

2016

# Losing Diana: Children and Families Reflect on the Closing of a School in Rural West Virginia

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LOSING DIANA:  
CHILDREN AND FAMILIES REFLECT ON THE CLOSING OF A SCHOOL IN RURAL  
WEST VIRGINIA

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Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the  
Marshall University Graduate College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education  
in  
Curriculum and Instruction

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South Charleston, West Virginia, 2016

Keywords: school consolidation, rural education, student perspectives, lived experience,  
phenomenology

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# APPROVAL OF DISSERTATION

## SIGNATURE PAGE


I hereby affirm that the following project meets the high academic standards for original scholarship and creative work established by my discipline, college, and the Graduate College of Marshall University. With my signature, I approve the manuscript for publication.

Project Title: Losing Diana: Children and Families Reflect on the Closing of a School in Rural West Virginia

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Committee Chairperson

11/28/2016

Date

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank my husband, Jeremy. Without your unending love, patience, support, and encouragement I would have never pursued my desire to earn my doctorate. For five long years, through my coursework, research, and writing, you were there to listen to me read, re-read, toss around ideas, and struggle to find my voice. You always knew exactly what I needed—a hug, encouragement, reassurance or motivational shaming to spark my inner competitiveness. You kept me on the path to success, but you also reminded me to enjoy life along the way. You always made me feel that I was pursuing a worthy goal and without your love and support, I would not be where I am today. And now that I am finished, I can say Thank You! Thank You! Thank You! You were right; it was worth it.

I would like to thank my children: Isaac, Brynna, and Makenna. Even at your young ages, you could tell when mommy needed a snuggle break. You were patient with me when I needed a few more minutes to finish my “homework”, and you always had a smile for me when I needed it the most. I know that none of you know a time when mommy was not in school, and I hope that you have learned the importance of hard work. I want you to grow up and love learning as much as I do, but more importantly, I want you to understand that when you have a dream and set your mind to accomplishing your goal, with hard work and dedication, nothing can stand in your way. I love you with all of my heart.

I would also like to thank my parents, Geary and Sue. Mom, as a former English teacher, you have taught me many things. I do not know where I got my love of commas, but I do know that you and dad have taught me the value of hard work. Thank you for your patience as you read each draft, offering suggestions. Although I ignored most of them, you did what great teachers do—you challenged my thinking and taught me to reflect on my ideas. The two of you were such

a strong system of support, encouraging me along the way, providing grandparent “services” when the kids needed a play break, and just being there every step of the way. Thank you so much for all that you have done for me.

Dr. Campbell, I do not even know where to begin. Luckily, I was fortunate enough to have you as a professor early on in my program. You taught me humility as you butchered my writing, and I finally learned to appreciate revisions. Although I still hate to see my work come back splattered in red, your comments always bring me to a deeper level of thinking and understanding. I feel that we have a very unique relationship; I tried to push you out of your comfort zone with my sometimes “different” ideas, yet you somehow managed to keep me grounded while working a compromise that allowed me to stay true to myself. Although I know that I was one of your many students, you always made me feel like a priority. I cannot thank you enough for your patience and dedication, but it was your willingness to fight for me and my ideas that I will remember the most.

Dr. Watts, I learned so much from you in my first semester. You challenged me to evaluate what I thought I knew about leadership. I always enjoyed the rich discussions that we had in class, and I knew from the beginning that I needed you on my committee. Thank you for your dedication to the leadership program at Marshall; all students who are lucky enough to have you in class will surely be better for it. I appreciate your willingness to support me on this journey, and I thank you for all that you have done to bring me to where I am.

Dr. Lassiter, your class taught me to appreciate the richness of qualitative research. Your work with the Kiowa inspired me to tell the stories of children, those who are under-represented and often overlooked in educational research. You have taught me, not just about phenomenology and ethnography, but about people and voice. I am glad that you agreed to serve

on my committee, and I hope that I was able to accept your challenge to stay true to the experiences of my participants.

Dr. Tuckwiller, I really appreciate your thought provoking and insightful comments. Your suggestions at my prospectus defense really helped me shape this study. Your personal experiences with school consolidation were an inspiration for me as I sought to find a way to bring the voices of my participants to the forefront.

I want to thank my cohort buddies, especially Donna Hage. There were many times when we were ready to throw in the towel, but your encouragement and support helped me through. As we commiserated over Dr. Campbell's brutal annihilation of our hard work, we managed to help each other through the toughest moments. I am glad that we were on this journey together.

Lastly, I would be remiss if I left out all of the people who were gracious and willing participants in this study. Thank you so much for letting me in to explore and ask questions about one of the most trying times in your lives. I want to personally thank each of the students who became my teachers, showing and telling me what it was like to be a child going through a consolidation. Your willingness to share with me greatly contributes to both the field of youth research and insight on school consolidation.



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## **ABSTRACT**

This was a phenomenological study that explored school consolidation through the lived experiences and perceptions of students and their families. This study included five elementary students, ranging from second through sixth grade and six adult participants, including parents and grandparents. Individual interviews, focus groups, and artifact exploration were utilized as the primary data collection methods. Because school consolidation is a social as well as an individual experience, this study worked through the constructivist perspective to allow a greater understanding of the complexities and nuances of personal relationships that develop and evolve throughout the consolidation process. This study also utilized feminist theory and humanism as they allowed the under-represented voices to arise shedding light on the familiar topic of school consolidation through new and unique perspectives while giving credence to the voices of children.

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **Introducing the Problem: Valuing the experience of school consolidation**

Diana, West Virginia, is a small, rural community nestled in the hills of Webster County. For seventy-six years, Diana children attended their own elementary school. In 2014, Diana Elementary School was closed, and students from the former Diana school were consolidated into Webster Springs Elementary School, eleven miles away. As is the story with many school consolidations, the Diana Elementary School-Webster Springs Elementary School consolidation was a contentious event. The existing literature on school consolidation focuses primarily on quantitative data measuring student achievement, financial implications, curricular offerings, and even community effects. Although there is a growing body of literature utilizing qualitative data, there is limited information prioritizing the experience of those directly affected by school consolidation: students and their families. This dissertation seeks to provide qualitative scholarship exploring consolidation through the experiences of both students and their families.

### **The Communities and Their Schools**

Webster County was established in 1860 from the counties of Nicholas, Upshur, and Braxton; 560 square miles nestled in the hills and valleys of the Appalachian Mountains (Miller, 1969). Built on timber and coal, the county saw a massive population increase from 1,730 in 1870 to 23,619 in 1900, but the decline of the timbering industry and the closing of coal mines midcentury would begin the decrease of the population in the early 1960s (Miller, 1969) and the eventual demise of the one-room schoolhouse. In fact, during the six year period from 1961 to 1967, forty nine one-room and small school buildings were closed (Weston, 1967).

Although the history of the first schools in Webster County is difficult to ascertain due to both a lack of record keeping and a massive fire at the county courthouse in 1888 that destroyed most written records (Miller, 1969), it is thought that the first schoolhouse was erected around 1835 by two brothers, William and Benjamin Hamrick, and James Doddrell, on the Elk River, six miles above Webster Springs (Doddrell, 1915). Under the old Virginia government at this time, there were no free schools, and pioneers wishing an education for their children relied on private tutors or subscription schools where the teacher was paid a fee for each student (Miller, 1969). In the period between 1846 and 1856, settlers who had received an education beyond the mountains often established educational systems in their new communities, teaching along with Methodist circuit riders; many of their students became the first teachers in the new system (Doddrell, 1915).

In 1889, the first railroad locomotive whistled through the county, connecting Webster to its more progressive neighbors in the north, and sparking a new era of educational reform (Doddrell, 1915). Until a county system was established in 1933, the four districts, Fork Lick (also known as Webster Springs or Addison), Glade, Holly, and Hacker Valley, were each charged with financing and governing the public schools within their limits; Holly and Hacker Valley had less wealth and population than the other two districts, and they never established secondary schools (Chapman, 1974). Economic and infrastructure development took precedence over the establishment of high schools, and the building of wagon roads, bridges, farms, stores, banks, courthouses, jails, railroads, lodging, and the expansion of tourism were priorities for the developing communities (Chapman, 1974). The growth of education in Webster County depended widely on community efforts, leading to deep pride in the local school, a virtue that

would be tested with the development of the county-unit system and subsequent consolidations (Chapman, 1974).

Today, the picture in Webster County is much different than that of 100 years ago. Although still blessed with beautiful natural resources, the county is no longer home to growing, vibrant communities. The once booming timber and coal industries that were the life-blood of the county are now struggling to remain in operation. The Salt Sulphur Spring is no longer a major tourist draw; the luxurious Webster Springs Hotel burned in 1925 (Webster County Tourism, 2015) leaving a community that has since all but turned to ash itself. The whistle of the trains that once bustled with passengers and freight no longer reverberates through the hills. There are now two main arteries for transportation that flow through Webster County, Route 20 and Route 15; both are two-lane roads that follow the course of the winding river or wrap around the edge of the mountains. As the sun rays filter through the canopy of trees, and wildlife scurries along the roadside, anyone driving along the old country roads knows the inspiration for “Almost Heaven” written by John Denver. The majority of roadways however, have not evolved much in the past century. The research of this dissertation takes place in the communities of Diana and Webster Springs, two towns located eleven miles apart, but situated worlds away.

## **Diana**

Diana has never been a highly populated area, and it has never had a booming, thriving economy. The people of Diana were mostly farmers and woodsmen in the early pioneer days. As the timber and coal industries thrived, so did many small, local businesses; however, as job opportunities within the county went into decline, Diana’s small businesses suffered greatly. Although most of the local community stores have since closed, a few new timber related

businesses have begun to appear. That particular industry pendulum is currently swinging upward, but it is not likely to bring back the prosperity that once characterized these places.

Once home to nearly a dozen small or one-room school houses, in 1938, Diana Elementary School became the first consolidated school in Webster County (Weston, 1967). The new Diana school, a ten-room masonry building situated on 13 acres of land, was built to serve students from the Holly River and Grassy Creek areas (Weston, 1967). Like many rural schools, Diana Elementary School became the gathering place for many social and community events. According to Miller (1969), people used the old country schoolhouses for a myriad of events, including town hall meetings, spelling bees, worship services, debates, and various literary activities with most social activities culminating on the last day of the school term. People often walked for miles (uphill both ways) or rode on horseback to participate in the festivities of closing day where “a literary program of songs, poems, monologues, dialogues, essays, and speeches of the highest type” were common events (Miller, 1969, p. 180). At the conclusion of the day's events, the women prepared a bountiful dinner and everyone engaged in a variety of games. Every school community worked and planned tirelessly for these social events (Miller, 1969).

The old country schoolhouses not only served the purpose of providing an education but also as a social gathering place. Operating for more than seven and a half decades, it was not uncommon for the parents, grandparents, and even great-grandparents of current students to have attended the same school, creating a strong sense of school pride and community loyalty. In particular, Diana Elementary School carried on many of the rich traditions of the one-room schoolhouses up until the time of its closing in 2014. One teacher commented that the community was always very involved with the school, working with teachers to plan and teach

“heritage week” in which the community members would do cent stations for churning butter, pressing and making apple butter, quilting, and playing traditional pioneer games (A. Moll, personal communication, Aug. 4, 2015). Diana Elementary School and the Diana community came together frequently and enjoyed many annual traditions. Each year, parents and grandparents would come and help the students prepare a Thanksgiving meal. Each grade level would be responsible for a different dish; students would make colorful placemats and decorations, and then at lunchtime everyone would gather together to eat the meal they had prepared (A. Moll, personal communication, Aug. 4, 2015).

With a population of 354 people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010), the entire population of the current Diana community is now equal to the student population of the current Webster Springs Elementary, the school that Diana students would eventually attend once the consolidation was complete. Although small in number, the Diana community banded together to fight against the consolidation. However, once the decision to close Diana Elementary became final, and the community had lost their school, they united in an effort to keep the building. In retaining the school building and property, the Diana community was able to preserve a part of their identity; they created the Diana Eagles Community Center. The Community Center still serves as the social gathering place; it is used for Saturday night community basketball, birthday parties, and family reunions, while serving as a polling place and emergency shelter as needed.

### **Webster Springs**

Within the first century of its establishment, Webster Springs experienced a boom in population and economy, most notably from its popular tourist attraction the Salt Sulphur Springs. In 1900, *The Webster Echo* greeted the summer tourism season with an article describing Webster’s beauty:



This is God's favored section of America. Rich in health-giving atmosphere we breathe, the waters we drink, rich in mineral resources, rich in oil, gas and ore, rich in our virgin forests, rich in everything that goes to make a people happy and comfortable- all waiting for the hand of an energetic development. Strike the road for Addison and hang up your hat where you will forever hereafter make your habitation, in the land of the Elk, where Nature has lavished all that man could ask for (as cited in Chapman, 1974, p. 7).

Through the 1960s, Webster Springs was booming. The coal mines prospered and because surrounding areas had not been well developed, people came to Webster Springs for entertainment. The increased mechanization of coal mining in the late 1960s, however, led to a steady population decline. Coupled with the development of surrounding cities and improved transportation, people began to leave Webster to look for both work and entertainment (G. Weir, EDA, personal communication, Aug. 6, 2015). In the early 1990s, in an effort to revitalize the town, the Main Street Organization was formed. Since its inception, the organization has purchased abandoned buildings and has focused on beautification and preservation efforts (G. Weir, EDA, personal communication, Aug. 6, 2015). Once the epicenter of a flourishing tourism community Webster Springs is now just a quaint little town located along the road between Interstate 79 and Snowshoe Mountain Resort. Although the coal mining industry in the county is almost obsolete, the town of Webster Springs is still holding its own. Many local business owners are working together to revitalize the community and bring in new businesses.

Webster Springs Elementary School, as it exists today, was established in 1975, when it inherited the old Webster Springs High School building. Prior to the consolidation of Webster Springs and Cowen High Schools, Webster County's population dramatically declined. According to the 1950s census report, there were 17,888 people in the county, but by 1970 there

were only 9,809 (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). The community began to decline as quickly as it had grown. Dee Alsop, former Webster Springs student, recalls his elementary and high school days,

We lost a lot of kids, probably once or twice a week when the teacher took roll we had lost more. Instead of catching the bus to school, they'd hop on a train with their parents who would head out to Michigan or somewhere looking for work. The auto industry was growing, and we just didn't need as many people working the mines. It was like a mass exodus out of the county (personal communication, Aug. 8, 2015).

Prior to the establishment of Webster Springs Elementary, Webster Primary and Webster Advanced served students in first through eighth grade (Weston, 1967). Along with many smaller community schools, these schools were all eventually consolidated into what is now Webster Springs Elementary. Due to declining enrollments and small student populations, coupled with dilapidated and aging facilities, and a variety of other circumstances, the closing of these small community schools became inevitable. With enrollment at Webster Springs and Cowen High Schools both over capacity for their current buildings, the Board of Education elected to consolidate the two schools into a new, centrally located building. Upon completion of the consolidation in 1975, the old Webster Springs High School building became the home of Webster Springs Elementary School.

Originally constructed in 1955, the building includes a gymnasium, athletic field, cafeteria, and twenty-two classrooms (Weston, 1967). When the elementary schools moved into this building, it housed students in first through eighth grades, and although Kindergarten was located in a separate building, the kindergarten students utilized the school cafeteria for meals. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, there were three classes per grade level in grades one

through sixth, as well as three language arts, one science, one math, and one history class for the seventh and eighth graders (S. Weir, D. White, A. Wilson, personal communication, Aug. 4, 2015). Additionally, they offered special education classes, physical education, Title 1 Reading, shop, and home economics. In the 1980-81 school year Webster Springs Elementary had 622 students in Kindergarten through 8<sup>th</sup> grade (Computects, Inc., 1990). There were many opportunities for seventh and eighth graders to participate in athletics, as baseball, softball, football, cheerleading, and boys' and girls' basketball were offered.

Along with a countywide population decrease, there was also a teacher shortage in the county during this period of time, and nearly half of the school staff at Webster Springs Elementary came from out of state. Conversations with some of the first teachers at the new Webster Springs Elementary gave insight into what life was like for the staff. Most of these teachers had no intention of staying in Webster Springs for more than a year or two to gain experience, and most were still actively seeking employment closer to their homes; however, many of them decided to stay because of the friendships that they had formed at the school. Because there was a large college recruitment effort to fill teaching vacancies, many of the teachers were close in age. They established bonds through out-of-school and after work activities such as staff volleyball games, weekly dinner nights, sporting event parties like "Derby Day" and Super Bowl, and summer activities like whitewater rafting and picnics. The closing of local restaurants in the early nineties, along with the changes in priorities and obligations (marriage and children) changed the dynamics; however, their roots had been established and their families were planted here. Many of the traditions that these original teachers started have carried through over the years, and the teachers at Webster Springs Elementary are very close-knit. The teaching jobs at Webster Springs were coveted, and often, if you were lucky enough to

be hired there, you didn't leave by choice, but only by a reduction in force. Now, more than 30 years later, many of these "original" teachers are beginning to retire, and Webster Springs Elementary School is now facing a large rate of teacher turnover.

### **Rural School Consolidation**

The Diana and Webster Springs merger exists within a larger national context. In the United States, the number of schools, especially rural schools, declined throughout the twentieth century. In fact, since 1938, (coincidentally the year Diana became the first consolidated school in Webster County) there have been more than 100,000 consolidations across the U.S., which has resulted in nearly a 90% decline in the number of schools (Duncombe & Yinger, 2007). This phenomenon has affected states from New York to Montana, Louisiana to Maine, and multiple places in between, leaving rural schools across the United States at risk. During this time, communities have repeatedly clashed over the closure of schools. The school is often the cultural epicenter of a rural community, providing social gatherings that strengthen community bonds, as well as educating youth and providing a key economic resource. Many community members fear that the loss of their school will result in the decline of the community. As communities decline, students leave to find work, depleting the workforce and further isolating the community (Morton, 2009). Advocates for rural schools argue that the school's relationship with the community ensures higher expectations, effective leadership, and a cohesive bond where school values mirror those of the community (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Sias, 2008; Lyson, 2002).

The subject of school consolidation has received a significant amount of attention from those who argue its benefits, often focused on cost savings, community effects, and optimal school size. Conant (1959) argued that small schools lacked the resources to offer students advanced level opportunities. Burton's (1989) study reported advantages as expressed by parents

and students in the form of expanded curricular offerings, and Benton (1992) described consolidation benefits that ranged from improved test scores to decreased dropout rates.

Those who argue against school consolidation regularly cite the benefits of small schools, especially in rural, impoverished communities. Friedkin and Necochea (1988) concluded that smaller school size benefitted students from impoverished communities, while larger schools benefitted students from more affluent communities. Similar conclusions have been drawn in other states (Howley, Strange, & Bickel, 2000). Although the research on school consolidation is rich in terms of the benefits and shortcomings, relatively little is known about how school consolidation affects those who directly experience it: students and their families. Although Hedlund (1993) explored student perceptions about schooling and how motivation affects student success, and Howley and Bickel (1999) described student outcomes in terms of school size and socioeconomic status, the issue of student and parent experience still needed more attention.

