



Education Improves When Communities Come Together to Help All Students

Dane Smith, Retirement Revised

How can we help all children do well in America's schools? Educators and policymakers debate strategies for educational reform, and journalists love to write stories about success cases. But all too often, the focus is only on urban and metropolitan settings. Smaller communities and rural areas are also trying to boost educational achievement – and many nonmetropolitan schools are grappling with the difficult challenges that accompany poverty, racial divisions, and the arrival of immigrants with new customs and outlooks on life. This brief focuses on the special strengths smaller communities can bring to the quest for effective educational reforms.

Old Traditions Meet New Challenges

The Upper Midwest has strong historical traditions prizing universal and equal educational access. Minnesota, in particular, developed an ethic of small-town community pride about high-quality schooling and efforts to help all students achieve at a level “above average” (as in Garrison Keillor’s mythical community of Lake Wobegon). Under the leadership of progressives such as Farmer-Labor Governor Floyd B. Olson in the 1930s, Minnesota raised income taxes specifically to support an ample and equal level of education investment. The state became an outlier in high student attainment and achievement. In a 1973 cover story about Minnesota’s remarkable economic health and quality of life, *Time* magazine pointed to “a near-worship for education and a high civic tradition.”

What happens when twenty-first-century Minnesota communities face unprecedented educational challenges amidst rising economic inequality and sudden social changes? The state is home not only to major urban centers, but also to smaller cities and towns and tiny rural villages, many of which are changing rapidly. In some smaller Minnesota communities, for example, Latino and non-white enrollment is surging toward 40 percent in school districts that previously taught only white youngsters. And villages far from college campuses must find ways to open the doors to the post-high school training vital to adult success. Can older civic traditions meet such daunting challenges?

A Close Look at Emerging Community Efforts

In a recent report about “Whole Towns Coming Together for All Students,” I looked closely at promising new forms of community engagement for student success, with close attention to towns and villages that are closing the income and racial gaps and helping all students increase levels of educational attainment at school and after graduation. The study examines educational reforms in eight nonmetropolitan towns and rural places throughout Minnesota, including the Brainerd Lakes area, Cook County and Grand Marais, Itasca County and Grand Rapids, Northfield, Rochester, St. Cloud, Willmar, and Worthington. Reforms include efforts sponsored by foundations and statewide associations, as well as “diversity coalitions” fostered by the Minnesota School Integration Council and rural community efforts encouraged by the Blandin Foundation based in north-central Minnesota.

Despite economic challenges and increasing racial diversity, academic studies show the effectiveness of community engagement and point to a revival in such activity across the nation. Minnesota examples were not difficult to find. In southern and western towns with many new immigrants, I found communities with diverse sets of activists and leaders collaborating to reduce dropout rates. In remote communities in northern Minnesota, I saw creative efforts to use online resources to let students of all abilities study for post-secondary vocational and academic credentials. And in small cities such as Grand Rapids and St. Cloud, I discovered high-functioning citizen teams putting together truly comprehensive “roadmaps” to student success that measure and support progress from birth to post-high-school preparation for adult careers.

In smaller communities, even modest projects that bring new civic engagement with schools can lead to

promising results for students. Yet the best results may come from multipronged efforts that engage many community actors in supporting young people from “cradle to career.”

Coming Together for the Long Haul

A model called “Strive Together,” first developed in Cincinnati and northern Kentucky, has spread in the last decade to other regions of the United States. In Minnesota, it is being adapted by reformers in north-central Itasca County, and in the St. Cloud School District. The model combines several key elements:

- All community sectors take part, including parents’ groups, business leaders and employers, minority community advocates, philanthropic and community service groups, and of course, schools and local governments.
- “Roadmaps” are laid out, along with specific measurements that go well beyond a few high-stakes tests. Real progress must be charted with benchmarks for milestones such as kindergarten readiness, school achievement, and preparation for college and work.
- Finally and perhaps most important, the Strive model mobilizes improvement networks and task forces to all help students achieve each milestone goal on the roadmap.

In an assessment of the Strive model that appeared recently in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, John Kania and Mark Kramer found great value when “a core group of community leaders decided to abandon their individual agendas in favor of a collective approach to improving student achievement.” Leaders realized that “fixing one point on the educational continuum – such as better after-school programs – wouldn’t make much difference unless all parts of the continuum improved at the same time. No single organization, however innovative or powerful, could accomplish this alone,” so many groups and leaders in the community must work together. Not surprisingly, this promising cradle-to-career approach is particularly suited to Minnesota’s rural areas and non-metropolitan areas, where the spirit of village responsibility for the well-being of all children is a long and proud tradition well-suited to build for tomorrow.

Read more in Dane Smith, “Whole Towns Coming Together for All Students,” Growth & Justice Policy Report, January 2012.