural School and Community

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with

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*Contextualized in relationship to other case studies about rural districts that have experienced population growth and decline as well as in relationship to the small sociological literature on "boom towns," this study considered the dynamics that seem to be interfering with one previously rural and now suburbanizing district's ability to address an academic mission. The research followed a structured case study protocol, with researchers gathering data from interviews with 31 members of the school community, including board members, educators, parents, and nonparent community members. In addition, the researchers reviewed relevant documentary and archival evidence. Analysis of data revealed three themes. The first theme was called "identity crisis" because it characterized a serious tension between district identity grounded in historical circumstances and an emerging new identity reflective of current circumstances. This tension promoted significant ambiguity with respect to district goals as well as the practices undertaken to realize goals. A second theme, therefore, was named "goal ambiguity." A final theme called "ambiguities in resource allocation" focused on the difficulties that district leadership faced in making judgments about how best to use limited resources. Because the district was dealing with ambiguous goals and the inconsistencies in practice resulting from goal ambiguity, decisions about resource allocation seemed to be made without much attention to long-range or strategic plans.*

## Introduction

Demographic and economic changes have altered the character of social life in many rural communities over the last 20 years, and a small research literature examines these influences (e.g., Barkema & Drabentstott, 2000; Blakely & Bradshaw, 1981; Goetz, 2000; Hobbs, 1994; Stephens, 1992; Taylor, Martin, & Fix, 1997). An even smaller body of literature looks at the impact of such changes—for example, changes resulting from overall out-migration or from the in-migration of diverse groups—on rural school systems (e.g., Brunn, 2002; Bryant & Grady, 1990). Among studies with

this focus are just a few that analyze the effects of suburbanization on such districts (e.g., Theobald, 1988).

Nevertheless, urban sprawl in parts of the United States is clearly having an impact on some rural places and the schools serving them (e.g., Goetz, 2000; Gordon, 1986; Hobbs, 1994). As Hobbs (1994, p. 154) notes, "a growing number of rural places are becoming bedroom communities—with all that implies for schooling." Nevertheless, these implications have rarely been studied. A few outdated studies of the "boom-town" phenomenon offer some insights about the psychosocial effects—increased social disruption, personal stress, alienation, and nostalgia—of rapid influxes of newcomers into rural communities (cf. Krannich & Greider, 1984; Thompson et al., 1980). And, of course, the very few studies that look specifically at the effects on rural school districts of major demographic changes illustrate

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how such dynamics have influenced educational policies and practices in particular places (Brunn, 2002; Bryant & Grady, 1990; Theobald, 1988).

This study adds to the literature on suburbanizing rural districts by offering a detailed picture of what is happening in one such community, where the tensions associated with demographic shifts seems to be affecting the performance of the schools. Because the analysis of data clearly point to the impact of urban sprawl on this district, we see value in presenting the findings in the context of other literature on suburbanization. Relying solely on qualitative methodology and focusing solely on one district, the study does not provide strong warrant for claims about generalized causal relationships. Nevertheless, the example of what is happening in one district is instructive, showing the types of challenges with which other suburbanizing districts might also be confronted.

#### Related Literature

Although we could find just one study and one anecdotal report that examined dynamics in suburbanizing school districts, several investigations of rural districts confronting other changes provided useful insights. Sociological studies of boom towns also suggested broad themes that might be salient to more fine-grained analyses of educational policy and practice. In our discussion below, we review the case studies of schools in some depth; in addition, we provide a brief overview of the themes uncovered in studies of boom towns.

#### *Related Case Studies*

Noting that there was no research on the impact of urban sprawl on schooling in rural districts, Theobald (1988) presented a case study of one community undergoing suburbanization. His study revealed that “insiders” and “outsiders” held different views about schooling and that suburbanization tended to turn the schools—once central to community life—into much more tangential institutions. In addition, with the influx of newcomers and a superintendent sharing their perspective, the school’s focus changed. No longer placing equal weight on academic and nonacademic activities, the school devoted most of its attention to academics. This change did not result in a more academically engaged student body, but rather seemed to produce a culture of disengagement and apathy. Students increasingly looked to other places than school for entertainment, and they took cues about appropriate behavior less from adults in the community than from peers in surrounding suburbs. With demographic changes, moreover, the perspectives of different groups of teachers also tended to diverge. More seasoned teachers held views similar to those of rural insiders, while

newly hired teachers tended to hold views more similar to those of the growing number of suburban newcomers.

Similar effects of suburbanization were reported more recently in an article about urban sprawl in Plainfield, Illinois (Vail, 2000). The report described the effects of an influx of families to the community, resulting in the tripling of the school-aged population over a 10-year period. According to Vail, community members initially showed resistance, refusing to pass levies to support much-needed construction. Over time, however, with the influx of larger numbers of outsiders, the balance of power shifted: the board was able to pass levies and undertake a series of construction projects. With so much of the board’s attention drawn to the building of new schools, their role began to change. Board members became less involved in the daily management of the district and yielded increasing amounts of power to the districts’ administrators. Despite the changes, educators in Plainfield worked to retain traditions from the district’s past, but at the same time, they also began to incorporate educational innovations that fit in with the expectations of the more cosmopolitan newcomers.

