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## Education and Rural Revitalization: A Study of the Link Between Education and Economic Development

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# Education and Rural Revitalization: A Study of the Link Between Education and Economic Development

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## 2

*Miles T. Bryant*

Rural Nebraska faces economic uncertainties that perplex state leadership. The public school system is an important part of any community or state effort directed at improving rural life. This chapter analyzes the relationship of Nebraska's schools to rural economic development.

Nebraska's rural economy might be best described as a roller coaster. Its vicissitudes were captured by Nebraska humorist Roger Welsch in 1971: "Living in Nebraska is absolute hell; No ordinary man can even make a living on these godforsaken wastes; I'm doing just fine."

Though times have improved, even extraordinary Nebraskans do not always find themselves doing "just fine." Rural Nebraska still faces economic uncertainties that perplex state and local leadership. In terms of both population and commercial activity, rural Nebraska has been in a decline for much of this century. The extent of this erosion became visible during the recent farm crisis. Since then, numerous initiatives from the state legislature, the governor's office, and other state agencies have sought to help Nebraska's rural communities handle their plight. Even Congress has allocated funds for rural revitalization. Across the nation, the need to reverse rural decline has received priority attention from policy makers.

In Nebraska this long decline does not necessarily mean that the state's economic productivity has suffered; Nebraska's agricultural land generates a proportionate share of the state's economic productivity. What perplexes state and local leadership is the issue of how to sustain a viable and economically stable rural culture. Should the state keep its rural communities alive? And if so, how?

Any rural redevelopment plan must overcompensate rural populations; that is, give more per capita to those in rural areas than to those in populated areas. Thus, before one begins to analyze the complexity

of rural revitalization, one is faced with the broad policy issue of whether it is in the best interests of the state to allocate a great proportion of limited resources to rural regions. Such a policy sets the interests of the populated east against those of the sparsely populated north, south and west. Nebraska's population disparities were evident as early as 1860, when Nebraskans were concentrated within 100 miles of the Missouri River. By 1920 ribbons of populated towns streamed westward along the railroad routes. In 1989 those ribbons have disintegrated, leaving scattered pockets of people in the rural parts of the state (see figure 1). It is the needs of those remnants that drive state rural revitalization policy.

At its heart, the rural revitalization issue is one of recreating or sustaining a critical mass of rural people. A retired postman in one Nebraska town put the matter simply: "To help these towns you've got to have people. And we've got two ways to do that: We either figure out how to get new ones, or we keep the ones we've got."

These two basic approaches to reversing the population declines common to many rural communities (i.e., attracting new residents and keeping present ones) require a strong educational system.

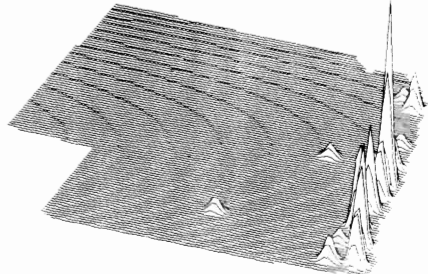
From the vantage point of the community developer, the local school is a factor in attracting new business and people, a site where local economic activity may be initiated, and an instrument of socialization. Without a local school, one could argue, a necessary community ingredient is lacking (Wall and Luther 1988a; Swain 1988).

The position that education has local economic usefulness for towns is not new to the state. The common school was one of the essential ingredients in the original founding and early development of Nebraska's rural towns. In his seminal work on the settling of the prairie, Cass G. Barns wrote, "the common school system established by early Nebraska was the keystone of progress and mental development of the state" (1930:115). One of Nebraska's early governors proclaimed that he would not rest until there were 10,000 school districts (Manley 1988), a statement fueled by his wish to see the prairie settled.