School consolidation is an educational issue of great concern, especially for those residing in small, rural communities like Diana and Webster Springs. Those in favor of school consolidation generally cite economies of scale (Conant, 1959; Burton, 1989; Benton, 1992). By touting financial benefits and fiscally responsible decision making, many policy makers and school boards have had success in closing small, rural schools. In West Virginia, the *Recht* Decision was a major catalyst for school consolidation and improvement as the plaintiffs contended that they were “denied a thorough and efficient system of education ... as a result of discriminatory classifications found in the education financing system” (*Pauley, et al. v. Bailey, et al*, 1983, sec. 1). Between 1990 and 2002, in West Virginia alone, nearly 300 schools were closed in an effort to broaden the curriculum and reduce spending (Eyre & Finn, 2002).

Proponents of consolidation therefore argue that larger schools will have a greater educational benefit for the students, as these larger schools can provide greater opportunities and expanded curricular offerings.

School consolidation still is the predominant choice when school boards are faced with declining enrollments and diminishing budgets, despite the research that suggests potential benefits of smaller schools for students from poor, rural communities (Howley, 1996). Diana Elementary School's enrollment declined nearly 64% in the twenty five year period prior to its closing and was a key argument of the Superintendent in her proposal to close Diana School (WVEIS, 2012 as cited by Dean, 2013). This decision does not take into account the research showing that adult expectations and student-teacher relationships exert a significant influence on a student's academic competency and performance (Benner & Mistry, 2007; Goodenow, 1993; Patrick, Ryan, & Kaplan, 2007). A positive correlation has been shown between small schools and favorable interpersonal relationships such as relations among students, between students and teachers, and in teacher attention and caring (Bates, 1993; Burke, 1987; Fowler & Walberg, 1991; Gottfredson, 1985; Smith & DeYoung, 1988). Much research has been conducted on how interpersonal relationships affect student learning and motivation; school consolidation often disrupts these relationships, and, therefore, this study, while exploring how the closing of Diana Elementary School and subsequent merger consolidation into Webster Springs Elementary School affected the lived experience of students and their parents, also sought to discover how relationships are transformed.

### **Conceptual Framework**

This dissertation followed a phenomenological approach, as it was the most appropriate research method for understanding the lived experiences and perceptions of the students and

parents affected by school consolidation. Because school consolidation is a social as well as an individual experience, working through the constructivist perspective allowed a greater understanding of the complexities and nuances of personal relationships that develop and evolve throughout the consolidation process. The feminist perspective allowed under-represented voices to arise and shed light on a familiar topic with new and unique understandings. Lastly, a humanist approach was appropriate because it gives credence to the voices of children. Listening to the stories that children have to tell, utilizing unbiased, honest, and open-communication lines, enables scholars and stakeholders to understand school consolidation from a unique and often silenced voice.

## **Phenomenology**

Phenomenology is a form of interpretive inquiry that focuses primarily on experience and perception, “the aesthetic quality of human experience” (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 2004, p. 405). Although some believe that phenomenology is messy and not as rigorous as statistical studies, Pinar, et al. state that it is a disciplined and rigorous approach to understanding experience deeply and genuinely. Phenomenologists seek to interpret an experience by listening to the stories of different participants, exploring the phenomenon or event from a plethora of perspectives (Bound, 2011). This dissertation utilized phenomenological methods to explore the phenomenon of school consolidation as presented in the lived experiences and perceptions of students and families from rural West Virginia.

In *The Dynamics of Educational Change: Toward Responsive Schools*, John Goodlad (1975) asserted that we must embrace the whole person: “the impact of pupils on teachers as well as the reverse; the impact of teachers on teachers, the use of resources, the relationship among all these” (p. 206). According to Huitt (2009), humanists believe that it is important to study the

person as a whole, especially the manner in which an individual grows and changes over his lifespan. Pinar, et al. (2004) discussed the necessity of interaction with the environment and the importance of dialogue for the exchange and growth of knowledge. Because school consolidation is a very disruptive process, the humanist perspective allows the researcher to carefully study all of the nuances of how the whole person and the dynamic relationships among people are affected. In concert with the idea of the importance of human relationships, this study was guided by the work of other humanists such as Carl Rogers. Rogers believed that the initiation of learning does not rest in the skills of the teacher or the curriculum; rather it resides in the relationship between the learner and the teacher (Rogers, 1961; Rogers, 1980). School closures and consolidation often disrupt the relationships that are formed in small, rural schools, and utilizing Rogers' work helped the researcher better understand the complexities of these human connections.

### **Social Constructivism**

The shared nature of learning in the view of social constructivism is closely linked to the ideas presented by Rogers (1961; 1980) and Noddings (1984; 1995; 1999) that focus on the relationship between individuals. It is also closely tied to the ideas presented by Miller (2005) and Clark (2011), the idea of co-construction of meaning, and in order to advocate for educational changes that benefit children and are reminiscent of their lived experiences, one must utilize the ideas of social constructivism and progressivism. In holding with the social constructivist viewpoint, children are viewed as having rights with the ability to voice opinions and influence decision making that relates to their own lives (Freeman & Mathison, 2009). Social constructivism is a theory that focuses on the social nature of learning where knowledge is constructed based on the experiences of the learner; therefore, knowledge is socially and



culturally constructed through interactions among and between individuals and their environment (Kim, 2001). Individual experiences and the unique perspectives gained offer value to the social learning process. When utilizing a social constructivist lens in research, the emphasis gives children a voice and rectifies the silence forced upon them through adult-only research agendas. These experiences, when told from the voice of the participants, offer valuable insight into how school consolidation directly affects students.

Pestalozzi, Froebel, and Parker all believed that in curriculum development, the child was at the center and educational values should be determined by the needs of the child (Pinar, et al., 2004). These men, along with Ward and Dewey set the foundation of the progressive movement, believing that students should discuss, plan, and effect social change (Pinar, et al., 2004). In order to instill a sense of democracy, encourage leadership skills, and help youth understand the requirements of citizenship, John Dewey advocated for students' active participation in schools (Rebore, 2003). One key element of Dewey's philosophy was empowerment, and he believed that the best way to help students recognize that they are valued members of the school community was by providing them with opportunities to become active in decision-making and leadership, thus empowering them (Rebore, 2003). Although the progressive reform movement began to take hold in the late 1870s (Pinar, et al., 2004), nearly 150 years later, researchers, especially in the United States have found it difficult to let go of the belief that young people are inexperienced and lack the knowledge and skills to become competent informants or co-researchers (Freeman & Mathison, 2009).

### **Feminist Theory**

Building on Rogers' work of human relationships, I also pulled from feminist theorists such as Nel Noddings and Janet Miller. Noddings' (1999) theory, based on her ethic of care,

believed that schools should nurture children to be caring, competent, loving individuals and that this aim of education does not work against the intellectual development or academic achievement of students, but instead provides a firm foundation for both. This idea of schooling aligns with Goodlad's view that "Schools are not factories. Their worth is found in the quality of life sustained there" (p. 216). Janet Miller, although a renowned feminist, also contributed to collaborative research methods. One of her great contributions was on the focus of perspectives and viewpoints of traditionally underrepresented groups (Pinar, et al., 2004). She was also instrumental in challenging the traditional taken for granted notions of research.

### **Working with Children**

The importance of strong parent and school partnerships is indisputable for student success, especially for students in rural communities (Witte & Sheridan, 2011). Therefore, gaining parent insight is a critical step for policymakers and local education agencies when making decisions that influence school policies and procedures. Regardless of culture, language, or background, every parent wants what is best for his or her child. Parallel to Miller's ideas, both parents and children must engage in important conversations in order to fight for positive change. Similarly, Cindy Clark's (2011) *In a Younger Voice* gives rise to the notion of children as competent co-researchers and participants. She maintains that adults often disregard the limited ways in which adults relate to children stating that "Politicians kiss babies, but generally don't take the next step to listen to school-age citizens before they make policy" (p. 3). Viewing adults in power as the natural structure places children under the dominion of adults, giving them little or no input into how institutions operate (Clark, 2011). Similarly, viewing children as individuals only on a trajectory path toward adulthood rather than as distinct individuals with unique perspectives and experiences further accentuates adult concerns (Freeman & Mathison,

2009). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) integrated the common idea of children in need of protection with the more progressive idea of children as social actors capable of forming and expressing opinions and sharing in the decision-making process (Bragg, 2010). Recent scholarship (Christiansen & James, 2000; Corsaro, 1997, 2005; Corsaro & Miller, 1992; James & Prout, 1997; Waksler, 1991) has championed child-centered inquiry, echoing the idea that the child voice is integral to research and understandings about children, moving into a multi-voiced, rather than adult-voiced, construction of human experience and meaning (Clark, 2011). This study attempted to elicit both children and adult perspectives of school consolidation in order to provide an inclusive, empowering, socially just research design.

### **Problem Statement**

The existing literature on school consolidation focuses primarily on quantitative data measuring student achievement, financial implications, curricular offerings, and even community effects. Although there is a growing body of literature utilizing qualitative data, there is still very little that explores the experience of those most directly affected by school consolidation: students and their parents. This research was designed to provide a comprehensive, empowering, and balanced research agenda that used qualitative methodology to explore consolidation through the experiences of both students and families. By utilizing a phenomenological approach, this study sought to illuminate school consolidation through first-hand accounts from the participants who directly experienced this event. Specifically, this dissertation informs broader and deeper understandings of school consolidation by investigating how the experiences of students and families from Diana Elementary School intersected and differed as they experienced the school consolidation process and subsequent integration into Webster Springs Elementary.

## Research Questions

The following research questions were investigated:

1. How have students from the former Diana Elementary School experienced school consolidation?
2. How have Diana school parents experienced the consolidation?
3. To what extent have those experiences intersected and differed?
4. How do the experiences themselves, and the extent to which they intersect and differ, inform broader and deeper understandings of school consolidation?

## Definitions

The following definitions are applicable and used for the purpose of this study. School consolidation is often used synonymously with terms like closure and merger. Although each term is unique, they are also closely related. *School consolidation* often refers to a school that is formed from the students and teachers from discontinued schools, generally within a district or defined area; whereas, a *merger* generally refers to a combination of two or more schools into an existing school (dictionary.com, n.d.). In this study, *school consolidation* refers to the closure of one Diana Elementary school and its merger into an existing Webster Springs Elementary. The school consolidation plan resulted in the closure of two schools: Diana Elementary and Glade Middle School and the merger reconfiguration of both Webster Springs Elementary School from a Preschool-8<sup>th</sup> to a Preschool-6<sup>th</sup> school and Webster County High School from a 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> to a 7<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> school. This study only focused on the students and families from the closed Diana Elementary School who chose to send their children to Webster Springs Elementary School.

This study utilized a *phenomenological* methodology that focused on the descriptive experiences of a specific phenomenon or event. As a philosophical discipline, *phenomenology* studies things as they appear in experience or the meanings things have in experience; phenomenology studies conscious experience from the first person point of view (Smith, 2013). Experience, meaning, and voice are all key terms that were utilized in this study. *Experience*, in this study, has a dual meaning as it refers to both the physical process of observing and undergoing school consolidation (the school consolidation experience) as well as, the total cognitions given in all that is perceived, understood, and remembered-the philosophical act of reflecting and making meaning from what one has encountered (definitions.com, n.d.). *Meaning*, therefore, relates to the purpose or significance of the experiences.

Because phenomenological studies often rely on first-hand data, the concept of voice is an important one to discuss. In regard to school reform, *voice* is a popular term that is often meant to refer to the values, opinions, beliefs, backgrounds, and perspectives of a group (Abbott, 2014). Although this sense of voice is important, it generally encompasses a collective view and may negate individual values or perspectives. *Voice* as a literary concept, in this case, refers to the act of giving authority or influence. Both the collective *voice*, as well as the individual authority were used in this study. Specifically, the under-represented student and parent groups were given a collective voice in sharing their experience of school consolidation; however, utilizing a research design that provided an avenue for children and families to express their unique perspectives gives authority to their experiences.

In order to provide the participants an opportunity to express their authentic voices, developmentally appropriate research practices were considered. *Photoelicitation* is one method for helping young people, including timid speakers find their authentic voice. In this study, the

researcher used a “native image making” technique in which the informants provided the images (photographic, video, etc.) and then discussed them with the researcher (Bignante, 2010). The emotions that the images elicit often generate insights that do not always surface during verbal inquiries. An essential element of *photoelicitation* is not the study of the images themselves but rather “how informants respond to them, attributing social and personal meanings and values” (Bignante, 2010, p. 2).

### **Significance of the Study**

Although the literature on school consolidation is vast, and there is a plethora of information about how school consolidation affects student achievement and school budgets, very little of that literature explores students’ understanding of and reflections upon consolidation. Research on school consolidation may topically address student and family experiences; however, there is little research conducted in the first voice. Clark (2011) describes the benefits of using children as firsthand sources in research stating that “relying on mature proxies (parents, teachers, etc.) to give accounts of youthful experience is an unfortunate concession, since adult proxies lack a direct line to children’s experienced meanings...divergent from those of adults” (p. 6). There is contradictory evidence touting the benefits or disadvantages concerning consolidation; however, there is limited information about how students and their families experience the closing of their school. Studying school closure through a phenomenological framework provides important insights into how students and families perceive and experience the school consolidation process. The effects of closing a school are felt by teachers, students, parents, and the general community. This research contributes to the field by giving leaders, policymakers, and practitioners- those directly and indirectly charged with educating and working with students and schools- insight into how students and their families

experienced this particular school closure and consolidation. It is my hope that such insight might help to bridge the gap between policy and practice.

### **Method**

In order to understand the phenomenon of school consolidation and the perspectives of those who have experienced it, data must be collected first-hand from the participants. Because this dissertation is a qualitative study that explored school consolidation from individual perspectives and experiences, random sampling was not an appropriate technique. Instead, this research used purposeful sampling and included all parents and students from Diana Elementary School that merged into Webster Springs Elementary School entering grades 1-6 during the first year following the consolidation. In order to best understand each experience, data was collected through in-depth interviews and focus groups. Drawing on the idea that children are competent social actors, this study included their experiences and stories. In working with young children, the methodology employed was developmentally appropriate, tailored to their competency levels, and acknowledged the different ways in which young children communicate. According to Clark (2011), there are several appropriate methods that can be used in addition to in depth individual interviews and focus groups. These include visual methods such as drawing, photographing, video making, photoelicitation, and metaphor sorts.

### **Limits of the Study**

This study was limited to students and families of Diana Elementary School who consolidated into Webster Springs Elementary School. It did not include students and parents from Diana Elementary School who consolidated to Hacker Valley Elementary School or Webster County High School or who chose to homeschool. This study did not investigate the

perceptions of teachers, administrators, or community members from the affected areas. Due to the nature of a phenomenological study this study seeks to engage us in conversation about the key issues at the heart of school consolidation. The examination of the perspectives and experiences of the students and families from Diana Elementary, although limited and unique, may still provide insight and guidance to other rural communities engaged in school consolidation.



## **CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

### **School Consolidation: An Historical Overview**

#### **The National Picture**

School consolidation in the United States has a long and complex history. The beginning of formal schooling and government supporting compulsory education can be traced back to the 1640s when the General Court of Massachusetts ordered that towns with more than fifty families must appoint a school master to teach all children to read and write (Burton, 1997). Throughout the 1700s and into the early 1800s, small, rural schools were built in order to support family and community efforts to educate their children within close proximity to their homes (Buckner, 2005). These small rural schools became the hearts of the communities, not only providing basic education for the students, but serving as the social and cultural centers (Lyson, 2002). However, shortly after this time, the school consolidation movement began gaining ground.

Industrialization in America brought about two changes that greatly influenced American schooling: expansion of transportation and improvements in industrial processes and production. In 1869, legislation for free public transportation was passed in Massachusetts (Bard, Gardener, & Weiland, 2006). This allowed for easier travel on railways, bicycles, and wagons. Decades later, the mass production of the automobile, coupled with the paving of roads, allowed students to travel further distances in a shorter amount of time, thus eliminating the need for many small, rural, one-room schoolhouses (Bard et al., 2006). Early school reformers also looked to industry when determining an optimal organizational structure; they believed that larger schools were more economical and efficient, and there should be a more urban, centralized model for education (Bard et al., 2006).

In an early twentieth century history of education, Ellwood Cubberley (1914) argued that the Industrial Revolution made the influences of the church, home, and local community on education inadequate, making rural school instruction less vital than it had previously been. Interestingly, Cubberley's argument would be echoed throughout much of the twentieth century as others expressed similar sentiments. Tyack (1974) stated that the modernization of rural schools benefitted everyone through better facilities, a broader more contemporary curriculum, and more qualified teachers and administrators; however, opposition to school consolidation was still fierce among local residents. According to Tyack, even though the patrons were dissatisfied with their school buildings and archaic curriculum, they wanted to maintain local control. Rural school reform efforts soon became an issue of a transfer of power from the local laymen to educational and political experts.

The industrialization of farming practices of the early twentieth century placed a huge economic burden on small rural communities as small farms were replaced by more technologically advanced agricultural centers. Rural farmers exited the community looking for work in more urban areas, and the old trades and smaller industries of the rural communities began to disappear, reducing student enrollment, and placing additional pressure on rural economies (Morton, 2009). Rural schools of this time also faced growing and complex problems, not least of which were judgments of reformers like Cubberley (1914) who also asserted the:

...absolute inadequacy of the rural school of to-day to meet the new educational and social needs of to-morrow is evident to anyone who has studied the problem...the situation calls for educational insight and leadership of a high order, and a reorganization of rural education under some authority of larger jurisdiction and knowledge than that of the district-school trustee. (p. 95)

Cubberley's ideas were echoed by many in the early twentieth century as the school consolidation movement began to take hold, and a "one best system" approach to schooling, which argued for centralized control and a standardized, modern community lead by professionals, was adopted (Tyack, 1974; DeYoung & Theobald, 1991; Conant, 1959; Burton, 1989; Benton, 1992; Edgerton, 1989).

In part, school consolidation efforts were also sparked by the political climate and international competitiveness that characterized the twentieth century. It increased during the Cold War, and reached a peak with the Soviet's launch of Sputnik, the first man-made satellite to orbit the Earth. The Soviet's success increased the already existing fear that small, rural schools were not producing the human capital needed for national security and dominance (Ravitch, 1983). American politicians' and educational reformers' reactions to the launching of Sputnik in 1957 further fueled the movement to consolidate small schools and apply a more business-like philosophy to increase educational efficiency (Bard et al., 2006). James Bryant Conant's 1959 book, *The American High School Today*, further emphasized the inadequacy of small, rural schools by arguing that small schools lacked the resources to offer students advanced level opportunities. Conant's research, based on high schools in 18 states, found that high schools with at least 100 students per graded level were the most cost effective to operate, and could offer a broader curriculum. Conant (1959) was a vocal proponent of school consolidation, arguing the cost of small schools was exorbitant, and that the best course of action for all was to eliminate "the small high school by district reorganization" (p. 38).

Rural school consolidation continued during the 1970s and 1980s, when economic instability led to the loss of small farms, and a new influx of people migrated to urban areas in search of work. This was a particularly devastating time for rural communities, as the loss of

student enrollment coupled with a rising cost of education per pupil lead to the consolidation and reorganization practices that are still common today (Sias, 2008). In 1983, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* was published, placing the American educational system under intense scrutiny by revealing all its inadequacies. In the report, Gardner claimed that the United States' educational foundations were eroding due to an attitude of mediocrity that was threatening the future of the nation and its people (1983). Its claim that the current educational system was woefully inadequate appealed to both policy makers and the populace, and served to further spur the consolidation movement (Gardner, 1983).

