

**What Does a School Mean to a Community?
Assessing the Social & Economic Benefits of Schools
To Rural Villages in New York**

by

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What is the Issue?

Much of what has been written about the benefits of small rural schools centers on student performance and outcomes. The myth that 'bigger is better' has largely been debunked. While considerable attention has been directed toward understanding the linkages between school size, educational quality, and student performance, a much smaller body of work has focused on the importance of schools to rural community viability. In a study of schools and villages in New York, I attempted to quantify and generalize what a school means to a rural community.

Why Schools are Important to Communities

Schools in rural communities play many roles. In addition to providing for basic education, they serve as social and cultural centers. They are places for sports, theater, music, and other civic activities. Schools serve as symbols of community autonomy, community vitality, community integration, personal control, personal and community tradition, and personal and community identity. For many rural communities, the school also contributes to the sense of

survival of adults in the culture. This project is particularly focused on identifying community-level characteristics associated with the presence or absence of a school.

School consolidation has been the bane of rural communities for at least the past 50 years. In addition to the detrimental effects on educational quality and student performance, school consolidation also has deleterious effects on small rural communities. Not only do schools meet the educational needs of a community and may be a source of employment for village residents, the local school also provides social, cultural, and recreational opportunities. It is a place where generations come together and where community identity is forged. As Fuller* (1982:234-235) noted almost 20 years ago, "To close a country school was to destroy an institution that held the little rural community together. It was to wipe out the one building the people of the district had in common and, in fact, to destroy the community..."

How do communities differ due to the presence or absence of a school?

In general, the presence of a school was

associated with many social and economic benefits. Housing values were considerably higher and municipal infrastructure was more developed in small villages with schools. The occupational structure in these communities was qualitatively different than in places without schools. Not only were there more people employed in the more favorable occupational categories, but there was more employment in 'civic' occupations. Further, income inequality and welfare dependence was lower in villages with schools. In sum, schools serve as important markers of social and economic viability and vitality.

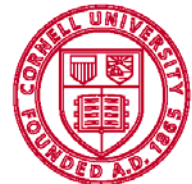
Policy Implications

It is important for policy makers, educational administrators, and local citizens to understand that schools are vital to rural communities (see Fuller, 1982; Lyson, 2002). The money that might be saved through consolidation could be forfeited in lost taxes, declining property values and lost businesses.

Given the positive attributes associated with schools it is not surprising that when threatened by consolidation, residents in most small rural communities mount vigorous campaigns to keep their schools open (Peshkin, 1982). In some cases, novel solutions are crafted when two school districts merge. The school in one community might accommodate the elementary school program, while the high school moves to the neighboring community. If no compromises are considered, challenges to school closings often move into the legal arena. When this happens, the social and economic impacts associated with losing a school can become part of the case against consolidation. In

New York, for example, legislation was recently passed which stipulates that a decision by a Board of Education to close a school in one community and consolidate enrollment in another community must undergo a State Environmental Quality Review (SEQR). The community that loses a school must be mitigated for that loss. While school superintendents and Boards of Education may believe they have good reasons for consolidation (Cummins, 1998), the SEQR process insures that a village that loses its school and its residents are compensated for their losses.

School consolidation is likely to continue, especially in rural regions that are losing population. As the farm economy undergoes profound restructuring, parts of the Midwest are losing economically and socially viable populations, tax bases, essential services, such as schools, and retail establishments. But, there are also cases of rural communities that are thriving and, in doing so, retaining populations or even growing. There is a body of research which shows that in communities where the citizenry is civically engaged, local businesses prosper, and that these factors anchor populations to place (Irwin, et. al, 1997). Civic institutions like schools are places where residents come together to solidify bonds of community, work to address the challenges of sustaining their communities, and plan for the future.



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