

The Superintendent

JOANNE YATVIN

Think Small

Educationally, Oregon is a perilous sea upon which scores of tiny school districts are tossed, some swamped by financial problems they cannot solve, others battered by state demands for standards they cannot meet. Sparsity of population and the fierce independence of its citizens have given rise to a tradition of separate school districts for each community, even when a community is too small to be a town. Out of 300 districts in Oregon, 98 have between 100 and 500 students, 71 have fewer than 100. Most of the patrons of these districts, seeing only the virtues of smallness, stand ready to fight a governor and a legislature pushing for consolidation, in order to preserve their status. In the eyes of the rural Oregonian, small schools mean old-fashioned values, friendliness, and caring, a place for every child to shine, and a chance for every parent to participate in the life of the school.

To an extent these perceptions are true, yet there is a dark side to each virtue. Values, for one thing, are not what they once were. Not all rural Oregonians are farmers and small business people whose forebears built the communities they now live in. Some are urban émigrés who came because city life was too demanding, too intrusive on their freedom. "You can't tell me what to do" is a common refrain we hear from misbehaving children and, when we call their parents, from them, too.

While places to shine may be plentiful in small schools, they seem to be concentrated in extracurricular activities. Teams, bands, drama clubs, and cheerleading squads need every warm body they can get, and the teachers who coach those groups have a vested interest in keeping and grooming all recruits. Opportunities are fewer in academics, where traditional practices keep honor rolls proportionately small, and awards go to the same few students year after year. To the majority, rural

schools offer fixed roles rather than star turns. If a child is recognized as an athlete, a scholar, or a charmer, fine. But what of those who get labeled early as dummies, troublemakers, or misfits and must play those same roles for their entire school careers?

Parent participation, as one might expect, is a two-edged sword. Rural parents work hard to raise funds for school projects, and they are willing to pitch in to clear a play area, build a fence, or transport groups of children. But they are also ever-present critics. No sparrow falls in a classroom without the whole community hearing it, half of them certain it was a flock of eagles. And no decision is made without unsolicited advice. Still, these are minor irritations compared to the political posturing that goes on when a large-scale educational change is proposed. Perhaps some rural citizens, feeling unimportant in state and national politics, use schools as their arena to exercise power for its own sake.

Beyond what the public sees, there are other problems that arise in small schools. Nine out of 10 times *small* means *poor*, at least on a relative basis, because money cannot be spent efficiently when buildings, buses, equipment, and teachers are not being used full time. Electives are a luxury. Pianos and copy machines become high-

ticket items when fewer students get the benefits and fewer taxpayers are paying the bills. Fluctuations in class sizes are not only administratively awkward, but they cost more money. You have to buy extra textbooks and desks one year that will sit idle until another large class comes along. You may have to hire an additional teacher to take care of the overflow, but, from an economic viewpoint, his or her class and the one the children have been taken from will be too small.

Special education is a particularly bitter pill for a small district to swallow. Every district has its handicapped children who, by law, must be educated, and in the least restrictive environment. But what do you do when there are only 10 such children of different ages with different handicaps? Do you tuition them out to a larger district at \$10,000 apiece, or try to find a miracle worker who can teach them all? What some districts do—not by design but in desperation—is to go through the motions. That is, their paperwork is legal, but the actual instruction provided is below children's needs in both quantity and quality.

Still, small is certainly not ugly. As a rural administrator who was once a city administrator, I am convinced that excellence and humaneness are more easily attained in a small district than a large one. Big districts don't really improve; they just get better at hiding the bodies. In a small district it is possible to know what is going on, to reach everyone, and to make changes. And when you make a mistake, it is not a million dollar one involving thousands of people, so you can admit it and correct it. Despite my griping, I came willingly to the hinterland and plan to stay. If the war to improve education can be won, it will happen here. □

Joanne Yatvin is Superintendent, Cottrell School District, Boring, OR 97009.

In a small district it is possible to know what is going on, to reach everyone, and to make changes.

Copyright © 1990 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.