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Rural Revitalization in New Mexico: A Grass Roots Initiative Involving School and Community

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The Rural Education Bureau of the New Mexico Public Education Department has established a program to address the special needs of schools and communities in the extensive rural areas of the state. High poverty rates, depopulation and a general lack of viable economic opportunity have marked rural New Mexico for decades. The program underway aims at establishing holistic community socioeconomic revitalization at the grass roots level with the schools playing a leading role. Initiatives include community conversations with key leaders to determine necessary steps to take in encouraging economic growth and attracting businesses, the institution of entrepreneurship within the community, the transformation of the school into a community resource and the encouragement of place-based education within schools. In the second year of this program there are 13 school districts actively involved in the enhancement of their schools and community. The program adopted many of the principles for rural revitalization seen in the remote communities of South Australia.

Rural schools throughout the country operate under a host of serious constraints. Among the more serious of them are declining enrollments as the lure of the city continues to draw high school graduates and those unfortunate young people who opt to leave school, insufficient funding for remote rural schools, lack of accessibility to higher-order urban centers with adequate health care facilities, teacher cores not as highly trained as their urban and suburban counterparts and generally higher levels of poverty. New Mexico is a decidedly rural state and socioeconomic conditions within its remote regions demand immediate attention. The Rural School and Community Trust (RSCT), one of the leading national nonprofit organizations addressing the crucial relationship between good schools and thriving rural communities, provides compelling evidence of the urgency for change in the rural schools and communities in New Mexico.

In the RSCT biennial report, *Why Rural Matters 2005*, New Mexico is ranked second in the country in its "Rural Education Priority Gauge," a combined measure of 22 statistical indicators grouped into four subsets. The higher the ranking in the priority gauge the more urgent the need to address rural education in the state. New Mexico ranks behind only Mississippi in this study (Johnson & Strange, 2005). The RSCT study ranks New Mexico first in its

primary measure of rural poverty: nearly one in four families with school-age children are living below the federal poverty line. In addition, New Mexico has the second highest percentage of rural students (18.7) receiving special education services compared to the U.S. average of 2.4 percent.

Ethnic diversity in New Mexico also presents unique challenges to the education system: The combined American Indian and Alaskan native population in 2000 was 9.5 percent compared to the U.S. average of 0.9 percent. Persons of Hispanic or Latino origin represented 42.1 percent of the state's population in 2000 compared to the U.S. average of 12.5 percent. As a consequence of these ethnic concentrations within New Mexico it is not surprising that a language other than English was spoken by individuals five years of age and older in 36.5 percent of homes in 2000 compared to the U.S. average of 17.9 percent, and that the state is the second highest in the percentage of rural students who are minorities (70.61 percent). Only Hawaii has a higher percentage of minorities within its population (Johnson & Strange, 2005).

The diversity of New Mexico's population, the high levels of poverty found regionally within the state and the remoteness of its extensive rural communities create significant challenges to the state's education system. The

New Mexico Public Education Department (NMPED) is responding to these formidable challenges in a comprehensive manner. The enhancement of rural schools and the growth and development of rural communities are both emphasized in the vision statement of the Rural Education Division: “Vibrant and Productive Rural Schools and Communities.” The division’s mission statement reflects its vision: (a) assist in the improvement of educational opportunities, (b) advocate for rural districts, (c) provide and support programs to strengthen relationships among schools, families, and communities, and (d) implement a comprehensive school-led public-private partnership for community revitalization. These initiatives are particularly important in rural New Mexico where 24 of 48 school districts with enrollments fewer than 1,000 students had declines in enrollment between academic years 2002-2003 and 2004-2005.

The division’s mission statement underscores the holistic approach already underway to remedy the challenges to both the educational system and community decline. That is, a focus on school improvement alone is not sufficient. Nor will community economic revitalization be effective if attention is not paid to the schools. Warren (2005) addressed the inextricable connection between school and community in urban areas:

What sense does it make to try to reform schools while the communities around them stagnate or collapse? Conversely, can community building and development efforts succeed in revitalizing inner-city neighborhoods if the public schools within them continue to fail their students? The fates of urban schools and communities are linked, yet school reformers and community builders typically act as if they are not (p. 133).

