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ABSTRACT

School improvement in rural places cannot succeed without attention to the rural context of learning. Most especially, smaller schools need to be preserved and sustained in rural areas, particularly impoverished communities, for the sake of student achievement and personal development. This school improvement tool suggests the character of a "good rural community school" and briefly considers the relationships among learning, community, and facility construction in rural areas. A 20-point "Rural Community Schools' Facility Checklist" is included that reflects connections to community, curriculum, and issues related to quality of life in rural places. A resources section describes 3 helpful books and 6 organizations, and contains 10 references. (SAS)

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Planning Schools for Rural Communities

ED 418 820

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The Rural Center at AEL

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As the condition of America's public school buildings gains national and state attention, education planners and policy makers have an opportunity to confront a growing problem—using old, dilapidated and technology-poor facilities to provide a world class education that prepares students to compete in our increasingly global society. Rural educators, especially, want to see the interest in bricks and mortar result in schools that serve rural communities well in the 21st century. To do this, new facility and

*In late 1995, AEL became the Regional Educational Laboratory, charged with developing special expertise in rural education. The discuss on here derives from the mission of this work: to sustain and promote the integral relationship of rural schools, particularly small rural schools, with their communities, their environs, and their joint futures (AEL, 1995). For more information about this work or the school-improvement toolkit, contact The Rural Center at AEL, 600-624-9120.

by
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local school improvement agendas need to be aligned with issues critical for sustaining the integral relationship between the school and its community.

Here—in this first-to-be-developed tool for AEL's rural school improvement toolkit—staff of the Rural Center and the

ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools at AEL consider circumstances of planning schools for rural communities.

Such issues are of special interest to AEL, which operates the National Rural Education Specialty for the nation's system of 10 Regional Educational Laboratories.* Our premise is that school improvement in rural places cannot succeed without particular attention to rural context (Harmon, 1997; Seal & Harmon, 1995). Most especially,

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we stress our understanding that smaller schools need to be preserved and sustained in rural areas—particularly impoverished communities—for the sake of student achievement and personal development (Fowler, 1992; Friedkin & Necochea, 1988; Haller & Monk, 1988; Howley, 1996).

Too often, however, rural-specific issues are submerged in national discussions, with predictably negative results. Too often school construction in rural areas applies now-discredited thinking about the desirability of increasing school size, the presumed but often mistaken “need” to close small schools, and the almost inevitable proposal of consolidation—of both districts and schools (e.g., DeYoung & Howley, 1992; Haller & Monk, 1988; Haller, Monk, Spotted Bear, Griffith, & Moss, 1990; Howley, 1996).

This school improvement tool suggests the character of a “good rural community school” and briefly considers the relationships among learning, community, and facility construction in rural areas. We provide (1) a checklist for developing the rural community school; (2) a list of key resources, including three important documents and several relevant organizations; and (3) a list of works cited in the discussion.

What Is a Good Rural Community School?

Good rural community schools sustain, but are also sustained by, local people and their interests. Such schools put their local communities in the center of all plans, their curricula honor community memories and respect local circumstances, their teachers and administrators make community participation easy and convenient,

and they welcome local functions and celebrations. Such schools help care for the rural places they serve and the interests of those who live there (Howley & Eckman, 1996).

Most of these schools would be small by urban and suburban standards. Small schools in rural areas serve the people who live nearby; they develop the habit of involvement in the issues that concern their communities. Rural schools that serve large geographic areas multiply the difficulties and the cost of parent and community participation; they are at risk of becoming impersonal and disconnected from their students’ lives. Genuine rural community schools respect a scale of activity (i.e., small scale) that makes trust and interaction more likely (Howley & Eckman, 1996).

Learning, Community, and Facility Construction

Rural communities face situations that are quite different from those in cities and suburbs. While cities and suburbs have seen tremendous population growth during this century, fewer and fewer people have remained in rural areas. In 1900, nearly 60 percent of the population lived in rural areas. Today, less than 25 percent of us do. What does this mean for schools?

For the most part, this decline has meant school closures and consolidations. In many places, communities have lost their schools, but, more importantly, many schools have lost their communities. When a single school or campus enrolls all the students in a large geographic area, where is the community?

