Rural Development
Make Education and Training Its Centerpiece

We hear a lot about rural development these weeks.

Even the agricultural sub committee of the Committee on Appropriations in the House of Representatives changed its name so that it is now called “Rural Development, Agriculture, and Related Agencies.” Presumably placing “Rural Development” first in the name reflects the increasing importance of attending to rural development.

But, what is rural development and what might our governments do about it?

RD: An Ambiguous Concept
For many of us it is an ambiguous term. It is not like “higher prices of farm products” or “larger exports.” We all generally know what these concepts mean—not so with rural development. At least I am never sure what someone else means when they use the term.

Most would agree that rural development involves economic development—more jobs and more economic activity. For others, rural development encompasses a lot more. It includes, for them, concerns—social and environmental—for people in rural areas of this country who are not farmers, as well as concerns for farmers.

Even if there were agreement on what rural development is, there would be disagreement over what might be done about it. Transportation facilities, environmental amenities, communication networks, medical services, commodity programs, police protection, property tax forgiveness, special income tax rules, low cost credit—the list goes on.

A Priority Component
Without attempting to judge past efforts or suggest a full fledge rural development program for the future I offer one thing that, in my judgement, should be a priority component of any rural development program—improved education for young people and training opportunities for others.

The Young Know
An emphasis on education and skill training recognizes that most children of today’s farm operators and hired farm workers will not find opportunities to operate farms in the future. Young farm people know this to be the case. For example, I recently read a news report on a meeting of three U.S. Senators with high school students in a midwest town.

According to the reporter, the Senators “registered surprise” that less than 10 percent of the students at the assembly expected to live there as adults.

The Usual Response
We all know the usual response to this kind of information. Elected officials and farm organization leaders have it well rehearsed. Farm conditions are leading to the demise of the family farm and rural communities. Something must be done about farm commodity programs, farm prices need to be higher, and exports need to be competitive.

We have heard it often. And the reason we hear it from elected officials is because elected officials know that we like to hear it.

But are these refrains, the appropriate response to conditions in rural America?

On one score they are appropriate—they help win elections. But on another score they are not. They give false expectations to students and their parents. More importantly a critical message is not communicated.

The Critical Message
Instead, I suggest that the more appropriate message to high school students (and their parents) is: “Only a few of you can aspire to be involved in farming in a significant way in the 21st century. It will be those of you who inherit wealth and or acquire skills needed in farming. The future for the rest of you can be bright too, if our society provides (and you embrace) an excellent education and you are willing to live in other, and in most cases larger communities.”

In turn, I suggest that any future rural development thrust emphasize education and skill training. This emphasis will benefit farm families and non-farm families alike.

First, the emphasis is consistent with the prospects that super production, marketing and financial skills will be required in the coming decades if farmers are to be successful farmers.

Second, better skills and education will enhance the entrepreneurial abilities and productivity of others who remain in our rural communities.

Third, with better skills and education those who want to do so will be able to more easily find good paying jobs in other communities and in metropolitan areas. Their leaving the rural communities will in turn mean greater opportunities for those who farm to operate more efficiently. And their leaving will mean opportunities for those who do not move to earn higher wages in their home communities.

Further, knowledge and skills make it possible for people to change occupations and to avoid being unemployed or trapped in industries (including areas of agriculture) that become uncompetitive in world markets.

It Won’t Happen Unless Someone Pays
Lest you think that surely everyone favors better education and skill training, I remind you that education and skill training cost significant amounts of money. To make education and training the centerpiece of a rural development program could mean less money for rural credit, less money for commodity supports, less money for soil conservation and fewer tax breaks or higher taxes.

But education and training as the centerpiece of a rural program will mean better jobs in the future for today’s children, alternative employment opportunities for people who must leave farming, and better financial and production skills for tomorrow’s farmers. And it will mean a more productive U.S. society in a global competitive system.

—LPS