

SCHOOL CONSOLIDATION AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT—The linkages between schools and community are seldom discussed in the research on school consolidation. Most of the focus of this body of literature is on the effects of school consolidation on efficiency and equity. In this essay I discuss the importance of school-community relationships and the critical role schools can play in community development. School consolidation can have several negative impacts on the local economy, social capital, and community identity. Assessments of the benefits and costs of consolidation need to consider more carefully the impacts on communities and the potential of building a stronger relationship between schools and communities.

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The Importance of Being Emily

Lessons from Legislative Battles over Forced School Consolidation

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ABSTRACT—Pressure to force or induce the consolidation of rural schools through legislation is common across the United States. Whereas consolidation was once chiefly about school improvement, today it is more likely to be about fiscal savings. Legislative battles have produced many lessons for rural school advocates which are discussed here. Consolidation is also on the agenda of many of the school reform movements at work in the United States, many of which see rural schools as too numerous, too attached to the communities they serve, and too democratically managed to reform from without. As reformers grapple with the resistance to reform in many rural community schools, they assume the haughty and arrogant style of the fading English aristocracy that Oscar Wilde lampooned in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The essay closes with a caricature of the “education reform aristocracy” attributing to it some of the sentiments expressed by Wilde’s pompous characters.

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Tiebout in the Country

The Inevitable Politics of Rural School Consolidation

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ABSTRACT—This essay explains why school consolidation issues are especially difficult in rural America. Consolidation is most appropriate when adjacent districts have similar preferences for taxation and spending on schools. In that case, economies of scale can be reaped without interfering much with resident preferences on taxes and school quality. In urban areas residents signal these preferences by moving into (or out of) school districts that match their preferences, a process known as Tiebout sorting. As a result, school consolidation decisions can be based on good information about resident preferences. The basic claim of this essay is that Tiebout sorting works much less well in rural areas for a variety of reasons. This means that consolidation decisions are based on thinner information; consequently, school consolidation is more contentious and political in rural America.

The essay then argues that, given this situation, a legislature interested in exploring rural school consolidation would do well to consider using legal and political processes that would enhance the ability of residents to express and record their preferences. Newer forms of political engagement that call on modern technology are available to do this and they may be effective in this context given the size and level of interest of the groups involved.

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Place-Based Civic Education and the Rural Leadership Crisis in Nebraska

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ABSTRACT—The Great Plains is facing a pending leadership crisis as rural depopulation decreases the number of residents who are available to serve in civic and government positions. This problem is compounded by the loss of youth populations in rural areas. In this essay, we offer a cross-disciplinary analysis of avenues for addressing the rural leadership crisis. We bring together work from rural demography, education policy, and civic studies to argue that civic education in rural areas needs to be reformed specifically to train and retain rural youth for leadership positions. We use Nebraska as a case study as it has suffered from rural decline, especially from youth depopulation; it has adopted new civic education standards as of December 2012; and Nebraska school districts have local control over the implementation of curricula. We review two competing trends in civic education, global civics and place-based education, and reflect on the impact each of these has on preparing students for leadership. We conclude that place-based education has the most potential for preparing students for leadership positions and should be used in rural schools even if that requires schools to sacrifice global civics.

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Considering Native American Students in Rural School Consolidation

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ABSTRACT—When discussing school consolidation it is important to consider the educational effects on Native American students. Many Native American students live in homes of poverty, deal with difficult home lives, and struggle academically. While there are many areas of concern in discussing consolidation, loss of a low student–teacher ratio, loss of connection with the school community, and loss of autonomy or control of schools are of particular importance. Consolidation efforts may bring some positive education opportunity for Native students which may include offering a diversified and expanded curriculum, specialization for staffing, and specialized resources for students. Discussing the potential effects of school consolidation on Native students can help maintain a positive learning environment for increasing student learning and educational potential.

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Economic Issues in School District Consolidation in Nebraska

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ABSTRACT—This research article examines how per-pupil spending on public primary and secondary education in Nebraska varies by school district size, and whether expenditures are expected to rise or fall after districts consolidate. We find a U-shaped relationship between per-pupil spending and the number of students per school district in Nebraska. We also find a similar relationship between property tax base and the number of students per school district. However, our analysis of per pupil spending before and after consolidation fails to find consistent evidence that consolidation lowered per-pupil spending, in either rural or non-rural districts. The gains from consolidation become even more uncertain after considering the impact of consolidation on parent and student time costs, school quality, and community vitality.

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Demographic Foundation of Rural Education in the Great Plains The Impact of Urbanization

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ABSTRACT—Demographic factors have been transforming the Great Plains for decades. Although the region increased in population from 1950 to 2007, closer analysis reveals that much of that growth took place in the Core Based Statistical Areas. These population trends reflect the broader impact of urbanization. This article provides a contextual perspective of critical demographic factors influencing the structure of educational systems in rural communities in the Great Plains region, helping administrators and decision makers understand the impact of demographic forces on the delivery of rural education.

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Segregation, Inequality, Demographic Change, and School Consolidation A Micropolitan Case

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ABSTRACT—We describe a rural/micropolitan example of the intertwining of school consolidation and demographic change with exacerbated segregation and inequality. To do this we consider Dawson County, Nebraska, which hosts the state’s most Latino/a school district (Lexington) and which saw its number of schools decline from 37 to 19 during this century’s first decade, and the number of local school districts lessened from 18 to 5. In particular, we call attention to the irony that consolidation was pursued with an explicit call for more equality in schooling in Dawson County (Swidler 2013) and yet population concentrations and variation in expenditures seemed to have moved away from rather than toward that goal. This article also highlights the application of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) technology to the review and presentation of educational research.

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Ensuring Mathematical Learning in Rural Schools Investing in Teacher Knowledge

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ABSTRACT—In this research article we share our vision of how to improve student mathematics success in rural districts. Good teaching matters. We have found two recurring features that can support teachers' success in effectively teaching students mathematics: high-quality, longitudinal professional development and professional connections. We partner with rural districts and master teachers to offer local high-quality professional development for mathematics teachers to strengthen their mathematical knowledge for teaching. We have substantial evidence that participation in longitudinal, high-quality professional development significantly increases teachers' mathematical knowledge for teaching, as well as improves their confidence in teaching. Bringing teachers together for professional development helps teachers develop professional connections. Such connections are necessary for teachers to have regular conversations about mathematics teaching and learning with peers. University-district partnerships can provide infrastructure to allow teachers to develop connections with each other, to collectively support each other, and to collaborate in teaching mathematics more effectively. Investing in professional development for rural teachers and supporting professional connections among teachers will help us achieve the common goal of increasing student success in mathematics.

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Strategies for Strengthening the Great Plains Oral Health Workforce

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ABSTRACT—The looming shortage of dentists in rural communities throughout the Great Plains is a well-documented concern. Access to care can be a problem, and the lack of dental care is generally most acute among those with low income, those with complex health issues, and minorities. Studies are finding that there are significant associations between poor oral health and the occurrence of systemic diseases or problems. Examples include cardiovascular disease, stroke, and preterm delivery of low-birth weight infants. The two primary diseases of the oral cavity—dental caries and periodontal disease—are not only treatable but also preventable with adequate care.

The University of Nebraska Medical Center (UNMC) College of Dentistry (COD) is committed to strengthening the rural dental workforce of the Great Plains by focusing upon rural recruitment strategies, service learning educational opportunities in rural communities, and strong support for dentists who practice in remote locations. Working closely with Nebraska and neighboring states, the UNMC College of Dentistry is striving to improve the oral health and economic vitality of small communities throughout the Great Plains region.

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