

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and
Social Sciences

Great Plains Studies, Center for

Fall 2013

PLACE-BASED CIVIC EDUCATION AND THE RURAL LEADERSHIP CRISIS IN NEBRASKA

Christie L. Maloyed

University of Nebraska at Kearney, maloyedcl@unk.edu

J. Kelton Williams

Knox College, jkwillia@knox.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch>



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), and the [Geography Commons](#)

Maloyed, Christie L. and Williams, J. Kelton, "PLACE-BASED CIVIC EDUCATION AND THE RURAL LEADERSHIP CRISIS IN NEBRASKA" (2013). *Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences*. 1268.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch/1268>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

PLACE-BASED CIVIC EDUCATION AND THE RURAL LEADERSHIP CRISIS IN NEBRASKA

Christie L. Maloyed

*Assistant Professor of Political Science
University of Nebraska at Kearney
2200 Founders Hall
Kearney, NE 68847
maloyedcl@unk.edu*

and

J. Kelton Williams

*Assistant Professor of Education
Knox College
2 East South Street
Galesburg, IL 61401
jkwillia@knox.edu*

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.

Key Words: civic education, place-based education, rural depopulation, rural leadership, education policy

INTRODUCTION

The rural areas of the Great Plains are on the verge of a leadership crisis. The rates of out-migration from rural counties, especially among the youth population, means those areas are left with fewer citizens to fill leadership roles in civic, government, and religious organizations. Consequently there is a need to prepare youth for roles as citizen leaders. However, national trends in civic education ignore or even undermine efforts to prepare rural students to become leaders in their own communities.

Although rural life holds a special place in the American tradition and imagination, school reformers and education scholars have for decades maintained a myo-

pic focus on the challenges faced by urban and suburban schools. The emphasis on urban schools in education reform and scholarship is largely due to the entrenchment of liberal and multicultural traditions that have become the paradigm within political and educational thought. A significant consequence of the transition to liberalism and multiculturalism and the focus on urban school reform is that the value of rural life and schools has been challenged. Civic education has become focused on preparing students to be global citizens in a world that is progressive and internationally connected (Altinay 2011). In such an interconnected world, it is easy to see rural schools as antiquated and poorly equipped to prepare their students for global citizenship.

This essay brings together several areas of study to

suggest possible avenues for addressing this leadership crisis and preparing rural students for civic life. By pulling together the work of rural demographers, education policy makers, and scholars of civic education, we focus on the particular needs faced by rural communities and strategies for addressing rural leadership via secondary education. First, we argue that a genuine tension exists between cultivating traditional, rural values on the one hand and liberal, multicultural, global values on the other. Understanding how this tension is manifested in public schools is essential to developing sound strategies for rural school reform. Second, the virtues of rural life are essential for citizens of those communities. Therefore rural school reform efforts must consider place-based education as central to teaching civics, even if doing so is inconsistent with the liberal and multicultural goals of urban school reform movements. Promoting local, place-based civic education in rural schools is necessary to avoid the continued decimation of rural towns.

In order to see the dynamics and tensions between rural and urban civic education, we use Nebraska as a case study. Focusing on the education policies of one state allows for a more detailed analysis of the types of policy problems that arise in rural areas. Although each state within the Great Plains faces its own particular challenges regarding rural leadership, this analysis raises themes that are familiar to many rural communities in states across the Plains. Because civic education has historically been rooted in the social studies, we have chosen Nebraska as it has recently adopted new social studies standards. Moreover Nebraska has also experienced a high rate of out-migration among its rural youth population. Our analysis shows that the type of civic education that has recently been approved in Nebraska continues to pay too little attention to the particular challenges of providing differentiated civic education, but we point to strategies that could be profitably used to overcome those limitations.

