

Implications of Recent Changes in Nonmetropolitan America: A Discussion of McGranahan, Hobbs, Nachtigal, and Stephens

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These four articles portray a disturbing scene. From each of these perspectives, we see that changes to the fundamental social fabric are occurring in divergent ways with generally negative consequences for rural communities. Rural communities are being distressed by political and economic influences over which they have little apparent control. After reviewing the works of both Hobbs (1994) and McGranahan (1994), one would wonder why people choose to live in rural areas at all. Perhaps they are a resilient, adventurous breed that "celebrates adversity?" I don't think so. We need to change the way we think about rural people, places, and policy if we are ever to achieve educational and social goals of quality of life. The implications of these four articles bring three fundamental lessons to my mind.

First, we must stop thinking of rurality as a form of victimization. As Nachtigal (1994) points out, it is doubtful that a rural "bill of rights" would have much positive influence upon the condition of things. People in America have the *freedom to choose* where they live, whether it be urban, suburban, rural, or reservation. People live where they do by choice. With the exception of agricultural families, rural people are no more tied to property than those in other locales. The real difference is that some places happen to be more remote and less densely populated than other areas. Because of size and distance, it costs more to import resources to these areas. Economically, rural places have fewer jobs and dollars per square mile than urban areas. This is a simple fact that is as true now as it was in the fiefdoms of the Middle Ages and the city-states of the Roman Empire. In spite of this, people have lived and continue to live in isolated areas for a variety of reasons. Living in a rural area is neither a crime, nor an excuse, nor a badge of honor. Like life in the city, rural life has its advantages and disadvantages, its problems, and its opportunities. But we do have a responsibility to ensure that the

public has access to adequate education and other human services regardless of their locale. In this regard, geography becomes an issue of equity.

Second, regardless of which political, economic, environmental, or educational forces are brought to bear in influencing rural outcomes, it is doubtful now more than ever that these influences will truly represent local rural interests. The Colorado example of Nachtigal was the coming together of special interest groups, rather than the general population as a whole, to divide up range land use. Since rural America has been rediscovered, even more nonrural powers have come to the table to gain their share of the rural pie. How could this happen in the era of empowerment, efficacy, and consensus building? Because the local public interests have become even more diverse than those from "outside." As Hobbs has demonstrated, the demographics of rural places have changed in increasingly diverse ways. We now share common ground in the geographic sense only. Our allies are less likely to be rural neighbors as they are special interests coalesced from urban and rural places. We need to form greater coalitions on the basis of common values—primarily of environmental and social values, as Nachtigal suggests. Urban/rural dichotomies are dysfunctional when we all share the same water, air, earth, and resources. Perhaps Nachtigal's "bioregions" are a hint for the future.

The final lesson is that now, more than ever, we must alter our strategies and perspectives for recognizing, celebrating, and building upon diversity. This isn't going to happen through the top-down application of uniform standards, be they educational, economic, or environmental. In the era of school choice, for example, what choice do rural schools and communities have but to be the best they can in achieving local goals? If we recognize the differences among schools, communities, and children, why would we desire uniform performance outcomes? Our perspective needs to be altered in a least three ways.

First, the purpose of public schools is not solely economic self-sufficiency. If all we are doing is educating youth for jobs, then our civilization is in a sorry state, indeed. We had better broaden our perspective on the value of education in cultivating human values. Literate, responsible consumers who actively participate in civil affairs would be a useful goal.

An earlier version of these remarks was presented as part of the symposium, "Implications of Recent Changes in Nonmetropolitan America," at the 1994 annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans.

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Second, the idea of equity, equality, and fairness is a myth. Things are not fair in rural life, as they are not fair in urban life. Rural, by definition, means diseconomy of scale. Urban, industrial, mass production models do not work in rural places. Successful rural plans are not miniature versions of urban places. We must stop thinking of equality as uniformity, but rather as unique qualities. Adequacy and sufficiency standards, as Stephens (1994) mentioned, are what's important.

Third, people live in rural locales for a reason. Our educational, social, and economic infrastructure serve those reasons. In the empowerment decade of the '90s, the active engagement of the public in gaining local consensus about desired outcomes is our one best hope. The need for local control concerning education, social, economic, and environmental outcomes has become acute. Public schools must become community schools serving all ages in a variety of ways. In 1993, the Rural Sociological Society Task Force on Persistent Rural Poverty noted that, "the fundamental, defining characteristic of rural America is its enormous diversity. . . . why force workers to move from a region they feel attached to when the spirit of democracy would call for us to evenly distribute economic opportunities among all places, rural and urban?"

Without a coherent, comprehensive rural policy, the nature of the rural landscape will continue to shift and dramatically divide into suburban areas, on the one hand, and de-populated environmental reserves, on the other. With such a scenario, there would be no future for the rural populace.

These four articles call upon each of us to think about our freedom of personal choice. How do rural conditions affect these freedoms? Historically, the adversity of rural conditions meant that life was just tougher and less genteel in rural areas, but provided a greater sense of efficacy. Recent changes in nonmetropolitan America have influenced those conditions. Rural life is much like life anywhere in America, except a little farther from jobs, schools, human services, cultural opportunities, commerce, and the state house. What has changed is the size and power of special interests fighting for what is left of the rural pie.

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