Notes From The Field

Louisiana Youth in the House

On July 6-8 the Louisiana Environmental Action Network (LEAN) held its first annual Youth in Motion Conference in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. LEAN, a state-wide, grassroots environmental organization has always included youth in its events, but this year decided to have a conference dedicated solely to youth.

The conference was a success in many ways. First and foremost, it had a great attendance bringing over 100 youth and parents from all over Louisiana, and even Mississippi. Those who attended were excited to be at such a groundbreaking event and were ecstatic to meet new people who shared the same interests.

The workshops focused mainly on empowering participants with tools to strengthen their communities. The conference brought speakers such as Collis Temple, III, an LSU basketball player, Florence Robinson, a biology professor and environmental justice activist, Roy Quezaire, a Louisiana State Representative, Lora Hinton, the first African-American to sign a scholarship with LSU and Emily Andrews from the Friends For Life organization.

A couple of the workshops focused on issues based in and around schools. LEAN has been working on the issue of pesticides in schools as an after-school program sponsored by the Rural School and Community Trust, and decided to bring it to the conference. The workshop focused on the problems with pesticides in schools, and set the stage for other workshops that focused on what participants could do to affect change in their communities and schools. One workshop did exactly that. A school and community organizing workshop was presented by Albertha Hasten, an Iberville Parish school board member, David Brown, a student activist, and Brett Holmes, a student who challenged school policy on [hair] “braid” laws in school.

Of course there were many fun activities for the youth. They had plenty of free time to hang out by the pool and meet the other conference participants. There were cooperative games for younger kids which taught teamwork, group dynamics and environmentally friendly crafts. On Saturday evening the group made a field trip to Alligator Bayou where they went on a bayou boat tour to learn about Louisiana wildlife and culture.

The conference ended on a great note with many of the participants giving good evaluations and stating that they would love to have another one soon. Many LEAN staff and members were very pleased, and plans are in the works for another conference with increased involvement by the youth in the planning and some more of the great things which made this conference a success.

— Andy Allen, educational instructor for LEAN

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Lake View: The Little District That Could

Tiny Lake View school district in the impoverished Mississippi Delta region of Eastern Arkansas filed a lawsuit against the state in 1992 claiming that Arkansas’ school finance system was unconstitutionally unfair to the children in that rural district.

With just 200 kids in a K-12 district that has only one school and a budget last year of about $1 million (and less than $5 million in property valuation) it seemed unlikely in 1992 that Lake View could mount a legal offensive strong enough to prevail.

But nine years later, a court has ruled in its favor.

The court had tentatively reached the same conclusion in 1994, but gave the state two years to change its school funding system, which it did. In 1998, the court ruled that the changes were fair enough, and dismissed Lake View’s case.

Undaunted, Lake View appealed to the Arkansas Supreme Court, which last year ruled that the district at least deserved a chance to prove in a trial that the changes made since 1994 did not go far enough toward fairness.

The stakes then became higher when Judge Collins Kilgore ruled that the trial would not only determine whether the finance system distributed funds fairly among districts, but whether it distributed enough funding to provide an adequate education. After trial last fall, Judge Kilgore ruled in its favor.

The facts about Lake View bear notice. This is a school district in which 94 percent of the children qualify for free or reduced-price lunches. It is so impoverished that its high school math faculty consists of an uncertified substitute teacher paid...

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$10,000 per year to teach pre-algebra, algebra I and II, geometry, and trigonometry. He supplements that meager salary by earning $5,000 a year to drive the school bus. In the classroom, he operates with two electrical outlets, calculators for less than half his students, no compasses for geometry, a computer printer that does not work, and an old “addressograph” duplicating machine that works so rarely that even examinations have to be handwritten on the one chalkboard in his classroom.

Still, Lake View has a “can do” attitude that produces an attendance rate of 99 percent, a graduation rate of 94.7 percent, and a dropout rate of 2 percent, all better than the state average. In effect, Judge Kilgore said they shouldn’t have to do so much with so little.

Teacher salary disparities between wealthy and poor districts were especially worrisome to the judge. Lake View’s high school science teacher, who has 31 years of experience and two master’s degrees, makes $31,500 per year. At wealthier Ft. Smith, a teacher with comparable preparation and experience would make $43,524.