THE PENDING LEADERSHIP CRISIS

That America's rural areas have seen a decline in population in recent years is of little surprise. This depopulation trend has been especially felt in the Great Plains, with 72% of the rural counties having experienced decreases in population between 1970 and 2000 (Cantrell 2005; Walser and Anderlik 2004). In Nebraska, this loss has been acutely felt, especially among the youth population in rural counties. As Randolph Cantrell has detailed, among the most rural counties in the state, meaning those with a population center of 2,500 residents or less, the de-

cline among residents 18 and under was 22%. In the most extreme case of Grant County, the youth population declined by 45.9%. This makes the median age of residents in Grant County 52.6, compared to the state median age of 37.3 (Cantrell 2010a, 1).

The declining youth population in rural counties points toward a looming leadership crisis. Although these counties are experiencing depopulation, the number of government and leadership positions within these counties have remained stable or have actually increased. As Cantrell has demonstrated, rural areas in Nebraska face a severely limited pool of potential leaders (2010b). Taking together the number of leadership positions in government offices and those in voluntary organizations (such as fire departments, rescue squads, church congregations, farm bureaus, and charitable organizations), and assuming only those over age 18 may hold these positions, the ratio of potential residents to leadership roles is 83:1 statewide. Not surprisingly, there are dramatic differences depending on the population size within a county. Metropolitan areas have a much larger pool to draw from, with a ratio of 103:1 while the most sparsely populated frontier counties (those with fewer than 6 residents per square mile) have only 40 residents per leadership role (Cantrell 2010b, 4). As more youth leave their rural counties the pool will only decrease. This means that many rural residents will have to assume multiple roles, likely resulting in leadership fatigue and a lack of innovative ideas.

Compounding the problems facing rural citizens is that they are also more likely to suffer from feelings of political inefficacy. In 2012 rural Nebraskans were surveyed about how much control they feel that they have over their own lives. Among residents in the smallest towns (population 500 or less) 32% agreed that most people are powerless to control their own lives, compared with 24% of residents in towns of 10,000 or more (Vogt et al. 2012, 22). Those from the smallest towns were also less optimistic about the prospects of improving their communities in the future. In the smallest towns 40% of residents reported that they believed their community would be either better off or much better off in 10 years, compared with 47% of residents in towns of 10,000 or more (Vogt et al. 2012, 21).

In order to help combat this feeling of powerlessness and to motivate and support citizens to assume leadership roles, education within rural areas needs to focus on training and empowering young citizens within those communities. It is necessary that the types of leadership programs that are developed do not simply teach abstract skills or values such as civic engagement or patriotism but actually focus on the needs of local communities.

Certainly some leadership skills will easily transfer from one community to another. To use civic engagement as an example, all students may benefit from learning about the importance of being an active member of the community. In order for students to translate those lessons into actual skills to benefit their communities, instruction on civic engagement needs to be grounded in methods of organization and rooted in the particular concerns faced by individual localities. Students in an urban Omaha classroom may profit most from learning about how to lead a culturally diverse mission to combat hunger among the homeless population. But a student in a rural town in the Nebraska Panhandle would likely benefit from a program that teaches students how to navigate state and federal programs concerning sustainable irrigation of crops. Teaching students abstract leadership skills without reference to a particular situation or context in which they would need to use those skills will likely do them no harm, but neither would it do them much good. To understand how localized education could be used, we review two current trends in civic education: global civics and place-based education.

APPROACHES TO TEACHING TO CIVIC EDUCATION

Before considering the specifics of either global citizenship or place-based education, it is important to point out that civic education in the United States carries significant historical baggage that provides a subtext to the current debate. Civic education has been used for many purposes, including social reform, cultural transmission and assimilation, segregation, and inclusion. Teaching a student how to be a good citizen also entails teaching them how to be good generally. Those behaviors, values, and skills are often culturally defined and highly contested. Devising a curriculum that addressed civic values became increasingly difficult as awareness of the country's pluralism expanded across racial, ethnic, religious, political, economic, gender, and sexual lines. Although the global civic education and place-based education discussed here may approach civics from opposite ends of the geographic spectrum, they both seek to move the discussion beyond identifying common values toward developing strategies for engagement in a pluralistic environment.

