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### A Phenomenological Study of School Consolidation

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*This phenomenological study of school consolidation is an investigation of how education policy that dictates the reorganization of schools and districts impacts educational choices, learning environments, and school culture. Although quality studies of optimal school size for promoting student achievement and cutting costs have emerged in the consolidation literature, few rigorous studies exist that investigate the affective costs and benefits of school consolidation policies. We present the findings from twenty-five interviews in four Arkansas school districts with students, teachers, and administrators who moved as a result of district consolidation, as well as those who were already in receiving schools. In addition to evidence verifying and throwing into doubt arguments in the existing literature both supporting and opposing consolidation, we report evidence of three new themes: 1) those moving schools and in receiving schools have different experiences, with those moving much more affected; 2) adults and children are affected differently, with children much more adaptable; and 3) some promising consolidation strategies to mitigate the problems of consolidation have begun to emerge.*

Consolidation is a broad term applied to describe the combining of schools, districts, or administrative units in rural areas of America in an effort to create administrative efficiencies that provide a broader academic experience for students in sparsely-populated schools. Consolidation policies have impacted the landscape of public school organization since the early twentieth century; Duncombe and Yinger (2007) note that there has been approximately a 90 percent decline (100,000 districts) in the number of school districts nationwide since 1938. Consolidation has been implemented in states as diverse as New York, Iowa, Louisiana, West Virginia, Montana, Kentucky, and Arkansas. Over the last few years, consolidation has surfaced on the policy agendas of state legislatures exploring education finance reform in Michigan, Vermont, and Maine.

In Arkansas during the last decade, litigation over adequacy and equity in school funding brought the debate over school consolidation into the Arkansas General Assembly and the office of Governor Mike Huckabee. When the Arkansas Supreme Court ruled in 2003 that the state's school funding system was unconstitutional in the case of *Lake View School District vs. Huckabee*, the Governor convened the legislature to address the court's decision in the Second Extraordinary Session of 2003 (Berry, 2006). Governor Huckabee proposed consolidating rural school districts as one way to meet the supreme court's mandate. The Arkansas Legislature

eventually passed Act 60 (2003), which required all districts with fewer than 350 students to consolidate.

According to rules promulgated by the Arkansas State Board of Education and the Arkansas Department of Education in May 2006, districts with fewer than 350 students have two options: annexation and consolidation. Annexation is defined as the “joining of an affected school district or part of the school district with a receiving district” (Rule 3.01). Consolidation is the term that is applied to mean “the joining of two or more districts or parts thereof to create a new single district” (Rule 3.03). Under consolidation, which can simply be the combining of administrative or central office personnel to one site for the governance of two districts, schools are less likely to be closed. Consistent with Act 60, consolidation or annexation can be initiated by districts voluntarily or at the bequest of the Arkansas State Board of Education. In either case, the state board must officially approve the consolidation or annexation petition. As conditions for proceeding with a consolidation or annexation petition, the state board is to consider whether affected districts are failing to meet accreditation standards or academic or fiscal distress requirements (Rule 4.02.1 and Rule 5.02.01). The state board is to apply its discretion to determine if consolidation is in the best interest of both the affected and receiving districts.

Despite state policymakers’ focus on rural school consolidation in Arkansas and in states nationwide, however, relatively little is known about how consolidation has affected students, parents, and educators. Thus, this study has been guided by two research questions: 1) How does school consolidation affect students, teachers, and administrators who move to new schools as a result of consolidation? and 2) How does consolidation affect students, teachers, and administrators in schools receiving new students, teachers, and administrators as a result of consolidation? We explore differences among student, teacher, and administrator perspectives and examine at differences between those who moved and those in the receiving schools.

### **Relevant Literature**

In this section, we present relevant research exploring the arguments and for and against school consolidation. Consolidation advocates have argued that consolidation provides a diverse, comprehensive curriculum, better facilities, better-trained and better-prepared teachers, a broader array of extracurricular activities for students, and a broader, more-diverse social experience for students. Opponents of consolidation have argued that smaller schools provide better extra-curricular activities and better student support. They also argue that consolidation causes teacher stress, hurts students by requiring them to ride buses for long periods of time, leads to reduced parent participation in schools, and damages rural communities.

#### *Arguments Supporting Consolidation*

Researchers conducting studies endorsed by the Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, Kentucky, Indiana, and Michigan Departments of Education have suggested that the advantages of consolidation greatly outweigh the disadvantages (Self 2001). The basic logic in favor of consolidation concerns economies of scale (Duncombe and Yinger 2007). Economies of scale, also called economies of size, occur in education when fixed costs, such as the cost to keep a physical plant operational, are spread among a larger student population. Advocates of

consolidation argue that, in addition to, or perhaps because of cost savings, consolidated districts can provide students, especially at the secondary level, with a broader curriculum, more opportunities, and improved educational quality. Larger schools can enjoy greater flexibility and can have more specialized facilities and instructors, and teachers can benefit from increased salaries and more opportunities for professional development.

In Arkansas, Benton (1992) argues that a 1980s school consolidation in South Nevada County created broader curricular opportunities for students. Elementary school students had new opportunities for art and art performances, vocal and instrumental music, and physical education. The high school could offer “subjects such as foreign languages, chemistry, instrumental music, computer science, word processing, advanced mathematics, biology, and English. Other new programs we’ve added include training in business, journalism, publications, and photography” (Benton 1992, 4). A study by Monk and Haller (1993), also finds that, in rural areas, larger schools do offer more classes than smaller schools. However, the relationship between school size and course offerings is complicated by a number of other factors, including types of courses, types of schools, and structural features. Monk and Haller (1993) suggest that the increased course offerings do not necessarily solve the problems school consolidation is intended to address.

In one Ohio school district, Mendon Union, the expectation that students would benefit from more advanced and specialized courses was a key reason for consolidation (Self, 2001). According to Self, the curricula and extracurricular offerings at Mendon were not “adequate,” and therefore consolidation was necessary to provide “adequate curricular and extra curricular offerings,” to Mendon students (2001, 74). As part of a post-consolidation evaluation, thirteen teachers and 58 students and parents affected by the consolidation were surveyed. Prior to consolidation, students could choose from 39 high school courses. Eight years later, the consolidated high school offered 87 courses. Self found that nine of 13 teachers felt students had a more complete curriculum after consolidation. While support for the expanded curriculum was not as strong among students and parents as it was among teachers, most indicated that students were better off because of the added opportunities (Self, 2001).

Another positive associated with consolidation concerns improved social opportunities for students. In a study of eight North Dakota communities affected by school consolidation, Sell, Leistriz, and Thompson (1996) found that community residents believed that students were better off socially after consolidation because they were able to make a broader and more diverse network of friends. The authors found that parents believed that consolidation was responsible for creating broader social network for their children, however, the authors’ did not survey or interview the students themselves.

Advocates also argue that with greater economies of scale, larger districts and schools can provide better facilities to students. Sell, Leistriz, and Thompson (1996) report that residents in North Dakota communities affected by consolidation judged the policy to be successful because they felt that students were better off academically after consolidation because of broader curriculum, better facilities, and better trained teachers. A close reading of the Sell, Leistriz and Thompson article, however, reveals that the direct impetus for the facilities improvements was the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requirements, not consolidation.

