A Case for Culturally Relevant Education in Rural Schools

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Abstract:

In this thesis, I aim to discuss the intricacies of rural secondary education in the United States. It focuses on faculty experiences at a rural high school in south-central Kansas and the methods they use to engage their students and community. A culturally relevant, community-centered curriculum focuses on the investigation, centering on the lived experiences of collaborators and myself. In conjunction, I will explore some of the systemic issues relating to the development and survival of rural areas, primarily examining their effects in an educational setting and the role of the school in this shifting landscape.

A Case for Culturally Relevant Education-Introduction

I never imagined I would leave. For as long as I could remember, I'd lived in this little Kansas town; my family had been there, or around there, for years. On one side, my grandparents had a little farm and a lot of kids; they did welding fabrication and construction. I could drive around and see the buildings and bridges my grandfather helped build; I still remember the smell of hot metal, gas, and cigarettes in the welding shop. A tin of chew and a dirty old bottle to spit it in in his cup holder, the half-gallon insulated cup with sweet tea and sometimes Wild Turkey that rarely left his side. A farmhouse on a dirt road just passed a hill, and the days I'd sit in his lap and shift the old manual Ford he drove. On the other side, my grandfather was a locksmith, and my grandmother a nurse, out on a few acres east of town in a little one-story white house. Their garage was packed with fishing poles, lures, knives, and tackle boxes, but the best part was the jar of mini Hershey's bars waiting just past the door. We'd fish through the weekends in spring and summer, one grandfather taught me to fish for catfish in the river, and the other to catch bass in the reeds. And in the late summer, we'd pick the last of the Sandhill Plums for jelly, not leaving the scorching heat till we had a bucket full of the bright red berries. As I got older, those summers turned to work on the same farm as my parents, loading and unloading trailers full of hay and alfalfa, stacking bales in the barn, running buckets full of water and grain. By the time I graduated high school, this turned to carpentry and construction, installing floors and cabinets, stacking 2x4s and doors, and cut lists and diagrams scribbled on scrap wood. By the time I left, I could drive the dirt roads, knowing where the deer had liked to run and the highway patrol liked to hide, smell the storms coming across the plains, identify the birds by their calls, clean a fish by feel, and patch up most things with a bit of baling wire and tape. I'd never met a stockbroker or data analyst, middle managers and surgeons weren't

familiar, and I'd never heard a good word of a lawyer. I didn't want to teach, and every nurse and paramedic I knew had already quit. I couldn't afford it, so why would I ever go to college?

This isn't the reality for everyone that grows up in a tiny rural town, but it was mine and more than a few of my friends. For the kids who showed up to school late and were already tired, the dawn hunting trips took priority over the 8 AM English class. Those who had to rush out the door as soon as the bell rang, off to check their cattle in the afternoon or start work at the nursing home. This was more or less how things had been running for the last 150 years. However, the educational and economic landscape of the United States has changed drastically in that period, from agrarian to industrial, to now an information or knowledge economy. For decades, rural schools and communities have struggled with this shift, and further analysis is necessary. A culturally relevant pedagogy has been considered a critical method of education for uplifting marginalized people for almost two decades. The theory was developed by Ladson-Billings in 1994 and has seen its use and literature evolve and expand since. Its focus continues to be on the environment it was designed for, marginalized youth in urban contexts. A gap in the literature exists in applying this pedagogy in rural schools. This paper will explore why and how teachers and administrators may support and utilize a culturally relevant pedagogy in a rural community. A relatively high poverty, the agrarian-centered school has been chosen for this topic.

The first chapter is the literature review, divided into three sections to develop a more comprehensive understanding of rural life and the relevant literature. The first section discusses how rural is defined and the unique cultural and economic landscapes found in rural areas across the United States. The primary focus is on the experiences in the rural Midwest and agricultural communities, including the effects on educational outcomes and expectations and how the changing economic landscape of the United States has impacted rural areas. The second section

discusses the school's relationship to the rural community it serves, not just as an educational institution but also as a social institution responsible for community integration and providing social, physical, and emotional necessities that may not otherwise be met. The final section focuses on how other rural schools have successfully leveraged community support and culturally relevant pedagogy to support their students emotionally, educationally, and economically. Of interest in this section is an original focus of the project, using this style of education to mitigate the broader decline in rural areas; the following chapters will discuss the flaws and successes of this approach.

The second chapter will discuss the methodology used to explore this topic. It centers on interviews as the method of approach, with detail on why semi-structured interviews were chosen as a method of inquiry. It also provides motivations for selecting teachers and administrators to be interviewed and how they were chosen and contacted.

The third chapter is the first analysis. It focuses on the state and national level socioeconomic trends and their effects on rural areas. It ties what is happening in this individual school with these trends primarily through economic impacts. This section discusses the plight of farmers, flight from rural areas, cutting of social services, and school funding mechanisms through the lens of the local effects. Impacts to the schools and students include decreased enrollment, staff shortages, high poverty, and substandard facilities. These are cyclical issues, often with varied effects, from social and emotional development deficits in the student population to an inability to offer advanced or particularly rigorous coursework.

The fourth chapter continues this investigation into the teacher’s and administrators’ efforts to mitigate the harms presented in the third chapter. The first theme centers on community outreach as a method, leveraging the strong social network found in the closed loop of a small

population. This is followed by a culturally relevant curriculum, focusing on the local economy and students' social, physical, and emotional needs. It also begins to explore the challenges of this approach and the importance of contextualization in approaching rural education. This chapter serves as a turn from the deficit-centric course of the first chapter.

The final chapter explores a culturally relevant curriculum's possible effects and tradeoffs. Of particular importance in this chapter is the influence of local conditions, which have roots in national trends but express themselves uniquely. In this section, I also attend to the flaws and modifications to my approach discovered throughout the research process. This section concludes the thesis and offers real solutions to the broader decline in rural areas, acknowledging that there must be comprehensive and systemic changes in state and national interests to support these places and their way of life.

Literature Review

I didn't realize the things I would miss when I moved away. I bought a beat-up old ford my junior year of high school and got it a couple of miles down the road, just outside city limits. An old friend lived on a patch of land with some goats, a garden, and an old falling-down garage next to their house; it had the remains of a piano, broken records, and snapped furniture, all worn down with weather and rot. On the other side of the house was the old ford, a 1996 Ranger; the dented green body was surprisingly rust-free, but the inside had more than its fair share of grime from the mechanic who used to run it. It hadn't been started in a few years, but I got it going long enough to limp back to my house to learn to drive it; I'd only driven automatics before then. It bounced along the old brick road; I couldn't tell if it needed new suspension or just a less rocky path; turning off onto the dirt, I sputtered through the stop sign; this late in the day, I knew none of my neighbors would be around so didn't mind skipping one. I developed a routine senior year, driving to and from school each morning; I'd run downstairs and hop in the truck, having neither the time nor the energy to grab breakfast at home. I drove down the old dirt road and took the next two lefts, turning onto Main street; the lines were a little faded on the old red brick, but the street was wide enough for the town parades, so I stayed on my side, and the farmer's stayed on theirs, heading out to the fields and pastures for the days work. I gave each of them a wave. Usually, I'd see them between the little IGA and the post office; they were on one side of the highway that split the town; on the other side was the farmer's Co-op, the gas station, and the bar. I pulled up to the gas station to grab a sandwich and a coffee before I headed to class; the table on the right always had four old farmers with their morning coffee, we would have a chat while I filled up my cup, and the cashier would have me rung up before I got to the counter. When I got to the school, the last stop in city limits down the main street, instead of

turning down the side to get to the student lot, I drove along the front of the one-story brick building till I got to the teachers lot at the end of the row, it was never complete, so I pulled in and parked next to the curb. The principal would be heading in about when I got there, so I'd give him a wave before I snuck in the side door to start the day.

What Does it Mean to be Rural?

Rural America is a diverse place, and my experience is only one of many. Though it claims 97% of land in the country, it is home to just under 20% of the national population. Rural areas can be found in every state, much more than others. Hank Williams Jr. divides it best in just a few lines,

"We came from the West Virginia coal mines

And the Rocky Mountains, and the western skies…."

"We're from North California and South Alabama

And little towns all around this land.

And we can skin a buck and run a trotline

And a country boy can survive

Country Folks can survive."

Their et al. explores the difficulty of defining the rural feeling in a 2021 mapping review focusing on published, peer-reviewed papers on the topic of rural education. It begins with the struggles of definitional schema related to the term rural, which are fraught with differences stemming from urban-centric coding. "U.S. federal agencies use more than 20 schemas to distinguish rural places from other geographic locales." To study how and if these schemas were used, a sample of 524 peer-reviewed, published articles with a rural education focus on the United States were gathered from 9 databases, spanning a timeline from 1985-to 2017. Among

these, “A minority of studies…(30%) provided any definition (explicit or implicit) of what made their settings rural.” Of these 157 remaining articles, 60% employed federal schema, most frequently that of the National Center for Education Statistics. Of the remaining 40%, “Quantitative descriptions that did not adhere to federal codes (n=25) described distances…or counted populations but never named an explicit definitional schema.” 17 used state, local, or nonprofit definitions, and 9 “employed thick, qualitative, theorized descriptions.” The remaining 13 used vague and cursory reports, some defining entire states and regions as rural. And while certain areas, such as the Midwest and South, came up most frequently in studies, “Even the best-represented areas comprised disproportionately tiny fractions of the education research landscape.” This vagueness has significant ramifications in rural studies, “lack of definitional clarity can yield inappropriate or inaccurate aggregations.” Can the Pennsylvania mining town be compared with a border school in Texas, a Kansas farm-town, a Washington logging village, or a New York resort town? Each with its unique history, population, or culture.

