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Bridging Multiple Worlds: The School Superintendent as Change Agent in a Rural and Poor School District

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Public schools in the United States have evolved as one of several institutional agents of the larger culture rather than as locales where local norms and values dominate. In isolated and economically disadvantaged places in Central and Southern Appalachia, however, the school often stands alone in this manner, for the norms of the family, workplace and church may not reinforce those of the school. This essay focuses upon the cultural meaning of schooling in Central Appalachia and deals more specifically with the concept of school leadership and educational change in one West Virginia county school system. In particular, the biography and school improvement strategies of the county school superintendent are highlighted in this discussion. His role as a cultural change agent is particularly elaborated upon in the analysis.

The professional literature on school administration and school leadership has articulated the view that school improvement and school reform are critically dependent upon characteristics of innovative individuals, or "change agents." Educational administration programs today proclaim little interest in preparing building or system "managers," but rather "instructional" or "transformative" leaders who are exhorted to transform the organizational dynamics of public schools toward more effective teaching and learning (e.g., Hallinger, 1992; Miles, 1993; Milstein, 1993).

The knowledge base upon which continuous school improvement tenets are based focuses upon personal behavior of effective leaders and/or group dynamics within the school. Although the delimiting characteristics of (primarily urban) neighborhoods and communities surrounding local schools are sometimes acknowledged, proponents of effective school leadership today exhort future principals and superintendents to overcome such environmental factors—that schools can, in fact, make a difference, despite home and community characteristics of students.

My focus here is on a particularly effective rural school system and its superintendent, KS, whom I characterize as a critical sociocultural "change agent." However, his agency is discussed here in terms of cultural dynamics, rather than strictly organizational terms or those borrowed from effective schools research (e.g., Hallinger, 1992). That is, I am more interested here in the cultural transmission objectives of American schooling, rather than with a discussion of organizational structure and operation. I begin with discussion of Central Appalachia as an American subculture, where the means and ends of schooling have often differed from ones that national figures have championed in the larger culture. I develop and illustrate the critical role of schooling and school leadership in Braxton County, West Virginia, as central to the enculturation of rural students into mainstream American culture there, paying special attention to norms and values of many local residents which are either neutral or oppositional to means and ends of formal schooling.

In particular, I focus upon the county school superintendent as an effective change agent in a region of the country where the meaning and purpose of schooling has often been contested (DeYoung, 1995). The case of KS demonstrates well the intersection of biography and history, which C. Wright Mills suggests in his classic work in historical sociology (1959). KS is a "local boy" whose family suffered the dangers of an extractive economy, yet a person who went away to the university, received an Ed.D., and came back to champion many of the goals and skills he found useful outside of Central Appalachia. His unique biography and the school programs probably only he could have engineered are developed later in this article.

Rural Schools in a Metropolitan Nation

Available research on the cultural dynamics of contemporary rural schools remains surprisingly sparse (DeYoung, 1987), a curious phenomenon considering that 28% of all American schools are still rural, and almost seven million children in the U.S. attend educational institutions in the countryside (Stern, 1994). Moreover, the professional literature has typically portrayed rural schools as inadequate in a nation where public education, industrialization, and

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city growth have gone virtually hand-in-hand. Industrial development and attendant emigration from rural areas and overseas virtually created the American common school movement, since our ancestors were convinced prior to these developments that education was a private, not a public, matter (Katz, 1971; Tyack, 1974). City schools were intended to teach language, literacy, and citizenship skills to the children of foreigners and the indigent, while other private and public institutions more typically provided collateral social activities for children (Cremin, 1977). On the other hand, rural schools historically provided a variety of social and civic services, which were often viewed by local adults as important as strictly pedagogical ones. Rural schools often served as the center of community social life, and teachers were of critical importance as agents of moral and civic virtue (Tyack, 1974; Tyack & Hansot, 1982).

Generalities like much of the above, of course, run a serious risk of oversimplification. It is clear, for instance, that great diversity exists within and between cities; and it is also the case that great diversity exists among rural locales and their schools. Educators in many urban places have undoubtedly dedicated their careers to social uplift and providing moral guidance to their students, and there are many rural schools where teachers and administrators probably perform as little extra duty as possible in their communities.