Schools used to be small and local. They used to be directly controlled by citizens, but over

the years control has shifted into the hands of professionals. The changes mixed the good with the bad, but increases in size and scale have been continuous everywhere throughout the 20th century.

The trend toward bigger and bigger schools—more and more remote from communities and the lives of their students—need not, however, continue. Today, not only educators but also people in many fields realize the need for “humanly scaled institutions”—buildings and the operations within them that match the natural pace and personal character of human activity.

More and more people, too, recognize that

schools need to care not just for individual students, but for the communities to which students, after all, belong. And people are beginning to realize that learning, too, has to be local to be meaningful. Communities are rich sources of experience, knowledge, and wisdom—all of which can be used to help students learn well.

One danger that rural communities may face, again, is the expectation that they will imitate the practices—including the facilities—proposed for more urban places. The result will often be the same as in the past: harm to rural communities and missed opportunities for local stewardship.

Rural Community Schools' Facility Checklist

AEL created the “Rural Community Schools' Facility Checklist” to recognize some of the facilities-related features that one might expect to see in a good small, rural community school. The checklist reflects connections to community, curriculum, and issues related to the quality of life in rural places. Facility issues are related to each item, but they are not the focus of every item. The checklist is offered to prompt

your thinking about small, rural community schools:

- 1. Educators, community members, and students work together to identify needs for any new construction or renovation.
- 2. The location of new facilities encourages use by the community.
- 3. Plans include provision for skilled community volunteers to help construct new facilities.
- 4. Community ownership is secured before the local board of education approves new construction.

This checklist is the creation of the authors listed with evidence in rural schools and communities includes parenting, teaching, administration, superintendents and principal staff, serving on boards and other committees, providing technical assistance from the state education agency, and of course conducting a variety of research and evaluation activities with rural schools and communities through AEL. The checklist is an initial effort of the group to develop a tool that will prove useful to rural communities seeking to sustain small, rural schools. Anticipating its development, users should look upon the checklist as a guide for thinking. It is not a measurement or research instrument. Rather, it is presented in form to purpose is to raise issues that, in the experience of the authors, are too often overlooked when rural school facility needs are considered.

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- 5. Educators, community members, and students work together to design new construction (and to realize the learning potential of their mutual work).
 - 6. New construction or renovation plans accommodate disabled persons in the community.
 - 7. The facility includes such areas as meeting rooms—separate from areas used by students—available to community members during the regular school day.
 - 8. Participation in facility planning and design processes includes community members from all income levels and ethnic groups, including those who do not currently have children in school.
 - 9. The school helps provide the community with access to communications technology.
 - 10. The school helps meet the leisure, recreational, and wellness needs of the community.
 - 11. The facility fits into the landscape. It looks like it belongs where it is located, not like it is a visitor from some other land or culture.
 - 12. The school maintains relationships with local small businesses that are productive for students and that are notably supportive of the local economy.
 - 13. The school actively seeks opportunities to use the community as part of its curriculum.
 - 14. Together, educators, community members, and students visit rural community schools located elsewhere to get ideas for building the new community school.
 - 15. The architect being considered by the school board is experienced in designing facilities that foster healthy relationships between a school and its rural community.
 - 16. Parking areas and the school's entrance are welcoming to community members.
 - 17. The learning resource center/library is designed with the community clearly in mind.
 - 18. The school helps students become good stewards of the community and the land by teaching the history, economy, and natural environment of the local community, perhaps using hands-on projects.
 - 19. The school is, or will be, small enough to serve its students and community well.
 - 20. Transportation arrangements allow all students to participate in extracurricular activities; the school is located within convenient driving distance of those it serves: students and community members.

Resources for Rural Schools and Communities

Many resources exist to help rural communities, schools, and districts understand issues such as those considered so briefly in the preceding discussion. Although we are not aware of any handbook or manual that deals specifically with creating the small, rural community school facility, the handbook listed below (*Sustainable Small Schools*) provides many clues and contains an especially timely discussion of school size and scale issues.

Both the Council of Educational Facilities Planners International and the National School Boards Association serve rural constituents and are available to provide appropriate referrals and information. The other listed organizations are devoted to rural issues, but may not have a particular familiarity with facilities issues. AEL's ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools can provide focused searches of its database on the topic.

