

Top-notch schools key to small town success

By Jim Nowlan

Quality of community and top-notch schools are keys to small town success in Illinois—but outsiders have to know your town has these characteristics.

In a recent column, I noted that more people want to live in small towns than anywhere else, but that population declined precipitously this past decade in Illinois' rural (and small town) counties.

In "Hollowing out the Middle," sociologists Patrick Carr and Maria Kefalas, wrote a few years ago about the rural brain drain in a small town of about 2,000 in northeastern Iowa. The schools in that town, and in most like it, prepare the talented "achievers" to go to college and never return; the "stayers" are generally, though not always, those with no place to go. Some leavers are "returners," but not enough.

I see this phenomenon in my local high school as well, and it has probably been thus for decades.

I think that strong communities of at least 2,500, maybe a little less, often have the stuff to make it and grow in the brave new world of the 21st Century. They can bring back more achievers as well as new folks.

But these towns need the basics, such as really fine schools; a good grocery; health clinic; a community-minded bank; some services on Main Street; truly welcoming churches and active service clubs, and a vibrant community college somewhere nearby.

Let's talk about the schools. Undifferentiated schools just like those down the highway are not good enough. The schools have to stand out somehow. And I think some do these days, but does anybody know it?

For example, in my rural school district, 40 percent of the high schoolers take college credit courses through Black Hawk, a community college. The students often earn up to a semester, even two semesters of college credit before they leave high school! Apparently this is not unusual among rural schools.

I think also, in this global society, a school system that offered a foreign language such as Mandarin from grade school on would stand out. Why not? After all, the Chinese are teaching English from kindergarten on.

Further, I suggest small town schools take a look at the Annawan school district on Interstate 80 east of the Quad Cities [west of LaSalle County; Kankakee]. This tiny school district of less than 400 students K-12 year after year scores two and three points higher on the required college testing exam than the state average.

This is a huge deal, as the state average is right around a sticky 20. I think you will find that parental and community support and expectations are high in Annawan.

The quality of the community is also critical. Those of us who have been around small towns all our lives know that each has its own personality. Some have positive personalities; others are less so. You can write off the latter for much growth.

I suggest that a community do a self-assessment—by observant outsiders, separately from that done by townsfolk. Western Illinois University has a valuable “mapping” program that helps a community assess itself and look ahead.

The big challenge for small towns that want to flourish is that few outsiders know about the positives of these burghs. And that is critical because today not everyone has to live in the cities.

I know airline pilots and stewardesses who commute to O'Hare for work from small towns all over Illinois and Iowa. More of us also telecommute, all the time or several days a week, and can live where we want.

The key is marketing, but how can each little community afford to market to the larger world?

The State of Illinois spends (or used to, before our financial crisis) a lot on tourism promotion. I think we should devote part of that budget to group marketing for small towns that qualify on the basis of positive criteria, maybe to be evaluated by the Illinois Main Street Program, which helps small towns.

Rather than attract people for the weekend via tourism dollars, why not attract them for life!

And maybe the rural and small town schools of Illinois should create a section within the state school board association, to compare notes. The best small town schools don't have to look like large, impersonal suburban schools.

Let's hear it for the best small towns in Illinois! No, let's make sure others hear it for these towns.