Even so, the history of rural schools suggests a host of educational issues and difficulties peculiar to their settings. For example, poor and/or isolated rural schools often have difficulty illustrating the importance of advanced years of schooling for employment opportunities when jobs are far removed. Yet a primary focus of contemporary education nationwide is the preparation of students for urban occupational participation and suburban consumptive lifestyles. Robert Dreeben (1968) argues the point well: Public schools today are primarily responsible for instilling, in the personalities of children, the norms of achievement (completing a task well), independence (by oneself), universalism (learning to play roles rather than be viewed as individuals in social circumstances), and specificity (focusing on particular events serially throughout the day). Such norms, he claims, are critical for the success of children in contemporary formal organizations as adults. City schools almost invariably operate near organizations that use such norms in daily operation, and the parents of city children are often likely to have and operate via the same sorts of norms instilled there. While urban schools serving even the most economically disadvantaged children can turn to some nearby private sector industry or organization for social support, because many businesses and civic organizations are within reach, such is not always the case in rural America.

Rural Subcultures and National Teachings

Much of the scant writings on rural schools assume some sort of pedagogical or sociocultural deficiency, particularly so when economic or demographic indicators provide the measuring stick. American schools have historically been dependent either primarily or significantly upon local social and economic capital. In rural areas, this has meant that schools must adapt to declining economies and local population outmigration, so that many of the stories about rural schools revolve around adapting to local economic issues (e.g., DeYoung, 1991; Peshkin, 1982). Often confused with tales of economically strapped rural schools, however, are tales of parental backwardness or the lagging interest of rural communities in our national crusade for school improvement. Historically, for instance, rural opposition to increased school expenditures or to the additional years of schooling extolled by state and national school reformers was castigated by reformers as symbolic of rural parochialism (e.g., Cubberley, 1914; Tyack, 1974). More recently, and particularly in the Deep South and Appalachia, professional educators report a myriad of more serious learning difficulties among rural students than do professionals who work with children from the suburbs, leading reformers to offer various strategies for addressing the "rural school problem" (Council for Educational Development and Research, 1987).

Stories about rural education deficiencies, however, often conceal the fact that schooling is primarily a cultural process rather than a psychological or economic one. This being the case, rural schools and rural communities and how they relate to state and national educational objectives ought to be considered problematic for theoretical reasons, not just administrative or economic ones. Since our public schools arose in conjunction with industrialism and urbanization, we might suspect that American subcultures unaffected at the local level by such factors might respond differently to public education initiatives. Such a perspective has in fact been suggested by various rural education researchers during the past two decades (Gjelton, 1982; Peshkin, 1978). Peshkin's seminal work on an agricultural-based school district in southern Illinois, for example, documented how a local school board kept at bay various potentially innovative initiatives of state and federal schooling forces via the selection of a superintendent with local, rather than national, educational perspectives.

Peshkin's research only partly reflects rural education issues today, however. At least three other types of rural districts continue to exist in the U.S., and they typically have different kinds of sociocultural characteristics as do the sorts in Peshkin's research. Some rural districts lie close to growing metro areas. Such places are likely to have communities increasingly similar to those of the suburbs, as metro employment opportunities and important cultural

change issues affect formerly rural communities in not always beneficial ways (DeYoung & Lawrence, 1995; Reck, Reck, & Keefe, 1986). The two other types of rural communities remain distinctive: those whose fortunes continue to decline along with their dwindling agricultural or mining economic base, and those that have historically remained isolated and far removed from the transportation and information centers of the national culture (Gjelten, 1982). In such places, the cultural transmission task of the school is more socially significant, but at the same time, more fiscally difficult. The roles of professional educators remain particularly critical in such circumstances, since there are often few stable public or private institutions to support the work of the school. Unfortunately, poor local economies typically equate to a tax base inadequate for strong local support of schools. This makes poor and rural school systems particularly dependent upon state and federal income sources, and to accountability measures that may constrict innovative practices found in more affluent systems. Below, I will focus on just an isolated, yet economically disadvantaged, rural school system and the superintendent who leads it.

Isolated and Depressed Rural Communities in Appalachia

Although isolation and economic depression are obviously relative terms, both of these adjectives have been used to describe portions of rural Appalachia for almost a century. The upland south historically had few plantations, few slaves, and little tenant farming. Neither did commercial farming and agribusiness ever gain prominence in the mountains, since there was little expanse of flat land or adequate transportation systems to move agricultural products out of the region (Billings, 1988).

Appalachia was never more than a satellite of modern American industry. The region was drawn into the sphere of national industrial development in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but it was primarily tapped for its natural resources, which were harvested locally but sent to the Northeast and Midwest for manufacture (Eller, 1982; Lewis, Johnson, & Askins, 1978). Major industries in lumber, oil and gas, and coal developed, but jobs created in these industries were primarily labor intensive and low wage. And, as in most boom-and-bust natural resource economies, the mid-20th century legacy of industrialization here has been poverty and environmental degradation (Gaventa, 1980). In fact, the poverty and unemployment associated with isolation and lack of economic possibilities in Appalachia were a primary impetus of the 1960 War on Poverty Programs of the 1960s and 1970s and led to (or reinforced) major federal level "social engineering" programs like the Appalachian Regional Commission (Whisnant, 1980).