The conceptual base expressed in this passage is eminently valid for rural areas as well. Any attempt at school reform must be linked with the concurrent revitalization of the communities in which the schools are located. The approach taken by the Rural Education Bureau emphasizes the key role played by the schools in initiating and leading community revitalization.

School and Community: An Evolving Relationship

Schools are located within communities and the relationship between the two entities has changed over time to reflect the socioeconomic situation of the period. Hickey and Van Voorhees (1969) discussed the concept of community education from colonial times to the immediate post-World War II era. The primary aim of community education in the colonial period was to use the schools for the general benefit of the community. To a large extent, this is a precedent that continues to the present in differing degrees. During the depression years, the schools became

more intimately involved with serving basic needs in the community. Programs were offered to community members in home economics, agriculture, and community development. In 1945, the concept of the “community school” was formalized. Hickey and Van Voorhees (1969) referred to the definition of community school/community education as provided by the National Society for the Study of Education:

The community school maintains two distinctive emphases—service to the entire community, not merely to the children or school age; and discovery, development and the use of resources of the community as part of the educational facilities of the school. The concern of the community school with local community is intended not to restrict the school’s attention to local matters, but to provide a focus from which to relate study and action in the larger community—the state, the nation and the world (p. 22).

In the years following this proposal, few schools incorporated this philosophy into their operations. One of the most successful adoptions took place in Flint, Michigan where in 1935 the Flint Board of Education, with generous financial backing from the C. S. Mott Foundation, established an ongoing community school program with an education center providing courses in a variety of areas open to all residents.

Van Dresser (1972) stressed the importance of community development in an uplands region of New Mexico taking into account ecologically derived development principles. Van Dresser advocated for reasoned economic development and resource use to insure the sustainability of both. In 1984, the widely read study on the condition of education in the United States, *A Nation at Risk*, concurred with the findings of a recent Gallup Poll: “People are steadfast in their belief that education is the major foundation for the future strength of [the] country (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1984).” There would seem to be no argument against this position. However, the study goes on to suggest that a great deal more needed to be accomplished before education truly represented the major foundation stated in the Gallup Poll. *A Nation at Risk* proposed the creation of a “Learning Society” committed to societal values and an educational system that reaches to individuals of all ages. The proposed Learning Society would provide educational opportunities that:

...extend into homes and workplaces; into libraries, art galleries, museums, and science centers; indeed, into every place where the individual can develop and mature in work and life. In our view, formal schooling in youth is the essential foundation for learning throughout one’s

life. But without life-long learning, one's skills will become rapidly dated (p. 17).

The idea of a "Learning Society" includes some of the salient aspects of the school-led community revitalization program underway in New Mexico. The belief that one's skills need continual renewal and that learning is life-long are eminently valid and are necessary for the development and sustainability of community revitalization.

A review of the community education concept by Minzey & LeTarte (1994) reminds the reader that in earlier and less complicated times, people were far more involved in schools and community. The authors consider such an orientation as "a far cry from the transient, cold, self-seeking society that exists today (p. 314)." A return to an earlier value system is in order according to Minzey and LeTarte. The authors further contend that the leadership needed for this transition should logically come from the schools. A U.S. Department of Education study took a similar approach (Stern, 1994). In addition to maintaining links to the community by providing social services and continuing education activities, schools were encouraged to use the local community as a resource for learning. Assigning students to work first-hand with community members, the study suggested, increased their potentials to learn through engagement in cooperative activities, to understand the requirements for decision making, problem solving, and the dedication required to grapple with real-world situations.

