

A Rural Community's Response to School Consolidation

A major trend in the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was school consolidation. This effort usually meant closing one-room schools and replacing them with fewer, larger schools. In 1913, the nation had more than 200,000 one-room schools; but hundreds closed every year. Some states quickly consolidated while others resisted for many decades. To encourage the change, some states passed legislation in support of consolidation. Others promised funds to every district that closed a school. Still others allowed people in a designated area to vote on the issue. As late as 1980, Nebraska had three hundred operating one-room country schools. Twenty-five years later, the Nebraska legislature passed a law to close many of these schools (Zimmerman, 2009) In the following study, Professor Jeanne Surface makes a qualitative assessment of the impact of school consolidation on a particular school in Nebraska and the neighborhood the school served.

Losing a Way of Life:

The Closing of a Country School in Rural Nebraska

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Introduction

A small school in Nebraska, called Country School A for the purposes of this study, began in only one room; and over the years additional rooms were added such that the school served seventy students and their families. All those associated with the school were significantly impacted by a

law passed by the Nebraska legislature in June 2005, Nebraska LB 126, which eliminated Class I districts (districts with only elementary schools) and Class VI districts (districts with only high schools). The statute specified that all Nebraska school districts were required to offer every grade by 2006; therefore, Country School A had to merge with a neighboring K-12 district. When it did, the larger district decided to close the smaller school.

It has been argued that community life is essential for a healthy democracy and further that a school is essential for a healthy community (e.g., Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti, 1994). Communities that have seen their schools consolidated have lost property values, local economic vitality, and a sense of community identity. With the closure of their school, they have also lost political power. Country School A consisted of teachers, board members, grandparents, students, and patrons. The purpose of this study is to make a qualitative assessment of the impact of school consolidation on the neighborhood served by Country School A and to relate the findings to a growing body of research on the roles of small schools in rural areas.

The Approach

A narrative approach was selected to study the impact of consolidation on one rural neighborhood, a community of families whose children were brought together in a country school. This approach allowed me to study the human dimensions of a country school by looking for meaning in the stories told by affected families. Geertz (1973) argued that the narratives we tell are stories about ourselves; they are the key aspects of most cultures. Jerome Bruner (1986) argued that narrative knowledge is created, experienced, and constructed through the stories of lived experiences and their meanings. These assertions are applicable to this study. The design was chosen in order to arrive at a deep understanding of the post-consolidation views of the people supporting Community School A.

Two focus groups were conducted on June 23, 2013, in the home of one of the families in the district. The selection of the members of each focus group was established through purposeful sampling by the family that hosted the meetings. The first focus group included parents of children and board members from the district. The second consisted of teachers in the district. The focus groups' discussions were recorded and transcribed. Additional sources of evidence for the study included individual phone interviews, news stories, legal documents, and newspaper clippings. The data from the analysis were grouped around several themes: family involvement;

community life; educational excellence; political activism; negative discourse, fight, and loss. The study is set within a larger academic context to reveal important insights derived not only from the qualitative data gathered in this investigation but also from other studies of the roles played by schools in rural areas.

The School

Prior to consolidation, Country School A was a well-kept, single-story white building. The lawn was manicured, and the playground was well maintained with modern equipment and an ample supply of pea gravel. The school was surrounded by family farms that were large by most standards and were owned by families that had likely lived on the property for generations. A majority of children enrolled in Country School A were from middle and upper-class families. The district was well funded and very conservative in the management of its finances. The closest community to Country School A was approximately ten miles away. Around forty-five miles from the school was a community that served as a central trade center for the area.

Family Involvement

Families associated with Country School A were deeply engaged in the school and in the community life around the school. Parents and children participated in activities that were held in the school building. They also helped keep the schoolhouse in good condition and volunteered their time for painting the building and maintaining the lawn. Both mothers and fathers volunteered during the school day. Every week a group of parents brought in lunch for the entire school. One of the students interviewed told a poignant story about his third grade class raising money with bake sales and volunteer activities to build a new playground for the school. All the families participated in the installation of the equipment. They prepared the area for the playground with their own farm equipment and donated pea gravel. Parents also served as classroom volunteers, helped organize music performances, volunteered music accompaniment, helped with class plays, supervised the playground, and provided other service. One parent respondent said, “We were such a close-knit community that it felt like the teachers could have been relatives. Parental involvement was an important contribution to the health of the school.” The parent continued, “[Volunteers] also saved a tremendous amount of money, which allowed

the district to maintain its cash reserves” (All responses like this one were made in a focus group, and the date for both group meetings was June 23, 2013).