Proponents of consolidation also suggest that this policy can lead to improvements in teacher salary and teacher perceptions of effectiveness. In the Ohio post-consolidation evaluation, Self (2001) found that ten of thirteen teachers who were forced to change schools as a result of consolidation reported that they grew more professionally in the eight years since their school was consolidated than at any other time in their careers. Nine of the thirteen teachers believed their teaching careers benefited from consolidation. The nine felt they had gained more tools for teaching since consolidation, and in particular appreciated having more peers with which to share ideas. Finally, teachers indicated that they benefited financially from the increased salaries brought on by consolidation.

In addition to their beliefs about improved academic opportunities, consolidation advocates also focus on the possibility of increased extracurricular outlets for students. Self (2001) reports that a majority of parents and students affected by his Ohio school district closing reported increased opportunities for extracurricular activities as a result of consolidation, with football the mentioned most often. The pre-consolidation Mendon district only supported nine student activity organizations, whereas the consolidated district offered 20 activity organizations. Improved economies of scale and combined resources provided the consolidated Mendon-Parkway district with the extra funds they needed to hire the staff necessary to provide more extra-curricular activities.

#### *Arguments Against Consolidation*

Proponents of consolidation are not the only group to assert that extracurricular opportunities change under consolidation. Indeed, rather than focusing on the availability of extracurricular activities, opponents of the policy consider of the access to those experiences. For example, Cotton (1996) points out that students in smaller schools tend to participate more often and in a wider array of extracurricular activities. Two key reasons, transportation and competition, are behind the contention that consolidation does not necessarily translate into superior extracurricular opportunities (Cotton 1996, Lewis 2003, Bard, Gardner & Wieland 2005).

A second line of argument for opponents of consolidation is that students are harmed when small districts are absorbed into larger districts because of the nature of large public institutions. Fanning (1995) argues that as schools are consolidated and grow larger, they become more bureaucratic, standardized, and impersonal. Other researchers use arguments from small schools literature as a foundation for their thematic explorations of this topic. They cite the benefits of small schools, such as fewer behavior problems, higher graduation rates, and more positive school climates (Barker & Gump 1964, Cotton 1996, Duncombe & Yinger 2001).

Opponents also contend that consolidation can lead to teacher stress and turnover. In a study of a single consolidated district, Glascock (1998) found that some teachers had difficulties adjusting to their new schools' block scheduling. When several veteran teachers left the school, some residents felt that consolidation was not the right decision for their community. Unfortunately, Glascock relied on residents' opinions and did not interview the teachers themselves to find out why they left. In a related study, McHugh and Kyle (1993) found that

teachers in Northern Ireland experienced stress even when their schools threatened to merge, as well as when they actually merged. McHugh and Kyle identified the threat of being laid off as the key stressor for teachers. Many teachers felt a loss of confidence, were tempted to take time off work, changed their consumption of coffee and alcohol, and were forced to tap into their support networks. Because McHugh and Kyle's study looked at school mergers in the Northern Ireland, the applicability to the United States may be limited. Kyriacou and Harriman (1993) confirm McHugh and Kyle's finding that school consolidation is stressful for teachers. Using pre- and post-consolidation interviews, Kyriacou and Harriman found that the most stressful time was the period just before and during hiring interviews for the new school.

Yet another negative associated with consolidation is that the closing of local schools will result in unwieldy commutes with lengthy, onerous bus rides. In a survey of residents in eight North Dakota communities affected by school consolidation, Sell, Leistriz, and Thompson (1996) found that the increased time spent busing students was most often mentioned as a negative consequence of consolidation. However, the survey responses only explain how parents and community members felt about busing. The students were never questioned as to how they felt about the longer bus rides. Lewis (2003) does, however, cite complaints of both students and parents in his article "The Long and Winding Road." Not only are long bus rides a burden to students, they represent considerable cost and risk to the districts as well. Indeed, problems with student transportation can be burdensome. Hillman (2003) writes, "for rural schools, priorities in transportation are the safety of the children, qualified bus drivers, times of arrival and dismissal, and bus routes" (8).

Opponents of rural school consolidation often argue that school closures have negative impacts on rural communities as well as on students and teachers. This appeal to community vitality is a key argument against consolidation. For example, Fanning (1995) argues that consolidation undermines the role of community in education. According to Fanning, a "healthy community" is necessary for teaching cultural and social values to children. In small communities, schools serve as a hub for local activities. Opponents argue that school district consolidation inhibits the spread of cultural knowledge and exacerbates a community's social and economic problems. Post and Stambach (1999) found that North Dakota communities that lost their schools had decreased involvement in community organizations and a loss of business. However, they make no causal argument that school closure led to community disintegration, just that these events were correlated. In other words, the decline of business, civic life, and school activity could all be symptoms of the same problem of declining population.

Finally, consolidation opponents argue that moving schools out of communities and placing them farther from homes leads to reduced parental participation in schools. Fanning (1995) argues that it is common knowledge that consolidation could lead to less parental involvement, which would leave teachers and students with less support. Parents face many of the same transportation problems as students, which can reduce participation. Cultural factors may also play a role. Glascock (1998) found that parents from a conservative, rural community that was consolidated with a university community became alienated when they perceived the school administration as too liberal. In focus groups, Glascock heard parents complaining, "Teachers are trying to make school too fun" (Glascock 1998, 21). These parents demanded a back to basics curriculum with more focus on education at home. She concluded that

“community members feel there is a lack of communication, not only with them, but also among the employees of the district” (Glascock 1998, 33).

Table 1 below is a summary of the central arguments in the consolidation debate found in our review of the literature.

TABLE 1: *Summary of arguments for and against school consolidation*

<b>Arguments For Consolidation</b>	<b>Arguments Against Consolidation</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Diverse, comprehensive curriculum</li> <li>• Broader, more diverse social experience for students</li> <li>• Better facilities</li> <li>• Better trained and prepared teachers</li> <li>• Broader array of extracurricular activities for students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Smaller schools provide students with better support</li> <li>• Smaller schools provide more accessible extra-curricular activities</li> <li>• Causes teacher stress</li> <li>• Hurts vacated communities</li> <li>• Hurts students by requiring them to ride buses for long periods of time</li> <li>• Leads to reduced parent participation in schools</li> </ul>

In the search for empirical data on the effectiveness or appropriateness of school district consolidation, we became aware that is not even clear if the right questions have been asked. Although quality studies of the cost savings associated with consolidation have emerged (e.g Duncombe and Yinger, 2007; Coulson, 2007), we argue that it is impossible to determine the full effects of consolidation without investigating the opinions and experiences of those affected by it. Some doctoral dissertations have considered the affective impacts of consolidation, but our review of the literature did not reveal any body of scholarly, peer-reviewed qualitative research that has considered qualitative aspects of consolidation. The policy relevance of this study is in its exploration of what consolidation has meant to those students, teachers, and administrators who have lived this phenomenon.

### Sample

By the spring of 2007, 57 public school districts in Arkansas had been restructured with respect to Act 60, which mandated the closure of all districts with fewer than 350 students. We conducted a purposive sampling method in an attempt to draw as representative of a sample as possible from that population. To that end, we used the following selection criteria:

- The merging of districts had to involve the closing of at least one high school.
- Next, there had to be a large enough movement of teachers, administrators, and students to expect that we would have study participants in each of the six interviewee groups. We conducted informal phone interviews with on-site personnel to obtain estimates of the numbers of personnel who moved.

- Third, we sought geographic diversity. Arkansas is typically divided into six regions, and although some regions encountered more consolidation than others, we attempted to draw a site from each region.
- Fourth, we sought racial and income diversity and used percent FRL and percent minority as indicators.