Isolated by several different mountain ranges and dependent upon subsistence and barter economies, pioneers on the Appalachian frontier developed a social organization of production by the mid-19th century that depended upon a strong kinship system and small community stability (Eller, 1982). Regional social scientists earlier this century posited that an Appalachian "subculture" persisted into the mid-20th century, and that a number of personal values and traditions to be found within isolated mountain communities approximated an earlier agrarian era. Ergood and Kuhre (1991) summarized several decades of scholarship upon this topic:

> [W]e find the mountain people described as independent, kin-involved people whose lives are closely bound to their physical environment, whose activities are traditional, and whose beliefs are both fatalistic and religiously fundamentalist. This description has slowly emerged and expanded from the earliest attempts by social scientists to the most recent. (p. 47)

Rural sociologists Schwarzeller and Brown (1960) agree that rural Appalachia is dominated by familism, traditionalism, and puritanism, but they more pointedly articulate the key differences between Appalachian subculture(s) and "the great society." In the national culture, Schwarzeller and Brown assert, work organizations and the church are typical participatory institutions which model social roles and institutional norms similar to those detailed by Dreeben earlier (1968). In much of rural Appalachia, however, family remains a more important institution than school or occupational groups:

> [F]ormal organizations occupy a very small part of the social life in [Appalachian] communities, and any change-promoting program, such as offered by the Extension Service [of the USDA], has a difficult, almost impossible, task of implementing that program if it relies only on communication through formal organizations. (Schwarzeller & Brown, 1960, 360-361)

In terms of employment, extractive and seasonal work are often all that is available in rural Appalachia, and they involve no rules or norms beyond physical endurance. Schwarzeller and Brown contend that it is primarily the few out-migrants returning home for a visit who display the norms of individuals engaged in careers, but these individuals return to work in the cities and are thus not present to sufficiently reinforce the national cultural norms that Schwarzeller and Brown view as positive. In their place remain more "traditional" norms: patterns of economic and political life little changed since earlier in the century when

allegiances between families and political parties were first made and continue into the present, where male dominance in family and community matters remains strong, and where "career choices" seem more relevant to city livers, not those in the mountains.

In fact, then, the norms that Schwarzeller and Brown (1960) describe as characteristic of mountain life and work even today closely resemble those that Dreeben argues are oppositional to the norms required for participation in modern America institutions. Ascription, dependence, particularism, and diffuseness remain powerful in the adult occupational world of many mountain communities, partly because the sorts of institutions that operate in the city are often hard to find in the mountains.

The norms taught by independent mountain churches often differ, too, from those of more modern and bureaucratic churches in the larger society. According to Schwarzeller and Brown (1960):

> The dominant mountain religious traditions emphasize congregational autonomy, which weakens ties with the outside and reinforces the localistic orientation common to much of the region's institutional structure. Furthermore, the general religious orientation strongly emphasizes direct personal relationships between the individual and his God to such an extent that great social pressure is put upon each individual to establish such a relationship. This stress, coupled with the low educational levels always characteristic of the region, has tended to make (Appalachian) religion more emotional, more fundamentalistic, more personal, and more familistic than the Great Society's religion. (pp. 362-363)

Without the (alleged) benefit of stable white collar employment, controlled by families tied to traditional politics, opposed to public expense due to declining economies, suspicious of "do-gooder" programs sponsored by outside formal organizations, and without the civic infrastructure of more metropolitan places, schools have virtually by default become the single best source of change in the mountains because, according to Schwarzeller and Brown, they are the only institutions to model and operate by the norms of metropolitan America. In Appalachia, they claim, the late 20th-century public school is the primary cultural bridge between regional subcultures and the national culture. Unlike other formal institutions which either do not exist in the mountains or whose impact can be minimized by local communities, public schools are local sites of the national culture and are pervasive in the lives of both children and families. Schools, Schwarzeller and Brown argue, are typically staffed by teachers from local families, but who are trained by academics from outside the region; offer courses dealing with the national culture and the subjects instrumental to working there; reward on-the-job performance by evaluation rather than patronage; and operate in a rational and efficient manner as they are subject to state and federal guidelines and funding imperatives.