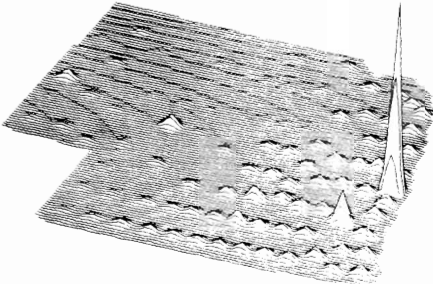
Thus, the contemporary role cast for education in rural revitalization has historical antecedent. However, the re-emergence of that role at this time in history is problematic. The primary mission of the public school system is an educative one. And since the long-range health and growth of the state are dependent upon the development of a superlative public school system, developing educational policy that attends to

**Figure 1 - Surface Maps: Nebraska Population Density**

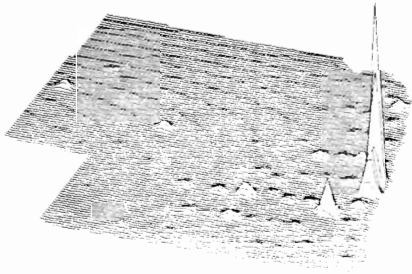
Population Density 1860



Population Density 1920



Population Density 1980



Source: Nebraska Legislative Fiscal Office.

this primary mission is essential to the long-term interests of the people of the state. The problem is that each of the two basic uses of the school to promote economic development—as a mechanism for attracting new people, and as a device for keeping current residents—runs the risk of compromising the basic educational mission in favor of short term economic gain. The primary mission of the public school system is and must remain an educative one.

### **Attracting New Residents**

As indicated above, one approach to creating the critical mass of people is attracting new residents. Schools are as essential now as they were in 1860 for communities seeking to attract new people and business. But it is not enough for a community to simply have a school; the quality of the school is important. Thus, state educational policy that supports the continuation of small rural schools while simultaneously overseeing the quality of education in such schools is an important part of a comprehensive plan of rural revitalization. It should be noted that these two features of rural education—provision of schools and attention to quality of programs—are important regardless of whether the general rural development strategy advocates assisting distressed rural areas or following a growth center strategy (Deichert and Smith 1987).

Aspects of state education that need to be interrelated with rural development strategies are consolidation, distance learning, educational service units, school board development, and educational opportunity.

**Consolidation.** A most visible part of recent education policy has been the consolidation of school districts. The state once had a huge number of very small school districts, but attrition in student numbers has necessitated some centralization. However, the general goal of school consolidation needs to be rethought in view of rural revitalization efforts.

Consolidation of school districts takes many forms. Sometimes consolidation represents the joining of a small elementary-only district with a K-12 district. Sometimes consolidation means the merger of two declining K-12 districts. Sometimes existent buildings or attendance centers are used to house the student population of more than one community. Sometimes new regional schools are built. Often a new facility is located between the participating communities.

Whatever the consolidation arrangement, by definition, some communities lose their schools. The new, consolidated school is unable to serve as a focal point, a source of community identity, and a repository of community culture for those communities that lost their schools. Lacking such a primary resource, a community's absence of a school may seal the fate of any present or future local economic development efforts. Once the school is removed from the rural community, it is almost impossible to retrieve it.

Thus, consolidating school districts requires careful evaluation. State efforts to reduce the total numbers of school districts should be constructed to coincide with rural economic development plans. If the state strategy is to develop growth centers, the educational resources within the shadow of those growth centers need to be planned carefully so that consolidation serves the needs of the regional plan. If the state strategy is to assist depressed areas, help must be provided to maintain—not displace—the rural school as one mechanism to reverse rural decline.

The strength of small rural schools is in the communities that surround them. Parent participation, small class size, close contact with teachers, a core curriculum, a set of community values that reinforces educational values—all of these exist in most small rural schools. However, while these factors contribute greatly to the affective education of students, they do not ensure a high-quality instructional program.

Again, it is important not to neglect quality. If state educational policy makers are to retreat from a goal of consolidating school districts, there must be an accompanying program to ensure that the educative mission of each school remains paramount. If economies of scale are to be sacrificed and the continuation of small rural schools is to be supported, educational quality in those schools must be equal or superior to that of larger schools.

Rural schools and the educators who make them work are particularly vulnerable to external forces. Because rural education is typically underfunded and undermanned, educators have little in the way of resources available to help them effectively analyze their own educational practices. Finding time and resources to enable rural educators to participate in inservice growth activities would be one concrete way of addressing the need for continued educational improvement.

**Distance Learning.** Distance learning promises much for Nebraska's rural schools. Presently some curricular material is delivered to schools

via satellite. A few schools are experimenting with two-way interactive television. Some use is being made, particularly in agricultural business classes, of on-line computer data banks. In all, Nebraska lags behind other states in putting technology to work in its schools. But an intensive use of modern communications technology by the entire rural school system promises the most for rural schools. Such technology offers a way for rural schools to protect the integrity of their educative mission.