After selecting the potential sites, we contacted the district superintendent by phone and with a follow-up letter. Referencing the controversy associated with their experiences with this policy, not all of our first-choice sites agreed to participate in the study. In some regions, we contacted another site. As a result, we were only able to visit districts in four of the six regions. The sites which chose to participate had the following characteristics.

TABLE 2: *Characteristics of districts participating in study*

Site	Location	Number of Students who Moved	Percent Free/Reduced Lunch	Percent Minority
1	Central	325	32	6
2	North/Ozarks	120	59	2
3	East/Delta	100	16	34
4	South/Timberlands	425	74	62

### Methods

The purpose of the study is to ascertain the perspectives of students, teachers, and administrators who have experienced consolidation. Through interviews, the study attempts to capture what consolidation has meant to students, teacher, and administrators who have been forced to leave their small, local schools. We also investigate the experiences of students, teachers, and administrators who have experienced consolidation as members of receiving schools. Finally, we explore differences among student, teacher, and administrator perspectives and examine differences between those who moved and those in the receiving schools.

We began our study by summarizing the arguments of consolidation advocates and opponents and by reviewing the existing literature on how students, parents, and educators qualitatively experience school consolidation. Based on this review, we constructed interview questions for students, parents, and educators who were forced to move from consolidated schools as well as for those from schools that received students and educators. These interviews provide a qualitative snapshot of students', parents', and educators' experiences. As importantly, these interviews help to identify which arguments may actually hold true, and thus set the stage for a more comprehensive study testing these arguments.

All interviews were conducted in person on site at the four locations in Arkansas during the spring of 2007. The research team visited the schools and requested a list of five potential

interviewees for each of the six categories. When the schools were able to provide multiple potential interviewees, the research team selected the participant to be interviewed at random. At some sites, for example, only one administrator had actually been hired at the receiving district. All interviewees volunteered for the study and were promised anonymity.

As this is an exploratory study there are a number of limitations that should be addressed. First, the selection of schools to participate in the study was not random, and therefore may not be representative of all consolidated schools in the state. Second, some schools selected refused to participate in the study. It is likely that these schools had different, and more negative, experiences with consolidation than those who agreed to participate. Finally, while we chose the phenomenological interview approach as the best means by which to understand the significance students, teachers and administrators attach to their consolidation experiences, we recognize the reliability problems inherent in this approach. Given these limitations it would be inappropriate to generalize these findings to other schools in the state that have experienced consolidation.

Ultimately, we conducted 25 interviews at four school consolidation sites. The eight student interviews included male and female high school students aged 15-18 from grades 9-12. The ten teacher interviews included male and female teachers from multiple disciplines and from elementary, middle, high school grades. The seven administrator interviews also included both male and female participants. These teachers and administrators ranged in teaching experience from 8-32 years. We coded interviews to identify responses which spoke directly to themes that emerged in the literature review. We also analyzed responses to determine if any new patterns of argument emerged. Our findings are reported by theme below, beginning with evidence with regard to arguments supporting consolidation.

### **Evidence: Arguments Supporting Consolidation**

The literature supporting school consolidation largely focuses on advantages from larger economies of scale, and particularly on the financial savings. However, we focused on the academic and social benefits to those directly affected by consolidation: students, teachers, and school administrators.

#### *Consolidated Schools Provide Diverse, Comprehensive, Curriculum*

As identified in the literature, one of the purported benefits of consolidation is that larger schools provide a broader curriculum (Benton 1992, Duncombe and Yinger 2007). This broader curriculum not only offers students a wider variety of educational options, but offers them the opportunity to take advanced classes that will better prepare them for college (Self 2001). To explore this, students, teachers, and administration were asked if course offering had changed due to the consolidation.

The consolidation of these four districts did indeed result in increase academic opportunities for students. Moreover, there is evidence that in at least one case, the consolidation resulted in expanded course offering for all students, not just those coming from the closing school. While all the students who moved felt that there were more courses offered, only one student from the receiving schools noticed an increase. Teachers from both sets of schools

reported an enhanced curriculum. Administrators were divided as to whether the consolidation resulted in the creation of new course offerings, but all agreed that the students who moved now have more academic opportunities.

### *Students*

All of the students we spoke to who moved from closing schools indicated that their new school offered more classes than their old school. These changes included electives, core courses, and Advanced Placement (AP) courses. Among the electives, agrimechanics, computer science, family and consumer sciences, as well as broadcasting were mentioned. Advanced courses included anatomy and physiology as well as AP classes.

All of these students felt the increased offerings were beneficial, and two of the four specifically stated that they felt they were being better prepared for college than they had in their previous school. As one student stated “I think it’s getting me ready for college better than it was at [closed school].” Another student mentioned that he was considering a career in Physical Therapy and so he appreciated the opportunity to take anatomy and physiology in high school.

Only one receiving student noticed any changes in curriculum, noting that the host school added choir classes after the consolidation. While the other three receiving students did not notice any changes in the curriculum since the consolidation, some students in the receiving schools perceived that the students coming from closed schools were benefiting from the receiving school’s academic offerings. One student this expressed sentiment by saying “I think our school’s got good academics and I think it’s better for them than to be at [closed school]...I felt like they probably get a better education here because bigger schools...have more to offer than smaller schools would academically.”

### *Teachers*

Teachers who moved to the receiving schools also reported that the students had more academic options after the consolidation. Courses mentioned by these teachers include distance learning, agrimechanics, anatomy and physiology, as well as a better selection of electives overall. One of the closed schools offered only two years of Spanish, and that was taught through distance education. Now the students have the opportunity to take more foreign language courses in a classroom setting. One teacher also mentioned that the receiving school offered college algebra, which means that students receive college credit without having to take the AP exam. While one teacher did not think the wider course offering represented a significant change, the others felt that it was beneficial to the students. As one of the teachers who moved summarized: “Our kids have more opportunities here.”

Teachers in the receiving schools perceived a change in their schools curriculum and agreed that the increased academic offerings represented better opportunities for the students. At least one receiving school, according to a teacher, made changes to the curriculum as a result of the consolidation. With the increased student body, the school was able to offer more AP classes than they had in the past. This indicates that in at least one case, the consolidation improved academic opportunities for both the moving and the receiving students.

### *Administrators*

One administrator who moved indicated that the consolidation had resulted in more academic opportunities for students. While this administrator did mention many of the same classes mentioned by students and teachers, the means of course delivery was also mentioned. While the closed school did have some AP offerings, these were offered as distance education. According to this administrator, “We used Arkansas Virtual High School, but if they didn’t have the mindset to ask for it, then it wasn’t readily available for them.”

Administrators in three of the receiving schools indicated that the students moving into their schools had access to a greater variety of classes, especially AP classes, as compared to the closed schools. One administrator noted that since the consolidation, students “have the same opportunity to be an honor graduate.” What is perhaps more interesting, however, is that one school reported that the receiving school’s curriculum had expanded since the consolidation. In addition to three more AP classes, the school expects to add more classes in art, economics, and world history due to the increased “kid count.”

### *Consolidation Provides Broader, More Diverse Social Experiences for Students*

Because consolidated schools draw students from a wider community, proponents claim, students are exposed to a more diverse student body. Sell, Leistritz, and Thompson (1996) found that parents felt that a “broadened network of friends” enhanced the students’ social experience. They did not, however, ask if the students themselves felt this was true. Students, teachers, and administrators were asked to comment on how the two student groups compared, and how easy it was for them to interact with one another.

