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Overcoming State Support for School Consolidation: How Schools in the Empire State React

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Since 1958, the New York State Education Department has officially promoted the policy of consolidating small, rural schools. This policy is delineated in the Master Plan for School Reorganization, and while the centralization of most one-room rural schools has been successful, the state has been less successful in the consolidation of smaller, centralized rural school districts. This paper examines some of the efforts made by those smaller, centralized rural schools to overcome the outside pressures that have emerged within the process of state-backed consolidation. Based on findings in literature explored and data collected concerning consolidation, it is clear that New York State's policy of supporting consolidations has not proven effective. Schools that are allowed creative freedom are examples for rural schools across the nation.

In 1958, New York State adopted a policy strongly encouraging small rural schools to consolidate as part of its efforts to reduce the number of local districts under the State Education Department's jurisdiction (NYSED, 1958). To date, the state has successfully centralized most small rural K-8 schools into consolidated school districts. The state has not, however, been successful in consolidating the remaining smaller rural central school districts described in the 1958 Master Plan for School Reorganization (NYSED, 1958). Despite state support for school district consolidation, many proposals to consolidate smaller rural districts end in failure. In these communities, and in other communities targeted for consolidation under the Master Plan and other school reform policies (Wiles, 1994; Suozzi, 2008; Lundine, 2008; Parsons, 2014), schools continue to operate. District leaders have made concerted efforts to overcome both the pressure to consolidate, and the ongoing economic crisis challenging their resource stream (Howley & Howley, 2006). This paper will discuss the current educational, political, and staff recruitment conditions that rural schools face as they attempt to educate students as small schools in the state of New York. A review of the initiatives some of these schools are implementing as they "stretch to survive" (Howley, et al, 2012) will follow. Finally, the paper will offer policy

proposals that New York State might adopt to allow rural schools greater freedom to educate students. A brief background in rural consolidation research will be followed by a review of the tensions between the state and local schools in the forms of educational accountability, political pressure, the difficulty in adequately staffing rural schools, and the ways rural schools are successfully educating students in spite of state support for consolidation. The paper concludes with recommendations for policy adoption.

Rural Consolidation Research

The northeast region of the United States (and in particular, New York) has publicly supported education in an effort to promote economic and political growth in their state since the 1790s (Parkerson & Parkerson, 2015; Beadie, 2014). New York State's Department of Public Instruction, the forerunner to the New York State Education Department, provided funding for operations and textbook expenses in conjunction with local tax levy or subscription support for the school (Parkerson & Parkerson, 2015; Beadie, 2014). In the 1800s and the early 1900s, state departments of education began to increase their supervision of schools, especially in rural areas, as the perception emerged that the rural schools were facing "problems" (Justice, 2009; Steffes, 2008; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). It was at this time that urban education experts began to push for centralization of small, one-room school houses into village-based centralized schools that would then offer students greater curricular options and higher-quality facilities (Parkerson & Parkerson, 2015; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). This led to conflict between rural communities and the state bureaucracy, as the direction for centralization (followed later by consolidation) came from New York's capital, Albany. Loveland (1993) found that the first Commissioner of Education in New York State, Andrew Sloan Draper, promoted an agenda of rural school consolidation as a way of enhancing educational efficiency and effectiveness within the state. Some examples of resistance to these efforts by local New Yorkers to protect their schools and oppose the state's drive to centralize, and later consolidate, the schools are documented in masters and doctoral dissertations and letters to the State Education Department in the New York State Archives (Balducci, 2003; Mauhs-Pugh, 2005). One particular example from the 1950s emerged from rural Genesee County, where the citizens of the Town of Stanford, District Two, refused to consolidate with the neighboring Byron-Bergen Central School District, and instead withheld

their children from school until the state allowed consolidation with the neighboring Leroy Central School District (Flemming, 1951).