### **Rural Appalachia**

The school consolidation movement in rural America had both vast effects and consequences. Even within the last decade 3,762 rural schools were consolidated or closed (U.S. Department of Education, 2013), events that profoundly affected both the social and the educational contours of rural communities.

The importance of this cannot be ignored. Schools in rural America are much more than just educational institutions; they are the critical symbol of the community's identity, serving as the location for social gatherings, lectures, meetings, and events (DeYoung & Lawrence, 1995). In rural Appalachia, schools are much more than educational institutions; they are often the heart and soul of the community. Anderson (1990) described this school-community relationship when he stated, "The school served as a social hub for the local residents," often holding pie socials, spelling bees, debates, religious services, Christmas programs, and other social activities (p. 53). Fuller (1982) contended that closing a country school was akin to destroying the institution that holds a community together. The curriculum of rural education in the early twentieth century focused on basic literacy and numeracy as well as character development; education beyond

eighth grade was often irrelevant because the rural economy did not require advanced degrees (DeYoung & Lawrence, 1995).

Rural communities today are faced with a complex dilemma where the aim of education is urbanized, training students for a workforce that often forces them to leave their communities. Just as it occurred in the national consolidation scene, consolidation in the Appalachian region was based upon the metropolitan method of schooling where education was seen as an industrial endeavor and centered on the idea that schools should be run like a business. When it came to rural schools, one important limitation of the metropolitan model of education was that it discounted the value of schools in rural Appalachia, framing them merely as pedagogical institutions rather than the cultural centers of their communities (DeYoung & Lawrence, 1995). Popular educational reformers like Elwood Cubberley (1914) argued the plight of both rural life and schooling when he stated;

Today, with the newer conceptions of educational work, and the new social, industrial, and educational problems facing the rural school, the need for intelligent direction and leadership is far beyond what any but the most intelligent communities can supply. The rural life problem is now far too complex and far too difficult to be solved by isolated local effort. Inexpert local authority does not have the grasp of the newer problem necessary to contribute much toward its solution. (p. 99)

Surface and Theobald (2014) contended that the denigration of rurality that is a part of American culture further supports Cubberley's stance that rural citizens are second-class and therefore cannot provide a proper education (i.e. one that legitimates urban ideals). They do, however, argue that although conventional cultural stereotypes, such as those

held by Cubberley abound, the research on small rural school success speaks to discredit these claims.

Despite the cultural differences between rural and urban views on education, reformers' efforts at school consolidation were successful as the number of schools has greatly declined over the past century despite an increase in student enrollment. In 1930 there were approximately 248,000 schools serving around 25 million students compared to about 98,000 schools in 2012 serving about 55 million students (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

### **West Virginia**

The picture of school consolidation in West Virginia is similar to that of the Appalachian region. School consolidation in West Virginia accelerated during the Great Depression and in the years following World War II; the county unit plan, a plan in which city or managerial districts were closed or combined into one district per county, went into effect in 1933, reducing the number of districts from over 450 to just 55 (DeYoung, 2010). By the early 1960s, the number of schools in West Virginia had been cut by nearly half from the previous century; however, student population had nearly doubled in the same time span. Economic challenges during the 1950s and 60s took a further toll on rural West Virginia schools as the loss of mining and industrial jobs reduced student enrollment and undercut school budgets (DeYoung, 2010).

In West Virginia, the 1982 *Recht* Decision was a major catalyst for school consolidation as the plaintiffs contended that they were “denied a thorough and efficient system of education ...as a result of discriminatory classifications found in the education financing system.” (Pauley, et al v. Bailey, et al, 1983). Judge *Recht* concluded that West Virginia's schools did not meet high quality educational standards and that the state's funding system created unequal educational opportunities between counties. The case was controversial with proponents arguing

that all children deserved a quality education, while critics alleged that the standards set forth in the ruling were unattainable (McGinley, 2010). Linda Martin, founder of Challenge West Virginia, argued that the implementation of the Recht decision missed the mark as the state failed to address education disparities; instead, she claimed that the state's solution for addressing educational problems was to close schools rather than fix them (Harris, 2012). Ultimately, this legislation created sweeping reforms across the state (including the formation of a School Building Authority and the creation of the Office of Education Performance Audits), and for twenty years, the State Department of Education was charged with implementing the decision. This effort led to the closing of many small, older schools where instructional and maintenance costs were high. Finally, in 2003, the case was closed and Judge Recht relinquished jurisdiction (McGinley, 2010).

Between 1990 and 2002, in West Virginia alone, nearly 300 schools were closed in an effort to broaden the curriculum and reduce spending (Eyre & Finn, 2002). Additionally, the West Virginia legislature appointed a School Building Authority (SBA) in 1989, at the suggestion of Governor Gaston Caperton, to fund school improvements; however, districts requesting the funds for the building or remodeling of schools for the purpose of consolidation were often given precedence over other projects, further forcing the consolidations of small schools (Bard et al., 2006).

### **Webster County**

In Webster County, knowledge about the history and effects of school consolidation consists primarily of the recollections of local residents; however, in 2005, Webster County was brought into the national spotlight by an article titled "Long Way Home". Speaking out against consolidation, the author highlighted the plight of one student who had to endure a ninety minute

bus ride each way in order to attend the only high school in the county, while giving up the opportunity to participate in many extra-curricular activities due to financial and logistical considerations (Slavin, 2005). Like so many others in Webster County, the story is a familiar one, and one of the main arguments against consolidation by residents. These stories and recollections define the importance of schooling in the area as the authors (generally, local residents) are acutely attuned to the issue of consolidation.

Prior to 1933, there were four districts within Webster County: Fork Lick, Glade, Holly, and Hacker Valley, each charged with financing and governing the public schools within its boundaries (Chapman, 1974). Because economic and infrastructure development were priorities for the developing communities, the growth of educational systems varied widely depending on community efforts. The development of the county system in 1933 brought about consolidations of many one-room school houses (Chapman, 1974). The decline of the coal and timber industry of the 1960s took a huge toll on both the local economy and the population. In fact, in the decade following, forty-nine schools in Webster County were closed (Weston, 1967).

Webster Springs Elementary School was established in 1975, as it inherited the old Webster Springs High School building. Originally built in 1953, to house high school students from the northern part of Webster County, two additions to the structure in 1976 and 1990 were necessary in order to accommodate the needs of the K-8 student population (Dean, 2013). This school eventually became home to all of the students in the old Fork Lick district as declining enrollment, small student populations, dilapidated facilities, and other economic factors inevitably led to the closure of all of the other community schools. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Superintendent Dr. Mark Manchin proposed a school consolidation plan that would create a county wide middle school by sending all 5<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> graders in the county to a newly constructed



middle school near the geographic center of the county in Bolair. This plan would have closed Glade Middle School but left the four remaining elementary schools and Webster County High School intact albeit with smaller student populations in grades preschool through fourth grade. Political mistrust rooted in long-standing bad blood from the high school consolidation decades earlier provided the impetus for communities within the county to fight hard against the plan. Various alternatives were discussed in local restaurants, church social circles, and wherever people would gather. Options such as a county-wide middle school and a new elementary school to house a consolidated Hacker Valley and Diana Elementary were discussed; however, none of these plans came to fruition. For several more years, the county continued to operate in a state of uneasy contentment as talk of school consolidations loomed in the future, and schools continued to deteriorate due to lack of maintenance and funding.

Ironically, Diana Elementary, the focus of this dissertation, became the first consolidated school in Webster County in 1938 (Weston, 1967). Originally built to replace nearly a dozen even smaller schools, Diana Elementary served students from the Holly River and Grassy Creek areas, and eventually became the gathering place for many social and community events. For 60 years this culture prevailed before talks of consolidation began.

Diana Elementary went through many renovations over the years. In 1976, a gymnasium was built adjacent to the original 1938 school building (Computects, Inc., 1990). A fire in 1984 caused some damage to the original masonry building but was repaired (WYK Associates, Inc., 1984), and in 1986, an addition was built adjacent to the gymnasium (Gandee & Partners, Inc., 1986). In 1990, the Comprehensive Facilities Plan suggested that the original masonry building be vacated (Computects, Inc., 1990); however, it was still used, along with mobile classrooms and the 1986 steel addition for nearly a decade.

Diana residents faced the possible closure of their school for at least 15 years prior to its actual consolidation in 2014; however-until that time parents and community members had been able to halt the efforts of the Board of Education. Board minutes from as early as 1999 showed delegations of parents speaking against the closure of Diana Elementary as then Superintendent Dr. Mark Manchin had proposed building a county- wide middle school. Again in 2003, Superintendent Kay Carpenter proposed a reconfiguration. Her proposal suggested that the fifth through eighth graders at Diana would merge into the existing Webster Springs Elementary/Middle School. Her proposal claimed that the merger would offer a vastly improved learning environment that would offset the negative effects of declining enrollments and high per pupil expenditures (Carpenter, 2003). Ultimately, this proposal failed; however, many local residents believe that the death knell for Diana Elementary tolled when the School Building Authority agreed to help finance a new \$8.2 million Hacker Valley Elementary School (Krason, 2010) to be constructed a mere 15 miles from Diana, under the direction of Superintendent Kay Carpenter. During the preconstruction phases there was much discussion about where the school would be built with many favoring a site nearer to the middle of the two northern elementary schools. Ultimately the building was constructed on land adjoining the standing Hacker Valley School. At the time of its construction in 2008, Hacker Valley enrolled 56 students (WVDE, n.d.); according to Principal Kennetha Howes, the new building has a capacity for 100 students (personal communication, Nov. 3, 3015). In 2013-14, the last year that Diana Elementary was open, it had a student population of 73; Hacker Valley's student population was 71 (WVDE, n.d.). The new Hacker Valley School was unable to house all of the students from these two communities, and there was no real push from county administration to merge these two schools; therefore, the parents from Diana would be forced to bus their children to nearby Webster

Springs (11 miles away) or drive them, at their own expense to the nearest bus stop or over the mountain to Hacker Valley.

### **Arguments That Support Consolidation**

The literature that supports school consolidation is vast, focusing on student achievement, financial implications, curriculum, and community effects. Conant's (1959) book *The American High School Today* argued that small schools were ineffective because they lacked the resources to offer students advanced level opportunities and that the elimination of small schools would increase cost-effectiveness and expand curricular offerings. Burton (1989) and Benton's (1992) studies both document some benefits of consolidation on student achievement. Specifically, Benton's (1992) study of five school systems in Arkansas cited improved scores on the Metropolitan Achievement Test and the American College Testing Program (ACT), as well as increases in extracurricular opportunities, higher level course offerings, and college-going rates while decreasing dropout rates. A study of student achievement from Ohio also reported significant academic gains on state math and reading exams for students displaced from closed schools (Carlson & Lavertu, 2015). Friedkin and Necochea (1988) found that the increase in school size in high socioeconomic contexts improved student performance because there were more opportunities for students and fewer constraints on the allocation of system resources.

Kreitlow's long-term study of ten school districts in Wisconsin, five of which had been reorganized<sup>1</sup>, confirmed positive student outcomes. Specifically, students in reorganized districts had more learning opportunities, higher achievement scores, and greater college enrollment rates (Kreitlow, 1971). Nitta, Holley, and Wrobel (2010) cited additional support for consolidation

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<sup>1</sup>Defined as "the consolidation of two or more school districts, the dissolution of a school district, the detachment of territory from one school district and its attachment to an adjoining school district, or the creation of a school district (Wis. Stats. 117.03(5)).

from their qualitative study of four Arkansas high schools. According to their interview data, students appreciated the broader social opportunities that consolidation afforded when they were integrated with a more diverse student population. Students also believed that they had improved opportunities and a broader selection of courses and extracurricular activities. Teachers from this same study were less positive about the entire consolidation experience, although they did report improved professional development opportunities and a reduced work load in preparing for fewer classes.

Proponents of school consolidation generally cite economies of scale and fiscally responsible practices, arguing that larger schools offer greater educational value for students by providing a myriad of opportunities and expanded curricular offerings (Conant, 1959; Burton, 1989; Benton, 1992; Nelson, 1985). By sharing courses and facilities, Nelson (1985) argues that consolidated schools could offer a more varied curriculum and reduce district spending for capital improvements and general maintenance, as well as lowering salary expenditures by providing fewer teachers and administrators. According to Ackell (2013), cost savings depend on a school district's ability to decrease expenditures per pupil by spreading fixed costs, such as salaries for administrators and utilities, over a larger student base. He states that lower education budgets allow for more financial freedom, and could increase possibilities for districts to offer higher teacher salaries and retain more highly qualified educators as well as allocate resources for additional trainings and better technology to be used to improve student performance (Ackell, 2013).

Although proponents argue the cost savings of consolidation, the financial benefits of school consolidation would not be completely accurate without taking school size into consideration. Fox (1981) found that the cost savings actually create a U shaped curve and

increasing school size beyond an optimal level actually increases rather than decreases per pupil cost. Many studies have concurred, stating that the smallest and largest schools are, per pupil, the most expensive, while schools ranging from 300-400 for elementary and 400-800 for secondary are generally the most cost effective when taking student achievement into account (Williams, 1990; Blum, McNeely, & Rinehart, 2002; Howley & Bickel, 2001) . Although there is no general consensus for the optimal school size, many believe that a range of 400-800 students for high schools and no more than 300 for elementary schools are appropriate approximations; however, studies focusing on achievement generally refrained from making size recommendations or made recommendations that were much lower than other studies (Howley, 1996). An abundance of the literature on the financial implications of school consolidation suggests that students from poor, rural communities benefit more from smaller schools (Friedkin & Necochea, 1988; Howley, 1996; Howley & Bickel, 1999; Cotton, 1996).

The general benefits of school consolidation on the community are not as well documented as the negative influences; however, a study conducted by Steve Kay (1982) describes the psychological benefits that combining schools can have on the community. In his report, he states that students from consolidated schools gain confidence and that the schools begin to form an identity within the community as their extracurricular programs and sports teams often flourish with combined funding and resources (Kay, 1982). Similarly, proponents of consolidation in a study by Kamerzell (1994) asserted that consolidating schools would put an end to duplicated services, save administrative costs, lower taxes, and generally strengthen the economic development of the community.

## **Arguments Against School Consolidation**

Although school consolidation is an educational issue of great concern, most research shows that it also has far-reaching effects that can negatively influence the community (Samson, 1997; Lyson, 2002; Bailey, 2000; Miller, 1995). Conant (1959) incited fear in rural communities across the nation when he advocated for eliminating small schools due to their inadequacy in offering a quality education that prepared students for postsecondary experiences. He stated, “I am convinced that small high schools can be satisfactory only at exorbitant expense” (p. 37). His philosophy that small, rural schools lacked the resources to provide advanced level opportunities and the subsequent consolidation movement over the next several decades has prompted a war between those favoring consolidation and rural communities fighting to keep their small schools.

A growing body of literature supports small schools, citing their benefits, especially for students in rural, impoverished communities. Research on optimal school size addressed cost effectiveness; however Friedkin and Necochea’s (1988) study, later dubbed “The Matthew Project”, took student achievement as well as community influences (socioeconomic status) into account for determining optimal size. The study which examined school performance in California concluded that smaller school sizes benefitted students from impoverished communities while larger schools were more appropriate for students from affluent communities. Subsequent researchers have replicated this study in Arkansas, Georgia, Ohio, Montana, Texas, and West Virginia with similar results (Howley, Strange, & Bickel, 2000). Howley’s (1996) replication in West Virginia reported that the “negative effects of large size among impoverished students are twice the magnitude of positive effects among affluent schools and districts; positive

effect sizes among the affluent are not as large as negative effect sizes among impoverished schools and districts” (p. 5).

Smaller schools are also associated with higher levels of attachment, positive attitudes and social climate, and increased levels of participation at both the elementary and secondary levels (Fowler, 1992). Furthermore, Fowler believed that student achievement is enhanced by satisfaction with coursework, low dropout rates, and voluntary participation in extracurricular activities, all of which are characteristic of small schools.

Research indicates that expectations and student-teacher relationships exert a substantial influence on a student’s academic proficiency and performance (Benner & Mistry, 20007; Goodenow, 1993; Patrick, Ryan, & Kaplan, 2007). Research has exhibited a positive correlation between small schools and positive interpersonal relationships such as associations among students, between students and teachers, and in teacher responsiveness and caring (Bates, 1993; Burke, 1987; Fowler & Walberg, 1991; Gottfredson, 1985; Smith & DeYoung, 1988). Generally, rural schools take advantage of their connectedness to the community, smaller faculties, and personal investments in the school in order to set clear goals and align the curriculum, instruction, and assessment to improve student achievement (Barley & Beesley, 2007). Haddad and Alsbury (2008) acknowledge that school size influences academic achievement through teacher attitudes, because there is a higher level of shared accountability, and teachers have a more optimistic attitude about their responsibility for student learning. In research conducted on rural adolescents’ perspectives on community and adult interactions, Hedlund (1993) found that students who had a positive relationship with or received individualized attention from teachers reported greater satisfaction with school and higher academic motivation.

Cotton (1996) also examined the efficacy of parents, students, and teachers in small schools. Because of the closeness of the community and the school, parents often play an important role, actively participating in their child's education and school activities and influencing decision making. Student involvement in school and extracurricular activities is also more pronounced as everyone's contribution is needed for clubs and teams to have a sufficient number of participants. It is therefore less likely for students to feel isolated or disregarded. Bailey (2000) found that extracurricular participation is more varied in small schools and that more students are involved, creating a generally diverse populace whereas larger schools are more polarizing. This means that a larger population of students from small schools is generally involved in multiple activities while larger schools generally have a small population that is involved creating a schism between participants and non-participants in larger schools.

Graduation and dropout rates are statistics often cited in determining effectiveness of schools. According to Bailey's analysis of U.S. Department of Education data, small schools graduate students at a significantly higher rate than do larger schools; additionally, rural school dropout rates are considerably lower than those in urban areas and equivalent to those in affluent areas despite a substantial difference in parental education and income levels (2000). Cotton's review of literature confirmed these results by examining ten different studies. In nine of the ten studies, small schools did significantly better in terms of both graduation and dropout rates; the other study revealed mixed results (Cotton, 1996).

Many studies have been conducted to determine the cost effectiveness of consolidating small schools. Stiefel, Latarola, Fruchter, and Berne (1998) examined 128 New York high schools, looking at expenditures per graduate rather than per pupil. There was a slightly lower cost of educating small school graduates than large school graduates; although the cost savings



were not statistically significant, the smaller schools also served a high population of low income students. Funk and Bailey (1999) conducted a similar study in Nebraska. They found that graduation rates as well as post-secondary school enrollment was greater in smaller schools. These studies demonstrate that measuring student expenditures on a per graduate basis shows that small schools are a better financial investment in terms of educational outcomes (Buckner, 2005). Proponents argue that although small schools may cost more to operate, they are well worth the investment because of the returns that are provided in the commitment to student learning and the fact that community cohesion reinforces values that are mirrored in the community (Bailey, 2000; Sias, 2008; Lyson, 2002).

