

RMJ

Rural Minnesota Journal

Taking the Helm:
How rural Minnesota's next
generation sees the future

2011



CENTER *for*
RURAL POLICY
and DEVELOPMENT

Seeking solutions for Greater Minnesota's future

**Center for
Rural Policy &
Development
Board of
Directors**

William McCormack
*Board Chair
The Schwan Food Co.
(retired)*

John Monson
*Vice Chair
AgStar Financial*

Nancy Straw
*Secretary/Treasurer
West Central Initiative*

Michael Brethorst
City of Melrose

Wade Fauth
Blandin Foundation

Amy Fredregill
*Midwest Renewable
Tracking System Inc.
St. Paul*

Rep. Bob Gunther
*Minn. House of
Representatives*

Richard Davenport
*Minnesota State University,
Mankato*

Neil Eckles
*Blue Earth Valley
Communications*

Timothy Houle
*Crow Wing County
Administrator*

Cynthia Johnson
Farmers' Union

Dave Ladd
RDL Associates LLC

Tony LookingElk
Otto Bremer Foundation

Lois Mack
Waterville, Minn.

Sen. Doug Magnus
Minn. State Senate

Kevin Paap
Farm Bureau

Tony Sertich
Iron Range Resources

Steve Wenzel
*Central Lakes College,
Brainerd*

**Rural
Minnesota
Journal
Editorial
Committee**

Jean Burkhardt
*Independent Consultant
Welcome, Minn.*

Richard Davenport
*Minnesota State University,
Mankato*

Tim Houle
*Crow Wing County
Administrator*

Sandy Layman
Layman Consulting

Wy Spano
*University of Minnesota,
Duluth*

Tom Stinson
University of Minnesota

© 2011 Center for Rural Policy and Development

The Center for Rural Policy and Development, based in St. Peter, Minn., is a private, not-for-profit policy research organization dedicated to benefiting Minnesota by providing its policy makers with an unbiased evaluation of issues from a rural perspective.

Any opinions voiced in the Journal are those solely of the authors and not necessarily of the Center.

Center for Rural Policy and Development
600 S. Fifth Street, Suite 211 • Saint Peter, Minnesota 56082
(507) 934-7700 • (877) RURALMN

RMJ can be found on the web at:
www.ruralmn.org

Acknowledgements

The Center for Rural Policy & Development gratefully acknowledges our friends who have made this issue of RMJ possible.



BLANDIN FOUNDATION

THE MCKNIGHT FOUNDATION



Bush Foundation

The State of Minnesota

You Can Be a Leader One Day

Bryan Joyce

“You can be a leader one day.” Seven simple words spoken by then-Janesville Waldorf Pemberton Middle School Principal Shelly Schultz have had profound meaning for me growing up. They were spoken to me as she handed me a certificate indicating I could start high school the following year. As a middle school student who liked to challenge authority, my run-ins with my principal were not always friendly times; despite this, Mrs. Schultz saw something in me. Since then, I have graduated from high school and college, there have been more graduation ceremonies, but none have left me with such a challenging statement. You can be a leader one day. What do you do with a statement like that? Do you forget about it and move on, or let it guide you in your career? I chose the latter.

The story of my eighth-grade graduation is not meant to show my leadership capabilities, but to show the importance of educators in shaping the leaders of tomorrow. I am a high school social studies teacher at Windom Area Schools in southwest Minnesota. I was born rural, raised rural, educated rural, I sought higher education at Minnesota State University, Mankato, and I finally settled down to teach in a rural Minnesota school. There are so many high quality initiatives happening in Minnesota, especially in the education field. On a daily basis, I encounter so many students with leadership potential. How does a rural education foster and help the leaders of tomorrow grow? First, the experiences and learning must be engaging. Second, the learning must be meaningful. Third, the student must be challenged. Finally, the experiences

created for students must be somewhat innovative. Here are some examples of how I see these in practical terms.

Engaging education

Engaging students is the goal of any effective educator. Some students are naturally engaged in the subject material, but educators are trying to engage all. Anyone who has spoken to a room of sophomores knows the enormity of this task. A student must first be engaged in order to find meaning. The experience and climate created by the teacher make all the difference in engaging learners.