The dynamics of suburbanizing communities contrast to some degree—but also, surprisingly, accord to some degree—with those described in a case study of a declining Nebraska community (Bryant & Grady, 1990). In the suburbanizing communities described by Theobald (1988) and Vail (2000) as well as in the declining community described by Bryant and Grady, long-time residents and newer residents differed in the meanings they attached to their communities and the schools serving them. In the declining community, however, efforts to sustain traditions and to integrate younger community members into the culture of the original community seemed to be more successful. The high school, for example, retained its central role in bringing the community together and representing its distinctiveness. Because the declining community was not being remade for new purposes, it was better able than the suburbanizing communities to hold onto its original identity.

In the “reborn rural” community described by Bushnell (1999, p. 81), by contrast, urban transplants to a rural community created new meanings through the establishment and support of a charter school. As in the suburbanizing communities described by Theobald (1988) and Vail (2000), the newcomers’ values prevailed, but unlike the suburbanites, these newcomers held values that they believed were “rural.” As a result, the contest between insiders and outsiders in the community focused on what counted as rural rather than on whether or not the community was rural. The newcomers saw themselves as supporting the existing ways of life of the long-time rural residents, while the old-timers believed their new neighbors were disrupting their way of life. Moreover, long-time community members felt excluded from the “rural” world created by the newcomers.

### *Themes from Studies of Boom Towns*

Beginning with Selznick's (1949) classic study of the influence of the Tennessee Valley Authority on rural life, the phenomenon of the boom town has interested a small group of sociologists. As a result of industrialization or other types of modernization, boom towns have experienced rapid population growth and, in the view of some researchers, a considerable amount of social disruption (Thompson et al., 1980). According to Thompson and associates (1980), findings from this research point to several dynamics. These include the breakdown of infrastructure—with resulting consequences for quality of life: decreased intimacy and family cohesiveness, and increased bureaucratization (e.g., Gilmore & Duff, 1975).

Some studies, however, revealed less dire consequences. For example, Krannich and Greider (1984) found that the effect of rapid population growth on individual well-being was not uniformly negative. In fact, in their study, the experience of life in a boom town had a negative influence on only one indicator of well-being—integration into community life. And Berry, Krannich, and Greider (1990) found that “neighboring” was not significantly affected by population growth or decline.

Although suburbanization is not the same thing as the boom town phenomenon, it is closely related. As a result, dynamics evident in boom towns might also be seen in rural communities that are undergoing a rapid influx of suburban residents. In our research site, for example, we might expect to see increased formalization of school policies and practices, diminished closeness and warmth in the relationships among educators and community members, and decreased ability of the existing schooling infrastructure to meet the needs of the growing community.

### Methods

The research team gathered data about the Spring Creek Local School District, primarily through interviews. Additional data were obtained from publicly available archives and from publications produced by the district itself (e.g., board minutes, school and district improvement plans, student handbooks). Altogether the team interviewed 31 participants: 12 teachers, 5 administrators, 5 Board of Education members, 8 parents, and 11 nonparent community members.

In most cases interviews were conducted in a face-to-face format on school premises. A few interviews were conducted by telephone or email. Interviews lasted from 30 minutes to approximately 1 hour and were audiotaped. Interviewers asked questions included on an interview schedule (provided in Appendix A), but they also posed additional questions in order to encourage participants to clarify and

elaborate their responses. All tapes were transcribed, and the researchers used the transcripts as the primary basis for identifying emergent themes.

Using an iterative process of coding and recoding data, the team developed a set of linked codes representing the most salient themes. The first stage in the process required individual interviewers to develop codes for data from their own interviews. Next the research team met to examine the individual codes and to develop somewhat broader categorical codes. The principal investigator then organized the data by category and examined the connections among the codes within the categories as well as the connections between categories. Once the themes were identified, the researchers reviewed all of the districts' documents to look for evidence that either substantiated or challenged the salience of the themes.

### Context

The Spring Creek School District is located in a mid-western state in a county that encompasses 688 square miles. Approximately 10 miles away from the center of the Spring Creek community is the county seat, a small city with a population of approximately 22,000. The city is the site of one fairly large factory that currently employs more than 1,000 workers. Whereas in the past many graduates from the Spring Creek community found work at the factory, that option is now less accessible. In recent years, the factory has cut back its workforce; but with improved roads, many Spring Creek residents now have other options. Many commute to other small cities or to a much larger city located about 45 miles away. The option to commute to well-paid jobs in that larger city has also attracted professional and white collar workers to purchase or build houses in the Spring Creek community.

A driving trip through the district reveals that most of its land is still open and that its two small towns still retain the character of an earlier era. On the western border of the district, however, are several large housing developments, most newly built; and several other housing developments are under construction. These developments primarily include single-family dwellings, ranging in value from approximately \$100,000 to \$250,000.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the median value of housing units in the district is still below \$95,000 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2004). Growth of the population over the past 25 years has been reflected in the growth of the student body from approximately

<sup>1</sup>Data about housing prices came from interviewees, but the principal investigator cross-checked the information with local realtors.