Schools are often the central link in small communities, and they both shape and reflect its vitality. Although there may be several public establishments within a community, none serve such a broad constituency as the local school. Often, the school serves as a place of employment for many residents, as well as providing social, cultural, and recreational events, in addition to serving the educational needs of the citizens; it is where generations gather to cement a collective, community identity (Lyson, 2002). According to Peshkin (1978), “Viable villages generally contain schools; dying and dead ones either lack them or do not have them for long. The capacity to maintain a school is a continuing indicator of a community’s well-being” (p. 161).

Rural communities face a unique problem, one that is two-fold. First, it is well documented that there is a strong correlation between poverty rates and student achievement. Because the rural poverty rate is nearly 50% greater than the metropolitan poverty rate, it is difficult to ascertain whether the differences in academic achievement are due to a deficiency in quality educational institutions or the rural-urban income differential (Hobbs, 1989).

Additionally, the rural economic development-education nexus rarely accounts for the outmigration of human capital from rural areas; these communities lose the return on their educational investment as their most highly educated youth leave to find more lucrative employment (Hobbs, 1989). Many community members are acutely aware that the forfeiture of the local school will be deleterious to the community as top students leave after graduation in order to find work in more metropolitan areas, depleting the workforce of highly educated citizens, thus causing further isolation (Morton, 2009). Although often touted as a financially responsible practice, the cost savings from school consolidation are commonly offset by lost taxes, the devaluation of property, and the loss of local business (Lyson, 2002).

Rural schools have an advantage in developing the social capital of their youth by revitalizing the bonds between the school and community because they have historically been the cultural center for athletics, drama, and social activities for the community. Rural schools, when working in conjunction with the local leaders and residents, can positively affect the community's sustainability by providing students with engaging and meaningful community-based learning activities. By building the social capital of the school and the youth, the community is developing responsible citizens and encouraging civic leadership, often renewing a sense of community pride and connectedness that may lead students to maintain permanent residency (Miller, 1995).

### **Summary**

The literature on school consolidation is rich and varied, spanning more than a century in American history. It covers aspects including the benefits and shortcomings, as well as how it affects student achievement and the community. Although the research is expansive, relatively little is known about how school consolidation affects those who directly experience it: students

and their parents. Some studies, such as Hedlund (1993) explore student perceptions, motivation, and school success. Still others (Howley & Bickel, 1999; Friedkin & Necochea, 1988) describe student achievement in terms of school size and socioeconomic status. Graduation and dropout rates, as well as community effects, have all been well documented; however, qualitative scholarship addressing the topic of student and family experience still needs more attention.

Research on relationships show that there is a strong correlation between professional learning communities, teacher retention, curriculum innovations, school improvement, and student success (Haddad & Alsbury, 2008; Barley & Beesley, 2007; Cotton, 1996); however, school consolidation often disrupts these relationships. This study explored how the closing of Diana Elementary School and subsequent merger consolidation into Webster Springs Elementary School transformed relationships and shaped the lived experience of students and their families.

## **CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Introduction**

This study explored school consolidation through the perspectives of students and families by examining their experiences of the closing of Diana Elementary School and subsequent merger consolidation into Webster Springs Elementary School.

A study's research design—whether quantitative, qualitative, or a mixed-methods approach—must reflect the nature of the problem being studied. Because this study explored how particular individuals experienced a specific event, a qualitative research design was most appropriate. Qualitative studies allow the researcher to collect data in a naturalistic setting in an attempt to understand multiple realities while focusing on participants' experiences and perceptions and the ways in which they make sense of their lives (Merriam, 1988).

### **Theoretical Approaches to the Study**

This study's methods drew upon three different, but very related theoretical approaches: phenomenology, which explores the lived experiences of specific phenomena; social constructivism, which focuses on the social nature of learning and the co-construction of knowledge; and feminist theory, which foregrounds issues of voice and representation. Phenomenology, a philosophy that informs and seeks to explore the lived experience of a specific phenomenon is particularly useful for studies like this one. According to Creswell (1998), the phenomenological approach is particularly applicable for illuminating the complexities and understandings of an individual's experience.

Qualitative research design generally stems from a social constructivist philosophy; because school consolidation is a social event, as well as an individual experience, this type of

design allowed the researcher to explore the complexities and nuances of the personal relationships that develop and evolve throughout the consolidation process. Working from a feminist lens the study further emphasized relationships while giving a voice to typically under-represented groups. Utilizing student voice, which is often absent in typical research studies of this topic gave credence to their experiences and understandings of the familiar topic of school consolidation. Listening to the stories of children and creating relationships that hold their perspectives in high esteem begins to balance the power structure. Framing youth and their voices as essential participants of a shared social world opens the researcher to a unique, collective, understanding of their shared experiences (Freeman & Mathison, 2009). Utilizing methods that align with phenomenological, social constructivist, and feminist theories enabled the researcher to explore school consolidation from students' and families' perspectives, understand how those perspectives intersect to shape and reshape their experiences, and bring new- often underrepresented- voices to the school consolidation debate.

## **Phenomenology**

Phenomenology is a qualitative approach to research that is concerned with “how human beings make sense of experience and transform experience into consciousness,” including how the participants “perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others” (Patton, 2002, p. 104). Phenomenology utilizes a methodical and rigorous approach in order to understand the participants' experiences honestly and profoundly (Pinar, et. al., 2004). Phenomenologists explore an event from a multitude of perspectives in order to gain a more thorough understanding of the phenomenon (Bound, 2011).

Phenomenological studies often utilize in-depth interviews and focus group discussions as a means for gathering data. Because this study sought to understand how students and families

experienced the closing of Diana Elementary School, a research design that emphasized their voices provided the most holistic and accurate account of the phenomenon.

This qualitative study utilized an emergent design, one that builds the story from data. According to Merriam (1988), in an emergent design, the meanings and interpretations evolve as the researcher analyzes the data. The participants' experiences and recollections help shape the study. In this study, the research design operated much like a funnel: at first, the outline was broad and very general; participants' initial interviews helped narrow the focus of the study and guided the questioning and direction of the study. This type of design allowed the researcher to embrace the whole person and his or her experiences, as well as the relationships that are inherently changed throughout the school consolidation process.

### **Social Constructivism**

Education is a transformative process, and relationships between and among students and teachers have a tremendous amount of influence over how people experience school. Learning is a social process that occurs when individuals are engaged in meaningful interactions with others, and individual experiences and the unique perspectives gained offer value to the social learning process (Kim, 2001). Because education and schooling are socially constructed experiences, the research methods must be designed in a way that captures the essence of these relationships with others and the environment. The method must also rely upon dialogue. Pinar (2004) stresses the importance of dialogue and interactions with the environment in the understanding and exchange of knowledge.

Social constructivism is a theory that focuses on the social nature of learning; the construction and co-construction of knowledge as it is formed out of the experiences of the learners (Kim, 2001). Although humanism tends to look at the individual as the focus, morality

and ethics cannot be ignored, and it is from this stance that humanism can be closely linked to social constructivism. The shared nature of learning can be connected to the ideas presented by Rogers and Noddings that focus on relationships between individuals. Acceptance, authenticity, and empathy are key components of humanist philosophy; however, these qualities are equally essential in building the relationships that are necessary for learning under social constructivist principles.

Strong family and school partnerships are significant indicators of student success and these relationships are particularly important for students in rural communities or from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Witte & Sheridan, 2011). Children should be regarded as capable individuals with the right and ability to voice their opinions in ways that influence decisions that directly relate to their own lives (Freeman & Mathison, 2009); this holds true for other stakeholders such as parents and teachers. Utilizing social constructivism as a philosophical lens allowed the researcher to emphasize these often underrepresented groups, giving rise to their voices and eliminating the restrictive silence too often forced upon them by policy makers.

### **Feminist Theory**

Feminist theorist, Nel Noddings (1999) bases her ethic of care on the belief that while schools must work to foster children's intellectual development, they should also cultivate an attitude of caring that nurtures children to be caring, competent, and loving. Noddings contends that although promoting an ethic of caring should not be the sole purpose of education, it should be the first purpose (Noddings, 1984). Historically, schools have been entrusted with the development of the academic domain while churches and parents have been responsible for the child's moral development. Noddings (1984) argues that "questions concerning the ethical arise

in every aspect of human life, and nurturance of the ethical ideal cannot be assigned to any one or two institutions. All must accept responsibility” (p. 173).

Small, rural schools can be powerful places to learn as accountability develops through relationships (Lawrence, 2006). According to Surface and Theobald (2014), increasing school size hampers the formation of strong relationships between students, school personnel, and parents and weakens social cohesion. Many other studies concur, as they cite the benefits of small schools on interpersonal relationships, student achievement, and community cohesion (Lyson, 2002; Miller, 1995; Hedlund, 1993; Kelly, 2007; Burke, 1987). Cotton (1996) states that “people in small schools and units come to know and care about one another to a much greater degree than is possible in large schools”, and students who move into a small school cite “attentive, caring staff as the reason for their academic and attitudinal improvements” (p. 12).

### **Feminist Theory and Youth Voices.**

Feminist theory, in addition to its emphasis on caring, focuses on equality, not just for women, but for all people regardless of gender, age, race, class, sexuality, culture, religion, or nationality. It seeks to give credence and voice to underrepresented and oppressed people. In her description of the matrix of domination, Patricia Collins (1990) explains that there is rarely a case in which a person is purely an oppressor or a victim but is rather a member of varying groups simultaneously. Children may be considered privileged based on their race or class; however, they are still viewed as members of an oppressed class because they are viewed as socially and culturally immature. Qvortrup, Bardy, Sgritta, and Wintersberger (1994) suggest that children may be characterized as a minority group because the adult-child relationship is often characterized by marginalization, paternalism, protection, and institutionalism. The belief that children do not have the knowledge, experience, or ability to be competent co-researchers or



even reliable informants has kept them from securing a place in research relevant to their lives; however, the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child altered the way that children are able to participate in decisions affecting their lives. The general principles outlined in this international human rights treaty helped pave the way for youth research and empowerment.

Janet Miller also worked to level power structures as she challenged the traditional notions of research. Specifically, her contributions helped to advance participatory research methods as she focused on giving voice and authority to the perspectives of traditionally underrepresented groups (Miller, 2005). Conventional research has ensured that knowledge is generated from adult experiences and vantage points; however, as feminism has begun to equalize the once male dominated research arena, child research methods have begun to restore some of the power inequities that have been taken-as-given in an adult dominated research world (Kellet, 2005). According to Freeman and Mathison (2009), a belief in the intelligence, worth, and capability of young people is necessary when doing research with children; however the “rewards go beyond the information gathered: in the privilege we have as researchers to engage with and learn from the lives of children and youth” (p. 84). According to Collins (1990) empowerment is the ability to reject the dimensions of knowledge that perpetuate objectification and dehumanization, and in order to become empowered, one must understand and use his or her individual dimensions of knowledge that foster one’s own humanity as a fully human subject. Utilizing children as researchers gives them a voice and means to use their individual dimensions of knowledge and allows them to participate as fully human subjects, being a part of the decision-making process.

## **Working with Children**

Similar to the social constructivists, Dewey also stressed the importance of connecting schooling and society; he believed that students should deliberate, organize, and influence social change (Pinar et al., 2004). His notion of active experience and free communication of ideas was the type of democracy that he thought was essential for both educational and societal reform (Pinar et al., 2004). John Dewey encouraged students' active participation in schools, and he believed that in order to instill a sense of democracy and help youth understand the requirements of citizenship students must have opportunities to become active in decision-making and leadership (Dewey, 1900; Rebore, 2003).

### **Children as Co-Researchers**

Although the ideas of active child participation is centuries old, researchers, especially in the United States, have been slow to acknowledge that young people are capable of making valuable contributions to research. In more recent years, researchers in the social sciences have begun to utilize children as co-researchers and informants. Since the late 1980s, there has been an increasing interest in conducting research *with* children rather than *on* children as evidenced by policy such as that laid out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and The Children Act (Christensen & James, 2000). The methodological shift in research has progressed from approaches which viewed children as objects (Watson & Raynor, 1920); adults' construction of childhood (James & Prout, 1997); childhood as a distinct social group (Qvortrup et al., 1994); exploring children's experience from their own perspectives (Harcourt, Perry, & Waller, 2011); to child-led research (Kerawalla & Webb, 2014).

Clark (2011) discusses the concept of youth as competent co-researchers and active participants; however, she maintains that adults often ignore the limited ways in which they

relate to children. Accentuating adult concerns and viewing adults over the dominion of children as the natural power structure, disregards children's unique perspectives and experiences and gives them little credibility to provide input into how institutions operate (Clark, 2011).

### **Age Appropriate Leadership Opportunities**

In West Virginia, state code WV§18-2E-5 along with WVBE policies 2320 and 2322 provide standards for high quality schools. Within these standards, student leadership is a component that is addressed across content areas. Throughout these documents, there are multiple references to student leadership or student-centered instruction. The goals of these standards are to ensure that schools within West Virginia are providing age-appropriate leadership opportunities that allow students to develop self-direction and a sense of responsibility for improving self, school, and community (WVBE policy 2322). Additionally, the standards provide a blueprint for setting up a classroom learning environment that is student-centered and fosters student reflection, intellectual inquiry, and self-direction. These standards are echoed in other states as well (Ohio Administrative Code Chapter 3301-35; N.J.A.C. 6A:8; Maine DOE: CPA1). As educational leaders and lobbyists have made clear in their advocacy for student-centered learning environments, it is time for policy makers to stop paying lip-service to children and start listening to what they have to say on matters that directly affect them. A growing body of scholarship (Christiansen & James, 2000; Corsaro, 1997, 2005; Corsaro & Miller, 1992; James & Prout, 1997; Waksler, 1991) advocates for the integration of child-centered inquiry; thus, it is becoming critical that we integrate this idea into policy development, especially for decisions that directly affect students such as curriculum, testing, and school consolidation. This study attempted to provide a more socially just, inclusive, and empowering research design so that a multi-voiced perspective of school consolidation emerged.

## **Research Questions**

Based upon the existing literature on school consolidation, additional qualitative research is still needed that takes up how parents and young students experience school consolidation.

Drawing upon the above theory and scholarship, utilizing a phenomenological framework, and working with an emergent design, this study addressed the following research questions:

1. How have students from the former Diana Elementary School experienced school consolidation?
2. How have Diana school families experienced the consolidation?
3. To what extent have those experiences intersected and differed?
4. How do the experiences themselves, and the extent to which they intersect and differ, inform broader and deeper understandings of school consolidation?

## **Research Design**

Creswell (1998) describes five different types of qualitative research designs: phenomenological, case study, ethnography, grounded theory study, and biography; however, phenomenological studies allow the researcher a more thorough understanding by illuminating the participant's individual experience. Studying school consolidation from the perspective of displaced students and their families can give insight into the essence of consolidation as it is experienced by those directly affected. The aim of this qualitative research was to reveal the meaning of the experience of school consolidation as it was described by individual participants rather than attempt to quantify, measure, or generalize its effects. In order to uncover the meaning behind the participants' experiences, the research design utilized individual interviews, focus groups, personal mapping, and child-driven photo elicitation. According to Clark (2011),

utilizing a hybrid approach—as stated above—allows a “triangulation across social and private aspects of meaning” (p. 75).

The participants in this study were identified as “co-researchers” rather than as “subjects” because they provided personal experiences and meanings of the specific phenomenon, helping to understand the essence of school consolidation; moreover, their responses guided the developing research. Because this research was co-constructed by the research participants, the design provided a blueprint for the study; however, the study evolved as themes and questions arose from the responses and data from each phase.

### **Phase One**

Phase one of the research consisted of identifying, informing, and engaging the research participants (See Appendix 1, Phase One). Parents and students from Diana Elementary School who attended Webster Springs Elementary School after the consolidation were invited to participate; however, due to the personal nature of the topic, not all were receptive to the study. The initial phase, therefore, included a group session in which parents and students were invited to attend an informational session about the logistics of the study. At this meeting, the primary investigator explained the purpose of the study and answered questions; IRB documents were made available, and consent and assent forms were obtained at this time. As a longtime resident who is known to potential participants, I anticipated they would be more receptive to me than if I were a stranger. If potential candidates were unsure of whether or not they wanted to participate, the forms were given to them to review for one week, at which time I contacted them again. Those who were still not willing to participate were not approached again. Phase one also consisted of individual interviews with research participants who agreed to participate. The main

goal of this phase of research was to identify the research participants and to ascertain the themes or topics for the photoelicitation and focus group phases.

Individual interviews are often utilized in qualitative research. This method was used early on in this study because it allowed the interviewer to engage with each child, building trust and mutuality without interference from others (Clark, 2011). Individual interviews also provided the participants a personal space in which they could voice their thoughts, share an experience, or reflect on a specific event (Freeman & Mathison, 2009). Individual interviews, however, cannot be considered the participant's true voice but rather a co-constructed narrative between the interviewer and the interviewee. Although the researcher should bracket his or her predispositions and biases (Clark, 2011), it is important to realize that the experiences of the researcher are reflected in the questions asked; therefore, from a social constructivist perspective, the interview can be viewed as a relationship in which the researcher and interviewee collaboratively build the story (Freeman & Mathison, 2009).

An individual interview gives freedom to both the interviewer and the participant. It gives the researcher flexibility to tailor the language and activities to meet the needs and interests of each person, probing for more information or following up on vague or confusing statements with sensitivity, but it also allows the participant more freedom to answer on his or her own terms (Freeman & Mathison, 2009).

Knowledge of child development helps the researcher set appropriate expectations for the interview, and it is important equalize the scales of power, giving the child confidence and building a rapport that encourages open communication. Some researchers recommend ice breaker activities (Winnicott, 1971; McCabe & Horsley, 2008) while others suggest breaking power norms by framing the interview as a role reversal. Clark (2011) likes to use the latter

strategy by explaining that the child is the expert “teaching” the adult researcher something that children know more about than grown-ups; in this scenario, the traditional adult-child roles are reversed, and the adult is the novice learning from the expert child. I used the role reversal strategy during the individual child interviews because I was the student learning from the experts, those who had experienced the school consolidation first-hand.

### **Personal Maps as Interview Tools**

According to Tammivaara and Enright (1986), “young children generally find *doing* something *with* something and talking *about* that something to be easier, more comfortable, and more interesting than only talking about something that isn’t physically present” (p. 232). Interviewers should select ways of questioning that fit the age and maturity level of the participants; younger children need more concrete prompts, whereas teens and young adults are better equipped to respond to abstract questions or tasks (Clark, 2011). In order to elicit rich responses and give the students a concrete object about which they can discuss or refer back, the initial interviews with the students utilized a personal “map.” The students were asked to trace themselves or draw a body on butcher paper so that they could create a personal collage of experiences, events, and memories. They were afforded the opportunity to draw pictures, cut and paste images, or write words on the body images that depicted important events and memories from Diana Elementary. They were also given the option to either “map” these experiences by placing them on specified body parts or create a random collage. The participants were then asked to repeat the activity, this time focusing their experiences or memories from Webster Springs Elementary. Veale (2005) explains that drawing is a method that creates a frame that children can fill with their own meaning, and Punch (2002) suggests that in having children explain their creations, it is more revealing to have them explain what their drawings mean to

them or why they depicted certain images. The goal of this interview activity was to elicit themes that were relevant to the children as well as drawing similarities or differences between and among the “selves” for each individual and eventually among the group. Based on the themes that emerged, the researcher determined that focus group discussions were appropriate.

