Am I a good parent? A good daughter to my own mother? A success at work? We routinely, if informally, take stock of how we’re doing on various fronts of our lives. We each have our own definitions of what a good parent, or child, or professional does, along with our own yardsticks for measuring. At one end of the stick lies our own image of perfection (maybe the loving, nurturing, yet firm parent) and at the other, a clear picture of the unacceptable and unworthy (perhaps the scapegoating supervisor who blames her workers for her own negligence).

As we go about our days, we tally our successes and shortcomings, items big and small: holding the line on our teen-aged son’s curfew, making the impossible deadline at work, canceling the last two lunches with Mom. Prompted by an incident that tests our view of ourselves—an argument or misunderstanding, a lapse in consistency, an oversight—we replay the moment, searching for evidence of strengths and weaknesses that move us back and forth along our personal measuring stick. Once we’ve come to judgment, we may pat ourselves on the back or swallow the requisite regret while resolving to do better the next time.

What makes this routine stock-taking so hard is the very variety in our individual beliefs about what constitutes strength or success, weakness or failure. Take parenting, for example. How do we pinpoint exactly what a good parent does? To what extent do we balance the...
Native Peoples had a highly successful model for the education of their children. . . . It was a system of education that honored and respected the interdependent relationships between all living things.

Rural Roots Native Sites

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Rural Trust Native sites met to discuss and prepare a series of four panel presentations. The presentations were sequenced to cover key features of the work occurring in the sites and included panelists from each of the three sites. All were based on the shared belief that the transformation of Indian education will only be realized through a return to the culturally embedded education that was practiced by Native Peoples prior to the imposition of Western paradigms of education.

The first presentation, entitled “Teaching Through Indigenous Cultures: A Return to Native Ways of Knowing and Teaching,” focused on the philosophical frameworks for the activity occurring across the sites. Panelists spoke to the importance of recognizing that Native Peoples had a highly successful model for the education of their children that predated white contact. This model was based in the worldview, culture, and values of Native Peoples and was the predecessor of what we, in the Rural Trust, have come to call “place-based” education. It was a system of education that honored and respected the interdependent relationships between all living things.

“Education Centered in Culture & Community: Examples From the Field” was the second workshop offering. This presentation introduced the themes and teaching styles employed in schools that embrace a return to Native Ways of Knowing and Teaching. The Native traditions of “giving back” to Tribe and community, and “elders as wisdomkeepers” were discussed along with techniques used for integrating these concepts into teaching and learning. Inclusion of this workshop theme was pivotal because it has become commonplace in Indian education to add Indian topic area courses to the regular curriculum and proclaim that this is “Indian education.” This workshop offered the alternative view that Indian education must be content and practice driven—“teaching through rather than just about indigenous cultures.”

The third workshop, “I Am, I Said: Creating Educational Standards That Honor and Respect Native Identity,” explored the unique ways that Rural Trust Native sites have integrated their cultural values and frameworks to affirm and celebrate Native identity while meeting and exceeding the academic standards set by their states. This workshop focused on the relationship between self-image and learning efficacy and the historic denial of this relationship in the practice of Indian education. The workshop title offered by Oscar Kawagley, a leader of the Alaskan project and fan of Neil Diamond, reflects the need to reclaim and proclaim Native identity in order to remake education into a “healing” experience for Native peoples.

The final workshop presentation, “On the Road to A Culturally Responsive, Community-Based School,” discussed the challenges of systemic change and the sustainability of the work begun in the Rural Trust Native sites and other schools/communities across the country. In combination, the Rural Trust and the Rural Systemic Initiative have invested large sums of money to create real and long-lasting change in the education of Indian children. The Rural Trust sites and audience participants discussed strategies for continuing this work and extending its impact beyond existing sites and current funding cycles. Specific strategies included a focus on the design and implementation of preservice teacher training programs to include the concepts of “place-based learning” and “Teaching Through Indigenous Cultures.” Other suggestions included the establishment of a Rural Trust Native Sites Working Group which would be charged with responsibility for ongoing promotion and networking of these concepts both nationally and internationally through the World’s Indigenous Peoples Education Conference, which brings together indigenous educators from throughout the world every three years.