The differences between rural communities are found in Ulrich’s national study and outline three distinct types of rural communities and geographies. The first of which is the type that defies the population trend. These are currently restructuring communities with strong environmental amenities, mountains, lakes, seashores, and other desirables that draw residents from suburban areas. These residents are increasingly older, wealthier, and more highly educated, relocating to these towns for their natural amenities. The next is a transitioning community; these are the formerly agricultural and manufacturing towns located across the country, those that have lost their industries, consolidated their farms, and lost their local businesses. Finally, the chronically poor regions are towns primarily in the South and in reservations, where persistent exploitation and a long-term lack of economic opportunity have created the highest rates of

generational poverty in the United States. Long-term residents, which make up the majority of the population in all but the amenity-rich towns (which have an influx of not historically rural residents), offer similar values unique or uniquely expressed in rural areas. These include a firm valuation of hard work, typically physical/manual labor. This valuation is strong enough to affect community standing through generations of resident families. Given their long-term residency, a significant connection to place, community, and family weighs heavily and was the most frequently cited reason for staying in place despite a lack of economic and educational opportunity. They also face many of the same issues as urban communities: a lack of employment or low-wage employment when available, youth out-migration, alcohol and drug abuse, lack of health and social services, and environmental destruction. David Hartley furthers this in discussing health disparities across the country "rural areas ranked poorly on 21 of 23 selected population health indicators." In each of the four standard US regions, "rural residents in each region were worse off than those in other regions on one or more of the population health indicators." Notably, while health is intimately tied to poverty, it is also linked to education and community relationships, "rural residents smoke more, exercise less, have less nutritional diets, and are more likely to be obese."

Thomas Butler explores the more significant societal factors and theories behind the widespread decline of rural communities. He focuses on the effects of globalization and neoliberalism on rural areas, defining globalism as "the interaction between cross-national economic, cultural and political forces which lessens the political, economic, and cultural importance of small, rural communities." The first attribution is the significant departure of manufacturing and the conglomeration of family farms into substantial agribusiness corporations. This has contributed significantly to rural poverty, "Between 1997 and 2003, over

1.5 million rural workers lost their jobs in the United States" and "of all the counties in the United States that are considered persistently poor, 340 out of the 386 are nonmetro areas." There are a few critical ways global phenomena have attributed to this; the first is in economic structures. As rural areas lose the ability to be economically viable due to the devaluation and privatization of natural resources and the fleeing of manufacturing corporations to cheaper labor, "a policy shift toward increasing human capital to help rural economies thrive" has emerged. In this world, education is central to survival, providing the human capital necessary to earn high-paying employment. This creates an individualistic focus that the best course of action is to provide an education for yourself and take opportunities because there is no protection if you don't. The erosion of government protections and public spaces has created the "opportunity trap." "People must strive for a positional advantage over others," which is found by "shopping around to find the best education…if their school is deemed as failing." As national standards seek to make every school teach the same material to the same test, local sensibilities are not spoken to, and disadvantaged schools are left behind. The trap in a rural school is that focusing education on this vein prepares students for a global economy, but a global economy is not found in a town of two thousand people. In preparing students this way, they are prepared to leave their communities behind.

This phenomenon, commonly known as brain drain, is a substantial consequence of restructuring schools and the broader US economy. Patrick Carr and Maria Kefalas studied the problematic term in the case study of a rural Iowa town and the recent high school graduates. Despite the problems of the term, namely increasing the deficit framework around rural areas and that those that stay in them are too dumb to leave, it does hold some merit. In their book, graduates are categorized in one of 4 ways, Achievers, Stayers, Seekers, and Returners; while the

naming conventions again display a deficit framework, the phenomenon itself is well described. "Achievers," typically those with more educated and wealthier families, something of a local aristocracy, are highly invested in the community and school and often leave their rural lives behind for college and urban employment. "Stayers" are usually from lower-class working families who generally struggle economically; they worked during high school and before and were employed locally if hire was available. "Seekers" were those who left to see the world on non-college bound tracks; in rural areas, this most often means military service. Finally, the "Returners," those who came back from college, military service, or other employment. They come back for their families and their communities, experiencing very close relationships and valuing the way of life, and they're willing to make do with limited employment. These groupings get at the heart of what is happening in rural communities, and it's the mass exodus of youth—reasons for leaving often come down to lack of employment, opportunity, and education. The remaining jobs may appear to pay well to a high school student, but they are rarely enough to feed families and offer limited growth. For those that leave or do not return, it's the changes from higher education and the cultural shift that happens when you leave-from the clothes you wear to the music you listen to, the way you talk, and the employment you are groomed for that no longer fit in the small rural town. And while in some areas, graves outnumber cradles, the more significant downturn comes in the youth who leave and never return.

This further reinforces a much older trend of school consolidation; less youth means fewer children for the future. This directly threatens schools, and what is a town without a school? William Dreier and Willis Goudy followed the consolidation trend in central Iowa and presented their findings to the Annual Rural and Small Schools Conference. The answer is often not much at all; "By 1994, 9 of the ten high schools in towns of less than 500 in 1940 had closed,

and 3 of the five high schools in towns with populations of 500-999 had closed." Within 50 years across the state, the number of high schools was more than halved. Following school consolidation, those towns with high schools experienced population gains of at least 2.5% per year. Of those without, over 3/4s lost population at a greater rate than anywhere else in the state. And consolidation is much more than a short-term or localized phenomenon; it is a national trend that shows no evidence of stopping. In the early 1900s, America reached its maximum of schools and districts, numbering 238,000 and 128,000, respectively. "By 1980, however, the number of school districts had dropped to 16,000 and the number of schools to 61,000." At the same time, enrollment was increasing across the country as population and attendance mandates increased. While the threat to a town's survival is evident, can schools stand above the struggles?

The Beating Heart

DeYoung and Howley explore the theories behind consolidation and attribute its rise to a shift in national political economy, the transformations that began the neoliberal trends that are currently destroying rural communities. They would argue that understanding this change starts in the fundamental definition of a school and schooling, offered as distinct concepts. They contend a distinction between "schools as important places in which people construct a social reality, and schooling as…systematic instruction of predetermined bodies of knowledge." Under this definition, the critique that rural areas do not value schooling is more apt because they value their schools highly. "Community identity was frequently formed at the community schoolhouse," it was a site of community interaction, hosting events for the townspeople from caucuses and community dinners to shows and speakers. Townspeople were directly involved in their school, teaching, cleaning, cooking, and building an engaged community ethos. These schools reflected the values of their community; close interpersonal ties, strong support structures, and deep respect for hard work-they were tied to the land around them as farmers, miners, loggers, and fishers. Underlying the change from community-oriented schools to nationally regulated schooling is a profound shift in the political economy. The first attribution of this is American industrialization; it fundamentally changed people's relationship to their land and enforced divisions of labor and a technical rationality-both focused on bettering the national economy and international competitiveness. This shift creates a trade-off; national focus demands less local focus, "organizing rural schools into bigger units concerned with producing students…for the pursuit of national goals." Naturally, the nation-state oversees meeting national goals, controlling educational content, and focusing on the individual's utility to the national economy. And with the private sector as the building block for the economy, thus support for the

private sector is necessary. Bigger schools, with less waste, centered on and controlled by national goals-consolidation is the natural solution because the holistic growth of students was never the intention.

There is a limited understanding of rural schools in the nation, “the rural school problem” with its broad deficits doesn’t provide a clear understanding, and research is limited. In 2019 Thier and Beach conducted a mapping review of 108,504 peer-reviewed and school-focused articles published over ten years, found on The Institute of Educational Sciences database, ERIC. The mapping review found that “Less than 15%—16,116 of 108,504 such articles overall—accounted for any of the locale-relevant terms.” Upon further examination, 15% was further broken down into two main categories, urban at 9.93% and rural at 3.26% of total articles; the remaining 1.81% was split between towns and remote rural areas. In a further review of 10 highly regarded journals, “proportions for each geographic locale type were remarkably similar... Among those 4,001 articles, about 60% accounted for cities and urban areas, while about 20% accounted for rural areas, producing a nearly identical disparity that favored urbanicity (3.04 times).” (Thier, M., & Beach, P. (2019)) Rural is an incredibly nuanced and complex term, with variations in geography, history, economy, and politics. Among the limited research described, topics are as varied as the educational sector itself.

However, in terms of school deficits, the research is detailed. Bouck summarizes the issues that have been raised and paints a picture not dissimilar to the inequalities found in urban schools. Compared to suburban schools, rural schools were more likely to have less diverse course options, fewer career pathways, less access to technology, and fewer teachers and administrators. Research enforced recently by Howley, Rhodes, and Beall explores the decreased opportunities for gifted students in rural schools. Kamrath and Brunner highlight the high

turnover rates of superintendents and other administrators. One overwhelming theme, and one of the most substantial in predicting academic achievement, is poverty. The rates in rural communities are higher than the national average for children, and extreme poverty rates are even higher. Almost ¼ of rural students live in poverty, and this has a direct effect on school funding. Federally, rural schools receive the least funding, and with national standards, that level is constantly in flux.

