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Rural Roots

News, Information, and Commentary from the Rural School and Community Trust

Rural Youth Take Action on School Funding and Facilities in Ohio

By Elaina Loveland

It's not often that youth take on policy issues with passion. But in rural Ohio, they are doing just that—and they are making a difference.

The hot issues? Equity in school funding and improving school facilities.

In partnership with the Rural Action, a regional organization dedicated to social, economic and environmental justice in the state's Appalachian counties, students across the state have become active in the struggle to change state policy on school funding and improve school facilities. Rural Action's Rural School and Community Organizing Project helps citizens learn about funding and facilities issue, develop priorities about what they want for their schools, and create a plan for action.

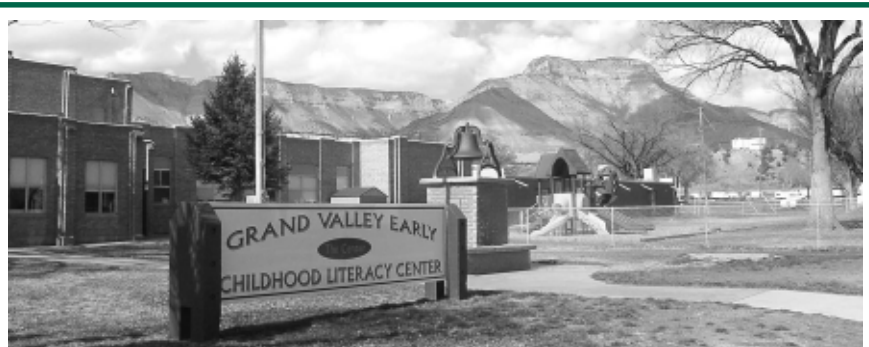
Youth and School Facilities: The Camera Project

Students at Warren High School in Vincent, Ohio, and Federal Hocking High School in Steward, Ohio, are involved in the Camera Project, the latest Rural School and Community Organizing Project initiative involving youth in

local and state policy. The Camera Project, which began in October 2001, enables students to educate local citizens on the issue of school finance and the

corresponding poor condition of school facilities.

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Transformation complete: The new Grand Valley Early Childhood Literacy Center, formerly the Grand Valley High School. Photo by Sandy Hanson.

An Old School Is Given New Life

By Sandy Hanson

With the passage of a \$14.45 million bond issue in 2000 a small school district on the western slope of Colorado was left with the task of deciding what to do with an empty and aging building. The bond issue allowed

Garfield County School District No. 16 in Parachute, Colorado to build its first campus designed solely for high school students.

With the old Grand Valley High School vacated administrators turned

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School facilities in Ohio were rated among the nation's worst in a 1996 report by the U.S. General Accounting Office and things have been slow to improve. Ohio has initiated a plan to spend more than \$23 billion in local and state funds on new school construction and renovation over the next decade. Many activists in Ohio believe that citizens should be involved in making recommendations for improvements in school facilities and students, with the help of the Rural School and Community Organizing Project, play a major role in educating Ohio residents.

The Camera Project includes youth in grades three through twelve who have been taking photographs with digital cameras at their schools to document what they like and dislike about their school facilities. After analyzing the photographs and deciding what most needed to be changed, students created PowerPoint presentations on computers. Students are now conducting presentations to local community groups on an ongoing basis to educate residents about the importance of having good school facilities to educate their young people. This is especially important in Ohio because of the ongoing crisis in school funding and the number of school buildings in poor condition.

"These presentations give students a sense of pride and power in their school. It says to students, this is your chance to speak up about what's important to you," says Amy Lipka, school and community concerns organizer at Rural Action. To help educate local citizens about school funding and facilities issues, students and Rural Action staff distribute publications such as the *Little Red Schoolbook*, a publication that discusses how schools are funded in Ohio.

As a result of the photographs and presentations, some schools see improvements in their facilities. Lipka remembers one elementary school where the

drains in the girls' restrooms were broken. All the spigots in the restrooms were changed the following year. At Warren High School, a parking lot was repaved.

Eric Shea, a senior, participated in the Camera Project at Warren High School in an Advanced Placement photography class last year. "The students took this project seriously and believed that their actions would affect the school. After the project, the school did indeed receive minor renovations," he says. "The students believe that they have made a difference, and the students at our school jumped at the opportunity to make a difference and affect the community around them."

Shea offers this advice for activists and educators seeking to involve youth in policy initiatives:

"The key to getting students involved is by giving them a means and giving them hope that they will make a difference in the future."

School Funding Equity: Youth and the DeRolph Case

Youth involvement with Ohio Rural Action does not stop with getting community members involved in the struggle to improve school facilities. This spring, students will attend a rally in conjunction with Ohio Rural Action's Rural School and Community Organizing Project and the Ohio Fair Schools Campaign, a coalition of Ohio organizations working toward a solution to the state's school funding crisis. Students will visit the state capital with adults to get the attention of the state legislature on the issue of inequity in school funding practices.

