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Educational Renewal in Rural South Dakota

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"I have a better understanding of what my community has gone through, and now I have a greater appreciation of what it faces," - Nick Wolf, Class of 1998, Howard High School, after completing a nine-week unit on the importance of place.

Introduction

In our school and community, we are working together for our continued future. Our lofty goal, the heart of our North Central Accreditation plan, is to develop a sustainable community which meets the basic needs of its citizens. Our community is only as well off as its most destitute citizen. This is a community that must grow and develop within its ecological limits, and the people living here today must inhabit it in ways that sustain it for future generations. We realize that ours is a commitment that requires the combined efforts of all of our citizens: not just the school, not just Main Street, not just the farmers, but all of us working together.

History

Howard County High School began to take a broad perspective on education when Jim Lentz became the principal in 1994. His philosophy of education allowed teachers to broaden their students' learning and extend the boundaries of our school beyond the four walls of the classroom. Teachers were asked to teach one community focused lesson each month, the only limits to the lessons were the limits of the teacher's imagination. Education was broadened from the "2-by-4" teaching of our traditional past (students learned everything between the two covers of the book and the four walls of the classroom) to a curriculum that encouraged student learning beyond the immediate classroom. In some cases, students might not touch a book throughout an entire unit.

As a result of this change in the curriculum, students are finally being told that they don't have to leave town to be successful. They are finally being taught the skills to create a job, not just the skills to find a job. We as teachers are encouraged to localize our curriculum, rather than standardize it.

Howard High School's success so far has been based on four ideals:

1. Students and teachers must understand their home, their community. This includes knowledge of the local history, economics, and government. According to Jim Lentz, named superintendent in 1997,

"Only then can you decide to build on your history, or perhaps not to repeat certain aspects."

2. The community is committed to making certain the basic needs of all citizens are met. Miner County is a poor region with some people living in desperate situations. Fifty percent of the population earns less than \$20,000 a year. Food, clothing, shelter, and education are basic needs of every person that we will continually work to provide.
3. The school promotes sustainability. Long-term goals include supporting agriculture and other land uses that don't harm the environment, and promoting economic activity that will keep businesses and the school district financially stable.
4. Revisiting democracy is essential for all of our citizens, the young and elderly. The school will help students and community members understand issues surrounding topics including corporate farming, antitrust concerns in agribusiness, government services, and others, as well as political solutions to those issues.

Mini-grants

In fall, 1994, the Program for Rural School and Community Renewal from South Dakota State University in Brookings, South Dakota, awarded Howard three mini-grants. Two of the mini-grants were directed to study the importance of place in the community and one was to do a community cash flow project. After the success of these small projects, Howard received several larger grants.

In 1994 the local Future Business Leaders of America (FBLA) chapter, with advisor Randy Parry and members of the community, wrote a 30-question survey concerning local spending patterns. This survey was sent to 1,000 Miner County residents. A remarkable 64 percent of the surveys were returned. On studying the responses, students calculated that if residents spent just 10 percent more of the money already budgeted for things they currently purchased in the county, we could have \$7 million new funds

circulated once the normal turnover is calculated.

This information was printed in the local paper, and people began to realize just how much power they had. Shopping locally is good for everyone. Then, in spring 1995 Miner County's largest employer and only manufacturer, Wrap-It, laid off more than 100 workers. During the same time, taxable sales increased 27 percent over the previous year. Unbelievable! Our citizens proved they have the power to increase the amount of money spent locally.

In an effort to help create a sustainable community, members of the local Future Farmers of America (FFA) chapter planted an apple orchard and a garden featuring summer produce, asparagus, and strawberries in spring, 1997. Funding for the project came from the Program for Rural Schools and Community Renewal. The school district already owned the land and allowed the FFA members to use it. Arrangements with the local grocery store owner allowed the students to sell their produce at a price below other sources. This project may one day evolve into a landscape business.

An additional \$65,000 federal grant in December 1997 enabled the school to build a greenhouse. This project has become a student-organized corporation with student stockholders. All stock will be sold upon graduation to future stockholders. Students will work year round in the greenhouse and orchard and will be paid out of profits from produce sales.

Both the gardening and greenhouse projects involve cross-curricular education. The garden and orchard are student-run organizations that teach organic crop production, accounting, and entrepreneurial skills. The greenhouse involves the efforts of the accounting class, the vocational business class for marketing, and journalism students involved in advertising. Our work in the community hasn't stopped with the garden and greenhouse. We have explored other ideas, such as processing food into jellies and salsa.

