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Rural Communities and School Consolidation-- Introduction to Special Issue

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INTRODUCTION

This special issue of *Great Plains Research* focuses on rural communities and school consolidation. It publishes some of the contributions, both essays and research articles, first presented at the Center for Great Plains Studies' 39th Annual Symposium at the University of Nebraska at Kearney on April 5–6, 2013. It also includes some images from a special Chuck Guildner photographic exhibition staged at the Museum of Nebraska Art. The symposium broadly addressed the connection between rural schools and rural communities, including a particular focus on the gains and losses from school consolidation.

Good schools are essential to the good life. Americans are optimistic, future-looking people, and we focus much of our hopes on our kids and their schooling. There is little wonder, then, that Americans worry so much about how good the schools are—a concern that is doubly true for rural schools. Despite a widely held norm that good schools are vital to community life, the declining population of many rural towns in the Great Plains combined with tight budgets and intense competition for state aid has often driven both state and local school policy toward school consolidation as a common political response. During consolidation, small communities lose their schools in favor of larger, presumably better or more efficient consolidated schools elsewhere.

Consolidation has a long history in the United States, including the Great Plains, starting in the nineteenth century. For example, in 1913 N.C. Macdonald, the North Dakota State Inspector of Consolidated, Graded and Rural Schools wrote,

We have too many small and weak rural schools in the state and nation. In the majority of our rural schools the attendance is poor, the teachers are poorly trained and underpaid, supervision is pitifully inadequate, high school privileges are lacking, opportunities to satisfy the civic-social life interests are also lacking, too many classes

are taught for one teacher to teach properly, the work is poor and the results are of low grade. . . . There is only one way to improve these schools in a large and rapid way and that is to consolidate them. This means the organizing of a consolidated school which . . . [has] at least two teachers. (Macdonald 1913, 5)

The modern movement for consolidation began roughly in the 1930s and continues down to the present, and it remade American public education (Berry and West 2010). Consolidation reduced both the number of *school districts* and the number of *schools*. As late as 1932 there were more than 127,000 school districts in the United States operating small, local schools, most employing but a few or even a single teacher; over the following decades the number of districts fell, so that today there are fewer than 13,000 districts. The number of schools has also fallen, from nearly 259,000 in 1932—including more than 143,000 schools with but a single teacher—to roughly 99,000 schools in 2010–11. Average elementary school size in the United States increased from 89 students in 1932 to 446 in 1999–2000, a fivefold increase.¹ In the process, school districts evolved into public agencies professionally run by educational bureaucracies, some educating tens or even hundreds of thousands of students.²

Consolidation had largely concluded in urban and suburban areas by 1980, but it continues today in rural areas, including in the Great Plains, where Nebraska leads the way. Between 1990–91 and 2012–13, 653 Nebraska school districts were dissolved and merged into receiving districts.³ The process can be seen in detail, for example, in rural southeast Nebraska during the past decade. The small towns of Adams and Filley consolidated their schools in 1998. The same year rival school districts Diller and Odell merged to become Diller-Odell Public Schools. Table Rock and Steinauer merged and then joined Humboldt, which had previously merged with



Figure 1. Plain Valley District #13 Schoolhouse. Photo by Janet Sanders. This former one-room schoolhouse is being restored and repurposed for use as the Loup Rivers Scenic Byway Interpretive and Tourist Information Center in Burwell, Nebraska.

- (8) A Detailed Statement of the Benefits of Consolidation.**
- (1) Increases the attendance.
 - (2) Makes attendance more regular.
 - (3) Increases the enrollment.
 - (4) Keeps the older pupils in school longer.
 - (5) Provides high school privileges at one-third the cost.
 - (6) Makes possible the securing of better trained teachers.
 - (7) Results in higher salaries for better trained teachers.
 - (8) Makes possible more and better grade work.
 - (9) Improves industrial conditions in the country.
 - (10) Enriches the civic-social life activities.
 - (11) Conserves more largely the health and morals of the children.
 - (12) Increases the number of eighth grade completions.
 - (13) Provides adequate supervision.
 - (14) Reduces truancy and tardiness.
 - (15) Develops better school spirit.
 - (16) Gives more time for recitations.
 - (17) Increases the value of real estate.
 - (18) Produces greater pride and interest in country life.
 - (19) Prevents the drift to the larger towns and cities.
 - (20) Brings more and better equipped buildings.
 - (21) Eliminates the small weak school.
 - (22) Creates a school of greater worth, dignity and usefulness.
 - (23) Makes possible a more economical school.
 - (24) Provides equal educational opportunities.
 - (25) Gives much greater and better results in every way.