Despite the conflict and controversy surrounding civic education, educators, policy makers, and reformers continue to develop new models of civic education. Among the current trends that attempt to move the discussion in a different direction are global civics (also called global

citizenship) and place-based education. Although the proponents of global citizenship education certainly do not speak with one voice in terms of ideology, pedagogy, or curriculum, they generally emphasize human rights, deliberation, tolerance, equality, and social justice and rely on communication technology as a primary pedagogical tool to help students learn about and connect with people and cultures from around the globe (Osler and Vincent 2002; Rubin and Giarelli 2007; Camicia and Zhu 2012; Marino and Hayes 2012). Proponents argue that the goal is not to establish a unifying set of values that define good global citizenship. Instead students learn how to engage people of different cultures and beliefs through mutual respect and discourse. Ideally the skills learned through a global civic education would translate to the experiences of students in their daily lives as they are faced with conflict and engage with people from diverse backgrounds. At the same time civic education is designed to foster a broader dialogue that would build cultural bridges and promote a peaceful process through which to address global conflicts (Reich 2012, 464).

As is true of all reforms and approaches to education, global civics is not without its critics and opponents. Few would argue with the ultimate goals of promoting peace, equality, and toleration in solving geopolitical problems. On the edge of the spectrum are conspiratorial fears that global civic education is ultimately designed to promote a unified global state (Rapoport 2010). Other critiques are more concerned with the implications of global civics on national identity and citizenship. This argument follows that global civic education leaves little room for students to learn about the institutions, processes, and values of citizenship in the United States (Rapoport 2010, 180; Torres 2002, 372). With regard to actual pedagogy there are concerns as to whether or not enough teachers would have the global perspective necessary to teach effectively a global civic curriculum (Merryfield and Kasai 2004, 354; Rapoport 2010, 182). Our critique of global civic education is based neither on philosophy nor on pedagogy. Global citizenship education has a place in public schools and can offer value to curricula and the educational betterment of students. Rarely in education, however, are reforms or practices applicable in every community and every learning environment. For instance, the dependence on technology makes integrating a global citizenship curriculum particularly difficult in a rural school district, where technological infrastructure and resources are often scarce. Aside from the infrastructural challenges, the depopulation problems facing rural areas that we have discussed are such that a civic curriculum

that focuses on local civic engagement offers a valuable opportunity to develop knowledge and skills that could overlap with global civic education, but also help to foster civic engagement and leadership at the local level.

The other major trend in civic education is the place-based education movement. In contrast to global civic education, place-based education incorporates translatable skills like deliberation, engagement, and organization into a curriculum that looks at the unique characteristics, virtues, and challenges of the community in which a school is located (Smith 2002, 31). As in our consideration of global citizenship education, we do not argue that place-based education is a silver bullet solution to civic education in all learning environments. With the challenges facing rural school districts, and the drain of young people from rural to urban areas, a place-based civic education would provide for a curriculum that could overcome obstacles stemming from limited technological resources. The approach could also provide students with a foundation of skills to reform their communities from within rather than feeling the need to flee to greener pastures.

The place-based education movement has evolved over the last century and has been used in various forms. In the early 20th century, Arthur Dunn, an early leader in social studies education, developed a community civics course—intended for freshmen—that focused on identifying and engaging with local community problems. Dunn published a number of textbooks for the course, including an edition targeted specifically at rural areas that enjoyed positive reviews and wide distribution in the second decade of the 20th century. Several competing texts based on Dunn's model appeared at the same time, but as schools evolved in response to the national and international pressures of the coming decades, the existence of community civics in the high school curriculum eroded until it was virtually nonexistent by the 1950s (Evans 2004, 29).

In 1966 Elliot Wiggins, an English teacher at a small private school in northern Georgia, engaged his students in a writing activity that focused on the local Appalachian oral and historical tradition. The consequence of this exercise was the publication of the *Foxfire* magazine. To some extent the *Foxfire* project could be considered the foundation of the modern place-based education movement. Environmental groups adopted and adapted Wiggins's localized and experiential curriculum—with its attachment to rural areas in the Appalachian mountains—in developing their own curricula (Resor 2010, 187) It has only been in the last decade, however, that significant efforts to return place-based education to the public schools has appeared in scholarship or school reform efforts.