Rural Resource Center

In spring 1996 the Program for Rural School and Community Renewal awarded a \$25,000 grant to Howard to continue its efforts to involve the community with the school. Miner County once had 9,000 residents and seven high schools. Now, there are about 2,800 residents and one high school. Similar to national trends, local farms have gotten larger, but the numbers of farmers have decreased. Most of the small towns in our county have become all but ghost towns, and most students graduate, move away, and never find their way back to live. They visit occasionally to hunt and celebrate the holidays.

Working from the premise that any school improvement plan will be absolutely irrelevant if there are not students or communities to serve, Howard's improvement plan will focus on the community as a whole. We anticipate the process will be long, and possibly controversial, but

certainly educational for all parties who choose to be involved.

With a portion of the \$25,000 grant from the Program for Rural School and Community Renewal, Howard established a Rural Resource Center within the school. This is a place open to the public and the school for a variety of needs. It holds a resource library dealing with issues such as ecology, agriculture, health care, education, public policy, energy, poverty, and environment. Organizations such as the Child Protection Team, the Student Council, Scouts, FBLA and others have full access to the center for meetings. It is open for coffee, research and small talk.

Local historians and school children use the walls to display *mementos* of related topics in the community. In the past, the room has celebrated Miner County's veterans, churches, rural schools, and is currently displaying the clubs and organizations both active and inactive in our county. Photos, historical artifacts, and writings of school children generated by local topics are always on display.

Curriculum

Curriculum changes have students exploring their own history and asking questions about their own future. In the past three years students recorded a history of the county. This included interviewing approximately 10 percent of the county's population. The students wrote about war veterans, farmers and merchants. They have written the histories of local churches and plan to do future writings which could include writing the histories of rural women.

Students continued their studies by looking closely at the land and their connection to the land. Students studied the nearby ghost town of Vilas. Just four miles west of Howard, the graveyard remains of Vilas, including an abandoned Odd Fellows Hall and six homes, stand alone against the prairie. Students have recognized many parallels between Vilas and Howard. Both communities were settled in the 1880s and were heavily dependent on agriculture and railroads for their survival. However, even with two railroads to support it, Vilas was not able to flourish. By the 1930s and 40s Vilas had lost its high school, and one railroad was ready to pull out. By the 1960s only a couple of businesses and a handful of people remained. Students studied the land, grasses, migration patterns of animals, people and businesses as part of the unit. They also looked at the influences of different business sectors, including railroads, trucking, and agriculture. Lessons in the importance of supporting their own community and accepting who they are were also part of the learning experience.

The realities of rural life are recorded in the book *Broken Heartland* by Osha Davidson and taught to juniors at Howard. The book, subtitled *The Rise of the Rural Ghetto*, vividly describes the history of farming. It explains the farm policies of the 1970s that set up the crisis of the 1980s, and then depicts the realities of the 90s. Issues such as these are seldom taught in high schools: however, they were readily

understood at Howard, and all of the students were influenced by their studies.

Once students finished the unit, some hard questions were asked, including, "What will happen to our town?" "Will we follow the same path as other communities?" "Will there be a place for me when I am ready to be a part of the community?" "What can I do to effect any changes in the situation I am in and my community is in?" Students' reactions took many forms including research papers, songs, video documentaries, and letters. The range of topics was broad, including antitrust laws that have no power because federal judges decide cases, not juries; the exploitation of the rural people and our natural resources; tax codes that are not equitable; and questions of rural democracy.

One student, Sarah Callies, presented a copy of the book and a letter to Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle, Tom Daschle reported that he presented it to President Clinton with a list of questions by fellow student Kristen Carmichael. Students found out that their opinions, decisions, and ideas are indeed important and relevant.

Today

According to Jim Lentz, what Howard High School and Miner County is trying to do goes beyond the sum of its parts. "It's more than economic development or acquiring a sense of place. It's nurturing." Lentz said. Nurturing communities produce internal solutions rather than compete for outside salvation. Between 1982 and 1992 Miner County lost more than 100 farms, declining from 527 farms to 424. "Right now ten cents of every dollar goes for food in the country." Lentz said. "Yet only one of those cents makes it back to the producer. A farm area like Miner County shouldn't be shipping all it produces out, then buying it back, with the profits going to those who promote and package the product." The garden and the orchard are first steps to the ultimate goal of a sustainable community.

The old belief system suggested, "If you stayed home to make a living, you were not as good as those who went out into the world. People who stay home don't have the ability to go elsewhere." For any of our projects to make a difference, the youth of today need to change their beliefs and expectations. These changes are slow, but they are happening. Students are learning that there is a place for them here, too.