All of the workshops sponsored by the Rural Trust at this year’s NIEA Conference were well-attended and the evaluations were superior. There was particular interest from a large delegation of Native Hawaiian people who attended every workshop and shared their own experiences and perspectives. It was obvious from the reception the workshops received that there is both a strong imperative and hunger for change in Indian education. As anticipated, the Rural Trust Native sites did an outstanding job of whetting all of our appetites.

Rural Roots

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Rural Roots is published six times a year by the Rural School and Community Trust, a nonprofit educational organization dedicated to enlarging student learning and improving community life by strengthening relationships between rural schools and communities and engaging students in community-based public work.

Through advocacy, research, and outreach, the Rural Trust strives to create a more favorable environment for rural community schooling, for student work with a public audience and use, and for more active community participation in schooling.

Founded as the Annenberg Rural Challenge in 1995, the Rural Trust today works with more than 700 rural elementary and secondary schools in 35 states.

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More than 150 students, teachers, administrators, and community members gathered in Eastport, Maine, in October for the Second Annual International Student Conference. Students from Lubec High School organized this year’s conference around the theme of “Connecting Community and Education.”

At the conference, students from a number of different schools throughout Maine, as well as a team from the North Coast Rural Challenge Network in Mendocino County, California, made presentations describing various aquaculture and marine initiatives that are impacting their local economies and enriching the school curriculum. A team of five from the East Feliciana Parish in Louisiana spent several days in Maine, not only attending the conference, but visiting schools and learning about the hands-on, entrepreneurial approach to science education that has earned Lubec students and their teachers broad community support for their innovative work.

Presentations at the conference included students from Shead High School in Eastport describing their water quality and a project to monitor phytoplankton; East Machias students talking about water quality monitoring in the East Machias watershed; and a boat trip across Cobscook Bay to the Lubec aquaculture center and greenhouse, where students use wastewater from their fish-farming project to raise hydroponic vegetables. The Mendocino team shared their experiences producing a Tidepool Guide for visitors to the Mendocino area.

From Maine to Mendocino: Reflections of a Student and a Teacher

by Daniel Williford, Biology Teacher, Mendocino Unified School District, and Corina Marks, 11th Grade Student, Mendocino USD

The parallels between Downeast Maine and the Mendocino Coast of California run deeper than the beautiful rugged coastline. The small population, the distance from a major city, and the natural resource-based economy are all similarities that these rural areas share.

As these characteristics are so intertwined, the public school education of the students in these communities faces the same incredible challenges. A question that arose as we attended the marine resources conference in Eastport, Maine, was: “How are we actively engaging our students in a real-life, project-based learning curriculum that is both meaningful and applicable to their future?”

Attending this conference was an amazing experience for both of us, as well as the 150 or so other attendees. It was amazing in the sense that here we had a group of schools actively facing these challenges in the hopes of truly educating their students in a place-based and career-oriented fashion, while covering the academic necessities for graduation and for work at a university.

Some of the projects that commanded our attention were the various aquaculture endeavors, the living history/environmental fair put on by high school students, and the research on the relationship of phytoplankton to the health of the local economy.

Here on the Mendocino Coast we are faced with similar obstacles. How can we replace our local and dwindling natural resource-based economy with something forward-looking that will appeal to our students and our community and actually make a lasting difference? What we learned here was that we are taking steps in the right direction. By creating a curriculum that is place-based, project-based, and experiential, we have taken the step for students to truly become involved in their communities.

Both of us felt that this conference was an excellent learning experience. It was interesting to hear what other small schools are doing to conserve, connect, and unify their communities. The enthusiasm and involvement to spread and share environmental awareness was an inspiration to us all.
Youth Leadership Is Major Focus at Rendezvous 2000

by Julie Bartsch, Rural Trust Steward and Matt Pritchard, Youth Leadership Participant

photos by Rob Amberg for the Rural School and Community Trust

The gavel raps on the desk. Student Matt Pritchard calls the meeting of the Wise County School Board to order. As he looks around the room he realizes this is no traditional school board, but one composed of actively involved students and community members, all carrying the right to vote. This visioning exercise, which took place in July as part of the Rural School and Community Trust’s “Rendezvous 2000” in Flagstaff, Arizona, represents the Rural Trust’s belief that young people should have meaningful input into all decisions affecting school and community life.

