

“Turning Their Back on Kids”: Inclusions, Exclusions, and the Contradictions of Schooling in Gentrifying Rural Communities



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In this ethnographic case study of amenity-driven rural development, we illustrate how the school as a local institution can provide social, cultural, and educational privilege to some students while systematically withholding it from others. Rural gentrification, although representing new resources to historically struggling places, can exacerbate existing inequalities or create new ones, or both. This study not only challenges more communitarian visions of the rural school-community relationship, but also underscores the complexities and contradictions of rural development that can often inadvertently create, reproduce, or deepen social, cultural, and economic divides. These issues assume a particular saliency at a time of pronounced spatial, social, and economic division in the United States given that local institutions like public schools play vital roles in either bridging or widening these divides.

Keywords: rural development, gentrification, social class reproduction, social inequality

This article explores the impacts of contextual influences on children’s schooling and educational experiences through a case study of amenity-driven rural development, immigration, and gentrification in the rural West. Rural schools are frequently described as local institutions that provide communities with coherent shared and intergenerational identities, functioning as centers of local civic life, and contributing to social and economic well-being (Tieken 2014; Schafft and Harmon 2010; Lyson

2002). Others have argued that smaller rural school environments have socially and academically protective factors that can have particularly positive outcomes for low-income youth (Coladarci 2006; Howley 1996). These imaginations of rural schooling are broadly consistent with understandings of rural places as bucolic, communitarian spaces, perhaps isolated from the wider world but with unique stocks of social capital (Flora and Flora 2013; Yarwood 2005; Halfacree 1995; Howarth 1995).

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However, other research has challenged these representations, pointing to a variety of ways in which rural schools may create or reproduce existing inequalities and exclusions (Miller and Edin 2022; McHenry-Sorber and Schafft 2015; Corbett 2010, 2014; Sherman and Sage 2011; Groenke and Nespoor 2010; Budge 2006). Furthermore, idealized imaginaries of rural communities mask significant variability in their socioeconomic, demographic, historical, and cultural characteristics (Hamilton et al. 2008), rural development pathways, and indeed patterns of social inclusion and exclusion more generally (Miller, Votruba-Drzal, and Coley 2019).

Within rural scholarship, and especially within the context of longer-term patterns of urbanization, rural decline, and out-migration (Johnson and Lichter 2019; Carr and Kefalas 2009; Fitchen 1981), the influx of human, social, and financial capital into rural areas is typically understood as a net positive as well as an encouraging development trajectory with often positive outcomes for local economic activity and the capacity of institutions, including schools (Glasgow and Brown 2012; Brown and Glasgow 2008; Kim, Marcouiller, and Deller 2005). Don Albrecht (2010, 16), for example, suggests that high-amenity rural areas are those with the best chances for bucking trends of rural depopulation, and "the presence or absence of natural amenities has become the best predictor of nonmetro population change in recent decades."

However, outcomes of this type of development may be uneven for communities, resulting in unequal distribution of and access to social, institutional, and economic benefits (Krannich and Petrzelka 2003), in the process importing urban and national inequalities into what were once more homogenous communities (Sherman 2018; Ulrich-Schad 2018; Brown-Saracino 2017; Lichter and Ziliak 2017; Golding 2016; Winkler 2013; Gosnell and Abrams 2011; Lichter and Brown 2011). Dwight Hines (2010, 288), for example, describes rural gentrification as "a form of colonization of formerly predominantly working-class domains by ex-urban middle-class Americans." Most analyses of the uneven outcomes of rural gentrification have focused on housing markets and affordability

(see, for example, Sherman 2021b; Gkartzios and Ziebarth 2016; Golding 2016), in which housing demands created by amenity-driven in-migration create cost inflations, resulting in increased economic and housing insecurity for lower-resourced residents. Other work examines rural labor-market shifts and bifurcation with the creation of lower-wage and often seasonal service-sector work (Slack 2014), labor-market polarizations that reflect national-level changes long in the making (VanHeuvelen and Copas 2019).

However, amenity-driven gentrification can exacerbate existing inequalities and create new ones beyond bifurcated housing and labor markets. While increasing social inequality, rural gentrification and in-migration also tend to decrease social ties and sense of community for local residents (Thompson, Johnson, and Hanes 2016; Nelson, Oberg, and Nelson 2010; Salamon 2003). Residential displacement of long-time residents can result in diminished social interaction with long-time neighbors and community, creating and exacerbating social isolation for the most disadvantaged residents (Thompson, Johnson, and Hanes 2016; Ooi, Laing, and Mair 2015; Winkler 2013; Larsen and Hutton 2012). These processes of social and residential displacement are particular characteristics of rural gentrification and can undermine the protective factors commonly ascribed to rural communities, such as social cohesion and informal support (Stockdale 2010).

In regard to local educational systems, gentrification can contribute to the process by which schools as local institutions provide numerous forms of social, cultural, and educational privilege to some students while systematically withholding it from others. As shown by Emily Miller and Kathryn Edin (2022), because of the ways in which social ties are historically embedded within rural communities, negative school interactions and experiences can be passed down across generations and within families and social networks, reinforcing privilege and deepening disadvantage (see also Butler and Muir 2017; Shucksmith 2012). Further, findings by Jessica Drescher and her colleagues (2022) in this issue suggest that community socioeconomic status is less likely to predict school achievement in rural than urban areas,

and that rural communities with higher socioeconomic status experience fewer benefits of rurality in terms of achievement. These findings raise further doubts about the degree to which the benefits of rural gentrification are spread evenly among students.

Scholarship exploring these contradictory processes not only challenges communitarian visions of the rural school-community relationship, but also underscores rural development's complexities and contradictions that often inadvertently create or reproduce social, cultural, and economic divides (Schafft et al. 2018; Sherman 2009; Schafft and Greenwood 2003; Bourdieu 1986). Given the resurgence of urban-to-rural migration spurred by the coronavirus pandemic (Banse 2020; Berliner 2020), these resource inequalities may well become even more pronounced and problematic in the future (Mueller et al. 2021), underscoring the need to better understand the role of local institutions such as schools in creating or ameliorating social divisions and inequalities. This article examines these processes and contextualizes them through ethnographic data collected in a remote rural area covering more than one hundred square miles and four distinct communities. Research participants included many with current and past ties to the local schools.