As an illustration, distance learning over two-way interactive television allows neighboring school districts to design, produce, and broadcast programs together. This allows schools to share teacher resources, to expand the classroom experience of children, to make the most of existing resources, and to control the education program locally. Using this technology, students in several classrooms can instantly communicate with one another. Furthermore, once the hardware for such a system is in place, the school can become a focal point for adult learning.

The state must expand its proactive role in helping to develop distance learning. The technology exists to bring knowledge and learning opportunities to the children and adults of rural communities. If state leader are seriously committed to rural revitalization, they must make getting these technologies to Nebraska's rural communities a priority.

**Educational Service Units.** In seeking to improve the education that takes place in rural schools, a critical resource that should be better utilized is the educational service unit (ESU). Currently each county in the state is part of a service unit. There are nineteen of these units in the state. A few school districts do not belong to their local service unit, but most school districts in the state are served by an ESU.

If rural education in small schools is to keep pace with the rest of the state, teachers need continued access to staff development activities (Breed 1989). ESUs can provide such development, in the form of workshops and regional conferences in new curricular content and approaches, training in particular educational innovations, skill development with new technologies, and access to new developments in academic fields. These kinds of services are essential in countering the isolation that often prevails in rural education.

In the future, though, ESUs will have increasing difficulty meeting the demands of school districts for staff development because of fund-

ing limitations. By law ESUs may exercise their authority to levy taxes up to \$.035 per \$1,000 evaluation. A number of ESUs now tax their patrons up to that limit and still face increasing demand from schools for more activities, particularly in the area of staff development. Unable to gain additional revenues from local sources, ESU leaders have made proposals to the legislature to allocate state funds to the ESUs to provide for staff development activities. Because of the link between ESUs and rural education, and between education and rural economic development, the allocation of state funds for this type of activity would contribute much to rural revitalization.

**School Board Development.** If rural schools are to be maintained as part of a larger plan to help revitalize rural regions, the school boards that guide these schools need assistance. Local school curricular improvement and staff development activities are unlikely to take place unless supported by the local board.

Expanded in-service activities for board members could be provided by a variety of agencies, including the Nebraska School Boards Association, the colleges and state university system, the Department of Education, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Directors, and the ESUs. Presently, the only in-service opportunities board members have are provided through the Nebraska School Boards Association, which does not include all of the board members in the state.

There is reason to believe that incentives to encourage participation in such activities would be needed. A survey conducted by the author in 1986 found that around 60 percent of the board members surveyed attended regional workshops hosted by the state school boards association, but participation levels could be much higher (Bryant 1988-89). Boards, in conjunction with local superintendents, should develop working plans for their own membership relative to board development. State financial assistance with such development should be provided.

Additionally, the state needs to be clear about its expectations of school board behavior. For example, if the state were to set in place standard operating rules, these rules could protect board members from some of their worst proclivities, such as routinely becoming involved in personnel matters and student discipline matters. Not infrequently, such interference has a negative impact on administrator and teacher morale, leads to staff turnover, and produces, over the long term, instability that results in an impoverished educational program.



Simple statewide educational opportunities and requirements that would guide individual board member behavior in more detail could assist local boards in doing a better job.

**Equal Educational Opportunity.** It is widely known that there is great funding diversity in Nebraska's school districts. In terms of adjusted current expenditures per pupil in 1987-88, the top ranked school district in the state spent \$7,403 while the bottom ranked school spent \$2,202 (Bureau of Educational Research, Service and Policy Studies 1988). In that same year, the highest tax rate paid by any community (the measure of local residents' willingness to tax themselves to support their local schools) was Wolbach's 2.84-cent mill levy; the lowest was Louisville's 0.81-cent levy. Both are small towns in rural areas; both had K-12 school districts with enrollments of fewer than 400 students. Yet the amount of local educational dollars behind their respective students varied a great deal. While the consequences such disparities have for the actual education received by individual students are dependent upon a host of variables, there is little reason to doubt that such large discrepancies result in unequal opportunity for children. In particular, these discrepancies create an educational marketplace that works to the disadvantage of rural children.

