



## **Rural school districts step up**

*By Frederic Smith for the Tribune*

Once again, a pair of school districts in the West River have shown themselves big enough to do the necessary but wrenching thing and throw in together.

Elgin-New Leipzig, with 244 students this year, and Carson, with 115, will enter into a cooperative next fall. The payoff for both: "more classes and an enriched curriculum," says Carson Superintendent Ruth Ann Larshus.

The superintendent at Elgin-New Leipzig, Martin Schock, has been there before. Elgin and New Leipzig, then separate districts, entered into the same kind of cooperative in 1993. After four years of mostly happy experiences, voters approved formal consolidation, by remarkable majorities of 90 percent in Elgin and 80 percent in New Leipzig.

Schock calls the co-op "a courtship period" during which districts "get a feel for each other" and find out if they are interested in seeking marriage. Elgin-New Leipzig and Carson will take a look at that in two years.

This is leadership of the best kind, keeping first things front and center. The co-op move will cost New Leipzig its middle school -- "a huge deal," says Schock. "But, at the same time, (patrons) realize that the students just aren't there, anymore. Our main concern is giving our kids the best education we can. If that means having to do what we're doing -- then, so be it."

In other words, education is about -- education, not towns or buildings.

Center and Stanton made the same decision when they approved consolidation last fall. The beauty of these districts stepping up is that they are doing so before they have financially exhausted themselves and have no choice -- while they still have something to bring to the marriage besides desperation.

They also beat the Legislature to the punch. If the present dismal school-population projections are fulfilled, the state will have little choice but to reach in and arrange marriages among districts that have not already paired off. The Legislature doesn't want to do it, but -- make no mistake -- it has the right and will do so if it has to.

Center and Stanton, and Elgin-New Leipzig and Carson, have chosen the better way.

Reprinted with permission from Frederic Smith; 2-12-04