Given the localized nature of place-based learning and the organic nature with which it has evolved, providing a precise definition of what place-based learning is—and, equally importantly, what it is not—proves to be a nebulous task. General recurring themes in place-based education include an examination of the social, economic, political, natural, and cultural artifacts of a community; an emphasis on interdisciplinary, hands-on, and experiential learning modalities; the development of deliberative and critical thinking skills; and the promotion of engagement, awareness, and problem solving at the local level. Central to the philosophical foundation of place-based learning is ensuring that the identity associated with place emerges from the experiences of the students, rather than being imposed by the teacher (McInerney et al. 2010, 4). Examples might include reading literature by local authors or about the community and using that to explore a social dynamic or natural phenomenon that shapes the community. For the purposes of rural leadership the objectives could range from class or individual projects that research local policies to efforts to undertake a project that actually reforms or transforms the community.

In the eyes of proponents the greatest virtue of place-based education is also its greatest obstacle. In an era of standardization and assessment, identifying objectives that are easily tested is difficult. Therefore teachers might be reluctant to spend time on projects and activities that would not directly improve test scores. The obvious rebuttal brings into question whether the purpose of education is securing higher test scores or educating the whole child (Jennings et al. 2005, 46). A place-based curriculum also requires a significant effort on the part of teachers to research avenues of local engagement and to coordinate an interdisciplinary curriculum. And given the historical precedence of localism perpetuating discrimination and isolationism, a locally centered civic curriculum might raise questions about its ability to prevent the potential negative consequences of localism. To the extent that place-based education can be implemented, states need to provide the ability for local school districts to have a role in designing and assessing their own curriculum. However, giving the state a role in supporting and approving place-based projects may help alleviate some of the problems associated with local curricula.

The tension between place-based and global civic education is not invariably irreconcilable. There have been efforts dating back to at least the Progressive Era to write textbooks and establish curricula that allow students to connect the rights and responsibilities of citizens from the local to the global context (Dunn 1907). Furthermore, the debate over the geographic structure of civic educa-

tion has served to drive the evolution of the social studies curriculum since the Progressive Era (Evans 2004). These efforts at civic education were often mired in localism, regionalism, racial prejudice, and xenophobia. The inability to exorcise these historical ghosts from the civics curriculum is at least partly to blame for the fall of citizenship education from a cardinal principle of public schooling in the early 20th century to at best a secondary purpose in the social studies curriculum.

Beyond the historical dynamics increasing the tension between place-based and global civics curricula, there are significant theoretical implications that cannot be overlooked in terms of the type of citizenship that each embraces. A central construct of citizenship is the idea of membership. Civic education is designed to instruct students as to the rights, laws, values, and norms of the members of a society. Through civic education students essentially are taught to recognize good members from bad—and, equally importantly, members from nonmembers. Through place-based education students explore the unique natural, cultural, political, and historical characteristics of their community in order to better understand the identity and responsibilities of membership in their community. With regard to global citizenship membership is essentially existential. Everyone is a citizen, and students learn to value commonality and deliberation across cultures.

What is at tension between a local versus a global civics curriculum is identity. In global civics identity is muted in favor of multicultural awareness, discourse, and conflict resolution. In place-based civics identity is highlighted to promote community engagement, environmental awareness, and cultural appreciation. These two approaches to teaching citizenship may not be entirely irreconcilable; however, it seems quite difficult from a pedagogical standpoint to get all actors involved in the educational process to grasp a model of civics that both highlights identity and minimizes it. Consequently civic education in most states has been watered down to a bland national idea that focuses on the institutions of government and such mechanics of citizenship as individual rights, voting, obeying the law, and patriotism.

For students in rural schools the message of global civics is that rights and responsibilities are defined universally rather than locally. This perspective contributes to the idea that opportunities for success and the ability to contribute to the world lie elsewhere, not necessarily in one's own rural community. However, by employing a place-based curriculum, students can be taught that their identity is rooted

in their own community and that they have the power and responsibility to shape that community. Again this is not to say that place-based education should always exclude a global perspective; however, given the limited time and resources for social studies, if rural schools want to train and retain leaders for their communities, place-based education is a more promising resource.

