



Local Schools, Civic Engagement, and Community Spirit in Small Towns

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Day/Time: Friday, Apr 29th: 2-3pm ET

Location: PSTC Seminar Room 205, Menco Hall

Abstract: Rural depopulation, limited tax revenue, and teacher shortages have made many small towns in America unable to support a local school. This study considers the effects of school presence or absence on small town residents' civic engagement and community spirit. I argue that schools can be a force for civic engagement and community spirit by serving as both a site and a symbol of community. Local schools are physical sites that provide opportunities for community participation and strengthen social capital networks. Local schools are also symbols of the community, contributing to local culture and social identity. Through these connective mechanisms, small town schools can have a unifying effect that motivates greater civic engagement and strengthens community spirit. Data from a 2014 survey of 6,163 residents of 98 small towns in Iowa supports my argument. Results indicate local schools may serve as community anchors for small towns fortunate enough to have one.



Bio: Monica Whitham is an Associate Professor of Sociology at Oklahoma State University. She earned her Ph.D. from the University of Arizona. Her primary research agenda examines generosity, cooperation, and collective action in small groups, networks, and communities. Her work has been funded by the National Science Foundation and has been published in top sociology journals including the American Sociological Review, Social Psychology Quarterly, and City & Community.

