

Small-Town Education: A Personal Perspective

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Growing up in the small town of Goodhue, Minn., was quite an experience. It is a small farming community with a population of about 800 people. The downtown area of Goodhue covers only a few blocks and consists of one grocery store, a bank, a post office, two gas stations, and a few other small businesses. Our small little town doesn't even have a stoplight in it. The first class from Goodhue High School graduated in 1913, and the school building that is there today was established in 1935.

Before attending Goodhue High School, I was enrolled at St. John's Lutheran School, just a few miles outside of Goodhue. I transferred to Goodhue in 9th grade, and I remember the feeling of dread as I left my little country school to go to the "big" high school. Needless to say, the transition between schools was not scary in the least. With about 200 students in the entire high school, I met almost everyone in just a few months. It turns out Goodhue wasn't as big as I'd thought. Goodhue seemed even smaller when I met students from larger schools who could not even name half of the students in their own graduating class.

The school itself was an old building, housing the elementary and junior high students as well as the high school. There hadn't been much remodeling done when I was in high school. Except for updates to keep the building up to code with the safety and health requirements, all of the classrooms were almost exactly the same as they were when my parents attended a few decades earlier. Other parts of the school, however, were added onto, giving us an ITV classroom, some offices and a new library with up-to-date computers. These were well used and much appreciated by the growing number of students and staff. My senior year, the school received enough funding to finally complete the much-debated and much-needed women's locker room, as well as an additional practice gym and more classrooms.

The academic curriculum was typical of what you could expect from most small schools. They had the basic class agenda, or generals, that were required for everyone their first couple of years. As an upper classman, more elective classes and learning options became available, such as work-study, independent study and ITV classes. For the most part, I felt we had a good variety of educational opportunities to pick from; however, our school did not offer many classes, including advanced and honors classes, and many elective classes were either under-funded or lacked support, causing enrollment (and at times the quality of teaching) to dwindle.

One of the programs lacking support was the arts. Whether it was due to a lack of funding or a shortage of teachers, the art department was very small and only a few students were able to participate in those classes. Art classes were not encouraged during class enrollment, and most students graduated without taking a single art class in high school. This was very unfortunate, since art can help students by encouraging creativity, increasing problem-solving skills and helping them view things from different perspectives.

Likewise, theater was not big at Goodhue. The same handful of students participated in the school play each fall. It didn't seem that new participants were actively sought out as auditions for these events, together with the one-act play and regional theater events, were not well-publicized or announced.

The band and choir at Goodhue also suffered. It seemed that band was very popular for students in elementary and junior high; however, by high school many students had dropped out. During my time at Goodhue, there were two different instructors. Even though both were very talented, they did not have the tools (i.e., updated equipment and facilities) or support from administration to run a successful program.

Choir had better enrollment; however, people usually took choir since it was an "easy A" and it filled an elective requirement. The choir was not well directed, and no one had to audition to join. It wasn't very serious — few people actually sang, and many did other homework assignments during class.

Like theater, there were a variety of opportunities for students in these musical areas, such as regional competitions and small vocal and instrumental ensembles. The only problem was that these opportunities were not properly relayed to the students. Only a select few knew about and signed up for these events. These music classes definitely had potential, they just lacked funding and support.

Other missed opportunities for students included shop classes. This is just one of the examples of classes that were stereotyped. It was almost unheard of for a girl to be in an agriculture, woods or welding class. These classes would attract one or two female students, since the all-male atmosphere was extremely intimidating and usually outweighed any girls' interest in the classes.

While the boys were in woods and shop classes, the girls were directed towards "Consumer Foods" (primarily a cooking class) and home economics classes. Although there were no written rules about which people could participate in these classes, I think stereotyping really deterred people from experiencing things they may have been good at.

While there were many classes that lacked funding, support and equal gender enrollment, there were also innovative classes that gave students a chance to excel. One of these classes was ITV. Since Goodhue high school was not equipped for honors classes, faculty and staff worked with area schools to establish a TV network between classrooms. If Goodhue did not have teachers for certain advanced courses, we could utilize other school's teachers via ITV and complete courses that had not been offered in the past. Some courses fulfilled college generals and as a result introduced students to college-level academics. I received college credit for the ITV English class I took, which saved me money in college and was much easier than commuting to a community college for post-secondary (PSEO). It also allowed me to meet students from neighboring communities.

Another great opportunity our school offered was occasional trips abroad (completed every few years or so). Our high school offered Spanish and German as foreign languages, and students must have completed a minimum of two years to be eligible to travel to either Spain or Germany. While I was taking German, my class traveled to Germany for nineteen days. It was an amazing experience, and we all had an opportunity to see the world and interact with other cultures. While we were in Germany, we traveled to many different cities, learned about European history and even lived with a host family for a week. I was completing my second year of German and couldn't speak fluently, but I still learned a lot about the culture—more than I ever would have in a classroom! This was a great learning experience that opened my eyes to the world beyond my small hometown.

