

Volume 3, No. 6  
December 2002



ISSN 1532-642X

# Rural Roots

*News, Information, and Commentary from the Rural School and Community Trust*

## **Rural Trust Named One of Worth Magazine's 100 Best Charities**

The Rural School and Community Trust has been named one of *Worth* magazine's 100 Best Charities in the December issue of the magazine. The Rural Trust has the distinction of being the only rural education group selected by the magazine in the article "To Give Well, To Give Wisely," which names the 100 top charities in the U.S.

"We are very pleased to be named one of the best managed, most focused, and wisest places for donors to invest their money," said Rachel Tompkins, president of the Rural Trust.

The Rural Trust, along with hundreds of other organizations, went through a rigorous application process. Charities that were selected are considered to have the "greatest impact in the field" and "wisest use of donor dollars." *Worth* selected charities in six categories: health,

continued on page 2



*Principal Sara Johnson works with students at Henry L. Slater Elementary School in Burns, Oregon.*

## **Challenges and Rewards of Rural School Leadership**

*By Elaina Loveland*

**I**t takes a special person to lead a rural school.

Like school leaders throughout the country, rural school principals and superintendents must recruit teachers and deal with often lower funding than needed. But in rural areas, depending on the geographic location, there are other problems such as declining enrollments, the threat of consolidation and

high principal and superintendent turnover.

Rural principals often take on many different types of responsibilities compared with principals of larger schools that have more administrative staff. "In larger schools, people are assigned to do many different tasks. In rural schools,

continued on page 6

## Challenges and Rewards of Rural School Leadership

from page 1

principals do it all," says Donald Buckingham, principal of Sedgwick Elementary School in Sedgwick, Maine.

Despite the workload, educators choose to become school leaders for several reasons. Sara Johnson, principal at Henry L. Slater Elementary School in Burns, Oregon, was inspired. She once overheard a woman administrator colleague say: "If you believe you could go into administration to make a difference, you have a moral obligation to do it." Johnson took those words to heart and knew she had a calling to become a principal.

Rural leaders face unique challenges every day. The snapshots below attempt to bring to light some of the distinctive aspects of leading a rural school.

### The Dual Principal

After 30 years of teaching high school English and drama, Christy Campbell decided she wanted to "help teachers be better teachers." So she took the plunge—she interviewed for a principalship at Lyman Middle School in rural Wyoming. Campbell landed the position, with a catch: the district was tacking on another school to her job—she would become the principal of both Lyman Elementary School and Lyman Middle School.

Now, three years later, Campbell is still a dual principal shuffling her day between two offices in two different buildings and heading a campus made up of four buildings altogether. "At least the buildings are in walking distance," she says.

A cutback in funds caused the Lyman district to combine two principal positions into one after the elementary school principal resigned.

What makes Campbell's dual principal job even more demanding is that her schools are at two different levels. This means double paperwork, not only for two different schools, but for different grades as well. "When I go to a superintendent's meeting, all the other principals have one set of papers. I have two: one set for the elementary school and one set for the middle school."

Campbell's situation is not all that unusual in rural areas.

Linda Pearl, from Escanaba, Michigan, has been principal at the same two K-6 elementary schools for eight years and has been a dual school principal for a total of 15 years. Pearl is currently the principal of Ford River Elementary

School with 174 students and Franklin Elementary School with 190 students, located about 12 miles apart. Because of the distance between schools, Pearl spends Mondays and Wednesdays at one school, Tuesdays and Thursdays at the other and divides Friday between the schools. "My biggest challenge is getting to all activities at both schools," says Pearl. "But having a great faculty makes a difference."

### Consolidation at Work

While many urban and suburban schools have enrollments increasing faster than they can hire teachers and

**After 30 years of teaching high school English and drama, Christy Campbell decided she wanted to "help teachers be better teachers."**



build facilities, rural schools can have the opposite problem. Some rural schools have declining enrollments and, as a result, lose state funding. Norm Yoder, superintendent of Heartland Community Schools in Nebraska, got into administration because he was interested in school finance. As the leader of a consolidated school district that faces a steady decline in enrollment, school finance is a key concern for this rural administrator who must, by definition, "wear a lot of hats."

Heartland Community Schools was created when neighboring districts Henderson Community Schools and Bradshaw Public Schools merged five years ago. The consolidation did result in saving dollars, according to Yoder, but it did not solve the declining enrollment problem. There are fewer students in Heartland schools today than there were when there were two separate districts.