Of importance to national standards in the United States is that the federal government has no direct control over public schooling, which is instead left to the states. Brendan Pelsue explains the federal government's role in public education, and it truly started in 1954. The historic Brown vs. Board of Education decision was the first time the federal government truly regulated public schools, setting a strong precedent that amendments like the 14th deserved primacy. In short, it means that the federal government could only intervene when there was a constitutional violation-that is, until 1965. Amid fears of lagging international competitiveness, the same that shuttered many rural schools for good came the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 "Rather than mandating direct federal oversight of schools… ESEA offered states funding for education programs on a conditional basis. In other words, states could receive federal funding provided they met the requirements outlined in certain sections, or titles, of the act." This soft power formula has been repeated and grown since, from the ESEA to No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, and Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). A school's federal funding is now tied to its success, and success means high test scores, a difficult achievement for schools that already lack resources.

While these programs have enforced the national standards and goals that have helped close small schools, their funding mechanism doubles down on rural areas. Due to a relatively

unique experiment in public school funding in Kansas in the 2010s, Emily Rauscher explored the effects of reduced funding on rural districts. As one of the least liked governors in US history, Sam Brownback planned to cut taxes across the state in 2012 drastically; amid state deficits, three years later, a block-grant funding mechanism for public schools was adopted. This froze funding for schools; whether their enrollment went up or down, funding was static until 2018, when public school closures made national news because they couldn't keep their doors open for an entire school year. Rural schools, which make up a substantial portion of the state, faced the most severe consequences for three reasons. Emily attributes this to "(1) smaller budgets, (2) lower economies of scale, and (3) less access to services." Given their small size, rural schools have smaller budgets, so a cut takes a more significant proportion of their budget. Smaller economies of scale are a direct result of fewer people and higher poverty rates. 48% of students from rural areas in Kansas in 2017 fell below the poverty threshold. Lower funding means fewer councilors, less specialized teaching, fewer specialized courses, and a higher portion of the budget spent on transportation, technology, and supplies. Finally, fewer public services are available in rural areas, such as healthcare, libraries, and museums. In comparing the achievement rates for the six years before the block-grant funding was implemented and for the two years of its existence, growing rural areas faced the most significant decreases in the achievement of any schools inside Kansas. This was also compared to rural schools in surrounding states that did not have a block-grant funding mechanism. Simply put, every dollar is essential; any loss cuts a more significant percentage of the total budget in these already troubled areas.

While these schools are indisputably crucial to their communities, the question is raised as to whether the communities are important to their schools? Are there legitimate successes

behind consolidation? Does theory or reality support claims of better opportunities, better schools, and better outcomes from these shifts?

Rural School Successes

Literature for the last 50 years suggests not. DeYoung and Howley point to the lack of records in consolidated districts and schools that show touted benefits. More importantly, theoretical and empirical reasons show the advantage of strong community-school ties. Following the greater cultural trend of students as valuable capital and schooling as an investment, theories of social capital heavily enforce the idea of place-based education. James Coleman and Pierre Bourdieu presented theories of social capital in the 1980s. Silvia Rogosic and Branislava Baranovic defined and reconciled the two approaches in 2016. At its heart, "social capital has a very simple and clear meaning – investing in social relationships with expected benefits." Bourdieu's is a more loose and difficult conception, including the two key concepts of habitus - "society embedded in a body, a biological individual" and field – "a stage where the battle…takes place: between dominant and subordinate." Bourdieu is mainly focused on the effects of economic capital on social capital and is used to explain social inequality. Coleman emphasizes the individual and the family and is commonly used in the educational research it was created in. There are two distinctions to Coleman's theory that are particularly salient to rural education: the family and the network. First is the inclusion of the family in social capital. Many families living in rural areas have done so intergenerationally, and immediate family members have invested in social capital that children take advantage of. The second is the network, particularly closed vs. open networks. An open network occurs when there are not many connections across and between members of a community. If two children are friends and their parents are not, that is an open network, but if those same parents were friends, that has created a closed network. Closed networks are common in rural areas due to intergenerational habitations and smaller populations.

The social capital of families is an idea that Stephen Russell and Glen Elder Jr. explore in reference to farm-dwelling families in the rural Midwest. Tracking 377 rural families in Iowa for four years, they were separated into full-time farm families, part-time farm families, families with parents raised on farms, and a minority of families that didn't fit into any of those categories. Each family had at least two children, one whose data was collected from 7th-10th grade and another within four years of age that was not collected. The farm was a central part of this study because "Farm families in the Midwest frequently assemble in community associations…especially among farm families in which generational succession is important." When parents show a high degree of social engagement, their children do too. A challenge of this study was the increasingly common case of part-time farming families who cannot make a living on farming alone and have other employment. The need for multiple modes of employment was a challenge Thomas Butler discovered as well, and it prevents parents from being as engaged in their communities and schools. The children of highly socially involved parents, meaning active participation and leadership in the local church, PTA and school meetings, and civic and social clubs, were the highest performing group in the study. These highly involved families were also overwhelmingly farming families. Moderately engaged families made up the majority of those studied (n=220), children from these families maintained their GPA over the high school transition period. Finally, 69 of the 87 children from isolated families had a noticeable drop in their GPA over this timeframe. "Children in isolated families who are performing at high levels are nine times more likely than others to be from part-time farm families." Due to the lasting effects of social capital, a once engaged family can still benefit from their earned capital while farming. If past social engagements can benefit children, is it possible for schools to strengthen this ability?

In studying high school completion in rural New York, Kristen Wilcox et al. found similar results that pointed toward community engagement as a strong influencer in rural education. They studied similarly funded schools, some with a substantially higher graduation rate and those with an average graduation rate. The first key finding is expectations and opportunities, "small size and isolation can make it difficult for rural high schools to offer rigorous, deep, and broad academic programs." There is a broad message of rural schools as poor, backward, and deficient. Students and teachers alike can embrace and internalize this. The highest performing schools worked actively to counter this idea. Faculty in these schools expressed "no doubts, they deliberately sought to instill in their students the confidence that they can succeed…their focus was on preparing high-poverty and special education students for success beyond high school." Expectations were balanced by their ability to recruit community resources, from online classes to partnerships with nearby colleges. Teacher collaboration was next; faculty were in constant communication between themselves and students' parents, ensuring that everyone was doing their best and that their talents were being utilized in the best possible way. Two of the most significant engagement successes are inclusiveness and connection to place. In tight-knit and intergenerational communities, it can be difficult for outsiders to find a place; in high-performing schools' additional effort was made to get students involved in school activities and establish trust with families. One school "assigned a district employee specifically to serve as a liaison to help families… " I visit every home…connect them to further services if they need help…and involve parents in monthly activities." In fostering a connection to place, "community members stressed practical applications of learning…becoming a productive adult within the community was seen as the definition of success." While higher-performing schools have a variety of successful practices, it is important to recognize the burden

should not be on the school alone, they are fighting against national pressures "the refrain 'We're holding on here' was common among the educators in the schools with higher graduation rates…maintaining their rural identity is crucial to their student's success in the face of pressure."

Mara Tieken found similar pressures in her multi-year case studies of two rural Arkansas high schools. She viewed these schools and communities with a racial lens atop the community-oriented framework. The direct comparison between two schools studied in such detail highlights a crucial factor in studying rural schools and their uniqueness. One school she studied resulted from multiple consolidation efforts and now spanned four towns, two primarily black and two predominantly white. This school was the first mentioned in the book, an opening that began with a community supper and a high school lunchroom packed with parents and children from the surrounding land. This school, through community outreach, was able to bring together segregated peoples into a more cohesive community. Despite their success in and out of the school, this building was consolidated, its population dropped below 300, and another identity was lost.

In the second school studied, just miles away in the same state, the history of this small town was substantially different. It had been founded on slave labor in the delta, and racial tensions ran high. The town was segregated into a poor black facility on one half and a wealthy white facility on the other; after Brown vs. Board, the integration was forced. The community made no attempts to come together. The rich white residents sent their children to private school or fled the small town altogether. The black residents lived in a state of enforced poverty; most of the land was owned by the white residents and former residents, absentee landlords controlling the local economy from far away. The public school stood, however, through struggle and

hardship. The remaining community, already below the poverty threshold, voted each time to increase their millages, taxing themselves as much as possible to support the school. Even as the town was split and divided, a strong community formed around their school, and with their support, they were able to meet and exceed state and federal goals.

There are hundreds of stories documenting similar phenomena in rural towns all across the country. Michael Martin and Anna Henry studied the school-based agriculture programs of three rural districts in Missouri and the benefits that these provided to the school and town. Aimee Howley and Craig Howley looked at the influence of a substantial Amish population in an Ohio town on the culture and outcomes of a rural school. Anne Walker describes how a community in North Dakota came together to support an immigrant population. From the struggles of a single ESL teacher for a district to a community-wide venture including parents, administration, political figures, and business owners working together to include the rising immigrant and refugee population in their community and culture.