Focus group members expressed the importance of maintaining the values of the community. For example, parents commented that the school kept the students innocent a little longer than was usual in larger schools. One parent said, “When my boys came home from school, I observed that they were naive compared to many kids at that age.” In the other focus group, a teacher commented,

The life issues and naughty things that come up were different, and I was very glad to postpone some of this exposure. Speaking of that . . . reminded me of a memory; . . . when someone came in from recess and said that someone said the s-word on the playground. Remember what the s-word was? Shut up! Those are the types of “problems” that I [was] happy to deal with.

The naivety of the children likely delayed exposure to alcohol and other challenges many adolescents face. Bullying, according to parents and teachers, was nonexistent. Parents cherished this aspect of the school.

It was evident that the children were learning to care about others, an important moral value according to philosopher Nel Noddings (2007). Noddings believes that schools should be defined as centers of care and that themes of caring should permeate every aspect of school life, from relationships and organization to curriculum and teaching. According to former students of Country School A, the teachers truly cared about each student. They cared not only about the children’s educations but also about their families’ lives. Teachers worked to bring out the talents of every student and worked hard to overcome learning challenges. Conflict was rare, according to a board member, who reported that all the teachers were deeply committed to the well-being of the children and worked hard at keeping relationships positive.

Decades ago, the research of Bloom (1964) and Cochran (1987) pointed to the benefits of parental involvement in children’s educations. Since that time, researchers have continued to find evidence that demonstrates the value of parental engagement in the educational process. For example, Henderson (1981) found in thirty-five studies that the value of parents’ participation was demonstrated by measurable gains in children’s performance. In 1987, Henderson described an additional eighteen studies with similar findings. The Accelerated School Model developed by Henry Levin (1987) at Stanford University included two urban, poverty-stricken schools, both

of which noted gains in reading and mathematics that were at or above the national average. One of the significant components of each school was parental involvement. The parents were volunteering, making decisions, learning for themselves, and serving as partners in home-school learning. The participation of the parents, whether in an urban or rural setting, leads to deeper engagement and commitment to the school by the students. They know that what they do matters and all eyes are on them.

Country School A encouraged parental participation through long-term relationships among children, their families, and teachers. Goodlad and Anderson (1987) estimated that children entering the first grade may differ by as much as four years in various characteristics essential to learning. Yet whatever a young child's readiness to learn, the research of Meisels and Shonkoff (1990) indicates that the learning process is enhanced when parents and students can count on seeing the same teachers over time.

Typically, when students in large schools return to the classroom in the fall, nearly a month is spent getting to know the teacher and understanding his or her expectations for learning. This was not the case in Country School A. Students and teachers in the focus groups commented on the long-term relationships of teachers, parents, and children. The transition to a new teacher's class was not stressful because the children already knew him or her. The teachers began the academic year with information about each student that they knew from working with the parents. They understood the students' medical and emotional needs, the housing situation of the family, and other concerns. When students were reunited with teachers following the summer break, they were immediately able to get back to work. All of these factors had an impact on student learning, and because of this, focus group members believed that teachers gained an extra month of learning time.

Community Life

In the case of Country School A, family involvement could not be neatly separated from community life. For generations, the school had fostered a great deal of public participation. It provided physical spaces for events that enabled neighbors, families, and extended families to come together. "When we had basketball games, music programs, and picnics, everyone came

out whether you had kids or not,” recalled a teacher. The families had a sense of shared identity and a strong attachment to place.