Overall, the responses to the social integration questions among all groups were quite positive. Nearly all reported that students have access to a wider and more diverse social group. Conflict was expected among the students who were formal school rivals, but this does not appear to be the case in these four cases. While some students from the closed school mentioned that students initially stuck to their original peer groups, they now report that the students from the two schools are now integrated and that their social interactions were enhanced by the consolidation. Ultimately, most students and teachers saw the consolidation as an opportunity for the students to make more friends with a broader diversity of people.

### *Students*

While two of the four students from closed schools reported that making friends at the new school was difficult at first, all four students reported that things were going well now. One student recalled, “I’ll admit the very first day I arrived I was a little scared and I didn’t really know what to expect. My first class was full of people...I mean, just really friendly people.” Another student responded, “After the first two or three days everybody knew everybody. Now I’m friends with everybody. I think consolidating is the best because it gives you more opportunities to meet more people.”

Respondents from two sites explained that, since both communities were fairly small, many of the students knew each other prior to the consolidation. As one student shared: “Actually, one of my best friends is from [closed school]. We knew him when we played Little League baseball with him, and we did not see him from the time we were twelve, and he comes over here when we’re sophomores, and we’re all excited. He’s hung out with us all term.” When asked if moving to a new school was difficult, one student said “...everybody knew each other. So I guess in my situation, I was fine with it. I didn’t care, I knew everybody.”

Several students commented specifically and positively on the increased diversity since the consolidation. One student who moved told us, “There’s variety all over the place. I mean, everyone has a social group now. It doesn’t feel like anyone’s an outcast or anything. A lot of kids would make more friends up here just because there’s [sic] more kids who are interested in the same thing.”

Students from the receiving school largely echoed the responses from the students who moved. While initially students tended to stick to their old groups, eventually they blended together. When asked about how the two groups interacted, one student from a receiving school said, “It really was good, because we were rivals before and then everybody just comes together now. There are no problems between everyone, really.”

### *Teachers*

Much like the students, teachers perceived that after a brief adjustment period students from the closed schools integrated with those in the receiving school. A teacher from the receiving school summarized these perceptions saying:

“At first they had their little group from the old school and they had their group of friends over here, but now we are seeing that it doesn’t matter. They’ve all kind of just blended in and they’ve got friends from both places and like I said with it being so close a lot of them knew each other anyway... They’ve just formed their own little friendships and buddies.”

When asked about differences between the student groups, one of the teachers who moved replied “we had more minority students in the [closed school] than they did in the [receiving school]. So that’s probably the biggest thing. We had mostly black students...and they had quite a few white students...and since we went together it’s kind of evened it out.” Another one of the teachers who moved responded to the diversity question by saying, “Kids are kids no matter where they go to school at. It’s how they’re treated and the atmosphere that they’re in that makes the situation different. But the kids are basically, you know, basically the same.” When asked specifically about the increased level of diversity, the teacher responded, “It’s more diversified. I love it. I wish we would have done it when I was in high school.”

Only one teacher mentioned that consolidation produced a negative effect on student social interaction. According to this teacher, who moved from a school that closed, said a downside was that some students have the attitude that “I can be friends with them, so I don’t

need you anymore.” As the teacher explained “kids didn’t have the friend choices they have now...that’s just part of being a bigger school.”

### *Consolidated Schools Provide Better Facilities*

A second argument in favor of school consolidation is that it provides the students with the opportunity to go to schools with better facilities. While some researchers assume that consolidation will lead to better facilities because of economies of scale (Sell et al 1996), it is also reasonable to assume that the receiving schools will have better facilities than those that close. To test this assumption in the four school studied, teachers and administrators from both groups were asked how the facilities at the receiving school, including instructional technology, compared to those of the closing school.

Overall, it does not appear that the consolidation has resulted in significant improvements in facilities or instructional technology. Teachers and administrators disagreed about how quality of facilities and instructional technology, the availability of technology, and the quality of the buildings changed as a result of consolidation. Not only was there a lack of consensus among any group, the reasons for differences varied as well. Changes in facilities were due in part to issues inherent to the consolidation, such as economies of scale and more crowded schools, and in part due to an external factor such as a tornado. Moreover, several of those who mentioned that facilities were now “better” than before the consolidation were quick to add that the facilities at schools that closed were adequate for their needs.

### *Teachers*

It is not clear that in these four cases, moving schools meant moving to better facilities. Two of the teachers who moved because of the consolidation said facilities were better, one said they were “about the same” and one said that they actually were not as good. In one case, the receiving school had recently been rebuilt only because it had been destroyed in a tornado. In the case where the receiving facilities were not as nice, the district has been using facilities from both campuses. A teacher from this school responded that “their [the receiving school’s] football field was nicer, so we use their football field. Our baseball field is nicer, so we use our baseball field. The district recognized some of the discrepancies.”

Only two teachers from the receiving school responded to questions about the quality of facilities. Again, the response was mixed. One teacher commented that there were some upgrades to the facilities due to the consolidation. The other receiving teacher had a different experience, however. In that school, the additional students and teachers meant that the school made more use of the “portable buildings.” Moreover, it was reported that in the portable buildings, there are problems with air conditioning and computer connectivity. So, while the facilities themselves may be better overall, the teachers in the portable buildings are worse off since consolidation.

The teachers were also split on the availability of instructional technology since consolidation. Two of the teacher who moved reported that technology was better, although one of these said that it was only better in that there is “better access to more people who can help

you.” One teacher said that the technology was essentially the same, and that while it had been upgraded, it would have been upgraded if the closing school had stayed open. Finally, one teacher said the availability of teaching technology was not as good since consolidating. When asked if the technology was better, the teacher responded “No...No. In fact I had a Smart board over there [at the closed school] and I don’t have a Smart board here.”

### *Administrators*

Only two administrators addressed the questions regarding facilities, and their responses were different. One administrator who moved said that facilities were better and that “moving to this campus made us realize that there were more things that we could have offered our students.” On the other hand, this administrator did not find the quality of instructional better, though there may be more of it in the receiving school. The other administrator, who had also moved, said that while the technology at the receiving school was “about the same,” but that the facilities were worse, stating, “This school was designed to be a high school. It wasn’t designed for little kids.”

### *Consolidation Provides Better Trained and Prepared Teachers*

According to research by Self (2001) and Sell, Leistriz and Thompson (1996), consolidated schools benefit from better trained teachers. Specifically, teachers experienced improvements in their professional growth. We asked teachers and administrators if professional development opportunities were more available since the consolidation.

It appears that when it comes to professional development opportunities, teachers and administrators who moved benefited more from the consolidation than those who did not. Those that moved reported that there were more opportunities and that those opportunities were more relevant to their needs. The teachers and administrators in the receiving schools did not see an improvement, but most indicated that professional development was something that their school did well.

### *Teachers*

Teachers from three of the four schools answered questions regarding professional development opportunities. Two of the three teachers who moved indicated that they have had more opportunities since consolidating, with one reporting it was about the same. One of these teachers has clearly taken advantage of the opportunity to improve instruction. “Technology was catching up with me really fast. I was one of those teachers who had been taught one way and wanted to continue to teach that way and I realized that way wasn’t the best way as far as technology. So I had to go to more training.” Not only did teachers report that there were more opportunities, but they reported that these opportunities were more relevant to their needs. A teacher who moved commented that the training she receives now is more relevant to her needs, both in terms of content and scheduling. She stated that she received “lots of hours in [the closed school] because our school was under academic distress so we had lots and lots of hours, but...there was a whole lot of that that wasn’t beneficial.” She went on to say that “they would always take you out of class to do it and that’s a waste of my time and my kids.”