This past July, more than 60 students gathered along with some 200 educators, parents, community members, and Rural Trust staff from 34 states for the three-day Rendezvous. A youth leadership forum made up a significant part of the program, and provided a wonderful opportunity for young people from across rural America to join in discussions on rural issues, the responsibilities of youth to their communities, and strategies to make the youth voice listened to and respected in efforts to build healthy and sustainable communities. Youth and adults participated in role-playing, brainstorming, self-evaluation, and articulating personal commitments to take back to their sites. Students and adults worked as equal partners, using the forum as a model for future endeavors.

Much of the 10–15 hour youth leadership session was dedicated to outlining a set of beliefs about what schools and communities would look like if the energy, talent, and creativity of youth were tapped. Students agreed on six principles necessary in reaching this vision:

1. **Student Work**—is intellectually powerful, holds personal meaning, and is related to “real life.”
2. **Expectations**—student energy, talent, and creativity are viewed as essential resources in addressing school/community issues and improving the quality of life for all.
3. **Involvement**—students are engaged in work that has meaning and utility for their community.
4. **Decision-making**—students have meaningful input in all decisions affecting school and community life.
5. **Equity**—all students, regardless of circumstances (economic, cultural, religious, title, gender) are recognized and valued in the process of improving their schools and communities.
6. **Development**—students possess the skills, confidence, and desire to be actively involved in shaping their school and community. Adults and students need training in how to create meaningful partnerships.

Early in the session, each participant was asked to stand on a line—representing various stages of progress in achieving these six principles—in the place where they felt their school was along the continuum of reaching the goals listed above. The line went from sites just beginning to realize the capacities of young people, to those where young people are involved in all facets of community-building. Many students saw their schools as somewhere in the middle, as expressed by the students from Mariposa, California, where “youth are encouraged to a certain extent, but they aren’t always valued. We are still trying to sell the concept of youth as resources. There is room to grow but it will take a lot of dedication.” Many of the youth leadership participants expressed a need to reach and utilize far more students than are currently involved through student councils.

For many students who have been involved in the Rural Trust since its early days as the Annenberg Rural Challenge, the Rendezvous youth leadership sessions represented the culmination of years of effort to increase student influence in the education system, rural communities, and the work of the Rural School and Community Trust. Many—including student keynote speakers Nathan Bruggink from Hayden, Colorado; San Juanita (“Janey”) Lazo from Edcouch, Texas; and Katie Sidler from Cottonwood Falls, Kansas—shared their personal stories about how Rural Trust work in their community has provided an opportunity for students generally not selected for leadership roles to get involved. For students like Teddy Ortiz from Ventura County, California, who was attending a Rural Trust gathering for the first time, the forum “gave me strategies that I can take back to my class/school. I couldn’t believe how much we had in common.”

—Student Teddy Ortiz, Ventura County, California

The initial task of this group will be to organize a 15–20 person steering committee or “National Youth Leaders Forum” representing young people from across the country to bring continuity and leverage to the work already going on in various sites. The initial task of this group will be to articulate a plan for leadership development (youth and adults) at the local, regional, and national levels. Matt Pritchard hopes the future work of the National Youth Leaders Forum will be an essential asset to the Rural Trust work around the nation and make a great impact on the landscape of 21st-century education.”
Ruben Ortiz of New Mexico shared his feelings about the youth leadership session in the final moments of the Rendezvous by thanking the Rural Trust for including him in such an “awesome” experience. “In the beginning I worried about fitting in,” said Ruben, “but almost immediately I realized that we had so much in common . . . that we were all working to make our community better. Back home it’s easy to get desanimado [discouraged] when only a handful of kids and adults will work on projects, but coming to the Rendezvous energizes you because you meet kids from across the country that are also working to make their schools and communities better. It gives you encouragement and lots of ideas to take back!”