Documents to Read

Howley, C., & Eckman, J. (1996). *Sustainable Small Schools: A Handbook for Rural Communities*. Charleston, WV: ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, 158 pp., \$12 plus postage.

Discusses community as focus of instruction, summarizes related school-size literature, describes options, and lists resources. Designed

specifically for community audiences and local educators. Practical rather than scholarly treatment, but pays careful attention to extant literature.

National Education Knowledge Industry Association (NEKIA) Communications. (1997). *Probe: Designing School Facilities for Learning*. Washington, DC: Author, 60 pp., \$20

Probe reviews the state of the nation's school buildings; presents a roundtable discussion of salient issues; overviews one innovative process for designing new schools; examines relationships between school design elements and students' learning; and considers local, state, and national funding issues.

Stockard, J., & Mayberry, M. (1992). *Effective Educational Environments*. Newbury Park, CA: Corwin Press, 184 pp., paperback, \$20 plus postage. (Also available on ERIC microfiche: ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 271 832)

In-depth review of how major features of school environments affect learning. Chapters 3 and 4 specifically focus on the physical environment (facilities, classrooms, size) and community (consolidation, new construction, policy). The entire work is coherent and well-argued. Scholarly treatment, but very readable. 400 references.

Organizations to Contact

Council of Educational Facility Planners International

8687 East Via de Ventura, Suite 311

Scottsdale, AZ 85258-3347

Contact: Tom Kube, executive director

Voice: (602) 948-2337

Fax: (602) 948-4420

E-mail: cefpi@cefpi.com

Web: <http://www.cefpi.com/cefpi>

Nonprofit organization devoted to school information, publications, expertise, referrals on general issues of facility planning; on-line publications and events calendar.

ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools

Appalachia Educational Laboratory

P. O. Box 1348

Charleston, WV 25325-1348

Contact: Berma Lanham, services and
acquisitions coordinator

Toll-free: 800/624-9120

Fax: 304/347-0487

TDD: 304/347-0448

E-mail: ericrc@ael.org

Web: <http://www.ael.org/erichp.htm>

Major connection to the professional literature on rural education and small schools and contributor to the ERIC database. Provides information on small schools, rural education, free searches of the database, publications (some free, some low-cost).

National Rural Education Association

230 Education Building

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, CO 80523-1588

Contact: Joe Newlin, executive secretary

Voice: 970/491-7022

Fax: 970/491-1317

Oldest unified voice for rural education in the United States. National advocate for rural schools and programs. Publications include a journal, *The Rural Educator*. Program of endorsed rural education research centers.

National School Boards Association

1680 Duke Street

Alexandria, VA 22314

Contact: Deborah F. Barfield, manager, National
Affiliate Program

Voice: 703/838-6746

E-mail: dbarfield@nsba.org

Web: <http://www.nsba.org>

Represents school boards at national level; featured work includes seminars, networks, publications, annual conference, journal (the *American School Board Journal*), National Affiliate Program, Institute for the Transfer of Technology to Education.

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The Rural Center at AEL serves as the organizational home for those aspects of AEL's work that involve providing R&D-based services to rural schools and communities. This includes the National Rural Education Specialty for the nation's system of 10 Regional Educational Laboratories. The mission of the Rural Specialty is to promote the integrity of small, rural schools in a global economy. Its guiding

focus is to foster the essential relationship between rural schools and their communities.

The Rural Challenge

P. O. Box 1569

Granby, CO 80446

Contact: Paul Nachtigal, executive director

Voice: 970/887-1064

Fax: 970/887-1065

E-mail: paulnach@aol.com

Web: <http://www.ruralchallenge.org/>

Mission: "to support, where they already exist, and to encourage, where they do not, genuinely good, genuinely rural schools"; three major thrusts: grants, policy, and public engagement.

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* These works consider the importance of small schools and districts for students in impoverished communities

AEL's mission is to link the knowledge from research with the wisdom from practice to improve teaching and learning. AEL serves as the Regional Educational Laboratory for Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia. For these same four states, it operates both a Regional Technology in Education Consortium and the Eisenhower Regional Consortium for Mathematics and Science Education. In addition, it serves as the Region IV Comprehensive Technical Assistance Center and operates the ERIC Clearing-

house on Rural Education and Small Schools. Information about AEL projects, programs, and services is available by writing or calling AEL.

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