Researching Educational Dynamics in Braxton County, West Virginia

Schwarzeller and Brown could well have identified and illustrated many of their cultural dilemmas and possibilities of central Appalachia with reference to Braxton County and its schools. Here were communities where norms of familism, religious conservatism, and suspicion of outsiders were clearly present. The role models Schwarzeller and Brown would have viewed as positive for Braxton students to observe in the county's primary communities were in little evidence, for between 1940 and 1980 almost half of Braxton's population of roughly 21,000 had out-migrated to northern and midwestern industrial states. During this era the timber, oil and gas, agriculture, and coal industries had either played-out or become noncompetitive. Remaining were significant numbers of families dependent upon various sorts of retirement, disability, or welfare payments. Braxton did have thriving working and technical classes of residents several generations ago when a major train repair and switching yard existed here. Many of the children and grandchildren of these workers currently work in the county school system.

I performed several studies for different agencies in Braxton County between 1988 and 1993 where I witnessed community dynamics, which display many of the cultural contradictions and issues involving rural schools, their local communities, and state and national reform mandates. My first analysis involved trying to explain a substantial high school dropout rate. I employed a variety of qualitative methods in my several studies, including participant observation, document analysis, oral histories, and unstructured interviews (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Merriam, 1988; Stake, 1978). As in later research, what I called the "battle of the high school" illustrated the mixed cultural expectations of teachers and parents in the county which were similar to those predicted by Schwarzeller and Brown (1960).

How teachers and school leaders negotiated within the county provided critical insight into the normative differences between professionals and locals at a county middle school was a later undertaking of mine. In one essay, I detailed the socialization efforts of county teachers as they developed and operationalized teaching aims and objectives within rural and isolated schooling contexts (DeYoung, 1995). A critical feature for many middle level teachers involved definitions and teaching strategies understood by them as "compensatory." Most believed that

Braxton County children were isolated and culturally disadvantaged, and great energy was put into programs and teachings designed to compensate for such disadvantages.

Where Biography Meets History

Throughout each of my studies, the active presence of the county school superintendent remained visible. KS, superintendent of Braxton County Schools, developed a statewide reputation as an effective and innovative school leader throughout the 1980s, while at the same time being seen as an important local civic leader. KS believed neither in the "security in the mountains," in the manual skill expectations of poor and rural parents for their children, nor in the good will of teachers for inspiring students to be "successful," graduate, and go on to postsecondary educational opportunities.

The biography of KS suggested both the reason why he currently remains the longest-sitting school superintendent in the state, while at the same time pursuing national academic expectations for students in his district even without the aid of significant local popular support. His ancestors were tenant farmers, miners, and railroad workers. All of his siblings out-migrated for work or marriage; several relatives were injured, disabled or killed in the mining industry; and most have been out of work either in the city or in the country during the past 4 decades. Thus, he is a local boy who made good in the same environment of his neighbors.

KS's grandfather's family came into West Virginia from the south to tenant farm in the mid-19th century. His grandmother's family was already there, working a 48 acre hillside farm with no bottom land. In the early 20th century, however, "opportunities" in the local mines became available. KS's grandfather's fate in the mines was explained to him by his father years later:

KS My dad says that when he was about 10 or 12 years old (circa 1914), his father was working in the coal mines and got crushed by a rock fall. They dragged him out of the coal mines and brought him home and he was bleeding and broken up, bleeding out of the eyes and ears and nose and mouth, gurgling blood, unconscious—and they didn't have any hospitals in those days. A doctor came from someplace later on that night or the next day and put him in a cast from his neck to his toes and he stayed in that cast for 6 months because his hips and legs were crushed. So, obviously when he got out of that cast—they didn't know about physical therapy in those days—he never walked again.

Compared to his grandfather, KS's father had a better, yet still difficult, life:

KS [My dad] started to work for the railroad when he was 20, probably in 1921, which was a boom period. They laid rails and repaired the track by hand with spikes and took crossties out and did that. That's how everyone started. But he was strong and he and another guy could pick up a rail, a full length rail and carry it a few steps. (I don't know how long they were, 30 or 35 feet, and one of them would weigh something like between 900-1000 pounds.) But anyway, he went from that to the work train, which was a maintenance-type train and he was a "ditcher" (what they called an engineer). They used the word engineer loosely. They would call that a ditcher operator nowadays. But he was a ditcher engineer. . . .

He got married after the depression, but he was working and probably supporting his mom and dad during that period of time. And he also took in a sister and supported her and her two kids. She had married at the age of 16 and a ran off with the mailman. She had two pretty little girls, beautiful girls—and then that winter or the winter thereafter [her husband] got sick and died. Of course, that was quite common even though being a young man he died. So my dad took a sled over to Crooked Fork and got them to his house and raised them.