Educational opportunity is not only measured by quantity—the number of teachers, books, courses, or activities. It is also related to expertise, knowledge and skill. Unfortunately for rural communities, teachers or administrators who are recognized as good at their jobs, and therefore marketable, tend to move to larger districts. These districts usually pay more, provide more benefits, and exist in communities generally judged more attractive. For example, Omaha's Westside School District ranks first in the state in terms of teacher salaries; Butte School District in Boyd County ranks last. In 1988 the average salary difference between the two was \$13,939 (Bureau of Education Research, Service and Policy Studies 1988). Left unregulated, therefore, the educational marketplace will produce rural/urban inequalities. In Nebraska those inequalities result not only from varying community tax effort and worth, but also from the amount of skill and expertise that fewer education dollars buy.

It would be difficult for state policy makers to change the perceptions people have of what is and isn't a desirable job or job location. But reductions in the huge spending differences across Nebraska school dis-

districts could accomplish two things: they could slow the inexorable movement of more gifted educators from poor to wealthy districts; and they could create a climate in which state initiatives to help retain gifted rural educators might have some chance of success.

Statewide programs to keep gifted teachers in rural schools and incentive programs for promising entering teachers could be developed. State funds could be used to augment salaries as way to sustain strong rural school personnel. Programs to help rural educators develop themselves with the stipulation that they return to rural communities could help motivate changes in typical occupational patterns in the state.

The topics addressed above are just a few that relate to the quality of education in rural schools. Rural educators as a group are often deeply committed to their students and communities. Finding ways to help and keep these educators in the rural communities is essential to the health of rural education.

### **Keeping Residents**

The strategy of keeping residents in the community also links education with rural revitalization. This strategy seeks to retain critical numbers of younger people in the community. The major obstacles to this strategy tend to be found locally, not within state policy. Thus, creative activities to merge schools and rural revitalization without compromising the educative mission of the school need to arise more from local community leadership than from statewide policy directions.

Although not often voiced, there is a simple and obvious contradiction between the educative role of the school and the community's need to retain young people. The more the school teaches about matters beyond the local sphere, the more it connects students to the world beyond the community. And the more that occurs, the less likely those students are to stay in town and remain participants in the local economy. In many small Nebraska communities, over 70 percent of a graduating class often goes on to some form of postsecondary education. In his analysis of the impact of high school on rural communities, historian Page Smith noted that "The high school did not provide the town with leaders; it simply encouraged migration to the cities" (1966:231).

### *A High School Case Study*

A survey by the author of the high school students in one Nebraska community captures student attitudes about remaining in their communities as well as the messages they believe they hear from adults and teachers.

The 315 students surveyed composed the school population of a high school-only district located in a town of about 4,500 inhabitants. The community was engaged in an economic development plan, and the survey of the high school population was conducted to provide community leadership with information about the opinions of local youth. Data relevant to the strategy of keeping youth in the community are presented below. Table 1 records the responses of students to an open-ended question asking what adults in their community commonly say to them about their futures.

Table 1 - Responses to the Question: When adults in your community talk with you about your future, what do they say to you?

Comment	Number	Percentage
No Response	92	29
"Get A Good Education"	94	30
"Be What You Want To Be"	26	8
"Plan Ahead"	26	8
"No Future in Small Town"	14	4
"No Jobs" or "Poor Pay"	7	2
Other	36	11
No Answer	20	6

Of those who answered this question, 30 percent perceived encouragement from adults about going on to more education. When asked in another question what they expected to be doing in the year after high school, 76 percent indicated they expected to be attending an institution of post-secondary education.

Interestingly, about 50 percent of the parents of these students ended their educations with high school diplomas. Thus, many of these students expect to exceed the education levels of their parents. If this is true, then this particular school and community are doing an excellent job creating future aspirations in its young. Unfortunately, as mentioned earlier, the success in creating these aspirations may well mean that the young people will leave the community.

A similar difference occurred with occupational aspirations; they were high, and they did not mirror parental occupations. Table 2 presents responses on a question about parental occupations and the students' occupational aspirations.