I believe the best way to engage the 21st century learner is by providing experiences for students to apply learning beyond the classroom. Students, especially those with great leadership potential, need access to educational trips and experiences. Having a shared educational experience in a field setting instantly engages students, regardless of their prior interest level. From my experiences leading student trips, I have found that the best leaders always seem to jump at the chance to apply their education beyond the classroom.

In 2008, the United States was in the midst of an extremely engaging presidential race with dynamic candidates on both sides of the aisle. Students in Windom seemed interested, primarily because the only president most could remember was President George W. Bush. The fact that a new person would become president was very exciting to them. I had an opportunity to travel on an educational trip in college, and I had been looking for an opportunity to do so as a teacher. I decided to organize a student trip to witness the inauguration of the new president on January 20, 2009. Joining me were fellow social studies teachers Sheryl Hanefeld and Steve Kuntz, as well as twenty-five students. We spent about nine hours on the Washington Mall that cold January morning and witnessed the swearing-in of President Barack Obama. While the world watched on TV, we were part of the crowd on the Mall. These students witnessed what is so great about our republic — the peaceful transition of power from one political entity to another. This is a uniquely American moment that has endured through times of peace and war for over 200

years, and Windom students were engaged in this historic event. When their children ask them about that inauguration, I can imagine there will be a great level of excitement when they tell the story of being there and soaking it all in.

While I believe the best way to engage is to have experiences, the classroom can be a magical place where greatly engaged civic discussion can unfold. Finding passion in what I do keeps me engaged. I love teaching, and I love a great discussion. When students feel that passion for a topic, they tend to let their guard down and let their minds be led down the road toward a great experience. I really stress to my students that I value their well thought-out opinions on topics. They are young, but they are forming their views on how much sovereignty they truly have. If they feel they have power, they engage. Empower the student-leaders to have learning experiences, and engage them during the process.

Meaningful education

Students want to know that what they are doing will have meaning in their adult lives. The day when the horrible nightmare involving U.S. Representative Gabrielle Giffords unfolded in Tucson, Arizona, I was at home spending time with my family and preparing for an evening basketball game. It was a Saturday in January, so I was not glued to my television, as my two young children kept me plenty busy. All of my basketball players have my phone number, and I received a text from one of them informing me that the representative she had role-played in class had been shot. This was a uniquely 21st-century moment, having a current events story broken to me via a text from a student. Events unfold all over the world, as they have for millennia; what's changed is the break-neck pace at which the world finds out. How does the world find out? Twitter, Facebook, blogs, you name the medium. The point here is that information is everywhere. A social studies teacher could go crazy trying to stay on top of all this.

This story is unique, though, on another level, which I think is worth explaining.

Every fall my sophomores participate in a U.S.

Government legislative simulation in which they role-play a member of Congress in a particular committee that is dealing with a certain piece of legislation. I am sure many government teachers run a similar simulation. All students learn that a bill becomes a law by passing through committees and making its way to the President. Knowing the process is beneficial, but I argue it lacks meaning. How can Congressional work become meaningful? Put the student to work in passing the bill.

Every student, not just the leaders, becomes involved in the legislative process. All students have to work on a particular chunk of the legislation. What really becomes meaningful is to see the true leaders step up. Every committee must have a chair and ranking member. Students who are truly engaged in the process are provided a great opportunity to lead their classmates in the committee work process. What they really find out is that democracy is muddy. It is not neat, it is not quick, and it is hard work. Only the most worthy bills pass, and this is usually true in the class simulation as well. Every student hems and haws about doing a project and being involved in their learning, but none would have it any other way after the simulation. Playing a member of Congress makes the person real and makes the legislation hit home. That was the most intriguing part of that awful January day for me. I learned about the event from a student, via a text, because she felt a personal connection to the news of the day. This simulation allowed a sophomore in high school to get interested in the House Science and Technology Committee and know who Rep. Gabrielle Giffords was prior to her name being in every headline.