A legacy of working as a railroad engineer in Central West Virginia those days was that much of one's work occurred far from home. And leaving home for extended periods of time was often risky for women and children left behind:

KS [Dad] was married in 1935. The first boy was born in 1936 and then a second in 1937, then there was a first girl in 1939 and a second in 1940. . . . There was a huge flood over there in 1941 which came up real close to the house that we were living in. . . . During that flood my dad was on the train in Cowden and then he was extremely busy because the flood was of a general nature and there was a lot of work to be done and him working on the work train and they were having to clean out bridges and repair track and do the maintenance along the railroad that needed to be done after a flood. But my oldest brother (of course, I wasn't born at the time) was apparently out in the flood waters or in the aftermath of that

flood and picked up some kind of virus or germ. I don't know whether it was typhoid or what it was and he got sick and died. That would have been in the Spring of 1941. But my dad couldn't get home because the bridges were all washed out. I think that that event probably weighed very heavy on him and he wanted to maybe get back home. After that time he started working more and more away because at that time the railroads were in other areas.

KS's father earned comparatively good money as an engineer. So, he decided to put most of his savings from his railroad job into farmland and quit the railroad, which was taking him further and further away.

KS [By] 1945, he had bought the ground that was in front of the houses—the bottoms that he had actually lived on and was born on. He was able to buy those, so he thought that he had him a farm that he could make a living on in 1945. The war was about over and there was a lot of interest in agriculture and that was the thing to do. Cattle prices were high, demand for beef was up. . . . We moved up into the hollow, the old home place. This was the Petry place, the 48 acres. He bought that place from my uncle, my great uncle who was Denny Petry . . . but my dad bought the old home place from him. That was where he was born and raised, but he sold it to my dad because he and my dad were pretty close to the same age and were friends.

Although KS's father had hoped that agriculture would provide the sort of economic stability that neither he nor his father had had, this hope proved illusionary. And once again he found himself working far from home for even less money than he made a decade earlier as an engineer. He became, in other words, one of the famous outmigration statistics used in demographic descriptions of Appalachia in the 1950s, in much the same way that his grandfather's accident had been used to tell the story of Appalachia in the 1910s and 1920s.

KS [T]he farming probably went well until the recession of 1950, and then the bottom went out of everything. That was the hard time probably. At any rate, he would go to Ohio [to work]. He couldn't sell enough eggs or beef to keep things going, so that was the lure to Ohio. So he, like everyone else, went to Ohio to work. Jobs were plentiful. He got a job in a rubber factory—Polson Rubber Factory— in Youngstown. But you see, his older sister had married a guy that already lived up there and they had a big family, so he just went up and moved in with them. So that was the lure for him to go up there. He would have close contact with that family over the years because see, our house was kind of like a homing place for everyone that would come on vacations there, they would come in the summer, kids would spend time there. But at any rate, after my dad went up there he would come home about every weekend with my first cousin.

With regard to KS's later zeal for improving educational opportunities and outcomes in Braxton County, the fate of his brother and what the local educational system failed to provide for him is perhaps critical. The brother first became a dropout statistic from his local high school and later became a black-lung victim:

KS But [they both] got laid off in 1953. My brother had [also] quit school and gone up there to work in a basket factory. So when the real recession hit Ohio in the mid-1950s, they all came back to the hollow. That is when my dad and my brother both started working in the coal mines down on Cedar Creek, on down the road. The first job my dad had in the coal mines was driving a mule transporting the coal in and out of the mines. Well, that mine finally played out. My brother then went with an outfit on down at Bower. I don't remember whether he ran machinery down there or not, I really don't think that he did because he often said that he did the damage to his lungs at Bower because there was no ventilation in the coal mines. But that would have been around 1956. [Later], my dad went to Buchannon to the Redstone Coal Company and started loading coal by hand, a dollar a ton. He worked there until he got laid off. He was working there probably when I was about 14 or 15. I would go up there with him the summer time and stay with him for a while. [It] was not uncommon for him to make $20 a day, when in 1944 on the day I was born he was making $2.60 an hour and getting 12 hours of work a day.