And Ruben did just that. He went back home to Las Vegas, New Mexico, and told everyone about the Rendezvous. His family and friends told him to “keep on at it.” So he is busy working on a mural project in his town that tells the history of the community. Ruben says that when it’s finished, children won’t have to just learn history in their books, but will see the rich history of the Las Vegas community everywhere. That’s youth leadership!

Clockwise from center:
Rendezvous participants were treated to Navajo fry bread, native crafts, and a dance presentation by a troupe of young Navajo dancers at one of the evening banquets.

Wisconsin teacher James Lewicki (left) chats with Rural Trust President Rachel Tompkins. Lewicki chaired the Rendezvous program committee.

Sharon Jones of East Feliciana Parish in Louisiana inspired conference participants with her singing.

San Juanita (“Janey”) Lazo of the Llano Grande Center in Edcouch, Texas, was one of several student keynote speakers.

Mexican-American culture was highlighted at an evening fiesta, with young dancers demonstrating the traditions of various Mexican and Southwestern states.

The Rendezvous provided opportunities for adults and students to work together on place-based education issues of concern to all.

A Native American “learning community” was moderated by Rural Trust Steward Elaine Salinas. The work of participants has led to the creation of a new Native American Working Group to address Native education issues in the Rural Trust.
Rural Trust Principles

A keystone to the work of developing portfolio-based assessments is a set of principles describing what the best place-based learning looks like. These principles are the result of extensive conversations among the Rural Trust staff, Board of Trustees, and affiliated sites. They form the basis for ongoing efforts to assess the progress of our work.

1. Students do sustained academic work that draws upon and contributes to the place in which they live.
2. Guided by teachers and other adults, students practice new skills and responsibilities, serving as scholars, workers, and citizens in their community.
3. The community supports students and teachers in these new roles.
4. Enthusiasm for place-based education spreads as the learning deepens, steadily involving more students, teachers, administrators, and volunteers.
5. Schools mirror the democratic values they seek to instill, arranging their resources so that every child is known well, and every child's participation—regardless of ability—is needed and wanted.
6. Decisions about the education of the community's children are shared, informed by expertise both in and outside school.
7. All participants, including teachers, students, and community members, expect excellent effort from each other and review their joint progress regularly and thoughtfully.
8. Multiple measures and public input enlarge student assessments.
9. The school and community actively collaborate to make the local place a good one in which to live and work.

Making the Best Better

from page 1

model set by our parents with our own views? Is consistency a virtue or do varying circumstances—and different children—require variable behaviors? What counts as evidence? Do we measure our performance as parents by our own actions or those of our children? In what proportions? No less confusing is the question of who is a fair judge. Our kids or spouse? Our parents or in-laws? Ourselves?

Taking the pulse of place-based learning in Rural Trust sites is every bit as complicated as assessing our performance as parents.

In the case of the Rural Trust, this sizing up demands a shared vision and language—a set of principles—for what we’re striving to do. (The first Rural Trust principle, for example, maintains: Students do sustained academic work that draws upon and contributes to the place in which they live.) We also need a common yardstick—a rubric—to measure progress towards this vision, along with clear understandings about what constitutes evidence of progress. (Sticking with the first Rural Trust principle, to what extent, in fact, are students doing academic work that pairs rigor with relevance? What’s the proof?) A strategy for collecting and organizing this evidence—a portfolio—is essential.

If the review process is to be consensual, moreover, it must have ways—what educators like to call protocols—for inviting input from a variety of people. If it is to be constructive, there must be a process for using the results to strengthen what’s working and change what’s not. (For example, What steps do we need to take to insure that our school’s English teachers actively help students prepare a position paper on local land use as part of a social studies project?) And finally, if this brand of stock-taking is to win support with community constituents, national funders and policy makers, it must be persuasive.