As Theobald & Nachtigal (1995) explain in their work, rural education should move away from the emphasis on modeling urban schools and instead utilize its unique position to assist rural schools in maintaining their central position in the rural community. Theobald (2005) has described in some detail the tensions that have emerged between urban and rural localities. Theobald & Wood (2010) explore the impact that media portrayal of rural communities has had on rural communities and their urban counterparts. The messages that are contained within the media have created a stereotypical representation of rural communities, insinuating that they are inherently lacking, and in need of improvement. Such negative representation has subsequently steered the focus of rural education research toward deficits within in rural areas. Still, the counter argument that rural research should be reporting on areas that urban schools could benefit from modeling (White & Corbett, eds., 2014) is gaining strength. Carr & Kefalas (2009) and Corbett (2007, 2015) have found rural schools and the communities they serve face competing needs in education, and that the practices of rural schools in their preparation of elite students may be emulated by urban schools. The schools successfully prepare students for a wider world, but this often results in graduates leaving the village for larger urban environments. Carr & Kefalas (2009), in their wide ranging study of schools in the Midwest determined students who are considered elite are often prepared by the schools to leave their communities to pursue further educational opportunities. Petrin, et al, (2014), challenged Carr & Kefalas findings by reporting on the number of “best and brightest” who return to their rural communities.

Harmon & Schafft (2009) and Lyson (2002) have reported on the significance of a rural school to its community, and the interconnectedness that the school and community enjoy. This echoes earlier research conducted at both New York State’s level (Fitchen, 1991; Smith, 2011; Vidich & Bensman, 2000). McHenry-Sorber (2014), and McHenry-Sorber & Schafft, (2015) have explored the depth of conflict that communities and the professionals within their schools may experience in times of change and crisis. The research into community and school connectedness has become especially rich in the last few decades, as the concept of place-based education allows scholars to observe the realities of rural life. Corbett (2014; 2016) reminds scholars to critically examine the interconnectedness and perceived idyllic nature of rural areas in their research. In many ways, the quixotic rural ideal has permeated mainstream media as an

example of the supposed ease in rural life. It is the critical nature of research which should allow scholars to systematically examine rural education and community interrelations.

Howley, et al. (2012) and Howley & Howley (2006) have demonstrated that multiple states across the United States have pressed smaller schools to consolidate. In most cases, state administrations posit that rural school consolidation will improve fiscal and programmatic offerings within the school communities. These consistent assertions occur despite research that does not demonstrate appreciable improvements in finances or programs in rural areas. Work done specifically in New York by Duncombe and Yinger (2007) found that promises of reduced costs in consolidating schools were only realized at the smallest level. Further, Howley & Howley (2010) have identified key characteristics of multiple gifted programs in rural communities that have not received widespread national attention. They note that communities provide rich opportunities for rural students to pursue advanced educational aspirations within the context of rural schools. These programs are in place, serving students in small schools, only before consolidation.

As New York State has struggled in the past five years to adequately fund schools (Rebell, 2011; 2012), rural schools and their communities have become increasingly hard-pressed to maintain an adequate level of education for their students. There are three main drivers of this anxiety within the state's milieu: increased educational accountability, political pressures, and staff recruitment pressures. These tensions between the local school district and the state in New York are not unique, but deserve to be studied, as local schools are implementing unique workarounds which will be discussed later in this paper.

Educational Accountability

New York State's stance on accountability for schools is one of the more advanced in the nation. When the Elementary and Secondary Education Act emerged during the Johnson Administration, New York found the increased federal aid for schools was especially helpful for its larger urban communities. As ESEA evolved into the No Child Left Behind accountability stance, rural schools in the nation have found themselves increasingly facing concerns with two provisions of the law. First, rural schools have some difficulty meeting the Highly Qualified designation. Under NCLB, schools are required to ensure all teachers are highly qualified to teach subjects they are assigned to instruct by the school (Jimmerson, 2005). In New York, there

has been difficulty recruiting teachers in the areas of special education (Hoppey, 2016), science, math and technology, especially in rural areas (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015; Azano & Stewart, 2015). Second, the testing provision of NCLB can negatively impact rural schools, as they tend to experience changes in enrollment from year to year (Jimmerson, 2005). O'Rourke & Ylimaki, (2014) echo their findings by examining the narrative school leaders utilize in explaining the impact of No Child Left Behind in their schools. The research into the two rural New York schools found an ongoing set of tensions between the needs of the local community and the educational accountability at the state and national level. This tension in rural communities emerged in one case study when the superintendent reported "curriculum alignment became more pressing than hiring a social worker" (p. 551). Within the second case study presented, the researchers found dissentience between the state accountability system and the media-based perception of student achievement. This engendered conflict between the professional staff and the Board of Education (p. 557).