The district may look to consolidation in the future, but the success may not be as simple. When Henderson and Bradshaw merged, the districts had to

## Educating Spanish-Speaking Children in Texas

"There is not enough of me to go around," says D'Ann Cathriner, describing her job as principal of Blessing Elementary School. The preK-5 school serving 220 students is located in Blessing, Texas, a small agricultural community on the Gulf Coast.

Due to its proximity to Mexico, Blessing Elementary School has many students who don't speak English. The school advocates total immersion to

teach English to Spanish-speaking children.

A lot of the children are illegal aliens and do not attend school all year; many parents are migrant workers and divide time between Blessing, Texas and other locations.

"We feel it is our duty to educate all children when they are with us and it is rewarding to see the students developing language skills," says Cathriner.

## Principals Leading Learning

Edd Diden, a 12-year veteran principal at Wartburg High School in Wartburg, Tennessee, believes that principals have the responsibility of helping teachers engage students in learning, not just by teaching, but by getting students to a higher level of understanding.

“Getting students engaged in education is not just playing the game of going to school,” he says.

Diden says that “knowing is only part of the big picture” and “caring and passion have to be part of learning” in order for students to want “to do something about it.” Getting students involved is a top priority for Diden; his mission is to “open teachers’ eyes to place-based and project-learning.” Recently, Wartburg High School was selected to participate in *My Place, Our Place, Your Place*, an international place-based learning initiative between the University of Tennessee and Bourgas Free University in Bulgaria.

Diden is pleased that he and his school will be part of the two-year project. “Any leader has to be willing to take risks. You can’t drive people to make changes—you have to do it with them,” he says.



*Principal Edd Diden with students at Wartburg Central High School in Wartburg, Tennessee.*

eliminate ten positions, but the state offered financial incentives for consolidation. That is no longer the case. Financing the school as enrollments decline pose a continuous problem and without financial assistance from the state, recon- solidation is a not as accessible as before.

“The state legislature is going to have to provide more funds,” Yoder says. “Period.”

For other school leaders who may look to consolidation due to community choice or state pressure, Yoder has this advice: “The best thing for a leader to remember in a consolidation is to keep the focus on the students. Kids mesh well. It’s the adults who sometimes have problems.”

### Leadership in Native Schools

Little Singer Community School in Winslow, Arizona, headed by principal Mark Sorensen is a charter school for Native Americans rooted in bringing the students back home. Native American children often leave the reservation to find jobs, and trying to promote tribal culture and keep Native children home can be difficult, especially in areas like Winslow where the poverty rate is high and the school is the largest employer.

The school, founded in 1978, has 120 students and was established in memory

of a Navajo medicine man who wanted to instill the values of Native culture and keep them alive on the reservation. Traditionally, Navajo medicine men were singers, hence the name of the school. Sorensen is also principal of the Star School near Flagstaff, Arizona, a K–6 school for Native students started just three years ago, which depends solely on solar power for its operation.

Being a leader at a Native school has challenges of its own, according to Sorensen. “It’s one thing to want to bring students back home, but it’s harder to address what are kids going to do back home,” he says. Yet, Sorensen believes that the school’s aim to “regenerate the multigenerational impact of traditional families” and keep Native children at home is an effort that is more than worthwhile. Teaching Native children with tribal culture integrated into the school’s curriculum is at the heart of Little Singer Community School and Star School’s mission. Through service to the people and the land, Sorensen hopes to keep Native traditions alive for children and keep them at home where they can impact future generations.

### Recruiting Rural Teachers

It’s no secret that salaries for rural teachers are often less than salaries for

their urban and suburban counterparts. Rural teachers earn an average of \$6,124 less per year than their counterparts in suburban and urban areas according to Rural Trust’s *Why Rural Matters* report released in 2000 [an updated report will be published in 2003].

“Salaries don’t often attract outsiders. There aren’t many job opportunities for spouses,” says Carlinda Purcell, former superintendent of the rural Warren County School District in North Carolina. Purcell is now associate superintendent for support services of Cumberland County Schools in Fayetteville.

Donald Buckingham, principal of Sedgwick Elementary School in Sedgwick, Maine, says that recruiting teachers in his small coastal town in Maine is becoming increasingly difficult. “We have a dual problem here,” he says. “Not only do we have trouble competing with surrounding larger districts for competitive salaries, there is a high cost of living here due to our coastal location where real estate is priced quite high compared to most rural areas.”

