

Community Shows Up

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When you go to a school with 400 people from PreK-12 including staff, it is hard to ignore the impact and relevance of relationships. Although I do not want to perpetuate stereotypes about rural communities, it is true that nearly everyone knows everyone else. In the school setting, this includes relationships between students, staff, administration, and community. With every relationship built, the network of our community grows stronger, and the school district is the heartbeat of that network. Specifically, the investment in community via relationship building creates both belonging and opportunity in both the school and community.

I remember sitting in the school library one day when there was a student having a conversation with our academic advisor.

"There's no reason for a student to fail in SoRoCo," the advisor said. SoRoCo is the name of our school.

In our rural school, there are many staff members and outside resources that could be leveraged to support students. This creates opportunities for students to succeed! To be clear, these leveraged opportunities are great for students, but they should already be in place in rural schools. For me, it was such a gift to go to school in which classes, activities, and connections were stretched beyond what was available in the building to assist student success; yet, it would be insincere to omit that supporting students in this way required extra effort from the whole community, and is inequitable from other, better funded schools. Nonetheless, due to these resources and hard working staff members, it would be impossible for a student to "slip through the cracks" in our school. Everyone is monitored, supported, and encouraged by many throughout the building.

In addition to creating opportunities for students, the relationships and investment facilitate belonging within the community

and school. As an elementary schooler, I fondly remember events at the school that invited older students down to play, teach, and interact with us. One tradition in our school district is a FFA Day, when the high school FFA chapter would bring animals, tractors, and other agricultural related products to the elementary school field. The younger students, no matter their background with agriculture, got to pet livestock, ride in tractors, transplant flowers, or engage in other agriculture based activities. I loved this event as a child, but I equally loved visiting the elementary school when I was in high school and teaching K-5 agriculture. Traditions such as these remained in place throughout my time in SoRoCo schools, but relationships keep community traditions special.

Working intergenerationally with students of all ages, staff, and community members strengthens the community; it makes everyone feel more connected. This happens rather naturally in small towns, through siblings connecting grade levels, family friends being from various age groups, and going through all of primary school with the same people while getting to know their family. However, South Routt and our greater community bring in rich multigenerational connections through our school buildings especially well. Traditions in SoRoCo such as our annual chili cook off, turkey bingo, and NHS story writing project invite all members of the community to the school. The traditions stand strong, but relationships make these experiences unparalleled and a staple in our community.

The investment in the community and strengthening of belonging is not limited to the school building, it is a feature of the community as a whole! If the South Routt Community is known for one thing, it is our 4th of July celebration. The festivities begin at noon when everyone lines up for the parade. The American Legion, the band, our feature twirler "Grandma Susi," the local youth hockey team, the high school FFA Chapter, the Grand Marshal, horses, old cars, bikes, the fire department and more all walk down main street throwing candy, popsicles, and other prizes for the crowd. After the parade, there are lawn games, BBQs, and booths open for everyone. From face paint to shopping from local vendors, we have it all.

Then, the main event: cowboy polo. Our gravel Main street is blocked off, with goals set up on each end. Trucks are backed up for spectators to sit in the beds and watch the cowboys compete. The riders duct tape brooms to create their polo sticks, and they attempt

to hit a soccer-size ball into the other team's goal. The game is hot, dusty, rough, loud, and awesome! After the game, there is a betting auction and horse race in which the horses and riders start on one end of main street and run the length in a dead sprint. Then, the firework show starts. The fire department sends up a huge firework show over the town, and soon enough fireworks start coming from all different directions from different households.

This celebration is renowned in our community. Our traditions are strong, the 4th has been this way as long as I can remember! Yet, without the people in my community, all of it would mean nothing. Recalling the event with my Grammy recently, she said "I am so glad I went to the Yampa parade. There is nothing like that in Steamboat. You can walk one block in Yampa, and it will take you an hour because you will see so many people you know!"

Without the network built in South Routt, both opportunity and belonging would be jeopardized. Rural communities do not have other external resources to fall back on; they are reliant on the people in the community and what they can create together. Disinvestment in these relationships would be detrimental to our way of life. The support system in our rural community is essential for the wellbeing and success of its members, which is why so many people chose to invest in the community. Our community thrives when everyone pours back into our network.