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Education in the Empty Quarter: How Have We Fared?

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Abstract

Garreau (1981) used the Arabic term Rub 'al Khali, or Empty Quarter, to label the Intermountain West portion of the United States. In Saudi Arabia, the Empty Quarter is a large, dry, and relatively unpopulated area with a wealth of energy resources not unlike the Intermountain West. Garreau described changes in the area that were associated with changes in commerce and industry during the 20th century, particularly with respect to mining ventures and the discovery of oil and natural gas in the region. Although Garreau discussed many ways that these changes impacted the people and environment, he did not discuss the actual impact, or predicted impact on the education of children and youth in the region. The purpose of this article is to examine the impact of these changes on the functioning of schools in the Empty Quarter and to propose considerations for improving educational services in the region.

The Empty Quarter of the United States includes Nevada, Utah, Colorado, Wyoming, Idaho, Montana, and Interior and Northern Coastal Alaska. Although not highlighted in Garreau's 1981 treatise on rural America, Montana exemplifies the Empty Quarter-vast open spaces, sparse population, mineral wealth, and a harsh climate in summer and winter. If superimposed over the eastern United States, Montana would stretch west to east from Chicago to Washington DC and south to north from mid-Tennessee to the upper Great Lakes. Geographically, Montana has two distinct regions-the western prairie covering the eastern two thirds of the state and the Rocky Mountain front providing a spine through the western third.

Montana's economy has traditionally depended upon mining, cattle or sheep ranching, and logging. The economy has diversified to include petroleum refining, tourism, and a growing service industry. Eastern Montana is losing population as farms and ranches fail with changing federal agricultural policies and subsidies. In the spring of 2005, the Billings Gazette published a 14-part series on changes in eastern Montana's economy, education services, medical services, and land use. The series presented a dreary picture of loss in both economic and human resources, similar to what Garreau predicted for the entire region. As opportunities for employment diminish, so does the population. The loss is exacerbated as schools close, making both repopulation of a community and population retention more difficult.

With over 80 one-room, one-district schools still in operation, Montana has resisted the move toward consolidation. While remote locations and unpaved county roads provide a rationale for these schools, the lack of a critical mass of students does not support an economy of scale. If two-room schools that are part of a county or town district, and the number of small, multi-grade per classroom schools are considered, the number of small rural schools struggling to survive rises to nearly 130. Growth in the number of Hutterite colonies in Montana has also served to increase the number of small rural schools in the state.

There are areas of growth within the state, namely south central Montana from Billings through the Yellowstone and Gallatin Valleys and northwestern Montana along the Bitterroot Range and around Flathead Lake. Demographically, adults who are forty plus years of age represent the bulk of this growth and the impact on schools is negative. The number of high school graduates is dropping because of a decreasing student population, not because of decreasing graduation rates, and this decrease impacts both public and private institutions of higher education in Montana.

Economic growth could be stimulated with sales taxes that capture tourist dollars for the state infrastructure. Coal bed methane development could revitalize the east in the same manner that it has been a benefit to Wyoming. However, these avenues have not met with favorable response from a population with one of the lowest per-capita incomes in the nation and from ranchers who fear the negative effects of mineral development on scarce water resources.

While Garreau did not include Montana in his 1981 examination of the Empty Quarter, Wyoming and

Utah were prominent in his discussion. Using a semi-structured interview tool, educational leaders in Wyoming and Utah participated in hour long phone interviews, responding to questions revealing their perceptions of the fulfillment of Garreau's predictions. Questions of educational impact were posed with a primary focus on changes in services for students with disabilities.

Two primary outcomes were reported by Wyoming educational leaders. The first outcome was that Garreau's description of economic and social changes arising in the late 1970s from gas and oil exploration in Wyoming were accurately captured. They also reported that many of Garreau's predictions of long term economic and social impacts resulting from exploration for natural resources were realized. However, they did report that predicted population growth did not happen.

The second outcome reported by Wyoming educational leaders was that the predictions of social problems were not realized to the extent that Garreau described them. They reported that the problems which did arise (e.g., transient students, increased high school drop out, insufficient parent support) were offset by the strong financial benefits derived by the state. They reported that the state's educational funding structure captured a strong and steady stream of resources for education in the state, and that these financial benefits were realized by students with and without disabilities. Respondents reported that salaries for teachers and related services personnel were high, and that hiring and retention bonuses were available and actively used in the state to acquire personnel to support the growth of students. Additionally, they reported that with 100% reimbursement for local expenditures from the state, supports such as assistive technology devices, therapies, and specialized instructional materials were less of an issue than in the past when funding was limited. As a result, instructional planning meetings for students with special learning can focus exclusively on the student's needs. The educational leaders who responded to these interviews contrasted their experiences with educational leaders in other states who are often conflicted between meeting students' needs and conserving scarce district monies. Overall, respondents reported that funding developed from natural resources exploration was allowing school administrators to provide strong educational services in their state. Finally, respondents reported that recent legislation (i.e., NCLB and IDEIA) was perceived as favorable and a benefit to students and that the current achievement focus, coupled with their funding stream, was an advantage to educational personnel. They did note, however, that with substantially reduced funding, both pieces of legislation would be viewed very differently.