The rewards for a life of hard work were few in the 1960s for a man who worked his whole life in dangerous and difficult jobs. KS's father could find no more local work in the mines, and, by this time, he was too old to travel weekly in search of other work outside of the state:

KS But he got laid off at the Redstone and came back to the farm. That would have been the summer of 1960. We were putting up hay, hoeing corn,

and cutting and doing pretty good at farming for the land we had there, and he had a heart attack. It was late in the summer, probably August. He got numb on his left side. And 3-4 days later when he saw he wasn't going to get any better, he went to the doctor and the doctor told him he had a heart attack and told him to go home and not do anything. Well, he knew that that wasn't possible because, in those days, to get disability and social security you had to be about half dead. They said you had to have one foot in the grave is the way they described it. He [went] to see a social security doctor and darned near had a heart attack getting up the steps of the courthouse. It took about a year, but finally he was ruled eligible and he got back pay for that. He used part of that money and bought a tractor—paid $550 for a 1947 Ford Ferguson tractor. See, because that was the big problem: He couldn't work the horses because that takes a lot of energy, trying to plow with a horse. I had done a lot of plowing and I could use the horses some too but I wasn't adept at it. The tractor, though, opened things up. He figured he could farm with that tractor in the condition he was in and still maintain the farm and keep it clean and that sort of thing. And, of course, I could use it too and it would speed things up a lot. That was the salvation, he was able to get social security. People told him he ought to go to welfare but he wouldn't go to public assistance. So, in a way it is kind of a tragedy, but it had a good ending. He was lucky enough to get his social security so he was able to live the rest of his life out fairly comfortably, you know and didn't have to die in poverty or lose his land and that sort of thing.

A Local Boy Striving for National Goals

When I first met KS, he chewed tobacco and liked to spit in a plastic cup. Much of what I learned early about his county and his schools occurred between spits into this receptacle which he kept on the door of his 1979 Pontiac station wagon. He was proud of all his cars: he talked often about how he rebuilt one car or another—including the Pontiac—during the past several years. But he had many other cars to work on as well. He informed me once (after I had erred in enumerating his vehicles in print) that he had at that time 13 automobiles, trucks, or tractors currently licensed. He lived in town above one of the old high schools, but he also owned and farmed the land that once his mother's family had only been able to rent. Planting and later harvesting his potato crop was often a topic of our conversations. We often began our interviews with reference to the weather and its implications for working on the farm that day. KS was also an avid stock car enthusiast, traveling to the Charlotte Speedway every summer for the races.

Braxton County's school superintendent was a local, then, and would-be critics of his educational philosophy or tactics had to contend with the fact that he was not an outsider; that his family had suffered through all the misfortunes common in a place with a boom-and-bust economy; that he didn't mind at all getting his hands dirty; and that he knew as much about farming, mining, and machinery as any farmer, miner, or mechanic in the county. The fact that he also held an Ed.D. in vocational education and school administration didn't seem to disqualify him from being perceived as a Braxton native, and I never heard him have to explain what a Doctor of Education was anyway. KS seemed to command a certain air of respect and trust wherever he went.

This was not to suggest, however, that most local citizens understood or valued his instructional aims. County residents appeared generally satisfied with him and the county board of education because it always made its payroll, almost never raised local property taxes for school improvement, and had never been charged by the state for corruption or improper fiscal dealings—phenomena very visible in several contiguous counties. Making the payroll was important, of course, for the school system remains the largest employer in the county. Keeping local taxes low was and remains also important in Braxton, for most residents (and voters in school board elections) live on fixed and/or seasonal incomes. KS, upon whom the board depended for sound fiscal decisions, was appreciated for being able to use state monies to operate most programs.

KS was himself a graduate of the local school system, and his belief remains that student academic performance itself is only marginally important in the eyes of most local parents. He also believes that such modest expectations for student learning have been transferred to many county school teachers and administrators. In his case, he claimed that it was primarily the expectations of his high school vocational teacher that were responsible for his later success, and he remained bitter about the experience of his brother, who without such a champion, dropped out of school primarily because he was shy and uncomfortable in the presence of less than enthusiastic teachers.

Dilemmas of Education at the Secondary School Level

My first study in Braxton involved a struggle to redefine the mission and purpose of the county high school (DeYoung, 1991). To oversimplify the story, the state department of education was alarmed with the school's high dropout rate (approximately 28%). Earlier in the county's history, the norm for school completion had been 8th grade, especially for rural and poor students. Without a strong lo-

cal demand for educated labor, community pressure for universal high school completion remained minimal. Meanwhile, teachers and administrators at the high school were satisfied to teach in more traditional ways to those interested in being in school. Dropouts were accepted, if not encouraged.

In an important way, this struggle at the high school involved an impasse between local values de-emphasizing advanced schooling and classroom teachers powerful enough to resist state mandates and the will of the state education department and the county superintendent. The struggle eventually turned in the superintendent's favor as he first used central office staff to help perform performance evaluations on high school staff. These evaluations included student classroom performance rates as important criteria, thus lowering marks of many teachers whose primary claims were subject oriented instead of student oriented. In addition, a new outcomes-based and more student-oriented principal was hired at the high school in 1991. In subsequent years the district adopted career days, shadowing programs, and college awareness programs, which involved transporting students throughout the state to view postsecondary opportunities for high school graduates. By 1993 the county high school dropout rate had declined to single digits—a significant turnaround for rural West Virginia.