## **Phase Two**

Phase two consisted of photoelicitation activities (See Appendix 1, Phase Two). Today’s society is rife with visual media; adults and children alike share a new form of socialization. Facebook, Youtube, Snapchat, and other social media platforms allow people to visually share their life stories. Anyone working to gain children’s perspectives would be remiss if they attempted to reach children only through verbal communication; they would be leaving out visual media, an important avenue by which information is now socially exchanged (Clark, 2011). Even young children (Wescott, Davies, & Bull, 2002), and those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Shams & Robinson, 2005) are confident in the use of visual media even when conventional linguistic discourses are difficult for them. Freeman and Mathison (2009) describe the importance of utilizing photographic media in qualitative research studies when they stated:

Photography, whether researcher or participant produced, provides a way to document a world viewed and experienced by the photographer. It provides a snapshot of a world or culture of interest that can then be used to support, augment, and illustrate the analysis or perspectives of groups or individuals. (p. 110)

Photoelicitation techniques can take many forms and are known by many names: auto-driving (Heisley & Levy, 1991); reflexive photography (Douglas, 1998), photo novella (Wang & Burris, 1994) and PhotoVoice (Wang & Burris, 1997); however, the shared goal of these methods is to use the elicited images to inform critical dialogue (Freeman & Mathison, 2009).



Researchers have used photoelicitation with children as young as 3 and 4 years old, showing that they are capable of both using cameras and talking about the pictures they took (Clark, 2004). These types of strategies align well with phenomenological, social constructivist, and feminist perspectives, as the emphasis is placed on the child or research participants defining what is worth knowing, remembering, and discussing (Freeman & Mathison, 2009). Photoelicitation allows the participants to talk about an experience or item by showing and discussing photographs or videos, a strategy that capitalizes on the familiar activity of photo sharing (Clark, 2011).

Based on the themes that emerged from the first phase of research, the students and families were given a photoelicitation task. The participants were charged with the task of taking photographs for a “time capsule.” They were also given the option of bringing in artifacts, mementos, or photographs that had special meaning to them. If the “time capsule” option was chosen, the researcher instructed the participants to draw or take pictures of items or places to put in a time capsule to show people in the future what life was like as a parent or student at Diana School. The families chose to bring in photographs and the children all chose to draw pictures. The photographs and pictures were used for discussion during focus group interviews. During the focus group, the researcher asked the participants to discuss each situation, place, or item. The researcher was looking to evoke reflections on the participants’ feelings toward each situation, as well as, determine why these events or places took precedence for the participants. The focus groups was divided into two groups: students and families. The participants were given the same tasks for both their experiences at Diana Elementary School and Webster Springs Elementary School.

### **Phase Three**

Phase three consisted of focus group discussions that were set up according to the data collected in the previous two phases (See Appendix 1, Phase Three). In comparison to individual interviews, a focus group allows the participants to build upon each other's understandings, often leading to richer elaboration of the themes raised (Clark, 2011). Although focus groups may limit the researchers ability to dig deeply into each individual's experience, focus group discussions "encourage participants to talk to one another: asking questions, exchanging anecdotes, and commenting on each other's experiences and points of view" (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999, p. 4). Focus groups are helpful for gaining a sense of the participants' collective perspective of an event (Freeman & Mathison, 2009), and in this case allowed the researcher to garner a better understanding of how school consolidation was experienced as a social event. By utilizing the pictures and photographs obtained from the previous phases of the study, prior research has supported that using photographs helps build rapport and disrupts preconceived ideas about child and adult interactions, eliminating guarded replies and getting at truer meanings (Freeman & Mathison, 2009).

Research supports that the makeup of the focus groups should be homogeneous; the student focus group consisted of four children, three boys and one girl, ranging in age from eight to eleven. Clark (2011) states that "through homogeneous sessions, the group is more likely to excavate shared experience and assumptions, revealed through the talk of members joined in common exchange" (p. 106). In keeping with these findings, the focus groups were homogeneously matched with the students and the families. Generally, this phase of research was divided into four categories: Diana school experiences, Webster Springs school experiences, a comparison/contrast of the two, and suggestions.

After the tasks for Diana Elementary and Webster Springs were completed, the researcher conducted focus group interviews to discuss the themes and experiences. The researcher and participants discussed a comparison of the experiences from both schools. Finally, the researcher elicited responses for suggestions about dealing with consolidation. The discussion focused on the phases of school consolidation from the initial discussion about closing a school to transitioning and attending a new school in the first years after a consolidation.

### **Population**

This study attempted to understand the experience of school consolidation through the eyes of people who directly experienced this phenomenon in a rural community in West Virginia. The study utilized a purposeful sampling technique because it allowed the researcher to select a sample from which he or she can learn the most (Merriam, 1988). Specifically, the population for this study included families from Diana, and their children who attended Diana Elementary School prior to its closure. This group allowed the researcher to focus the study on the experience of school consolidation from the perspective of families and students who directly experienced it. It only included the students who, after the consolidation, attended Webster Springs Elementary School. This study did not include families or students from Diana Elementary who chose homeschooling or transporting to Hacker Valley Elementary; it also excluded students from the sixth, seventh, and eighth grade who attended Webster County High School after the consolidation. I chose this participant group in order to garner an in-depth understanding of the experiences of a small group of students and their parents, and although the results of the study will be admittedly limited, my hope is that their voices will provide important

insight into how students and their families are directly affected by school consolidation and the issues surrounding it.

### **An Emergent Design for Data Collection and Analysis**

Most qualitative research studies utilize an emergent design in which the researcher allows the data to dictate the study as themes and patterns emerge rather than beginning with preconceived ideas about the phenomenon (Taylor & Bogden, 1984). By utilizing an emergent approach, the researcher allows the themes to emerge naturally from the data rather than imposing a particular analytic framework on the study's results (Hendrickson, 2010). Because the various phases of the research design were dependent upon the data gathered from previous activities, the exact number of interviews was undetermined at the outset; the research design was contingent upon the data collected and the need for additional information.

### **Data Collection**

A qualitative researcher must be flexible and open-minded in her quest for knowledge. Bogden and Biklen (2003) stressed the importance of these qualities, reminding the researcher that verbal responses, artifacts, and observed behaviors could all be the clue to unlocking an understanding of the subject being studied. The individual interviews and focus groups were audiorecorded and later transcribed to ensure accuracy of recall. Researcher notes and bias were bracketed to separate participants' and researcher thoughts. The personal maps, photographs, and pictures all served as artifacts for data analysis. All interview transcripts, photographs, artifacts, and observations of individual and group activities were collected, reviewed, and studied as data to help the researcher understand the phenomenon of school consolidation from the perspective of students and their parents.

## **Data Analysis**

Qualitative research is an inductive approach; therefore, data is not gathered to test a predefined hypothesis. The data is used to help the researcher better understand the meanings of students' and their parents' experience of school consolidation. According to Banks (2001), all data have internal and external narratives of meaning. For example,

photographs have a double border, the 'frame' in the sense that photographers use the term, to mean what is contained within the viewfinder (and what is selected out), and the 'frame' created by the way we talk about the photograph, particularly in the way we locate it in time as an indicator of memories. (Schratz & Walker, 1995, p. 76)

Taking into account both the internal and external narratives strengthen the investigative scope.

Data does not have a single voice, and the data analysis must take into account the relationship between the data and the researcher (Freeman & Mathison, 2009). Patton (2002) describes emic analysis as categories that are created by the participants to make sense of their world whereas etic analysis refers to the labels imposed by the researcher. Inductive analysis used in qualitative research moves from specific to generalizations which help the researcher make theoretical connections; however, researchers must come to understand that although the themes are grounded in the data, they have emerged from the researchers' interactions with the data (Freeman & Mathison, 2009). The analysis and report then is actually an interpretive account constructed from the interplay between the researcher, the participants, and the data.

William Wells (1974) explicated a data management process he coined the "scissors and sort" or "long couch, short hallway" strategies in which data is coded and bracketed to mark themes then cut apart, and finally sorted by topic. Today there are computer programs that allow for paper free sorting of data. The trend, though, is that coding, sorting, and indexing data

through computer programs is best looked at as an aid to interpretive research; it does not replace the human intuitions and inductive insights provided through Wells' original techniques (Clark, 2011). Moreover, as Campbell and Lassiter (2015) point out, using digital technologies to sort and code one's research materials cannot substitute for continued and "deep reading of the texts themselves" (p. 119).

Clark (2011) explained a data analysis method that she compares to a kaleidoscope. She metaphorically chose the kaleidoscope because of how the materials within can

sift, then show, alternative arrangements of all the bits and pieces...the small pieces of glass and colored materials in the toy, peered at with intensity, are flexibly adjusted and looked at in different lights and with different arrangements of the pieces on view. (p. 183)

Similarly, the qualitative researcher searches for patterns of meaning within the data. Oftentimes, the researcher will utilize the participants' responses to possible theories when interacting in the field and the continuity between fieldwork and analysis is advantageous for testing and rejecting hypotheses (Campbell & Lassiter, 2015; Clark, 2011).

In keeping with this theme, data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously and recursively throughout the study. According to Bogdan and Biklen (2003) this process should include developing investigative questions and assessing pre-determined questions for relevancy, planning data collection activities based on previous interviews, noting observer comments and biases, and journaling about what has been learned including summarizing data and possible emergent themes. This study, with its emergent design for both data collection and analysis, allowed the researcher to follow where Diana's children and families led.

## **CHAPTER FOUR:**

### **The Changing Landscape**

Webster County is nestled in the hills of the Appalachian Mountains, and although the mountains, streams, and forests have provided the natural resources that have long been the life-blood of the county, they have also created unique challenges for travel and infrastructure development. As is true with most small, rural communities, a single catastrophic event can have lasting consequences. Throughout the course of this research, Webster County faced two such events: the closing of the last remaining coal mine and the worst flood in the county's recorded history.

#### **The Closing of Brooks Run**

In the spring of 2016, the Brooks Run Mining Company ceased operations and shut down permanently, creating a loss of over 200 jobs—a huge blow to Webster County's already depressed economy. Coal, timber, and other natural resources had been the impetus for both social and economic development at the turn of the century as the county established its strong economic and tourism base; however, the infrastructure of Webster County was poorly suited to keep up with the shift from rail travel to vehicular transportation, and the tourism industry quickly diminished as a result. During this time period, both the coal and timber industries were thriving, and because there was money to be made in the mines and forests, the loss of tourism had less devastating effects. But as the years passed and both the coal and timber industries declined, the population of Webster County decreased, leading to wide-spread and escalating school closures.

At the time of the Diana School closure, there was one mine and several timber related businesses still operating in the county. Approximately ten percent of the county's workforce was employed in the mine (Data USA, 2014). The closure of Brooks Run in 2016 caused a loss of 233 jobs (Tincher, 2016), the effects of which are still being felt. Webster County's economic outlook grows increasingly bleak as the unemployed search for work in other fields, hoping to stay in the county, but often forced to uproot and relocate their children and families or leave them behind. Many miners have opted to find work in the woods—flooding the timber industry and further complicating the rocky economic landscape. The influx of woodsmen has created a flooded timber market in which the supply exceeds the demand; this, of course, drives down both timber prices and workers' wages. As more people compete in the market, profits are more thinly spread, and workers struggle to maintain a living wage. As the coal industry continues to dissipate, so does the overall population of the county; Webster County had nearly a 4.5% decrease in population over the last five years (United States Census Bureau). Less than six months after the closing of Brooks Run, Webster County suffered a second devastating blow—this time in the form of a massive and destructive flood. Nearly every community in the county was affected.

### **The Flood**

On June 23<sup>rd</sup>, torrential rainfall turned the county's usually beautiful tranquil streams into destructive, raging rivers. The water carried uprooted trees, vehicles, propane tanks, and other debris at bone crushing speeds, damming up bridges and flooding entire towns. Route 15 in Webster Springs became a river, its waters racing downhill into local businesses and homes. Areas around the county faced similar fates as dips and valleys became lakes, burying homes and communities in their murky, muddy waters. When the water receded, cribs, teddy bears,



clothing, furniture, and carpeting littered the roadways, houses sat abandoned, and the stench of raw sewage and mud filled the air. There were silver linings in these dark clouds, however. As people began the struggle to put their lives back together, the county came alive; volunteers and helpers filled the hollers. Although the flood negatively affected the county's physical landscape, it brought about a positive change in its people.

Volunteers from local fire departments, churches, and other community groups worked tirelessly on clean-up efforts. Schools across the county, including the old Diana School, became emergency distribution centers providing food, shelter, and supplies to those in need. People from around the county banded together to help each other. There was permeating support for those who suffered loss. People young and old gathered supplies, mucked houses, and helped their neighbors rebuild. Shelters were set up at the Diana Eagles Community Center—the former Diana School—as well as the schools in Webster Springs and Glade. Teachers called each of their students to see if the families needed supplies or assistance. They donned their muck boots and went door to door checking on those who were out of stranded or isolated. The outpouring of love and support came in many forms from monetary donations and supplies to grueling physical labor.

Amid the statewide devastation, Webster County was actually fortunate. Although the county suffered approximately \$7.4 million in property losses, there was no loss of life (Personal communication, Richard Rose, OES director, October 4, 2016). And although one school had flood damage, it was not severe enough to warrant closure, unlike many of the schools in the neighboring counties. Although the floods left some families without homes, no student was displaced from his school.

Leading up to the closure of Diana Elementary, the Board of Education had time to plan, community members had time to voice their opinions, and families had time to prepare. The massive flooding experienced across the state left many schools facing closure and consolidations without the benefit of forethought and planning. This June, Mother Nature forced school closures and consolidations on communities already facing devastation and chaos. Ironically, in my discussions with the parents of Diana, one of the biggest points of contention dealing with the closure dealt with the lack of a clearly communicated, well-thought out plan. The opaqueness of the detail surrounding the consolidation proved to be one of the primary issues with which the families struggled, and according to the participants, transparency might have helped eased the anxiety of the transition. It was the lack of open, two-way dialogue and meaningful input that created unnecessary hardships on the teachers, students and families involved. The Superintendent of Webster County was afforded the benefit of time and preparation when closing Diana Elementary; however, this opportunity was squandered and the result caused a breach in the community that may never completely heal.

### **Looking Back on Closing Diana**

As a customary and required practice during a consolidation, there were public hearings held at each of the four schools that would be affected. These meetings were meant to be an open forum where the public could voice concerns and ask questions about the proposal to close Diana School and reconfigure the other elementary schools and the high school. Although I did not attend the first public hearing at Diana, I felt compelled to attend the meeting at Webster Springs Elementary because I was a teacher there, and the principal always encouraged the staff to participate in events held at the school.

The media attended the initial hearing that was held at Diana, and I remember seeing a news segment where parents and the Superintendent were interviewed. Both parties argued their points and I remember thinking that the parents who were interviewed seemed extremely emotional and distraught; however, the Superintendent had obviously prepared a press brief and appeared confident and calm. I personally attended the next meeting that was held at Webster Springs, and although I knew it would be a contentious and heated event, I was rather surprised by the arguments that were brought to light. I knew that the parents from Diana would be fighting hard to save their school, and I was sympathetic to their cause—as a parent and teacher I, too, would be fighting to preserve the local school; however, I also understood the district’s need to find a solution to declining enrollments, loss of funding, and high expenses. I knew that as a teacher, I would not be affected, as Webster Springs was under capacity and could easily absorb the low number of students that could potentially be attendees if Diana closed; however, as a mother, I was against the idea of sending the seventh and eighth graders to the high school. Like many in my shoes, I was teetering on the fence of what was best for all of the students.

As I sat and listened to each of the delegates who addressed the board that night, I began to realize how badly the communities were going to suffer as a result of the proposal. Many parents from Diana attended the meeting at Webster Springs. Expectedly, they expressed concerns over bus issues, curriculum and the benefits of small class sizes; they questioned cost savings proposed by the Superintendent, but to my surprise, they appeared to also launch an attack against the teachers at Webster Springs. Several parents accused the teachers from Webster Springs of trying to “steal” the students and school away from the Diana community. Others questioned whether the teachers and staff at Webster Springs would care for their children, and one even stated that she doubted the teachers would ever be able to learn the names

of the students. Some parents expressed concerns that their children would be treated differently because they were “from Diana”, but what struck me as particularly odd, was that the people (teachers, parents, and grandparents) from Webster Springs who addressed the board that night were also generally against the consolidation.

After the meeting at Webster Springs, I felt compelled to attend the remaining hearings. The other meetings followed a similar pattern, but in addition to asking questions, voicing concerns, and trying to get the board to vote down the proposal, it also became a fight between communities. Parents, teachers, community members, and even students spoke at the hearings, and each adult who spoke publicly opened himself up to criticism. There was a greater tolerance for the students who spoke; as a teacher, I believe that many people had a greater sense of empathy for the children. As whispered comments from the crowd suggested, many felt that the students were obviously very passionate and courageous for speaking their mind in front of a hostile group of adults.

It was becoming apparent that the communities were being ripped apart by the proposal to close Diana and reconfigure the schools. Many citizens of Diana banded together to form a “Save our School” group; they hired a lawyer to address the board, voice their collective concerns, and refute the data presented by the Superintendent. And although he was able to look into the legality of the plan and file motions when things were not being handled appropriately, he also dissuaded the teachers at Diana from speaking at the hearings in order to remain neutral and keep them from being insubordinate. This caused a major division between the teachers at Diana and the other schools because the other teachers exercised their rights to voice their personal opinions. A once united county staff was quickly torn apart, and the teachers who would be forced to work together in the same building if the proposal passed appeared to be

fighting on different sides of the line, even if they were for the same outcome. The teachers at Diana felt isolated and voiceless in the matter, and the intricacies of how these relationships played out, both through the closure process and the subsequent transition is what sparked my interest in this study.

## **Participants**

The participants in this study included five students from three different families, four males and one female ranging in age from eight to eleven. All of the students attended Diana Elementary School prior to its closure. The study included six adults, three of which had children also participating in the study. Two of the adults were grandparents of a child in the study, and one was a student, parent, and teacher at Diana. She is also currently a teacher at Webster Springs Elementary. Initially, there were additional families who were willing to be interviewed for the study, but unforeseen circumstances created hardships that interfered with their participation. The stories that follow describe their experience with the closure of Diana Elementary and subsequent merger consolidation into Webster Springs Elementary School.

### **The Families**

David and Mandy are the parents of Brayden and Rosie. They both attended Diana Elementary as children themselves, and they currently live near the county line about five miles from the old Diana School. Their interview took place one evening after work in the conference room at Webster Springs Elementary while their children were both at soccer practice.

Joy, Louise, & Joseph are Jack's family. Joy is Jack's mother and Louise and Joseph's daughter. After she and Jack's father divorced, she and Jack moved back in with her parents. Like many of the families from the Diana area, they report that they have always been very

close, and that both Joy and her parents were always involved with Jack's education, attending field trips and events together. Louise and Joseph both attended Diana as children, even though Joy had attended Diana and Webster Springs.

Mary is currently a teacher at Webster Springs, but she had also taught at and attended Diana. Mary's oldest child attended Diana Elementary while she worked there. Both of Mary's parents had also attended Diana Elementary and remain instrumental in the efforts to maintain the old Diana school as a center for the community. Although Mary's younger children never attended Diana, she was included because of the unique multi-perspective that she could bring to the study.