<sup>2</sup>This is the 1st year for which the *Common Core of Data* (NCES, 2004) provides information.

1,300 students in 1986<sup>2</sup> to approximately 1,500 students in 2000. According to the superintendent, however, the growth curve has recently taken a sharp upward turn. Evidence of this growth can be inferred from a 15% increase in personal property wealth and an 8.5% increase in real property revenue in the district between 2000 and 2001.<sup>3</sup>

According to several study participants, new residents in the district typically are professionals who commute to work in the large city. Some prefer the district to other suburban alternatives because of inexpensive land prices and construction costs and low taxes. Since the district is noted neither for its academic nor its athletic performance, participants did not believe that new residents were deciding to live in the district because of its schools.

The Spring Creek District operates three schools, enrolling slightly more than 1,500 students in total: Spring Creek Elementary School, Spring Creek Middle School, and Spring Creek High School. The district employs 84 teachers, all of whom are white, and the average teacher salary is \$38,112, an amount considerably lower than the state average of \$45,645. The pupil-teacher ratio is 18/1. In 2000-2001, 14% of the district's students qualified for free or reduced price meals.

Recent educational indicators revealed that the district's achievement in all subjects at the fourth grade level was below the state average as well as below the average for similar districts. At the sixth grade level, however, performance exceeded that of similar districts in three out of five tests, and it exceeded the state average in four out of five tests. The pattern at the ninth grade was similar to that seen at the fourth grade, with almost all pass rates falling below both state averages and averages for similar districts. Across the grade levels, mathematics achievement lagged behind achievement in other subjects.

### Findings

Analysis of data revealed one overarching theme, subsuming two other related themes. The researchers termed the overarching theme, "identity crisis" because it characterized a tension between district identity grounded in historical circumstances and an emerging new identity reflective of current circumstances. This tension as well as others experienced in the district translated into significant ambiguity with respect to district goals as well as the practices undertaken to realize goals. The second theme, therefore, was named, "goal ambiguity." A final theme focused on the allocation of resources. With ambiguous goals sometimes supporting

inconsistent practices, district leadership had a difficult time making judgments about how best to use limited resources. Whereas some constituents classified these difficulties as "mismanagement," the research team saw them as the—perhaps inevitable—corollary of goal ambiguity. For this reason, we called the third theme, "ambiguities in resource allocation."

### *Identity Crisis*

Formerly a rural community with economic ties to manufacturing enterprises in several small cities and one larger city, Spring Creek increasingly resembles a suburb. Some residents, however, particularly those with multigenerational connections to the community, tend to see it as more rural than it actually may be. Newer residents, by contrast, seem to exaggerate the extent to which it has become a suburb. Clearly, though, the community is in transition.

Participants' descriptions reveal their perspectives about the district's identity. Those who view its identity in terms primarily of rural life, tend to describe the district as two participants did: "Even though we're so close to [the city], I would still consider it rural, especially [because] it's not very diverse—very little diversity—a lot of farming families." "This is a farming community, so we have people who still have some of the old beliefs and the old standards."

Those who characterize the district's identity in terms of its suburban qualities tend to see it somewhat differently:

It is predominantly a suburb. . . . It lies in between [one] city and [another] city—a rural area but yet close enough to town, close enough to [the big city] and starting to attract in the past 20 years . . . a pretty good cross section of rural professional people. (Community Member)

We've become pretty affluent and as the market place dictates, people like to live out here because of the school district, and the price of land is expensive enough that, if you can afford to buy it, you can afford to build generally nice homes. Our community, our people are of a professional bent. (Community Member)

Moreover, expectations of its schools seem to be tied to the way people understand the fundamental identity of the district. Those who focus on its rural past—and some district educators are represented in this group—see the schools as the center of community life. They expect residents to feel loyalty to the district, celebrate its symbolic victories (e.g., in athletic events), and view upbringing in the community as an important source of personal identity. A few locate rural meanings in the district's legacy of farming, as this

<sup>3</sup>This information was reported in the district's 5-year forecast of revenues and expenditures. Data for 2001 are the only retrospective calculations included; all other calculations are based on extremely conservative projections.

comment from a teacher suggests, “We have a lot of farm boys, just live for the farm and they plan on growing up and working on the farm and everything.” Most, however, derive meaning from the relationships and rituals associated with rural life:

But I still think there’s a strong bond to come back. I don’t mean necessarily to work, but I see kids coming back to ball games and homecomings and those kind of things. Because you know, we’re rural. There’s some loyalty here I think and yet there’s a lot of them go away to work. ‘Cause there’s only so much around here. (Board Member)

I have lived here all of my life. I graduated from here in 1988. My husband also went here. He also graduated in 1988. Our children started, so this is the only school they have attended. We have two daughters, one in fifth grade, and one in seventh grade. It’s nice to be a part of it when this is your heart and soul, and this is my heart and soul. I love this district. (Parent)

Participants with more recent connections to the community are sometimes critical of the perspective of those who focus on the rural meanings attached to life there. According to one parent, for example, “too many members of the community bring too many sports issues before the board.” A teacher commented, “It is a nice community, but I’m afraid a lot of people just never leave and never expand their boundaries any. . . . There’s too many people here who’ve never been anywhere else.”