We describe the social class inequality in the community, including the divide between well-resourced in-migrants and mostly low-income and working-class locals. We then focus on the numerous mechanisms by which local schools fail to equally distribute the resources and services that gentrification and economic development bring. Instead, we show that even better-resourced rural schools continue to privilege children of the wealthy and well educated while creating additional roadblocks for those whose parents lack income and wealth to pay for access to sports and other extracurricular activities; human capital to navigate difficult and complex homework and curricula; and cultural capital to forge and maintain social network connections with elites. We also illustrate how social class-related differences in educational

attainment and aspirations influence the ability of both parents and students to navigate the pathway to higher education and out-migration that are understood as necessary for more lucrative careers and leadership opportunities even within the community. Through in-depth interviews with parents on both ends of the social class and rural-urban spectrum, as well as numerous adults who are themselves alumni of the local public schools, we illustrate how improved economic and educational conditions driven by amenity-related rural development may result not in better chances for all, but rather a continuing reinforcing and reproduction of social inequalities between the most and the least advantaged residents.

METHODS AND FIELD SITE

This research was conducted in Paradise Valley, a mostly white mountainous region in Washington State that transitioned from logging to a mainly tourism and service-based economy over the past several decades.¹ More than a half a million visitors annually come to the area to enjoy outdoor recreation, including hunting, fishing, hiking, biking, skiing, rock climbing, and water sports.² The recreation and tourism industry now dwarfs extractive industries in their share of the local labor market and economy (Census Bureau 2016a), although the historical legacies of resource extraction continue to be important to the local culture.

The Paradise Valley region has a population of roughly five thousand year-round residents (Census Bureau 2015) across the four communities, only two of which are incorporated, and all of which are served by a single regional school district that includes a public grade school and high school on adjoining campuses. All of the communities depend on amenity tourism, vacationers, retirees, and second-home owners for their economic base to some degree, and all have experienced significant in-migration of wealthy ex-urbanites in recent decades as well, including both retirement-aged adults and much younger adults with school-aged children, often moving for quality-of-life

1. All names of people and places (except the state itself) in this paper are pseudonyms. The region is more than 95 percent white (Census Bureau 2015, 2016a).

2. Sources of local information are omitted in order to protect confidentiality of participants and community.

Table 1. Employment by Selected Industry for Paradise Valley’s Two Largest Incorporated Towns (Percent)

Industry	1980	1990	2000	2010–2014
Agriculture, forest, fisheries, and mining	10.9	6.4	7.2	6.4
Construction	6.5	11.6	7.4	7.5
Manufacturing	20.7	10.3	2.7	6.4
Retail	17.2	25.3	13.0	10.5
Entertainment and recreation	9.5	1.4	24.7	30.8
Unemployment rate (all working age)	24.2	11.9	8.8	13.1

Source: U.S. Census Data source for 1980, 1990, 2000 (Minnesota Population Center 2016); American Community Survey source for 2010–2014: (U.S. Census Bureau 2016a).

reasons.³ Although in-migrants historically preferred the towns closest to the mountains, over time all of the communities have received substantial in-migration.

As shown in table 1, employment in natural resource-based industries fell between 1980 and 1990 in Paradise Valley’s two most populous towns, then stabilized with a smaller share of local employment. Manufacturing, which has historically consisted mostly of forest-product businesses such as lumber mills in Paradise Valley (for classification information, see Census Bureau 2016b), fell significantly between 1980 and 2000, eventually rebounding slightly between 2010 and 2014, but still well below 1980 to 1990 levels. Construction and retail both grew between 1980 and 1990, before falling significantly again in 2000. Construction, reflecting the steady demand for new homes, was the only one of these four industrial sectors to employ a (slightly) larger proportion of local workers in 2010 than it did in 1980. Employment in the arts, entertainment, recreation accommodation, and food-services sector has followed a very different trajectory, falling from 9.5 percent in 1980 to a low of 1.4 percent of employment in 1990, and then rising to nearly 25 percent in 2000, and close to 31 percent by 2010 (Minnesota Population Center 2016; Census Bureau 2016a).⁴ By 2010, this tourism-associated sector employed as many workers as did the other four categories combined.

At the same time, between 2000 and 2010 Paradise Valley’s unemployment rate rose considerably after falling in the previous decades, reflecting both the impacts of the Great Recession and the economic instability inherent in heavy reliance on the tourism sector for local employment. Although many of the tourism-based jobs tend to be seasonal, low-wage, or part-time, the growth of tourism and in-migration by wealthy newcomers has contributed to expanding tax bases and rising housing values and allowed for improvements in local educational infrastructure. In 2019, the community’s high school was ranked by a national publication as being within the top twenty of the state’s more than five hundred schools, which many locals eagerly pointed to as evidence of the area’s rising level of resources and the school as an important local amenity.

For this study, the first author collected data during ten months of intensive qualitative field research in Paradise Valley from 2014 to 2015, which included eighty-four open-ended in-depth interviews and ten months of ethnographic observation and participation. Interviews lasted from one to four hours, the average being about two hours. The majority of interviews took place in participants’ homes, ranging from large, airy, artisan-crafted modern houses showcasing picture windows with extensive views, to rental homes, subsidized apartments, and cramped singlewide and

3. According to local estimates, more than 50 percent of homes in the region are owned by people who do not live there full time.

4. This dip in 1990 reflects a local crash in this industry due to speculation in a tourism-related venture that fell through in the late 1980s.

travel trailers in various states of disrepair. Some participants chose not to meet in their homes; these interviews took place instead in settings including public parks, coffee shops, pubs and bars, work offices, the community center, and the local grocery store.

Interviews were digitally recorded (with participants' consent), and transcribed verbatim. Each transcript also included detailed field notes and memos written generally within twenty-four hours of the interview in order to provide additional insight and observation. The final sample was 43 percent male and 57 percent female ($n = 36$ and 48). The average age of participants was about fifty (ranging from eighteen to eighty), and the average number of years spent in the region was twenty-three (ranging from less than a year to eighty years). Based on self-reported income and the federal poverty guidelines, about 24 percent ($n = 20$) of the sample were classified as poor; 30 percent were low-income (above the poverty line but less than 200 percent of it; $n = 25$); and 46 percent ($n = 39$) were middle-income or above (greater than 200 percent of the poverty line and including some very wealthy individuals).

In addition to local resident interviews, the ethnographic research involved taking part in numerous activities and immersion into the community. This included approximately twelve hours of regular volunteer work every week between three locations: a public library, a food bank, and a family support center. It also entailed volunteering for numerous special events, including benefits for local nonprofit organizations, holiday celebrations for the public, and charity events. Beyond these structured activities, the ethnographic work also included involvement in the daily life of the community and getting to know as many people as possible from different social strata. This meant shopping at local stores and frequenting local services; regularly attending yoga classes and line dancing; cross-country skiing and hiking with community members; attending parties, church services, plays, films, lectures, concerts, and gallery openings; and investing as much

time and energy as possible into building relationships with residents across the class spectrum. It also meant being open with everyone about the research agenda. Ethnographic observations were recorded in hundreds of pages of field notes typed over the course of the year, generally within twenty-four hours of the original observations.

