

Before I address the students today I want to extend my sincere thanks to Superintendent Cornelius Smit and Principal Mark Bergman.

I appreciate your willingness to accommodate us on such short notice.

I also want to welcome those citizens who are taking time out of their schedules to join us today. Thank you for coming out on a cold day in January.

So why am I here today?

From the news, you may know that my message today for you young people will center on the good life in rural Minnesota. You may think that's an odd topic coming from a city boy like myself, but I'm worried about rural Minnesota and its ability to survive into the next century.

And there is cause for worry.

I don't need to tell you that Minnesota's rural areas are a shadow of their former selves. At the turn of the last century, nearly half of us lived in the country. Today less than five per cent of us live in rural areas. And the shift in population from the country to the city shows no sign of letting up.

But even in the face of these population trends, I'm optimistic about the fate of rural Minnesota.

The reason I'm optimistic is because of you.

I know that you appreciate the values that rural life has to offer, and that you don't want to move to the city. Rural people take pride in producing Minnesota's food and other agricultural products, and you aren't anxious to trade your lifestyle for the convenience that city life sometimes offers.

Yet while your heart may tell you to stay, your head says you have to think about the ability to make a living and whether rural Minnesota can support you and a family.

I'm here today to tell you that my administration's rural initiatives are designed to make that choice easier for you. My Commissioner of Agriculture, Gene Hugoson, and I are working on ideas that will make it easier for Minnesota's farmers to diversify their operations.

Let me illustrate with an example.

I think Minnesota farmers should be able to produce industrial hemp. It's a natural product that has hundreds of commercial uses. In short, there is a market for this product and Minnesota farmers would benefit by being able to produce and sell this product. But overcoming the

perception that industrial hemp is a substitute for marijuana takes time, and I'm proud to say that we are closer to the time when Minnesota farmers will be able to grow industrial hemp.

That's but one example.

We also need to diversify our markets, something I am attempting with my recent trade mission to Japan.

Likewise, my Commissioner of Commerce, Steve Minn, is working hard on our telecommunications initiative for rural Minnesota.

If rural Minnesota is to prosper it must have the same access to the electronic marketplace as that enjoyed by metropolitan Minnesota. It's not enough to strengthen our farms; we must also strengthen the rural economy that surrounds them. Put another way, we want to provide security for rural Minnesota's middle class.

Protecting the middle class is the key to keeping rural Minnesota's best young men and women in rural Minnesota.

Southwest Minnesota is no different than the rest of us. It needs to keep its young farmers, but it also needs to keep its young doctors, teachers, engineers and architect.

My hope is that my administration's policies will give you sufficient reason to stay in towns like Slayton. I want my legacy as governor to be that of having restored rural Minnesota to a place of prominence.

Working hard together there is no reason we cannot be successful.

Thank you.