

SCHOOLS SUPPORTING THE RURAL INFRASTRUCTURE

by

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Speech Reprint

It is a pleasure to be here in Portland and the Northeast, particularly at this time of year. I am particularly pleased to share with you some thoughts about "Schools Supporting the Rural Infrastructure."

What I hope to do today is to expand your concept of the role and activities of schools. Move beyond the comfort areas, and challenge the concept "we've always done it this way." For what we are all talking about at this conference is the reshaping of the vision and mission of rural communities.

In thinking about just how to frame my remarks today I considered looking at the expected — Rural America. But I believe to focus just on domestic issues, at least to create the framework of my remarks would be too narrow. Having just re-visited Naisbett's *Megatrends 2000*, and recently looking at the issue of U.S. competitiveness in the world- I believe I would be remiss if my comments were not framed in a "global" economy-and then moving from the global community back to rural community. In America, Naisbett reminds us that we do indeed live in a global community. Our children attending rural schools and our rural constituency compete in the international economy.

Throughout the industrialized nations-education and the economy have become a catch phase for a vague but urgent dissatisfaction with the status quo (OECD, 1990).

In a recent proceeding document published by the Organization of Economic Cooperation & Development it was stated:

The central problem is the risk that the capacity of a highly interdependent, open and fast-moving international

economic system to generate change will outstrip human and social capabilities-unless education and training can enhance the capacity of individuals to change and thereby increase their security.

This same report goes on to say:

The functionally illiterate-those with inadequate educational preparation and access to educational preparation and access to educational opportunities, or those with inappropriate qualifications-risk being marginalized, unemployed or having access to little more than unstable, low-paying jobs.

In reviewing the literature which addresses the problems of rural education and rural community development, there seems to be increasing evidence that rural education policies and programs are inextricably linked to the future development of rural communities, both here and abroad.

Our global economy, and in turn, our domestic economy are changing quickly. The key to maintaining a competitive edge is the ability to understand the local community and its history, while remaining flexible and adaptive. Rural communities must be able to draw the best from their collective past-while looking to the future and where they want to be in the 21st Century.

We have seen a great deal of change in our society, many of which are global in nature: high levels of unemployment long-term unemployment, sharp declines in manufacturer employment, intensified international trade competition, changing skills & qualifications.

For rural communities in the U.S. we have:

- ♦ Higher proportion of rural workers that are part-time, self-employed, and/or seasonally employed.
- ♦ A higher average of disabled persons (proportionally)
- ♦ Higher proportion of persistently poor.
- ♦ Much smaller proportion of population ages 20-44; much higher percentage in the 55+ category.
- ♦ Smaller number of both college graduates and in the number years of education attainment.

All of these factors influence the economy in rural communities. Such inequities jeopardize the present and future viability of these communities. In order to survive communities need to tap their local resources to maximize its potential. Education agencies are an essential part of the local infrastructure. The OECD report states it best:

In an open economy, the competitiveness of the workforce is closely connected with its ability to acquire the right kinds of knowledge and skills.

So then how can schools, at all levels, be supportive in their rural communities? It is more complex than most would think. For the past 40 years we have had an industrialized model of schooling. The local schools were an integral part of the community but most of the community viewed the schools as a K-12 enterprise. When we talk about schools and community development it is a broader concept.

First, let us look briefly at a definition of community development.

Ken Wilkinson, (1988), "As a process, CD means capacity building-building (or at least trying to build) the capacity for self-help and self-direction through community action."

Paul Nachtigal (1989), "An educational process through which a community learns to survive."

My definition, "CD is the process communities helping citizenry help themselves for the common good."

Development entails deliberate action and long term commitment. It emphasizes a *process*.

If one accepts the idea that community self-help and collective action are at the heart of community development, then Community Development efforts focus on capacity building.

Schools, education agencies, in this sense are clearly a part of the CD process since they are integral part of community infrastructure. But not as a single entity, schools are part of the basic building blocks of Community Development.

Sense of Community

- ♦ Knowledge of local community
- ♦ Integration of community into curriculum
- ♦ Development of community
- ♦ Belonging
- ♦ Balance

Quality Of Life

- ♦ Health
- ♦ Social service delivery
- ♦ Civic groups
- ♦ Churches
- ♦ Volunteerism
- ♦ Libraries

Human Resource Development

- ♦ K-12
- ♦ Higher education
- ♦ Technical schools
- ♦ Training/Retraining
- ♦ Community Education
- ♦ Lifelong learning

Economic Development

- ♦ Creation of wealth
- ♦ Economic diversity
- ♦ Job creation

First, let me say that educational reform that provides a quality education, combining practical experience with ideas and concepts for all students is, in and of itself, an important contribution to Community Development.

Benefits:

- ♦ Students benefit through increased mobility & higher earnings that come from improved education.
- ♦ Communities benefit in that improved schools make them a more attractive place to work and live.
- ♦ Communities benefit when better educated individuals remain in the community, their skills and abilities contribute directly to the capacity of the community to deal with common problems. (Raftery and Mulkey, 1989)
- ♦ Schools can facilitate the development of the broader community by adding explicit community focus to existing programs.

However, I must raise a caution flag that while the benefits of improved education to both individuals and communities are believed to have a positive correlation merely improving the education delivery in a rural community will not automatically lead to economic development. Improved education and schools are a necessary but not sufficient condition for economic development. While we need to improve the quality of our educational system that alone is not the solution-the quick fix-the miracle.