Every town, every district, every school comes with its unique history. As Mara Tieken says, “When you’ve seen one rural school, you’ve seen one rural school.” From politics to economy, each place is its own, yet all have been able to recognize the importance of their community to their success. In the fashion of our culture, tied to the land, tied to those around us, it takes everyone to survive together in a small town. These studies only raise more questions, how do teachers and administrators support a community-based curriculum when the world pressures for anything but? And will their efforts revitalize their communities, or are they doomed to send the bright, bold, brave, curious, or adventurous far from home for good?

Methodology

To better understand how this school implements a community-engaged curriculum and how it has affected students, the next step is in conjunction with a school that practices such work. To do this, I conducted interviews with teachers and administrators to gain their perspective on the issues facing their school and how they have been working with the local community to provide greater opportunities to students. I intended to follow this with a survey of students, discussing employment, education, and location after graduation. This portion of the thesis was removed for reasons discussed in the findings.

I am fortunate to be an alumnus myself, so I already have developed trust and access to the community I would be researching. There are three categories of people I contacted, starting with the administrators. I interviewed two administrators, one current and one former. The first is the current principal of the high school, we had established a positive relationship during my attendance, so I have contacted them by their email found on the district website. For all interviewees, I wished to avoid a more personal method of contact since the research involves their employment; I felt it was safer for communication to take place in official channels and to try to prevent a negative impact on their work/life balance. Due to their extended time in the district, the principal was chosen for ~8 years as a principal with additional time as vice-principal. The second administrator selected was the former superintendent of the district. They have had a long career in rural schools and worked in the studied district in multiple positions. I chose them over the current superintendent for two reasons, first was their time in the district. The new superintendent has been in place for less than one year and was hired out of the district. The second was that when the former superintendent was replaced, there was a strong community reaction, with over 100 parents protesting the decision not to renew the contract.

Administrators were the first population chosen for several reasons: their lack of involvement in prior literature was a highly influential factor. Among mapping reviews, administrators were the least spoken to category out of students, staff, and parents. This provides a unique insight into the school climate, as leadership can identify what they believe to be issues in the school and the methods they have implemented and considered solutions. While administrators were rarely surveyed, all successful cases discussed in the literature depended on administrative support.

The second population to be interviewed are teachers; these were a more commonly discussed population in the literature and had a vital role in disseminating a community-engaged curriculum. I interviewed three teachers, one former and two current. The current teachers were also contacted through their district emails, while the prior had to be contacted personally due to their retirement status. Teachers were chosen after discussion with alumni who experienced their courses and the principal who has a greater understanding of who is doing community-engaged work in their classes. The principal was an invaluable resource for the former teacher, providing contact information I would otherwise not have been able to access. Teachers were chosen because of their ability to elaborate on the specific conditions required for community engagement, how those conditions were developed, and why this was selected as a teaching method. While age and gender vary among the participants, it is not a representative sample of the teaching population as only those implementing a community-engaged curriculum were chosen.

With high school alumni no longer being included, the final choice category was one counselor. Due to their connection to students and focus on their social and emotional health, I believe a counselor was an excellent choice to examine the current needs of the students. This counselor serves dual purposes, teaching one class and focusing on the holistic health of

attending students. As a strategy to support this community, engagement and fundraising were the primary methods used by this counselor.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the primary method of investigation for the personal aspect and ability to illuminate material that is not directly asked. I have little knowledge of the details of teachers and administrator duties, especially how decisions are made cooperatively, so a less personal method would leave significant gaps in knowledge. Also in consideration is that I will be asking for practices and development histories, a detailed analysis of how they developed a working relationship with community members that would not be feasible in a survey or document analysis. I'm also selecting from a relatively small pool; while there is a sizeable staff of educators, it is the minority that uses a more community-centered curriculum; this small pool allows a deeper analysis of programs.

Each interview was conducted through video call to analyze this amount of information. Each interview was recorded and transcribed through the video conference program with participant permission. Some notes were taken, given mistakes in transcription, and after each interview, I completed a multi-page journal entry on the interview experience. Coding began once all the data was collected; as a primarily content-driven process, inductive coding was the process of choice. With all of the data, deductive categories were determined around the findings' issues. Data was sorted into these categories for further examination. Inductive coding allows for unknowns in the data to arise, and an understanding based first on the information received. Throughout this process, I continued to be in an informal discussion of themes and results with fellow alumni and participants to prevent coding errors and misrepresentations. Likewise, I relied heavily on my peers and advisor to discuss themes; more perspectives helped prevent themes from being missed in the coding process.

This study has significant limitations; the first is time and depth. Time limitations severely affect the depth of study; for interviews, I'll be receiving a single top-down perspective which does not account for program efficacy. Without observation time and student interviews, there is no way to determine how effective and engaging a teacher's community-centered curricula may be, which would likely substantially impact the findings. I expect to see limited proactive action from administrators and community engagement based upon former residency and connections developed outside of the workplace for teachers.

Chapter 1-Community Needs

From 88 school districts to 6, over 100 schools to 30, this is a story repeated in counties across the country. Within the last 100 years, schools and districts have been closed and consolidated, creating large and irregularly shaped districts based more on political agendas than students' or communities' wellbeing. This process is far from over, and in South-Central Kansas, old consolidations feed some of the problems schools face today. The district I attended and later studied covers nearly 190 miles, stretching from the county seat to the northwest border. This chapter will cover how broader political and economic trends can have a cyclical effect on a once-rural majority district.

A small town of 1000 residents was one of the first founded in the county, located just over 20 miles northwest of the county seat; it had its own district and two schools, a boon that would last well into the second wave of consolidations taking place in the mid-1960s and '70s. The county was home to over 30 such small towns, and each held onto its school with a fierce pride built out of hard work and desperation. Every small town resident knows that once your school is gone, the town is sure to follow. This town saw its neighbor's schools consumed into larger districts, but in a twist of fate, it survived, stretched thin, and now including the twin of the county seat, a town over five times their size. Wheat Town had never been a thriving town, but as with other small midwestern towns, it was fueled by farming, wheat, corn, soybeans, cows, and pigs; nearly as many residents lived outside of town as inside. This marks it as one of Ulrich's transitioning towns, built by once more lucrative farming, now suffering due to consolidations. Another 50 years into the future, the schools haven't changed much, but the district's makeup has.

In this first section, I will discuss the needs of the school and the community and what the underlying causes are. Through my time in the school and interviews with multiple staff members, the need for funding is high on the list of priorities. As one administrator said, "The challenge with rural education is really, it's really resources." A school that serves fewer students needs nearly as much funding as a school that serves more students. For example, a gymnasium is considered a necessity in a school, and whether you have 300, 600, 1000 students, or more, a single gymnasium may serve all your purposes.

He went on to say, "Why are these schools still open? You're going to have a superintendent; you have a principal; you have teachers for 26 kids. That's why you consolidate. The same amount of teachers, one principal, one superintendent…one building instead of three…The reason for consolidation is really money."

Emily Rauscher backs this up with a study of funding for rural schools across the state; every dollar matters more. A similar per-pupil expenditure can fund many more resources in a more heavily populated district; the principal makes this comparison when talking about the northern district in the county. Their population is double, their per-pupil expenditure is less, yet their facilities are newer and their course offerings greater.

Inadequate funding is a common issue in schools, but that can hardly encompass the reality. First, the things that money would be spent on, books, facilities, students, and teachers. Books were not just outdated by a few years; they could be by a decade or more in some classrooms. This has further ramifications when considering the types of courses to be offered; one of the many barriers to advanced classes is being unable to afford the textbooks required to teach them. Regarding facilities, there is no question; some of the faculty skirted around the issue; one addressed it head-on: "We are in dire need…I mean, the roof isn't leaking right now

because it's not raining." And while the whole roof may be leaky, departments have unique needs, especially the sciences. Inadequate chemical storage, poor ventilation, broken sinks, lack of fume hoods, and leaky gas lines become a health hazard for students and teachers alike. The basics also suffer from damaged flooring, stained walls, broken and dented lockers, and seating in the auditorium and lunchroom that couldn't be repaired. And funding goes a long way to getting new teachers; as current staff retires or moves away, they are harder to replace than ever. The administration gave me an insight on finding teachers, "When I was student teaching up there (Kansas City), there were over 3000 applicants for 25 positions…I'll be lucky to get one or two applicants for one position…I think it comes down to schools and facilities and locations, and that's a huge challenge." When the applicant pool is so low, rural schools must do everything to subsidize their teachers, payout more in salaries, and even pay for additional education like certification courses and master's degrees. This places more and more strain on an already small budget. Finally, there is the issue of transportation; transportation in rural areas requires a more significant share of the budget than in any other school district. Due to consolidation efforts, school districts have gotten larger in rural areas. This means busing routes are longer, and kids spend more time traveling before and after the school day. The U.S. Census Bureau puts Wheat Town's 190 miles in the middle of the pack, with transportation being the third largest expenditure at 6% of the budget in any given year, surpassed only by instruction and facilities. In comparison, smaller districts such as the one covering the county seat spend less than 2% of their budget on transportation per year.

