Introduction

Rural Community Academy is Indiana's first and only rural charter school started by community members in 2004 after a local school was decommissioned in 2003 for consolidation to a failing school. The institution takes pride in the small, rural context in which they educate their students, and utilizes a place-based curricular model to achieve their goals of academic excellence and personal growth for all students.

Overview

Profile Completed: Fall 2010
Location: 2385 N. State Road 63
Sullivan, IN 47882
Grades: Kindergarten-8th
Students: 123 students (2007-2008)
Year Organized: 2004
Square Footage: approx. 18,000 SF

Learning Snapshot: A rural charter school focused on a place-based curriculum with attention given to students with special needs.

History

Rural Community Academy is an example of a small school resisting waves of consolidation. First built in the later part of the 19th century the original school house outgrew became too small for its students. A new school was built next door, with the older school house remaining vacant to present day. Open in 1927, the Turman Township Grade and High School served grades K-12, expanding the schools facility. First existing as a township school for Turman Township in Sullivan County, Graysville school was decommissioned in 2003. The community fought for the spark they knew was needed to continue to keep them vivacious and prospering. Immediately after the news of the school's closure two non-profits were created with one acquiring the building to use as a community center and one to obtain a charter school. Chief Operations Officer (COO) and community activist Susie Pierce asserted “Closing a 4 star school was just not an option….Here was our opportunity to realize a dream”.

Vision

The vision of Rural Community Academy is to nurture accomplished students to achieve their very best academically and personally in a rural community setting.

Figure 2.19.1: The historic facade of the Rural Community Academy still bears the front nameplate of initial intended use as the consolidated Turman Township schoolhouse.

Figure 2.19.2: Graysville is centered around the intersection of SR 63 and SR 154 with minimal city buildings. Much of the town is residential and farms with one church and gas station.

Figure 2.19.3: Still bearing the 4 stars awarded to the original school, Rural Community Academy reminds the county of what the school accomplished when closed.
The hope of Rural Community Academy is that they can become a model for other charter schools who wish for their students to excel academically, personally, and socially with special focus on community, people, and place.

Mission

“Rural Community Academy will give students the opportunity to reach his or her greatest potential personally and academically with small class size in a rural setting with active parental environment, supported with the people, places, and things of the community incorporating partnerships and a focus on giving back to their community.” (www.rcsi.k12.in.us)

Philosophy

Rural Community Academy believes that paying special attention to social dynamics and cultural values of the rural setting will instill students with self-confidence, practical skills, pride of place, and excellent academic skills. They believe this can be accomplished through strong parental support, differentiated instruction, and continuous interaction with the community.

Enrollment

The school enrollment fluctuates between 130-150 students on any given school year. Due to the rural, “small school” mission of the institution, Rural Community Academy stands firm on capping class sizes at 19 students per room to optimize their instructional goals.

Demographics

The 2008-2009 student body consisted of:

- 99% Caucasian
- .5% Black
- .5% Hispanic

Of the 148 students, 25% are eligible for special education services. Also, 62% of the school qualifies for free or reduced lunches.

Curriculum

Rural Community Academy has implemented a place-based curricular model that emphasizes the integration of local culture and local context into each lesson plan. The school and community illustrate a reciprocal relationship of sustaining each other, and the resulting pride is exhibited through local, community driven
Partner Profile: Sullivan, IN

Rural Community Academy (RCA) is a charter school located in Sullivan, IN. RCA focuses on a place-based curriculum, which integrates local geography, history, and community knowledge into the learning experience. This approach helps students understand their local town and county, fostering a sense of place and community engagement. Classes interact with local historians, scientists, hunters, and parents, who volunteer their knowledge and time to support the school.

**Curriculum:**
In the words of COO and school leader Susie Pierce, “We focus on a place-based curriculum supplementing curriculum with people, place, and things.” This place-based curriculum is incorporated into all classrooms, in all grade levels. This place-based learning has students learn about their local town and county. For example, local Indian tribes are studied along with the local geography and county government. Classes also interact with local historians, hunters, scientists, and parents, all considered partners of the school who volunteer their knowledge and time. Students are taught local knowledge with the belief that many will not live outside the surrounding counties and will ensure the community remains vibrant and secure. If students end up living elsewhere, the school hopes this knowledge will help them become better citizens and community members.

