Smalltown USA

Smalltown is a sleepy little community nestled in the rolling hills of the Northern Piedmont. It is off the beaten track, and, while up to date, has a slightly antique air about it. The forces that have made the rest of the country multicultural and diverse seem to have missed Smalltown. This is America, but it is a different America. According to the data released in the 2000 census, the United States has changed dramatically in the last decade, with its population growing by some 30 million to more than 280 million citizens. A large part of this growth arose from an increase in Hispanic and Asian immigrants, transforming the towns and cities of the United States. But this sea change barely has touched Smalltown.

In the 1990 Census, Smalltown had 7,848 residents. Today, ten years later, it has 7,846 residents. It remains 97% white, a percentage that grows to nearly 100% when one factors out the only diverse pocket in Smalltown—the idyllic campus of Near Ivy College. “Everybody gets along here, and everybody knows each other,” says Chip Berry, gazing from under his red cap with its oversize logo advertising the local beer. Some might think that Smalltown is isolated, but its residents don’t. “We’ve got a MacDonaldds, a Bob Evans, a Wendy’s, and a Domino’s,” he said. “And we are getting an Applebees and a Denny’s. We are with it.”

Sixty-three-year-old Wayne Huber, the city manager, is among those who prefer to keep Smalltown the way it is and always has been—small and friendly. He grumbles about the Ph. D.s on the council who are always talking about Black and Hispanic people coming to Smalltown. “The only reason we have Blacks and Hispanics is because the college draws them in an effort to be diverse,” observed Huber. “The fact is everyone gets along and we don’t need to look for ways to divide us.”

Huber represents the way most of Smalltown residents view their community and the outside world. They like the cosmopolitan flavor that the college brings, but enough is enough. They don’t need the troubles that they see on national television. They are proud of the fact that there has not been one homicide in a decade. Paradoxically, the local newspaper, the Express, has adopted the motto “a diverse community is our greatest asset.”

The public schools have only the slightest hint of diversity. Of the 264 teachers in the district, one is Black and one is Hispanic, which is about as many ethnic teachers as there are ethnic students. Yet, the town is not hostile to multiculturalism. In fact, the fire and police departments are taking Spanish lessons. They want to be prepared to serve all the people of the community. They don’t see themselves as hostile to change, but they are quite content with the slow pace of change of the past decades. They know the world is changing. They have no need, however, to speed up what is inevitable.
Against this backdrop, Jerry Larkin, a veteran social studies teacher of 15 years, has tried to keep current with what is happening in social studies education. In fact, he feels the obligation, if not the duty, to take summer courses and maintain close ties to Near Ivy College, his alma mater. Larkin had come to Smalltown from Philadelphia as a student at the local college. He had liked life in the town, fell in love with a local girl, married and settled down. He had never regretted his decision, but sometimes he chaffed at the parochialism of his fellow citizens. Still, they were good neighbors and well-intentioned people.

In recent years, Larkin had become more active in the state and national Social Studies Council. He went to the national meetings, listened to papers, and tried to incorporate the best practices into his teaching. He was the kind of teacher any school would be delighted to have on staff. He was professionally talented and well liked, especially by his students. He was one of four people, not connected with the college, who subscribed to the *New York Review of Books*.

Larkin reasoned that the best preparation he could give his students for the world outside of Smalltown was an introduction to it. Increasingly, graduates were leaving Smalltown simply because there were not enough good jobs. Some, of course, left to satisfy youthful curiosity. Over the years, he had fallen into the habit of shoptalk with some of the faculty at Near Ivy. Recently, the talk had turned to class activities that would lessen the insularity of his social studies students. The college professors were interested in the problem for their own reasons. Many of the college students had a narrow view of the world and found college life in Smalltown to be non-threatening.

As they discussed broadening the students’ perspective, it occurred to Larkin that travel, the typical senior trip, for example, was not enough to give the students a sense of life in another place. He thought they needed a closer contact with the people in other places. With that end in mind, Larkin set about to plan next year’s senior field trip. They would not be walking on the Mall in Washington next year. They were going to Harlem.

To make the most of this proposed trip, Larkin wanted to include ideas from his colleagues at Smalltown High. He talked to his friend, Grace Pearson, in the English department, who got excited about the prospect. She observed that her unit on Black literature, especially the Harlem Renaissance, could be completed by a literary tour of Harlem. Grace willingly joined in the planning of this trip.

A surprising source of help came from Fred Grimley, the band and choir director. Grimly, an ardent Baptist had a broad interest in music and was enthralled by the idea of visiting Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem for both religious and professional reasons. The history of the church with Adam Clayton Powell as its leader and the great music suggested to him a unit for the seniors about religion and music. This way, said Grimly, they would get the most benefit out of their visit. Fred was absolutely enthusiastic. The interaction and excitement of the three teachers moved the project forward quickly, perhaps, too quickly.
As the three teachers planned and discussed the trip with their students, word got out, and principal Adam Paige was unhappy to learn of this proposed trip from the community rather than the teachers. When the superintendent called to inquire about the field trip to Harlem, Paige knew he had to talk to the teachers soon.