In Rey's (2014) research, both the school superintendent and parents in a rural New York community expressed competing narratives about the quality of their schools. This tension, which echoes research by Haller, Nusser & Moink (1999), found that citizens and the state had different perceptions about the underlying characteristics of school quality in New York. The tension between the professionals in the district and the local community members emerged during discussions between the parties as to schools' overall academic performance. Rey's (2014) research discovered that the two superintendents in the study felt a sense of duty to ensure the education provided to students would secure them a "ticket out of poverty" (p. 526). Rey found that the role of a rural superintendent requires balancing the local understanding of educational achievement with the state and federal government's definitions of educational achievement. Rey's research echoes efforts that Kearns (1992) examined in New York's rural superintendents reaction to state level mandates within their community. As part of the findings, the research by Kearns indicated that New York rural superintendents needed to act as mediators for their district, as the need to balance local district needs with state policy decisions caused conflict within the educational community. Research conducted in New York finds the local school administration often acts as a buffer between the state and their local school district in the areas of school expectations (Albright, 1999).

The tensions that have emerged within New York State are not unique. Rural schools are facing increased accountability for educational quality. In Maine (Dorris-Keller, et al. 2013), Vermont (Rodgers, et al., 2014), and Arkansas (Tieken, 2014), the state governments have advocated for local school consolidations. One common driver for consolidation in those states is the promise of improved educational accountability as measured by state tests. These tensions, as illustrated above, emerge in those states' definitions of achievement and their local schools' definitions of achievement.

Political Pressures

In state government, the governor acts as a leading advocate for change in education reforms (McHenry-Sorber, 2009; Shorber, 2012). In New York, there has been a strong political effort to change and reform rural education. Parkerson & Parkerson (1998) describe some of the initial reform efforts in New York to ensure state jurisdiction over education. Later, in Parkerson & Parkerson (2015) the authors expand the review of New York's intervention in schools by describing the efforts of the state to regulate schools through the Cole-Rice Laws of the 1920s by providing increased state funding. In 1958, the State Education Department, in conjunction with the legislature released The Master Plan for School Reorganization. This master plan announced the state's political philosophy for supporting rural school organization, including suggested minimums for school size, program offerings, and considerations for transportation to the school (NYSED, 1958). The Master Plan also listed which schools should consolidate, and with whom the consolidation should occur. The State also implemented a philosophy of gauging requests for building aid against the Master Plan (MacGregor & Lenard, 1970). In the 1990s, the state again requested that the New York State Education Department release a list of schools that should merge due to small size. This public report created a political backlash against the State Education Department and the Commissioner of Education at that time (Wiles, 1994). Unquestionably, school consolidation is a politically difficult undertaking for the leadership within state government.

Since the Great Recession of 2008, New York's executive leader has pushed for school consolidation. The past three New York State governors, Spitzer, Patterson, and Andrew Cuomo, have placed an emphasis on government efficiency and reduction in size. By their executive action, the state's political leadership has emphasized a desire to see a change in the educational

structure that each administration inherited. The political action has involved the empaneling of governor's commissions on local government efficiency. Three commissions have emerged that have called for school consolidation in New York: Lundine, (2008), Suozzi (2008), and the New York Education Reform Commission (Parsons, 2014). Each of the three commission's findings reveals a common thread of seeking efficiency through consolidation at the local school government level. The three commissions indicate that the consolidation of local school districts should lead to increased programmatic offerings in their rural communities. The establishment of reform commissions place political pressure on schools, and the media intensifies this pressure. The establishment of a commission and the revealing of the report advocating for consolidation typically leads to the media requesting local school superintendents to comment on the commission's findings, as well as editorials in support of consolidation. The media coverage of the commission's findings adds political pressure on the local school districts to examine consolidation as a viable solution to their economic issues (Dearing & Rodgers, 1996).