Interview participants were recruited in various ways, including ads placed periodically on the local electronic bulletin board, face-to-face recruiting during the volunteer work, the efforts of several key informants with extensive social ties, and snowball sampling. Interviewing continued until a saturation point was reached and additional interviews neither produced new analytical themes nor represented new populations or perspectives. Transcripts and field notes were later analyzed and coded for both anticipated and new themes using NVivo software, which allows for the creation of multiple levels of coding, and thus identification of themes in the data, and variations within those themes. As data were analyzed through multiple stages of coding, Jennifer Sherman continued to check our understandings against those of locals in the field, through both comparison with their interview narratives and discussion with participants and key informants. The final sample of interview and ethnographic participants included multiple adults who worked presently or had worked in the local school district, as well the school superintendent, many alumni of the local schools, and numerous parents of school-age children.

The participants in this research are separated into two ideal-typical groups, newcomers and old-timers, characterized as such based on a five-point index that includes their time in the community (less than versus more than or equal to twenty years); income (middle income or higher versus low income or poor); education (bachelor's degree or higher versus less than a bachelor's degree); political stance (liberal versus conservative); and cultural orientation.⁵ Not all short-term residents are categorized as newcomers and not all long-term

5. The cultural orientation measure was constructed to address the cultural divide often referred to as Lycradenim or spandex-Carhartts by community locals. Newcomer culture is measured as preferences for fine arts, music, and theater, as well as specific outdoor and leisure activities, including hiking, biking, cross-country

residents are considered old-timers because social class status makes up a significant component of the index and can override length of residency in the final classification. Although time in the valley often predicts (or is predicted by) social class, political leaning, and cultural orientation, it is not an exact match for all individuals.⁶ Nor are all individuals perfect fits for their final classification, although for most it is consistent with the ways in which they and others in the community view them. The sample includes close to equal numbers of each group, forty-three newcomers and forty old-timers, distributed similarly across the region.⁷

Taken as groups, newcomers and old-timers look different in a number of ways. In terms of the components that make up the classifications, the trends are clear: although the average age of the two groups is similar in the interview sample (forty-nine years for newcomers, fifty-one for old-timers), newcomers, on average, had lived less than fifteen years in the valley; old-timers spent an average of more than thirty years. Most newcomers (70 percent; $n = 29$) had moved from or spent a large portion of their lives in urban areas; less than a third of old-timers (30 percent; $n = 12$) had. Close to three-quarters (74 percent; $n = 31$) of newcomers were classified as middle-income; only 18 per-

cent of old-timers ($n = 7$) were. Just 7 percent of newcomers ($n = 3$) were low-income, relative to 54 percent of old-timers ($n = 21$). Another 28 percent of old-timers ($n = 11$) were below the poverty line, versus 19 percent of newcomers ($n = 8$).⁸ Newcomers mostly had a bachelor's degree or higher (74 percent), but just 8 percent of old-timers did.⁹ Newcomers tended to have more-educated parents as well: 64 percent of newcomers had college-educated parents, whereas just 26 percent of old-timers did. Old-timers had also often experienced harder living. More than 38 percent of old-timers discussed having past or current drug or alcohol problems, relative to 7 percent of newcomers.¹⁰ Fifty-six percent of old-timers reported having experienced some form of abuse as children or adults; 34 percent of newcomers did.

Other differences between the two groups are noticeable as well. Newcomers were more likely to be employed at the time of interview (60 percent versus 41 percent of old-timers). They were also slightly more likely to be married (67 percent versus 59 percent of old-timers), but old-timers had an average of 2.1 children, while newcomers averaged 1.4. Old-timers were more than twice as likely to attend church regularly (29 percent versus 14 percent of newcomers). Both groups were mostly white,

skiing, trail running, triathlons, and rock climbing. Old-timer culture is measured as preferences for television, video games, or more traditionally rural outdoor and leisure activities, including hunting and fishing, snowmobiling, and horse packing.

6. For example, six individuals classified as old-timers have lived in the valley for less than twenty years, and nine classified as newcomers lived there for more than twenty.

7. One participant remains unclassified, as he split the measure and was not classifiable. Sample distribution is similar across the towns in the region, with the exceptions of Eagle Flat, its largest town (population greater than one thousand), and Pinedale, its smallest town, with a population of less than 150. The interviewees from this tiny remote community included only newcomers, reflecting the town's makeup and appeal to those most heavily invested in outdoor recreation. Distribution is listed here by pseudonym, from largest to smallest town. Old-Timers: 61 percent Eagle Flat; 21 percent Reliance; 18 percent Outpost; 0 percent Pinedale. Newcomers: 44 percent Eagle Flat; 23 percent Reliance; 16 percent Outpost; 16 percent Pinedale.

8. Half of poor newcomers practiced *primitive survivalism*, a popular subculture based on subsistence techniques that did not generate income. A number of these individuals did have significant wealth despite lacking income.

9. In Washington State, 32.9 percent of residents have a bachelor's degree or higher (Census Bureau 2015).

10. Five of those old-timers (13 percent) had issues with methamphetamine use in particular; no newcomer discussed current or past methamphetamine usage. However, though rarely discussed openly in interviews, use of marijuana was known to be relatively common among both groups. By 2014, marijuana was legal in Washington State for recreational use.

but newcomers in the sample were slightly more so (95 percent), with just one participant of Asian race and another of Latinx ethnicity. Old-timers were 85 percent white, with one Asian participant, and five reporting some Native American heritage.¹¹

RESULTS: EDUCATION AND INEQUALITY IN PARADISE VALLEY

Inequalities in both symbolic and real resources (Bourdieu 1986) not only deepened social divides within the community, but also created systematic exclusions, both formal and informal. Experiences with (and resultant attitudes toward) schooling represented a primary mechanism of this dynamic. Parents' levels of education and experiences in school influence their goals and attitudes toward education for their children, a phenomenon that may be particularly pronounced in rural areas (Fitchen 1981). Mara Tieken (2016), for example, notes the long-time lag in college-going rates between rural and urban students. Part of this lag is due to structural barriers, including financial constraints, proximity to higher education institutions, and rural labor markets that do not provide the economic rewards of college going that other places do. But the gap is also a consequence of differential aspirations, in which rural youth are less likely to have parents with college degrees and more likely to come from areas that at least historically have been defined by industries that did not require post-secondary credentialing (but see Brown and Schafft 2019; Petrin, Schafft, and Meece 2014).