Only one of the three teachers in the receiving schools noticed a change in professional development opportunities, saying:

“We have had a ton of opportunities for professional development. I will say this they have done a great job with that. If there is something we feel we want to go to all we have to do is say that we’d like to go and they will...we have group that just go back from San Diego. We have a group that went to Oregon. They will send us where we are willing to go.

Of the two receiving teachers that did not see an improvement, one said the number of opportunities was about the same and one said that there were fewer opportunities. This difference in opportunities was presumed to be due to the fact that there were now more teachers and therefore more competition. Interestingly, all of the other respondents from this particular school indicated that there were more opportunities. It is unclear if this is due to their respective assignments, or simply a difference in perception.

### *Administrators*

Only three administrators, two who moved and one in the receiving school, commented on the availability of professional development opportunities. The receiving administrator did not see a change, but the administrators who moved both reported that they had more opportunities. One attributed the increase to the fact that “there are so many more people in this district that have to have the professional development, and the district tries to provide a lot of it.” The administrator went on to say “so much of our professional development is handled right here in the district, so they don’t have to go out and look for it.” The other administrator’s reasoning was more succinct, saying, “I have an assistant principal and I’m not scared to leave. That’s all it boils down to.”

### *Consolidation Provides a Broader Array of Extracurricular Activities*

Consolidated schools, it is argued, allow students more options and opportunities and options for getting involved in extracurricular activities. This is presumably due to the fact that there are more students to populate the activities, and more staff and resources to support them. According to Self, this is especially true for sports, and for football in particular (2001). Students in this study were asked to comment of the number and variety of opportunities to participate in clubs and sports.

Moving and receiving students perceived that there were more extracurricular activities available to them after the consolidation. Furthermore, all four sites reported that the receiving school offered more sports, particularly football, than the closed school had.

### *Students*

Nearly all of the students, moving and receiving, reported that there were more opportunities to get involved with extracurricular activities since the consolidation. Students who

moved reported that there were more clubs, more sports, and opportunities to get involved in earlier grades. One of the students commented they “have a lot more here than we did at [the closed school]. Our sports are a lot different.” Another student mentioned that while there are only a few more clubs than in the closed school, those clubs have more activities. It was also mentioned that there were more sports, mostly football, available to the students since consolidation.

As with the students who moved, most students in the receiving school reported that there were more opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities. One student in a receiving school explained that activities were now available to a wider age range, saying “as a 7<sup>th</sup> grader, you could have the opportunity to be in FCCLA, FBLA, FCA, all that, and when I was in 7<sup>th</sup> grade you couldn’t be in it. The younger age levels can be in the high school groups.”

### *Teachers*

A few of the teachers also noted that the consolidation resulted in improvements in the number and variety of activities. As one teacher who moved put it: “Extracurricular things, there was none of. About all that we had offered anymore was basketball.” The consolidation also improved opportunities at the receiving school because of the increased student body. A teacher and coach from a receiving school stated, “I coached for three years, the first year I didn’t coach, we barely could fit a team. We can offer the kids more. Especially from the athletic stand-point.”

## **Evidence: Arguments Against Consolidation**

As noted above, arguments against consolidation follow two main logical approaches. First, consolidation creates larger schools, but smaller schools do a better job providing high-quality activities and support. Second, the process of consolidation—closing schools and moving students and teachers—hurts those involved, particularly those who are forced to move and those who live in vacated communities. Our interviews probed both lines of argument.

### *Small Schools Provide Students with Better Support*

A central argument against school consolidation is that smaller schools provide students with better academic and social support, leading to fewer behavior problems, higher graduation rates, and more positive school climates (Barker and Gump 1964, Cotton 1996, Duncombe and Yinger 2001). To test this assumption in the four school districts studied, students, teachers and administrators were asked about as a result of consolidation in social and academic support provided to students.

Educators and students, both moving and receiving, noted larger class sizes as a result of consolidation. However, there was significant disagreement about the academic and social effect of consolidating into larger schools. Academically, educators acknowledged that larger class sizes meant less individual attention for students, but many appreciated the concurrent reduction in the number of classes teachers had to prepare, which allowed for more preparation time per

class and greater specialization. A minority of students and teachers who moved to larger consolidated schools saw more distant relationships and weaker social support networks.

### *Students*

All the students interviewed noticed larger classes, but they disagreed about the effect consolidation had on the support offered to them. One moving student and one receiving student observed a negative impact, while the other six did not describe any negative effect. According to one of the six, "I think with smaller classes your teachers have more independent time with students than with a larger class. But it really doesn't seem to have that much effect, because a lot of the classes are just common sense stuff." In fact, two of the four moving students felt it was *easier* to get attention in their new school, despite larger class sizes, because the schools were better run.

One moving student, however, stood out in seeing a marked decrease in support at the new, larger school:

"It's probably a little harder to get attention from teachers. At our old school, we didn't have a whole lot in every class, and the teachers were people you'd see at the store somewhere, and you're always talking to them, and you could tell they really wanted you to do well, and always offered you help. Whereas over here, they're a little bit more reserved... I guess sometimes it just feels like you're a bother to them. We were all really tight and close, just a tight-knit family. Where over here everyone's just kind of spread out."

Three of the four students already at the receiving school saw no change in the amount of social or academic support offered to them. According to one student, "I think they pay the same attention to us as they did before... it didn't change anything." One receiving student believed the larger class sizes worsened the academic support she received: "In some classes, you need more one-on-one... It's harder to ask questions." The student also had closer relationships with teachers and administrators before consolidation, explaining, "I guess when the school was smaller, you know more about the teachers."

### *Teachers*

All four of the moving teachers believed they knew their students better in the old, smaller schools. Two teachers did not believe this affected the support students received, but two others believed their old, smaller schools provided better support for students. One moving teacher said:

"We had several kids that didn't make it through the first year over here because they got lost. They went home and never came back... We were such a close knit family over there. We knew the kids and we knew their families and we knew what we could do for them to try to help. Over here, they kind of give the impression that there's a line that we're not allowed to cross... They don't want us to become personally involved in the students' lives, whereas over there it was almost encouraged."

Another moving teacher at a different district made a similar point: “I had a child from the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. We knew our students well. We knew when something was going on with them by the way they were acting... Over here... you just don’t get to know them as much.”

All four moving teachers said they taught to larger classes, but all four said they had fewer classes to prepare. One teacher described the positives of this: “I can concentrate more on just 11<sup>th</sup> grade English, instead of having 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> grade English.”

All four teachers already at receiving schools also noticed increased class sizes, but saw little change or observed improvements in the nature of support provided to students. One receiving teacher expressed the consensus opinion: “It makes no difference with consolidation or not.” Another receiving teacher believed consolidation improved the academic support he provided to his students because he was able to specialize and had fewer classes for which to prepare. “Whereas before I might have taught half a day of English and half a day of Math... now I just teach English. Before I would wear so many hats throughout the day, you know it was hard to focus on one content area... That has really helped me as a teacher.”

### *Administrators*

Administrators observed little change in the amount of support offered to students as a result of consolidating into larger schools. A moving administrator described no change in the way students and adults formed relationships, observing: “It’s just normal.” Academically, three of the four administrators noted larger class sizes but believed this did not necessarily have a negative effect on students. One moving administrator explained, “I’m not sure class size necessarily has as big an impact as the people you have teaching them.” The administrator cited the decrease in the number of class preps for teachers, which allowed for more specialization and preparation time per lesson.