Meaningful learning puts the student to work. Why do students enjoy making things in shop classes, testing something in a science experiment, cooking in an FACS class, making art projects? They are all hands-on and meaningful, and they produce tangible results. We as educators must allow students the opportunity to get a meaningful education and make the connections to the "real world." Failure to do so will lead us down a path of irrelevancy that will have disastrous results for our education system, and ultimately, our republic.

Challenging education

Collaboration is often talked about in education, but usually never followed up on. In a school the size of Windom Area, and in addition to teaching full-time, most teachers are also helping with any number of extra-curricular activities, from fine arts to athletics. Can teachers collaborate for a yearlong project challenging seniors to go beyond the classroom? Eagle Achievement has been our way to try just that.

Eagle Achievement started as two separate ideas in our English and Social Studies departments. As seniors, the English students always had to write a problem/solution paper. In social studies, I always assigned the seniors a project challenging them to “Change the World.” After the first year of these two assignments running independently, it seemed to English teacher Laura Alvstad and me that these two projects should work together. We spent a year planning, including a trip to St. Peter to view some finished senior project presentations. We launched our version of the senior project, called Eagle Achievement, in the 2009-2010 school year.

The project works this way: Students in their senior year at Windom Area Schools identify a problem in society that they want to learn more about. Some topic examples include blood shortages; hunger; poverty; second language acquisition; technology availability in schools; and alternative energy. After selecting their topic, students research and write a documented paper explaining the problem and offering solutions to the topic, based on their research. After the paper has been written and approved, the student must choose one way to help solve the problem and act on it. This is where the social studies “Change the World” part comes in. The paper is written during first semester and the project acted upon in second semester, with a few exceptions based on the project. About two weeks prior to graduation, students make a formal presentation of their Eagle Achievement project to a panel of community judges. An Eagle Achievement Excellence Award is given to the student, or students, who best exemplify what it means to show leadership and go beyond the basics of the project.

After two years of this large collaborative project, we have learned quite a bit. I have learned that students who have leadership capabilities truly challenge themselves with a project of this magnitude. During the 2009-2010 school year, Windom Graduates Mike Farrell and Mason Voehl decided to research two different areas of alternative energy and write very different papers. After researching, they realized that our school was lacking a strong alternative energy curriculum. They, along with science teacher Jonathan Smith, started the Youth Energy Summit group at Windom Area Schools. This group continues today and tries to find innovative ways to teach about alternative energy in our school. All this was made possible because of the initiative of two willing senior leaders and a helpful teacher.

Sunny Patel, a 2011 graduate of Windom Area Schools, decided to research the topic of blood shortages for his Eagle Achievement project. He was hoping to have a blood drive and be done with the project. What he found through his research, though, was a real need to educate the public on what happens when blood is donated. This led Sunny to create a 15-minute video detailing exactly what happens to blood once the actual donation has occurred. The video picks up where most people stop — at the donation table. Now the public can be informed through the Sioux Falls Blood Bank website and the Windom Hospital website as to how a blood donation actually makes a difference in someone's life. Sunny assisted on two to three blood drives, but he found that after the initial research, he needed to do more.

Sunny, Mike, and Mason embody what Eagle Achievement is all about. This project allows the leader inside to come out and be challenged like never before. Students should be better prepared for whatever the "real world" has in store as a result of this project. I must give some credit here where it is due. Minnesota State University, Mankato, is involved in a program called Public Achievement headed by Professors Joe Kunkel and Tony Filipovitch. Much of my preparation to lead Eagle Achievement comes from my involvement in the Public Achievement program. Public Achievement does a tremendous job of developing leadership skills in future teachers and the students involved.

Innovative education

The last 20-30 years have been difficult for rural communities. Family farms that were once the mainstay of the community have shrunk in size due to technological innovations. What has been beneficial for the global food supply isn't always beneficial for the rural community. Gone are the small family farms scattered throughout the countryside with eight to ten kids per family. In their place, we find much larger farms, while the need for labor is far less. Many more families are living in the city and looking to the larger metropolitan areas for opportunity during and after high school. Lost in all this is the true measure of the value of the rural community. The Internet allows us to harness this value, while accessing the best of the rest of the world.