Of 18 occupational categories, the most popular responses were the following:

- 1) Professional who works in science, math or engineering, such as physician, scientist, veterinarian, engineer, computer scientist, or college professor in these areas (n=48; 15 percent of total surveyed).
- 2) Professional who works with people, such as clergy, lawyer, psychologist, sociologist, or college professor in these areas (n=32; 10 percent of total surveyed).
- 3) Other professional, such as artist, writer, social worker, actor, politician, or athlete (n=23; 7 percent of total surveyed).

These students aspire to professional occupations that require more education than their parents obtained. These aspirations will probably lead students to localities where professional career opportunities exist in greater numbers than in their present community.

Table 2 - Parental Occupation and Student Occupational Preference as Reported by Students\*

Occupation	(n = 315)	Father	Mother	Self at Age 30
Agriculture business		15	5	9
Clerical occupation		8	61	13
Crafts occupation		28	7	21
Farming		53	6	14
Homemaker		1	49	2
Manager		29	13	6
Military		2	0	12
Owner of business		22	15	15
Professional (doctor)		11	5	48
Professional (lawyer)		0	1	32
Nurse		1	13	18
Other profession (arts)		1	0	23
Police (security)		4	2	6
Sales		8	8	3
Barber/beautician		2	28	17
Beef fabrication		36	25	0
Skilled operator		38	17	8
Laborer		10	7	6

\*Columns do not total 315 because non-respondents are excluded.

Supporting this probability are the responses to another survey question relating to expected future residence. Sixty percent of the students in this study did not plan to live in their home town as adults. The major reason was that they did not expect to find the type of job they wanted.

The students completing this survey were relatively typical of rural Nebraska high school students. They lived in a community with an agricultural base that has been losing its commercial market share to larger nearby communities. These students shopped for most of their needs in the larger nearby area and looked to these communities for recreational activity. They did not dislike their community—many reported that they would like to raise a family in such a community—but they found its smallness inadequate for their perceived needs.

### *Perceptions and Attitudes*

If the strategy of retaining youth is to be successful, ways must be found to change these perceptions and attitudes. What community leaders need to do is multifaceted and complex, although Wall and Luther capture the central idea: "If they could create a vision of the community's potential...they might be able to keep the young people in the community after graduation" (Wall and Luther 1988a).

The steps community leaders take to develop a vision of their community and region offer the most promise relative to retaining rural youth. Rural community leadership needs to actively incorporate its youth into the social and economic life of the community, which requires the investment of energy and resources. This is referred to as the "deliberate transition of power to a younger generation of leaders" (*Visions from the Heartland* 1989).

One of the ways to incorporate youth into the leadership of a community is to involve them in the workings of that community leadership. In the present climate of rural redevelopment, there are ample opportunities to include high school students in the strategic planning process. Requesting that students participate in the planning is likely to increase their feelings of loyalty toward the community. Providing them with some voice in community discussions is one route to involvement. Identifying youth needs and seeking to provide for these should be a critical part of strategic planning. Linking school and community leadership is also a way to enhance youth involvement. Initiatives such as these work to foster a sense of loyalty on the part of a community's youth. Com-

munity leadership needs to work with the educators in the local school system to identify youth leaders.

Incorporating youth into the economic life of the community is a second method of helping to retain a critical population mass. Schools have been identified as "small business incubators" (Wall and Luther 1988b; Sher 1988). Finding ways to create small, student-operated businesses that serve to model for young people a productive, entrepreneurial spirit may help to revive community economic life. When they see that prosperity is possible, the young people of a community are more likely to remain and become economically productive.

One rural researcher described a North Carolina school-based business activity where students operate a deli-style restaurant and gross approximately \$15,000 a month (Sher 1988). Wall and Luther, of Lincoln's Heartland Center for Leadership Development, identified a school in South Dakota where disabled students make puppets for a toy firm (1988b). Examples of other student-run business include:

- A greenhouse operation producing and marketing plants and seeds;
- An herbal export business;
- A silk-screen shop designing t-shirts and posters for individuals, community events, and businesses in a resort community;
- A child development center providing day care;
- A swine breeding and feeder operation; and
- A student-operated and -licensed radio station.

Activities of this type are common in high schools, and many others are waiting to be identified. However, linking the entrepreneurial activities of creative students and teachers with community development is uncommon. That linkage is what excites many rural development proponents. (For a more thorough discussion of such partnerships see Chapter 3, "School/Business Partnerships.")