### *Smaller Schools Provide More Accessible Extra-Curricular Activities*

In contrast to arguments that consolidated, larger schools provide more extra-curricular opportunities, critics of consolidation argue that consolidated schools provide less accessible extra-curricular activities because of more transportation challenges and greater competition to join (Cotton 1996, Lewis 2003, Bard, Gardner and Wieland 2005). To explore this, students and administrators were asked about changes in how difficult it was for students to get involved in extra-curricular activities due to the consolidation.

Overall, both students and administrators saw little decrease in access to after school clubs. However, they noted that transportation challenges that prevented some students from participating in extra-curricular activities, though these transportation challenges were not necessarily the result of consolidation. While moving students saw increased competition to participate in sports teams, students already at receiving schools saw little change and no access problems.

### *Students*

Moving students had a different experience with regard to access to extra-curricular activities, particularly sports, than students already at receiving schools. While all four moving saw little difference in access to after school clubs, they all indicated that it was more difficult to participate on sports teams. One student explained, “You have to try out... Some people were used to being able to say, ‘Hey, I want to play basketball or I want to play softball,’ and they can just walk on, but I mean, here you can’t do that.” A receiving student observed that some moving students were less likely to play sports because “they just didn’t feel comfortable with the coaches.” All four moving students described after school transportation as a challenge. For example, one said, “Some of the kids who can’t drive, I’ve heard them having problems getting home, parents having to make different [arrangements].” Two of the four moving students explicitly stated that transportation issues reduced access to extra-curricular activities.

In contrast, all four students in receiving schools saw little change in the accessibility of extra-curricular activities, even sports. According to one receiving student: “It’s really easy to [get involved]. I mean, you just put it on your schedule. You’ll get involved if you want to.”

### *Administrators*

Administrators recognized transportation challenges for those wishing to participate in extra-curricular activities, but disagreed about how much of an obstacle they posed. According to one receiving administrator: “In the first year [after consolidation], we provided an extra-curricular bus that would make a trip later in the day, but this year they couldn’t provide that, so we had some that couldn’t participate because they didn’t have a ride.” However, the other administrators saw little effect in students’ access to extra-curricular activities. One administrator pointed out his district ran a bus after school for those participating in extra-curricular activities. Another said, “We don’t provide transportation after school. [However,] we live in a society today that’s very mobile, and I think people can get where they need to be, and I really don’t think that’s a factor.”

### *Consolidation Causes Teacher Stress*

There is evidence from Europe that school consolidation causes stress among teachers, which affects their performance, as they struggle to adjust to their new schools and routines (Glacock, 1998; McHugh and Kyle, 1993). To test this hypothesis, we asked teachers and administrators about the effects consolidation had on teachers, focusing on changes in the amount of stress teachers faced.

We found consolidation required significant adjustments among teachers, particularly in their social interactions and in harmonizing curriculum and materials. However, the consolidation process was much more stressful for educators that were forced to move, though reduction in force layoffs, when they occurred, created stress among all educators.

### *Teachers*

Teachers who moved as a result of consolidation described frustrations from changing curriculum and especially from integrating into new teaching staffs. One moving teacher explained, "It's much more difficult for me to form relationships with my co-workers... I had been teaching for 11 years and I had my way of doing things, and they wanted me to do things their way, and I said, 'You can't tell me what to do.'"

Another moving teacher described a very stressful consolidation process, in which she was one of the only teachers to retain her job. "When consolidation happened, it ranked with the death of my mother and our store burning... I was crushed. Now I'm happy as I've ever been, so it's worked out OK. But the initial shock of it was overwhelming." Another moving teacher cited the reduction in force layoffs precipitated by consolidation as a significant source of stress.

Other moving teachers described a much smoother consolidation process: "There was no resentment or fear. I was apprehensive because I had taught in the same classroom for 10 years... I was concerned about when you've worked so long, you know you feel cliquish, like 'This is my group.' I was concerned about how we would relate, but there wasn't a problem." On the other hand, the same teacher observed, "Some of my colleagues chose to go to a different school rather than go along with consolidation."

Teachers already teaching at the receiving school described much less stress, but still described significant adjustments. The most common issues were curricular. One receiving teacher explained: "Schools are different in how they deliver state frameworks. And that's probably the biggest change bringing together two schools and staff that approach things in a different manner and trying to merge them into one. That for me has been the most difficult in terms of adapting." Another receiving teacher believed the new, moving teachers had the burden of adjusting: "The teachers that came over had [different] philosophies and styles... That was one of the rocky points."

One receiving teacher described significant tensions among the new staff and blamed the moving teachers: "The teachers that moved had the biggest problems. They wanted to stay in their same little groups, because that is their comfort zone, and they would just stay there and really wouldn't try to blend in... They didn't think they were being treated right, but they were!"

### *Administrators*

The two administrators who moved to the new consolidated school noticed many of the same tensions the moving teachers noticed. One administrator said, "I still notice cliques. The [school A] teachers still hang together and the [school B] teachers still hang together. That still exists. I made everybody move [classrooms]. Even if they were already here, I made them switch classrooms, so that everybody was suffering at the same time." The other administrator noted, "The teachers that resisted the consolidation had been in the old school their whole teaching career. They have not assimilated into the faculty as much as you would like. [However] there are a very few that have not taken the move very well." The same administrator described how he and his teachers felt during the move: "I'm not sure resentment is the right word. Anxiety is probably a better word to describe it... The first little while of the first year there was a lot of apprehension. I noticed that some of the teachers stayed more in their classrooms than they did

before. They didn't venture out a lot... [However] I think they assimilated themselves into it very quickly."

In contrast, administrators already working in the receiving schools described a smooth integration of new teachers into their staffs. One receiving administrator summarized, "We didn't see a lot of change... We really didn't have a problem." Another administrator described the efforts made to make the new teachers feel welcome: "At our first staff meeting, one of our staff stood up and just made an acknowledgment about, 'We don't understand how you feel, and we'll be the first to tell you that. But we want you to know that we welcome you here, and that we're here to assist.' That just broke the ice. I mean it really did. And from then on we were like, 'OK, this is going to be OK.'"

### *Consolidation Hurts Vacated Communities*

A key argument against school consolidation is that it hurts communities in which schools were closed. Researchers have found decreased involvement in community organizations and loss of businesses (Post and Stambach 1999, Sell, Leistriz and Thompson 1996). Because our interviews focused on schooling and school personnel, we are not able to fully address this claim. However, we did ask teachers and administrators for their opinions about the effect of consolidation.

Teachers whose schools closed down clearly described the negative effects of school consolidation and school closure on their communities. Teachers already at receiving schools noticed no changes, and school administrators were more positive overall.

#### *Teachers*

Both of the moving teachers who mentioned community effects saw negative consequences for their home communities. One teacher described the negative effects on her small community in strong terms: "As good as it is for the kids, for the community it had to be negative. It had an impact on all the businesses. We had a business, and [it went under]... The grocery store, the bank, everything, it had an impact." Another moving teacher agreed: "It's kind of harder to get a sense of community without those kids being there, getting their primary education there...After we consolidated, we didn't have the kids coming back that usually stayed in the community. When they graduated they moved off."

All four teachers already teaching in receiving schools saw no impact on that community. One teacher gave a representative response by saying, "I haven't heard anybody say one way or another. As far as for me, it hasn't made a difference."

#### *Administrators*

Administrators who moved as a result of consolidation were more positive about the effects on the communities they left, describing efforts to keep schools open and communities engaged.

Administrators who were already working at receiving schools, like their teachers, saw little impact of consolidation on their schools' communities. One receiving administrator said so in so many words: "I don't think there's been an impact."