CIVIC EDUCATION IN NEBRASKA

Nebraska is a state where place-based education may be profitably and more easily implemented because the state provides an unusual amount of latitude for local school districts to design their own curricula and assessments. Following the passage of No Child Left Behind, many states opted to standardize tests across their districts. By contrast, Nebraska allowed each school district to design its own method for identifying learning objectives and also measuring and reporting learning outcomes. Nebraska's School-based, Teacher-led Assessment and Reporting System (STARS) is one of the only teacher-directed assessment programs in the country. Districts that develop their own local standards submit them to the state Department of Education to demonstrate that they are equal or more rigorous than the state guidelines (Roschewski 2004, 10). Beginning in 2008 the legislature began to transition control of assessment of reading and math from the local to the state level, but social studies remains under the control of local school districts (Roschewski 2008, 6).

Nebraska regularly revisits its state guidelines, and a new set of statewide social studies standards were approved by the State Board of Education in December 2012. The standards cover civics, economics, geography, and history. The process of developing the new curriculum was not without controversy. The most contentious standards, which garnered a record response during the period for public comment, involved whether to teach climate change as a fact or theory, and also whether to teach that the United States is an exceptional nation (Reist 2012). School districts across the state have one year to adopt the new standards or submit local standards for approval.

The new social studies standards are intended to provide a basis for teaching students about the rights and responsibilities associated with citizenship. Although citizenship is often referred to within the standards as being multilayered—involving local, state, national, and international levels—the main emphasis is placed on citizenship at the national level rooted in knowledge of American history and founding documents. The stated purpose of the standards is

to teach our children to become young patriots who have an intellectual understanding of the genius of our country's founding principles and who feel an emotional connection to our nation. Achieving this purpose requires teaching Nebraska students to become responsible citizens who are prepared to preserve, protect and defend freedom and democracy in our nation and in the world. (NSBE 2012, i)

Civic education begins in kindergarten and continues through high school. At the lowest levels, the civic education standards focus on teaching young students to identify their role in their most immediate society—including their family, neighborhood, and community. These standards emphasize objectives such as recognizing the purpose of “rules and the role of authority figures” (NSBE 2012, 1); modeling citizenship skills including “respect, courtesy, honesty, and voting” (NSBE 2012, 3); and identifying patriotic symbols, songs, and holidays. Beginning in fourth grade, students focus on their role as citizens of Nebraska. This includes learning about the institutions of state government, laws and rules, and rights and responsibilities such as “voting and public service projects” (NSBE 2012, 4).

From fifth grade through high school the standards move from local and state citizenship to the national and international levels. These standards require students to learn about various forms of governments, the development of written laws, and the structure of the American constitutional system. In terms of global civics, the standards emphasize teaching students about international and supranational organizations such as the United Nations, NATO, and the European Union, and an evaluation of American foreign policy issues (NSBE 2012, 4). In the upper grades, civic participation continues to be emphasized, with a focus on having students “describe ways individuals participate in the political process (e.g., registering and voting, contacting government officials, campaign involvement” and evaluate the effectiveness of those methods (NSBE 2012, 4). Students are also expected to participate in their communities directly by being able to “demonstrate civic engagement (e.g., service learning projects, volunteerism)” (NSBE 2012, 6).

There is much that is encouraging about the civic standards for Nebraska: they provide solid guidelines for teaching students about history, rights, and responsibilities, and promote direct participation. However, there also remains cause for concern. Social studies is not subject to a statewide test to assess student learning. As Nebraska Board of Education president Jim Scheer noted in an interview with the *Lincoln Journal Star* following the

adoption of the new standards, “Without an assessment, it may get lost in the educational process. . . . It may get, perhaps, minimized” (Reist 2012). Following the educational adage “if it is not tested it is not taught,” the social studies may indeed continue to receive less emphasis as compared to tested subjects. This is something of a double-edged sword, as it may reduce the time spent on the subject in total; but because it is not assessed by a statewide test, control of material also remains squarely with local districts. This provides leeway for school districts to design a curriculum that fits their local needs.