Buckingham says that in the last decade, more people have found a way to live in a highly desirable coastal community like Sedgwick and make a decent

continued on page 8

## Challenges and Rewards of Rural School Leadership

from page 7

living. Technology and the willingness to take on long commutes have brought higher income families to the area. The economic demographics of children attending Sedgwick Elementary School are unusual. "About half the children are eligible for free and reduced lunch and the other half are from wealthier families," says Buckingham.

Teachers at Sedgwick Elementary don't earn high salaries, and coupled with the higher than average cost of living (compared to other rural settings), attracting and retaining teachers is tough.

About half of the staff at the school

has been hired in the past three years. Other districts and schools and even other schools in the same districts can pay upwards of \$5000 more per year.

"I try to get good teachers who are committed to the area," says Buckingham.

In an area like Sedgwick, commitment to place is the primary factor in getting educators to say put, because the salary alone just won't cut it.

### Networking, Networking

The Vermont Rural Partnership (VRP), a coalition of 17 of Vermont's

smallest, most rural, economically challenged schools and communities, offers unique networking opportunities for principals and supports place-based learning. Each August, the VRP hosts a Principal's Retreat, a required one-day meeting for principals in member schools. The retreat provides networking opportunities, place-based readings, and pairs new principals with a more experienced "buddy" principal. The VRP also has a "response team" to go to schools to help solve problems. Team members volunteer their service based on their expertise in order to ensure the most efficient problem-solving team possible.

Principal Sonja Davis of Burke Town School has been attending VRP's Principal's Retreat for five years. Initially her school, serving grades K-8, applied to be a part of VRP to get funding for students to get more involved in the community. But, happily, Davis got more than she bargained for. Burke Town School staff has participated in writing place-based curricula, the school has developed a strategic plan, and also has standard units based on place-based learning. "Being part of the partnership, we've gotten 100 times back in opportunities for staff," Davis says.

Director of the VRP and Peacham School Principal Margaret MacLean believes that principals are key in helping to implement place-based learning in schools. "Their role in place-based education is to facilitate the curriculum," she says. "Leaders need to know how to make it happen for teachers." To fill the need to educate principals on place-based education, VRP provides workshops in addition to the Principal's Retreat and encourages leaders to visit other schools where place-based learning is effective.

The VRP Principal's Retreat also exists to ease the leadership transition period due to high turnover of principals in Vermont—a trend that affects many other states across the nation, especially in rural areas. According to MacLean, the average time principals stay at one job is three years so there are new principals at the VRP Principal's Retreat every year.

"Leadership changes have been a huge issue," she says. "Often principals come

## Rural School Leaders Honored

*These rural principals are among 63 chosen as 2002 National Distinguished Elementary and Middle School Principals by the U.S. Department of Education and the National Association of Elementary School Principals.*



*Cynthia A. Eliser, a 2002 National Distinguished Principal*

**Name:** Cynthia A. Eliser  
**Position:** Principal  
**School:** Raceland Lower Elementary  
**Location:** Raceland, Louisiana  
**Size:** 425 students (Pre-K to second grade)  
**Years as a Rural Principal:** 8  
**Quote:** As a rural principal, people not only see me as the school principal, they see me as a "real" person. I go the same churches, stores, and businesses that they do!



*Peggy Ames Nerud, a 2002 National Distinguished Principal*

**Name:** Peggy Ames Nerud  
**Position:** Principal  
**School:** Northside School  
**Location:** Wolf Point, Montana at Fort Peck Indian Reserve  
**Size:** 219 students (grades 4-6)  
**Years as a Rural Principal:** 14  
**Quote:** I get to know my students and parents as individuals and beyond the school day. You can make a difference working with them over a long period of time.

in and have a new agenda. There has to be buy in from teachers and community members.”

Sara Johnson, principal of Henry L. Slater Elementary School in Burns, Oregon, notes that superintendent turnover is especially problematic in her rural district. “When a superintendent leaves, the district becomes fractured. Instead of working with one clear vision, schools start working independently and can create competition among the schools,” she says.

### It Takes Vision to Lead

For better or worse, education is not just about schools, but also about politics. Parents, educators and policymakers are raising questions about the accountability of education, its success rate, its methodologies and even its purpose. Rural school leaders play a key role in educating American’s children, yet they are in the midst of politics as well.