In many respects, Country School A served as the hub of community life for the surrounding area. The level of engagement by community members in the educational endeavors of the school contributed, in wide-ranging ways, to the success of the overall educational experience. The school was important to the life of the citizens around the school in addition to families with children. Even the teachers, some of whom lived close to the school and others who drove a distance to and from their homes, were committed to the work of the school. The school was a force that brought people together for a common purpose. There was an expectation for everyone to be involved in keeping the school an outstanding academic institution as well as a healthy social environment.

Educational Excellence

Paul Olson, a University of Nebraska professor and champion of rural schools, once said, “Rural schools are small, ‘human sized.’ In . . . healthy school communities, membership is automatic, no one stands alone. Nothing stands apart. Change is short and there is continuity” (2013). Country School A fit Olson’s description. Students were proud of their school, and alumni came back to the school to participate in school activities and to reminisce about the educations they had received. A former student summed up his love for the school when he said, “Our school was all the friendships we all had. A couple of my close friends moved to Prairie View [a consolidated school] with me . . . and I know that we still have a great friendship!” He continued, “Even with the transfer to Prairie View, it seemed so easy because we were moving to a little bit bigger school but not too big. Being in such a small class [eighteen children], it was easy to make new friends!”

Another former student had a similar view of Country School A. “What I really remember the most is how helpful the teachers were,” she said. “No one was ever excluded from the group or denied one-on-one teaching. Being in a small class, one-on-one teaching [was] very helpful to me and many other students in my class.” She commented further:

Some of my greatest memories would be of the great teachers who left a lasting impression on my life. . . . One reason it was a great school was due to the way teachers were

able to teach. Classes and lessons were smaller and more personal than [those in] a larger public school. No student was left behind because the teacher was able to offer more help since there were [fewer] students to teach.

I would send my own children to a smaller school because they would have the potential to be taught on a more personal level. I felt that the teachers cared more in smaller classes, even compared to my larger (yet still small) classes when I was in high school. There were [fewer] students per grade, which made me feel comfortable learning in that environment. All of the students were my friends, and I felt I could ask any of them for help if the teacher was busy.

I want my children to feel that comfortable in a school. I want them to feel confident they can succeed because there [is] less competition. . . . Most of the students in my class throughout grade school were around the same level of competency. Each teacher made sure to help any struggling student. I never noticed any student who would be a consistently poor student. Each of us had the motivation to learn since we never knew another option.

The larger the school I attend, the less personal learning becomes. My country school was far better than my high school, and college classes are even worse. Some of my smaller college classes are personal, but they are still too large for the teacher to get to know every student in one semester. A couple of college professors who have reached out to me or made an effort to be more personal stick out in my memory, but I will never forget my teachers from my country school who I consider my own family.

Families and teachers in both focus groups said that academic achievement was significantly higher than in the K-12 district into which they would eventually be absorbed. A former board member commented, “Families from other towns, including the ones [who] would eventually take us over, were opting their kids into our school. The quality of our school was obvious, and people knew it and wanted us to educate their kids.”

Country School A was not unique in its effectiveness, as a number of researchers have shown. For example, Lawrence et al. (2002), in a large-scale study, found that small schools were safer, had lower drop-out rates, provided students with a stronger sense of belonging, and offered students greater opportunities for participation in extracurricular activities. Lawrence et al. also reported that students in small schools had higher grade point averages, and a larger proportion of high school graduates went on for post-secondary education. Funk and Bailey (1999) found that when graduation rates in Nebraska districts were compared, 97 percent of students in high schools with fewer than one hundred students graduated in comparison with a statewide average of 85 percent. In another large-scale study, Lee and Smith (1995) established that small schools were more productive and effective than large ones. As schools increased in

size, test scores fell. Overall, small school students had higher achievement levels, made rapid progress toward graduation, were more satisfied with school, were less likely to drop out, and behaved better. “All of these things we have confirmed with clarity,” stated Raywid, 1998, 35).