RURAL SCHOOLS AND PLACE-BASED EDUCATION

Nebraska is the model of a rural state. Of its 531 incorporated communities, only 18 have populations over 10,000 (Cantrell 2005, 6). Consequently, Nebraska is home to a large number of small schools that serve rural populations. Of the 285 secondary schools (grades 7–12) and high schools in Nebraska (grades 9–12) for which enrollment totals are available for the 2012–13 school year, 170 schools (60%) have enrollments of 200 or fewer for the entire school (NDE 2012). In terms of academic outcomes, rural schools are a boon for the state. In their study of small schools in Nebraska, Funk and Bailey found that the smallest schools—those with fewer than 100 high school students—average a 97% graduation rate, compared to the statewide average of 85%; moreover, students from the smallest school districts were 25% more likely than their counterparts in large schools to enroll in Nebraska colleges (1999, 1).

Although it is clear that small schools in Nebraska are known for high academic achievement, recent educational policy changes may make that more difficult to maintain. What many within the education community find frustrating is that despite the emphasis on local control within Nebraska, the overall education climate, both statewide and nationally, is geared toward easily testable learning objectives. This is especially problematic for rural schools. In an evaluation of the STARS system in 2003 conducted on behalf of the Nebraska Department of Education, Gallagher found rural schools often experienced the greatest pressure to move away from place-based forms of learning. The study highlighted the potentially dire consequences for rural schools in this policy environment:

In many schools, as we note throughout this report, effective and meaningful projects and programs

are being cut in favor of more easily tested material. Much place-based education, for instance, is being cut in small communities because it does not “fit into” an ESU-designed CRT [Education Service Unit Criterion-Referenced Test]. . . .at stake here is nothing less than the survival of some small communities. The state’s unique system was built in part to preserve the unique circumstances of Nebraska’s small schools. However, educators in these schools are having a difficult time protecting what is unique in their curriculum and instruction as they seek to comply with the demands of STARS. (Gallagher 2003, 56)

The movement from place-based education to easily tested standards is troubling precisely because it exacerbates the trends associated with youth out-migration, rural depopulation, and the rural leadership crisis. Students who are educated in a system of nationalized, globalized, and standardized curricula are taught that academic and professional performance is measured by standards external to their own community experiences. As place-based education advocate and University of Nebraska–Lincoln professor Robert Brooke writes, mainstream education teaches rural students that success is achieved outside of their own hometowns: “As predominately practiced, education points elsewhere: to history happening in other parts of the world, to migration as the means of personal advancement in the corporate industrial complex, to an ineffective form of citizenship” (2012, 163).

Citizenship without reference to a place can be an abstract and difficult concept for students of any age to understand. The rights, responsibilities, and skills associated with being a good citizen must be contextualized in order for students to be able to make meaning from their experiences. What the national standardization movement has caused, in part, is gravitation toward national and global learning objectives that have little relation to the specific contexts in which students experience learning. As reading, math, and science have become rigorously standardized and tested, social studies—and civics classes in particular—have become the classes in which students learn how to become citizens. The problem is not that the new Nebraska social studies curriculum prohibits place-based education, it is that in a system that is increasingly focused on assessment it is easier and less expensive for rural schools to use generic, prepackaged standards and tests rather than spend precious and scarce resources on developing and maintaining place-based curricula.