As Ginsberg & Wimpleberg (1987) and Meta (2013), report in their research, commissions at the national level have influenced educational policy. The commissions created a reform agenda and changed how states implement education policy. The use of commissions to effect change in educational policy establishes a sense of urgency within government structures, and can affect local school districts due to pressure the state exerts downward (Louis, et al., 2010). Political pressures are not the only area that local rural schools face concerns in New York. Social and Economic pressures are forcing rural schools to find proactive strategies for survival.

Staff Recruitment Pressures

Rural schools have traditionally faced difficulty in recruiting teachers to work in their environments. Within teacher education research, strategies are emerging to assist candidates in preparing for work in rural schools (Schulte & Walker-Gibbs, eds., 2016; Barley & Birnham, 2008; Anzano & Stewart., 2015; Monk, 2007). Miller (2012) examined the rural teacher recruitment market in New York State. The research found rural schools are disadvantaged in competition against suburban schools for two reasons. First, many teachers wish to live within 50 miles of their home districts and do not wish to relocate. Second, many teachers wish to work in schools similar to districts they graduated from. With these two issues facing rural schools in the

teacher recruitment process, the competition for the best and the brightest with the suburban schools can place rural New York Schools at a disadvantage. After teachers have been recruited to rural schools, Greco (2007) found many experienced teachers leave rural New York schools due to poor working conditions, non-competitive salary schedules and challenges with their school boards. Recruiting and retaining teachers in rural communities creates difficulties when hard-to-staff districts are constantly moving to fill positions, and usually hire the newest, and most inexperienced teachers for their classrooms. Eppley (2015) found preparing teacher candidates for rural placement should include professional training as to the unique position rural schools hold in their community. Further, she recommends that teacher education programs work to ensure the deficit model of rural education is eliminated from their training, and by extension, the consciousness of candidates. With many rural schools in rural areas recruiting teachers from teacher education programs that are intended for suburban and urban teaching assignments, this goal of preparing teacher candidates for rural areas will take on a greater role for many schools. Martino & Shuls (2012) found in Arkansas some specific recruitment techniques were used to increase the number of teachers applying for hard-to-fill and rural districts in that state. Some of the techniques included the use of teacher housing incentives, monetary incentives, and web-based recruitment. Gagnon & Mattingly (2015) found in national studies that most states do not have specific steps to address rural staffing issues. Internationally, Lassig, et al., (2015) found teachers in rural Australia made career choices based on the needs of their own personal children. In some instances, highly qualified teachers passed on job prospects in rural areas in order to work in an area that allowed access to higher quality schools.

Recruitment and support for teachers are not the only areas rural schools face in staffing difficulties. Morford, (2001) found new rural principals need additional supports when they transition from teaching into administrative positions. This is significant for rural schools that recruit administrative staff into first-time roles. In many rural districts in New York, the administrative staff is composed of the superintendent and the principal. The superintendent and the principal, in forming an administrative team, must rely upon each other in many ways. If the principal is still developing within his/her role, the superintendent may face the burden of mentoring the new administrator in addition to performing his/her own role as the CEO of the district. As a highly visible leader, principal takes on the roles of teacher coach, curriculum coordinator, school disciplinarian, and is the public face of the school in a rural area.

After the district has recruited and trained a principal, that principal is not likely to stay in the district long term. Papa (2004) found that rural principals were more likely to leave their positions for different districts than to stay within the rural areas for their career. With principal leadership viewed as a key driver for improvement efforts, the need for stability in leadership is pressing, and the constant churning of leadership in a rural building can be detrimental to the relationships that are established among the principal, teachers, students, and the community.

Unique Solutions to Rural School Issues

School districts in New York are moving successfully beyond consolidation pressures in three specific ways, and are also beginning to implement creative solutions to the problems they face. Such out-of-the-box thinking helps the rural schools “stretch to survive,” but serves as a model for school reform in urban contexts as well.

Firstly, when past researcher critique rural teachers for a lack of professional development opportunities, some innovative programs have been put into place to reach the rural teachers (Howley & Howley, 2010). In New York specifically, the State University of Albany has partnered with a number of rural districts in the state in order to facilitate the *Know Your Schools... For Children's Sakes*. (Baker, 2011). Designed as a collaborative professional development program, the collegial circles within the rural schools provided teachers with in depth and collaborative discussion in order to improve professional practice. The goal of SUNY Albany and its practical application arm at the Capital Area School Development Association (CASDA) is to ensure rural schools in the capital district of New York and beyond receive state of the art professional development and technical assistance that the state education department does not have the capacity to provide to rural schools.