Political Activism

As was previously stated, the Nebraska legislature in June 2005 mandated school consolidations by the passage of Nebraska LB 126 designed to force Class I (elementary school only) districts and all Class VI (high school only) districts to merge with neighboring districts. Further, the State incentivized consolidations through its structure for financing schools (Miller, 2006). The law was enacted over the veto of Nebraska Governor Dave Heineman. Opponents of LB 126, called “Class I’s United,” utilized the referendum process in Nebraska’s Constitution (Article III, section 3) to overturn the legislation. Petitions were developed to place a referendum on the ballot. According to the Nebraska Constitution, a petition had to be signed by at least five percent of the state’s registered voters before a referendum could be placed on the ballot. Class I’s United collected the signatures of over seven percent of the voters. However, they fell short of a constitutional mandate that required the signatures of ten percent of the voters to suspend LB 126 from being enforced until the voters had had their say on the referendum. They turned to the Nebraska Supreme Court to have the enforcement of LB 126 halted until after the referendum vote in November of 2006.

The financing structure outlined in R.R.S. Neb § 79-1007.02—enacted in 2003 and amended multiple times—was a tremendous catalyst to the consolidations that followed. The law detailed the statutory formula for school financing, dividing school districts into three categories based on the geographic concentration of student populations: standard, sparse, and very sparse. Schools with very low enrollments were jeopardized by the statutory formula of financing, particularly if they did not qualify for the “sparse” or “very sparse” cost groupings. The “standard cost grouping” lumped together for funding all schools with more than two students per square mile, and in doing so, severely underfunded and essentially made it impossible to maintain very small districts. Hence, consolidation was primarily driven by the school finance formula that disadvantaged small rural schools.

A group of forty-three mainly rural school districts, called the Nebraska Coalition for Educational Equity and Adequacy (NCEEA), contested the finance formula in court, *Nebraska*

Coalition for Educational Equity and Adequacy v. Heineman (273 Neb. 531[2007]). The NCEEA argued that Nebraska's school financing law was inadequate in providing small schools with adequate resources necessary to provide the quality of education outlined in the Nebraska Constitution (Nebraska Dissolution of Class I School Districts Referendum, 2006). The NCEEA presented the following argument:

The inadequate funding by the state finance formula resulted in school districts that were unable to 1) adequately pay and retain teachers; 2) purchase textbooks, equipment and supplies; 3) replace or renovate facilities; 4) offer college bound courses, advanced courses for high-ability students, technology, and other extra-curricular courses, or adequate services for special education, English language learners, and vocational programs (273 Neb. 531, 536).

A political backlash ensued. Ron Raikes, the Lincoln representative who served as the chairman of the legislature's Education Committee, asserted that the issue of school funding needed to be settled in the legislature, not in the courts. Senator Raikes characterized the lawsuit as an illegitimate attempt to shorten the political process and was likely related to a consideration of the representation advantage of Omaha and Lincoln in the state legislature. The pressure from political forces in the legislature was likely an obstruction to the NCEEA's attempt with the lawsuit. In the court response to the coalition's petition, the court concluded:

The relationship between school funding and educational quality requires a policy determination that is clearly for the legislative branch. Although an overall goal of state aid to schools is to reduce reliance on property tax, there are a multitude of policy decisions that go into state funding decisions, including considerations of federal mandates, the school district's local efforts and ability to support its schools, and the State's ability to provide funding. In brief, it is beyond our ken to determine what is adequate funding for public schools. This court is simply not the proper forum for resolving broad and complicated policy decisions or balancing competing political interests (273 Neb. 531, 553-554).

When the Nebraska legislature passed the law that closed Class I school districts, Country School A's community opposed the legislation. Several members of the community and school board assisted in the founding of Class I's United, and they also supported the NCEEA. "We presented facts to the legislative body and worked closely with state senators in the hopes of impacting this decision," recalled a school board member. "In the end the larger K-12 district

into which the country school was merged manipulated the process in their favor, quickly leaving our families, our board, and our community powerless.”

As was previously indicated, community life had centered on Country School A for generations. When the school became a part of a nearby K-12 system, the administration and board of the K-12 system closed Country School A. Much anger ensued. The families chose to take advantage of the “option enrollment” law in Nebraska and sent their children to a school in a different school district. The community members interviewed in this study still felt the sting of the consolidation. At the time of the closure, they were suspicious that their school was closed because the K-12 district wanted to build a new school in town. When the K-12 district initiated construction of a new elementary school, they believed their suspicions were confirmed.