Figure 2. This "Detailed Statement of the Benefits of Consolidation" constitutes the last chapter in the 1913 report by N.C. Macdonald, state inspector of Consolidated, Graded, and Rural Schools for the State of North Dakota. The report also contains photos of new school buildings which, Macdonald writes, "present a strong argument for consolidation of rural schools in North Dakota" (Macdonald 1913, 33, 12).

part of Elk Creek. In 2004, Dawson-Verdon closed and joined Humboldt–Table Rock–Steinauer. Elk Creek, Burr, Lorton, Cook, and Talmage combined to form Nemaha Valley. Then Tecumseh and Nemaha Valley Schools consolidated in 2007 to form Johnson County Central.⁴

Most commonly, consolidation results from attempts to lower costs of operation, typically through state school-aid formulas that encourage consolidation. For example, the California legislature's nonpartisan Legislative Analyst's Office issued a report in 2011 acknowledging that "Neither the academic research nor our own review offers persuasive evidence that consolidating small districts would necessarily result in substantial savings or notably better outcomes for students;" but not much later in the report the authors seem to take it all back:

We recommend the state eliminate the substantial fiscal advantages that enable districts to remain small, often as single—school districts—particularly since we find little proof that being small leads to better student outcomes. We also recommend the state remove existing disincentives for districts to consolidate. (Legislative Analyst's Office 2011)

Citing concerns about inefficiencies and accountability, they recommend that California raise the required minimum size for districts and establish a minimum for schools.

Sometimes consolidation occurs because of legislative fiat. For example, in June 2005 Nebraska's legislature passed LB 126 abolishing elementary-only (so-called Class 1) school districts; even though LB 126 was overturned by Nebraska voters by referendum in November 2006, most Class 1 schools had been dissolved in the interim and could not be resuscitated.

But is consolidating rural schools a good idea? Is it a necessary cost-saving measure—the perhaps unfortunate, sad, but entirely predictable outcome for towns with too few students or too little money? And what considerations or criteria should policy makers and educators use to evaluate this question? Understandably studies of school consolidation have mainly targeted its effects on cost savings for taxpayers and equitable access for students. But perhaps policy makers should include a wider set of considerations. As we learn from the essay by Gary Green, rural schools are crucial to healthy rural communities for many reasons beyond just the schooling they provide. The loss of a town's school leaves a void in the community, reducing its capacity to sustain itself and improve its residents' quality of life. School buildings

often function as centers of community activity and nurture public participation in civic and community affairs. They not only host sporting events, PTA fundraisers, and school board meetings but also town theatrical productions, charity benefits, political rallies, and other community-building activities. Connected to the very life of the community, rural schools serve as symbols of community autonomy, vitality, and identity. Moving the school out of town may rupture the link between the school and its surrounding community, reducing everyday interactions among residents and diminishing civic engagement. In losing its school, Green notes, a town may experience negative effects on property values, business activity, social capital, and community identity. These losses may need to be weighed against consolidation's putative benefits in efficiency and access.

Marty Strange argues forcefully in his essay that whereas the early phase of consolidation was "led by education professionals genuinely convinced it would improve teaching and learning," today the process is propelled by public officials "whose driving concern is saving money and exercising greater control over the conduct of the educational process." Yet Strange finds both rationales lacking, based on his review of evidence from the Great Plains and cases from Maine to Michigan to Arkansas, including both rural and urban school consolidations. Rural schools like other schools receive state and federal aid, bringing with it intrusion into local-community school self-governance. In many cases such oversight may be beneficial, if it overrides local discriminatory practices or raises standards of student performance. But it also brings growing bureaucratization and, as Strange argues, removes actual decisions from the community so that few local residents see the benefit of serving on school boards or in other ways. He concludes that "small schools work because people participate in them . . . [and] people served by these schools feel they own them."

Determining school boundaries and school structure would seem to be intrinsically political issues, but as Steven Willborn discusses in his essay, a different process operates in cities—residents signal their tax and school-quality preferences by moving into or out of school districts that match their preferences, a process known as "Tiebout sorting"; policy makers thereby gain access to much information about residents' preferences. But, Willborn argues, Tiebout sorting tends not to work well in rural areas, making it more difficult to ascertain to what extent rural residents desire to obtain the benefits of consolidation versus maintaining smaller, local schools; the result is that such questions as school consolidation

become inevitably political. He proposes some methods by which policy makers might obtain richer data about how rural residents value school quality, school location, and associated taxes.

Schools also play a crucial role in developing future leadership for rural towns and communities, and in their essay Christie Maloyed and J. Kelton Williams raise the question of whether there is a pending rural leadership crisis due to depopulation and youth out-migration. They argue that civic education in rural schools “needs to be reformed specifically to train and retain rural youth for leadership positions.” They favor place-based civic education, which they see as hindered by “rigid state standards” and “easily testable learning objectives” but potentially offering “avenues to engage students directly in their communities” and hence address the rural leadership crisis.