Second, at Cornell University, the New York State Center for Rural Schools provides information and research assistance to schools in the midst of consolidation pressure. The Center provides data that is in a user-friendly format that allows the “layperson” to access fiscal, administrative, and achievement data in a way that allows Boards of Education to address questions about a school consolidation without an expensive and emotionally contentious process. The Center’s data provides board of education leaders rapid access to data at board meetings, and allows the citizens of the school districts to observe data that directly concerns

their school district. The provision of information to local schools without a study can deflect some of the pressure from the state bureaucracy to consolidate (Sipple, 2011).

A third way New York rural schools are “stretching to survive” is the recruitment of international exchange students to enroll in their district. Casto, et al, (2012) examined the efforts of one upstate rural district to stave off consolidation by serving as a hub for international students. By enrolling a significant number of exchange students in the school, the local residents benefitted from exposure to a wide range of cultures. Exchange students increased class sizes to the point that greater curricular offerings were put in place. Additionally, the exchange students and the resident students gained greater insight into world issues with different perspectives shared in class. The school community benefitted from the increased numbers of consumers within the local school system. Finally, the exchange students benefitted from experience in an American school system that was not a large, urban environment.

With the higher education-school partnership for professional development and data provision, as well as the international exchange student recruitment efforts, rural schools are addressing two large critiques of the operations structure: limited professional support for educators, and declining population. Small success stories in the state, and the improving ability of schools to utilize distance learning technology in order to increase curriculum offerings, are important indications of the smaller rural and remote schools in the state implementing models of practice for other states and schools.

Recommendations for Policy

New York State political and economic leaders should consider revisions to their nearly 60-year-old support for consolidating rural schools. The efforts to eliminate the one-room school house were largely successful during the initial centralization movement following World War II. The efforts to consolidate many rural schools have slowed in the past 5 years (NYSASBO, 2014). Instead of pushing for consolidation the state may wish to adopt one or more of the following options:

- 1) Allow rural schools to serve as schools of choice for urban students. As more urban schools transform into schools in need of improvement, parents should be allowed to choose inter district transfer requirements. If rural schools were permitted to serve as a destination for urban choice, their communities would

likely see an influx of students. The schools would subsequently see an increase in aid as the state and federal aid would follow the child. A number of research reports have found at-risk children do better in smaller environments. The smaller class sizes of rural communities would provide ample numbers of seats for students who are currently attending overcrowded urban schools.

- 2) Allow rural schools greater freedom to share staff. Under current law, schools in New York State are required to provide instruction in core subject areas. The schools are allowed to share teachers in arts, music, and professional providers in special education services. If the law was changed to allow the local intermediate districts (Boards of Cooperative Education Services) or BOCES to hire and assign teachers to different districts as needed, the local school districts would have a greater pool of instructors to utilize in the core subject areas.
- 3) Permit rural schools to offer regional core high schools. In New York, the BOCES can administer schools that specialize in technology and Career and Technical Education. For some rural schools, provision of basic educational requirements is a challenge. If local districts were allowed to regionalize high schools, greater cost savings and increased programming would be made available to students. Two studies, Ontario and St. Lawrence counties, both showed the potential benefit to regional high schools.
- 4) The state should consider changing the aid formula to give schools suffering from population shifts “impact aid.” As Sherman and Sage (2011) demonstrated in the research into an Oregon community, a single plant closure can devastate a local community. New York State’s rural communities have seen significant economic impacts over the past 30 years. While downstate and parts of upstate are recovering, a large swath of the rural part of New York has not.

With the midpoint of the first decade of the 21st Century closing, New York has the opportunity to put its motto of *Excelsior* into action. By allowing greater creative freedom to the rural schools, the districts can solve problems and improve the education offered to their students. New York has three specific models of success in the state. These efforts can only serve as starting points for what can be the future of rural education in the Empire State of New York.

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