Let me return once again to the report of the organization for Economic Co-operation & Development (OECD). This report identifies four areas of concern when discussing education and the economy in industrialized nations.

1. The "human factor" is assuming a pre-eminence as a factor of production. QUALIFICATIONS are becoming critical determinants of effective performance of enterprises and economics. Skills, qualifications, innovation, and personal adaptability assume greater importance.
2. Mastery of advanced technologies requires:
 - ♦ Workforce capable of applying advanced technologies;
 - ♦ Technologically literate consumers.
3. Very notion of what it means to be active in society is changing due to longer life spans.

Education preparing for an active society needs to be much more than simple preparation for working life. Life-long learning is becoming the norm worldwide.

4. Education is less synonymous than ever with schooling. Initial education not enough impact of corporate "training" programs.

Now let us look at these four identified needs through a rural America "filter."

1. Qualifications, skills, innovation, and personal adaptability.

Rural America has always prided itself on a skilled, hard working labor force. To remain competitive however our labor force will need to become more innovative and adaptable.

2. Master of Advanced Technologies.

As a nation we have adapted to quite well to the information and technology age. Rural America however lags behind. This is partly the result of sparsity of population and geographic isolation. More often it is high of the "cost" of these new technologies. For instance, much of our current rural infrastructure of phone lines is not adequate to accommodate new technologies.

If rural America is to stay competitive the delivery of technology and technological innovations must be a priority for rural communities in this country. Only with availability will our rural citizenry be able to apply such advanced technologies, as well as begin a technologically literate consumer.

3. Lifelong Learning

Community colleges, community education, as well as other forms of lifelong learning, and quality of life enhancements have become more prevalent in rural communities. There is still much room for creativity and innovation in this area.

Often our rural schools are not utilized for community activities associated with lifelong learning. Interagency collaboration may help to elevate some of these barriers in order to provide our rural clientele with a higher quality of life.

4. Education is less synonymous than ever with schooling.

Graduating from high school has been viewed in many rural communities as the terminal education experience. A re-socialization process will be necessary if we are to capture the vitality and resourcefulness of our rural labor force.

Learning is a lifetime endeavor. Education (K-12) can no longer be viewed as enough. The rural workforce will require up-dating, and when necessary, retraining.

What emerges from the literature, both here in the U.S. and in the global context, are three essential roles of education and economic/community development:

1. Schools need to contribute to a flexible labor force, innovative management, research, and new blood for entrepreneurship.
2. Providing the stable general and vocational foundation of skills and competencies; opportunities for further education; training and retraining; a second chance opportunities to update and upgrade skills.
3. Providing the trained, adaptable and flexible labor forces in regions hit by structure change and unemployment.

To achieve these goals in rural America will require policy; both rural development policy and rural education policy. To begin with, it would be helpful if we were to make an attempt to have both a comprehensive rural development policy and rival education policy in this country.

However, a void in such policy does not exclude action on critical issues in the interim.

RURAL QUALITY OF LIFE:

Poverty

Current rural education legislation pending at the national level uses percentage of students living in poverty as part of the definition to identify rural schools. While it could be debated whether that is a relevant description of

“rural schools,” poverty is however a real issue in rural communities in this country. The war on poverty was not won. Persistent poverty continues to impact rural citizenry in inappropriate numbers.

It could be argued that by addressing the poverty issue schools could be served. There is a very strong correlation between declining standardized test scores with the number of children living below the poverty level. Two years ago when examining state achievement scores and income levels such a correlation explained nearly 60% of the variance.

The question could be posed: Perhaps for every dollar spent on eradicating poverty, would that be equivalent to spending 60 cents toward improving education?

Poverty is not a question that most rural communities or rural schools can address adequately at the local level. Yet what occurs in the classroom does not happen in a social or cultural vacuum. Poverty affects each and every part of the basic building blocks of Community Development (Figure 1).

Delivery of Social Services

Policy constraints often are placed on more innovative means of delivering social services to rural areas, usually designed or adapted from urban models with little utility in rural America. Schools could play a networking role if policy changes were made. Use of facilities for community events, delivery of services, or community centers.

Such changes would allow schools to become a life-long service provider to the community, meeting the needs of the broader community.

LIFELONG LEARNING POLICY

- ♦ More opportunity for experiential education; changing state policy that constrains using the community as a learning laboratory.
- ♦ Regional post-secondary education and training institutions must strengthen relationship with rural public schools and their communities need to look at funding policies and accountability mechanisms to erase the current reality of competition.

PUBLIC EDUCATION POLICIES

Education Reform Legislation

- ♦ Needs to be weighed against reality of rural. Many policies are potentially harmful to rural schools.

Teacher Training

- ♦ Need a rural context in teacher training — rural not second rate or substandard.
- ♦ Information on rural communities.

Technology

- ♦ Flexibility in state mandates and financial assistance from state should be given to rural schools to make the new technologies.

These policy suggestions are likely to be difficult to implement. Nothing of substance ever comes free. These policy changes will require school district, community, state and federal level.

We need to ensure that our schools and rural communities are responsive to the demands of economic, technological and structural change, and indeed to contribute to the process of change. Now, more than ever schools must impart a broad base of transferrable skills. The future of rural America, its schools and communities is in our hands.

It is up to us to voice our concerns to our policy makers to formulate rural education and development policies. Such policies would provide the guidelines that would allow for rural America to draw the best out of our communities and our schools.

Only then will those living in rural America will be able to fully claim ownership in their future.