NEW DIRECTIONS FOR EDUCATING RURAL LEADERS

Place-based education offers avenues to engage students directly in their communities, to provide training and experience in leadership positions from an early age, and also to empower students with the knowledge that they are capable of influencing their own communities. A shift in citizenship education would be one step in addressing the rural leadership crisis. State and national level policy changes are also needed to assist rural areas in addressing their economic and environmental concerns; but a change in the way civics is taught is a proactive measure local school districts could implement on their own without the need for federal policy oversight. We do not wish to suggest that this is a panacea, nor that it would be without challenges. First, we recognize that just as is the case with global civic education, place-based education may not be applicable to all learning environments. Second, reforms need to be made to the current assessment-driven model, and although there is general agreement on this point there is little consensus as to how these reforms should be structured. Pursuing a place-based curriculum, particularly in rural areas, offers an alternative for communities and schools to explore more holistic models of learning to provide a balance between meeting the individual needs of students with broader societal and community interests. Although a place-based curriculum may require research and time on the part of teachers, the interdisciplinary nature of place-based learning allows teachers from several subjects to work together.

Finally, place-based education requires a critical approach to learning based on inquiry and experience. As students are learning about their community and environment, they also are constantly questioning them. This in turn would limit the likelihood that students would simply accept the circumstances of the world that they perceive as perpetual and unchangeable. Nebraska provides an ideal laboratory in which to experiment with various applications of place-based learning because it consists of largely rural communities, suffers from the exodus of youth that we have addressed, and also because the state is less rigid in terms of the curricular objectives that it expects local districts to adhere to.

Despite this potential, the challenges facing Nebraska’s rural school districts are representative of those facing rural school districts across the country. The allure of life in the city has enticed young people in the United States to abandon their small towns for dreams of a better life since at least the middle of the 19th century. This

flow of people from rural to urban environments only accelerated as the industrial revolution exploded and civic reforms made cities cleaner, safer, and more habitable. Because of the general improvement in the quality of life available in urban areas and the economic and political capital enjoyed by industries located in larger cities, some observers argue it is not worth the time or resources to preserve small towns or small schools (Pasley 1986; Popper and Popper 1987). However, those small towns contain some of our country's most precious natural resources, are the location of our farms and food sources, and are home to citizens who have a right to keep their communities. It is important for members of those towns to train new leaders to keep those places thriving, but more broadly to train students to be the stewards of those natural resources. The maintenance of rural towns is linked to the prosperity of urban centers, and to abandon those rural communities to a slow death by out-migration profits neither rural nor urban dwellers.

In this vein, handcuffing school districts to rigid state standards that are designed, in part, to satisfy federal mandates sends a subtle but powerful message to students in small communities that their towns are simply the places in which they learn. In other words the lessons of life and the ideas and events that are worth learning have happened elsewhere and are relayed to small towns through education and media. Nebraska's emphasis on teaching students "to become young patriots . . . who are prepared to preserve, protect and defend freedom and democracy in our nation and in the world" (NSBE 2012, i) emphasizes that the ideals and duties of citizenship are defined at the national and international levels, not by local communities. Place-based learning offers an important and necessary counterpoint to give students the opportunity to become meaningfully engaged in their own communities and to explore opportunities for shaping the policies and places where they live. When students feel empowered and connected to their own communities they are less likely to feel as though their only opportunities exist outside their hometowns. If the purpose of civic education is to teach students to be responsible citizens, we need to begin by teaching students how to be citizens of their communities—with all the rights and responsibilities that entails.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

An earlier draft of this essay was presented at the 2013 center for Great Plains Studies Symposium at the University of Nebraska at Kearney. We would like to thank audi-

ence members for suggestions as well as the anonymous reviewers for helpful feedback.