A publication from the Southwest Educational Development laboratory made a renewed effort to enlist parent and community support especially for low-performing schools (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). The authors strongly recommended that parents not only encourage their children to excel in school but to express their expectations that they will do so. Further, schools are charged with engaging families in meaningful ways to improve learning. Finally, the report suggested that families and communities join forces in holding poorly performing schools accountable. The last recommendation clearly identifies with the stringent Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). In 2004, two studies were conducted for the Center for the Education and Study of Diverse Populations (CESDP) by the Rural School and Community Trust (RSCT). The studies dealt with teaching conditions in rural New Mexico and aspects of fiscal inequality in New Mexico school districts. Full drafts of the studies are reprinted along with conclusions and policy recommendations in a recently published final report (Center for the Education and Study of Diverse Populations, 2006).

Four major areas of concern are discussed in the CESDP reports and provide the basis for recommendations aimed at improving education in rural New Mexico, one of which includes a proposal for greater community involvement:

- 1) Teacher recruitment, professional preparation, and professional development to ensure that the diverse

ethnic groups in rural New Mexico are adequately served;

- 2) Revision of the state's education system funding formula to ensure that students at greatest economic and educational disadvantage receive the resources necessary to improve student learning;
- 3) Ensure that curricula in rural schools is both culturally relevant and aligned with state standards; and
- 4) Establish partnerships between higher education and the K-12 educational system to provide a seamless progression from pre-kindergarten through the college years, and to promote partnerships involving parents, school, and community that ensures student success in rural schools (Center for the Education and Study of Diverse Populations, 2006, p. 49).

Background to the New Mexico Rural Revitalization Initiative

Soon after his inauguration in 2003 as governor of New Mexico, Bill Richardson initiated a series of studies to identify areas of need within the state. One of the studies focused on critical needs in rural education. The study group found that rural schools had limited local resources to ensure quality educational opportunities, funding from private organizations was difficult to obtain and their ability to engage in partnerships with other entities was difficult due to distance. In addition, the study group identified problems related to transportation, declining enrollments, reduced per-student state funding, limited or non-existent access to educational technology, administrative overload brought on by staff shortages and difficulty attracting and retaining good teachers. The study group drafted a set of recommendations directed at each of the problem areas. One of the recommendations called for the establishment of a high level leadership position within the New Mexico Public Education Department (NMPED) specifically devoted to rural education.

In 2004, the office of Assistant Secretary for Rural Education was created, staffing was initiated and start-up operating funds were acquired from the state legislature. The NMPED is committed to advocating on behalf of identified rural school districts and supporting the establishment and maintenance of school/community partnerships for community revitalization. The definition of rural education used by the Rural Education Division is based, in part, on information contained in the NCLB basic document. The Rural Education Division will respond to the requirements of school districts eligible for the "Small, Rural School Achievement Program (SRSA)," an initiative included in the "Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP)." The SRSA allows small rural schools additional time to satisfy the highly qualified teacher requirements mandated under NCLB. The number of school districts in New Mexico identified in the SRSA list will vary from year

to year as the highly qualified teacher requirements are met. For the 2005-2006 school year, 45 school districts in New Mexico were identified under the SRSA program. Additionally, the definition of rural education used by the Rural Education Bureau allows school districts not included in the yearly SRSA list to apply for assistance. In this way, no school district in need of assistance would be excluded from participating in the program.

Other National Models of School/Community Revitalization

New Mexico and other states are by no means alone in addressing the pressing needs in their rural regions. A particularly successful program in Alaska saw the 22,000 square-mile Chugach school district overcome the conditions of low morale, essentially absent parental support, high staff turnover and low student academic achievement (Schreiber, 2002). The restructuring program instituted in the 1990s brought the district from the depths of despair to rank first in writing and third in mathematics in Alaska. The Chugach success resulted, in large part, from a comprehensive shared vision that included all major stakeholders in the program (school, community, and business) in strong support of needed change and being accountable for its sustainability.

Alaska is now nearing the end of its ten-year rural school improvement effort, the "Alaska Rural Systematic Initiative" (AKRSI). The core of the program focused on ways to effectively integrate the schools into the life of their communities and to develop a systematic approach to addressing educational conditions throughout Alaska (Emekauwa, 2004). AKRSI has achieved remarkable results in its efforts to bring school and community closer together. The outcomes are particularly impressive given the enormous size of most rural school districts in the state. The impact of this areal expanse is candidly expressed by Iowa teacher Sheri Skelton (2004) when she first arrived at Shishmarif School in the Bering Strait School District:

From the air, the village seemed to be sitting on the edge of the world on a huge sandbar. It seemed as if someone had flown over it and randomly scattered people, houses, dogs, snow machines, and four-wheelers (p. 76).

