Building Community Leaders in West Virginia

Cindy Miller knows the value of community. Growing up in Hacker Valley, West Virginia, Miller rode the bus close to 90 minutes each way to high school. She graduated at the top of her class and went on to be a Dean’s list student in college. Now married with two children, Miller is back in Hacker Valley because she wants her children to experience the same close community connection that she had. As a fellow with the Challenge West Virginia Fellowship Program, Miller is furthering her interest in community by working to give the schools in West Virginia the benefit of community connection, as well.

“I believe the only way for us to change things in West Virginia is to change the laws that allow or force consolidation upon communities as the only means of obtaining state dollars for renovation and construction of school facilities,” says Miller. Miller is just one of the 16 fellows working in 10 counties spread across the state and representing the diverse geographic and economic mix of West Virginia. The fellowship program is designed to engage local people with leadership potential in community organizing. Fellows meet monthly to discuss issues, share information, and plan strategies. They are responsible for organizing their local communities to form county chapters of Challenge West Virginia. A small monthly stipend helps to cover expenses for participation.

Linda Martin, the co-director of Challenge West Virginia, writes, “While we understand the concept of global citizenship, we believe it is on the place where we stand on the earth that true citizenship begins… It is in that place, where people act in the world, that people develop a sense of belonging and understanding that their actions do contribute to the quality of life being lived by all who inhabit that particular place and the entire globe.” It is this philosophy that guides the fellowship program’s goal of affecting change in state-level education policies by training local leaders and building a movement at the grassroots level.

For Miller, this means fighting for community-based schools. “I believe our work is important because community-based schools promote responsible adult citizenships,” she said. “County-wide schools are simply too far away from most children’s communities to build any sense of civic responsibility. No one knows what it is like to rid a bus over an hour each way for four years — not to mention eight years, from the ages of ten to eighteen — does to children and their families unless they have been there and done that. And, too many of the ones who were there and did that just want to forget about it as quickly as possible.”

In her own community of Hacker Valley, Miller has been involved in the struggle to keep the local school operating as the school board tries to close it down. The board was doing no upkeep on the building and the roof was leaking. In response, the community came together, bought the materials and put a new roof on themselves. The community has since come together again to ask the school board for $25,000 to build a new school with the agreement that the community will raise the remaining $250,000 to make it happen.

When asked about what she’s learned from the fellowship program, Miller replies, “The most valuable...
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thing is that community people can and need to be educated to the fact that they do have a voice, not only locally, but also at the state level when it comes to the education of their children and grandchildren.”

Thanks to the Challenge West Virginia Fellowship Program, Miller and others are doing their part to make those voices heard.³

(For more information about Challenge West Virginia and their Fellowship Program, visit www.wvcovenanthouse.org/challengewv)

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“That helps us understand how and why we need to keep on training and stay in the trenches around work: so that we can continue to stay as knowledgeable as those people that we are putting at the table to make decisions, and so that we can continue to be able to come to the table to participate in those decisions. […]

“We keep reinforcing to our own selves that we live in a world with other people. No matter if you live to be 100 years-old, there’s going to be someone living with you. That means that the decisions and choices that you make not only affect you, but they’ll affect somebody else. So if you’re climbing and all the world around you is standing still, it’s still going to affect you.

“Where I come from, I can get enough knowledge and enough degrees to be making $150,000 a year, but if there’s poverty going on and people are stealing, they’re not only going to steal from the poor, they’re going to steal from the rich, too. So it benefits all of us that, as we climb and as we participate in conversations, that everybody have the opportunity to participate in conversations. That we come to the table with the understanding that no matter what your color is, no matter what your class is, no matter what your educational background is, that you’re worth something. And when we start seeing ourselves and each other that way, then we can understand why we do organizing.”³
Lessons Learned from Ohio’s Litigation Efforts

Editorial Comment

The recent school finance ruling by the Ohio Supreme Court was surely a disappointment for the Ohio Coalition for Equity and Adequacy, the organization that brought the case to the Court, and also for school finance reform advocates in Ohio and around the country. In a decision clearly based on political compromise, the court may have, for now, dampened the dream of fundamental and comprehensive school finance reform that would deliver equal educational opportunity for all Ohio’s children, irrespective of where they live or their socioeconomic status. Of course, the Ohio Coalition, Rural Action, Inc., and others who care deeply about equal educational opportunity will have something to say about that. Even the final word of the courts doesn’t last forever in a democracy.

However, disappointment in the specifics of the ruling should not overshadow the important contribution the case made to improving education in Ohio. Nor should it dissuade school reform advocates from pursuing litigation to achieve the goal of equal educational opportunity for low income and rural children. In fact, the work of the Ohio Coalition and its attorneys is a model for other organizations seeking school reform through litigation to emulate.