The high school vocational director, RW, suggests why academic instructors at the high school had a more difficult time convincing students to think of college than is likely the case in contemporary suburban America. Still, KS had used just this route via vocational education to become one of the most important and powerful professionals in the county. Thus, the vocational programs in Braxton are viewed not as a dumping ground for low achievers, but as at least one final place where vocational or academic futures can be begun despite difficult odds:

AD [The county superintendent] once told me that over 90% of the kids in the high school took vocational classes.

RW They almost all do. Now that's not as noble as it sounds. That's because sometimes there is nothing else to fill out their schedule. But to have a saleable skill is a value to most of our families here. In vocational section, we have almost no problems with parents. None. They love what we do, because that fits their norm. A boy is learning carpentry. He's learning to weld. Now understand that I said, a *boy*. If you walk up and down the hall you don't see too many girls in our classes. We do our best. We have a few boys in home ec. And we have an occasional tough girl that takes welding or something. So our parents can relate to what we're doing: We're teaching skills. And they like that. And they love to see their daughters going through our secretarial branch. That all fits very well. So we have almost no parental problems whatsoever to worry with, where in academia they just have problem after problem. Because of the parents.

AD In the academic wing [of the high school]?

RW Right. In the academic wing. Because it's much more difficult for their parents to relate to the need for academic skills as far as there is to earn a living, because most of them don't have them either. We have sort of a trap in this area geographically. Because I have so many young ladies and young married people and young adults up in these hollows that have great skills as far as working IBM typewriters and word processors and those types of things. But for what? Where are they going to go. You can't go to Charleston or Clarksburg for minimum wage. What are you going to do? Then, plus the fact that most Appalachians are not mobile anyway. They want to live here. They want to stay here. There is sort of a security in the mountains.

School Leadership and Elementary Reading Emphases

Although KS values vocational education and skilled labor training, his belief also remains that early reading instruction is critical for student success, that spending more money on early literacy programs across the board is critical for later student learning, and that statewide test score gains in school districts with high percentages of needy children can be most dramatic if at-risk student scores were specifically targeted for systematic improvement. In the case of Braxton County, it was locally acknowledged in my interviews that some of the monies targeted for special needs children also benefited early reading programs for other students in the system, a possibility which fueled the suspicion in the state legislature that perhaps more special needs children were being identified than actually existed. After all, how could the elementary reading scores remain so high—among the top 5 in the state's 55 counties—in a place of such disadvantage? The original research project which brought me to the county in 1989 came about partly because Braxton County had developed a reputation for being educationally and fiscally excellent even though the county was rural and poor (DeYoung, 1991). Approximately two thirds of all students in the county, almost all white, received either free or reduced-price lunches.

In my view, systematically targeting improved literacy skills of elementary school children illustrated a cultural

change strategy rather than simply one of effective pedagogy. Although the study of elementary academic instruction was never my specific research focus, this effort permeated instructional strategies of the entire system, and it was acknowledged and designed by its implementers as an effort to replace or supplement academic parenting skills of many parents who themselves were without reading abilities and/or interests. In the early 1990s, the district also began to identify and instruct low income four-year-olds along much the same rationale. Importantly, demand for effective elementary instruction was rarely a discussed topic at the local school board meetings or among local parents. It was in fact a commitment by the central office and considered part of a comprehensive educational strategy primarily in the mind of the county superintendent.

Middle School Consolidation as Cultural Change Strategy

School consolidation was the issue that drew me back to Braxton in the early 1990s. In my judgment, the closing of small community schools under the guise that they sometimes cannot provide either the cost effectiveness or the breadth of curricular offerings of larger schools provides an excellent opportunity to look at the actual and symbolic abandonment of ascriptive, dependent, particularistic, and diffuse norms for the sake of their "modern" parallels in rural America.

In the early 1990s, the state of West Virginia issued bonds for school renovation and construction in which significant economies of scale might be accomplished. KS, a former colleague of the director of the new School Building Authority (SBA), learned quickly about how the funding would work and how plans would be evaluated and awarded. Without enough local or state money to renovate the three old middle schools in the county (which once were high schools until consolidated in 1969), KS convinced his board that successfully competing for SBA funds would solve many of their fiscal problems in operating three old buildings with too many teachers. He simultaneously suggested that the chances of actually winning the competition would be minimal (although I judged that his status as an insider to the process was significant).

