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Jeanne L. Surface

University of Nebraska at Omaha, jsurface@unomaha.edu

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Introduction to Rural Educational Leadership

Jeanne L. Surface
University of Nebraska at Omaha

Correspondence — Jeanne L. Surface, Ed.D., University of Nebraska at Omaha,
312 Roskens Hall, Omaha, NE 68182; email jsurface@unomaha.edu

CHANGE generally emerges when the status quo no longer serves most people. It is at that point that different ideas take root and begin to direct the process of change. And where do the different ideas come from? Wendell Berry (1987) argued that they come from the periphery, which in the context of the 21st century, is the countryside.

America's educational system is not improving, and hasn't been for decades. Despite the fact that the system flatlined with the advent of the standards and testing movement, the creation of standards and tests has reached a kind of fever pitch—with few stopping to question whether teaching to standards—teaching the same material to all students everywhere—makes any kind of sense from a learning standpoint. The fallout from our standards/testing fetish has been well-documented: a narrowing of curriculum, inhibited curricular imagination among teachers, and a deadening drill/kill experience for youth that has contributed to a spiking drop-out rate. And there is even more insidious fallout, because a standards/testing milieu enables those interested in privatizing and corporatizing America's educational efforts to use predictable test failures to squeeze their way into the educational arena, putting the very concept of “public” schools at risk.

In short, schools are not serving most students well. Where are the ideas that will replace those that drive the status quo? Where will they come from? This issue of the *Peabody Journal of Education* will argue that Wendell Berry was right, that change in the educational system will come from the countryside, from rural educational leaders with a deep commitment to true education in their particular place on earth.

In this issue we will highlight the critical needs and special conditions that affect rural education and we will highlight the possibilities that exist for improving the conditions that exist in all schools. Rural school leaders need to decide when to exercise their voice, and be bold and confident in the face of cultural and stereotypical characterizations of rural life and living and therefore, by extension, cultural and stereotypical characterizations regarding the worth and quality of rural education. The article by Surface and Theobald, “The Rural School Leadership Dilemma” begins with actual conversations that reveal the subtle and sometimes not-so-subtle put-downs that come with living a rural life and building a rural school career. This will be followed by a short history lesson that demonstrates why bias against rural people and places remains prevalent in the 21st century. The article ends by helping rural school leaders muster the courage to challenge the status quo by calling out stereotypes and celebrating the strengths of rural schools.

Rural schools can be very difficult places to lead, as they are often fragmented along class lines, with political factions promoting competing values and interests regarding the purpose of schooling. In her article “The Power of Competing Narratives: A New Interpretation of Rural School-Community Relations” McHenry-Sorber painfully illustrates the ways in which opposing groups consolidate political power around competing narratives in the community. The goal is the realization of a hegemonic narrative of community, in which one group is socially excluded and the other gains the political power necessary to influence school district decision-making.

The Common Core movement reflects a historical tension experienced in rural communities over power and privilege. The prominence of neoliberal political philosophy in discussions impacting rural communities has affected these communities in the past and is undergirding philosophy about current educational reform initiatives. In “School Leadership in the 21st Century: Leading in the Age of Reform,” Butler defines neoliberalism and connects past policy decisions affecting rural communities with the current reform efforts. He addresses how the neoliberal-influenced agricultural policies of the mid-20th century parallel current education reform. Last, he discusses the impact of Common Core on rural school leaders and school districts.

Canadian scholar Michael Corbett furthers the discussion by addressing how the concept of community has been central to the discourse of rural education for generations and at the same time, how community has been and continues to be a deeply problematic concept. The article, “The Ambivalence of Community: A Critical Analysis of Rural Education’s Oldest Trope” examines the idea of community and looks at the ways it has been used historically in rural education. He argues that effective rural education policy today needs to focus on a conception of place that keeps in focus multiple and complex understandings of rural places.

The school district is the fundamental administrative unit of schooling in the United States and the superintendent is the lead official. The nature and challenges of this position, however, vary across the landscape. In “Three Contemporary Dilemmas for Rural Superintendents,” Howley, Howley, Rhodes, and Yahn discuss the challenges that typically bedevil rural superintendents. From this vantage, they theorize such challenges, and illustrate the theory with three episodes: (1) the continuing threats of school and district consolidation; (2) the arrival of ethnic diversity in all-White rural places; and (3) the leasing of school lands for mining, with a focus on hydraulic fracturing (“fracking”).

One of the major obstacles to successful educational efforts in rural areas is overcoming the widespread acceptance of cultural assumptions regarding the worth of rural America. A number of rural two-year colleges today are under siege, just like so many of their rural PK–12 counterparts. In “The War: The Story of One Rural College’s Battle for Survival,” Mills discusses the movement to close and consolidate rural schools. Legislators and policy makers who live in urban or suburban areas have been working toward what they like to call “efficiencies” in education. For these folks, efficiency means closing down and consolidating small schools to free additional funding for large ones. For the numerous rural communities that would be negatively impacted, the challenge is nothing less than a political “war” that they must now wage to protect the quality of life they cherish.

In their case study, “Putting Foucault to Work: Understanding Power in a Rural School” Freie and Eppley use the work of Michel Foucault to examine the complex power relations of a school and community in the midst of a closure/consolidation and subsequent reopening as a charter school. The use of Foucauldian tools, governmentality, disciplinary power, and ethics informed the analysis of interview data from teachers, community members, and the school

principal. The tools are used to examine the power relations within the school and community and the school's relationship with governmental systems. This will help us to rethink a commonsense understanding about school leadership. Innovations associated with gas and oil drilling technology, including new hydraulic fracturing and horizontal drilling techniques, have recently led to dramatic boomtown development in many rural areas that have endured extended periods of economic decline.

The Marcellus Shale region is one of the world's largest gas-bearing shale formations, lying beneath about two-thirds of Pennsylvania, including some of the state's most rural areas. Spurred by a policy environment favorable to unconventional gas extraction, drilling activity in the last five years has increased exponentially, with often-profound impacts on communities, both positive and negative. Several decades of scholarship on boomtown growth has examined the community effects of rapid economic, demographic, and social change. Kai Schafft and Cat Biddle address boomtown development through the analytic lens of schools in "School and Community Impacts of Hydraulic Fracturing Within Pennsylvania's Marcellus Shale Region, and the Dilemmas of Educational Leadership in Gas Boomtowns." Using data from interviews and focus groups with educators and community stakeholders in Pennsylvania's Northern Tier, they examine the effects of boomtown development on rural schools, as well as the multiple organizational and fiscal dilemmas school leaders face as they confront decision-making in the context of incomplete information and rapid and unpredictable community change.

In this issue we highlight the critical needs and special conditions that affect rural education and discuss possibilities for improving the conditions that exist in all schools. We hope that you enjoy this issue and develop a stronger understanding of what rural school communities face in the United States.

Reference

Berry, W. (1987). *Home economics*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.