**Rural Community Academy also incorporates Wilderness classes, teaching students information like local plants, animals, rudimentary hunting knowledge, and homemaking skills.**

The school also works with Title I classes, including sensory rooms within the facility for the students. With separate rooms, Title I students are able to focus on their specialized education while able to join other classes the remainder of the day.

The school also incorporates Junior Achievement, with local business leaders teaching kids about home, community, the world and personal finance. Each grade builds from the one before it, relating to the school’s place-based curriculum.

**Leaders involved are:**
- Club 10
- L & L Drywall
- Wampler Mowing
- Carby Electric, LLC
- Monroe’s Melons
- Scott Foster Construction
- Wampler Farms
- Troy Pearson Construction
- Frey Farm Drainage
- Dr. Gregg Smith, DDS
- Wholesale Drainage Supply
- Keith Mosby Farms
- Steimel Communications
- Regions Bank
- Mike & Susie Pierce
- Ungerwear

The students, starting in 5th grade, also run a local flea market called The Graysville Mall. Open every Friday during the second half of the day, the students sell toys, clothing, accessories, books, household goods, and furniture. The flea market helps students understand supply and demand, profit, and other aspects of running a business. This program helps students realize the challenges a local business must face but also the benefits of a local community-oriented business.

**Classroom Environment**
Classrooms within RCA are kept small intentionally, but demonstrate even the small can be mighty! Focus on differentiated instruction allows for students to demonstrate their learning in a variety of ways. Teachers personalize classrooms with student projects, artwork, and inspirational materials that tie back to greater institutional goals of focus on local community.

**Teacher Response**
School leader Susie Pierce commented “Every charter has a different mission, ours is being the first rural charter school. Our staff is a true team with each employee having a passion for what they do for students.” She continued on to say, “None of us have a Principal’s or Superintendent’s License. We know we can do this; our experience is valuable”. Chief Academics Officer and former special education teacher, Mandi Johnson commented on the efforts at small classrooms by saying “Limiting class sizes gives kids an opportunity to learn”.

**Community Involvement**
Students come from several counties around both in state and out of state in Illinois. Sullivan County along with Vigo, Clay, Green, and Knox County students attend the school as well as Illinois counties Clark, Crawford, and Lawrence. The parents of the students, even when in counties farther away, provide the essential financial and social/emotional support needed to execute the mission of Rural Community Academy. It is desired that all families of RCA volunteer 20 hours of their time throughout the year. There are many options to complete these hours such as helping in the classroom, recess or lunch room duty, and chaperoning field trips.

Every parent and employee is automatically a part of Rural Community Schools, Inc. (RCSI) This non-profit organization is the backbone of Rural Community Academy, obtaining the

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**Figure 2.19.7:** A library space, which provides areas for children to read during study hours and quiet place to relax, also includes computers for researching class projects.

**Figure 2.19.8:** Original gymnasium is in need of renovation, installing a new gym floor.
The school also has several partners including the Eagles Club, the Turman Township Youth Foundation, and the Finkbiner Fund. The Eagles Club is the RCA Booster Club, acting as liaison between parents and the school administration. The club sponsors the basketball teams, cheerleading, fundraising events. The sister organization to RCSI, Turman Township Youth Foundation (TTYF) is a non-profit organization that owns and operates the school facilities and grounds. The organization is also the liaison with Vincennes University. The final partner is with the Finkbiner Foundation. Set up by the family of Bruce Finkbiner, integral to the chartering of the charter school, is a fund whose interest is distributed to the school each year. Financially, the school has developed partnerships within the community, working directly with parents and Sullivan county. The school is a partner to the parents as much as the parents are partners to Rural Community Academy.

Other local agencies support the school by volunteering their services to supplement the schools’ efforts at place based curriculum. These community groups also strive to submerge students in knowledge of local people, places, and things. For example, local volunteer firefighters spent a week educating children on fire safety. Students would take breaks during the day to travel across the street to the firehouse.

