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Small towns' pride in schools bolsters students' academic performance

Students' perception of community pride in their school is a significant indicator of academic achievement in Missouri rural high schools, according to a University of Missouri-Columbia study.

"In looking at differences between schools, we found students' perceptions of whether or not their community was proud of the school outweighed other factors and had a greater effect on average test scores than socioeconomic status or school resources," said Michael Seipel, rural sociology research associate

The study evaluated average scores on the standardized Missouri Mastery Achievement Test for tenth graders in 240 Missouri rural high schools. It then zeroed in on four school districts. In two of the four, tenth graders placed in the top quarter of average test scores. In the other two districts, tenth graders placed in the bottom quarter. The districts' student populations ranged from about 600 to 1,500.

Two of the districts are about 45 miles apart in northern Missouri in a region formerly known for coal mining. The other two districts are in primarily agricultural areas, one in northwest Missouri and other in the central part of the state.

The study showed that students and schools benefit from what Seipel calls "social capital", in other words, the trusting relationships that exist within families and within the community.

"While many studies have focused on comparisons of rural versus urban schools, this research looks at the diversity of Missouri's rural schools," Seipel said. "Missouri's rural high schools rank among both the highest and lowest in the state in terms of achievement scores, dropout rates and socioeconomic status."

School-community relations across successful Missouri rural school districts are more likely to be characterized by continuity, stability and trust, with social support to students, he said. Data from the 240 rural high schools showed that test scores are also enhanced when administrative and teacher turnover is lower and school personnel are perceived as members of the community--not just "teachers at the school".

Networks linking churches, civic clubs and businesses are other important positive factors in academic achievement, he said.

In the highest ranked of the four districts, church-related activities were found to be especially important for youth and community members. Wednesday nights were kept free of school activities so students could participate in church activities with their families.

"Schools do not exist as autonomous institutions but are embedded in and penetrated by their communities," Seipel said. "Local school districts and community policy makers need to consider more fully the impact of the whole community on the educational process. Student achievement is improved through stable relationships among students, teachers, administrators, parents and community members."

Students in one of the districts showed improvement in test scores after teachers made an effort to involve parents, and after residents secured state and federal grants to build a community baseball field, he said.

"The policy lesson here may be that educational policies should focus at least partly on strengthening the community in which the school is situated," Seipel said."

Often school performance is "blamed" on the school system. This study has added to the growing body of research that is proving again and again that, if you want a healthy school with students that succeed, we need to work to make the whole community a healthy place.

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