Negative Discourse, Fight, and Loss

The consolidation process was marred by a lack of constructive discourse among district officials and the families of Country School A. The principal began as an advocate for the families and their school but later switched her allegiance. Community members were appalled. It was clear to them that the school district taking over their school had brought her in and asked her to help move the consolidation effort to the district’s advantage. “Prior to the impending closure of the school, district officials talked to our teachers individually and offered contracts to the teachers behind the board’s back,” said a former board member. The teachers were concerned about keeping their jobs and maintaining their livelihoods.

Focus group members recalled the principal coming to a Country School A board meeting and expressing her disgust that money was being spent from the reserves in the school’s budget to support a statewide coalition of Nebraskans opposing the consolidation of Class I’s. One respondent recalled that the principal had a school law book in her hand with pages marked. She began to spout off laws that would be broken if the district spent its cash reserves on protesting the new law and finance formula. The board had already sought the advice of the school attorney, so they argued with the principal. In response, she stormed out of the building. Later the board members were once again assured by their attorney that they were within the limits of the law to give financial support to the state coalition.

Community members continued to fight even though it seemed to be a losing battle. The district taking over the school began to move teachers out of Country School A into other

schools within the community where the district offices were located. According to the parents, the communal bonds began to weaken, and the quality of learning at Country School A began to decline. The student who talked about raising the money for the playground summed up these changes by telling the story of seeing the playground equipment in a pile near a dump site in the community where the district offices were located. Much like him, the community surrounding Country School A felt disposed of, and they believed they had lost a very healthy way of life that is rare in our world.

Discussion

When American public schools first started to consolidate, the change was seen as school improvement in part because of the specialization that it allowed (Cubberley, 1922). Continuing a trend that had begun in the previous century, one-room, one-teacher, and one-school districts were systematically closed between 1930 and 1960 (Howley, Johnson and Petrie, 2011). James B. Conant argued that high schools needed at least four hundred students in grades K-12 to offer a comprehensive curriculum. Building larger schools was seen as a way to improve student learning.

Currently, the pressure to consolidate often comes from state legislatures. Howley, Johnson, and Petrie (2011) argue that decisions made about consolidating schools are often made by legislators whose agendas are informed by a desire to reap public relations benefits rather than substantive fiscal or educational improvements. Strange elaborates on this argument:

The pressure to consolidate is often led by four factors: 1. Declining enrollment and rising per pupil costs; 2. State fiscal crisis demanding budget cuts; 3. A court finding that the state's school funding system is inequitable and/or inadequate; 4. A "disparity of fortune" where urban and suburban areas are prosperous and rural areas are in distress, prompting resistance toward laggard regions (Strange, 2011, 107).

Interestingly, small schools in some places (usually urban), are often praised by policy makers as essential elements in improving the education of impoverished students. Unfortunately, small schools in rural places are seen as an expensive luxury. A stereotypical belief exists that rural residents are backward and rural schools and rural school professionals are

second-class. Successful people are viewed as residing in urban or suburban places (Surface and Theobald, 2014).

Are small schools in rural areas inefficient? The word "efficient" has grim connotations for advocates of small schools because inefficiency has often been used to justify their closure. New research, however, challenges "economies of scale" by showing that large schools can be inefficient and small schools efficient (Lawrence et al., 2002). Reports offering new staffing models and budgets show that small schools can be cost-effective to build (Lawrence et al., 2002) and cost-effective to operate (Darling-Hammond, 2002).

A study by Berry and West (2010) indicated that changes in the size of schools and districts as well as changes in the share of education funding from state governments have impacted educational attainment and student labor-market outcomes. Students born in states where the average school size increased completed fewer years of school than did earlier cohorts born in the same state. The study also found that the effects of school consolidation on labor-market outcomes confirm that students from states with increasingly larger schools have earned substantially lower wages later in life. Even more, it was found that both school size and district size exhibit a statistically significant relationship with the estimated returns to education. These results indicate that increasing school size is associated with a decline in return on education.