Different Expectations, Different Experiences: Human Capital and Parental Aspirations for their Children

Both old-timers and newcomers discussed the importance of education, although to differing degrees and often with different goals (see, for example, Byun, Meece, and Aggar 2017; Schmidt-Wilson 2013). A higher proportion of newcomers who were parents, 55 percent ($n = 16$) versus 40 percent of old-timer parents ($n = 14$), listed education as a top parenting goal.

The differing reasons for education as a goal reflected both divergent cultural norms and parents' levels of human capital. Differing aspirations for children are a key part of social class-based differences in parenting styles and resources that provide middle-class children with advantages over working-class and poor children within educational systems and institutions (Lareau and Calarco 2012; Lareau 2003; Kohn 1959). Within rural areas, educational attainment and aspirations may be further depressed because of the extent to which educational attainment is associated with leaving the (rural) home community, creating particular conflict for youth with strong rural identities and community attachments (Corbett 2020; Petrin, Schafft, and Meece 2014). Whereas newcomers often described education as an important end in and of itself, old-timers more often discussed it vaguely as a way of securing local work and achieving upward mobility.

This was the case for old-timer Chad Lloyd, a twenty-eight-year-old low-income sawmill worker who had four children. Chad had not finished high school, and later pursued his GED. For him, education was a tool that would allow his children to increase their employment options:

I want 'em to go to college. I want 'em to get a good job where they don't have to work so many hours that they don't get to see their kids. My biggest thing is, "You're goin' to college. I'm not goin' through all this so you can do what I did!" [laughs] Yeah. All I want is them to be happy and do better than I did. I think that's every parent's wish. "Do better than me, dang it!" [laughs]¹²

Tilda Conner, a thirty-six-year-old low-income careworker with a high school education, had a similar goal for her teenage daughter: "I hope that she goes to college. She's got so many great ideas. And I want her to be—every parent wants their kid to be better than they were, and I do."

In contrast, newcomers' educational aspira-

11. Most of these participants were not enrolled members of federally recognized tribes.

12. This quote and several others originally appear in the book, *Dividing Paradise: Rural Inequality and the Diminishing American Dream* (University of California Press, 2021).

tions were often more ambitious and less focused on employment outcomes (but see Schmidt-Wilson 2013). Newcomers also tended to have much clearer understandings of what was needed to achieve educational goals. They spoke specifically about the costs of different types of colleges, the potential for different types of scholarships, and the importance of grades and extracurricular activities to securing admission into more competitive and prestigious colleges and universities:

I think in this family there is an expectation that they go to college. I think we are in a little bit of denial. I am not sure exactly how we are going to make that work financially, but we just kind of hope things work out. . . . So I have been reminding him, you know, every Ivy League school has a soccer team. He could do worse. (William Turner, sixty-two-year-old middle-income retiree)

We certainly hope that they are bright, and we hope that they push it, and we hope that they—you know, partly one of the incentives is if they do well, there will be help with college. If they don't do well, we are paying for all their college and money isn't going to be that easy. . . . I am hoping that they push it—you know, [their mom] went to Berkeley. Well, right away our son wants to go Berkeley. OK, well, then you need to do the bonus work. You know? That's a pretty good school. (Andrew Bowden, forty-six-year-old middle-income carpenter)

Newcomers not only encouraged their children to think in these sorts of terms, but often implicitly and explicitly judged children who were not similarly oriented. Frank Brooks, a fifty-three-year-old middle-income entrepreneur, explained this distinction as he saw it: “My daughter had a few more friends who had similar goals and were able not just to get through high school, but to get straight As and go to a good school and those sorts of things. There's definitely—that's where the chasm is, just going to school to get through or trying to achieve something. So it's definitely, in my mind, that's an us and them thing.”

Although both groups described sincere de-

sires for their children to go to college, their abilities to guide their children were influenced by their different orientations and understandings of how to navigate the process, starting with K–12 education. Different levels of parental cultural and human capital often translated into much more proactive involvement and direction for the educational experiences of newcomers' children. Newcomers were much more likely to send their children to private schools prior to high school and to actively manage their children's participation in different courses and extracurricular activities. They were also more likely to feel that they had efficacy within the school system in ensuring that their children's needs were met, also commonly associated with higher social class and education (Calarco 2014; Lareau 2003; Fan and Chen 2001). Their sense of comfort in advocating for children's needs was often amplified by the small-town setting and close social ties to teachers and school administrators, many of whom were also newcomers. High school senior Jason Hill explained: “At this point [Paradise Valley High School] is mostly all just new teachers that don't really, that aren't really connected to the old-timers at all.” Old-timers were much more likely to complain of problems in the local schools—their own as well as their children's, and to feel like they lacked agency in addressing them. Many described feelings of abandonment and bias in the school system that ultimately undermined their support for their children's education and their abilities to advocate for them.

ADVOCACY AND EFFICACY IN PARADISE VALLEY SCHOOL DISTRICT

We talk about these kids that don't really eat enough and whose parents aren't there, or they're in jail, or they're on meth. We have—not a very big population like them, but it's there. And I wish we could get that taken care of. . . . 'Cause you see those kids that are always absent and never have their homework in, and always losing every library book. Well, that's because your mom's high all the time. (Emily Hill, forty-seven-year-old middle-income Paradise Valley elementary school teacher)

For old-timers, the sense of bias in the local schools was pervasive and dates to the beginning of the tourism industry's growth in the late 1980s. Both parents and more recent alumni told stories of unfair treatment. It was common for old-timers, including many with low educational attainment, to homeschool their children after repeated frustrations with local schools. Their complaints ranged from children's not receiving enough help with special needs, to feeling that children were unjustly targeted by teachers and school officials, to the extra costs for participation in certain activities, including sports. Asa Hobson, who had lived most of his thirty-eight years in the valley, had experienced problems with the local schools as a student, though he went on to eventually get an AA degree. He described feeling abandoned at Paradise Valley High School, where he received no guidance about how to pursue college:

It just was like this mentality back then that they could get away with because it was a small town, that there were good kids and bad kids. And I was a bad kid. And that was it. It was just as simple as that. If you weren't from a Christian household, if you just misbehaved, or if your family didn't have money—you know, if you weren't in school sports—all of those things. And I was none of those things. And I graduated with, like, a D average from high school, and graduated college with a 3.8. So it is like, you know, where was the problem? You know? I just—yeah. Still to this day I haven't gotten to a point where I have gotten old enough to say, yeah, I was the problem. I mean, yeah, I was a tough kid to deal with, but they just had a way of turning their back on kids.