After funding, the most frequently discussed issue is competitiveness with other districts. Competitiveness is something of a race to the bottom mindset when it comes to school choice; those schools with the most money generally have the most resources and are the most

competitive in their area. The need to be competitive is driven by student population and funding; a better school has greater odds of retaining its current population and attracting a larger student base. In today's knowledge and education-centric economy, a school that can offer more diverse and more advanced classes has the upper hand; here, small and rural schools falter again. Both funding and staff limit varied and advanced options, one administrator echoes the points made by Howley and Rhodes concerning gifted students and higher-level work, "Because of our size, we can't offer Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate courses and things like that." You can't hire a new teacher or even devote a class period to a course that only a handful of students will likely attend. This issue is repeated with the breadth of offerings, unique classes in the arts, sciences, and humanities that cannot be taught because of funding and teacher restrictions.

Hand in hand with the school's needs is the student population's needs, which one counselor divides well into social and emotional needs. Rural areas are particularly troubled in accessing social services; Dr. Judy Zimbelman identifies many of the challenges rural areas face in this dimension, statements echoed by residents. While urban and suburban cities have a range of social services to meet the needs of their communities, those sorts of organizations rarely service rural areas. Social services refer to any degree of services designed to serve the public through support and advocacy. This can include physical and mental healthcare, education, clothing, transportation, emergency services, infrastructure, etc. In place of other organizations providing these services, some of that burden falls on schools as social resources. In Wheat Town, there is no hospital, doctor, or dentist, no police or fire department, no food bank, shelter, or public transportation. The high school hired a new counselor who quickly advocated for a social and emotional learning class required for all first years. This meant addressing physical

and emotional needs, and it's an issue that ties in very close with funding. Some students need clothes, shoes, personal hygiene supplies, or food in a district facing relatively high poverty, around 70% of those students receive free and reduced lunches. The school is one of few social organizations that can take up the cause. And it is another cause that requires additional funding; there is no state or federal budget for providing necessities to your students. Identifying social needs is more difficult but no less critical, and this is the strategy that the counselor has started with.

"Every year I email a Google Form, a survey to the middle school, and I have all these questions like; what are the top five social, emotional needs and have a list of 15… Then what are the top, ten or five school-related things that they would need to work on, you know because these classes are different. I've noticed that I did it last year and this year that the data was similar in some ways, but there were a few things that were different. So, what I do is I take the top five, and I make sure to hit them… incorporate them in lessons or activities or speakers… Because if they didn't learn in middle school, they probably aren't coming in with it. Like one, for example, self-control, so this class, there was self-control…so we really worked on that early"

These two issues are deeply related; unmet emotional needs stem in part from unmet social needs, and both dramatically affect the ability of a child to learn, retain, and process information in a meaningful way. Both drain funds from a district that is already financially troubled and take time and energy from staff and the school day. This is not to say that these issues should not be addressed, but to understand that the school must use resources as one of the few institutions standing.

But how did these become issues in the first place? The answer requires understanding how schools are funded and what economic trends affect the rural Midwest. This brings us to a

recent measure the school has taken to increase funding: a bond. The Kansas State Department of Education defines a school bond as a proposal by the district to raise property taxes to a maximum of 14% of land value, with the funds going to an expressly stated purpose; traditionally, these are capital bonds that would be used to build, repair, update, or furnish facilities, or buy school buses. The 14% rule can be surpassed, but only with an exemption from the State Department of Education. The bond is based on property taxes. It is a public bill and must receive a majority of supporting votes to pass. This bond hints at the complex history concerning how schools are funded across the United States. The school budget comes from 3 sources, federal, state, and local funding. The federal government spends a certain amount of money on education; this tends to be a maximum of about 6-7% of a school's annual budget. Federal funding is low and generally tied to legal measures to ensure compliance; this is how standards such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, No Child Left Behind, or Every Student Succeeds Act are enforced. Additional funding may be granted conditionally, such as the Race to the Top Program, based on test scores, or the Rural Education Achievement Program, based on location and perceived need. The federal contribution makes up a small portion of the total budget, leaving the state and local funding to cover the majority, even with conditional financing. A clear breakdown is published by the National Center for Education Statistics each year. After a series of lawsuits determining unequal state funding for schools, state responsibility has increased in Kansas, but local sources still offer a significant contribution. There is a baseline state funding of just over 4,000$ per student to provide equitable funding. Additional funding is provided based on student population, low-income percentages, special education, and vocational education, among other qualifications. In Wheat Town, the state contribution is almost 75% of the total budget, around 9,000$. The remaining 20% of the budget is the local

contribution; in wealthier districts, the local contribution may top 50% of school funding, with 25-40% higher per-pupil budgeting.

This unequal funding system necessitates a bond in Wheat Town; for the school to have enough money to repair and update facilities and support their teachers, they must increase property taxes. This funding system makes it much more difficult for districts to raise funding; lower-income districts will inherently receive less funding from local sources. A property tax increase can be devastating because of poverty and land distribution in rural areas. Wheat Town is on the edge of being considered a high-poverty district. The border to the National Center of Education Statistics is 75% of students on free or reduced lunch; Wheat Town is ~70% free or reduced lunch. However, this is a proxy measure for poverty, with Census-defined poverty rates between 15-20%. Poverty likewise may give an inaccurate depiction of outcomes, as it is only a facet of socioeconomic status, including education, occupation, wealth, and location. Land distribution is the other significant influence, with two topics of interest locally. The first is negative; wealthy local elites who own vast land and housing are unwilling to pay for increases because their contribution would be higher in value if not percent. The second is a foundation of the local economy, the farms which have been in crisis for decades. Much of the district's land area is farmland, and they would find themselves paying substantial sums for the amount of land they possess. Following the U.S Department of Agriculture, the average farm has nearly quadrupled in size over the last 100 years in Kansas, an effect of economic restructuring devaluing their labor, decreasing land prices, increasing equipment prices, inflation, high-interest rates, fertilization needs, and expanding corporate agribusiness. While it may appear profitable, there is underlying debt that has buried generations of farmers. Family to medium farms have suffered since the 1980s, being pushed out of their businesses, their homes, and their livelihoods,

an increase in property tax on that much land can bankrupt a farm, a point made by the counselor, “it’s hard to pass bonds because a lot of these people are farmers, and they’re going to get taxed out the wazoo on their land.”

Because of this long-term economic trend, the number of farmers, and their children, has dropped dramatically in the past decades. Not only does the population shrink, as people lose jobs, farms, the land they’ve held and taken care of for generations, but they are also forced to relocate, whether this means out of the district or into the city, it has far-reaching effects, a longtime employee said, “[The] High School ran 500 kids at one time. We are 300 this year…lost over 200 kids in the last 20 years” While the population has dropped, even more have had to relocate, “So, bus routes, north of Wheat Town…those buses were full, you know, you’re running four to five buses. Now, there’s one bus picking up all those kids.” North and west of the town was the farmland; four to five buses were 200-250 kids, half of the school population at the time. Now, it might be 30 or 40 kids coming from west of town. The trend is people moving to the nearest city, most of the district’s population is no longer rural, but the school is. This restructuring across the district has increased tensions between Wheat Town and County Sister and lost the high school both support and students.

The effect on economic conditions across the district is directly tied to this trend, discussed further by Thomas Butler. As your primary supporting industry fails due to pressures, so do the supporting industries, and the last couple of decades have been particularly devastating. A few other industries can claim to support the area, employing Wheat Town and County Sister residents at a subpar rate, meatpacking, manufacturing, mining, and oil and natural gas. The past decades have seen manual labor wages stagnate or fall, and meatpacking and manufacturing jobs that could once feed families from a single salary can now support just a single earner,

sometimes less. However, it is fortunate they remain; the community would be in much more dire straits if they had fled out of the country as many manufacturers did in the 90s and ’00s. Location-based industries like the salt mine and petroleum cannot relocate, but their wages are hardly better, and their impacts are devasting. Surveys for over 20 years have detailed the pollution risks. Over the past decade, evidence has stacked up that they have caused severe environmental harm through groundwater pollution from brine, wastewater, and metals. Cancer rates have increased, even among school-aged children who may have their lives cut short. This social and economic decline has real effects on the children and their families. For their health and well-being, relocating may feel like the safest course of action.

This has a cyclical effect on the school and the district; restructuring is damaging. The citizens of County Sister don’t have a history in the high school; they had lost their own decades earlier. They don’t have the enduring loyalty and connection that Wheat Town and rural residents have to their school. And that has shrunk the high school and district’s population, half of the students who attend County Sister Elementary transfer out of the district. The benefits are clear: moving to a larger, better-funded, better-equipped school closer to their home is an obvious choice. And the effect that it has on the high school is severe. A loss in population is a loss in funding resources from the community that would filter into the school, building the school and community. It’s a relationship that would cycle either way, but the district’s future is limited. Fewer kids mean fewer resources, which further hinders the competitiveness of the school and the likelihood that students will be retained or gained.

Chapter 2-Pedagogy and Practice

So why do these schools stay open? It doesn't seem to make economic sense for the students, staff, or district to remain in place. The simple answer is some things are far more important than money. There are many generations of habitation in the town or the surrounding land. My family can trace generations to South-Central Kansas, living and working, farming, construction, driving to town, and seeing buildings, bridges, and overpasses built by my grandfather and great-grandfather. Knowing that my family had a place there, long-running connections to the land, where they had hunted, fished, or picked berries for decades. That alone is the reason to stay and why these places stay alive. More than that, this is where the nation's food is produced. Kansas is consistently the most significant producer of wheat in the United States; South-Central Kansas is one of the greatest producers in the state. For that reason, there must always be a population who lives there, and those farmers must be supported with services and industry; rural life cannot be eliminated without eliminating food production. Despite this, it remains clear that rural areas have been neglected politically, socially, and economically for decades. I know why I'm passionate and proud of where I came from, but in this section, I will discuss why and how school staff display that pride and work to support their school.