Educational leaders from rural eastern Utah reported somewhat different perspectives. While they reported that Garreau's description did capture the state of the community during an earlier boom from oil and gas exploration, it occurred in Utah during the 1970's as opposed to the 1980s. By 1981, people were moving to Wyoming, and Garreau's predictions were beginning to occur during the early 1980s. The Uintah Basin region of Utah, where the respondents live and work, is currently experiencing a second "boom," and these educational leaders reported that current activities are compounding the social and economic impacts from the 1970's. For example, the towns of Vernal and Roosevelt have experienced significant increases in population in the last five years. While the boom of the 1970s resulted in increases in the population and changes in the demographics of the region, both respondents indicated that once the boom "busted," many of those who came with the oil and gas exploration left and the region returned to its pre-boom tenor. Unlike the boom of the 1970's, the current influx in the population is resulting in a building boom-hundreds of new homes are being built, and smaller communities surrounding the main towns of Vernal and Roosevelt are becoming "bedroom communities." These communities are concerned about the impact on real estate values when the oil "boom" goes "bust" and real estate values plummet. This building boom is permanently changing the landscape, unlike the 1970's boom when oil workers and their families tended to live in temporary housing or hotel and motel rooms. In addition, as in the 1970s, the influx of oil workers and their families is adversely affecting the tourist industry in the area. For example, many of the oil workers that currently move into the area live in motel rooms while they wait for homes to be constructed and people who might stay in the area to visit local attractions such as Dinosaur National Park are by-passing the area because of a lack of lodging.

The influx in the population has resulted in existing schools reaching capacity and beyond, and the districts in this region lack the resources to build new schools and hire additional highly qualified teachers. Many of the families that have moved into the region are Hispanic and the schools have not been able to adequately address cultural and linguistic issues that impact learning. One of the individuals responding to this interview indicated that schools in this rural area of the state are grappling with drug and gang problems never experienced before. Unlike Wyoming, the boom of the 1970's and the current boom have not resulted in increased revenue and high teacher's salaries. The increase in population and diversity within the school age population has compounded the already difficult challenges that have resulted from legislation such as IDEIA and NCLB, and the low teacher's salaries make recruitment of new highly qualified teachers in this

region particularly difficult. Both respondents indicated that, unlike their Wyoming counterparts, this legislation has not been good for schools in rural eastern Utah. The increases in numbers of school age students coupled with the cultural and linguistic challenges have taxed both general education and special education teachers with respect to meeting annual yearly progress (AYP) goals. Because many of the new students have parents who are transient workers with the oil companies, school personnel have found it difficult to obtain school records in a timely manner and determine appropriate services and placements. Furthermore, both respondents reported that a seemingly disproportionate number of these students have been receiving special education services. This has compounded the challenge to prepare these students adequately for state-wide assessments, and one respondent stated that educators and administrators feel as though they are "flying blind" much of the time.

These educational leaders reported that they are losing teachers and related service personnel to high paying jobs in the oil fields. One district in the region is currently without a school nurse and unable to recruit individuals for that position. The former school nurse left the position to drive an oil rig because she can make more money. They also reported that they have lost several bus drivers for the same reason. This has impacted drop-out rates as well. One respondent reported that a high percentage of high school students at-risk for failure, and students in special education, are dropping out of school for high paying jobs in the oil fields. In addition, families who run businesses that serve the oil fields are home schooling their school age children to allow them to work in the family business during the day. Collaborative efforts between the school districts and community agencies and government have begun to target this problem by initiating campaigns to educate students and their families about the long term benefits of staying in school and pursuing jobs that will be more reliable. This has been a difficult task however, because as one respondent indicated, "It's very hard to tell a sixteen year old to stay in school and pursue a trade or profession when they are making $30.00 an hour." Another response to this problem has been the expansion of alternative education programs.

While the educational leaders in Wyoming reported that, overall, Garreau's predictions have not been realized in their region, the responses of Utah educators and the current state of services in Montana clearly indicate a realization of many of Garreau's predictions. The Empty Quarter presents a continuing challenge to the provision of quality rural educational services, and for rural eastern Utah and Montana, the outcomes have, for the most part, been detrimental and have made educational mandates resulting from IDEIA and NCLB all the more challenging. Legislators and educational policy makers would do well to consider the interaction of these economic and social changes with the demands of IDEIA and NCLB when evaluating school district success. It is also clear from the contrasting responses to IDEIA and NCLB across Wyoming, Utah, and Montana that funding makes a difference, and policy makers should consider all possible economic avenues that will lead to 100% reimbursement for local educational expenditures.

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