In addition to providing a possible solution to fiscal and staffing problems of the district, the superintendent also believed that a consolidated middle school would solve many of the cultural or pedagogical issues he faced in transforming the school system into one where more students would graduate and go on to college. In his view, several communities in the county had declined to the point where adults could no longer provide the sorts of "social capital" necessary to convince local middle schoolers to aggressively pursue their secondary schooling possibilities. School consolidation would help middle schoolers be more successful in the high school, he argued, because the transition from a sheltered middle school experience would be less traumatic for students if they were bussed to a central location at grade five than at grade eight. He was particularly concerned about what he perceived as the declining possibilities for educating students at the middle school that was the site of my own fieldwork (DeYoung, 1995). He phrased the issue and his concerns in this fashion:

> KS [Little Kanawha] had the most to gain [from consolidation] because there weren't sufficient students there to have a good educational program. Then there was probably an opportunity for the emergence of some groups that caused kids to develop attitudes to drop out of school. They are probably more prevalent in that school and it was an opportunity to overcome that. The public doesn't think about those issues, but that was present. So we're hoping that we've done more for [those] kids. I'm not saying that we helped stimulate their community and that sort of thing, but that's not our mission anyway. Our mission is to deal with the kids and get them through high school and give them a good education. And if they want to stay here, fine, and if they want to go somewhere else, that's okay too. But we can't concern ourselves with keeping the school in a community for the sake of the adults.

As the above passage suggests, Braxton County received state monies to consolidate its three middle schools into one. The biggest concern of parents—and one that helped to assuage the opinions of most in the affected communities—involved the sufficiency and importance of new athletic teams which came into being with the consolidation. KS was not surprised but could not refrain from commenting that it was amazing how many parents asked him about athletic programs for the new school, but virtually nothing about the instructional program which teachers spent almost a year considering and putting into place during the transition.

The new middle school was delivered almost exactly as promised, which had not been the case in the earlier high school consolidation. Both boys and girls athletic teams fared very well in regional competitions, which also eased the transition from three community middle schools to the new consolidated high school. The governor of the state, who campaigned as a friend of education and was behind the SBA effort from the start, routinely brought dignitaries and officials from throughout the state to see how education could be improved via his programs.

Conclusion: KS as a Cultural Change Agent

KS continued to bring innovative programs to Braxton County, and gained further commendations as an effective educator. Clearly a product of a declining and isolated rural county, but with an eye to the national possibilities of schooling, his agency was critical during the years I spent there in helping to transform his school system - without significant local popular demand. In the years of my research in Braxton County, new programs and incentives for significant school success were often attributable to the goals and strategies of the superintendent. Many, of course, were either borrowed from other places or read about in the professional literature. KS was a big fan of the effective schools movement, and sent many principals and teachers to the statewide summer academies where the tenets of this movement were taught. Graduation ceremonies and student awards days were held throughout the county during the year, consistent with studies that at-risk students needed such events for academic performances not rewarded at home.

Most recently, Braxton schools were up-and-running ahead of most other districts with computers, and KS is fully cognizant of the networking capabilities that the state of West Virginia is currently providing. At the same time, the school system applied for and received authorization to be a federal Medicaid provider for the county, the first in the nation to be so entitled. The superintendent believes that early intervention for at-risk children is critical for the success they will have later in school.

By 1993, his local prowess as well as his statewide reputation had become significant. In June, the superintendent was honored as county Citizen of the Year even as he presided at an alumni banquet where he announced the sale of the middle school building where he himself had graduated 3 decades earlier. Two weeks later, the West Virginia Association of School Administrators proclaimed KS as the State Superintendent of the Year.

KS, as well as many of his staff, illustrated a number of schooling dynamics and cultural change possibilities in Appalachia during the 1980s and 1990s that Schwarzeller and Brown (1960) had conceptualized and predicted several decades ago. As a cultural change agent, his agency in Braxton County was clear. His philosophy of schooling, which in many ways he has been able to operationalize, suggests the cultural significance of schooling in compelling ways. I conclude with a written statement he gave me upon reading a defense of Appalachian "otherness" with which he seriously disagreed. As a local with extensive exposure to both the traditions and hardships of Appalachia, as well as a witness to the world which an advanced education has the possibility to open up, he has been as effective an agent of change—rightly or wrongly—for some time:

> A school system must always try to lift hopes and dreams and raise the level of expectation of persons who are in a nonproductive mode and content with the present. Schools provide the path to new horizons and new ways of viewing [one's] surroundings. Appalachians are prone to accept their circumstances as inevitable and think they have no control over events and the future. Such a fatalistic attitude pervades many communities and families and creates dysfunctional units in modern society. Education is the catalyst or the empowering elixir that allows options to be available to the "good old boy" that can free him of caretakers and transfer payments.

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