Such disparities, Judge Kilgore said, “work to destabilize the education system by driving qualified teachers away from districts where they are most needed.”

Quoting an earlier Arkansas court decision, Judge Kilgore made it clear that equity between districts on matters like teacher salaries is every bit as important as providing a minimum adequate level of funding everywhere: “For some districts to supply the barest necessities and others to have programs generously endowed does not meet the requirements of the constitution. Bare and minimal sufficiency does not translate into equal educational opportunity.”

Disparity in teacher salaries must be eliminated, he admonished in his March ruling. And overall, teacher salaries in the state must come up—“no deficiency in our education system is in more urgent need of attention than teachers salaries,” the Judge wrote.

He also said the state must provide:
- Buildings properly equipped and suitable for instruction;
- Pre-school programs for children who need them to compete academically with their peers;
- The funding necessary to meet its constitutional obligations and a study of the amount needed to do so throughout the state is required.

In perhaps his biggest bombshell, the judge also ruled that Lake View’s attorneys must be paid for their work by the state, because the fruits of their labors will benefit the state as a whole, not just their clients. He awarded them a stunning $9,338,035.

The state will appeal the decision.

Yes, New Jersey. Rural Counts, Too

In New Jersey, a group of 17 small, mostly rural school districts has won the right to a trial later this year before a state administrative law judge to determine whether they should be eligible for the same improvements mandated in 30 large, urban districts by a series of court decisions. The improvements include: smaller class sizes, better facilities, more qualified staff, pre-school programs, and the funding to pay for these improvements.

Over 25 years of nearly continuous litigation has resulted in eight court rulings that New Jersey’s school funding system is unconstitutional as it applies to the 30 large, urban districts. Each decision has specified benefits that must be provided by the state to these districts, known as “Abbott” districts for the name of the lead plaintiff. But, the small districts claim they are just as poor as the Abbott districts, since all 17 are among the poorest 20 percent of districts according to the state’s own ranking system. Ironically, some of the 30 Abbott districts are not among the poorest 20 percent.

Many of the small districts are elementary-only “feeder” districts that send kids on to high school in some of the Abbott districts. Most are in rural, southern New Jersey.

Matters of Fact

North Dakota teachers get a boost from the DOE

The University of North Dakota Teacher Education Program has received a grant from the U.S. Department of Education that is designed to help with technology training and to encourage teaching at smaller rural schools. The grant will provide $200,000 each year for three years. It will also support partnership agreements with rural school districts so that more UND students will get student teaching experience in rural schools. The goals of the program are to give UND students more field-based experience with technology in teaching and to encourage new teachers to stay and teach in North Dakota.

Arizona’s rural schools under pressure

Sixteen small and rural school districts in Arizona have requested state money to build 32 new elementary schools and three new high schools to accommodate the rapid population growth that is taking place in Arizona’s small town and rural communities. Right now, those sixteen districts have a combined enrollment of 26,000 students. By 2004-05, that number will more than double. Funding for the new construction is coming from Arizona’s Students FIRST (Fair and Immediate Resources for Students Today) program. Students FIRST is a school capital finance program funded by revenues from the state sales tax and is intended to provide funds for correcting deficiencies in current buildings, building renovation, and new school construction.

Rural districts to take on Iowa’s sales tax law

Rural school districts in Iowa want a statewide one-cent sales tax increase that would provide revenues for all schools, and are preparing to sue the state to get it. Currently, Iowa has a local-option sales-tax law that allows all schools in a county to share continued on page 4
Nebraska Faces Consolidation Legislation

Nebraska’s rural schools were the target of a consolidation bill that was recently introduced and defeated in the State Legislature. LB431 sought to close an unlimited number of rural schools by 2006 and would have created a “School Structure Task Force” designed to develop a plan to “reduce and reconfigure” school districts in the state.

LB431’s sponsor, Senator Chris Beutler of Lincoln, introduced a similar plan in his amendment to a school finance bill last year. That amendment would have closed up to 40 school districts by 2003. Despite being opposed by all rural members of the Legislature, that bill still came within six votes of passage.

According to a spokesperson for the organization Friends of Rural Education (FRED), the schools generally targeted for “elimination” have excellent academic performance, less than one-tenth of the drop-out rate of the larger Nebraska schools, and enjoy great community support. “In Nebraska, ‘efficiency’ of schools has come to be seen as nothing more than code for cramming as many students into low-performing large schools as they can, with little or no consideration of effectiveness or educational outcomes,” he said.