One teacher’s comment characterizes a viewpoint expressed by several participants suggesting that, to some extent, district identity is perceived differently based on community members’ economic circumstances:

They [i.e., children of the affluent] don’t seem as afraid to move away from home as some of the lower economic people within the area. The ones that are usually low income tend to stay here. They work regular jobs and stay here and are happy with that.

In fact, the long-time rural residents of the district are viewed by their more affluent neighbors as concerned more with athletics than with academics, unwilling to provide adequate financial support to the district, and indifferent to the actual economic prospects of the district and the surrounding region. Nevertheless, participants’ comments seem to suggest that, at least at the present time, the implicit tensions between the groups’ interests remain dormant. According to one board member, “this district has two distinct groups, I think. . . . I don’t set it up as they are against each

other, but . . . we have a really high socioeconomic group in this district.” Points made by several community members identify a set of interests shared across community groups, including concerns for caring teachers, a safe learning environment, and direct involvement of parents with their children’s schooling.

At the same time, several comments revealed possible grounds for conflict with respect to support for school funding, resource allocation, curricular emphasis, and discipline practices. Affluent community members, for example, seem to expect the district not only to strengthen its academic standing but also to provide a rich set of learning experiences. Whereas many Spring Creek educators see improvement on proficiency tests as an important aim, some parents see these efforts as both insufficient and misguided:

I do not know what Spring Creek offers other than a new building and mandatory entrance of a Science Fair Project for the fourth-sixth grades. . . . However, I do know that teaching is done mostly to pass the proficiency tests (not allowing exploration outside of requirements) stifling the natural inquisitiveness of the younger set. (Community Member)

Long-term residents, by contrast, value practices that are unlikely to meet with the approval of suburban newcomers:

Well, this school still has corporal punishment, so I like that. I think we ranked 10th in the state in the last survey for the most paddlings. I think that’s good; I think that speaks well of the school. At least they are maintaining some discipline. They haven’t succumbed to the liberal pressures, yet. And I don’t know for how long. (Community Member)

Our data suggest that two domains of schooling practice already show signs that they are becoming sites for contest between constituent groups. Contest in one domain, which relates to district operations, concerns the proper role and function of the board; contest in another, which relates to academic improvement, concerns the relevance of state accountability requirements to the district’s work.

*The role and function of the board.* As is the case in many rural communities, Spring Creek’s board of education has historically played a central role in the routine management of the schools. Moreover, several of its current board members still view their role in this way. One teacher’s description of the board president characterizes this approach:

The board president’s in there . . . He’s in the building a lot, he helps out, he walks around, he talks to

the principal, he's in the offices—he's visible, but he's well known in the community, as well, so he knows everybody. Every once in a while, you see him in the lunch lines dishing out food if they need help, stuff like that, so that's nice.

A board member described his direct engagement with the community:

We're with these people all the time. At ball games. Invariably, they're gonna come up to us and question something that they want to know about school and the board. You know, so I remember football games last year that me and . . . my wife . . . and I would come and stand down the fence. [Laughs.] Way down. And people always find us. I hate to bother you at the game, but yeah right, so you know. But there's stress and I think we are a small community, close knit.

When board members are involved in the daily operation of schools, community residents see them as the ones with authority. As one board member acknowledged, "I think a lot of people voted for me they think they can call me all the time. And they do, you know, so I get a lot of calls." A long-time teacher explained her view of the board as both approachable and powerful: "Well, with me, I'll go to a board member if there's something that's bothering me." Even though administrators in the district accept the board's involvement, they sometimes see it as too intrusive: "Probably, sometimes, too involved in the day-to-day operations. I think the community will call them before they'll ever call me, which is interesting" (Principal).

Newcomers—teachers and community members alike—hold even stronger views, clearly favoring professional management, with board members serving in a policymaking capacity and school administrators taking charge of daily operations. Consequently, they appear displeased with the traditional pattern of board authority at Spring Creek:

With a small community like this, you see a lot of the "good ole boy" type of system, and, instead of doing what's best necessarily for the teachers and for the school, they try to please the parent, which, I know, that's part of their job. Parents in this district a lot of the time are able to skip the teachers, skip the principal, and go right to the school board. (Teacher)

Some evidence suggests, however, that the board is changing: Traditional kinds of involvement are being replaced by more remote and professional kinds of involvement. A comment from one board member explains this shift:

We hired a new superintendent and then we are starting to become more businesslike in the approach, and I think that is what I bring to the table. I am a business woman by job and when I look at how we operate the districts in some respects, like in the financial respects . . . we're doing quite well.