One of the most important revelations for this teacher was the vast amount of student learning that took place outside the classroom with the Alaskan environment as the setting. This view reflects the current educational approach in Alaska, which avoids setting classroom learning apart from traditional skill acquisition, the so-called "two worlds" view that blends strong academics with the essentials of culture.

International Models of School/Community Revitalization

The uniting of school and community in rural New Zealand provides another focus (Bensemen, 2006). In addition to rural community revitalization efforts underway in this country, there is a strong shift away from traditional schooling to one of life-long learning. The primary impetus comes from the increasingly competitive international marketplace. When Britain joined the European Economic Community (now the European Community), New Zealand lost a traditional trading partner and was forced to seek out new markets in the rapidly emerging era of globalization. The key to economic success for New Zealand in this new and highly competitive world market hinges greatly on the expansion of education to all members of the society. This approach would appear to be suitable for every country in the world as the complexities of the global market system become more evident.

Rural school/community revitalization programs underway in Australia are of particular importance to the New Mexico initiatives. In 1993, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) combined three existing educational organizations to form the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MYCEETA). The purpose in grouping these educational entities was twofold: (a) to optimize the coordination of policy-making in these areas and (b) the recognition that actions taken in one of the areas can impact activities in the others and that these entities must work together in a systematic manner (National Framework, 2001).

In 1999, the MYCEETA Taskforce in Rural and Remote Education was established to improve employment, education, training and children's services in the rural and remote regions of Australia. The work of the organization was based on the following vision statement: "By age 18 each young person residing in rural or remote Australia will receive the education required to develop their full potential in the social, economic, political, and cultural life of the nation." The set of principles developed by the task force underscore the vision statement and are the key elements in understanding the special situations and requirements of rural regions. The vision statement and stated principles are eminently applicable to rural New Mexico:

Students and families living in rural and remote Australia have specific needs which are the direct result of living in particular geographic locations. The needs of rural and remote students should be met through local commitment . . . as well as through predictable and sustained government funded initiatives. There is a high degree of variability in the characteristics of rural and remote communities. . . . The provisions of education in rural and remote Australia

require creative and flexible approaches that require leadership at all levels, innovative technology, and holistic government approaches (National Framework, 2001).

Implicit within the holistic approach established by the taskforce are the extensive use of partnerships and the merits of working collaboratively (Moriarty & Gray, 2003). Schools were encouraged to work closely with their communities for mutual benefit and to form alliances with higher education. In addition, the attributes of life-long learning were embraced and implemented at all levels of the education system. Of immense importance was the realization by Australian educators that while everyone is *able* to learn, all must be *motivated* to learn (Halsey, 2003). This is a crucial concern: the majority of life-long learning will occur following the years of formal education and the motivation to continue learning must be embedded within every individual.

The Rural School – Community Interface

The notion of uniting school and community seems on the face of it to be obvious: Schools and the participants in them (students, teachers, administrators, janitors, maintenance workers, cooks, bakers, and bottle-washers) are all members of the community in which the school is located. Of course, the insistence on school-community unity involves other considerations and has been a recurring theme for decades. Hands, in an article in *The School Community Journal* (2005), examined the partnership process and the key issues that may impede the development of sound school-community operations. Another approach to connecting classroom and community through service learning arrangements is discussed in a monograph from the National Council for the Social Studies (Wade, 2000).