*Consolidation Hurts Students by Requiring Long Bus Rides*

One of the most common arguments against consolidation is that it will require longer bus rides that cut into students' homework or extra-curricular activities (Sell, Leistriz and Thompson 1996, Lewis 2003, Hillman 2003). Accordingly, we asked students, teachers, and administrators several questions about the length and impact of commutes.

We found evidence that consolidation created longer bus rides, but no evidence at all that the length of the commute negatively impacted students' academics. The four districts studied were already so geographically large, admittedly in part as a result of past consolidations, that students and staff in the most recent round of consolidations did not have the longest commutes. As noted above, availability of transportation after school restricted access to extra-curricular activities, but we found little evidence that after school transportation was restricted as a result of consolidation.

*Students*

Moving students described longer bus rides but only five to fifteen minutes longer. One student explained, "It's just a bit more time, having to wake up earlier to get there." None of the four moving students believed the length of their commute affected students' ability to do homework. As high school students, three of the four drove cars to school, and all three expressed little concern with the longer commute. In fact, one moving student preferred the new commute, even though it was longer, because the new school was closer to his after school job.

*Teachers*

None of the moving or receiving teachers observed an impact of the longer commute on their students, academically or socially. One receiving teacher explained, "I don't think it's too far. Actually, we cover a huge area, and [the moving students] are not driving any further than the kids that were already here." When asked if the length of the commute affects students' ability to get homework completed, the teacher replied, "Absolutely not." A moving teacher who described a difficult transition because of consolidation admitted, "I don't hear the kids complaining about the busing."

Moving teachers also described longer commutes of their own, but all four believed the length of their commute had no impact on their ability to be an effective teacher, nor on the expectations their administrators had of them.

*Administrators*

District superintendents described busing and transportation as one of the biggest logistical challenges of consolidation, but believed they had done a good job handling it. School-

based administrators agreed. Both of the school administrators who moved to a new school described initial transportation problems, but saw limited impacts on students or teachers beyond the transition period.

While administrators did not describe academic impacts from longer student commutes, they did believe that transportation challenges in general impacted students' ability to get involved in after school activities. As noted in the section on extra-curricular activities, administrators believed students without rides were restricted from participating in sports.

Finally, one administrator described discipline difficulties because of long bus rides, though it is important to note he did not say this was caused by consolidation:

“We probably go 15 miles at least north, 20 miles south... We have some kids that get on the bus before daylight in the morning, especially before the time changes, and if we run an after school program, I see the bus coming back at 6:30, 7:00... A lot of my discipline problems are bus discipline problems... If you take them up there and trap them for an hour, what do you expect?”

All administrators reported they gave no special consideration to teachers with longer commutes, and none believed the longer commutes caused by consolidation impacted their teachers' effectiveness. Describing a teacher with a one-way, hour-long commute, a school administrator said, “I mean, I hate for him to drive that far, but I don't think it affects his classroom.”

### *Consolidation Leads to Reduced Parent Participation in Schools*

Closely related to research on the negative impacts that school closures have on communities as well as research on transportation challenges created by consolidation, critics of consolidation argue that it leads to reduced parental participation in schools.

Teachers we interviewed described engaging parents as a constant challenge, but believed consolidation made parental participation even more difficult. Transportation problems and parents' resentment about school closings created additional barriers for students to attend parent-teacher conferences or PTA meetings. Administrators described parent participation in their schools much more positively and, with one exception with regard to transportation, reported no challenges with parent engagement as a result of consolidation.

### *Teachers*

Two moving teachers saw a decrease in parental participation after consolidation. One teacher reflected, “As far as the parents go, I have a lot less interaction with the parents... than I did over there... a lot less interaction with parents... I have less parents come to parent-teacher conferences... I would say I had 30-40% come [before]... Here I probably don't even have 20% come.” Another moving teacher explained why parents from her old school faced challenges participating in the new school: “A lot of our parents, if they don't have cars, it's kind of hard to come to school, because they're charging \$20 now to get from [there] to [here]. So, if they don't

have a car, then they have to get a friend who does. And so the going rate now is \$20, to get someone to take you [here]. So that makes it a little hard to come to school.”

In contrast, one moving teacher saw little change in parental involvement after consolidation, explaining, “We still struggle with that... When we have parent-teacher conferences, this is a small district, so we pretty much know the parents that are involved and those that are not. We know that it will be more difficult to contact some than others. It’s pretty much the same.”

Teachers already at receiving schools saw no decrease and even improvement in parental participation as a result of consolidation. One teacher expressed a common opinion: “We have those that participate and those that don’t... I don’t think it’s hard [to get parents to come to parent-teacher conferences]. You just call their home and set up conferences.” Another receiving teacher actually observed increased parental involvement after consolidation, as involved parents reached a critical mass:

“Before consolidation, there was very, very little parental involvement... And now there seems to be. If you have one school, you’re going to have a certain set of parents who are there all the time, and you’ll have parents that never show up. So when you consolidate, you’re going to have a bigger group. The same percentage still shows up, but you’ll have more physical bodies that are willing to do anything for the students and for the school. You’re getting the best from both schools.”

### *Administrators*

Like most teachers already at receiving schools, receiving administrators saw little change in parental participation as a result of consolidation. One expressed the consensus opinion: “This school has a lot of parental participation. I’ve not really noticed any change.” Moving administrators also described strong parental participation in their schools and little change in parental engagement as a result of consolidation.

The one exception was a receiving administrator who acknowledged that parents from the consolidated school faced “transportation trouble and things. So those may have trouble getting here for a parent conference.”

## **Results/Discussion**

In addition to the evidence presented that is related specifically to themes already present in the consolidation literature, we found evidence of three new themes that add to the existing knowledge about the phenomenon of consolidation.

### *Differences Experiences For Those Moving and Receiving*

First, we found significant evidence that those who moved schools had far more powerful experiences than those already in receiving schools. This differential impact spanned all three interview groups and each of the four sites. Students, teachers, and administrators who moved

routinely reported that they were extremely anxious about finding their place in a new school setting. For example, one student who moved stated, “Well, at first I didn’t like the idea at all. I’d been raised over at [previous community], and went there until 9th grade, and then whenever we had to combine schools, I was dreading it really bad. But once we combined...I’m on the basketball team, I made a lot of friends real quick, and it was a lot easier after that.”

Alternatively, students, teachers, and administrators in receiving schools rarely reported significant anxiety about the merging of populations. As one receiving teacher noted, “I have dealt with it well. I think it was hard for the students to come here, and the teachers to come here. It was easier for us, the ones that were already here. I haven’t personally had any problem with it.”

### *Different Impact on Adults and Children*

Second, we identified a differential impact for children and adults. Parents and teachers often object to consolidation by arguing about how such policies negatively impact students, but we found that students often adjusted to their new settings much faster than parents and teachers. One teacher who moved reported: “It’s more difficult for me to form relationships with my coworkers. I feel like I have been readily accepted by my students. I don’t feel like I was readily accepted by the staff at all.” A teacher at another location who received stated:

“The teachers are the ones that had the biggest problem about coming over. The students, as a whole...I mean, kids here today, you wouldn’t know who came from [closed school] and who came from [receiving school]. They had friends, they blended, but the teachers, they wanted to stay in their same little groups, because that is their comfort zone, and never...they would just stay there and really wouldn’t try to blend in.”