Although he strongly hoped that his children would have better experiences and greatly valued education, Asa voiced multiple complaints and frustrations focused on his daughter's needs not being met in the public schools, and commented, "Some of those limitations are still there. And I think you get them with small towns and communities."

Old-timers repeatedly complained of unfair treatment, and both social and economic barriers to their children's success. Tilda Conner's complaints had to do with a combination of poor communication with school officials and the feeling that they treated her daughter unfairly:

The principal and I, we didn't get along. . . we did not like each other, almost to the point where I was gonna pull her out of public school. . . . She was getting bullied by a boy who is at least a hundred pounds bigger than her. . . . He would pick her up out of her seat and throw her. And when I would call and complain, [the principal] would go, "She shouldn't instigate. She shouldn't say things to him." I was like, "No, because verbal things are way more different than physical, and if it happens again, I'll call the police." And when I threatened that, he put [the kid] on a different bus, but [the principal] was out to get her.

Like Asa Hobson, Wendy Harris, a thirty-seven-year-old, poor, stay-at-home mother, had struggled in Paradise Valley's schools, and felt that she was targeted for being from a troubled family:

Well, I was a straight-A student up until high school, and then from there, that's when—I don't know, things changed. I don't know why. . . . And I would get in trouble for the stupidest things at times. It got to the point where—and this was because my cousins were ahead of me. And I'm the spittin' image of my cousin. So [the principal] figured I'd be just as much trouble. So the slightest thing I did, I got in trouble. And that's when I gave up. I gave up trying to pull the straight A's and stuff like that. I gave up. If I'm gonna be in trouble for stupid things, you know, forget it.

Wendy had hoped that her son might succeed where she had failed but found that her family's financial constraints held him back from full participation, particularly the pay-to-play fees attached to afterschool sports,¹³ which were a more recent imposition that disproport-

13. Parents were also charged separate fees to attend children's games. Although limited support for these fees was available to those who applied for help through the local Booster Club, as one of its members explained, "I

tionately impacted lower-income families: “The pay-to-play is ridiculous, I think that’s what’s stopping him [from playing sports]. It’ll cost \$150 just for one sport right now. I’m sorry. I think that’s ridiculous. We didn’t have to pay when I was in school. I don’t understand why it’d be \$150 just for one sport. . . . I’m like, ‘Are you kidding me? It would cost me almost \$150 [for him] to play a stupid sport. You people are rippin’ me off.’ He’s not gonna do a sport. I’ll go out and play with him instead [laughs].”

Problems like those Asa and Wendy encountered often left old-timers with lower levels of human capital, as well as disadvantages that ranged from lacking information about how to pursue higher education to lacking money for school fees. As mentioned, old-timers in the sample were less likely to be college educated than their parents were, unlike their newcomer neighbors. Their lack of confidence and sense of frustration in navigating educational institutions further impeded many in their interactions with school officials, lowering their abilities to negotiate to get their children’s needs met.¹⁴ These barriers undermined the supposed protective qualities of rural schools, and helped ensure that their children also faced numerous struggles in their educational trajectories in Paradise Valley and beyond.

Newcomers, on the other hand, tended to have few complaints about the local schools, and when they did express frustration, it focused more on lack of opportunities for their children to excel, such as competitive sports teams and advanced curricula. Instead, they often discussed satisfaction and a sense of gratitude for the high quality of local schools. Thirty-eight-year-old Brooke Gilbert, who had moved to the valley two years earlier, explained: “We moved here for the school.” Shawn Murphy, whose children were in grade school, commented, “Our school is an incredible school that has provided a great opportunity for support as a parent.” William Turner, whose children were in high school, also expressed con-

tentment with local offerings: “Paradise Valley High actually shows up on the—within the top ten or fifteen of state high schools, so I think—because there is enough people here—people who have moved here from—you know, there is a few other Microsoft retiree types, and people who come over here from the West Side generally came from strong academic backgrounds. So I think there is reasonable expectations at school. And our kids get mostly As and are active in things. . . . So I think they are going to have reasonably good opportunities.”

Although fewer newcomers had attended Paradise Valley schools, those who had often described positive experiences as well, further suggesting that social class had helped shape school trajectories during the decades since the growth of amenity-based development. The adult children of earlier generations of better-resourced in-migrants tended to speak of special treatment they had received in school there, particularly when their parents were well known or well connected to the schools. Nadine Gough, whose mother was a teacher herself, recalled, “I definitely got accused of being the teacher’s pet a little bit. But my parents never did that. Like my mom was harder on me than the other kids, probably. Again, I sort of teetered between, I knew how to get good grades and check all the boxes academically to stay relatively on top. But also was partying and skipping—you know, shucking and jiving—but I didn’t really get in trouble because I was one of the good kids. You know?”

Toby Cook, a thirty-two-year-old middle-income carpenter and Paradise Valley native, described a similar experience when asked whether he thought that his parents’ teaching in the school system made any difference for him: “Yeah, plenty. I think it made um, a big difference in how teachers thought of me. . . . It got me a lot of tickets to act bad and still have a good reputation. . . . I had a lot of freedoms that other kids didn’t because I uh, I could get away with stuff that other kids couldn’t.”

don’t think it’s been as effective as we want it to be, because there’s still kids in the community that need to be active in school athletics and activities that aren’t, because of the perception of the economics or their parents are too proud to ask for it, for whatever reason.”

14. For more on these issues, see Calarco 2014; Cooper 2014; Kohn 1959; Lareau 2003; and Lareau and Calarco 2012.

In general, newcomers expressed fewer problems of their own in Paradise Valley's schools, and fewer problems for their children. None complained of the fees attached to extra-curricular activities or other barriers to their participation. Rather than concerning themselves with individual issues, they were more likely to focus on improving the overall educational or extracurricular offerings in Paradise Valley's schools to ensure that their children were not missing out on opportunities by growing up there versus a larger city. These educational agendas, which old-timers often strongly resisted, generally prevailed.

Thus it was common for old-timers to feel as if they had little agency or power to get their children's needs met in the local schools, and newcomers described feeling confident that the schools were providing adequate opportunities for their children and empowered to enact any changes necessary to enhance their chances and outcomes. Ten-year valley resident Andrew Bowden, a forty-six-year-old middle-income carpenter, said of the community's changing makeup, "I think it has been very positive for the schools. You know, there is a lot of us putting energy in the schools. The school board has switched 180 degrees in terms of their, you know, orientation of what was valued at the school." He described newcomers as having strong positive influences on the direction the school board took over his time there, many of which were not supported by the community's old-timers.