George and Albert's parents declined participation in the study due to work and personal obligations. They did not feel that they could dedicate the time necessary to participate in the study; however, Glenda, their mother, reported that she was not happy with the closure and that it had not been an easy transition for her family.

## **Themes**

In conversation with the families and Mary, as both parent and teacher, several themes emerged: Diana Elementary as a school family, the process of the consolidation, the transition to a new reality, and helping children and families cope. As is true with many small communities, Diana Elementary served as a social gathering place. The families in this study had a long-standing relationship with Diana Elementary as they had all attended the school as children as did many of their parents and grandparents. Mary recalled a favorite holiday tradition in which each grade would prepare a dish, along with their families and other community members. Then everyone would gather together to share the meal together. Jack's family described the class events where parents and grandparents alike could participate. They said these types of events

created an atmosphere where the students and families shared an experience and learned together.



**Thanksgiving feast, 1987**

David and Mandy talked about the time capsules that they buried at Diana Elementary as students. They said that their youngest child, Rosie, had also buried a time capsule during her last year at Diana. They felt that this was a good activity that captured memories and was a neat way to reminisce with their children about how the school had changed over the years.



**Diana Elementary, 1938**



**This Diana Elementary School building was in use up until 2002.**



**Left: The sign that adorns the gymnasium entrance at Diana Elementary. Right: Diana Elementary at the time of its closing in 2013.**

The families in the study also discussed the close personal relationships that they had with the staff at Diana. Joy said that she attended church with the principal and several other staff members and that this helped with the open line of communication between her and the school. As is common in small, rural areas, people from the community know each other and often have longstanding relationships. Joy and her parents all attended Diana, and many of the staff were either people that they had gone to school with or people who were employed when she was in school. These close and familiar relationships gave Joy confidence knowing what was going on



with her child and his education. Likewise, Mandy agreed; however, she stated that she felt that both schools presented easy access to the staff and that she felt comfortable talking to the administration about concerns.

In discussing the consolidation, the families could not pinpoint the actual announcement of the proposal to close Diana School; however, they all recall just hearing about it through casual conversations. Mandy remembers hearing about the possible consolidation in the school's office when she picked up her children from school one day. Although discussions of possible closures and consolidations had occurred for several years prior, the families and the Diana community wanted the answer to one single question: Why? A declining population and diminishing budgets, as well as the cost of maintenance and operation for the aging Diana facility were cited; however, none of these were different from any of the previous failed attempts to close the school. Banded together with a common goal, the community formed the "Save our Schools" group to fight against the consolidation, and eventually, the group hired a lawyer to dispute the reasons the Superintendent gave for the closure, with the main focus on finances.

The required school closure hearings scheduled at each of the possibly affected schools in the county were emotionally charged meetings that often became heated debates. While the various factions fought to maintain the current school configurations a clear dividing line was being drawn between the communities, even among those who were ultimately on the same side of the issue.

Many of the families that participated in the study were also strong advocates for saving Diana Elementary, often attending every meeting and even speaking out during the public hearings. Mandy voiced her concerns at the hearings, citing long bus rides and a loss of

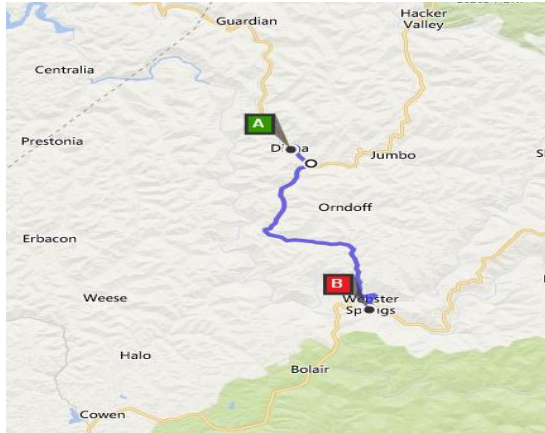
community identity as reasons not to support the proposal. She suggested that the students from Diana and Webster Springs should be allowed to come together to form their own school identity: voting on a new school mascot and new school colors. Many people from the Webster Springs area balked at the idea, at least partly due to the fact that major gymnasium renovations had just been completed, including a newly refinished gym floor with a Wildcat painted in the center. Webster Springs had also recently received grant money to purchase safety mats for the walls, all of which were customized with bright blue and gold letters reading: “Webster Springs: Home of the Wildcats.”

Admittedly, the parents and community fought hard to keep the school open and their children close to home; however, they reported that the overall lack of transparency and planning was what concerned them the most. Many of the parents felt that the Superintendent presented a picture that was riddled with inconsistencies. According to them, the reasons for the closure changed each passing meeting, as the Superintendent struggled to maintain a lie that she had perpetrated. The Save our School lawyer picked apart her reasons, and tried to discredit all of the Superintendent’s research.

Even though the Diana community had misgivings about the closure data that was presented, it was a lack of a clearly articulated plan that was consistently cited by all groups fighting against the consolidation. The families in the study articulated that many people felt that the plan only laid out the bare-bone basics of what was to happen: all of the seventh and eighth graders from Glade Elementary, Webster Springs Elementary, and Diana Elementary would attend a newly reconfigured 7<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> Webster County High School and all preschool-sixth graders from Diana would attend Webster Springs Elementary. The families recalled promises that the seventh and eighth graders would remain separated from the more mature high school students

and that all students affected by the consolidation would have greater athletic opportunities and more varied curricular offerings; however, no one could offer specifics as to how these things would be accomplished or what offerings would be available. Parents across the county wanted to ensure that the board members made a decision that benefited all of the students; however, many of the people from the Diana community felt that the proposed plan was meant to benefit only a select few.

Another main concern that the families in this study cited, and was echoed by parents from the hearings, was the length of the bus ride that many students from the Diana community would endure because of the closure. Webster Springs and Diana are separated by nine miles of winding, mountainous roads; however, many students would have to travel nearly an hour or more on a bus each way to get from their homes to Webster Springs Elementary. Students in the seventh and eighth grades would have to travel even further as the high school is an additional fifteen miles beyond Webster Springs. The dangers that this travel presented in the treacherous Webster County winters was only a part of the concern that the parents feared. Mandy cited that the additional travel would create a major upheaval in her family's schedule, leaving less time for homework and other activities. She also feared that her children would be more tired, both from the trip and the longer day, and that their academics would consequently suffer.



**Left: Map of Webster County showing the route from Diana to Webster Springs. Children attending Diana Elementary lived in Jumbo and Guardian. Webster County High School is located in Cowen, the southern part of the county. Right: Snow covered Route 20 in Webster County, the road students from Diana travel to Webster Springs Elementary.**

Many of the parents that participated in this study struggled with where their children would attend school. Joy considered homeschooling Jack, while David and Mandy discussed several different options such as sending their children to neighboring Braxton County or over the mountain to Hacker Valley. Familial scheduling, work, and student choices were factors that weighed on their decision. Living close to the county line in Guardian, David and Mandy considered taking their children to Braxton County where Mandy worked, but her work schedule would create difficulties in transportation. They also considered sending the children over the mountain to Hacker Valley where David worked; however, they did not feel that this small school would be able to offer as many academically and socially diverse opportunities as Webster Springs. There was reliable transportation to Webster Springs, and they knew that there would be several new opportunities for the children. Joy knew that transportation to Hacker Valley was going to create undue hardships, and she considered homeschooling Jack; however, ultimately, all of these parents took their children's opinions into consideration and sent them to

Webster Springs. All three of these children wanted to stay with their friends and travel to Webster Springs.

Mandy discussed the difficulties that she and her family faced with the new schedule. The children had to be up earlier to go to school, and they did not get home until much later in the evening. Also, both of her children chose to participate in extra-curricular activities at Webster Springs which has created a need for the entire family to have a very structured routine. She and her husband both agreed that if it was not for the help of some of the parents who live in Webster Springs with afterschool care before practice, they would have a much more difficult time meeting the demands of school, work, and practice. Mandy also said that she is beginning to learn about some school sponsored offerings that would alleviate the need to transport her children back and forth from Diana between school and practice. All of the families in the study say that it is more difficult to be involved in the day to day operation of the school because of the distance; however, they all agree that attending special events and celebrations should be a priority for parents who wish to be involved. Many of the parents agree that personal preference plays a huge part in determining how involved they are in their children's education.

Now two years in, many of the parents from the study concur that sending their child to Webster Springs Elementary has either had no major effect or a positive effect on their child. Some parents say that the academic setting is similar to that at Diana, and that they feel comfortable with the relationships they have with the staff at Webster Springs. Also, Mandy and David state that coming to Webster Springs has had a positive influence over their children because they have developed more socially and now have a larger friend base.

Still, all families agree that the Superintendent and the school system could have done a better job with the actual transition. Going back to the consolidation process, the families felt

that having a bigger role in creating the plan would have eased many of their anxieties and fears. With a more open line of communication, the parents felt that they could have offered solutions or suggestions that may have made the actual transition more successful. Mandy suggested that including students would have been appropriate as well; specifically she felt that having an assembly or poll where students could voice their opinions about what would make the move easier could have been extremely helpful in reducing their anxiety. All parents agree that the students and families should have been afforded the opportunity to come tour the school and meet the staff prior to the first day of school. This should have been a priority for the school system, even if that meant delaying the start of school for a few days so that teachers could finish moving their classrooms. The students and families all agreed that having time to meet the staff and tour the building would have reduced the stress that they all faced.

As a teacher at Webster Springs during the time of the consolidation, I can concur that the lack of a structured transition caused undue stress and hardship on all of the involved parties. Teachers were struggling to get their rooms together after hastily moving from different schools around the county, and although it is common to have an open house prior to the first day of school, it was impossible due to the construction and renovations that were being done through the start of the year. The high school faced additional challenges brining in the upcoming seventh and eighth graders as the new wing where they were to be housed, as well as additional building renovations, were still under construction during the first few months of school. This created a trickle-down effect as those teachers were unable to vacate their rooms at the elementary schools. No one was fully prepared for the first day of school, let alone hosting activities to introduce students, parents, and the communities into their new schools.

## **The Students**

The student participants provided valuable insight into their experiences with the closing of Diana Elementary and its subsequent merger into Webster Springs Elementary. As a teacher, I had already been able to build comfortable relationships with the children, and I believe that these connections allowed me to quickly develop a rapport during the individual interviews. The children appeared to be at ease with the environment and talked freely about their experiences. There were five children who, with parental consent, agreed to participate in the study.

### **Rosie**

Rosie was a second grader, and the only girl in the study. As the younger of two children, Rosie spent two years at Diana Elementary School before coming to Webster Springs. Both years at DES, she was in a Pre K-Kindergarten split with the same teacher and support staff. After the consolidation, Rosie came to Webster Springs Elementary School for her first grade year.

Rosie's individual interview took place in a preschool classroom at Webster Springs Elementary School in the evening during her brother's soccer practice. Her mother was present during the interview, but she tried to allow Rosie complete freedom in answering the questions and participating in the activities. She interjected occasionally and when Rosie directly asked her a question.

Rosie was cooperative and energetic during the interview; however, she became distracted a few times and wanted to explore the classroom. When this happened, I allowed her to explore for a bit before redirecting her to the task. Rosie chose to participate in both art activities. She chose to do a body tracing for her "Diana Self" drawing and to make a drawing of a person on an 8" x 11" sheet of paper for her "Webster Springs Self." When asked why she

chose to make the Webster Springs body smaller, she stated that she was getting tired, and it would take too long to trace and do another large body.

Throughout the interview, Rosie acted out stories, played with toys, and put on a puppet show. She also created two self-portraits. Rosie's interview lasted nearly twice as long as all of the others; however, because she was the youngest participant, she needed more frequent breaks and changes in activities.

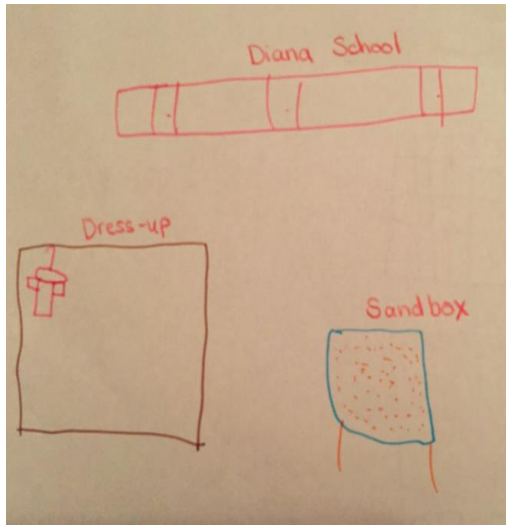
Like many of the other students that were interviewed, Rosie reported that playing in the gym was one of her favorite activities at Diana Elementary. Although she had gym class with her regular classroom teacher, the activity time in the mornings before and during breakfast with the rest of the student body was her favorite. Because Diana's gymnasium also acted as a cafeteria, the students would come in to that common area in the morning to have breakfast and play games before school. Nearly all of the children interviewed mentioned this as one of their favorite things about Diana.

All of the children that participated in this study agreed that "video game day" was one of their favorite memories from Diana. Although the specific details varied slightly according to each child, on Friday, if the students had behaved appropriately throughout the week and if they had finished their assignments, they were allowed to play video and computer games. The frequency and length of the event varied by the recollection of each child; however, they all recalled playing on the Game Cube, computer, or Wii. According to their testimonies, "video game day" was a big deal to everyone in the school, and the students strived to stay out of trouble and complete their work so that they could participate. Although Rosie never experienced "video game day" first hand, the excitement of the other students led to an anticipation for the event as she got older. In fact, Mr. Jones was one of her favorite teachers,



even though she didn't have him, because he did "video game day" on Fridays which made him seem "cool" in her eyes. Rosie reported that all of the teachers at Diana were nice, but she had spent two years with her preschool-kindergarten teachers: Ms. Sally and Ms. Janie, making them her favorites.

During our focus group meeting, Rosie included many of the props from her preschool and kindergarten classrooms as artifacts that she would like to include in a time capsule for her time at Diana. She illustrated a picture of the dramatic play area that she lovingly referred to as the dress-up area. She also drew a picture of the sandbox from her preschool room. Rosie said that she and her best friends loved to play together in the sandbox and "at dress-up". Rosie also included a drawing of the school building at Diana. She said that she loves going up to what is now the Diana Eagles Community Center and looking at the old pictures and uniforms that are housed in the memory room. Like many of the other children, Rosie mentioned playing out back on the wooden playset. She said that playing up on the hill was always fun because it was in the woods and "you could build all sorts of stuff." Because her parents help maintain the building, she still gets to go up there frequently to play and explore.



**Left: Rosie’s Diana time capsule drawing. Right: One of the playgrounds at Diana Elementary, located on the hillside behind the school.**

Upon learning about the closure of Diana Elementary School, Rosie admitted that she was sad but that she did not really tell her family or friends about how she was feeling. She knew that all of the teachers and other adults were sad as well because they were all talking about it at school. She doesn’t remember her parents or brother really talking about the closure much, but she reports that the teachers and adults at Diana talked about it “all the time.” Rosie stated that the hardest part about Diana closing was leaving her friends behind and the fear of not knowing anyone at her new school. Rosie’s best friend did not come to Webster Springs after the closure, as her parents elected to send her to another small school in the county. Rosie admitted that it is still hard not seeing her best friend everyday but that she has made many new friends at Webster Springs.

At Webster Springs Elementary, Rosie now has specialized music, art, and physical education classes, apart from her general education teacher, and although gym used to be her favorite class, she now prefers art. When prompted about the change, Rosie reported that gym at Diana was more fun because you always got to play lots of games but at Webster Springs you

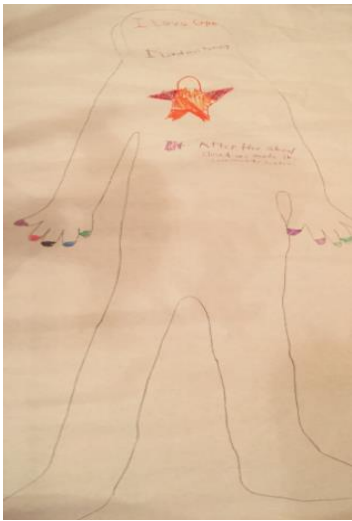
have to learn things like hockey skills. We discussed that as you advance through the grade levels, some classes have to change because the state makes rules about the things that teachers have to teach for each class. Rosie enjoyed both her music and art classes at Webster Springs, and she reported that all of the teachers at WSES were really nice. Rosie reported that her favorite teacher was Ms. Johnson, her current second grade teacher because she was “cool and nice.”

Two years into the consolidation, Rosie still reports mixed feelings about the closure. She was sad to leave some of her friends from Diana, but she was also excited to meet new people. She said, “I like Webster Springs, but I like Diana too. They are both my favorite schools.”

Rosie stated that the worst part about coming to Webster Springs after Diana’s closure was the bus ride to school. At Diana, her mom usually took her to school and picked her up. When she did have to ride the bus, it was a short trip home, and she got to leave right after school. Now that she is at Webster Springs Elementary, she has a bus trip that lasts about forty minutes, and she has to stay for an extra hour after school to wait for her bus to come from the high school. Both Rosie and her mom state that the bus issue has created some additional challenges. Rosie is more tired now and has less time for personal activities like playing when she gets home. According to Rosie, she only has time to eat dinner, do homework, and get ready for bed, and “sometimes play a little bit.” Both her parents and her older brother agree that adjusting to the new schedule has been difficult.

Rosie suggested that a field trip to Webster Springs Elementary would have helped her feel more comfortable. She wanted to have a chance to see and explore the school, as well as meet her new teachers and the students who would possibly be new friends. She reported that if her parents had taken her out to dinner and to get her nails done before she started school that it

would have been a much easier transition. She wanted to look and feel good as she stepped into a new experience. Rosie's mom reported that the move to Webster Springs had been really good for Rosie's social life, as she is now much more outgoing and has a broader group of children with which she shares interests.



### **Rosie's Diana Self-Portrait, complete with painted finger nails**

#### **Brayden**

Brayden was a fourth grader at the time of the study. He is the older brother of Rosie and attended Diana Elementary School for kindergarten through second grade. Brayden did not attend preschool, although his preschool classroom at Diana would have included a small group of four-year olds in their own building. Brayden's kindergarten year was the first year that was scheduled to integrate the preschoolers into Diana Elementary. His parents had originally considered sending him to WSES for kindergarten because they were not sure they wanted him in a split multi-age classroom with preschoolers. However, after his parents attended informational meetings with the kindergarten teachers at both Webster Springs Elementary and Diana Elementary, they ultimately decided to keep him closer to home and send him to DES. Brayden started his third grade year at WSES after the closure of Diana Elementary.

Although initially Brayden's mother said that he didn't want to participate, he chose to be interviewed after I had interviewed his sister and his parents. Brayden was comfortable speaking with me, and reminisced about his time at Diana and Webster Springs with smiles and stories. He chose not to create either a Diana or Webster Springs "Self" during the interview but chose to play with playdough instead. While creating with playdough, I asked him questions about his creations, but he just said that they were snakes or balls. There did not appear to be a connection with his schooling experience at Webster Springs or Diana, but instead gave him something to do with his hands while we talked. His mother was also present during the interview. Again, she did not interject unless he asked, but then he would usually correct her memories back to the way he recalled an event. Brayden's interview took place in the conference room at Webster Springs Elementary after school was out.

