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The Rural Continuation School: A Working Alternative to Traditional Education

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The establishment of rural educational alternatives within public school systems has gained increased attention in recent years. Previously these types of programs were almost exclusively the products of urban and suburban communities trying to meet the needs of specialized groups.

However, with the decrease in student interest in courses that were seemingly irrelevant to their needs, and a dropout rate that was growing at an alarming rate, even the most conservative and cautious of rural school districts have begun to consider the implementation of instructional options.

A relatively small community in north central Kansas found that they had a problem keeping students in school. Despite the near presence of a State University and military post, the community is predominantly rural and agricultural. In reviewing reports of graduating and nongraduating students the school board, representing many facets of the community, was very concerned about the student dropout rate within their school system.

Under the board's direction, a committee composed of psychologists, counselors, teachers and administrators investigated the possibility of starting some form of alternative education in the secondary schools.

The committee met periodically over an extended period of time in an attempt to develop a target

population and devise a philosophic and curricular base. Beginning their work by investigating alternative options that were already in operation, they found the variety of programs that were offered across the country staggering.

There were free schools, experimental schools, folk schools, schools without walls and schools within schools, each offering a different educational opportunity, but all trying to serve the same clientele, that being the disenchanting student.

The proponents of these alternatives also offered their communities a wide spectrum of teaching and learning styles ranging from behavior modification to Montessori methods.

The continuation schools' selection methods were just as varied. Some schools only catered to the economically disadvantaged, some programs encompassed whole school districts, while others worked exclusively on the lottery system.

At the conclusion of the extensive review, and on the third attempt the committee submitted an acceptable proposal to the school board. The conceptual base for this program, The Rural Continuation School, was to deal with the dropout student who returned to school or the potential dropout who presented a problem in the regular academic program. These students had a desire for an education, but were frustrated because they lacked academic, social and/or emotional skills.

Unlike many alternative programs which are housed in a separate setting away from the established public facilities, The Rural Continuation School was placed in a modular unit close by the high school. In this way it could utilize the established resources of the district, such as art, music, drivers training and physical education. Courses that are the most supportive to the potential dropout can thus be included within the program, yet offerings which are more frustrating can be personalized.

Students in the program are selected through a screening process conducted by the staff of The Rural Continuation School. The student is encouraged to get an application, fill it out, sign it, have his/her parents sign it, and return it to one of the Rural Continuation School staff members.

Students are also referred to the program by school counselors and administrators, parents, and local community members. After the application is submitted, the student is contacted for an interview to determine his/her needs for such a program. When the program is full, students are placed on a priority waiting list, and are brought into the program as already enrolled students move back into the main school or on to other alternatives.

The Rural Continuation School is staffed by four certified instructors whose teaching styles are flexible enough to adapt to a variety of teaching and learning methods.

The curriculum concentrates on language arts, social studies, and required courses for graduation. Additional high interest courses, as determined by the student, are available through the regular high school program. The Rural Continuation School student is thus not excluded from any area special to him/her. The language arts field is broken into two parts: (1) basic skills and (2) literature. The basic skills include composition, grammar, spelling, reading comprehension, vocabulary and oral communication. The area of literature is handled in a very flexible manner, in which a student may combine reading for a social studies project or a personal interest project along with a literature project.

The basic course work for social studies and government is based on mini-pacs and topical studies developed around a wide range of materials. Each mini-pac or topic lists from four to ten activities, such as materials to be read, community people to be contacted, and places to visit. Besides the mini-pacs or topical approach, the students can choose to follow

a programmed chronological approach to history or government.

All of the levels and areas of curriculum at the Rural Continuation School are handled on an individualized basis; emphasis is on meeting the needs and working at the learning rates of the students. The students assist in deciding the objectives that need to be completed for earning a specific amount of credit; therefore, right from the beginning, both the students and the teachers have the basic framework from which to operate. Even with this concentrated contractual method, a certain degree of flexibility is retained in order to accommodate students' changing needs and desires.

Unfortunately, statistics for student completion of varied alternative education programs are scarce. A comparison of the ability of these schools to meet the needs of their student clientele is still unclear. This information could be helpful to administrators and staff who must choose among alternative approaches when establishing new and innovative programs in rural communities.

At the Rural Continuation School, enrollment figures for the 1978 year (Table 1) which included variables for grade level, sex and race have been compiled.

It should be noted that the high school's total enrollment for the school year was 1329 students. Of this total, 3.74 percent of the student body was Black and another 2.86 percent was classified as Other, which included Spanish surname, American Indian and Oriental students. Out of the total high school enrollment, 199 students (14.9 percent) participated in The Rural Continuation School program.

Table 1
The Rural Continuation School
Student Enrollment, 1978-1979

Including Completers and Non-Completers

Group	Race	Grade			Total
		Sophomore	Junior	Senior	
Enrolled and Completed School					
Male	Black	2	1	5	8
	White	39	26	29	94
	Other	4	0	1	5
Female	Black	1	0	5	6
	White	19	17	12	48
	Other	1	0	2	3
Total		66	44	54	164
Enrolled And Did Not Complete School, Including Reasons					
Male	Black	0	1(a)	0	1
	White	7(a) 2(b) 1(c) 1(e)	7(a) 2(b) 3(e)	1(d) 1(e)	
	Other	0	0	0	0
Female	Black	0	0	1(f) 1(d)	2
	White	4(b) 1(f)	1(a)	0	6
	Other	0	0	1(a)	1
Total		16	14	5	35

Note: The reasons for non-completion are:

- a. non-attendance
- b. moved
- c. vocational rehabilitation
- d. armed forces
- e. institutionalization
- f. pregnancy
- g. General Equivalency Degree
- h. unknown

Of the six reasons for leaving the program, five were considered positive: moved, entry into a vocational rehabilitation program, entry into the armed forces, institutionalization and pregnancy. In this case, institutionalization was considered positive because the students were now receiving more intensive professional help in youth facilities than could have been provided for them in The Continuation School program. One of the variables for leaving was considered negative. This was an administrative request to leave school because of lack of attendance. However, in further follow up analysis, it was found that six out of the sixteen students in this category are working toward completion of the General Equivalency Diploma. A majority of the other ten students have stated that they will return to school next year.

With a combined total of 199 students enrolled in The Continuation School during this past school year, the rate of student completion was 82.4 percent. When taken into account that all of the students involved were either dropouts or potential dropouts, there is no question that this program has had a positive effect upon its school district. It also points out that with the combined efforts of a concerned community, administration and faculty, alternative programs can successfully function in rural communities.