The Internet has become a way that we access information on a global scale. Education has been slow to change to meet this new and exciting shift, but in some cases the school is not to blame as high-speed Internet is not readily available in all rural communities. We are fortunate in Windom as government and grant funding have allowed access to fiber-optic cable and high-speed Internet at a very reasonable price. Windom Area Schools is in the process of making the entire school a Wi-Fi hotspot for students to access using personal computers. Many of our departments are starting to offer online options, including physics and economics. Students at Windom Area Schools have the opportunity to learn how to take an online course while still in high school, where they know the teacher is just down the hall if they have issues. The flexibility that an online class option has given some of our students allows the leaders of tomorrow time in their day to work with younger students and take on more of a leadership role. But while online learning is exciting, it has its drawbacks. It forces the student to learn very independently. Taking an online course is a great way for college-ready students to practice their time management skills to prepare for college life, which is great for students who are ready, but should be approached cautiously for students still needing much guidance.

Can online learning work for everyone? This question is something that schools will have to grapple with in the next

ten years as costs of operation rise and Internet access is more readily available. I do not see a future where the traditional school is replaced. I envision an environment in which every student has a way to access the Internet for basic research in the palm of his or her hand. Students in Minnesota, especially rural Minnesota, need a one-one technology initiative. A device that allows students to access the Internet, process documents and presentations, and communicate with other students needs to be in all students' hands by fifth grade. We have the infrastructure in place; the students just need the tools to use it. How we access information is changing. Need to know the date of the Battle of Antietam? Google it. The Blackberry in my pocket takes care of that in about eight seconds. This allows me to spend my time and energy really learning the causes and effects of the battle and place it in the grand picture that is the Civil War, instead of spending the time memorizing an easily retrievable date. A one-one initiative will allow educators to help students learn how to best utilize the technology available. Let's start putting the money to work to get students and schools into the 21st century.

The Internet has allowed students in rural communities to access a world's worth of knowledge, but it also allows us to show what is great about our community. A rural community has so much value. The parks are clean. My kids are safe walking around town. I know most community leaders, police officers, fire fighters, and city workers by name. The store clerks in town know you by name and treat you well when you shop there. We have a community, and the Internet allows us to embrace this community and still have access to the best the world has to offer. Nobody tells this story better than 2001 Windom graduate Mari Harries.

Mari graduated high school in 2001 and left for the big city, hoping never to return to little Windom. She was seeking opportunity and needed to leave the small town behind. Now, ten years later, Mari is back and opening a café called the River City Eatery with 2007 Windom graduate Sarah Cartwright. What changed? The short answer is Mari. After seeing the world and experiencing college, Mari moved home to be close

to family and find a job. While living back in Windom, she got married and started a family. Having a family started to open Mari's eyes to what is great about her hometown. She started a group called Finding Windom. The goal of Finding Windom is to highlight just what is so special about this small town so it doesn't take ten years for others to realize what Mari did. Mari's mission led her to organize cleaning up the city square in Windom that surrounds the Cottonwood County Courthouse. Like many small towns, the buildings in the town square are starting to empty, and businesses continue to come and go. Mari realized that what is missing is the third place — the place where the community comes to have a bite to eat and some conversation. The River City Eatery is set to open in July, thanks to Mari's vision of what her town can be. I encourage you to check out Mari's blog at mari2cents.blogspot.com. Mari Harries, Windom graduate, college graduate, restaurateur, mother, wife, daughter, sister, and friend, is using the Internet to help others find what it took her so long to. Mari is exactly the type of leader that students in Windom can look up to, and we are lucky to have her.

"You can be a leader one day." The words still echo for me. As a social studies teacher, I am constantly learning about history. If we fail to look to our past, we cannot understand what awaits us in the future. We can learn so much by looking around at family and community. All of my experiences have shaped the way I approach what I do. The future leaders in our rural communities are the same: the experiences they have today shape the leaders they become tomorrow. An engaging, meaningful, challenging, and innovative education will lay a foundation for these future leaders. As educators, our job is to make sure that when that future comes, we have helped our leaders find the tools they will need to lead. The students of the 21st century are waiting to have their worlds awakened and for that one person to tell them: "You can be a leader one day."