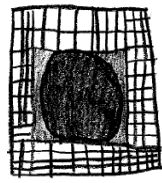
Brayden is an athletic child who plays soccer at Webster Springs. He also participated in soccer while he was at Diana, but belonged to a league from a neighboring county because there was no league in Webster County at that time. Many of Brayden's favorite memories from Diana are related to physical activity. He stated that he had more time for recess when he attended Diana, and that the thing he missed the most was playing basketball every morning before school. Brayden's mom said that she would have to bring the kids to school early so that Brayden had a chance to play ball before school. This is still something that he likes to do on Saturday evenings at the Diana Eagles Community Center. He reports that there is always a full house at the gym. People from all over the county show up to play basketball at the Center when the weather starts getting cold in the fall, and they play all year long until summer. Interestingly, Brayden did not include a picture of either a basketball or a basketball court in his time capsule drawing of Diana.

Brayden had three years in multi-age classrooms when he was at Diana, and he enjoyed that environment, saying that it was fun to have down time when the teacher worked with the other students, but he also liked helping the younger children with their work when he finished up his. His mom also reiterated that peer tutoring was a positive aspect of the multi-age classroom. Like many of the other students interviewed, Brayden reported that “video game day” was one of his favorite things about Diana and his teacher, Mr. Jones. He stated that “it’s a big deal for the whole school, like everybody loved it.” In fact, Brayden did include a picture of Mr. Jones’s Game Cube in his time capsule drawing.

In addition, Brayden shared more personal memories from Diana as well. Specifically, he remembered a substitute teacher that wore wooden boots to school. This particular substitute is a local lumberjack legend who has won many national and international woodchopping competitions. Although Brayden said that there was no special story behind the solid wood boots, he was definitely the most memorable substitute teacher he has ever had. Brayden also shared memories of a project he completed in Kindergarten where he had to create an animal habitat. He and his parents worked together and created an owl’s habitat using hollowed out wooden logs and a nest found in his yard. He reported that his mom and dad were more excited about the project than he was, but his mom said that he also had a really good time doing it.

During the focus group, Brayden drew a picture of his desk and chair from Diana. As I inquired about the picture, Brayden said that he wanted to include this because that specific chair had special meaning to him. Brayden’s father David had attended Diana Elementary as a child, and he had carved his name in the back of the chair. When Brayden was in second grade at Diana, he used the same chair that his father had when he was in school. Brayden said, “It was just really cool to have the same chair my dad had. He carved his name in it.” Brayden also

included the words “the playground” for his time capsule drawing. He stated that they had a lot more recess time at Diana, and that he and his friends would always play on the playground at the school. They would build things in the woods by the playground and play all sorts of things like “army” and “forts” there. He still goes there occasionally with his family when they are working at the Community Center.



Mr. Cools game  
Cube

the playground



My desk  
and chair



**Left: Brayden drew a picture of Mr. Jones's Game Cube to represent the beloved "video game day". He also included a picture of the desk and chair that he shared with his father when he attended school at Diana. The playground behind Diana Elementary.**

Like his sister, Brayden reported that the bus trip has been the biggest adjustment. He gets carsick and says that the long bus trip each day has made it really hard for him. He is nervous about going to the high school in a couple of years because he fears “I’ll probably just get sick everyday”. He said that testing days (referring to the statewide summative assessment) are especially long and hard as he is really tired because stress and worries keep him awake at night. His mom said that the consolidation was harder on him because he is more nervous than his sister, Rosie. She felt that when people discussed the closure at school, it had a negative influence on him because they all said how awful it was going to be to come to Webster Springs

and it made him very nervous about the transition. She suggested that people should not discuss the negative implications surrounding the consolidation around children because it could cause unnecessary stress; instead they should try to stay positive and look at it as a new adventure.

Although Brayden expressed that he misses the morning basketball time the most, he likes that there are more physical activities that he can do at Webster Springs. He was looking forward to fifth grade at Webster Springs because he knew that he would be able to play basketball in the gym before breakfast. He reports that physical education is his favorite class, and he likes that there are more sports in which he can be involved. Although there is no “video game day”, there are exploration clubs for the students every other Friday while the teachers have staff meetings. Brayden reports that he liked the sport club the best, but that he also enjoyed many of the other activities he has tried. Similarly, Brayden reports that the best thing about starting over at a new school is that he has made a lot of new friends.



**Soccer**





## **Punt, Pass, and Kick Competition**

### **Jack**

Jack was a fifth grader during the study. He had attended Diana, like his maternal grandparents before him; however, his mother had attended both Webster Springs Elementary and Diana growing up. Jack’s parents discussed home schooling after Diana’s closure; however, his mother eventually decided to send him to Webster Springs. During the first year of the consolidation, Jack’s parents divorced, and he and his mother moved in with his grandparents, less than a half a mile from the dividing line between the attendance zones for Webster Springs and Diana.

Jack was interviewed during a field trip to Pittsburgh with the gifted class. His interview took place in a motel room, and although his mother was present during the interview, she was engaged in conversation with another adult. Jack was cooperative throughout the interview even though he chose not to participate in the art projects for creating a Diana and Webster Springs “Self”, stating that he did not really like art. Jack repeatedly said that he couldn’t remember when asked the questions; however, given time, he generally answered.

Some of his favorite memories of Diana included the teachers, especially Mr. Jones. And like the other children, Jack loved “video game day”; however, unlike the others, he stated that

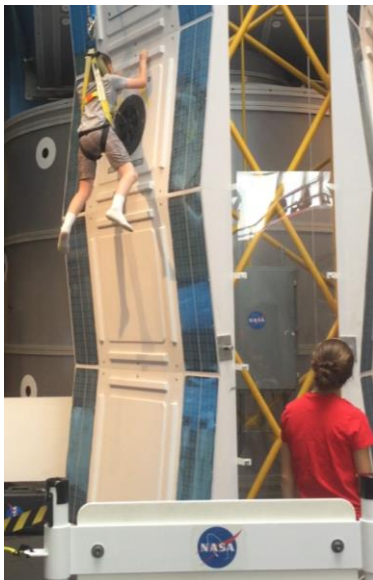
Mr. Jones was his favorite because he would make jokes to make you laugh while making learning fun. He remembered learning about rectangular prisms because Mr. Jones related them to Spongebob Squarepants, saying his name should actually be Spongebob Rectangular Prismants because he is not really a square at all. Jack said that Mr. Jones always made jokes like that so that you were learning but also having fun. Jack also mentioned morning basketball as one of his favorite activities at Diana.

He said that all of the teachers at Diana were really nice, but Mr. Jones and Ms. Suzie were his favorites. When he came to Webster Springs Elementary after Diana's closing, he had Ms. Suzie as his fourth grade teacher. He said that having her made it easier to start over at a new school. One of Jack's fears about coming to Webster Springs was that he would not know anyone. Having a teacher that he knew and liked from Diana made his transition easier. He also said that many of his friends from Diana were in the same fourth grade class, so "it really wasn't so bad."

Jack reported that he really liked the teachers at Webster Springs and how they made learning fun. He is in the gifted program in the county, and upon the closure of Diana school, they revamped the program, connecting students from across the county to participate in active learning experiences, project based activities, guest seminars, and field trips. Jack said that the new gifted program was probably one of the best changes he has faced since Diana closed. This experience has allowed him to explore new places and meet new friends. Jack's mother and his grandparents were also pleased with the changes to the program because it has given them more opportunities to be involved in Jack's education as they attend many of the field trips together.



**Field trip to the Pittsburgh Zoo**



**Practicing being an astronaut at the Carnegie Science Center**

Although Jack was sad when he heard about the closure of Diana, he sought out support by talking to his mom, his friends, and some of his teachers. His biggest fears were that he did not know about the school itself or the students that he would be with at Webster Springs. He stated that he had mixed emotions because he wanted to stay at Diana Elementary, but he also wanted to go to Webster Springs Elementary School to see what it would be like.

During the school consolidation process, Jack felt that the children should have had more input into what was going on. He did not feel that the grown-ups listened and that they should have asked the students for advice about what they wanted. Although he was saddened by the closure, he has adjusted and would encourage other children facing a similar situation to “give it a chance; it could be bad, but it could be good.” Jack reported that switching to Webster Springs Elementary has given him a chance to make new friends, and he did not lose any of his old ones, even the ones that did not come to Webster Springs after the closure.

### **George**

George was in third grade during the study. He is the younger brother in a family of two boys. Both of George’s parents had attended Diana Elementary School as children, as did their parents. Neither of George’s parents chose to participate in the study. George attended Diana for three years prior to the consolidation. His first year after the consolidation, George had Mr. Jones, a teacher that had come from Diana as a result of the school’s closure.

The interview took place in the physical therapy room at Webster Springs Elementary School. George’s face would light up as he spoke about Diana Elementary and his memories there. He was very cooperative with answering the questions and completed the “Diana Self” art project; however, he was very concerned with his art abilities. George chose to do a full body trace but only included a heart with the word “Diana” written in the middle and a picture of an eagle, the school’s mascot. He did not appear confident in his skills and would periodically say that he could not make something the way he wanted. I offered magazines, pictures, and other art materials that George could use for his creation; however, he preferred talking rather than drawing or creating. He chose not to create a “Webster Springs Self” because he stated that he was not really that good at art stuff.



**George's Diana self-portrait includes a smiling face and a heart emblazoned with "Diana"**

Although George was still fairly young during his time at Diana, he had many memories that he shared during the interview. Like many of the other children, morning basketball and “video game day” were some of the things that he enjoyed most about Diana Elementary. George also mentioned that there was a playground that had a treehouse where he and his friends liked to play during their recesses. According to George, he had recess a couple of times a day, so he would get to play there a lot when the weather was nice. George also described a path that went behind the school where the children were allowed to play and explore. He remembered that the older students would dam up the creek with rocks and sticks and then let the dam break free before building it back up again. George also had more specific memories as well. He shared memories of an event where a guest came in and showed the students how to make candles and play “old” games. Although he said that parents did not attend the event, all of the children in the school were there. George also reminisced about having a snowball fight with Mr. Jones and sledding down the hill by the school using his school folder.



**"The Crick" behind Diana Elementary, where the children would build dams**

George could remember exactly where he and his friends sat and how the classroom was arranged. He told me that he and several of his best friends sat together in the front of the room because “we were the shortest of everybody.” George recalled many of the same stories during the focus group discussion with the other students. He included a picture of the playground and the classroom arrangement, with he and his friends seated at the front of the room, for his time capsule drawing.

me and my friends



**George's Diana time capsule drawing**

George showed lots of emotion as he talked about his memories from Diana, and when asked about how he reacted when he first learned of the closure, he said, “I felt bad. I was about ready to explode. I was so mad.” George reported that he did not talk about the closure to his parents or teachers, but that he and some of his friends discussed it. George did not think that the teachers even knew about the closure until the day the school shut down.

When asked about his experience at Webster Springs Elementary School, George shared many positives. He liked that Webster Springs had a bigger building and a bigger gymnasium that had hardwood floors (rather than a rubberized floor like at Diana). He also liked that Webster Springs had lots of choices for physical activities like baseball, football, and basketball. George reported that the best things about Webster Springs Elementary were that he had made lots of new friends and that there were book fairs and projects he could do. George particularly enjoyed the many field trips and quarterly learning celebrations that were held at Webster Springs.





**George's Webster Springs time capsule drawing**



**Warming up before the slopes open on Snowshoe Mountain**

According to George, his first year at Webster Springs was difficult. Although his second grade teacher came from Diana, and was someone with whom George had a positive relationship, George faced challenges with harder work and being bullied. He reported that “Mr. Jones wasn’t as good as I thought he’d be, and we don’t even get video game day anymore.” Particularly, there was one child that George said made fun of him because he was new. Although there were friends who stuck up for George and stood up to the bully, George said that



the bully continued to pick on all of the children in that grade, students from both Webster Springs and Diana. Bullying was something that George said he had not experienced prior to coming to Webster Springs. That child has since moved, and George reported that things are much better at Webster Springs now that the bully is no longer at the school.

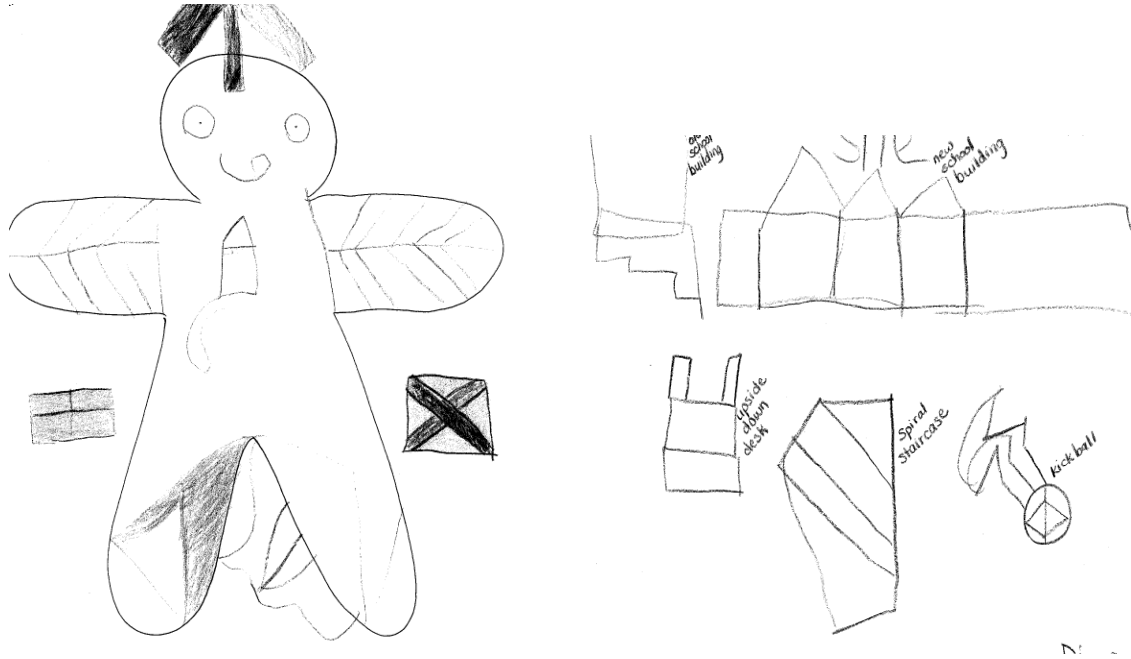
When asked about what George would want to tell the adults about the consolidation, he said, “Why would you shut that school down? There ain’t nothing wrong with it.” He believed that the school was closed because it was small and nobody liked it. If he had the choice, although he has made new friends at Webster Springs, he would still prefer that things would go back to the way it was before Diana Elementary closed down.

### **Albert**

Albert is George’s older brother, and he was in fourth grade at the time of the interview. Both Albert and George live with their mom and dad, neither of whom chose to participate in the study due to family and work obligations. Albert came to Webster Springs in third grade; he reported that he had attended Diana for preschool through second grade.

Albert was interviewed in the conference room at Webster Springs Elementary, and he chose to participate in the art activities by creating a Diana and Webster Springs “Self.” He drew a person for each on a piece of 8” x 11” card stock. Albert completed the project while we talked, and he would occasionally interject something about the picture that he was drawing. During both the interview and the focus group, Albert doodled and drew many images for his Diana projects; however, his Webster Springs projects were both sparsely decorated. On his Diana self-portrait, he created a person complete with blue spiked hair, a reminder of a girl who used to attend Diana, who always “dressed crazy and acted funny.” He included the playground, both the old and new school buildings at Diana, and other drawings, some of which he said were

just “random things I like to draw” (like the flags on his Diana self-portrait). As he drew, he recounted memories of sneaking up into the old “creepy” brick schoolhouse with the “spiral staircase” at Diana and the “upside down desks thrown everywhere.” He shared many of the same stories as his brother George, like snowball fighting and sledding down the hill on school folders.



**Left: Albert's Diana self-portrait. Right: Diana time capsule includes illustrations of the old and new Diana school buildings.**

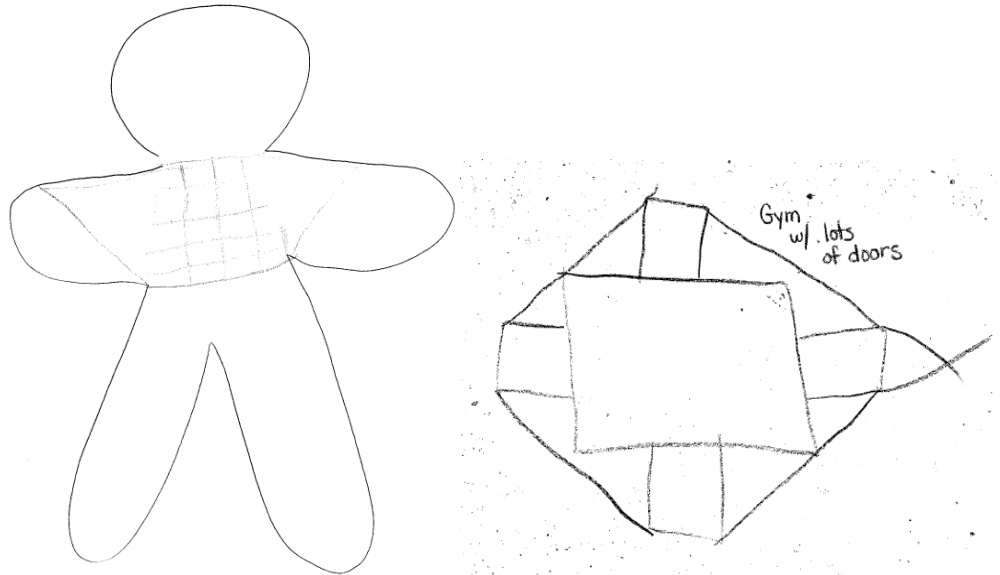
Like every other child that was interviewed, Albert mentioned morning basketball and “video game day” as two of the things that he missed most about Diana. Having time for extra recess and getting prizes were also things that Albert missed. Like many of the other students, Mr. Jones was Albert’s favorite teacher. He believed that Mr. Jones, and his mother, Marilyn, the school’s principal, owned Diana Elementary. When he first learned of the school closing, he felt bad about it. He did not talk to his parents about the closure, and learned about it from “over talk” at the restaurant and school. Albert believed that Georgia Small, the Superintendent, shut

the school down because she “likes going around and shutting down schools” and maybe because Diana Elementary was not making enough money. When asked about what he would want to tell the adults about school consolidation, Albert had a storied response. He said:

Tell Georgia Small to get outta our school. I mean she likes going around shutting down schools for no reason. I don't know if they was making enough money or not, but I think they was making enough money, but she just told them for some reason to shut it down, 'cause I don't know, but if I tried to change her mind she probably wouldn't listen to me. She doesn't listen really to anybody. Like, Mr. Jones and Mrs. Jones owned it, and they was like talking to her and she was like no, no. They tried to change her mind but she didn't listen.

Unlike all of the other children, Albert did not mention making new friends as a positive aspect of coming to Webster Springs Elementary. He reported that he does not like to talk a lot and although he has made some new friends, he still just hangs out with one or two people that were his friends from Diana. Albert did mention that he likes art class at Webster Springs, and that he likes the bigger gym and football field. Albert was amazed that Webster Springs Elementary had a football field because he said, “It is the only school I've ever seen that had a football field.”