Rural areas, no less than urban ones, are places of considerable and, in many areas, growing diversity. Andrea Miller, herself an enrolled member of the Oglala Lakota Tribe, challenges policy makers and educators sponsoring school consolidations to consider the special obstacles facing Native American students and the potential detrimental effects on them of creating large and “efficient” schools. (Issues of consolidation and diversity are also central to the article by William England and Edmund Hamann.) In Miller’s essay she notes that among other concerns, “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.”

To the extent that consolidation is driven by the desire to cut costs, there remain some fundamental questions: *Does it in fact do so? And if so, by how much?* These are the central questions addressed by Bree Dority and Eric Thompson in their article. Assessing recent research on the topic, they find that the results are quite mixed; for example, one review study found that “although there is some evidence of increased fiscal efficiencies from consolidation, the overall benefit to the state is minimal,” whereas other studies suggest “cost savings may exist by increasing district sizes from fewer than 500 students to 2,000–4,000 students.” Dority and Thompson proceed to provide a rigorous econometric analysis using Nebraska data of the relationship between per-pupil spending and district size, the role of property values, and the impact of consolidation on per-pupil spending. Their results are stunning: using cross-sectional data, they find that there is a *potential* monetary cost savings (not counting students’ and parents’ travel costs) from school district consolidation; however, using time-series data, they found

no consistent evidence that consolidated school districts *actually* experienced lower per-pupil spending.

Dority and Thompson suggest several possible reasons for these seemingly contradictory findings: (1) consolidation’s expected reductions in costs, such as fewer under-enrolled classes and reduced numbers of administrators-per-pupil, may be more than offset by other outcomes that raise costs, such as paying all teachers on a higher (consolidated) scale, increased transportation costs, and growing bureaucratization. (2) Perhaps “higher spending per student in [fewer-student] school districts . . . may reflect a desire by high resource districts to spend more on education as much as it reflects technical economies of size [in delivering educational services]”; this possibility emerges from Dority and Thompson’s intriguing finding that per-pupil property tax declines with rising school district size; that is, small school districts tend to have more taxable resources per pupil than do larger districts. (They found this relationship to hold in both 2006 and 2011, indicating that it is not an artifact of the recent rapid run-up in farmland prices.) Thus, while many questions remain, the Dority-Thompson results challenge the simple premise that consolidation reduces school costs.

The most powerful force driving consolidation in the Great Plains is a declining population in many rural towns and counties. Robert Blair, Jerome Deichert, and David Drozd survey the principal demographic trends, particularly the movement from rural regions to large urban areas (Metropolitan Statistical Areas) and their adjacent counties and to smaller cities (Micropolitan Statistical Areas, between 10,000 and 50,000 population). In addition to geographic redistribution they document the changing characteristics of the rural population—an aging white population, a growing proportion of Latinos, and continuing substantial rates of poverty. Their article shows the intimate link between population dynamics and school consolidation.

Consolidation has been proposed for “equity” as well as cost reasons, although that term carries a variety of meanings. Sometimes it refers to rebalancing access to school resources for children of disadvantaged racial, ethnic, or class groups. Sometimes it refers to redressing the differences between what in a nonconsolidated situation would be disparities between poorer districts and richer districts. Sometimes it is advanced on the grounds that small-school (mainly rural) students deserve access to an enriched curriculum—including, for example, AP courses and pre-calculus—which would not be possible in unconsolidated schools. When implemented consolidation is likely to create numerous changes, both intended

and unintended, in the affected schools and communities. William England and Edmund Hamann trace the experience of one Nebraska county, Dawson—home to the small city of Lexington, which attracted a new meatpacking plant and a subsequent large in-migration of Latino families. Although consolidation has often been expected to reduce educational disparities, in Dawson County the opposite occurred. The concatenation of rapid meatpacking expansion, explosive growth of (primarily Latino) immigration, and school consolidation ironically created *new* segregations and *growing* inequalities. The state's school-aid formula seemingly reinforced rather than reduced these disparities.

So, too, consolidation is sometimes said to be needed for rural areas to be able to attract new teachers, who are said to value the greater professional opportunities available to them in consolidated schools. Wendy Smith, W. James Lewis, and Ruth Heaton, however, in an article focusing on math teachers, show that great gains in rural math teaching and student performance appear to be available by building professional networks and training teachers who themselves come from rural areas. Arguing that “good teaching matters,” they report on two innovative programs built around “two recurring features that can support teachers’ success in effectively teaching students mathematics: high-quality, longitudinal professional development and professional connections.” Their empirical results show that rural math teachers in both elementary and middle grades strengthened their deep mathematical knowledge, increased their confidence and motivation, and reduced their anxiety. Students in the one district for which they were able to obtain data scored markedly higher than average on statewide math tests. Achieving stronger math education in rural areas appears to require investing in high-quality teacher professional development and supporting teachers as members of a professional math community.