These were the challenges the Rural Trust faced when it embarked last spring down the path of portfolio assessments. At a meeting in March, representatives from 12 pilot sites and the evaluation team from Harvard hammered out a preliminary set of seven Rural Trust principles, along with a rubric that measured sites’ progress towards each principle on a scale of one to five. In July, these same sites gathered again to present the portfolios they had compiled during the intervening months, giving testimony to their progress against the rubric. Together, they had begun to fashion a strategy for shaping, capturing, and measuring what is distinctive and important about the community-based learning at the heart of the Rural Trust.

Creating a System

With these preliminary experiences under our belt, the Rural Trust national staff and the Harvard assessment team launched a partnership with Educational Testing Services (ETS) to create a full-fledged, portfolio-based documentation and evaluation system for the Rural Trust. With the Rural Trust’s field staff (stewards), we have recruited a design team that includes three representatives (closest to the work) from eight projects, joined by stewards and the Harvard team, and led by ETS. The team will meet three to four times over the coming year, with the goals of:

1. Developing a portfolio structuring process that includes protocols, support materials, rubrics, etc.
2. Sharpening the existing statement of Rural Trust principles.
3. Developing a common understanding of principles, rubrics, and quality through the design process, and developing materials that will support this common understanding.
4. Developing materials that help projects move from descriptions of activities to analysis of evidence—toward portfolios that “make the case.”
5. Developing a library of exemplars that demonstrate principles, evidence, and different levels of quality and growth.
6. Developing mechanisms or protocols for the presentation of portfolios.
7. Developing protocols for the evaluation of portfolios.
8. Developing a plan for sharing with all Rural Trust sites.

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Promoting Analysis and Reflection

As those who prepared and presented portfolios at this July’s pilot meeting know firsthand, this is hard work—and an enterprise for which few teachers, students, or community members have experience or time. It is, nonetheless, rewarding work. Participants at the July meeting commented that assembling a portfolio of their work and then standing back from it had been extraordinary: “We really had no idea how much we’d done and how far we’d come,” said one. “We also learned how much further we need to travel.”

The process of constructing a portfolio is in itself a powerful self-learning tool. A strong portfolio “builds a case” by presenting evidence that addresses critical questions about the purposes, methods, and results of a student’s, teacher’s, or school’s work. The business of collecting, selecting, then analyzing the evidence helps participants learn more about their own efforts; the ability to distinguish between “better” and “worse” is a critical aspect of improvement. Presenting one’s case to those several steps removed—what some call “critical friends”—furthers this analysis and reflection.

Without such a process, it can be hard to see clearly all the strengths and weaknesses of a project when you live and breathe it daily. And whether school-community teams are engaged in self-evaluation or reviewing the work of their peers, Rural Trust project participants need to be able to peg just where they and others are along a continuum that measures quality.

Learning Together

What has our own analysis and reflection about our early experiences with portfolios taught us so far?

From the perspective of the national staff and Harvard team, we realize that we did not give project teams participating in this spring’s pilot phase enough direction before they began assembling their portfolios. Our initial instructions, for example, failed to stress the importance of context—of supplying stage-setting narrative and background information about the evidence to follow. In hindsight, we should have urged portfolio makers to begin with an introduction that summarized what would be featured, how the portfolio was compiled, who compiled it, why a particular project was selected for inclusion, and who participated in the scoring.

We also failed to ask for specific details about particular projects. How did this project come about, for example? What time and resources has it required? How many students have been involved?

The links between work in the community and the classroom called for more explanation. The importance of a particular piece of evidence was not always clear. The project’s relation to—and impact on—the larger school curriculum needed clarifying. If “location, location, location” is a motto for real estate, “context, context, context” (we’ve learned) is a good motto for portfolios.

With regard to the evidence presented, the portfolios contained a rich array of newspaper clippings, student journal entries and essays, informational material about the projects, photographs, videos, CDs, and print publications. If we were to single out the one thing that would have strengthened the evidence presented, though, it would be more examples of student work.

Instead of a newspaper article about students making a presentation to the community about a particular issue, include the students’ presentation itself. If a poetry class on nature writing was part of a project, include some of the students’ poems (maybe show a first and final draft of a poem to illustrate a student’s increasing mastery). Rather than show photos of the backboards students made for a science project (photos in which, typically, it’s impossible to read or decipher much), pick one or two student efforts and present them in detail.