Particularly emblematic of this divide during the fieldwork was the controversy over the school board's decision to pursue the international baccalaureate (IB) program for kindergarten through tenth grades. The debate around the program was virulent at times, newcomer parents generally supporting the initiative and old-timers—as well as many retirees without children in the schools—harshly opposing it. Complaints revolved around its cost for the community, its rigorousness being too much for kids who already struggled in school and for less educated parents to help with

homework, and its international focus and ties to the United Nations, which irked political conservatives. A number of old-timers, including several who did not have high school diplomas, chose to remove their children from the public schools over this issue and homeschool them instead. The debate was particularly lively on the community's electronic forum, where some explanations for the program's importance were posted, but mainly the anonymous comments represented the rage felt by long-time locals.¹⁵

Our kids come home from school loaded with various homework and projects and after-school programs and sports and dance, and now they want to add more intense study. I am worried that they are going to be overloaded and a lot of kids will suffer academically. It also bothers me that this program is foreign based. This is the USA and I am not ok with another country setting the standards in our schools. (February 21, 2015)

I have been reading up on this program and if it is voted in by the school board I will have no problem taking my four children out of this school and enroll them in the k12 online school. . . . People, these are your children. Be their voice and stand up for them. Do not allow the superintendent or the school board to get away with "fixing" something that isn't broken. Our school is ranked in the top ten schools in the state and top fifty of the United States.¹⁶ (February 21, 2015)

There should have to be overwhelming support in the whole district, not just from a few people that included [school] staff at a meeting. . . . [The superintendent] has been here for two years and wants to completely change the way our school operates. Our school is one of the best in the state—a huge achievement. Why change it? Why try to do it so quickly? What is the true agenda? (February 22, 2015)

15. Posts have been edited slightly for readability.

16. These numbers are those expressed by the quoted commenter and do not necessarily represent any reliable or published ranking.

There are people in this valley having difficulty making ends meet as it is. For those that say. . . “What’s the big deal?,” I truly am glad you are in a position to be able to take the hit on your property tax. What about those that just may be pushed over the edge by yet another tax increase? Should they be forced to sell ground that they may have already worked their lives to pay for and own outright, taxed off of their property? What about the family struggling to buy their first house? Tough s***t? (March 17, 2015)

Despite numerous protests of these sorts, the school board went on to apply for authorization for the IB program, which it received in 2017. It was implemented at both the elementary and high schools soon afterward.

On the other hand, although school administration was aware of problems with course and extracurricular fees that primarily affected low-income families, movement on these issues was slow. In our 2014 interview, the school superintendent, himself a newcomer, explained: “When I first arrived I heard numerous stories about families who are challenged by the fees associated with public education, [including] pay-to-play, enrichment fees, course fees, supply fees—you know for a family of four that begins to add up really quickly. In fact, we started to look at what does it cost to send a child to—or to support a family that attends a public school in Paradise Valley, and the numbers are significant. And we know we have families that can’t afford that.”

Yet despite expressed commitment to addressing this concern, efforts to remove the fees were incremental, and for years these initiatives were the purview of separate entities such as the local Booster Club, which focused efforts on subsidizing the fees for individual low-income children who applied for the specific scholarships. The school board initially focused on addressing course fees versus pay-to-play fees, and all fees were not fully eliminated until the fall of 2019. As with other issues, whereas newcomers triumphed quickly in their desires to improve their children’s access to ed-

ucational and curricular excellence, old-timers were left feeling frustrated and powerless to get their children’s very different needs met. They lacked confidence in their abilities to affect local educational decisions, social networks that included people in positions of power to make substantive changes, and human and cultural capital that might inform them about either processes or channels for pursuing change.

STAYERS AND LEAVERS: SELECTIVE MIGRATION REPRODUCES THE SOCIAL DIVIDE

These processes had predictable results: newcomers’ children tended to excel in school and generally went on to pursue college education outside the valley, gaining access to more human and cultural capital. A handful returned as adults who were often absorbed into the next generation of more privileged newcomers. Old-timers’ children, on the other hand, generally did not perform as well in school, did not participate in as many extracurricular activities, and were less likely to either pursue or earn college degrees, particularly from more prestigious colleges or universities. They were more likely to remain in or return to Paradise Valley as adults, but also more likely to struggle to find meaningful and lucrative work there.

As in many rural communities, education in Paradise Valley was both a vehicle for upward mobility and a mechanism that perpetuated selective migration whereby young adults,¹⁷ often the community’s most advantaged and economically promising, out-migrate to pursue educational and work opportunities elsewhere (Corbett 2020; Petrin, Schafft, and Meece 2014; Sherman and Sage 2011; Carr and Kefalas 2009; Budge 2006). Many newcomers were extremely clear regarding the importance of children leaving Paradise Valley for higher education; old-timers were often more ambivalent. Out-migration was an explicit parenting goal for 35 percent of newcomers ($n = 10$), but only 11 percent of old-timers with children ($n = 4$). Old-timers often focused on the positive reasons for staying there, including family ties, natural beauty, and the rural lifestyle:

17. Often referred to colloquially as *brain drain*, we opt here to avoid the more pejorative connotations of its usage.

I would like them to [stay]. I think it's one of the nicest places in the country. I mean, there's wonderful places. . . . You hike around, do stuff, you live there, you get involved in the community. And all of a sudden you just come across like, "Wow, that's really cool!" (Greg Rossi, fifty-seven-year-old middle-income retired U.S. Forest Service employee)

I hope [my kids stay]. I mean, I hope that they, you know, like me, just—I want to take them out and show them everything, and I would hope that they see the reason in living in such a life as this, for sure, yeah. Because I just don't understand, you know—metropolitan life just seems really shallow to me. It doesn't seem very rewarding. (Asa Hobson, thirty-eight-year-old low-income field scientist)

Yet at the same time, they were not unaware of the potential risks of staying in the valley, which they often weighed thoughtfully in their interviews. Such was the case for Barbara Phillips, a seventy-year-old rancher whose husband's family had lived in the valley for generations. She struggled with wanting her adult children to return and take over the ranch, versus knowing the potential struggles they might face:

You hope that they will be happy, and you hope they might want to come back, but most of all you hope they are happy, healthy, and doing—able to earn a living without—that was so important. . . . We would like things to be different for them. We don't want to have them have to go through some of the things we went through. So I think even if they took [the ranch] over, they would have to have—they would have to have their career and maybe work it a little differently.