The institution of school councils composed of parents, teachers and community representatives (including business leaders) is proposed in a recent issue of *The Rural Educator* in response to the growing need to address accountability and the sharing of school governance (Pharis, Bass & Pate, 2005). A study of the impact of schools on rural villages in New York concluded that social and economic welfare is higher in communities where there are schools. Further, the positive impact of school presence is measurably higher in smaller places with fewer resources (Lyson, 2002; 2005). Schools are, as the author suggested, vital to rural communities. The “Coalition for Community Schools,” a Washington, DC organization, takes a holistic approach in the formulation of community-based learning. The Coalition’s mission statement includes mobilizing “the assets of schools, families, and communities to create a united movement for community schools . . . to improve student learning (Melaville, Berg, & Blank, 2006).” The primary emphasis in the Coalition’s program is to introduce students to the excitement of learning not only in the

classroom but in the community. The community becomes a source of learning and action.

An important attribute of community learning is the associations students make with their locale once they have been significantly acquainted with the place and begin to gain a greater appreciation for its merits. These gains in appreciation are most readily developed using the principles of place-based education, a pedagogy long advocated by the Rural School and Community Trust (2004), in which the community becomes an important context for learning, students work to address community needs and interests, and members of the community serve as resources in teaching and learning. Sobel (2005), a prominent advocate of place-based education, suggested these outcomes:

Bring education back into the neighborhood. Connect students with adult mentors, conservation commissions, and local businesses. Get teachers and students into the community, into the woods, and on the streets—closer to beauty and true grit. Get the town engineer, the mayor, and the environmental educators onto the schoolyard and inside the four walls of the school. These are the places we all belong (p. 8).

Bishop (2004) discussed the importance of place-based education and drew attention to the value of community and student acquisition of the skills to “live well anywhere,” concluding that the closing of a school can result in the loss of a community’s identity. The notions of community-school integration and the excitement of place-based education are central tenets in the rural revitalization program underway in rural New Mexico.

Rural Entrepreneurship: Toward Creative Economic Development

Advocates of the entrepreneurial approach to community revitalization conclude correctly that traditional economic development strategies do not lead to sustainable rural economic development. The traditional approaches—natural resource development, the attraction of industries and small business development—all mainstays in earlier eras of economic development—as a rule do not invoke the grass-roots and creative approach of the entrepreneur (Markley, Macke, & Luther, 2005). The entrepreneurial approach is characterized by the emergence of (a) self-development projects; (b) the substantial investment of local resources in the initiation of new enterprises; and (c) local control once the enterprises are up and running. A program to mobilize and enhance community support for local entrepreneurial efforts has been developed and implemented by the Center for Applied Rural Innovation (CARI) at the University of Nebraska. The program, “Enhancing, Developing, and Growing Entrepreneurs (EDGE), emphasizes development

of the community as opposed to development *in* the community. The entrepreneurial approach is structured to enhance the linking and coordinating of community actions that serve public interests and generate community economic vitality (Korsching & Allen, 2004).

The entrepreneurial movement gained momentum from a conference hosted by the Center for the Study of Rural America in Kansas City in 2003. The conference, “Main Streets of Tomorrow: Growing and Financing Rural Entrepreneurs,” contended that rural America is “on the frontier of a new economy. . . .” and that “[e]ntrepreneurs are crucial to claiming that frontier, as enormous changes sweep through other traditional rural industries like agriculture and manufacturing (Drabenstott, Novack, & Abraham, 2003).” Prominent themes discussed during the conference focused on ways in which public policy could be brought to bear on making rural America a more entrepreneurial place and the steps necessary to stimulate and sustain entrepreneurial growth. In another Center study, prospects were predicted to be high for rural America claiming a share in the burgeoning “knowledge economy.” Knowledge-based activities—the use of information to generate new ideas, to increase productivity and to create new products and processes—identify the essence of entrepreneurship (Henderson, & Abraham, 2005). Because knowledge manipulation is primarily completed electronically, there is no reason why centers in the rural areas cannot play leading roles despite their remoteness.

