

Cooperative Venture in Rural Planning

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HOW COULD a typical country school be converted into a vital community cooperating-center adapted to serving the interests not only of the children but of the adult citizenry as well? In April 1944, the Department of Elementary Education of the University of Nebraska¹ launched a plan to determine from actual experience some of the answers to that question. The plan, to run for three years, was designed to allow cooperation with the State Department of Public Instruction, to meet new school legislation, and to alleviate the needs of the county teachers.

An experiment of this kind, intended to improve the quality of living through the schools of a given locale, would have, it was felt, a fivefold objective: (1) to make available to the county (and other counties) services toward a program of better living through better schools, (2) to provide students of the University Teachers College with a rural laboratory area, (3) to furnish an opportunity for the elementary education department to try out various methods of off-campus service, (4) to give the teaching staff a chance to evaluate the pre-service training of teachers, and (5) to experiment with cooperative effort between a teacher-training department and a county school system in a widely scattered rural area.

To initiate its plan, the department of elementary education, enlisting the aid of the county superintendent of schools,² selected a

country school conveniently located and otherwise suited to the purpose of the program. Hearty cooperation of both the school board and the teacher was quickly gained. As a first step, small groups of students from the department of elementary education visited the school. These visits were followed by conferences with the teacher and the children regarding what equipment the school needed most. With funds at hand such items as a library table, benches, and bookcases were purchased. Plans for color in the room were completed. To familiarize themselves with the physical features, social patterns, economic conditions, land values, extent of modernization, nationalities, religious groups, and other pertinent data of the community, the visiting university students had recourse to a floor map (prepared by the children) and a survey of the district.

Bright Touches Replace Drabness

With these preliminaries over, the actual task of transforming the classroom and improving the grounds could begin. A beautification program, to apply both indoors and outdoors, had to be carried through. Within, faded pictures gave way to bright prints for children, an old cupboard was replaced by new, low bookshelves, and much useless material was discarded. Repainting was done by the children's mothers. Various pieces of furniture were rebuilt by the University's industrial arts department.

During the summer of 1944, many teacher-students from the University studied the district, the school plant, the facilities, and were helpful with their contributions and advice.

Outdoor beautification began in the early fall. The children repaired and repainted all outdoor equipment, as well as drew up plans for improvement of the school grounds. Shrubs and trees native to the state were planted.

That this rural school had undergone a real transformation not only in outward show

¹ With the help of Dean F. E. Henzlik.

² Glenn Turner.

Rural America has a bright future if the kind of community school described in this article becomes widespread. It is an inspiring account of how community members in Lancaster County, Nebraska, cooperated with teachers and students from the nearby University to convert their typical country school into a center of activity for young people and grown-ups alike. Describing the project is Clara O. Wilson, chairman of the Department of Elementary Education at the University of Nebraska.

but, more important, in its significance to the community was well demonstrated by the 1944 Christmas community festival held there. On this occasion children and parents met in a house of their own creation, which they themselves had set in order, and which, therefore, was in every sense a proper place for celebration.

First Year Shows Results

As this is written, some eighteen months have passed since the beginning of the experiment, and the "Community School," District 107, Lancaster County, has assumed the character of a model for other rural schools of the county. Features of its program have been and are being carried out in other districts. Since the plan has almost two more years to run, it is too early to estimate its ultimate success. As we look back over the first year of cooperative effort, however, certain important achievements, county-wide in their nature, stand out quite clearly.

First, through the office of the county superintendent, a study has been made of the help desired by rural teachers. This study reveals that, in addition to conferences and supervisory visits, these teachers would like to have available a lending library of books and visual aids and exhibits of children's work (changed each month), as well as numerous other services. The county superintendent is at present concerned with the realization of these desires.

Again, special problems confronting rural teachers have been brought to light and certain steps taken to meet them. For example, a study has been made of beginners in rural schools, teaching equipment, programs, and similar problems of living in a rural school.⁸

⁸ A guide book *Teaching Beginners in a Rural School*, prepared by this author, was published in January by the University Publishing Co., Lincoln, Nebr.

Another study has been made of the problems and need touching the health of the rural school child. Here valuable help was received from the State Department of Health and from local physicians and nurses. Health check sheets, of values to teachers and school boards, have been developed. In the matter of school beautification, great interest was created by visits of teachers to the "community school" and out of this interest have come several extensive projects in interior decoration and landscaping at other schools. Here help was given all teachers in working out renovation plans for the summer months. And last, since a change in Nebraska school laws made a new type report card urgent, a committee was appointed to prepare the needed form. The result was a conservative but greatly improved report to parents.

Finally, the cooperative plan was one of the direct stimuli for setting up a lively professional-social organization for Lancaster County teachers. This organization, in addition to serving the interests of its members, should be, in the years ahead, a fine instrument for bringing school and community closer to one another.

The second year of the cooperative plan will doubtless bring new practical ideas towards making the school a real community center. It will also mean further consideration of problems encountered the past year. Too, the general use of standardized achievement tests is anticipated. And there will be the introduction of a new arithmetic program and new units on soil and water conservation, these as part of the social studies course.

What future problems will rise to test this venture in cooperative planning it is, of course, impossible to say, but there is good reason to believe that the community school, in which parents and children work and play together, is the rural school of tomorrow.



MY SNOW MAN

I made a jolly snow man
I left him in the sun!
Mr. Sun saw him and said—
"I'll teach him how to run!"

*Edith Smith, Grade 4, Amsterdam
From New York State Education*

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