These discussions differed substantially from most newcomers' understandings, which generally focused on the importance of leaving the valley. Although several newcomer parents suggested that they might like their children to return after seeking education and training elsewhere, most did not think this outcome was very likely. Shawn Murphy, a forty-three-year-old father of two, was one who

was very clear that "I want them to leave Paradise Valley when they graduate from high school. I'll tell them this before they graduate from high school." On considering the question further, he explained in regard to his older child,

I want her to go out into the world, to have that experience, rather than be one of those kids who don't leave here and gets stuck in the underclass here. If she would choose to come back here, after having gone out into the world, hey, great. I don't think it would be a bad place to be, but I think leaving is necessary for context, for choice. And so I'm gonna do everything I can to make sure she goes off into whatever adventure. Maybe it's not college, but go travel, go—you know, go work somewhere. Whatever it might be. I feel like you need to broaden your horizons beyond this place.

The importance of leaving to gain more educational, occupational, and life experiences was echoed by newcomer parents across the valley:

I think it's important that they leave. I don't think just staying in the valley is good. I think going out, going to college, whatever, working someplace else just to have a different perspective for a little while is good for them. (Maria Setzer, forty-year-old, low-income substitute teacher)

I think we are realistic enough to know that—somebody once said there is a reason why small towns are small. There is not an economic base here to support a lot of people. And I think frankly we would probably rather they—even if they chose to come back here, we would rather they go out in the world and sort of experience a few things and sample the bigger life. And if you want to come back here someday, that would be great. (William Turner, sixty-two-year-old middle-income retiree)

No, I don't [want them to stay]. I don't think I do. Which is weird. And it is funny, even my—even when I think about being here, it kind of ends when they graduate. . . . I would love

that—definitely would love for them to go. I feel like at some point you go. (Nadine Gough, thirty-six-year-old middle-income teacher)

Beyond just hoping that their children would leave the valley, many residents, both old-timers and newcomers, worried about what could go wrong if they stayed. Adults across the social class spectrum, but especially newcomers, expressed concern and judgment about the fortunes of young adults who did not leave the valley to pursue higher education, often suggesting that those who remained were both intellectually and morally flawed:

It seems to me that the ones who are born and raised here and stayed here and never left are pretty ignorant—not in an academic way necessarily—but they just don’t have that broader perspective of humanity and what’s out there. (Claire Woods, forty-two-year-old, middle-income, nonprofit consultant)

Most of the kids that stay around here, that’s the ones that end up using [drugs] and falling, you know? You can only go so far in this town. . . . I just know that if you stay here, you are either going to be flipping burgers for the rest of your life or waiting tables. (Megan Wicker, twenty-eight-year-old, poor, stay-at-home mother)

Nothing good happens to kids who stay here without going somewhere else. It’s a very small community [and] there are a lot of small—“small-minded” is too harsh—conservative values. There’s nothing a kid can do here work-wise after high school that’s at all challenging or rewarding. . . . You know, there are people here who were born and raised here and didn’t ever leave, and I don’t want my kids to become that. And then there are other people who were born and raised here and left and worked somewhere else for thirty years or ten years and then came back, and that’s great. They’ve seen something else and they’ve chosen this. (Hannah Lowry, forty-five-year-old middle-income consultant)

Our friends call them “Valley Rocks.” It is like they go to high school here, they are on the

football team, super popular, blah, blah, blah. . . . And [after high school] they get down, and like—you know, like I feel like it has to do with suicides here. . . . “And now I am, like, feeling kind of down about myself and I’ll get into drugs.” And then they never, like, pursue something to the next level, or they, like, don’t feel successful and supported. (Sabena Griffin, thirty-three-year-old middle-income nurse)

These judgments of young adults who did not out-migrate meant that those who stayed faced additional barriers to adult success beyond a lack of higher educational attainment. In addition to their education and skills deficits, they were repeatedly judged as bad workers and bad citizens and passed over by local employers in favor of in-migrants with higher human capital, regardless of the skills requirements of the jobs.

Thus, whereas newcomers’ children mostly went on to pursue higher education and better-paid careers outside the valley, old-timers’ children often grew up to lack human capital and job opportunities. Caleb Daniels, who had lived all of his twenty-six years in the valley, described this cycle. He struggled in school, in part because his learning disabilities went unnoticed and untreated, and in part because, as he explained, “I was having some bad family problems, home life was—a living hell would be the best way to put it.” Caleb began acting out in high school, including cutting classes, not turning in homework, and giving substitute teachers a hard time. In response he was sent to the principal regularly:

CALEB: It got too hard to read, and I figured, it’s hard, why do it?

INTERVIEWER: So you would get in trouble for not doing your homework? What did they do about it?

CALEB: They had what they called the cubby, which was a closet they painted pure white and left neon lights on. They’d put you in it.

INTERVIEWER: For how long?

CALEB: All day.

Although Caleb was able to graduate, he felt that the administration just wanted him gone.

He still lacked basic skills. He also lacked both the grades and resources to pursue higher education outside of the valley. He expressed regrets regarding the ways in which this held him back in the labor market: “There’s still stuff I don’t really understand, but I kinda really need to know in today’s work force. I got doomed to be low-level employment. . . . There’s been a lot of job opportunities that if I would’ve known just a little bit more back then, I would have better luck now.”

Caleb described a history of short-term, insecure work in Paradise Valley, as well as employers questioning his behaviors, including battling rumors that he was a drug user:

CALEB: I [mostly] worked under the table. So it’s like, I’d work for however long they needed me and then I’d go someplace else. They either wouldn’t want to hire me or the only way I’d get paid is if I worked under the table.

INTERVIEWER: Why would that be—?

CALEB: Mostly I don’t know, but it’s also because apparently I’ve gotten a reputation around the valley, I’m not sure how, as a drug dealer, a troublemaker. I look at ‘em and I’m like, “Really? I’ll take a drug test right now. I don’t do drugs.”

For Caleb, a childhood full of missed educational opportunities translated into an adulthood of unemployment, underemployment, and poverty. When he was interviewed, he was living in a precarious and substandard situation and had recently been homeless. Although his experience was at the extreme end, it was not significantly different from that of many young adults whose families’ lack of social, cultural, and human capital contributed to their struggles in the local schools and beyond. Differences in these symbolic (and real) forms of capital structured educational experiences before children even entered the local schools and impacted them for the rest of their lives either within or far beyond Paradise Valley.