Small business incubator successes have the potential of not only initiating students into the ways of developing and operating small businesses, but also of helping a community retain some of its own monetary resources, an important potential side benefit.

### *Youth and Spending*

Rural students themselves are a market force, but they tend to take their dollars out of their rural communities. Responses on the high school survey indicate that over 50 percent of the students earn money through part-time jobs. But that money tends not to be spent in the local community. These same students report shopping in other communities for clothes, sports equipment, and shoes. They patronize other communities' fast food restaurants and movie theatres. In fact, the three major economic activities they report in their home communities are purchasing gas, haircuts, and banking services.

The economic power of the young is shown in an analysis of the spending activities of Nebraskans. Table 3 provides evidence of the contribution younger consumers make to a county's economy. Using census data and sales tax receipts for 30 randomly selected counties, seven age cohorts were examined to see if there was a relationship between the proportion of residents in particular age groups and the amount of taxable goods bought.

Table 3 - Correlation Matrix of Net Taxable Receipts (Non-Auto) With Seven Age Cohorts (Heads of Households)

	Per Capita Sales	15-24	25-34	35-44	Age 45-54	55-64	65-74	75-
Per Capita Sales	1.000	.483*	.384*	-.233	-.318*	-.591*	-.270	-.002
15-24	.483	1.000	.797	.258	-.294	-.880	-.772	-.535
25-34	.384	.797	1.000	.463	-.015	-.752	-.893	-.751
35-44	-.233	.258	.463	1.000	.472	-.127	-.569	-.839
Age 45-54	-.318	-.294	-.015	.472	1.000	.360	-.128	-.434
55-64	-.591	-.880	-.752	-.127	.360	1.000	.621	.335
65-74	-.270	-.772	-.893	-.570	-.128	.621	1.000	.756
75-	-.002	-.535	-.750	-.840	-.434	.335	.756	1.000

\*Statistically significant at the 0.05 level.

The sales variable in Table 3 was created by transforming basic sales receipts into dollars per capita per year using the following formula:

$$\frac{\text{County Non-Auto Sales Receipts}}{\text{County Population}} = \text{Average Per Capita Annual Sales}$$

This transformation controlled for the differential effects of local wealth and size of the county's population.

A similar transformation was made for each age cohort. The formula below was used to find the percentage of each cohort as part of the county population.

$$\frac{\text{Household Heads in Age Cohort}}{\text{Total Households}} = \text{Percentage of County Household Population Age Cohort Represents}$$

The resulting sets of data were then correlated.

The strong positive relationships between the younger age cohorts (15-24=.483 [p > 0.003] and 25-34=.384 [p > 0.017]) and sales tax receipts are suggestive. Increases in the size of these two age groups are associated with increases in sales tax revenues. Thus, it appears that one of the conditions for economic viability is adequate numbers of these two age cohorts. Interestingly, negative relationships exist for the other age cohorts, meaning that greater population in these age groups is associated with lesser sales tax revenues. Clearly these older cohorts participate in the economic life of localities, but the relationship of their numbers to consumption is less clear.

These county statistics suggest that the youth contribution is essential. But according to the high school survey, that contribution is likely to be made in the regional commercial center, not in the small rural community. On most of the survey measures of consumption, over 70 percent of the students reported traveling to another community. Thus, rural revitalization needs to attend to the spending patterns of the younger population and seek ways to help small communities regain some portion of this market. Student- and school-generated enterprises are one very real way to accomplish this.

## Conclusion

The resources that flow to education and the role that is envisioned for education will vary according to the orientation of Nebraska policy makers toward rural revitalization. The analysis above shows some of the areas of concern that arise when education is expected to directly contribute to the economic fortunes of a local community.



If education is to be used as an instrument to help rural community leaders improve their local economies, it is important that the mission of education to educate the youth of the state not be compromised.

Many policy alternatives need to be pursued simultaneously. District consolidation efforts need to be carefully orchestrated with regional and community planning. Educational leadership needs to develop state initiatives to bring distance learning to all rural schools, to expand the capacity of the service units, and to provide much greater resources to local school boards. Additionally, rural schools and educators need help, not to look like their larger school cousins, but so that they can create equal opportunities for all of Nebraska's children.

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