



**Small Districts, Big Problems: Making Schools Everybody's House.** Richard A. Schmuck and Patricia A. Schmuck. Newbury Park, CA: Corwin Press, 1992, 182 pp. ISBN 0-8039-6026-3 (pbk).

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With an acknowledgement of inspiration from William Least-Heat Moon's classic book *Blue Highways* and John Steinbeck's *Travels with Charley*, Richard and Patricia Schmuck set off from Eugene, Oregon, on a 6-month odyssey of 25 rural schools in 21 states west of the Mississippi River. Their goal was to pool their years of experience teaching, researching, and consulting with public schools in an effort to assess the status of public education in America's rural communities. Their plan was to spend the equivalent of a week in each of the schools observing, interviewing the educational participants, and assessing the environment in which they were living and working. The result is a 175-page book larded with descriptions, anecdotes, observations, and the authors own recommendations.

The title, *Small Districts, Big Problems*, suggests a search for problems. The problems they encountered are reported, but their trek was equally devoted to finding practices that work, teachers that excel, administrators that are exemplary and boards that are true partners in the educational enterprise. They found some of these, but they also came to the conclusion that these were exceptions more often than the rule. While touched by the efforts of a few, often against odds of limited resources, the authors more often found schools that were operating in bureaucratic and impersonal ways despite the presumed advantages of small size and close connection with community.

Conventional wisdom about the deficiencies and strengths of rural schools generally portrays them as suffering from a lack of resources and a limited curriculum, but as having offsetting educational advantages in the form of the quality of interpersonal relationships and closer connections with family and community. But an irony im-

posed itself on the authors as their initial impressions were contradicted by evidence as their trip wore on. In the words of the authors: "Too many of the small districts . . . either neglected or ignored the importance of personal relationships in teaching, learning and administering . . . [many] were characterized by superficial and distant relationships, covert hostility and cynicism, and too little mutual concern or respect among administrators, teachers and students" (p. 170). True to expectations, they found schools that were the centerpiece of community identity and entertainment, but also found patterns of communication that frequently stifled, rather than facilitated, open communication among participants in the education process. Too frequently they found bureaucratic and hierarchical patterns of communication and authority characteristic of larger urban schools.

They also encountered some other unexpected circumstances confronting rural schools. Rural communities in much of the region they traveled have suffered serious economic erosion during the past decade. Generally the natural-resource industries that provide the economic base for most of the region's rural localities—timber, energy, farming—have been in a state of economic decline. Consequences include declining income and employment along with accelerated outmigration of younger people usually the most highly educated. The Schmucks found that those economic changes have contributed to changing the composition and perspective of school boards and, in many cases, is creating a rift between teachers, administrators, and board members. When board members themselves are struggling to make ends meet, then retirement benefits, health insurance, and salary increases that are the norm within the education profession become sources of local contention.

Whether it was the author's intent or not, this little book supports a need for pre-service and in-service training for education professionals who expect to work in rural localities. The Schmucks identify many important characteristics of the rural school and its environment that are impediments to effective education, but which can be overcome if understood and taken into account. The Schmucks prescriptions for repair focus less on resource deficiencies and more on improving the humanity of relationships among all the participants in the rural education enterprise. This is not impossible as evidenced by the number of

teachers, administrators, and boards they found who were contributing to outstanding education despite limited resources and a rural environment. Those exemplars were, in fact, taking educational advantage of the inherent benefits of small size and closer relationships with parents and community and, as a result creating schools that are "everybody's house."

Although *Small Districts Big Problems* makes a contribution to adjusting some of the popular images, both pro and con, about rural schools, it falls somewhat short of meeting expectations raised in the first chapter. It is a relatively brief volume (175 pages in a 5X8 paperback) generally limited to high and low lights extracted from what must have been a massive amount of data and observations. With 25 weeks of data gathering, the reader could hope for a more comprehensive portrayal of the diversity and complexity of education in rural America. Missing, for example, is any report of statistical data showing distribution of various characteristics of the 25 districts and the environments in which they were functioning.

No data are reported concerning the enrollment of the districts, size of communities, costs per pupil, and so forth. Such data could have effectively contributed to an improved understanding of another presumed characteristic of rural school districts: their diversity. The reader is left to wonder what lies between the best and worst teachers, administrators, boards, and so on. Description of the schools and how they operate is further limited by the authors devoting many pages to their own recommendations for how to improve teaching, meetings, and administrative styles. These recommendations are generally pertinent and worthwhile, but they further reduce space devoted to description and analysis. The book provides a valuable overview of rural schools and should be read by both rural educators and policy makers, but the reader is left with the feeling that its contributions could have been greater if more of the data had been used to paint a more complete picture of the places where schooling occurs in rural America.

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