CONCLUSIONS

The growth of the amenity-based economy meant economic expansion in Paradise Valley, and it also brought the in-migration of new res-

idents, many of whom had significantly more wealth and social, human, and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986) than long-time residents. These resources allowed them to outcompete locals for its best jobs and positions of power, and to navigate its structural lacks in ways that its less-resourced locals could not. Gentrification and the resultant social and economic divides within Paradise Valley were driven not simply by housing and labor markets, but also by how these inequities were expressed within rural schooling (Sherman and Sage 2011). The divide in real and symbolic resources (Lamont and Fournier 1992; Bourdieu 1986) affected old-timers in multiple ways, including systematically marginalizing them from power within the community and its schools (for more on this issue, see Sherman 2018, 2021a). In the case of education, the considerable difference in human capital between old-timers and newcomers increased the inequalities in other resources and contributed to reproducing them into the next generation. In Paradise Valley, education and the local schools served not only to prepare children for their adult futures, but also to provide social and cultural opportunities to some while systematically withholding them from others.

By most old-timers’ accounts, social class had long mattered in Paradise Valley’s schools, which had for decades disenfranchised the community’s most disadvantaged residents through both the structures of school programs and the ways teachers and administrators treated children. Parents, schoolchildren, and local alumni described experiences with the local schools that both reinforced dividing lines and prepared some children for brighter futures than others. As in many communities both urban and rural, in Paradise Valley schools acted to sort and divide children more than to even the playing field (McHenry-Sorber and Schafft 2015; Calarco 2014; Sherman and Sage 2011; Lareau 2003). The results of these multiple structural barriers and social processes included very different experiences with schooling, and very different levels of adult human capital acquisition for newcomers versus old-timers.

While these processes might be expected in communities with limited resources and op-

portunities and longstanding social class divides (Miller and Edin 2022; Corbett 2020; Sherman and Sage 2011; Duncan 1999), sociologists have argued that amenity-driven in-migration of educated young adults should result in improved school resources and outcomes (Carr and Kefalas 2009; Hamilton et al. 2008). To the contrary, in Paradise Valley the in-movement of wealthier outsiders reinforced preexisting informal processes of sorting and exclusion, and created opportunities for new ones, such as sports-related fees that are nominal to the economically well-off but prohibitive to the economically marginal. As newcomers demanded ever expanding services and advanced curricula to meet their children’s educational goals and aspirations, old-timers continued to be disadvantaged and unable to access even basic educational and extracurricular opportunities and success.

This research thus finds that not only can rural schools often serve to create barriers to some children’s achievement while continually prioritizing others’, but also that improved school resources and curricula will not have an equal impact on all students when inequality is deep or persistent. In Paradise Valley, human capital was just one of multiple resources unevenly distributed between newcomers and old-timers. These resources included the important roles of parental aspirations, cultural orientations, and knowledge about how to achieve educational goals (Calarco 2014; Sherman and Harris 2012; Lareau 2003; Kohn 1959). But in Paradise Valley, as in many other rural school settings, other social class factors and community divides also played important roles in encouraging or limiting student achievement (Corbett 2020; Mette et al. 2016; Petrin, Schafft, and Meece 2014; Sherman and Sage 2011; Cobb, McIntire, and Pratt 1989).

Like many rural school districts, Paradise Valley struggled to fund education and passed some of these costs onto students. Thus low-income and poor families faced multiple economic challenges to their children’s full participation in Paradise Valley schools. At the same time, newcomers who possessed high levels of human capital, as well as social connections, income, and wealth, were in strong posi-

tions to advocate for their children’s needs within the local school district. They regularly pushed for diverting school resources toward elite programs and extracurricular activities that were unequally accessible to all children, either due to their extra costs or due to the invisible resources such as cultural and (parents’) human capital required to utilize them. Regardless of the impacts of these agendas on less advantaged children, newcomers easily implemented them in relatively short time frames. Old-timers’ educational needs tended to be both more basic and more serious—including equal access and participation, and support for learning and behavioral challenges and disabilities—yet were seldom so quickly or efficiently addressed.

Given the importance of parents’ educational attainment to children’s adult attainment (Gerarld and Haycock 2006; Lareau 2003; Parcel and Dufur 2001; Jencks et al. 1979; Sewell and Hauser 1975), it is unsurprising that children of more-educated newcomers would have multiple advantages in the attainment of human capital. These advantages were exacerbated by the structures of the local schools and then further exacerbated by the labor market in Paradise Valley. As expectations of college education and out-migration became the norm, particularly for the children of elite community members, those young adults who failed to follow this trajectory faced judgment and stigma. Beyond just having less human capital, they were often branded as lazy, ignorant, and drug-addicted, and faced systematic exclusion in the local labor market. This in turn perpetuated the cycle, leaving them with even fewer resources to pass along to the next generation of local children, and further widening the gap between privilege and disadvantage in Paradise Valley. Although the study’s methodology did not allow for directly studying either longitudinal patterns or educational outcomes for current students, narrative evidence from adults suggests continuing and worsening inequality in terms of both perceptions of power and efficacy and educational attainment between the two groups.

This study illustrates the grave importance of rural schools as central community institutions that can but often fail to provide mecha-

nisms for minimizing social class differences, improving social mobility for all residents, and functioning as a mechanism for local community development and vitality. These dynamics are not especially unusual or surprising, as they reflect broader understandings of the origins of poverty and inequality as cultural (rather than structural) in nature and a consequence of individual decision-making and “values” rather than behavior bounded and shaped by specific social and institutional contexts (Shucksmith and Schafft 2012; Sherman and Sage 2011; Prins and Schafft 2009). Nonetheless, within rural settings these exclusions can have especially pronounced effects for low-resource residents because of the particularly strong institutional and social roles assumed by rural schools (Corbett 2020; McHenry-Sorber and Schafft 2015; Budge 2006).

As processes of urban-to-rural migration and gentrification have been accelerated and exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic throughout the rural United States (Bowlin 2021; Sherman 2021a; Banse 2020; Berliner 2020), we can only expect that rural schools will become increasingly important as sites and institutions that either challenge or reproduce these inequalities. Although some of these processes may be unique to the current setting, it is likely that they apply to multiple other types of rural communities facing rapid change or social inequality, including those facing conditions such as falling local wages (Thiede and Slack 2017) and boom-town demands (Schafft et al. 2018), as well as communities in which inequality is deep or persistent (Hamilton et al. 2008; Schafft 2006; Duncan 1999; Fitchen 1991). The mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion described in this article may also structure distribution and access of multiple other resources in rural communities, calling for future investigation into the outcomes of inequality with regard to other types of needs, resources, and rural settings. In the case of Paradise Valley the importation of resources vis-à-vis amenity-driven development did not help improve all life chances, but instead raised a bar that had been and continued to be out of reach for children and families with the fewest resources at the outset.

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