

A Reply to Kannapel, Coe, Aagaard, and Reeves

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The Annenberg Rural Challenge

In their introduction, Kannapel, Coe, Aagaard, and Reeves (1999) say, "this evolved more into a study of systemic reform in schools located in rural places than a study of rural schools per se" (p. 5). This is an important distinction, invisible to many researchers. Unless one studies the context in which the school is embedded—and that context is rural—it can't be a study of rural education; it is a study of education taking place out in the country. There are three dangers in using an exclusively geographic definition for rural education: (a) researchers make causal inferences between behavior and geography that aren't supportable, (b) they miss asking more important questions, and (c) our understanding of the world is not increased.

When the authors assert, in the discussion section, that "they have illustrated the influence local conditions can exert on statewide school reform" (p. 12), they overstate their case. "Local conditions" here does not refer to the rural context of two elementary schools being contrasted; rather it refers to circumstances within the social/emotional dynamics of the faculty. "Most of our field research was conducted inside schools with school professionals" (p. 5) We know nothing of the history, the context, the environment of the families that make up the school constituency; less than 10% of the interview data comes from parents or community members. The findings that (a) teachers tend to have higher expectations for students who are most like themselves, (b) trusted leaders get more cooperation and effort from teachers than do unfamiliar and/or unwelcome leaders, or (c) reform efforts that appear familiar are more likely to be embraced than those that seem unfamiliar, apply equally to any school environment. They are not specifically rural.

Gresham's law is at work here. The space taken up by restating the obvious and calling it rural research shoulders out attention to the more important questions: "What would it take for rural schools to take advantage of their size, history, and constituency; to engage their communities, to establish high expectations for all children; and to tailor approaches to curriculum and instruction to meet those

expectations?" A related question might be, "Why is this happening in only a few places in the country, and those mostly rural?" This may be an uncomfortable question for members of the education establishment to ask, calling into question as it does the professional, industrial paradigm that has dominated education for the last century.

What, more than geography, makes a school rural? One measure is how it accepts the responsibility to provide a bicultural education, using Jonathan Sher's phrase; how it prepares children to thrive in both rural and urban places. The global economy must include vibrant rural sectors. Other indications of significant rural education reform include the reciprocity between schools and communities, how each serves the other; the ways that schools see themselves as public institutions and create educations with a public, as well as private, benefit; and how a public purpose and audience is established for student work.

Kannapel et al. note, "While many rural teachers have roots in the local community, they have been schooled in rather generic approaches to education" (p. 5) Alas, this is no less true of researchers. They note the "difficulties we've faced trying to 'ruralize' our study" (p. 5). There are snarly problems, not the least of which is the time and travel expense incurred by going far out in the country. Local context can't be detected, analyzed, or understood from within the walls of the schools, or garnered exclusively from conversations with professional educators about curricular reform issues. Stereotypes can cloud vision. Definitions of achievement, ambition, success can be powerfully influenced by local culture and are not revealed truth. A frank discussion of what it means to do rural research in education could be a mighty contribution to the literature.

References

Kannapel, P. J., Coe, P., Aagaard, L., & Reeves, C. A. (1999). Mandated achievement in rural Kentucky: Contrasting responses. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 15, 5-15.