The Nebraska school finance law groups school districts in three cost groupings—standard, sparse and very sparse. Sparse and very sparse are based on students per square mile in the district. The standard cost grouping consists of over 70 percent of the districts in the state, primarily in the more heavily populated eastern and central parts of the state, and has no relation to school size or enrollment. LB431 applies only to districts in the standard cost grouping.

As introduced, LB431 called for the creation of a 16 member School Structure Task Force. In two phases to be completed by December 1, 2001 and 2002, the Task Force would ultimately determine whether “reduction or reconfiguration of school districts in the standard cost grouping is advisable” and would issue a detailed plan to the Legislature on specific districts to merge or unify.

Analysts from the FRED Data Center commented: “Much, if not most, education legislation in Nebraska does not appear to be about students, teachers or education, but rather seems to be about protecting tax breaks for powerful urban interests. Nebraska consistently has ranked in the top five or six states for student performance, while teacher salaries have deteriorated into the bottom few. School districts, especially rural, have become starved for finances, and all this while enormous tax breaks are provided to powerful interest groups.”

On March 6, 2001, the Education Committee of the Legislature held a hearing on LB431. Sen. Beutler stated that the study that would be undertaken by the Task Force would answer questions about whether some schools existed “simply as a town economic development center” and whether the current structure of school districts was the best mode of education. He also stated that he believed many districts might be passing up opportunities to improve education and passing up merger and consolidation opportunities without thinking of the best interests of children. In addition to Sen. Beutler, Virgil Horne, lobbyist for the Lincoln Public Schools is also a proponent of the bill. Members of the Lincoln Public Schools school board have made statements in the past about the need to “close inefficient rural schools” in order to free funds for other school districts (such as Lincoln).

A coalition of rural education, agricultural and farmer organizations and rural citizens opposed the bill. Thirteen people testified as opponents to the bill. Among the organizations opposed to the bill were: Nebraska Rural Community Schools Association; Class Is United; Center for Rural Affairs; Friends of Rural Education; Nebraska Farmers Union; and the Nebraska State Grange. Much of the testimony focused on how Phase I of the
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proposed Task Force study—to study
the resources necessary for quality
educational opportunities and other
policy issues—might be worthwhile.
However, Phase II—the recommend-
dations on school closings—was an
arrow aimed directly at rural schools.

On May 15, 2001, the Education
Committee voted unanimously to
Indefinitely Postpone (or kill) LB431.
This means the bill will have to be
reintroduced in 2002 to receive
further consideration. Analysts from
the FRED Data Center note that while
LB431 has been defeated, the
pressure to consolidate Nebraska’s
rural schools will return.
— Reported by Jon Bailey, Rural Policy
Program Director for the Center for
Rural Affairs.

For more information, contact the
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Matters of Fact
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money that is generated by a sales tax
increase and earmarked for school
construction and property tax relief.
According to the Iowa Association of
School Boards, most of the sixteen
counties that have passed the tax have
large retail centers and have raised
$120 million a year. The school board
association estimates that a one-cent
statewide sales tax would generate
about $350 million per year. The
potential lawsuit comes after several
failed attempts to get lawmakers to re-
write the existing tax law.

Virginia losing teachers due to SOL

Virginia’s Standards of Learning
(SOL) are contributing to the state’s
impending teacher shortage. The
Washington Post recently reported
that teachers in Virginia’s public
schools are retiring early, moving to
private schools, or moving to grades
or subjects where students don’t take
the SOL exams. Currently, students in
third, fifth, and eighth grades and
high school students taking English,
math, science, and social studies take
the SOL tests. Starting with the class
of 2004, students must pass six tests
in order to graduate. The SOL tests
have been in place for three years and
teachers have expressed concern
over the pressure to raise scores, the
number of drills students must do,
and the lack of time provided to focus
on any one topic in depth.

Intelligence Gathering

Can you help us identify other
states where legislation similar to
Nebraska’s LB 1241 have been
introduced in the past year? Send
your “intelligence report” to the
Policy Program, PO Box 68,
Randolph, VT 05060; email:
policy.program@ruraledu.org.