REFERENCES

- Altinay, H. 2011. *Global Civics: Responsibilities and Rights in an Interdependent World*. Brookings Institution Press, Washington, DC.
- Brooke, R. 2012. Voices of young citizens: Rural citizenship, schools, and public policy. In *Reclaiming the Rural: Essays of Literacy, Rhetoric, and Pedagogy*, ed. K. Donehower, C. Hogg, and E. Schell, 161–72. Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale.
- Camicia, S.P., and J. Zhu. 2012. Synthesizing multicultural, global, and civic education perspectives in the elementary school curriculum and educational research. *Qualitative Report* 17:1–19.
- Cantrell, R. 2005. Rural depopulation: A closer look at Nebraska's counties and communities. *Rural Initiative Publications and Reports* 13:1–32.
- Cantrell, R. 2010a. A quick look at Nebraska's youth population data from recent census estimates. *Cornhusker Economics* 491:1–5.
- Cantrell, R. 2010b. The demand for citizen leadership in non-metropolitan Nebraska. *Cornhusker Economics* 505:1–4.
- Dunn, A.W. 1907. *The Community and the Citizen*. D.C. Heath, Boston.
- Evans, R.W. 2004. *The Social Studies Wars: What Should We Teach the Children?* Teachers College Press, New York.
- Funk, P.E. and J. Bailey. 1999. *Small Schools, Big Results: Nebraska High School Completion and Postsecondary Enrollment Rates by Size of School District*. Nebraska Alliance for Rural Education, Lincoln.
- Gallagher, C. 2003. *Charting STARS: Sustainability as Challenge and Opportunity*. Study contracted by Nebraska Department of Education, Lincoln.
- Jennings, N., S. Swidler, and C. Koliba. 2005. Place-based education in the standards-based reform era—conflict or complement? *American Journal of Education* 112:44–65.
- Marino, M.T., and M.T. Hayes. 2012. Promoting inclusive education, civic scientific literacy, and global citizenship with videogames. *Cultural Studies of Science Education* 7:945–954.
- McInerney, P., J. Smyth, and B. Down. 2010. "Coming to a place near you?" The politics and possibilities of a critical pedagogy of place-based education. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education* 39:3–16.
- Merryfield, M.M., and M. Kasai. 2004. How are teachers responding to globalization? *Social Education* 68:354.
- Nebraska Department of Education. 2012. *2012–2013 Number of Districts/Systems*. Study conducted by Nebraska Department of Education-Data, Research and Evaluation, Lincoln.
- Nebraska State Board of Education (NSBE). 2012. So-

- cial studies standards, http://www.education.ne.gov/AcademicStandards/Documents/NE_SocialStudiesStandardsApproved.pdf (accessed March 1, 2013).
- Osler, A., and K. Vincent, 2002. *Citizenship and the Challenge of Global Education*. Trentham Books, Stoke-on-Trent, UK.
- Pasley, J. 1986. The idiocy of rural life. *The New Republic*, December 8, 24–27.
- Popper, D.E., and F. Popper. 1987. The Great Plains: From dust to dust. *Planning*, December, 12–18.
- Rapoport, A. 2010. We cannot teach what we don't know: Indiana teachers talk about global citizenship education. *Education, Citizenship, and Social Justice* 3:179–90.
- Reich, J.C. 2012. Global learning as general education for the twenty-first century. *Educational Research and Reviews* 21:464–73.
- Reist, M. 2012. State board adopts social studies standards. *Lincoln Journal Star*, December 7.
- Resor, C.W. 2010. Place-based education: What is its place in the social studies classroom? *The Social Studies* 101:185–88.
- Roschewski, P. 2004. History and background of Nebraska's school-based teacher-led assessment and reporting system (STARS). *Education Measurement: Issue and Practice* 23(Summer): 9–11.
- Roschewski, P. 2008. Standards, assessment, and accountability: The transition years—2008–2012. *NCSA Today* (September): 6–9.
- Rubin, B.C., and J.M. Giarelli. 2007. *Civic Education for Diverse Citizens in Global Times: Rethinking Theory and Practice*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Mahwah, NJ.
- Smith, G.A. 2002. Going local. *Educational Leadership* 60:31–33.
- Torres, C.A. 2002. Globalization, education, and citizenship: Solidarity versus markets? *American Education Research Journal* 39:363–78.
- Vogt, R., C. Burkhart-Kriesel, R. Cantrell, and B. Lubben. 2012. Quality of life in nonmetropolitan Nebraska: Perceptions of well-being and church life—2012 Nebraska rural poll results. University of Nebraska–Lincoln, <http://ruralpoll.unl.edu/pdf/12community.pdf> (accessed March 1, 2013).
- Walser, J., and J. Anderlik. 2004. Rural depopulation: What does it mean for the future economic health of rural areas and the community banks that support them? *FDIC Banking Review* 16:57–95.