Nevertheless, the board's move away from operational management seems to displease some long-term residents:

There's a lot more restrictions with our board now that they have to meet certain things. Before it used to be more conversation back and forth; now everything is very formal. If you want to say anything at a board meeting, you have to sign in, and you have five minutes, with not everybody [getting] to talk that wanted to talk, but you still feel free to call them on the phone if something is under your skin. But I think that maybe in the last 10 years you just don't feel as comfortable. (Teacher)

*Academic improvement.* Whereas perspectives on the role and function of the board tend to vary on the basis of participants' status as district "insiders" or "outsiders," perspectives on academic improvement are somewhat more difficult to map. Seemingly, however, there is commonality in the views held by some veteran teachers and residents, with both groups favoring a more rigorous and traditional academic curriculum. According to some participants, there are also long-time residents in the district who seem not to be particularly concerned about academic improvement: "They didn't have any education and I think they just don't respect it" (Board Member). Interviews also reveal that some experienced teachers and most of the younger teachers appear to view academic improvement narrowly, focusing almost exclusively on efforts to raise scores on state-mandated accountability tests.

Several teachers, for example, describe the need to align the curriculum with state standards as a way to increase test scores: "We are doing everything they are telling us to do. They meaning the state; they have set down guidelines and by gosh that's what we are doing" (Elementary Teacher). "Grade-level indicators: They're our Bible right now. We go by the grade-level indicators, and if it doesn't meet a grade-level indicator, I ask myself, why am I teaching it?" (Middle School Teacher).

Comments from other educators, including some administrators, however, suggest that not all teachers are supportive of this approach:

I . . . reach beyond those indicators I have to teach. I do quite a bit of science, "hands-on" science. I believe in a lot of, you know, touching and doing

such things that we do learn more when you move instead of just doing the worksheet. So I guess if anything I try to get the kid to do as much as possible. (Veteran Teacher)

Several community members also hold the view that “teaching to the test” is not a suitable way to improve academics. According to one parent,

One of the reasons I wanted to get on the continuous improvement plan committee was I remember [my daughter] would come home and she said, “wow we stopped working on this, and for two weeks we’re going to work on this and get ready for the test.” And I’m like, you know, you shouldn’t have to stop what you’re doing just to study for this test. I mean that to me is ridiculous. So but that’s what we’re doing for the new test and, of course, people are concerned.

Asked what he thought might improve school performance, a community member commented, “more importance on academics, higher expectations of the students’ behavior, a division of abilities so that all could excel in their own levels of understanding.” Several other community members also saw increasing the rigor of the curriculum, not greater focus on test content, as the way to improve academics in the district.

### *Goal Ambiguity*

Emerging culture clashes between rural and suburban constituencies and between more and less experienced teachers have the potential to fuel on-going contests over district priorities. Already the district seems to be experiencing goal ambiguity, which sustains incompatible educational practices across the district. One apparent incompatibility relates to the way educators at the three schools think about the district’s academic mission. Although each school seems to employ some educators whose views do not correspond to the prevailing approach, cross-school variation in perspective seems larger than within-school variation. Educators at the elementary school, for example, tend to support “standards-based education,” which typically is put into practice as curriculum alignment and “teaching to the test.” Many middle school teachers, however, seem to construe standards in terms of a rich inquiry-based curriculum or to subscribe to traditional views of what constitutes a rigorous curriculum. At the high school, focus on academics seems to be eclipsed by attention to discipline and extracurricular activities.

Participants identify these differences, often in relationship to the way the schools are performing, as the following excerpts from interviews with parents suggest:

I think academically, middle school is very good, but the high school I’m a bit concerned about . . . the math department is so weak. Now English is not quite as bad, although I have a stepdaughter who also graduated from Spring Creek and she has said that she has had a lot of trouble in college.

The junior high—I honestly believe that at our junior high a lot of the classes are harder than are the high school level . . . I would have to say that our junior high is the only one that is really academically oriented higher than what maybe the standard should be. I’d say that in seventh and eighth grades is where our academic standards are really high in a lot of classes. Junior high here is 5th, 6th, 7th, and 8th grades.

Educators also make evaluative statements that reveal differences among the schools. According to one administrator, for instance, “for a long time it seemed like the elementary school worked very hard on improving proficiency scores. There was not as much focus in the middle and high school.”

*The three schools.* Evidence from numerous interviews indicates that the instructional program differs considerably across the three schools. Differences seem to relate to expectations for students’ performance, organizational strategies, and curriculum focus.

At the elementary school, the curriculum is aligned with state standards and teachers focus on preparing students for proficiency tests. Nevertheless, because they set their compass to tests that are always changing, the curriculum is less coherent than some would prefer. According to one teacher, for example,

What determines it is what the state gives us. And this is changing constantly. We have had a proficiency test and now they are changing to an achievement test. They have sent us down indicators and standards that we must teach and we must base all of our lessons on it. There are so many things, that we worry if we can get it all covered. We have to base everything on that.

Another teacher talked about the fact that, with so many indicators, it becomes difficult to assure that students actually learn the most relevant content:

So in my classroom we are doing the indicators and you know I try to teach until they understand each indicator but they are so many of them you kind of, at a grade level, have to go on after a while. When I went to college they taught us teach until they learn it. And it is kind of changing a little bit [so] that you

teach and hope they learn it, but you got to move on because there is other stuff coming. Everything is the preparation for the test.