An essential preface to this section is something I have struggled with throughout this project: the status of education in rural areas. Education is not heavily weighted, or for most of history, it was not, not formal, high achievement education anyway. Before top-down policy and consolidation, every little town had its own school. Usually, a single room was staffed by a single teacher and provided for by volunteering parents and townspeople. Multiple ages of kids would be taught together in the same room, often by a teacher who may not have had a lengthy formal education themselves. Yet the content was meaningful and taught to the best of their ability,

oriented towards local values and local needs. It may prepare you to work on the family farm, mill, or fishery, to go out into the skilled trades as a carpenter, welder, bricklayer, plumber, or any necessary vocations to a small and sustainable community. This was the education most residents would receive; some local elites may have the money and perhaps the need for more, the bankers, store owners, mayor, but they were the minority. Of importance was the social aspect of the school. It was a unifying factor for locals; everyone attended the same school and was able to form a closed-loop social system in childhood. Rural researchers DeYoung and Howley elaborate on this concept in *The Political Economy of Rural School Consolidation*, offering the critical distinction between the school as a place of learning and the school as a social institution. Particularly in rural areas where the school may be one of, if not the only, social institution. While this creates lasting bonds among the population, it makes it increasingly difficult for new residents to join the community. They have missed early bonding opportunities and did not have the local history of being trusted community members. The school as an institution may be an essential factor to any town, even if the mandated curriculum isn't. This importance becomes increasingly apparent when schools are closed or consolidated; Dreier and Goudy presented their findings on this relationship at the Rural and Small Schools Conference in 1994. Every town that lost its school suffered consistent declines in the population at a rate greater than any other town, regardless of other economic or social activity.

This may seem like a historical anecdote, calling back to times romanticized in books and shows like *Little House on the Prairie*. However, the spirit is still relevant today, especially when considering educational outcomes. Higher education in America is still a commodity reserved primarily for the wealthy, and in higher poverty areas, it is not considered a viable or necessary option for many. This was clear in discussions with faculty, recognizing students' financial limits,

and meeting local values and needs. First, I would return to the close connections between community and school as a method for mitigating the harms from Chapter 1. Second, I will discuss how various courses have maintained a degree of local control over schooling and how that meets local needs, as opposed to programs implemented by and for the federal government and national markets. Again, district restructuring and degree of rurality are necessary inclusions to understanding.

When it comes to mitigating harms of the social and economic variety, the social and emotional learning program takes precedence. The counselor was able to elaborate on the needs they saw, and when they decided to take action, "So there was a need. A lot of the teachers, every year say, 'Well these freshmen.' Well, it's not just the class... they say, 'I wish the freshman can be more on top of it, what are they doing in the middle school,' let's blame the middle school." The counselor quickly acknowledged that it's both the change of coming to the high school and a lack of prior teaching on these topics. Where that teaching should have come from doesn't matter anymore; it needs to happen now. So, the school can step in to work for the youth, and one of the first needs of this program is funding. With the school mainly being unable to provide financing, direct fundraising from the community becomes necessary. The counselor expressed difficulty with this process, "So, it's like where do you start there. Obviously, businesses that are in the community would be more than likely wanting to help a school... you know, [Local Grocery Store], and get the [Local Bank], which they were very generous and helped because that's a really good connection there. But the smaller businesses, that's harder for them." Immediately there was an issue with the few local businesses not being able to afford to help either; even so, their connection to the school convinced them to give something, but they found a shoulder to lean on, "You know the ones that did help were alumni. One of the ladies at the bank, very

passionate about our school, went to school here; kids went to school here." This was followed by trying to bring in speakers, locals who had graduated from the high school "Because I thought it'd be good for the kids to make a connection, they can see, 'Oh they're just like me they went through here' you know, and they can be successful, but that was hard" One of the reasons for that is Covid-19, which has further exacerbated many of these issues, another may be the flight of youth from more rural areas, especially those who may be considered traditionally successful. That is one of the biggest problems in rural areas, and it returns to the issue of district restructuring, which follows a national restructuring trend. People are leaving rural areas at an astounding pace; not just that fewer people are being born, but youth are consistently moving away to go to college or to find work.

When it comes to community outreach, the few local businesses cannot satisfy demand, "there's just a lack of, not support by any means. The ones that are here are very supportive; there's just not a lot of resources." This requires reaching out, and the counselor seemed confused when he told me, "The biggest donations were from banks and stuff that aren't even in our community or district, not even district lines." Even the biggest businesses within district lines, in County Sister, were unwilling to donate; they do not have the connection to the high school that might compel them to, "It's just finding those connections. Otherwise, you're just kind of with nothing." The reality is the town is dying, it has been shrinking for decades, and the state's newest highway project has been routed around town rather than through. This has stretched the idea of community engagement to its limits; there just isn't enough left, especially not in Wheat Town, County Sister is only slightly better off. Other programs around the school have faced similar struggles and continue to rely on businesses from outside, getting materials

donated for projects and classes. Each year the fire department donates supplies to the surrounding schools, but it's County Seat because Wheat Town doesn't have a fire department.

When it comes to supporting local values, the high school is on the right track. For 35 years, the high school supported a Combined Cooperative Vocational Education Program (CCVEP), where students would take their required courses in the mornings and have the afternoons to work. At its inception, the program was designed for 12 students; by its final year, 28 students were working. This program allowed them to learn valuable skills while in high school, and for many, it guaranteed fair-paying employment after graduation. In the 90s, this program was defunded and cut, but the high school has seen it advantageous to return in the last two years, albeit in a limited form. They currently allow for job shadowing, taking up to 3 days to follow a profession of interest; in the coming year, they intend to expand further to school year internships, offering credit and reduced school time. Preempting these options is an ongoing career day. At least once per year, a series of local professionals are brought to the school to represent their industries; students can choose who to visit to learn more about their interests while still in school.

Less traditionally academic courses have continued to thrive. When the CCVEP was defunded, the teacher continued with business classes. They were determined to make sure students graduated ready for the world, covering financial literacy; this included renting and buying cars from dealerships, interpreting insurance for vehicles and houses, budgeting groceries through shopping trips, opening checking and saving accounts at the bank. It consistently included meetings and talks with the owners and managers of local businesses, who would describe the ins and outs of their industry. This was paired with the Family and Community Sciences (FACS) classes, teaching another critical segment of life skills. There were classes on

cooking, food science, and nutrition, teaching everything from measuring and converting to making from scratch meals. Others cover the basics of sewing, attaching buttons and zippers, patching clothing, even quilt making. These classes make up a distinct section of skills necessary to living independently and often without wealth, a series of classes lost in the highly academic curriculums of other schools.

Another school area has highlighted its commitment to local values and needs in an exceptional way through the woodshop and metal shop. Faculty frequently mentioned these classes for the engagement opportunities and by students for the fundamental skills they were taught. When it came to external community engagement, options were less limited; in the past years, projects included desks built for the city hall and a trail sign and mile markers constructed and installed for a walking path around town. The metal shop visited businesses focused on welding and metal fabrication, though those were all out of town and district. The programs shined in their work in and around the high school. The teacher may be the project lead, but the students drew up the plans, the construction was supervised but student-led, and the projects came from the students and teachers inside the building. It started small, building a prop table for the school play and woodcut signs of the school logo. Then, a storage shed to sell for fundraising, a ticket booth for the sports games, and refurbishing cafeteria tables and chairs. They recently built three-tier risers for the choir from locally donated lumber. A soundproof room for the audio/visual classes, with supervision from the electrician, students even ran the wiring for the room. They plan to build a shed for the baseball scorekeepers to keep them warm and dry through the games. The metal shop has helped students refurbish their vehicles and participates in fabrication fairs each year; within the next year, they are trying to bring back an entire automotive program. An apparent downside of these programs comes from the funding,

hundreds of thousands of dollars invested in equipment and materials, money that could be spent updating facilities, buying textbooks, training teachers for advanced classes. So why here?

The woodshop teacher had an eloquent answer, “Tailoring our education to meet their needs, I think, is probably the best thing that we can do. Give them a variety of different things, whether it’s this or the FACS classes and things like that.” That is the answer, and its motivation comes in three parts: providing a sense of pride and community, meeting local needs and values, and meeting rigorous educational goals. One of the first things to understand about attending a low-income, rural school is that there is a real social stigma attached to it. Everyone hears about Wheat Town being the worst in the county, the last chance school; people apologize when they hear where you’re from. A consistent thread in interviews was about combatting this stigma. The counselor replied, “Our students, they're very capable; talk about test scores, you know. It's not like we're any different than anybody else. We've got intelligent kids that could go somewhere.” One method of pushing back on that perception starts in the school itself, “Doing stuff here at school, if [students] can come back in five years, ten years, and see that what they did in high school is still standing, and they helped contribute; it gives them a sense of pride and ownership within the school.” That school pride is something the woodshop teacher works hard to develop; local pride is what keeps these communities alive, and it’s so much more important than the money, “if I can give them a sense of pride, of ownership, and they want to come back, want their kids to go to school here. Wheat Town can get bigger and better, and ultimately that was my plan when I came here.”