The struggle for equity in school funding has been a longtime effort in the state. In 1991, Dale DeRolph filed suit against Ohio on behalf of his son, Nathan, a high school student in Perry County. The school system, like many

Students participating in the Camera Project took photos of what they liked and didn't like about their school facilities. Pictured at left are a glass walkway students like; a leaky sink needing repair, deteriorated pipes in a school restroom; and a pond, a positive part of their school.

others, had dilapidated buildings and a deficient educational program. *DeRolph vs. State of Ohio* came to a head in 1997 when the Ohio Supreme Court decided that school funding in Ohio was inequitable based on the state's heavy dependence on local property taxes for funds. The court ruled again in 2000 that the school funding violated the state's constitution and was inequitable. For the third time in December 2002, the Ohio Supreme Court deemed school funding in the state unconstitutional in the *DeRolph case*. The fourth and final ruling on the case in January 2003 upheld the earlier decisions that the school funding system in Ohio to be unconstitutional. In that ruling, the Ohio Supreme Court charged Governor Bob Taft and state legislators with resolving the state's school funding system without a clear deadline. Though the *DeRolph* saga is over, the problem with equitable school funding in the state remains unresolved and school funding dilemma seems to have reached its peak.

"There is a horrible budget crisis in Ohio," explains Debbie Phillips, project coordinator for Ohio Rural Action's Rural School and Community Organizing Project. "A certain portion of the legislature won't raise taxes, period. And there is a projected four billion dollar deficit for next year."

Phillips says 900 students and 300 adults attended the last rally they organized in May 2001 at the Ohio Statehouse. This year the event will be held May 15 and Phillips hopes it will be even more successful. "We want to make sure there is some kind of pressure on legislators that school funding is important and keep the issue on the front burner," says Phillips.

At least the same number of students are expected to attend this year's rally, if not more. In preparation for the event, some high school teachers use a curriculum handbook on the *DeRolph* case prepared by the Appalachian Initiative for School Funding, the Ohio Rural Action's Rural School and Community Organizing Project.

The Ohio Fair Schools campaign is sponsoring an essay contest for students in grades 7–12 on school finance issues in Ohio. Students have the option of writing on why public education is a fun-

damental right, what makes a quality education, what makes Ohio's system of funding schools unconstitutional or what the *DeRolph* decision means to them. Three students will be selected to read their essays at the upcoming rally. The winning authors will also receive a \$250 scholarship as an honorarium.

"The purpose of this essay contest is to provide a way for student voices to be heard in the debate about school funding in Ohio," says Phillips.

Certainly, improving the school funding system in Ohio has a long way to go, but with the support of Rural School and Community Organizing Project, the Ohio Fair Schools Campaign, activists, educators, and students, the possibility for positive change looks bright. Engaging youth in the struggle can only strengthen the cause. After all, what could be a more powerful force in championing policy reform than listening to the voices of tomorrow?

ResourceCenter

BOOKS AND REPORTS

Adding it Up: Taking Stock of Efforts to Improve State-Level Youth Policies, Thaddeus Ferber and Karen Pittman, The Forum for Youth Investment, 2001. Available online at www.forumforyouthinvestment.org/fyi/addingitup.pdf.

Digital Cameras in the Classroom by Mary Ploski Seamon and Eric J. Levitt, Linworth Publishing, 2003.

Equity and Adequacy in Education Finance: Issues and Perspectives, National Academies Press, 1999.

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Ohio's Education Matters from the KnowledgeWorks Foundation, 2003. The report can be found online at www.kwfdn.org.

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State Youth Policy: Helping All Youth to Grow Up Fully Prepared and Fully Engaged by Thaddeus Ferber and Karen Pittman, The Forum for Youth Investment, 2002. Available online at www.forumforyouthinvestment.com/papers/stateyouthpolicy.pdf.

Youth Acts, Community Impacts: Stories of Youth Engagement with Real Results by Joel Tolman and Karen Pittman, The Forum for Youth Investment, 2001. Available online at www.forumforyouthinvestment.org/cyseriesyouthacts.pdf.

WEB SITES

Youth Participation

American Youth Policy Forum: www.aypf.org

At the Table: www.atthetable.org

The Forum for Youth Investment: www.forumforyouthinvestment.org

What Kids Can Do: www.whatkidscando.org

Youth Action Net: www.youthactionnet.org

Ohio Funding and Facilities Issues

Ohio Fair Schools Campaign: www.ohiofairschools.org

KnowledgeWorks Foundation: www.kwfdn.org

Rural Action: www.ruralaction.org