Educators at the elementary school, moreover, have chosen to use homogeneous grouping strategies, which may reinforce lower expectations for the performance of students in the lower groups. As one teacher explains,

We are kind of grouped in our grade level and . . . I have the bottom group. So you know my parents are not as active as the top group is whose parents are working with them all the time and that is why they are there.

In addition, symbolic practices at the elementary school seem to confound academic performance with behavioral compliance. For example, when asked what the school was doing to improve academic achievement, the principal described the following school ritual:

We have a principal star student bulletin board in the hallway. Each week the classroom teachers select a student star from their class. To be eligible, students have to turn in all of their assignments for that week. They have to have perfect attendance and no discipline referrals. If they have four or five students, then they have to decide which student to refer. At the end of each month, one student is randomly selected from each grade level. They get a principal star T-shirt and their picture is up on the bulletin board.

Although educators at the middle school also pay attention to standards-based tests, they seem to focus more on the “spirit” than on the “letter” of the standards. For example, several middle school teachers discussed the fact that the adoption of the new state test, which is supposed to focus on more challenging content than the current test, supported their efforts to explore academic content in greater depth. In the words of one teacher,

It seems like this year the students are retaining a lot more, and they’re getting into a lot more in-depth material than what they were last year. . . . So, we’re looking forward to this [new test] to see how it works out. I guess I really can’t say much about the achievement yet until I get the results back.

And, in order to promote more in-depth teaching, the school has moved to a block-scheduling arrangement.

Not all teachers at the middle school, however, favor new approaches to instruction. Some veterans seem to

subscribe to more traditional methods. Nevertheless, differences in pedagogy do not seem to be keeping the staff from working as a team. As one teacher explained,

It’s a great school, especially here at the junior high. I think we have great communication among the staff; we’ve got a good mix—a really young staff that brings in all kinds of new ideas. Then we’ve got the old stewardship that know how things should be, and it’s great to talk to them when you come into situations that arise. They’ve been there and done that. It’s a good mix.

Other participants were not quite so up-beat about these differences, but no one characterized them as disabling. The principal, however, explained that, with the consolidation into one building, the fifth and sixth grade teachers had been brought together with the seventh and eighth grade teachers. From her perspective, additional work still is needed in order to foster cohesion, even though the addition of several new teachers to the newly configured middle school seems to be making the transition smoother.

Unlike comments about the elementary and middle schools, comments about the high school suggest that the academic mission (however construed) is not a major focus. Maintaining discipline and bolstering athletics seem to be the two primary concerns, as the following comments from participants illustrate:

There doesn’t seem to be much praising for academics, just sports . . . It just doesn’t seem important to the school’s functioning. (Community Member)

The elementary is pretty good—kids come out of that classroom at the end of the year, they are way ahead of where they started. High school, junior high—they get harder to handle, and too many times they [teachers] take the easy way out. (Community Member)

And they’ll just sometimes they just flat tell you—we’re not learning anything cause the teacher’s not teaching anything. Well that’s where I get all my ideas on the teachers aren’t really telling ‘em all that they need to know—just getting their day in which I think is wrong. To be a teacher you should dedicate your life to teaching kids. If you’re just doing it to get your hours in, to get your money, then somewhere we’re losing. (Community Member)

My oldest son is a sophomore and he’s an honor student. I feel that maybe he is not getting the

academics that he needs as far as—when you have a 3.9 and you don't bring homework home, something is wrong—that's in my opinion. (Parent)

Organizational arrangements at the high school seem also to be interfering with a focus on academics. For example, even though it is small, the high school offers a wide range of course choices. With a small staff and limited resources, however, this curricular smorgasbord may affect the quality of instruction. Under this arrangement, some teachers are required to develop five or even six preparations for different classes on a daily basis. Such conditions are quite likely to limit teachers' ability to design meaningful activities that address significant content. Rather, these conditions set the stage for reliance on commercially developed materials, objective-response tests, and the recycling year after year of the same lesson plans. Even worse, they may encourage some teachers to misuse instructional time by engaging students in trivial discussions, allowing them to complete homework during class periods, or substituting entertainment (e.g., popular movies) for instruction.

The incompatible practices discussed here point to schooling arrangements that may be constraining academic achievement at Spring Creek. In particular, the evidence suggests that academic quality is not a core value held by all stakeholders in the district. Moreover, certain practices—homogeneous grouping at the elementary school and a smorgasbord curriculum at the high school—may impede efforts to improve the district's academic performance. Similarly, a narrow understanding of “academics,” limited to the content included on state tests, may keep teachers from using the types of pedagogical approaches that tend to foster high levels of student engagement. We offer these judgments, however, quite tentatively, more as hypotheses about what is going on than as definitive claims. In the next section, we examine the ways that incompatible practices, and the underlying goal ambiguities supporting them, influence the district's decisions about resource allocation.

