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# School Leadership in the Rural Context

Mary Lou Gammon

Guest Editor

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Looking back through previous *Rural Educators* has illustrated the myriad of issues that impact the rural school. Although we understand that the rural school is changing with the societal and political times, we cling to the hope that rural school students will understand the value of the personalized attention they have received throughout their school years. While the percentage of people who claim a near rural connection is diminishing, there continues to be a widespread sense that rural is synonymous with peace and quiet, nature, community, and isolation. In the articles found in the special issue of *The Rural Educator*, Volume 21, Number 2 in the Winter of 1999-2000, we find a series focusing on the impact of programs such as the National Science Foundation Rural Systemic Initiative and the Annenberg Rural Challenge. Individual state initiatives focused on helping schools and communities recognize the "sense of place." Emphasis was given to strengthening the bonds between the school and the community.

South Dakota high school teacher, Mary Stangohr, describes in "Educational Renewal in Rural South Dakota" how she developed curriculum to help her students gain a perspective about their rural community. Using mini-grant funding from a variety of state and federal sources, students explored their own history "by interviewing approximately 10 percent of the county's population" (Stangohr, 1999, p. 20). Students looked closely at the land and their personal connection to the land. They studied a nearby ghost town located just four miles from their town, visiting the abandoned graveyard and buildings standing alone against the prairie. They recognized parallels between this ghost town and their home town, both of which were established in the late 1800s. They traced the history of the demise of the once prosperous ghost town and drew conclusions about what happened to preserve their own town. Because the article presents timely information almost ten years later, the editors have decided to reprint the article for your information.

In addition to the overarching concept of place and the impact of rural economic stress, i.e., small businesses closing doors, rural has had to deal with other changes from the outside such as losing family generational farmland to large corporations and builders creating residential communities on land that once grew grains and pastured livestock. One of the outcomes of the influx of agribusiness on a small rural community in Illinois was an instant need for ESL services for an Hispanic student population that increased from eight students to over one hundred eighty in a short three years (Brunn & Delany-Barmann, 2001, p. 8). In this Spring, 2001, article, *Migrant Children and Language Policies*, the authors characterize the rural school culture as "having a strong sense of community among the teachers, administration, and the students reflective of the social and kinship ties within the community. These schools also have a strong sense of being an integrated part of the extended community in which they are located" (p. 9). Schools in rural areas often serve as community centers for meetings, activities, and political agendas. The authors continue their description by stating that "smaller class sizes, fewer number of teachers, building level administrators who work closely with the staff and the community, and the centrality of the school to the functions and the social events of the community contribute to the nurturing, the achievement, and to the socialization of students individually and collectively." Imposed, then, upon this smooth functioning school is the establishment of a new form of business that brings with it a population that has a new and intensive educational need for which the school system is unprepared.

## References

- Stangohr, M. (1999). Educational renewal in rural South Dakota. *The Rural Educator*, 21(2), 19-21.  
Brun & Delany-Barmann, (2001). Migrant children and language policies. *The Rural Educator*, 23(2).