



Newsletter Expanded Feature –

Cyndi Moorman, Rural School Activist

Rural school supporters in Arkansas may not know how much they owe Cyndi Moorman of Delight.

Moorman is a 28-year veteran teacher of rural schools, currently at Delight teaching a wide variety of courses, such as American History, pre-AP World History, AP European History, and AP English. In addition, she maintains the school's website and grading program and sponsors an ACRE student chapter. She has a BSE with dual certification and major in English and a minor in social studies; she has a MSE in curriculum and instruction.

One of the first activists to resist Governor Mike Huckabee's plan to consolidate most of the state's school districts in 2003, Moorman formed an Internet-based group called Arkansas Citizens United for Results in Education. Through this network, she shared news and information about legislative proposals and other grass-roots community work across the state. She was one of the first in the state to tap into the national resources of the Rural School and Community Trust and participated in their efforts to help small schools in Arkansas resist consolidation. Her group was part of the grass-roots coalition that produced materials, held rallies, and lobbied against consolidation in the historic legislative sessions of 2003 and 2004.

As the anti-consolidation movement grew, Moorman merged her efforts with the Save Our Schools group coming out of Valley Springs and eventually headed by Lavina Grandon. After the 2004 legislative session, Moorman, along with Grandon, Laretta Moore, Kerry Cunningham, and Dorothy Singleton formed a unified organization to carry on the work of preserving and improving small and rural schools. The name Advocates for Community and Rural Education (ACRE) was Moorman's inspiration, and she created its distinctive plow and book logo.

"I joked to people that my life changed 'when Huckabee spoke,'" Moorman says, referring to his January 13, 2003, address to the Arkansas legislature in which he surprised and shocked the state with his plan for consolidating all school districts with fewer than 1,500 students. This plan would have eliminated all but about 25 districts at the time. She was on the original ACRE board and designed and maintained its website until the summer of 2008. She wrote a pamphlet called "From Punishment to Partnership," which analyzed education legislation coming out of the 2003-2004 legislative sessions and suggested improvement through cooperation rather than the regulation and enforcement that were the focus of most legislation and efforts of the Arkansas Department of Education.

"To me the central role and first priority of any rural education organization should be preserving and improving rural schools," says Moorman. "What the Arkansas groups have done toward that goal, especially at the local level, is their greatest achievement. Organizing communities and informing them about how to work with their local school boards, businesses, and administrators has literally saved schools that would have been in serious trouble or even consolidated without the help of these organizations. They have also helped consolidated districts tremendously, organizing people to maintain voices in consolidated districts and maximize their roles in their new circumstances. Where possible, they help those schools preserve their campuses."

Of rural communities, Moorman states, "Preserving communities is a necessary long-term goal that has become a big focus of ACRE, but it's also a more elusive one and one that cannot be achieved if schools in those communities close. My challenge to people who wonder about the value of advocating for the preservation of rural schools is to name one economically viable community that doesn't have a school. Unfortunately, with the passage of Act 60 many are now seeing how true that is."

"The thing I found most upsetting about working on rural issues was the hostility and condescension so many policy makers, all the way up to [Governor Huckabee], displayed toward rural communities and people. Arkansas is a rural state and a poor state. Of all people, those who are elected to represent the interests of Arkansans should understand that. Only one of those qualities (rural and poor) is a negative, but many wrongly conclude that the former causes the latter and that rural people are somehow at fault and need to be 'improved' and brought into the 21st century."

"To fight these stereotypes, rural people have to do the same as other people who have fought stereotypes—they have to stand above and beyond what is expected of everyone else. Is this fair? Of course not. But it's the reality of the current climate. I feel that climate will change soon, out of necessity as much as anything. States and the federal government cannot continue to micro-manage

schools, and there are too many problems with state and federal laws, many stemming from NCLB, that schools are challenging.”

“In the past what reforms took hold in the rest of the state and nation didn’t matter as much to rural people, because rural schools and communities were their own little worlds. The modern communication revolution has changed all of that forever, and there are some good possibilities for rural communities and their schools because of those changes. Rural schools now have more access than ever before to what suburban schools have had due to new technologies, especially the Internet. There is more accountability and there are clearer expectations as a result of the last wave of education reform. And rural communities have had a chance to use these changes to show their value to the rest of the nation, as well.”

“My hope is that in the end rural communities will enjoy the benefits of the 21st century technology while maintaining all the elements and values which make rural living so important to those of us who have fought so hard to preserve it; because, as those of us who are fortunate enough to be rural know, without the rural school, the rural community and the rural way of life will die, and that would be a great loss, even to those who would call it ‘progress.’”

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