According to Harmon and Schafft (2009) well-functioning schools increase the collective mixing of communities by strengthening local identity and the sense of a commonly held purpose. Schools function as centers of community activity and nurture public participation in civic and community affairs. They also provide space that enables community members to come together, attend, and participate in sporting and academic events, and school board meetings. Rural schools, in particular, serve as symbols of community autonomy, vitality, and identity. Since they tend to enhance an attachment to place, they have socially developmental outcomes. The comments made by focus group members support Harmon and Schafft's assertions.

Putnam comments, "[There is] hard evidence that our schools and neighborhoods don't work so well when community bonds slacken, . . . our economy, our democracy and even our health and happiness depend on adequate stocks of social capital" (2000, 28). David Mathews of the Kettering Foundation expressed a serious concern that public schools are losing their connection to a democratic public and that citizens are losing their sense of ownership and responsibility for their schools.

[B]y democracy, I mean what the word implies: self-rule or rule by the people. Self-rule isn't confined to elections and representation government or to what citizens do in relation to the state such as pay taxes, obey laws, etc. Self-rule is rooted in what citizens do with other citizens for the common good through formal and informal civic associations as well as through institutions such as government and schools (2008, 560).

Researchers have found that a century of consolidation has already produced most of the efficiencies that are possible in our country. In reality, consolidation has often produced diseconomies of scale. School consolidation does not improve the quality of education or save tax dollars. It is also very clear that consolidation does not increase student achievement. A reduction of the "span of control" is a result of centralization and consolidation. After school consolidation, superintendents have fewer schools to administer and state education agencies have fewer districts to manage. What often ensues, however, is the employment of additional mid-level managers and more office staff (Howley, Johnson and Petrie, 2011). Further consolidation results in increased expenditures for transportation, operation, management and supervision, security and guidance (Coulson, 2007). Some arguments in favor of consolidation include producing a wider menu of educational experiences for students. The evidence shows, however, that consolidation is negatively associated with student outcomes, including lower graduation rates, lower achievement levels for impoverished students, and larger achievement gaps related to poverty, race, and gender (Cotton, 1996).

Conclusion

Qualitative data were collected several years following the closure of Country School A; and it was apparent that resentment, even anger, still lingered. The consolidating district wanted to move fast in an attempt to limit the discourse and push back from the Country School A community. The people associated with Country School A became aware of the manipulation going on in the background; and while trying to be respectful, they were ignored, their opinions were rendered meaningless, and their relationship with the consolidating district eroded beyond repair. The consequence of closing the school was a powerless feeling by those who were fighting against the government. To these people, the closing of a healthy, sustainable district was synonymous with the loss of community life.

The extensive information shared about the loss of Country School A demonstrates the need to examine what is best for children, families, and communities rather than attempting to simplify the logic by relying only on economic means to make decisions about schools. Sadly, in Nebraska the future will mean additional consolidations and more loss of community. Consolidations will continue, and as a result there will be further population decline in rural areas; and the bonds between rural youth and their hometowns will weaken even further.

Closing a small, rural school means less participation, less involvement, less access, less belonging, and probably lower test scores. It usually means longer bus rides which are already distressingly long for children and particularly primary aged children in many rural communities. In Country School A, small worked. Small saved money, brought families together, and student needs were met on an individual basis. Students understood the importance of strong relationships and communication because they witnessed it daily. Closing a country school was not a guarantee of educational improvement.

Forced consolidation can leave a small community empty and its citizens angry with a loss of connection to the newly formed district and to their own community. Thus, school consolidation is fertile ground for deep suspicion and distrust. Respect toward leadership begins to erode and everyday exchanges begin to be contentious. Sumner cautions that

Rural communities are a canary in the mine that warns us of impending disaster, the feedback loop that tells us that all is not well. The sustainability of our rural communities is, in the end, a reflection of our overall sustainability. We can actively choose our sustainability by following a life-values perspective or we can passively leave it to the money values of those who dominate the global economy (2007, 13).

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