It’s clear this helps create and maintain community, and part of that is meeting the needs of students here, of those who want to stay. The social and emotional program gets support from alumni who have their connection and sense of pride to meet the immediate needs of students.

Business owners have deep partnerships with the business classes, employing students and welcoming them into their industries. All the life skills classes, from finances to FACS and carpentry, teach the youth how to survive and do it within their means. It comes down to two aspects, understanding the financial limits of the population and understanding the prospects of the area. A local resident and teacher said, “We’ve got kids that don’t have money, families that don’t have any money.” Post-secondary education is doubtlessly important, but it’s simply not accessible to many students, especially not in the traditional 4-year College or University track. This has created genuine partnerships with the nearest community college; the administrator has been instrumental in this “We push our kids into college credit to raise the rigor and give them more challenging classes…most of our kids (that go to college) go to County Seat Community College…a credit hour there, it’s 100$” It has also pushed students into less academic careers, less than 50% of graduates go to college, they’re going to work. Having baseline skills and introductions to job markets before graduation makes that possible, and even if they don’t go into the trades, those skills will pay off, a point the shop teacher made clear. “We bring a wall out that we sheetrock, we punch holes in it, and we fix it because I tell the kids someday you’re going to have something that happens…bust out a wall in your rental house, and you want to get your deposit back, let’s learn how to do this…you don’t want to pay 100$ an hour for an electrician to come over and flip a breaker because you don’t know how to diagnose the problem.”

Finally, is the educational rigor; students from rural areas are no less intelligent than their peers, regardless of the “brain drain” arguments. A 2019 analysis by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development sorts the most recent TALIS and PISA results geographically. They found that rural students consistently scored as well as their urban peers in testing and resiliency measures. Traditional academia should not be mistaken for intelligence or

ability; where the school may lack in those areas, they more than make up for it in others. Internships and early work opportunities provide a dedicated and readily applicable knowledge base. FACS classes provide complex knowledge about the foods we consume and how those affect our health; sewing requires care and skill, maneuvering fabrics, and using appropriate needles, thread, and bonding materials. Woods and metals require equal manual skill, an understanding of electrical processes and complex machinery, an application of mathematics that is rarely seen elsewhere in the school, and countless other skills. Each allows for multiple dedicated professions that can take a lifetime to master. They may not lead to the highest-paying employment or the highly valued kind today. Nonetheless, it is stable work, necessary to a functioning society, and capable of providing deep personal satisfaction. The teachers that support this are educating students in a way that affirms local values, a dedication to hard work and often manual labor, and allows them to find employment even before graduation that is part of the local economy. If, as many do, you wish to stay close to home, to family, in the land you were raised on, it is made possible.

Chapter 3-Impacts on Students and Community

We were sitting in one of the science classrooms around an old lab table at the end of the period. Its black surface was cut, scratched, and stained by decades of high school kids doing experiments. We'd long grown tired of searching for the signatures of relatives and friends in the old textbooks and stacked them up under the sink in the middle of the table; it would never let out more than a trickle, and that was only when another table would turn theirs on, and the pressure would cause backflow. There was no vent hood around and not a window to be seen, even though most of the gas hookups were more than a little leaky. "Imagine how well we'd do, the opportunities we'd have if were went anywhere else." My friend said while looking around the room. We were a couple of the "smart kids" who'd elected to take the school's first-ever advanced chemistry class. Our teacher didn't have the qualifications to teach an AP class, but they could instruct the labs while we learned online. "If we just went to Northeast or Central…" he trailed off; we were thinking about taking AP or IB courses, maybe in rooms that didn't give the hallway a headache on lab weeks. We weren't dreaming of the best schools in the state; we couldn't even imagine the best schools in the country; we were hoping for a reliable internet connection and a decent lab. But it was hard to think about my school that way; my next period was in the woodshop learning from a brilliant carpenter, an opportunity that few of my peers would ever have, and I said as much. We both knew there were things to treasure about this school, opportunities we wouldn't have had elsewhere, but the things we were missing would be important to our success in the world. A world that is more focused than ever on formal education, whether we want it to be or not. College applications were due soon, and we dreamed of the future where we had made it. "I'd come back, have a scholarship for us."

"Yeah, just our high school, ten or twenty thousand a year…."

"Be one of those speakers in the auditorium we have to go to, but they'd actually want to listen to us because we'd have something for them. We could make a difference."

Wheat Town has never been a large, thriving town; its peak was nearly a hundred years ago with just over 1,600 residents. Since then, its decline has been consistent, if slow. It narrowly avoided the threat of consolidation of the school district in the 50s. Small jumps in population happened in the 70s and 80s, likely related to the farming crisis of those decades. But there's something different this time: the population is lower than ever. Its existence is more at odds with national trends, groundwater pollution has had severe health effects on the community, and state infrastructure projects are bypassing it. I can't help the sense of pride and loyalty I have to this small town. A bond forms when you know everyone you go to school with; when the same people you played with in kindergarten walk across the stage with you 12 years later, you can't walk down the street without seeing a friendly face waving back. One teacher pointed to the care in rural schools, "Nobody can fall through the cracks here." I grew up knowing my neighbors would support me, not because they were on good terms with my family or because we were particularly close, but despite it. Small towns like this and their way of life will never die, not just because there must be farmers and truck stops, but because of the millions who experienced what I have, who will stay or return to keep them alive.

There is a substantial difference between not dying and surviving or thriving. Many rural areas continue to experience a downturn, being unable to offer an equal education, well-paying employment, and in some cases, even the environmental amenities for which they are famous. When I started this project, I wanted to explore the role that schools have in the survival of rural towns; if schools can foster the attitudes and abilities that would keep their towns alive, either keep residents or incentivize them to return. And that is certain; it's why I'm writing today but is

it enough in the face of external pressures? To answer this, I had planned to survey high school graduates on their post-graduation choices, whether they stayed, and why. Considering the unique situation of Wheat Town, I decided this was no longer apt; not only are external pressures significant, but the makeup of the district itself no longer supports that thesis. In this section, I will discuss the considerations around rurality and remoteness, economic impacts, and how the support of the school has kept some students in the area.

When discussing any rural area, remoteness is crucial; how far from the nearest metropolitan area are they, and how large is that city? This will dramatically affect not just the available resources but the population of the town or school district. All of the nine schemas used in Kansas are urban-centric, marking the state's majority as rural. Wheat Town, with its population of 900 and located 20 miles from the nearest Urban Cluster (population less than 50k but greater than 2.5k) and almost 60 miles from the nearest Urbanized Area (population greater than 50k), is certainly included. But this is a much lower degree of remoteness than in western Kansas, which consists of some of the more remote towns in the United States that may be 150 miles or further from the nearest Urbanized Area. This dramatically affects the resources available to a school, what must come from the surrounding community and what can be sourced from the neighbors, even out of district ones. This discussion of remoteness was one of the primary reasons I avoided surveying alumni; with a district spanning 190 square miles, it includes a significant amount of the nearest Urban Cluster, where most of the students and staff reside. The situation of a rural school and town serving a primarily urbanized population emphasizes the uniqueness of any given rural area and the difficulty of measuring educational effects.

While a community-centered education can make it possible to stay in the area, the broader economic situation is beyond local control. One touted solution within the district and beyond is business classes, giving students the ability to understand their personal finances and the confidence to start small businesses of their own. There have been published articles and a well-kept record of students creating their own businesses, from a floral shop to a woodcarving business. The broader economic condition makes this impossible for most students, though; generational poverty and poor credit are particularly prohibitive when acquiring the capital necessary to start a small business. However, this is a step in the right direction; any small business is better than none, and a single student who can do so can provide motivation and even hiring opportunities to others. If running a business isn't possible or is otherwise unappealing, prospects are low, and employment is limited to established institutions. This means the primary employers are the school, the bank, and the grocery store. In the most recent career interest survey, many students are interested in pursuing visual and digital arts, where employment opportunities are slim even in the Urbanized Cluster. The available businesses that can provide a living wage continue to attract returnees. Multiple high school teachers are alumni themselves, but the less socially fulfilling employment opportunities may not be pursued or inherited. This goes back to the most significant reason people choose to leave and to who that choice is available. Economic prosperity is frequently cited as a reason, and the children of the more economically prosperous have the greatest ability to pursue opportunities like higher education that will draw them away from the community. You may love where you live, but if you can't afford to live there, you may have no choice but to leave if there isn't a viable economic future.

The focus on a viable future is critical here; in April 2021, it was announced a major Kansas highway would be expanded and routed past small towns in the area, including Wheat

Town. The lack of consistent highway traffic will certainly affect prospects for employment in the region; the gas station will likely close next, followed by the bar or the grocery store. The impacts will ripple through the community. A similar incident occurred in 1970, the Urbanized Cluster was routed around by a highway, and there was an economic downturn overnight; this will only exasperate the current situation. A prominent factor of viability is health; when you have the opportunity, it is essential to live in a place that can support your health and well-being. That is not necessarily the case in Wheat Town anymore. There is severe groundwater pollution, seriously impacting the health of residents across the district; within the past six years, this became public knowledge, and treatment plans were devised, the kind that cost hundreds of thousands of dollars and further drain the resources available to a small town. As local resources disappear, the future residency will be even more commuter-based, and this would be a viable form to explore were it not for district restructuring. It is no longer the case that most students live on farms, and in the small town, the farming crises have ended the legacy of many family farms. There are few residents in Wheat Town, and if you or your family are not from a rural area, it is unlikely that you would choose to move to one, especially when that area faces poverty and pollution.