K–12 schools are just one component of a much broader educational system that also includes preschools, higher education, and lifelong learning opportunities; all components are necessary contributors to the quality of rural life and the health of rural communities. John Reinhardt (dean of the University of Nebraska College of Dentistry) and Kimberly McFarland explore the problem of limited access to quality dental care in rural areas and the associated shortage of rural dentists. As they note, high-quality care requires access to the oral health system throughout one's life. As they see it the problem of rural dental care will best be solved by recruiting quality students from rural regions to dental school, which

is why the College of Dentistry participates with other medical disciplines in the University of Nebraska Medical Center's Rural Health Opportunities Program, a program encouraging rural residents to pursue careers in the health professions. Equally important is supporting rural dentists through postgraduate opportunities, teledentistry, and in other ways to connect practicing rural dentists with dental faculty and research. Their findings are important as delivery of health, dentistry, and all allied health care fields is of vital significance to the quality of rural life.

This issue also contains a photo essay by noted photographer Chuck Guildner, who in the years between 2002 and 2006 photographed a number of currently operating one-room and one-teacher rural schools. His images provide texture to rural realities.

Education has been a relevant concern to those seeking good governance and ultimately a good life. Indeed Aristotle suggested that “the legislator should direct his attention above all to the education of youth; for the neglect of education does harm to the constitution” (Aristotle 1985, 2121). Local schools provide life-sustaining roots for many citizens. For some citizens, the local school imbues that which is good in a community or a place. In rural towns the local school is often viewed as the unifying focus of the community.

Because schools are so important it is no surprise that they figure so prominently in our politics; in particular, conflicts over state aid—More or less for urban or rural areas? More or less for small schools or large ones?—have become routine features of state legislative sessions. The *Oklahoma City Journal Record* reported on January 9, 2013,

Every year during the legislative session, the issue of school consolidation is revisited. In an effort to put a face to this debate, Professional Oklahoma Educators has filmed and produced a documentary about rural schools and school consolidation. . . . *We Are Rural* tells the story of six rural Oklahoma schools in their fight to stay autonomous while they face a greater push for consolidation each year. (Gilmore 2013)

The *Omaha World Herald* on June 2, 2013, in its lead editorial, scolded,

As for state aid to K–12, the Legislature nearly tore itself apart over the issue this year. . . . The emotion and my-way-or-the-highway attitudes displayed during that bitter debate are not the way Nebraska needs to decide policy of this magnitude. School districts, education associations and their lobbyists

need to be prepared for reasonable compromise. Senators need to be wary of rigid parochialism and understand that this issue will require serious give-and-take that balances the interests of all types of school districts and taxpayers.

Perhaps so. Parochialism aside, certainly we all have a stake in sustaining quality education in the Great Plains. Schools are a vital piece of building the good life, and the vitality of our democracy is intimately linked to our public schools. Rural towns must be prepared to deal with the gains and losses from school consolidation, and being prepared means being informed across the rural and urban citizenries. It is abundantly clear that all of us, rural and urban residents alike, have a stake in the quality of rural education and should join the effort to support it. This special Symposium Issue offers insights into possible paths for sustaining rural schools and rural communities throughout the Great Plains.

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NOTES

1. Calculated from Historical Statistics of the United States, Millennial Edition 2006, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, <http://0-hsus.cambridge.org.library.unl.edu/HSUSWeb/table/previoustable.do?id=Bc7-18> (accessed May 11, 2013), tables Bc3 and Bc10; and National Center for Educational Statistics, Institute of Educational Sciences, <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2001/overview/table05.asp>, table 5 (accessed May 11, 2013).

2. Historical statistics from Historical Statistics of the United States, Millennial Edition, 2006, <http://0-hsus.cambridge.org.library.unl.edu/HSUSWeb/toc/tableToc.do?id=Bc1-6>,

tables Bc1, Bc2, Bc4, and Bc6 (accessed May 11, 2013); and National Center for Educational Statistics, Institute of Educational Sciences, <http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=84> (accessed May 11, 2013). Number of school districts and schools in 2010–11 from National Center for Educational Statistics, Institute of Educational Sciences, http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2012/pesagencies10/tables/table_01.asp, and http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2012/pesschools10/tables/table_02.asp (accessed May 11, 2013).

3. Data at Nebraska Department of Education 2013 at <http://www.education.ne.gov/FOS/OrgServices/Reorganization/Downloads/1990TO2013.pdf> (accessed May 11, 2013).

4. Data at Nebraska Department of Education 2013 at <http://www.education.ne.gov/FOS/OrgServices/Reorganization/Downloads/1990TO2013.pdf> (accessed May 11, 2013).

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