“Our nation has to figure out what our schools are going to do. Are they supposed to maximize the potential of the individual or set a minimum standard of education across the board—it’s hard to do both,” states Mark Sorensen, principal of Little Singer Community School and the Star School in Arizona.

A rural school principal has to figure out how to balance individual achievement while maintaining standards. The role can be “both a quandary and a blessing” in the words Edd Diden, principal of Wartburg Central High School in Tennessee. “Typically in rural places,

leaders can get very close to people in the community. The negative side is that there can be unbelievable expectations that a leader can’t solve because they are societal problems,” he says.

As rural school leaders, principals have to be up to the challenge to see resources that they have in rural areas, which are different than resources in urban and suburban settings. “The dominant culture sees resources as big buildings, but there are things we can enjoy that are nature-connected and these are resources too,” says Sorensen. In order to recognize non-monetary resources in rural areas, Sorensen recommends that rural leaders, as a group, need to “realign our vision to see and appreciate the richness we have.”

## GrantsWatch

**Grant:** *Johanna Favrot Fund for Historic Preservation*

**Funder:** *National Trust for Historic Preservation*

**Deadline:** *February 1, 2003*

The National Trust for Historic Preservation is offering grants through the Johanna Favrot Fund for Historic Preservation for projects that contribute to the preservation or the recapture of an authentic sense of place. Funds may be used for professional advice, conferences, workshops, or education programs, and grants range from \$2,500 to \$10,000. The annual deadline for applications is February 1. For more information contact Melissa Curran at (202) 588-6197 or by e-mail: [psf@nthp.org](mailto:psf@nthp.org). To learn more about the National Trust for Historic Preservation and additional funding opportunities, please visit <http://www.nthp.org>.

**Grant:** *National School Library Media Program of the Year Award*

**Funder:** *Follett Library Resources and The American Association of School Librarians*

**Deadline:** *January 3, 2003*

Sponsored by Follett Library Resources, this award recognizes exemplary school library media programs in three categories: large school district (over 10,000 students), small school district

(under 10,000 students), and single school. The winners in each of the three categories will receive \$10,000. The award honors programs that emphasize the importance of the school library media program as an integral part of the instructional process. An application is available online at <http://www.ala.org/aasl/awards.html>. For more information contact AASL, 50 East Huron Street, Chicago, IL 60611; (800) 545-2433, ext. 4381 or e-mail [kchaney@ala.org](mailto:kchaney@ala.org).

Diden agrees that leaders, educators and community members need to see rural areas in a new light. “School leaders must convince young people that living and learning in a rural place is an asset instead of a liability,” he says. “Students, educators, and parents may catch a renewed vision and enthusiasm for local communities and the possibility of a bright future through education rooted in place.”

Ultimately, rural school leaders believe that rewards of rural school leadership are worth the challenges. “It’s a great job,” asserts Donald Buckingham, principal of Sedgwick Elementary School in Maine. “We get to make a real difference in the school and how the community views education.”

(under 10,000 students), and single school. The winners in each of the three categories will receive \$10,000. The award honors programs that emphasize the importance of the school library media program as an integral part of the instructional process. An application is available online at <http://www.ala.org/aasl/awards.html>. For more information contact AASL, 50 East Huron Street, Chicago, IL 60611; (800) 545-2433, ext. 4381 or e-mail [kchaney@ala.org](mailto:kchaney@ala.org).

**Grant:** *NEA Fine Arts Grant*

**Funder:** *National Education Association*

**Deadline:** *February 3, 2003*

Sponsored by the National Education Association Foundation, the NEA Fine Arts grants are awarded, through local NEA affiliates, to enable fine arts teachers to create and implement fine arts programs that promote learning among students at risk of school failure. Programs must address the arts (e.g., painting, sculpture, photography, music, theater, dance, design, media, or folk arts). Ten grants will be awarded in the amount of \$2,000. Grant funds may be used for resource materials, supplies, equipment, transportation, software, and/or professional fees. To learn more, visit <http://www.nfie.org/programs/finearts.htm> or call (202) 822-7840.

## Feedback

Do you have any questions, comments or feedback? Something got you jazzed up? Think we should cover your story? Have an idea for us? Have a rural education need that we are not fulfilling? We greatly value your thoughts and opinions. Write to the Editor at the Rural School and Community Trust: 1825 K Street, NW, Suite 703, Washington, DC 20006. Or e-mail: [editor@ruraledu.org](mailto:editor@ruraledu.org). We look forward to hearing from you.