One of the most impressive things the Ohio Coalition did was turn what began as a rural initiative into a broad-based coalition of urban and rural school districts, all united to support fundamental reform in schools funding. By doing this, the Ohio Coalition became an organization that had the financial ability to fund the litigation, retain expert legal counsel with the capacity to wage legal war with the state, and mount an effective media and communications campaign.

In Nebraska, where a school funding case was brought a number of years ago, the plaintiff learned the hard way that without a cohesive, well-funded coalition of school districts, committed for the long-term, litigating a school finance case is problematic. The case was the effort of an individual plaintiff, who attempted to put together mainly non-school interest groups to support the case. The effort was hampered from the beginning by a lack of funds—to litigate the case and to organize and to conduct a public education campaign.

Certainly there are examples of successfully litigated cases with little or no financial support from the school district. Vermont is an example. And, while there is no one recipe for success, a lesson from Ohio is that school districts can be critically important allies. As rural interests in Nebraska now prepare to take another look at achieving school finance reform through litigation, they would be wise to look to the experience in Ohio and other states for guidance as to how to successfully wage the campaign, notwithstanding the disappointment of the recent ruling.

In doing that, advocates will need to consider that successful school finance reform requires a broad array of allied groups working in concert over a sustained period of time in both the courts and state legislatures. School districts are key allies to help fund and organize the litigation. But, community groups, non-profit child advocacy organizations, parents and students are also essential allies to support litigation and to help carry the day in the legislature. Without such a broad base of support, both courts and legislatures will be reluctant to order or implement sweeping education reforms that children need and deserve. Thus, as advocates continue to fight for equal educational opportunity, foundations and others supporting school finance reform will need to commit financial resources to develop and sustain broad-based coalitions dedicated to improving funding for public education.

The Rural Trust perceives that generating broad-based community support can be the turning point that produces results in both legal and political realms. With this hope in mind, the Rural Trust recently made a grant to Citizens for the Educational Advancement of Alaska’s Children (CEAAC), a school district organization, to start building grassroots and community support for a school facilities finance reform remedy. CEEAC obtained a ruling in the district court that Alaska’s current system of funding school facilities in rural areas is unconstitutional. The hope is that through community and public engagement the group will build the support it needs to win the funding battle in the legislature. Time will only tell, but it may turn out to be a model for winning both in the courts and in the legislature. In any event, for rural school advocates, keep your eye on Alaska.

As this issue goes to press, the battle for school finance reform still wages, as the Ohio Supreme Court has ordered the parties to mediation, with the possibility of further rulings should they fail to reach a settlement.

—Tyler Sutton, Consulting Attorney, Rural Trust Policy Program

Matters of Fact

Georgia budget cuts could hurt rural schools

In the face of an economic downturn, the Georgia Department of Education is looking for ways to cut its budget. The leading option is to eliminate the field service director program, in which state employees act as liaisons between state education officials and local school superintendents. Such a change would be a direct blow to the rural and small school systems that rely on this program to answer questions about new state policy, budget requirements and other state procedures. With no central offices and high administrative turnovers rates, small and rural school systems are especially in need of the field service program.
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resource. Also included in the budget cut proposal is a cut in after-school programs funding.

New report looks at E-Rate

“Great Expectations: The E-Rate at Five” is a new report that discusses the latest models and policies that could maximize the impact of the E-rate on educational technology. Since its inception in the Telecommunications Act of 1996, the E-rate has provided $10 billion in resources for schools. The report, published by the Benton Foundation and the Center for Children and Technology, makes several recommendations for improving the E-rate program, including: lifting the funding cap from the current level of $2.5 billion; providing outreach and assistance to schools in low-income communities; and investigating ways to improve program administration. For a copy of the report, visit www.benton.org or call 202.638.5770.

New data on dropout rates

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) has released an updated report in its series on dropout rates and high school completion. Dropout Rates in the United States: 2000 presents data on rates for 2000 and examines time series data from 1972 through 2000. The key finding is that, while dropout rates have improved since the 1970s and 80s, the rates have remained stable since 1987. According to the report, five out of every 100 young adults enrolled in high school in October 1999 left school before October 2000 without completing the high school program. Students in families with the lowest 20 percent of family incomes are six times more likely than their peers from families with incomes in the top 20 percent to drop out of high school. The report can be found at http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2002114.

More on small schools

Education Week recently ran an article on small schools. The article “Research: Smaller is Better” appeared in the November 28th issue and examines the apparent disconnect between what the research on small schools is saying and the size of public schools. The article reports that, although more and more research is indicating the value of small schools, American schools continue to get bigger. According to the U.S. Department of Education nearly 44 percent of all public elementary and secondary students attend schools of 750 students or more. Among high schools, enrollments of 1,000 or more are common in at least seven states. To read the article and view a table on related research, visit http://www.edweek.org/ew/newstory.cfm?slug=13small.h21.