The school also provides “Hunter Education,” discussed earlier, as well as opportunities for licensure by a local conservation officer. Several environmental programs are implemented as well including:

- Hoosier River Watch
- Wabash Raft Trip
- Recycling

RCA have local historians, scientists, artists, quilters, nurses, business people, farmers, world travelers, musicians, and so on who are asked to come in and help teach students about the community and skills found within.

As a rural school, population density does not allow the school to easily attract residents. The community is also involved with the school by supporting the Graysville Mall and other fundraising events. Many are located on the front lawn of the school or the community event hall next door. The school has become a...
community center, not by functions within but by reaching out to the parents and residents of Sullivan County.

Facility

Size: 2 story building plus basement setting on 4 acres, approx. 18,000 Square Feet
Architect: Not Available
Year Renovated: 2008
Cost: Not Available

Introduction

The school's property includes the building footprint itself, along with a large playground and a baseball field behind the building.

Rural Academy was once a group of 13 one room school houses in Truman Township. In 1903 they were all consolidated into one building. This building still exists in the Truman Township and is directly adjacent to the current site of Rural Academy.

Spatial Systems

Rural Community Academy is a three story school, with three stair cases located at the front and two ends of the school. Each floor is organized as a double loaded corridor, with classrooms on both sides. Lockers are along the hallway with paintings above, done by local artists.

Classrooms are located on all floors, separated by grade level. On the lower floor is the cafeteria with the gymnasium on the main floor. The main floor, half a story from the outside, also holds the school administration offices. The third floor also provides access to the gymnasium via a balcony. The balcony is off limits to students but is a treasured portion of the facility. Also on the third floor is the library and multi-purpose room, holding the computer lab and stage. Originally a larger room, the space was divided for more classrooms before RCA was chartered.
Future Improvements
Currently, the school’s gymnasium is planned for renovation. The original cork floor on the basketball court is still used by the students, but is in need of repair. Remodeling this area could prove to be an attraction for children in the surrounding areas by improving the athletics at the school.

Funding
Rural Community Academy receives state funding from the Indiana General Fund, Title I fund allocations, and is supplemented by the Turman Township Youth Foundation. This non-profit organization was initially responsible for regaining ownership of the township school building and currently leases the facility to RCA for $1.00.

S.W.O.T.
Strengths
• Rural Academy is the first truly “rural” charter school in Indiana and it has capitalized on its unique location in advancing a place-based, regionally focused curriculum relevant to the students of the area.

• The initiative by the community members to take back a decommissioned school and make it a viable learning opportunity as a charter school is commendable.

• The small school culture, personalized classroom environments, and caring and nurturing faculty and administration are positive forces in creating student and faculty identity and connection.

• Housed within a well built, brick masonry school building from 1927 allows the students to see and understand the history of their school, community, town, and county.

• Rural Community Academy has utilized the existing facilities and outbuildings and forged partnerships with the community with great success. RCA stands as a model of rural community school campus success.

Weaknesses
• Accessibility for physically disabled and sensory impaired students and staff is a critical issue that must be met with an effective vertical conveyance system in the three-story building. Finding a place for this elevator to be housed will be a challenge.

Opportunities
• Access to the lower level of the building for supplies and maintenance also provides a challenge with a very steep ramp coming into the mechanical room.

• The school’s gymnasium is in need of repair to its original cork floors. In addition, expansion of athletic opportunities, especially for middle school students, would be an opportunity given that the context provides open space for playing fields.

• The local, place-based curriculum must be effectively balanced with global opportunities for students to have an understanding of the interconnected 21st century world. New digital technologies and communication tools would help to advance this local/global connection.

• Rehabilitation of the old township school diagonally across from Rural Academy would be a tremendous opportunity in continuing the rural school campus feel, building on the historical fabric, and obtaining more needed specialized classroom learning settings.

Threats
• The grassroots initiative to start up the Rural Community Academy may wane as the community and school settles into itself. This will hurt the facility in its need of ongoing and sustaining operational and economic support.

Sources
Interview - 10/8/2010
Mandi Johnson
Chief Academics Officer

Interview - 10/8/2010
Susie Pierce
School Leader and Chief Operations Officer

www.rcsi.k12.in.us/