With experience as the best teacher, these early lessons show us what we need to work on in the months ahead.

Looking Ahead

How will we know if the Rural Trust’s investment in portfolio documentation and assessment is paying off? It will pay off if, together, we create effective tools for measuring progress against a set of broadly shared expectations. It will pay off if we create a constituency: teachers, students, parents, and community members who feel they’re learning valuable lessons from this approach to assessment. It will pay off if the evidence we collect is compelling in the eyes of appointed and elected officials, funders, and others whose support we need. Finally, it will pay off if, like the tide, it lifts the quality of the work for all who have dropped anchor with the Rural Trust.

Four New Trustees Elected to Rural Trust Board
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and Vice President of Radcliffe College. In 1977, President Jimmy Carter appointed her as Director of the National Institute of Education, where she served until 1979. From 1991 to 2000, she served as President of the Spencer Foundation in Chicago. Dr. Graham also serves on the boards of the Northwestern Mutual Life Insurance Company, the Josiah Macy, Jr., Foundation, the Johnson Foundation, the Hitachi Foundation, the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, and the Chicago Annenberg Challenge.

Paul Martinez is the Director of the Center for the Education and Study of Diverse Populations (CESDP) at New Mexico Highlands University at Las Vegas. The CESDP was created by the New Mexico State Legislature in 1993 to assist rural communities in improving the quality of education for citizens statewide. Having worked in the states of Colorado, Illinois, and New Mexico, Dr. Martinez has been a classroom teacher, district administrator, tenured faculty member, department chairperson, and technical assistance center director. He also has served as a consultant to state departments of education, the U.S. Department of Education, and private industry. Dr. Martinez serves on the Board of Directors of the National Association for Bilingual Education, and until recently, was on the board of the National Education Knowledge Industry Association. He is nationally recognized as an expert in the area of bilingual and multicultural education.
Hot Topic: Rendezvous 2000
Roundup—See Pages 4 & 5

Four New Trustees Elected to Rural Trust Board

Leanna Landsmann, Mollie Hale Carter, Patricia Graham, and Paul Martinez have joined the Board of Trustees of the Rural School and Community Trust, greatly expanding the reach and diversity of the volunteer body that governs the organization. A Board nominating committee headed by Art Campbell, Assistant Secretary for Economic Development at the U.S. Department of Commerce, proposed the new members for election and the Board approved the nominations at its June and November meetings. “These four new Board members not only bring incredible professional experience to the Board, but also a real passion for our work with rural schools and communities,” said Rachel Tompkins, President of the Rural Trust. “We are delighted that they have agreed to join our efforts.”

Leanna Landsmann is President of TIME For Kids, a publication reaching more than 2.6 million student readers nationwide. Prior to joining TIME For Kids, Landsmann owned and ran her own company, Leanna Landsmann, Inc, where she worked with major corporations and associations that publish instructional materials for schools to market their outreach efforts. In 1994, Landsmann launched New York City’s Principal for a Day initiative and directed the program as a volunteer for two years. She also serves on the boards of the Getty Institute for Education in the Arts and PENCIL (Public Education Needs Civic Involvement in Learning.)

Mollie Hale Carter is a Vice President for Star A, Inc., a family-owned farming operation and investment business, with offices in Shawnee Mission, Kansas. She is also Chairman of the Board of Sunflower Banks, Inc., which has branches located throughout central and western Kansas. From 1987 to 1997, Carter worked for the John Hancock Mutual Life Insurance Company, serving as the Senior Investment Officer of the Bond and Corporate Finance Department managing investments in the food and beverage industry. She was an Assistant to the President and an Assistant Consultant for Agribusiness Associates, Inc. from 1984 to 1986. She is a director of the Archer Daniels Midland Company.

Patricia Graham is the Charles Warren Professor of the History of American Education at Harvard University. She has written four books and numerous articles on education issues. Dr. Graham began her career as a teacher and high school counselor and later moved into higher education, where she lectured at Northern Michigan University and Columbia University. She also served as Dean of the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study.

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