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## Small Town Survival - Schools

July 9 // Bruce Sorte // Hermiston, Oregon

“Schools are the heart of the community. Without a school, the community will gradually disappear.” (Marvin Gloege *Survival or Gradual Extinction* 2007 p. 208)



Source: Wikipedia\ODF&W

If you want your small town to survive, you will not let your schools be consolidated away from your town or their quality diminished with consolidated classes.

Since the 19th Century well meaning people have been advocating school consolidation to improve efficiency (reduce costs) and bring the most current learning techniques and facilities to students. Many deserted rural schools and communities emphasize - without a school you will eventually be without a town.

There is no optimum school size, yet we do know from over a century of research that “Smaller schools provide benefits of reduced discipline problems and crime, reduced truancy and gang participation, reduced dropout rates, improved teacher and student attitudes, improved student self-perception, student academic achievement equal to or superior to that of students at larger schools, and increased parental involvement.” (Bard, Gardener and Wieland *Academic Leadership* 2007).

[http://www.academicleadership.org/emprical\\_research/Rural\\_School\\_District\\_Consolidation.shtml](http://www.academicleadership.org/emprical_research/Rural_School_District_Consolidation.shtml)

From a community economics perspective small town schools:

1. provide some of the better paying jobs and multiplied economic benefits in small towns,
2. serve as a focal point for small town activities and identity, as Willie Riggs, my blog advisor from Klamath Falls says; "Sports, Friday night high school football is a community gathering, FFA, 4-H, Science Fair, etc. All have a value to a community. It is where the community gathers and decisions are made."
3. offer academic programs in some small schools that focus on the local businesses and reinforce economic clusters.

In the next Oregon legislative session, decision makers will face the three part problem in education with fewer resources than ever before.

Until the 1960's, when federal legislation and technological advances provided more pay and freedom to women working outside the home, most women had two professional career choices – nursing and teaching. So, without many alternatives, women accepted unusually low pay in relation to their skills. (Levitt & Dubner *Super Freakonomics* 2009 p. 43-44). **The cost of education has increased and we now need to pay a competitive wage to recruit capable teachers.**

Until the 1980's in Oregon, a person with a high school diploma or less could readily find a family wage job – not so today. **The need for education and training is increasing at an increasing rate.**

Oregon is disproportionately reliant on manufacturing jobs, which are being eliminated or shipped offshore. Income inequality has been growing across Oregon and real wages have stagnated for most Oregonians over the last decade. **Taxpayers are less able to pay for education.**

Higher costs, greater need, and reduced ability to pay – still, you have resources that you can use to retain your small town schools.

*Almost a third of our population has time and strong academic and/or experience based skills to contribute*

*Teach for America's* success putting exceptional scholars, who do not have teaching backgrounds, into schools with certified teachers provides evidence that people who are not formally trained as teachers can be effective teachers. A small town school with which I work has recently transformed their whole school district into a charter school. They will now have more flexibility to support their teachers with skilled experience based teachers, primarily in the arts and other electives, and retain their small class sizes and autonomy.

*Technology can reverse the trend of fewer teachers in larger classes*

I teach one college level microeconomics class each year in a small town high school. One third of the classes are online with real time visual and audio broadcast to the students and text responses back to me from the students. Small town schools need to utilize interactive or synchronous – not recorded online classes – even more than they already do to retain low student to teacher ratios and wide range of options in small town schools.

***New educational structures have shown some positive results***

Charter schools and online schools offer an opportunity to bring new approaches and people into the classrooms. The [Communities in Schools](#) program is another example of bringing adults with a variety of backgrounds into the classroom.

***Consolidation is not all bad and can reduce administrative costs without losing identity***

Purchasing, accounting, and many other administrative functions can be consolidated among a number of school districts or contracted to an Educational Service District (ESD) or private company without losing the individual schools' identities. The savings can be significant and some school districts have already moved in that direction.

***Oregonians know high quality and accessible public education is essential***

A bit larger central Oregon town last year created a program called Choice Friday, when their school district went to a four day school week. The whole community pulled together, created lots of different programs for students that ranged from basic academic skills to physical activities to civic activities. Students' test scores went up and a community demonstrated its commitment to its students.

Small towns must retain their schools to survive. Folks need to decide whether to give more of their time and money for students and their small towns or watch as one of the main reasons they live where they do disappears. Vested interests in the educational system need to decide whether to dig in their heels and push their small towns to extinction or support and maybe lead the changes necessary to give their small towns more hope for the future.

Take care,  
Bruce Sorte

Posted at <http://www.rippenw.org/authors/26/posts/166>