Finally, G.O.A.L.S. was a relatively new class that was offered when I was a senior. It was a type of "senior project" class that gave students a chance to be creative and design their own project (with

the approval of their advisor). I was really interested in this class and signed up, deciding to research diet and nutrition. As part of my project, I made a diet and exercise plan and researched various aspects of healthy living. I recorded everything I did each day, and at the end of the year I presented my findings to the school council. During this project, I found out how interested I am in diet and nutrition and decided to pursue a degree in dietetics. I am now a dietetics major, learning about nutrition and the human body. With my graduation fast approaching, I can't help realizing that without G.O.A.L.S., I may have never stumbled upon my interest in this field.

After discussing the pros and cons of the curriculum, it seems only fitting to talk about the teachers who taught these classes. The teachers really made high school worthwhile. They were kind, caring people who helped students accomplish their goals. I worked to establish good relationships with my teachers in class, and got to know them during extra-curricular activities (where they were the organizers and advisors). Those relationships were very helpful, as my teachers acted as references, mentors, and resources throughout my years in high school and even into college. Sometimes I felt that my teachers were pushing me too hard and their expectations seemed too high; looking back now, however, I am so thankful for the times that they did push me, because it helped me to get where I am today.

Outside of academics, there were a variety of extra-curricular events and student organizations that students could participate in. Some of those groups included: Teens Needing Teens (TNT), a peer helping group; Learning is Fun Together (LIFT), an elementary tutoring program; Family, Career and Community Leaders of America (FCCLA); Future Farmers of America (FFA) and National Honor Society. Most of these programs didn't require a nomination and students could join as they pleased. Once you made the choice to become active in one group, it was amazing how things always seemed to snowball until you were somehow part of almost every other organization in school. Personally, I was a member of quite a few different groups and it was a great experience! I was able to be in many different leadership roles, which gave me the time-management and organizational skills I needed to make it in college. Extracurricular activities also helped me when I applied for college (and scholarships), as they demonstrated leadership and the other skills I'd developed.

My favorite extra-curriculars, however, took place in the gym. Sports were definitely a huge part of the student life at Goodhue. For its size, my high school had an unusually strong athletic program,

peppered with trips to the Metrodome and state-winning trophies. From wrestling and football to basketball and softball, it was really exciting for the students and community to be able to support the teams throughout each season.

Support from the community was huge, as their donations and contributions kept us from having to consolidate with other area schools. Although the actual school building was small and we only had two gyms (one actually doubled as the cafeteria, a very unfortunate circumstance for the wrestlers who practiced there and suffered on days we had tater tots, chili or other pungent meals), our community raised enough money to update the large gym where the main sporting events were held.

In the works was also a project to remodel the women's locker room. Due to the increasing number of girls participating in sports and a shortage of lockers, the already-cramped locker room was beyond its capacity. The girl's varsity team, B-squad, 9th grade and junior high teams had to share a handful of tall lockers (the other lockers were so small you could barely fit your shoes, clothes and equipment inside). On some occasions, we would even have to share our locker room with the opposing team. Everyone was eagerly awaiting the long-promised expansion; however, the new locker room was completed the summer after I graduated (much to the dismay of my teammates and I).

I really liked being able to participate in sports in high school. It was a great way to be involved, be active, and make friends. Since our school's enrollment was small, we recruited just enough people to make complete sports teams. As such, most sports didn't really have try-outs. If you were dedicated and somewhat athletic, you were on the team. When I started playing sports, I was by no means an outstanding athlete, but over the course of high school, and with help from coaches and teammates, I was able to mold myself into a much better player than when I had started.

I played basketball and softball, and some of my best memories from high school are from those sports seasons. I know that I would most likely not have gotten chances like that if I was at a larger school, and I am really thankful to have had that experience in my life.

Overall, I would say that my high school experience at Goodhue public was a very positive one. I felt that the education I received did a good job of preparing me for college and for the future. Even though small schools lack many of the opportunities available to students in larger schools, my high school gave me the chance to stand out instead of being just another person in the crowd. With the

personalized attention I received from faculty and staff, I was able to excel. I got into a great college, received helpful scholarships and grants, and am now working on my dream career. Is this a result of luck? Maybe. Is it because I worked hard? Most likely. Does it have anything to do with the fact that I grew up in a small town with a huge support network? Definitely.

Something that people forget about small towns is that you always have someone there for you — everyone knows you, your family and your friends. Yes, this means there's gossip, and everyone always seems to know what you're doing. And maybe in this small town there's not a Subway or McDonald's to eat at, and you have to drive 45 minutes to get to a shopping mall. But you've got a support group — not just your teachers, parents and peers, but an entire community. Maybe you don't get every single opportunity as a student from the Twin Cities, but you'll always have someone to motivate you, celebrate with you, comfort you and be there for you, no matter what. My experiences shaped who I am and what I will be. I am grateful for the classes that challenged me, the people who inspired me, and the community that helped me excel at Goodhue High School.