

Op/ed 2: Policy frameworks, like our body's bones, make many connections

By S. Kelly Tonne, Teacher

The children in my classroom are fond of “*Dem Bones*,” the old spiritual about the foot “bone connected to the ankle bone, and ankle bone connected to the leg bone. They sing it with the gusto eight year olds everywhere bring to fun.

I realized the other day that the song provides an analogy for explaining to them the way our country is connected. How its many parts—from big cities to small towns like the one in which I teach—are interdependent. How a head carried high depends very much on a strong neck, right on down to the toe bones. They get it. But I wonder if our nation’s policy makers do.

Recently I have come to think that national policies hamper those of us who live in small town regions and, as a result, they work against our national interests. It is as if the body were being allowed to feed only one part of itself – as if some parts were cut off with a tourniquet. When you do that, you put the whole body at risk, as any physician can tell you.

Kids know this. They do not tie off their fingers with rubber bands for too long before they realize the folly. Kids are smart. Every day I teach I see the great potential in my children. Yet, I have grown concerned that they, and students all over small town and rural America, are being cut off from America’s future. If you look at the statistics, you will see small town America is not doing as well as the rest of the nation. There is more childhood poverty in rural counties, less health care, and the school systems have a harder time attracting teachers. This is because these rural areas have been literally cut off from the doctors, dentists, teachers, and the variety of music and athletic programs that all kids need to succeed.

This is not a good situation for my students. And it is not a good situation for my country. The children in my classroom are, like the children in classrooms in big cities, the people who will be shaping the better part of this century. Soon they will be making decisions and starting families that will carry through to its end.

For that reason, it is important that, as we think about national and state policies, we think about how policies will affect small town America, because we are going to need every one of these

Simplifying model used early and repeated. Model is intended to illustrate interdependence, connections, solutions

Using children helps contest existing idea that people can simply move out of rural areas. Children don’t have that choice. Also, it’s important to make clear that people who live in small towns and thinly populated counties are like people everywhere.

children, their talents and contributions, in tomorrow's global economy.

Let me give you an example. It has been difficult to bring new teachers to our school. One suggestion is that national and state policy might create scholarships for people who would pledge to teach in rural counties for five years. That seems to me to be an excellent idea. It would create a ripple effect. Good teachers add up to good schools. Parents prize good schools for their children and seek communities that have them. So when local businesses seek employees, they will be able to point to the schools as a reason to move here. Growing businesses mean more money for merchants, and so the community rises in an upward spiral.

Attracting more teachers is only a start. We need to recognize we need a systematic approach. This is a lovely place to live. However, we are three hours from the nearest city. The closest hospital is forty minutes away. We have only one doctor in this end of the county. The perception of being away from things and the lack of health facilities are disincentives to many who think about locating here.

We need a broad approach. Our federal government could offer more scholarships to medical schools for doctors willing to practice in small towns. This would increase the availability of health care. Comprehensive transportation systems would reduce isolation. And state and local governments could do much to encourage economic development and regional planning. Businesses and private philanthropy also have a role in stimulating our economic and social life – from sponsoring our kids as interns in local businesses to supporting summer art and high-tech camps for kids.

If small town America is undernourished or cut off, the national body will not be functional. As a nation, we will lose potential, and that option is neither practical nor affordable.

My children do not have a choice about where they live. And it does not seem fair that they should have fewer opportunities to learn and to contribute to our society because they live in a small town in a lightly populated county. So the next time you hear a national policy being debated, ask yourself whether it will help nourish small town America, or hurt it. Whether it helps knit all the bones together, or leaves some hanging. Ultimately, as we teach our children, we all do better when we work together. And if you

It is important to make a connection to the reader's world to answer the question, "Why might this matter to me?"

Chain of causation

Systems thinking.

Solutions possible and examples
Not government alone

think the policy makers don't quite get it, would you teach them
my class' favorite song?

***S. Kelly Tonne, a fictional teacher, teaches third grade at Willow
Oak Elementary School in Middleton, Any State, a town of 2,500.***

Ms. Kelly Tonne doesn't use rhetoric, and she's not a spokesperson that makes the reader think "politics as usual." The writer chose a spokesperson who would be a neutral messenger, one who might open readers' minds to a new way of thinking about the issue.