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Rural Revitalization in New Mexico

By Gerald Pitzl, 10/16/2007 8:35:12 AM

Taking its cue from immensely successful rural community redevelopment programs in South Australia, the New Mexico Public Education Department has created the Rural Education Division, with express directives to address the needs of the state's far-flung, isolated, and struggling rural areas.

The uniqueness of the New Mexico Rural Revitalization Initiative (NMRRRI) is seen in the key role played by the schools within each community. Countless small towns across the country have seen their socioeconomic vitality diminished as businesses close and population declines.

These negative outcomes accelerate when the public school in a community closes. The impact of school closing or consolidation can be devastating to a small community where the school may well be the largest single employer in the place as well as a community center. The NMRRRI philosophy stresses the holistic and integrated development of both school and larger community.

The revitalization process begins with a series of community conversations involving key members of the community, including the mayor, business and civic leaders, interested townspeople, and the school superintendent. Together, the group identifies the strengths of the community and, importantly, the directions the community wants to go in its future development. The approach is very much a grass roots initiative, which demands that the impetus for change be identified by community stakeholders and initiated by them. The process is closely associated with conflict resolution in which the parties to a dispute must take part in the ultimate remedying of the dispute.

The role of the school is crucial to the success of the program. There is no real validity in upgrading a community while its schools flounder. Nor is it sensible to pour resources into schools if the community is in stress and decline. School and community must work together in the revitalization process. Student feelings of being isolated from their community are countered with programs that bring community members into the schools and take students into the community for mutually meaningful and rewarding experiences, a sound and time-tested approach called place-based education.

Successful place-based education programs have given students a greater awareness of their community and appreciation for its positive attributes. Programs of this type can reverse the seemingly endless out-migration of young people from small towns.

The NMRRRI is now in its third year of operation. Thirteen rural school districts serving approximately 5,000 K-12 students are now represented, and it is hoped that the number of districts will increase steadily in the next few years. During the first year of the initiative, representatives from the selected rural communities joined staff members from the Rural Education Bureau on a 12-day excursion to South Australia to visit and study firsthand the community revitalization programs in ten towns in the region. Exposure to these small South Australian towns, once close to disappearing and now thriving, has transformed U. S. educators into true believers in the effectiveness of the program.

Take, for example, the South Australian seacoast village of Cowell. Traditionally a farming community, Cowell became one of literally hundreds of small Australian farming centers that could no longer compete in the new era of agribusiness. During one of the community conversations held in Cowell, someone suggested that since the land could no longer provide significant monetary return, why not farm the ocean? Fast-forward a few years and Cowell is now doing just fine with its new and highly productive oyster farms. Students in the Cowell schools work in the oyster operation and several have stayed on following graduation. A true entrepreneurial success story, Cowell's oysters are shipped all the way to Japan, and the town has become a leader in aquaculture Down Under.

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There is an abundance of documentation strongly indicating that entrepreneurial initiatives are the economic future for small communities in the U. S. The old economy of agriculture, resource processing, and the capturing of manufacturing spin-off operations from the big cities will not work in the new economy. It's a new world with new opportunities in a truly global setting. A business leader from the small town of Cimarron, New Mexico, who went on the first visit to South Australia, became so excited about the prospects for community revitalization that on returning home she ran for mayor and was elected.

There's a lot going on in the small rural towns in New Mexico. Sadly, New Mexico is the only state that has rural revitalization as official state policy. Other states might do well to look at this success story.

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