

10-1-2007

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Recommended Citation

Gammon, M., & Hodges, P. (2007). A View from the Past. *The Rural Educator*, 29(1), 4-5. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v29i1.949>

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A View from the Past

Mary Lou Gammon and Paula Hodges

Guest Editors

As we reviewed articles from past issues of the NREA professional journals, we were struck by the dichotomy of how rural schools are faced with some of the same issues today as they were years ago: isolation, finding and keeping good leaders, training teachers, and changing curricula demands.

We were also reminded of the impact of developing technology on the rural cultures: availability of broader curricula, the problem of the affordability of such innovations, and training of faculty and staff to use the technology for instruction.

“The recent awakening in the study of rural life has given to the rural school a new task and a new responsibility . . . To the end that the school may meet more adequately the demands of the new “ruralism”, better trained teachers are needed—teachers who have a clear conception of the mission of the new rural school and an enthusiasm born of a knowledge of what ought to be done and how it may be accomplished.”

This quote, taken from the first volume in a series of teacher education texts published in 1917 entitled Rural School Management (p. ix), illustrates the persistence of the problems faced by schools that are more commonly defined by their demographics or distances from cities. “The U.S. Census Bureau defined rural as ‘a residential category of places outside urbanized areas in open country, or in communities with less than 2,500 inhabitants, or where the populations density is less than 1,000 inhabitants per square mile’” (cited in Stern, 1994; cited in Horn, 1995; cited in Oliver, 2007). In other words, rural has typically been defined by their “distance from a city, population density, apparent isolation, availability of resources, homogeneity of population, and similar characteristics” (Oliver, 2007).

While the “new ruralism” of 1917 was centered on the then new practice of providing educational services outside of city limits, we can say that the “new ruralism” of today struggles with the very definition of rural, even though finding and keeping effective leaders, finding and training highly qualified teachers, providing state-of-the-art technology, and meeting state and federal curricula mandates still take precedence.

An adjunct to the definition of rural may be understanding how the “rural myth” may have changed in recent years. The commonly held myth includes references to rural life as “safe, peaceful, and good” (Oliver 2007) or

that rural schools have “less specialization among teachers, less equipment both in and out of classroom, and less bureaucracy...greater tendency toward teaching the aspects of basic education, more recognition of the individual contributions, and more relaxed relationships between faculty, administration and staff” (Sher, 1983 cited in Oliver 2007).

Our current “new ruralism” takes issue with the myth that rural communities are mostly agrarian in nature, although some still are, and that these communities exist outside the mainstream of American urban culture. The myth included the thought that every person, in one way or another, can boast of a direct experience with life on the farm. With the isolation factor greatly influenced by “waves of culture-delivering” cell phone technology and the increasing availability of “connections to the larger network of our culture” (Oliver, 2007), the redefinition of rural certainly has taken an unforeseen turn. In the persistent search for a common definition of rural, the factors of technology and access may have complicated this task. In fact, Oliver (2007) continues by saying that “Our framework for describing a rural school may not allow for any generalizations, but we can hope that the myth still lives in the people we find there.”

The articles included in this centennial issue reflect current studies and discussions on leadership, technology, and teachers. In “Killing Mayberry: The Crisis in Rural American Education” by James A. Bryant, Jr., Ph.D., we find a comprehensive overview of critical issues such as economic and social pressures facing rural schools today and the impact of these issues on teachers and administrators. The article offers a hopeful conclusion that policymakers and Americans in general will recognize that the educational needs of over eleven million rural school children impact the country and cannot be ignored any longer.

Excerpts from articles have been reprinted from past issues that treat with the evolving use of technology to address distance learning, once unheard of in both public schools and universities. These articles begin with correspondence courses and end with a new article by professors from Ft. Hays State University where the faculty has created an entirely new program for principals as leaders in the utilization of technology in their schools, as well as where the program is delivered to these principals via the use of technology. Reading Bruce Barker’s article from the 1980’s in which he predicts the widespread use of computers for instruction makes us realize what vision he had long before many of us in education had. These articles also make us cognizant of how fast the technology changes

and how fast we have to work to keep up with those changes if we are to remain effective in our rural schools. We hope these views from the past are enlightening, as well as entertaining. Often it is good to review what we have done to see how far we have come in rural education.

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