

The Appeal of Rural Schools: “Old Sport” Day in Northern Wisconsin

Paul Wiegel, Ripon High School/Lumen Charter High School,
wiegelp@ripon.k12.wi.us

Abstract. Wiegel discusses the quirks, advantages, and perks of teaching in a rural district and references “Old Sport Day,” one specific activity in an American Literature class that developed school-wide momentum.

As a kid growing up in Green Bay, I really only wanted one thing when I grew up: I wanted my address to be a fire number. You know, those pre-2000 signs mounted in every rural neighborhood in the state--small white squares with bold black letters and numbers. **N6789**. Believe me when I tell you that there are scores of people across the country who are completely thrown off when confronted with a letter at the beginning of an address. I used to be one of those. There were Ns and Ws, but I never saw an E or an S. I figured that this was some kind of rural Wisconsin address system quirk that you only understood if you lived “out there” among the country roads. There were no curbs or stop lights to prevent the unfailing optimism that having an address that began with a letter could bring.

As an adult, I got that wish. I’ve been teaching in rural schools ever since I began my career in education twenty-two years ago. I can safely say that all of my ideas about the perceived advantages of rural schools have mostly proven to be true. You get to know students and their families. Every day, you can make offhand remarks about homework to your students working in the grocery store. You can measure your throwing skills against your students by tossing hay bales for the fundraiser during FFA week.



Back when I graduated from the University of Wisconsin--Stevens Point (a rural school in its own right), I didn't even apply to city schools. I didn't want to work there. What was the advantage to working in a building with over one thousand students? As I teacher, I wanted to work closely with colleagues to understand everything that was going on in the 9-12 English classrooms, not be a part of a department of twenty people who might not even see each other. Somehow I thought the trees and corn fields would foster a love of literature among students. "Of course they'll like to read some Thoreau, they live in rural America. We'll all scoff at Gatsby and his excess--they'll get it."

It was all a bit naive, but I've never looked back. It doesn't hurt that I've always considered myself somewhat of a nature person anyway. Perhaps that was the biggest advantage I had. The crickets and owls in the neighborhoods I've lived in have always been part of what I liked, and one of my first big purchases with my early paychecks was an aluminum canoe. But the small-town classroom elements have their own rewards aside from the natural settings. In many rural Wisconsin towns, the high school is the central element. There are more people in the high school building on most days than in any other building in the town. Almost everyone knows a teenager who is sitting in a classroom. For those reasons, what goes on there seems to carry a little more weight. How the building looks is a marker for the town--and that doesn't mean it has to be pretty. I've seen some old, red brick high schools in parts of northern Wisconsin that

would be the envy of any district. They were built as a monument to what that small town thinks about educating its youth. Bricks mean “We’re not going anywhere. This is our school.”

One of the more interesting parts of teaching in a rural school is the way things quickly take on a life beyond the classroom walls. A number of years ago, I created “Old Sport Day.” This is an activity that I began while Juniors were reading *The Great Gatsby* which required, as an “official” assignment, all of my American Literature students to say “old sport” at the end of everything they said that day. I usually did it around chapter six, when even those who were “lightly reading” were aware of Gatsby’s idiosyncrasies with language. I would make about 300 paper buttons for the occasion and hand them out all morning: “Happy Old Sport Day!” “Darth Vader is an Old Sport” “I’ve got ‘gonnegtions’ with Meyer Wolfshiem.” I don’t let anybody speak to me without ending their statement with “old sport.”

“Can I run to my locker?”

“I’m sorry, what’s that?”

“Can I go to my locker?”

“I don’t think I understand.”

“Oh. Can I go to my locker, old sport?”

“That’s better. Yes, go ahead...old sport.”



Seniors want to get in on it remembering all the fun from last year, and everyone has a blast. Now, I'm sure bigger schools can create this kind of vibe. I don't think that just because the student handbook features instructions for proper parking of snowmobiles that we've cornered the market on building community. The difference, I think, is the almost total visibility. I never announce this ahead of time, but by second hour, the whole school knows it's Old Sport Day. By lunch I'm out of buttons. I don't think we're having more fun than an urban school, I just think things like this can't spread so quickly in a bigger school to become a "thing."

One of the biggest advantages, though, is exemplified in my school's bike racks. I took this picture at lunch one day when I noticed that none of them were locked--even the one with an actual *unused lock* wrapped around the handle bars. This is a perfect example of the appeal of teaching in rural Wisconsin. At the back of the school, away from traffic and lots of witnesses, a handful of kids didn't see a need to lock their bikes. Why? This isn't a utopia--kids steal stuff here. But to me, this marked an overall trust and faith in the community as a whole.



It's likely that nobody is going to steal your bike, and one of the reasons is because if someone sees you riding it, they'll likely know who the bike really belongs to. The unlocked bikes suggest a faith in small towns that goes beyond students and teachers. They seem to indicate that the students believe this school and the community as a whole are going to do right by everyone. Maybe one of the reasons the kids don't lock their bikes is because this belief is just part of growing up here. I'm not saying bigger districts are less caring or less safe. I do, however, think kids in rural districts in

Wisconsin *feel* like they are safer. And, as we all know, when kids feel safe and welcomed, they tend to be more engaged with their education.

In my experience, this is the biggest advantage that rural Wisconsin schools can claim, and as a teacher I've gained the benefits from. I'm sure I'll finish out my career in Wisconsin's rural schools. I'll keep making the daily commute in much the same way I've always done--factoring the extra time for tractors on Hwy. D as fall harvest time or spring planting requires--and enjoying every minute of it.