Another employee observed, “The kids are fine. The kids are [new mascot] they’re not [previous mascot] or [other previous mascot], but their parents aren’t... So there are still some hard feelings, but I think that after a year that will go away.” Another school employee responded to a follow-up question about whether there was tension among parents, “Gosh yes. [Closed school] parents are still mad and they haven’t gotten over it yet.”

By contrast, students appeared much more resilient and able to adapt to their new settings. As one student in a receiving school noted, “Well, we were kind of worried about it at first when they told us, because [our school] and [their school] never really got along that well. We were scared there was going to be a bunch of fights and stuff, and mouthing at each other all the time. They came and everything was fine, nobody’s really had anything, any problem with each other yet.”

### *Some Promising Consolidation Strategies*

Finally, we discovered evidence of strategies that may contribute to successful consolidation. The first strategy relates directly to the ability of parents and teachers to adjust to the policy and to realize that student interests must be the priority. One teacher stated:

“...you know, we all loved the community that we teach in, or that we’ve grown up in, but things change. And whether it’s somebody’s fault, or whether it’s just circumstances or whatever, but the more resistant you are, or the more set in your ways and resistant to change, the harder it is on students. If you don’t just...I’m not saying just give in and go with it anytime someone suggests something, but I’m saying if it’s inevitable, if you know that your district in the next three years is not going to be able to handle the financial burdens that are brought about by everybody starting at the same base pay, that type of situation, than certainly start promoting the idea, and do it in a positive way, so that parents and the community members and the students can become, I don’t know, advocates for it, or at least not resistant to it, not as a punishment type situation.”

This sentiment was echoed by an administrator at another site, who said, “Communication would be the first thing. Have an open mind about it. See what’s best for the kids.”

The second strategy is to keep something related to the prior school open in the community which has been closed. Several teachers and administrators who were forced to move felt that the efforts to preserve the history and heritage of their prior school were important in easing the transition. For example, one participant noted, “Leave something open in closed district. We’re lucky in that they kept the campus open. It’s a middle school now, and as long as they keep the campus open, I think the community over there will be fine, as long as there is always a school over there. If the school ever closes, and there’s not any kind of school activity going on over there at all, it will impact the community greatly.” One explained the efforts of the school district to repurpose the closed school: “They went so far as to take all of the memorabilia, all of the trophies, all of the things that they had, and built like a museum... I think the community has really embraced the idea of, you know, they’re not taking the school away from them, they’re just using it in a different way.”

Another employee at a different district observed, “You know small schools tend to gravitate toward athletics. Athletics play a large part in school. And I think the fact that we have our football games in [receiving school] and our basketball games in [closed school]...if we had moved all of our games to one town then it probably would have caused bigger problems than it does now...I think that splitting between the two just eliminated that problem.”

A third strategy is to come up with a new merged identity, rather than allowing one school to be consumed by the other. In establishing a new identity, districts may want to consider settling on a new name, new school colors, and a new school mascot. These symbols of unity appear to communicate a commitment to building a new blended community without marginalizing the group which has moved. As one teacher noted, “The thing that I think is better ... is we did at least get to start over with colors. We took one from each school, and we changed the name, and I’ll tell you, it still bothers me when we see papers come through that say [Previous] High School. I mean, that’s a touchy thing, because this isn’t [Previous High School] anymore, as time goes on, that’s going to take care of itself, but it’s still kind of an issue.” This sentiment was present at another location, as well. As one teacher noted:

“You need to start fresh as a new school...I do think that you need to wipe out everything at both schools, because we still have things that were red that were [one school]’s and

we still have things that were black and yellow that were [the other]’s. And people hang on to those, but it’s mostly the community people. If you can redo the whole thing. It needs to be done before school ever opens. New colors need to be painted. Everything else needs to be wiped out before they start, because people are so touchy about that stuff.”

At the same time, community members need to be aware that some students, particularly those who have to move in their junior or senior year, may feel threatened by the loss of their identity. In these situations, teachers and administrators need to be respectful of the difficulties that some students may encounter. As one insightful administrator noted:

“We’ve got some students that are coming to us, they’re in their [prior school] letter jackets, because they’re not going to give that up, they’re seniors, they’re from [prior school]. We need to be mindful of that... sometimes the mindset of the student is, ‘I’m from [prior school], I’ll always be from [prior school],’ and you know, some of them even wore t-shirts, ‘Once a [prior school mascot], always a [prior school mascot].’ You know? Their not going to give it up, and hey, should they have to? My goodness, I don’t think so.”

### Conclusion

Formal studies of consolidation largely focus on the effects of school size or the financial benefits and costs. In this exploratory study, we talked with students, teachers, and school administrators who had experienced school consolidation first-hand. We recognize that our results, based on twenty-five interviews in four districts in the same state, cannot be widely generalized. Further, the limitations in the way our cases were selected created bias toward more positive and successful consolidations. As a result, we restrict our conclusions to areas that confirm or draw into question assertions in the existing literature. More importantly, we identify several new issues and hypotheses that deserve further attention and research.

We found evidence to support several assertions in the literature, both supporting and opposing consolidation. Educators and students alike believed consolidation in these four districts increased academic opportunities for students. We found even stronger evidence that consolidation created conditions for a broader, more diverse social experience for students. We also found evidence that students had more extracurricular activities available to them, particularly sports, after the consolidation. On the other hand, we confirmed that many students face transportation challenges that prevented them from participating in extra-curricular activities, though we cannot conclude that these transportation challenges were the result of consolidation. Transportation problems and parents’ resentment about school closings created additional barriers to parent-teacher conferences or PTA meetings. Finally, as expected, those whose schools closed down clearly described the negative effects of school consolidation and school closure on their communities.

In contrast, we found little evidence to support many hypotheses drawn from the literature. Our informants believed consolidation has not resulted in significant improvements in facilities or instructional technology. Educators and students, both moving and receiving, noted larger class sizes as a result of consolidation, but there was significant disagreement about the

academic and social effect of consolidating into larger schools. Academically, educators acknowledged that larger class sizes meant less individual attention for students, but many appreciated the concurrent reduction in the number of classes teachers had to prepare, which allowed for more preparation time per class and greater specialization. Socially, we expected conflict among the students who were formal school rivals, but did not find it in these four cases. Again, this finding should be treated with caution because of the limitations in the selection of the districts. Finally, we found evidence that consolidation created longer bus rides, but no evidence at all that the length of the commute negatively impacted students' academics.

Perhaps most importantly, we observed different impacts of consolidation on different groups within schools. First, those moving and receiving had very different experiences. Moving students observed increased competition to participate in sports teams, but students already at receiving schools saw little change. Several students and teachers who moved to larger consolidated schools saw more distant relationships and weaker social support networks, but those already at the receiving school saw temporary change, if any. Teachers and administrators who moved benefited from improved professional development more than those who were already at the receiving school. Finally, as expected, consolidation required significant adjustments among teachers, particularly in their social interactions and in harmonizing curriculum and materials. However, the consolidation process was much more stressful for educators that were forced to move, though reduction in force layoffs, when they occurred, created stress among all educators.

Second, we found evidence that adults and children experienced consolidation quite differently. Adults had far more difficulty forming new social and academic relationships, while all commented on how quickly students adapted. Our informants identified parents, much more than students, as unhappy with consolidation and unwilling to accept the new situation.

Finally, even if our selection of school districts was biased toward more positive, successful consolidations, we are able to identify several promising strategies that could be pursued during consolidation: 1) communicate early and often, 2) if possible, maintain a building in the old community, and 3) create a new merged identity, with a new mascot and colors. It is important to manage issues of community and identity as well as transportation logistics and curricular frameworks during the consolidation process.

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