#### *Ambiguities in Resource Allocation*

Because in the past Spring Creek worked with the children of rural families to prepare them for community life and for economic participation in farming and industry, its fiscal practices relied on (a) frugality and (b) balance. Teachers were primarily local people, drawn to work and reside in the district because of family ties; they did not base their decisions about employment in the district strictly on principles of economic rationality. As a result, the board of education was able to employ qualified teachers at salaries below state and even regional averages. Keeping teachers' salaries low probably fit with the values of most local residents, and doing so probably did not compromise what

district educators and residents viewed as good schooling. Furthermore, it enabled the district to use limited resources to support a variety of activities—including extracurricular programs—valued by the community.

Demographic changes in the district, coupled with state-mandated accountability provisions, seem now to be challenging the operational principles used in the past. Evidence of these challenges is found in much of the interview data we collected. The following comment from a parent was the only one in the data set representing a different view: “The funds are used appropriately and efficiently.” Far more often, we encountered comments such as this: “I think that there is more they could be doing, maybe a lot more” (Parent). Across participant groups, the most serious concerns focused on low teacher salaries, insufficient and haphazard professional development, and inadequate facilities and materials. Some community members also indicated that funds had been inappropriately diverted to support athletic programs:

I think we wasted money, like up there on the little football field. They went up there and spent all that money to put that football [field] in—got the cart before the horse. Last year they went up and bulldozed it all back out and put the bigger field in, which they could [have] done to start. . . . Talk about big money to waste. I think it was wasted, and then they're going to start crying around that they need this and they need that and going to try to pass a levy. And I don't understand why Spring Creek, one of the highest paid tax districts around has to put a levy. (Community Member)

*Low salaries.* With teacher salaries in the state averaging \$45,645, average salaries of \$38,112 in Spring Creek are hardly competitive. In fact, based on 2000-2001 data, Spring Creek spent less money on instruction than 22 out of 23 districts within a 30-mile radius (NCES, 2004). According to participants, low salaries affect teacher morale and encourage teacher mobility. As one community member commented, “I know a few years ago we lost some good staff members—you're going to do that because maybe your salary is not competitive.”

Although some participants believe that the district has improved its salaries in relationship to those in neighboring districts, recent data belie that claim. According to 2002-2003 data, Spring Creek has the second lowest per-pupil expenditure for instruction in the state. As a result, it faces difficulties in attracting teachers in certain fields, such as special education and foreign language. In addition, it continues to face the threat of high teacher turnover, as the following comment from a board member suggests:

We got a lot of young teachers right now and a lot of that is because of finances. When a teacher retires we have to take a look at younger ones just 'cause we had an income tax levy that failed four times. So now we're going to try to do it again, but it's not a renewal anymore. So, we're going to try to do that in probably 2 years. So we have a lot of young teachers, but we've got a good administrative staff.

Although the district is not supporting its administrative staff lavishly, ranking 114th out of more than 600 districts in the state, its expenditures in that domain are not skewed as seriously as its expenditures for teachers.

#### *Inadequate Professional Development*

Numerous respondents commented on the district's limited support for professional development and the low quality of the professional development that is provided. As one educator explained, "the community sees it, as a waste of money for the people to be out of the district and spending tax dollars on that kind of thing." According to a board member, "our policy is each teacher is allowed \$1,200 per year until we reach \$20,000. First come, first served." With 84 teachers in the district, this allocation provides support for approximately 17 teachers (i.e., approximately 20% of the teaching staff).

Other comments indicate that funds beyond this \$20,000 allocation are used to bring speakers to the district and to support on-going initiatives. In recent years these initiatives have included Baldrige training and participation in a program that engages teachers in the process of writing curriculum-based assessments. Notably, district participation in these initiatives represents compliance with the wishes of agencies outside of the district itself. As one teacher put it, "I think we do all from the state as far as professional development." Such initiatives neither reflect the preferences of teachers nor advance a particular agenda adopted by the district. As is the case with much of the professional development provided to teachers, some see it as beneficial in a transitory way ("I find it very informational and energizing and I take some of the things and use them in my classroom.") and others see it as useless ("The guy we had that came for professional development I didn't like him. I think it was a waste of time, I think we could do more constructive things.")

#### *Inadequate Facilities and Materials*

Sometimes I think they spend the money in the wrong places and then they wonder why the voters don't want to vote for anything. And then there's other places I think they could spend a lot more

money we don't for things around here. (Community Member)

The comment above exemplifies a view heard often in the interviews. According to participants, additional resources are needed for (a) classroom space, (b) the employment of additional teachers and support staff, (c) textbooks, (d) science equipment, and (e) field trips. At the same time, several respondents, such as the teacher quoted below, believe that resources are adequate:

They also give us money for supplies in our classroom, which is really good. People think we reuse things each year, but there are so many new things to add each year, especially with the new standards from the state. We have to keep up with our supplies. There is a lot of money involved, and they help out a lot with that.

As is the case in many schools, we also heard from teachers who spend their own money to buy classroom supplies:

I do not know I spend a lot of money in my room so anything that I want I usually go and buy. And I can guess that is probably true with everyone: They spend their money on their rooms.