The prospects for renewed growth in the rural areas of America have never been more positive. Despite enormous natural disasters that struck the country in 2005, significant gains were realized in agriculture and rural communities saw widespread gains in employment and income (Henderson, 2006). While countrywide prospects for continued economic growth in rural areas appear to be positive, the picture in New Mexico is anything but clear. In recent years, business growth in the sparsely populated rural areas of New Mexico has been slow. As a consequence, outbound migration from the state has occurred. Thirteen of the state’s 33 counties experienced either population declines or single digit increases in the period from 1990 through 2003 while the state increased in population by nearly 24 percent. In addition, the U.S. Census predicts only a 12 percent increase in New Mexico’s population between 2000 and 2030 primarily because of limited economic growth (Ziler, 2006). Business leaders in the state, along with governmental and education leaders, are unanimous in their belief that grassroots economic development and the stimulation of entrepreneurship in rural areas can reverse the downward trends and bring about a resurgence in community socioeconomic vitality. This belief and the approaches prescribed serve as the basis for the rural revitalization program underway in the Rural Education Bureau.

New Mexico’s School-Led Community Revitalization Program

The Rural Education Bureau and the Center for Relational Learning (CRL) have teamed in a public/private program to revitalize rural communities at the grass roots level. Implicit in this program is the insistence that the rural community provide the impetus for change based on a real desire to engage in holistic and sustainable efforts to measurably improve their socioeconomic situation. It is further understood that the school within the community plays a significant role in the overall revitalization effort through community education (especially place-based education), opening the school to all members of the community during non-class hours and involving students in economic activities within the community at large. The initiative begins for a community with a series of “extended discovery conversations,” with representatives of both the Rural Education Bureau and the CRL. These conversations provide the opportunity for all segments of the community to come together to discuss at length those topics that really matter most to them about the future of the place (Otero, 2003). From these conversations, plans can be put in place to bring about significant change. It is mandatory that the mayor of the community and the superintendent of schools take part throughout the discovery conversations.

During the first year of the program, 2005, six school districts were fully involved in revitalization efforts. By the spring of 2006 significant results had been achieved. Briefly, these included the following:

- **Tatum Municipal Schools** attracted \$400,000 for a town beautification project; received funding from a construction firm to finance the building of one home a year; and began plans for a tourist ranch, museum, and Internet café. In a recent development, Tatum Municipal Schools will receive ongoing funding from a uranium enrichment plant in Hobbs, NM, to be used in a welding training program for students.
- **Cimarron Municipal Schools** convinced the community to approve \$5 million for capital works for school improvement; started a high-tech laser gift and souvenir business with a sales shop in the school; and initiated a partnership with the Philmont Scout Ranch, the largest scouting organization in the world. One of the community members in the program became so enthused about the revitalization initiative that she ran for mayor of Cimarron and was elected!
- **Loving Municipal Schools** developed a community library and a story-telling program; initiated an enhanced credit arrangement for senior students using distance learning to expand curricular possibilities; and began work with the mayor and other community members to construct

low cost and energy-efficient homes in the community. This program uses student workers and teaches them essential construction skills.

- **Jemez Valley Public Schools** began offering arts, theater and drama options for community members in an after school program; created the “Valles Caldera Project,” an outdoor education initiative for both students and the wider community; and expanded the school’s vocational training certificate program.
- **Maxwell Municipal Schools** instituted a community health service in the school for students and community members; created a café and youth center within the community; began a small business run by senior students to produce tactile blankets for disabled children and senior citizens; and developed several small business partnerships with the local wildlife refuge, the Maxwell Village Council and the local natural gas supplier.
- **Jemez Mountain Public Schools** implemented a biomass heating system for the high school building, partnered with a local community college to develop curricular materials to support the biomass initiative, and began a program to market student art works.

In spring 2006, an additional seven school districts were added to the rural revitalization initiative. Like their counterparts from the original six districts, representatives from the new districts along with two Rural Education Bureau staff members, traveled to South Australia for a ten-day visit to study selected communities in that region and see first-hand the operation of successful school-led rural community revitalization programs. The Rural Education Bureau looks forward to the growth of new and exciting entrepreneurial progress within the current cohort of communities and the sustainability of efforts underway if the original six. In addition, we look forward to the continued expansion of the program in the future. With renewed growth and development of the rural communities in New Mexico as our goal we emphatically proclaim, **¡Si, se puede!** (Yes, we can!).

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