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Tim L. Adsit, Small Schools, Education, and the Importance of Community

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Adsit, Tim L. *Small Schools, Education, and the Importance of Community*. Landham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, 2011 (210 pp.), ISBN: 1610480155, US \$28.95.

Reviewed by Ann E. Theodori

Prefacing his text with the proclamation that rural communities are in “economic, social, cultural, geopolitical, and environmental distress” (p. ix), Tim Adsit’s *Small Schools, Education, and the Importance of Community* is designed to be a practitioner’s toolbox for cooperative efforts between small schools and communities. The author outlines three main themes for the collaborative efforts he proposes: using the school as a community center, focusing on the community as curriculum, and investigating school-based economic development opportunities. Several case studies, including schools and communities with which the author has worked, are provided as inspirational examples for community and school leaders looking to make positive change. The real worth of this book is in the impressive appendices, in which Adsit has compiled a broad assortment of salient, timely resources for school and community leaders to consider. The first few chapters, however, do little to advance the research or theory of school and community development and may prevent readers from finding the valuable information at the end.

Adsit draws almost exclusively from Bruce Miller’s decades-old research to inform the first several chapters of his text, providing a scant overview of rural decline and rural distress and citing rudimentary definitions of *rural* and *community*. Practitioners seeking action strategies from this text will likely know all too well the challenges rural communities and schools face in light of youth-outmigration, an aging populace, a changing farm economy, and increasing unemployment and poverty rates. Recognizing that, historically, many community development efforts have largely focused on economic development, Adsit advocates a view of community development drawing on social, economic, and environmental dimensions. With this broader scope in mind, rural schools can serve as both a catalyst for and a beneficiary of community development efforts.

In chapter four, the author again lifts whole pages of text from Miller to provide a foundation for understanding school and community interdependence. Rural schools benefit rural communities by providing educational, recreational, cultural

and social activities; schools are often also one of the largest employers in a community, and teachers often play leadership roles in communities. Concomitantly, rural communities provide tax bases as a source of school revenue, provide parent and community volunteers, and provide feedback and support regarding students, activities, and programs. Moreover, communities can also supply an important context for education, an environment for place-based learning. Adsit carefully forewarns readers that barriers to school-community linkages include deeply-engrained beliefs about the roles of schools and communities, resistance to change, and state and federal mandates. However, he fails to elaborate on ways to circumvent or prevent these barriers. Instead, the author offers the pat advice to be “open to change and able to objectively assess new challenges and lead with professional growth, staff development, and school improvement efforts” (p. 25). To illustrate these efforts, several case studies showing school community collaboration are presented, including Dr. Jonathan Sher’s *Rural Entrepreneurship through Action Learning* (REAL) program, in which students set up and operate enterprises in cooperation with their schools, and several instances of “school as community centers” (p. 29) initiatives. The chapter concludes with a brief nod to community as curriculum, referring to Paul Nachtigal’s work at the *Rural Institute of the Mid-Continent Regional Educational Laboratory* (McREL) and Eliot Wigginton’s *Foxfire* program. The McREL approach involves students in community-level data collection and analysis, engaging students in community study. Foxfire encourages students to learn about their communities through interactions with community residents and research into community history. Unfortunately, while both programs are worthy of promotion and apt models for consideration, the author provides no information on recent McREL or Foxfire research, again relying on Miller’s research to provide evidence for his claims. The author begins to fulfill his promise to provide a process for facilitating dialogue between schools and communities in the penultimate chapter by outlining “areas of consideration for developing and operating community-focused educational programs” (p. 40), again gleaned from Miller. These areas include: a) commitment to act, b) leadership, c) ownership, d) policy and curriculum guidelines, e) implementation, and f) evaluation. Encouraging small groups to brainstorm school-community linkages, the author provides a sample list of possible economic, environmental, and social interactions. The concluding chapter includes a list of questions for discussion during the school-community development process, broken down into the headings such as “Key Community Development Questions for Leaders and Participants,” “Interview Questions for Quality of Life/Community

Strengths and Weaknesses,” “Interview Questions for Local Economy and Economic Transition,” and “What Characteristics are Shared by Thriving Rural Communities?” (p. 53-57).

Following sixty pages of superficial advice and outdated research, readers may be surprised at the massive directory of resources found in the appendices. The first two appendices summarize the prospective benefits of community service education and direct readers to numerous resources to assist service-learning project design. Appendix C offers detailed descriptions of several community development strategies, including community asset mapping, school-community vision development, and strategic planning processes. The final appendix is a comprehensive collection of “Other Useful Resources” (p. 151) for communities and schools, listing more than 150 centers for research, funding organizations, community development tools, and academic journals. Comprising over two-thirds of the text, the appendices to *Small Schools, Education, and the Importance of Community* are far more functional and significant than the chapters themselves.

Appendices aside, *Small Schools* is a clumsy hodgepodge of limited research and anecdotal evidence, but the text will prove a quick and motivating read for school and community leaders who are already considering a school-community collaboration. The true value of this book is its compilation of current, accessible, and diverse resources in the appendices; while offering no quick fix, these resources present numerous possibilities for school and community partnerships.

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