In addition to reports about inadequate resources, we heard speculation about why this circumstance exists. Four theories are represented in these comments:

- Voters won't support levies: "High-end houses. And we need to pass a levy. Big time. We really do. . . . Put my kid on a basketball team, I'll vote for the levy. That's the way it works." (Board Member)
- Poor districts struggle with unfunded mandates: "It is kind of tough, 'cause you have the state, the federal government mandating all this stuff, then there is no funds there." (Parent)
- State funding formulas are irrational. "I consider us a poor-rich school. We make too much money to qualify for state aid, but we don't have enough money to do what we need to do. So we are a poor-rich school and we have barely enough to get by." (Parent)
- The district doesn't manage its resources effectively: "Usually most of the budget goes to salaries, next books and labs, and then updates. There is supposed to be a separate budget for

plant management. Most frequently it is insufficient to meet the needs due to inflation and poor planning.” (Community Member)

#### Discussion

As the findings indicate, Spring Creek is a district in transition. Whereas it once served a rural community and provided educational services compatible with that community’s expectations, it now faces increasing pressure to serve multiple constituencies with competing views of what good schooling entails. Nevertheless, the forces affecting the district are unlikely to change in character; in fact, the available evidence suggests that pressures for change may accelerate. Therefore the district faces the challenge of crafting schooling practices that fit with suburban residents’ views of effective education. At the same time, it owes allegiance to its rural past and to those community residents who still pursue rural ways of life.

Workable responses to its circumstances may require Spring Creek to walk a fine line between respecting the interests of “insiders” and addressing those of “outsiders.” Alienating either group carries high costs in terms of failed levies, increasing reliance by parents on educational alternatives such as charter schools and home schooling, and erosion of trust. Moreover, failure to achieve a workable compromise between the interests of these competing groups may hamper the efforts of the district’s educators to foster any version of good schooling at Spring Creek.

The difficulties experienced in Spring Creek are much like those that Theobald (1988) and Vail (2000) described with regard to other suburbanizing districts. Furthermore, they resemble the types of dysfunctions attributed by some researchers to boom towns.

Notably, increased professionalization of the board and increased attention to state accountability requirements demonstrate greater formalization in school operations. In addition, consolidation of the district’s schools has strained and perhaps even ruptured the bonds among members of the teaching staff. Furthermore, changes in the district’s approach to governance have rendered board members much less accessible to community members than they once were. Finally, the contest over the district’s identity seems to affect its ability to garner sufficient resources to provide a good education to the community’s children. Breakdowns in the schooling infrastructure are evident: The district cannot muster sufficient community support to provide facilities for its increasing student population, it seems unable to allocate the budget in ways that permit it to offer competitive salaries, and it seems unable to provide the sorts of professional development that actually work to build instructional capacity.

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Appendix  
Interview Schedule

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Superintendent

1. What are the characteristics of the teachers in your district?
  2. How is information shared in your district?
  3. How does professional development work in the district?
  4. What role do the board members play in the district?
  5. If you were suddenly given some additional funding for the district, how would you use it?
  6. What do students from around here do after they leave the district—either graduate or drop out?
  7. How do you determine what is taught and how it is delivered in your district?
  8. What's going on in the district about student achievement?
- 

Board Members

1. What are the characteristics of the teachers in your district?
  2. How is information shared in your district?
  3. How does professional development work in the district?
  4. What role do you play in the district?
  5. If you were suddenly given some additional funding for the district, how would you use it?
  6. What do students from around here do after they leave the district—either graduate or drop out?
  7. How do you determine what is taught and how it is delivered in your district?
  8. What's going on in the district about student achievement?
- 

Principal

1. What are the characteristics of the teachers in your building?
  2. How is information shared in your district?
  3. How are parents involved in your school?
  4. How does professional development work in the building and in the district?
  5. What role do the board members play in the district?
  6. How are resources used in this district?
  7. What do students from around her do after they leave the district—either graduate or drop out?
  8. How do you determine what is taught and how it is delivered in your building?
  9. What's going on in your building about student achievement? How about the district?
- 

Teacher

1. What are the characteristics of the teachers in your building?
  2. How is information shared in your district?
  3. How are parents involved in your school?
  4. How does professional development work in the building and in the district?
  5. What role do the board members play in the district?
  6. How are resources used in this district?
  7. What do students from around her do after they leave the district—either graduate or drop out?
  8. How do you determine what is taught and how it is delivered in your classroom?
  9. What's going on in the building about student achievement? How about in your classroom?
  10. How do you use assessment results?
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*Continued*

## Parent

1. What are the teachers like in your child's school?
  2. How is information shared in your district?
  3. How are you involved in your children's schools?
  4. What are the schools doing to help the teachers learn new things?
  5. What role do the board members play in the district?
  6. How are resources used in this district?
  7. What do you envision your children doing after they leave school?
  8. How does your child's school determine what is taught and how it's taught?
  9. What's going on in your child's classroom or school about student achievement?
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## Citizen

1. What are the teachers like in your district?
  2. How is information shared in your district?
  3. How are you involved with the schools in your district?
  4. What are the schools doing to help the teachers learn new things?
  5. What role do the board members play in the district?
  6. How are resources used in this district?
  7. What do students from around here do after they leave the district—either graduate or drop out?
  8. How does the school district determine what is taught and how it's taught?
  9. What's going on in the district about student achievement?
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