This is not to say that the school has been unsuccessful in allowing students to stay or return. The first method is creating pride and care in the community. There is a real stigma associated with attending a small, poor, rural school. It's noticeable in the county when your friends go to better schools or when you attend competitions and aren't taken seriously by virtue of your school. As another method of combatting this stigma, the high school sponsors community service projects each year. The community service projects help develop care and understanding of your community; many students continue to do community service after

completing their projects. The woodshop building up the school, seeing something you built or designed, to see it years later, there is real pride in knowing you have given back and aided your school and community. And these programs allow students to forge connections and develop the skills to be employed in the area. There are handfuls of students every year who stay to work in the trades, doing construction, furniture making, welding, metal fabrication, or plumbing. A student who graduated a semester early started work at the boilermakers after an interview conducted during a class trip; they bought their first house before they walked across the stage at the end of the year. I was one of those students; before I graduated, I had a full-time job as a finish carpenter. It wasn't just healthier and better-paying work than I was doing before; I was making more money than anyone in my household. Any of these opportunities can radically change a student's position in life, and it can do so in a way that allows them to retain their values, care for their families, and give back to their community.

The newest programs are the most difficult to evaluate because of their recency. Job shadowing and career day are the latest programs. Just now in their 4th year, the students who have felt their full impact have yet to graduate. The burgeoning internship program appears promising; with the other career-centered programs, it looks to follow in the footsteps of the CCVEP program of the previous century. A wildly successful program that had students employed during high school and earned them employment after graduation, work that went on to advancements and business ownership. Importantly it gives students exposure to opportunities that they would not have, which is often lacking in rural areas. And the social, emotional learning program is a step toward meeting the emotional needs of residents, towards creating healthier and more supportive communities. At just three years old, it's still in its beginning stages and

cannot be evaluated until more students pass through the program and those first generations have developed more.

The role of the school in rural community survival cannot be understated. They can provide the connection, care, and pride that keep you or bring you back. They can teach the skills to survive and thrive in the local economy, the confidence to know you can make it and do better than those before. But they cannot defeat the social and economic principles that command the world at large. A desire for employment that cannot be found, many students in the last job interest survey wanted careers in the arts, occupations that require significant populations to support them. The desire for higher education, the kind that cannot be found in most small or rural areas, is a desire that fundamentally changes your relationship with the place you grew up. A community-centered education is not a solution to the challenges rural areas face, and it will not work for everyone. Funds spent on the shops and FACS classes could be spent on advanced curricula and academic counselors. Time invested in career readiness could be spent in college preparation. The importance of higher education is undeniable, and it goes well beyond economic futures. Higher education improves health outcomes, and social and civic engagement, imparting valuable skills that are just as necessary to the survival and revitalization of rural areas. There is a tradeoff, but higher education is not a reality for most graduates; the community college is a fantastic partnership to expand access. However, even this cheaper option can feel impossible; I couldn't afford the reduced cost of dual enrollment in high school. Rural areas' survival requires both those who stay and those who return, but most importantly, it requires real, structural, and systemic change. Real change, like the resources we receive, must come from outside. Farmers must be supported, and industries must provide a living wage, schools must be

more equitably funded, infrastructure must be developed. We cannot be ignored and circumvented for convenience.

Epilogue-My Own Experience

I thought I learned what rural meant throughout this project until I was asked, “How do you still participate?” I floundered. A hundred thoughts raced through my mind.

The burning desire to sit on a lakeshore and fish for my dinner.

The stack of wood outside my door for spring grilling.

My tool bag and unfished wood carvings, the notebook of plans, and project sketches.

The scars I can trace from animals and accidents.

The feeling of a cold beer after a long day in the sun.

Baling wire is the first idea of a quick fix.

Shopping for bulk-dried goods but fresh meat.

Blue jeans, boots, a leather belt, a pocket knife, and a faded t-shirt.

Hourly wages and poor employment.

Reluctance to visit the doctor-and, the crate of medical supplies in the closet.

But none of them felt right. And it was all I could think about. Did I lose touch? Have I changed that much? What is my relationship with “rural”? And then I watched a show set in a rural town; all my friends told me I acted just like one of the farmers. Another said they envied the way I fit in with the grounds crew. When we picked up decorations, no one could tell the difference between a hay bale, straw bale, or alfalfa bale. How unfamiliar I felt walking through New York City, the uncertainty of taking a subway for the first time. I took a flight last week and the bone-deep feeling that arises when the mountains and trees give way to fields of wheat and corn. Being rural is about the land you live on; it’s a deep and lasting connection to your space and home. Everything else is just another piece, rural expresses itself differently wherever you go, but that connection brings us together.

And that is something that is fundamentally at odds with popular culture, with being a certain kind of successful. Searching for more education, more money, and more benefits is a process that requires relocating and requires severing that connection. I have been through that; I'm going through that. So how can I advocate for the opposite? For locally relevant, culturally relevant, community-centered education. The first answer is simple; they are not mutually exclusive. You can return with higher education, new ideas, and more money, return to start or continue businesses and help the next generation. The second is that it is still a minority who leave for good. Due to the underlying conditions of poverty, access to social services, and the other deficits those create, most can't leave. I worked on a farm for years; I worked after school, on weekends, and during breaks from elementary school to graduation. Seven days a week throughout high school, the cows don't take holidays; they need food and water on Christmas and New Year's. The hay doesn't wait to be harvested; it demands it once grown. After that, I became a carpenter; I took the skills I had learned while in school and transferred them to a well-paying job within a week. Somehow, I got accepted to college along the way; I didn't know what I was doing or have time to think about the future. And when I left for college, I left everyone and everything I knew behind.

There are three things discussed in the previous chapters that can change the situation in rural areas. An unavoidable first is funding. This is a primary and structural issue. Due to low population and poverty, current funding mechanisms are insufficient. This creates deficits in infrastructure, technology, and curriculum options. Schools do not have the funding to support their student's needs and allow them to thrive in the current economic landscape. While certain states like Kansas do better at providing more equitable funding through increased state contributions, this is not a solution for all schools and can still be insufficient. The method of

funding schools demands a fundamental reevaluation. The focus on charter and private schools as a solution further complicates this issue in rural areas, which often have access to neither.

Second, as a significant influencer of funding, there are systemic and structural issues outside of the control of rural areas. This broad category includes the lack of academic and institutional awareness or focuses that Michael Their illuminates in their research studies on rural areas. This lack of educational and institutional understanding has the additional effect of not preparing teachers to teach in rural locations, exacerbating inequalities. The ongoing consolidation of schools shuttered entire communities in the search for cheap solutions to operating schools. Thomas Butler explains how neoliberalism and globalization's international economic and social trends have systematically disenfranchised rural communities. Judy Zimbelman discusses the comparative lack of access to social services; most organizations cannot service rural areas on top of their urban and suburban commitment. These issues harm rural communities' social and economic life, which is reflected in their educational opportunities and achievement.

Finally, the incredible diversity of rural areas must be accounted for. Rural encompasses the majority of land, leading to uniqueness in every location. As Mara Tieken put it, “When you’ve seen one rural school, you’ve seen one rural school.” This includes racial and ethnic diversity from African American communities throughout the south, indigenous American reservations in the Midwest and west, and growing immigrant populations from Southeast Asia and Latin America. The economic diversity, where a single industry is the primary supporter of life, whether farming, fishing, mining, logging, or manufacturing. Remoteness, from those that are a short drive from the largest metropolitan cities to the most remote in the country, a hundred miles or more from a supermarket, hospital, or higher education institution. And each of these

further intersects with cultural and religious diversity, long histories, and different social conditions in every case. This diversity supports the need for local control of schools and curricula. No one is more qualified to provide students with a relevant education than the staff who have worked and lived there, who understand the conditions and realities of their lives.

Rural areas need help; they need people to stay, people to return. Their economies depend on the lives of those who stay because they want to, because they must because someone must. I want to be clear that this is not a solution to the struggles of rural life but that it can help the situation. A culturally relevant education facilitates learning, and its application is no less intellectually rigorous. The wood and metals shops were a big part of this thesis, not just because they are direct pipelines to local industry, but because they are intellectually rigorous disciplines that can help apply the education you receive. Math proficiency at graduation is below 10%, but a good carpenter will use everything shy of calculus to build a riser, a stage, a room. Community service and projects create a sense of belonging and a sense of pride in your home. Understanding and combatting the deficit framework around rural areas is fundamental to their survival and maybe one day their success.

Honestly, this is a single step, a single case of a school on the road to more culturally relevant education, one that is still incomplete. Classes on farming, water, land management, or animal husbandry could follow this trend, using the subjects that people are exposed to teach them the concepts they need to know. Now, much of the goal is to push people away while knowing you need to attract more to survive. A shift in schooling may not change the societal conditions that push students away, it likely will not create well-paying jobs, economic growth, or even clean water, but maybe one day it will. Some students willing to stay, willing to return, willing to risk themselves for their homes could make that difference. There are systemic issues

that must be fixed around funding, labor and wages, land and water, and health and social care to make these places grow, but the school is a place to start.

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