“What’s going on with this trip to Harlem?” Adam asked Jerry Larkin, his social studies teacher and the senior advisor for next year. “People are asking me about this and I haven’t the foggiest.”

“Well, there’s nothing really to say. We’re just planning next year’s senior trip as we do every year. Grace, Fred, and I are trying to tie the senior trip to our curriculum in a way so the trip becomes a capstone of several courses of the senior year, including music, literature, history, and religion. The option that we are working on right now is a trip to New York City with a focus on African-American history, culture, literature, music, and religion. I also believe that this is a wonderful multicultural experience. We don’t have the diversity in Smalltown that is typical of most places. Many of our students are going to leave Smalltown and they should be prepared for the real world.”

Adam Paige was thoughtful and admitted that it sounded pretty good to him also, but he was troubled by the call from the superintendent. It was nothing that was said, but it was the tone and hardness of the call. He respected all three teachers; they were three of the very best teachers he had at SHS. On the other hand, he heard the note of concern in the voice of the superintendent: Is this a good idea?

Later that afternoon, principal Paige went by the Smalltown Market to pick up some things for dinner, and was putting his groceries in the car, when he heard “Hey, Adam, how are you?”

It was Chuck Kramer, his neighbor and school board member. “I have been hearing about the Harlem trip, and, I’ve got to tell you, some people are a little worried about it. Me, too, to be honest. I was in New York a few years ago, and you always have to watch your back. It’s a dangerous place. And, Harlem, for pete’s sake. Harlem is always on television. What’s the matter with Washington? You know, I went to Washington on the senior trip and I still remember the good time.”

“Well, Chuck, we are just planning. There is nothing firm here. But, we are looking for something different and, I gotta tell you, the kids like the Harlem idea.”

“That may be,” responded Chuck, “but, if you continue, I am afraid there is going to be trouble.”

“Trouble?” asked Adam, “What do you mean, trouble?”

“I am already getting angry calls. People don’t want their kids put at risk. These are dangerous places. And, there is no need for them to go there. I know the
superintendent shares my views on this. And so does most of the board. Let’s not polarize the community over a silly field trip.”

“Ok,” temporized Adam, “I’ll talk to you later.”

As Adam drove home from the market he was both angry and depressed. He was angry because of the narrowness of many of the citizens of Smalltown, and depressed because he knew he was in for a hard time. Was it worth it? He wondered.

Only the three teachers and a few students knew specifics of the trip. But it was shaping into an interesting venture. Through the internet and strategic phone calls, Larkin and his group learned that they could take a guided literary tour of Harlem and see the places where famous Black writers lived and worked. After their tour, it was possible for them to arrange a group luncheon that featured authentic African-American soul food. Not something to be found in the Smalltown vicinity, to be sure. Saturday evening promised something really exciting. The class could drop by the Apollo Theater for a mix of jazz and general Black music. The Apollo was used to group reservations and somebody would be on hand to give their group of seniors a short talk about the Apollo Theater and music in Harlem.

Sunday would be a real treat. At the suggestion of Fred Grimley, one of the music students called the Abyssinian Baptist Church and found that they would be welcome at the Sunday services. The choir would perform a special concert for visitors to Abyssinian after the regular 11:00 service. And, then, of course, was the obligatory visit to the United Nations and, finally, the bus ride home. They would stay over Saturday night in a dormitory at St. John’s University, who had offered them a great deal on group accommodation. There was a lot of work to be done, but everyone was excited about the possibilities—students and teachers alike.

Things appeared to be moving faster than they were, thought Adam Paige. This trip is not ‘til next year, but the excitement of the students was contagious. Thus, Principal Paige was not altogether surprised by another call from the superintendent and the suggestion that they meet downtown at the board to talk about the senior field trip to Harlem. Before Adam Paige could decide on a strategy in speaking with the superintendent, he had to decide how he felt about the trip.

How did he feel? Three of his best teachers were leading the trip, and the students were enthusiastic about it. On the one hand, it was an exciting possibility and genuine learning experience. Clearly, the trip would broaden the perspectives of the students, provide a multicultural view of city life, relate to the literature, music, and history being studied, and it would be truly an adventure for kids from Smalltown. On the other hand, there was bound to be strong opposition from the conservative parents of Smalltown; there was the apparent danger of life in the big city, the unfamiliarity of it all, and a general feeling that the trip would be more of a novelty than the traditional trip to the nation’s capital. On balance, he liked the idea, but was fearful of the town’s reaction. How far was he willing to push this idea? He could always back down if the stakes got
too high. He had to prepare to meet with the superintendent. Should he take Jerry Larkin with him? Should he take a student representative? What if the superintendent warns him and then says, “but, it’s your decision?” Could the clergy get involved? Would the Catholics object to visiting a Baptist service on Sunday? The Baptists might object to an overnight at St. John’s University, a Catholic institution. How safe would it be for the students? New York was, after all, not Smalltown.

**Discussing the Case**

- What should the principal’s position be with the superintendent?
- What is the leadership role of the principal?
- What are the reasons to go forward with the trip?
- What are the reasons to change the destination of the trip?
- Prepare your presentation to the superintendent?
- Should you talk to the teachers first?
- Should you devise a graceful exit strategy?