Unfortunately, Albert believed that Webster Springs Elementary was too big and had too many doors. According to him, it was easier to get lost at Webster Springs because there were so many doors everywhere and there were too many kids. During the focus group, Albert included a picture of Webster Springs' gymnasium with all of the doors, and his Webster Springs self-portrait was a faceless form, adorned only with “all the windows and doors everywhere, they're everywhere around here.”



**Left: Albert's Webster Springs self-portrait has no face but is decorated with many windows. Right: Webster Springs time capsule drawing of the gymnasium with all of its doors.**

Albert reported that now that he was attending school at Webster Springs, he had to get up at 6 o'clock each morning and take a long trip on the bus to get to school. When he was at Diana Elementary, he did not have to ride a bus because his mom would bring him to school. That was a change that he did not enjoy, but the hardest thing about going to Webster Springs Elementary was starting over. According to Albert, he had to start over in the third grade, even though he had already completed third grade at Diana. Because Diana had multi-age classrooms, Albert believed that he had completed third, fourth, fifth, and sixth grades at Diana. In reality, his chronological age shows that he should have been a third grader upon entrance into Webster Springs Elementary. Like his brother, Albert would choose to go back to Diana if it was still open, but he reports that he likes Webster Springs and would only change the morning breakfast routine. At Diana, breakfast and morning basketball were combined in the gymnasium; however, at Webster Springs, fifth and sixth graders go to the gym for morning busroom while the

kindergarten through fourth graders go to the cafeteria for breakfast first. Albert would like to be able to do both at the same time, like they did in Diana. Albert also reported that he would have “video game day” at Webster Springs Elementary because he misses that the most from Diana.

## **Chapter Five:**

### **Research Questions**

Throughout this study I sought to view school consolidation from the eyes of the children and families who experienced it first-hand. Through individual interviews, focus group discussions, and visual media activities I attempted to answer the following questions.

#### **How have students from the former Diana Elementary School experienced school consolidation?**

The students that participated in this study each dealt with the experience of the consolidation differently; however, they each shared common experiences as they moved through the process. Initially, each of the five children experienced sadness over the loss of their school. Some progressed on to anger, while others became anxious over the unknown changes that were ahead. None of the children felt that they had a voice in the matter, and how they each coped with this manifested in different ways. For example, Albert and George were both angry about the closing; George stating, “I was about ready to explode.” These boys only heard of the closure through “over talk- where you hear people talking about stuff when they think no one is listening.” Albert felt that having a voice would not really matter anyway because “they don’t listen to nobody.” These boys reported having a more difficult time transitioning to Webster Springs after the closure than the other students in the study. Additionally, these two boys were the only students who would choose to go back to the way it was before the consolidation if they were given the chance. The other three students experienced a different set of emotions. Jack, Brayden, and Rosie all experienced mixed emotions, and looked at going to Webster Springs Elementary as a possible adventure into the unknown. Although they were nervous, they all hoped they would like the school and make new friends. These three have all reported that they

love Webster Springs Elementary, but that they miss Diana Elementary as well. All three have reported that making new friends was the best part of coming to Webster Springs. Jack is the only student in the study who admits to reaching out to his parents to talk about the consolidation during its early stages; however, some of the others did say that they talked to their friends at school about it.

### **How have Diana school families experienced the consolidation?**

Much like the students, the families also experienced a sadness over the closure of Diana Elementary. Because every participant in the study had attended Diana Elementary as a child, they each brought another layer of complexity to their responses. They had deeper connections that included their own school experience and memories as well as their experiences as parents and grandparents. When talking about their child's educational experiences at Diana, they would often interject memories from their own childhood. These families appeared to have a much deeper connection to the school than many of the young children that were involved in the study. Although most of the families were ultimately pleased with how their children have adapted to the new environment at Webster Springs Elementary, they still miss many of the positive aspects of the smaller, local community school they had at Diana. The biggest complaint that the families presented dealt with how the consolidation was handled.

The families all took a stand against the closure of Diana Elementary, not because they disliked Webster Springs Elementary, but because they wanted to keep their children close to home in their local school. According to many of the parents, they felt that the Superintendent and the Board of Education did not provide transparency throughout the process. Many of the families found out about the closure through word of mouth at the school. In fact, one mother recalls hearing about the closure for the first time as she picked her children up from school.

She said that Mrs. Jones and some teachers were talking about it in the office. She could not remember the exact circumstances, but she recalls everyone was upset: parents, teachers, community members all talking about it in the office that day. She also believes that these open discussions, charged with strong emotions, that occurred in the presence of the children made it more difficult when the school closed and the students were forced to attend a different school.

Parents, teachers, and several community members banded together to form the “Save our School” group to fight against the consolidation. Not only were they fighting to keep their school open, but they wanted a transparent process with an open dialogue about the reasons why the school had to close and input about the proposed plan for integration. The families reported that this did not happen, as the reasons the Superintendent cited for the closure frequently changed. Two consistent reasons that were presented were a declining population and a reduction in funding. The “Save our School” group eventually hired a lawyer to delve deeper into the financial issues cited by the Superintendent; however, the parents said that they proved that the cost savings were not going to be what the Superintendent was relaying to the Board. All of the families that participated in the study just wanted open and honest communication throughout the process. They felt manipulated and lied to, and this created an atmosphere of distrust that made the transition for the children and families more difficult.

As we discussed how Diana Elementary met the academic needs of their children, the families recollected experiences from their own childhood as well. Communal activities such as “heritage week” and holiday celebrations were cited as learning activities that brought the community together and made learning real for the students. Mary discussed how during heritage week, community members would come in and teach the children how to make butter and apple butter; they would do quilting, and the band would showcase their skills with a concert. During



Thanksgiving, parents and community members would come to school to help prepare food. Each grade would be responsible for a different dish, and then everyone would sit and eat the meal together. These activities created a family atmosphere at school with the community and appeared to have special meaning for the adults. Many of the parents commented on how they liked these types of activities as it was a positive experience where they could be directly involved in their child(ren)'s education.



**Left: Bee keepers give a demonstration at Diana Elementary, 1976. Right & Below: Heritage Week festivities, 1989.**



I questioned the parents to see if there were similar learning activities that were conducted at Webster Springs. Mandy stated that every school does little things that like, it was just harder for her to participate now that the school was further away. When her children were at Diana, she could leave on her lunch break and come to an assembly, but that is not possible now

that they are at Webster Springs. She would have to take a half day off of work to attend events during the day because of the distance she would have to travel; however, she believes that it is really just up to the parents to make it a priority to be involved in their child's education. Mary discussed the different activities that are traditional in each of the grades at Webster Springs, many of which are similar to events that occurred at Diana, like making knot quilts and doing family story time in preschool or doing habitat projects in kindergarten.



**Left: Making apple butter. Right: Carving Pumpkins**

Jack's family talked about the field trips that they have been involved in since coming to Webster Springs. Although they had attended events and trips with him in Diana, Joy stated that there were a lot more trips now that Jack is at Webster Springs. Overall, the families that participated in the study felt that the end result of the consolidation was positive, as the consensus was that their students were still receiving high quality instruction but now had greater social opportunities. They do, however, believe that the process could have been handled differently.

### **To what extent have those experiences intersected and differed?**

Although many of the children remember people talking about the consolidation, they experienced it differently from the adults in the study. It was something that was often discussed around them, but in many cases no one talked to them about it. Many of the children were sheltered from conversations that surrounded the issues, only hearing part of the whole story; however, many of the parents felt the same way—as if they were only given a part of the information. Both groups, the students and the families, felt as if they had no voice in the matter, that what they had to say did not matter.

Many of the parents cited longer bus rides as the most negative aspect of the transition, and in most cases, the students conceded that adjusting to the longer bus ride to Webster Springs was a difficult task. Some were more tired, another got carsick more frequently, and all of them say that the ride is long and boring.

Another aspect that both the families and the students discussed was the adjustment to schooling at Webster Springs Elementary. According to one parent, she felt that the multi-age classrooms posed challenges for some teachers at Diana in terms of differentiating instruction for the varied grade levels; however, several parents believed that teachers who utilized peer mentors made this configuration successful as the older students would often tutor the younger students. This provided more one-on-one teacher time in the small classes, but it also provided the older students with confidence in their abilities as they reviewed past skills and tutored their younger peers. Some parents felt that the curriculum and teaching was comparable at both schools citing that there are good teachers and bad teachers everywhere; however, two mothers

expressed concern that the much loved “video game day” at Diana wasted too much instructional time.

The students reported that the class size did not seem to have much effect on their learning because although there were more students at Webster Springs, the class size was fairly similar. Mandy also stated that having more students at Webster Springs has widened her children’s social base as they both have more friends with whom they share similar interests. Many students discussed the size of the building itself. With two stories and three separate wings, nearly all of the students were intimidated by the enormity of their new school. Some liked that there was a separate gymnasium, cafeteria, and auditorium; however, Albert felt that it was excessive and unnecessary. Many of the students said that it was harder to navigate, and they feared getting lost during their first year at the school.

In terms of academics, all of the students recounted “video game day” as one of their most loved experiences at Diana, even Rosie who never experienced it firsthand; however, the students reported that the labs and explorations that they do at Webster Springs almost make up for losing video game day (almost). The students also recounted tales of field trips that they have taken since coming to Webster Springs, and even though they hate the long bus ride to school each day, traveling far away for a field trip does not bother them. Overall, the students, much like their families, reported that their experience with school at Webster Springs Elementary has been positive; however, Albert and George would still prefer to go back to the way things were before Diana closed.

**How do the experiences themselves, and the extent to which they intersect and differ, inform broader and deeper understandings of school consolidation?**

Each family in this study experienced the consolidation differently; however, they also shared common experiences and emotions during the process of the consolidation, transition to a new reality, and the adjustment to a new school. Their experiences, although unique, can provide meaningful insight into how people from small, rural communities deal with school consolidation. Each person, both adult and child, went through a range of emotions from sadness, to anger, to confusion, to anxiety, and for some even excitement. Where we diverge is in how each person or family processed these emotions and how they allowed them to manifest.

In the beginning, both the parents and students admit that the news of the possible closure of Diana made them sad. The thought of losing their school was like losing a beloved pet or family member. Many felt that their way of life was being stolen, that they were losing a large part of their identity, turning their sadness into anger and confusion. As the adults in the study banded together with others in the Diana community to fight the consolidation, they had an avenue in which they could express their collective anger and seek answers to their questions. Many of the students; however, did not feel that they had this choice. Some were confused and saddened, wondering why someone would want to close the school they loved, while others became angry, feeling helpless and unheard.

As the rumored whispers of closure became a public debate, communities began to clash over what was best for their children. People who spoke out publicly became targets for ridicule and retaliation. Even those who were planted on the same side of the issue were pitted against one another as the consolidation fight ripped apart the communities themselves. Relationships

became strained and an atmosphere of distrust and negativity pervaded the county. However, as the reality of the closure drew nearer, outward reactions tended to have the greatest influence over student anxiety. The parents in the study who said that they tried to keep a positive outlook in front of their children, looking at the closure like an adventure, had children that reported an easier transition. These students, although nervous about the change, were excited about the prospect of meeting new people and making new friends. Many of the people who were the strongest opponents of the consolidation chose not to send their children to Webster Springs, choosing to home school instead. George and Albert never discussed the consolidation with anyone other than their closest friends, garnering all of their information from “over talk” by adults who did not think they were listening also reported having a harder time adjusting to the new school. Their mother, although she chose not to participate in the study, reported that the transition had been difficult for her family.

Although the experiences of these people are unique, they provide some valuable insight into how families experience school consolidation, and anyone considering how to consolidate schools should take note of the lessons they have offered. Namely, the families and communities want to be involved in the process through open communication and transparent and collaborative planning. Children hear and see what is going on, even when no one thinks they are watching or listening. They may not appear to be important players, but in fact, they should be the MVP. Adults in general, and policy and decision makers in specific, should seek the voice of children when making decisions that affect their lives. Often conversations will clear up misgivings, but children also have valuable insight into what they need and desire. School consolidation will continue to be a contentious event; however, honesty and collaboration may help make the decisions and transition more successful for all.

## **Hardship and Resiliency**

When faced with adversity and hardship, people from small communities often band together toward a common goal. Oftentimes, poor, rural communities are doubly cursed as they lack the infrastructure, resources, and support to overcome adversity; however, social capital helps these small communities build resiliency. Social capital—which is based in and grows out of people’s relationships—is what drives change, progress, and innovation in human systems and is often “richest at the local level” (Lerch, 2015, p. 8). In June, 2016, communities across West Virginia were devastated by horrific flooding, but in many of these small towns people came together to help one another. When all physical possessions and hope seemed lost, leaders emerged, connecting people and resources, and restoring a sense of hope and faith in humanity. Although devastating natural disasters present a completely different set of challenges than social disruptions or economic downturns, the road to recovery and healing often intersect.

The Diana community was devastated by the loss of their beloved school, and many joined forces to provide support for one another and to try to combat the plans to close. Just like in June, when neighbors emerged to help one another, strangers and friends alike joined a movement to try to save Diana Elementary. Although in the end, they were ultimately unsuccessful, there are many lessons to be learned from their experience.

Communities are built from human relationships, experiences, and interactions. Building community resilience takes trust, both in a system and in people. Lerch (2015) stated:

What a community is now and what it will be in the future both result from decisions made by people interacting, negotiating, and working together. Trust and deep relationships are crucial to holding communities together year after year and making resilience durable... Resilience building cannot turn a blind eye to the political and

economic processes that determine what gets done, how it gets done, who decides, and who benefits. People of all interests and means must be able to participate in and benefit from resilience building; indeed, if they are to build true resilience, communities must embrace dissent and diversity (p. 12.)

The families in this study experienced a traumatic event when Diana Elementary closed; many had lost hope and the vision of the future was unclear. They didn't feel that they were given a voice, and a strong distrust of the political institution bred fear and dissent. Even today, many of the families are resentful for losing their local school; there is still a deep rooted contempt and distrust of the system but also in the people who voted to close the school. The families needed strong leadership and a voice to help transition them from their storied history at Diana to their new reality at Webster Springs. They needed to have their concerns heard, and they needed to have a voice in the decision. According to Gordon (2010), it is having a voice, and the recognition that you are being heard that helps clear the insecurities of being insignificant and builds a foundation of trust. There was no foundation of trust on which to build a strong, cohesive consolidation plan. It is with trust and honesty that people can work together to plan and create a new future, one filled with hope, one in which the community can begin to heal and grow stronger. That opportunity was lost during Diana's closure.

The communities of Webster County are, however, resilient; when faced with challenges, they work together to bring back hope. Building resilience by fostering relationships, social connections, and giving people a voice helps create stronger communities. The closing of Diana was inevitably going to be a painful event, as many families had strong personal connections to the school and its role in the community's history; however, allowing all of the stakeholders to play a bigger role in the planning may have made the difference in how these families were able



to adjust and cope with the transition. Many say that children are naturally resilient, but this resiliency must be fostered through interactions with trusting adults and peers. The experiences of the children and their families teach us about the importance of relationships, especially in terms of building resilience. Relationships are built upon a foundation of trust and respect, and people need these social connections to help pull them through adversity. The Diana community felt isolated from others within the county, so they created their own network to provide support, resources, and hope. Ultimately, when they lost the battle to save their school, their group began to dissolve, leaving many to process their emotions and find individual solace. Alone, we may be able to provide the necessities to survive, but we need the social connections in which we can share resources, knowledge, and the supports necessary to thrive, especially in times of turmoil and uncertainty. Although Webster County may not face another school consolidation, understanding how a community deals with economic, social, and natural disasters can build the community's resilience. Applying the knowledge garnered from past events and reactions can help to improve understanding and inform further response so that the community can better withstand future incidents (Acosta & Chandra, 2016).

### **Implications and Limitations**

As a phenomenological study with only eleven participants, this research was meant to engage us in a conversation about school consolidation, rather than provide a representation of how people experience consolidation. The group of participants in this study included five elementary aged children, four parents, and two grandparents. The demographics, aside from age, are similar; however, the essence of this study is not to represent how others with similar backgrounds in similar communities will react and experience school consolidation. This study, instead, allows us to engage in dialogue about community, relationships, and school

consolidation and how they are all intricately intertwined. Replicating this study with a different group of people, will likely yield different results but would still add to the very important conversation about these issues.

As my initial interest in this project was sparked by the emotional plea to save Diana Elementary, I expected the students and families to remain adamantly against the consolidation, even a year or two into the transition. I anticipated that the families would have liked to maintain the status quo at Diana, returning to the way things had been before the closure. I assumed that the local school would win out in the battle of consolidation in the minds of the families and community because the close, familial relationships and deep rooted connections to the building, the memories, and the shared history that it represents. And although there may be benefits to the larger school, I expected history, tradition, and emotional connection to triumph.

Most of my expectations and assumptions did not pan out. Reflecting on my experience and conversations with the people involved in this study, I can propose several reasons why. First, the participants in this study may have accepted their current situation with an optimistic outlook, choosing to focus on the positives, both in their memories from Diana and their attitude about Webster Springs. This attitude may have made them more willing to participate in the study than others. Secondly, this study provided an avenue for them to finally voice their experiences. In telling their stories through this study, they were able to give their memories a special place and retain a piece of their Diana identity, freeing them to accept and perhaps even celebrate their new situation.

I tried to approach this study freely, un-biased, and with an open-mind, but I too was a participant, whose own experience was connected to the event under study. It would have been impossible to completely free myself to conduct this research in such a manner. I had to work

through the process and find where I fit into the picture. I realize that my prejudices had an influence over what I expected to find. From these suppositions, I can assert certain limitations to this study. As a teacher at Webster Springs, some potential participants may have been put off by my connection to the school. Because I was a teacher at Webster Springs, and I had attended the public hearings during the consolidation process, some people viewed me as one of the enemies. Throughout the consolidation hearings, I found myself torn between the groups, believing the promises of greater curricular offerings and opportunities for the students, but also leery about sending the much younger, less mature middle school students to the high school. I was also empathetic to the parents of Diana, and although I had no connection to Diana Elementary, I understood how heart-wrenching it would be to lose the local school. At one time during the public hearings, I spoke out advocating for peace and cooperation, regardless of the final decision, because I feared that the constant bickering and hateful attitudes would taint the students' ability to adjust to any possible changes. I fear that my position as a teacher at Webster Springs may have discouraged some people from participating in the study, and therefore, I may have gotten a more optimistic view of the experience of the closure because those who had (and continue to have) difficulty with the consolidation refused to tell me their stories.

In the beginning, I had difficulty recruiting people to join the study; some stated that the subject was still too painful to discuss while others would just ignore my calls. I can postulate that some people were indifferent to the current situation, and although they may have once had strong feelings about the issue that they may have waned into indifference as time had passed. Some families initially agreed to participate in the study; however, withdrew when it was time to begin the interviews.

Because Webster County is a small, rural, isolated community that lacks the infrastructure and economic development to offer new and diverse employment opportunities for youth, the people who live here often have strong family connections. Familial disputes and marriage dissolutions can damage relationships that reach beyond family walls into the community. One marriage dissolution created a rift that cost the study six participants, forcing me to widen the scope of participation to include grandparents. I realize that these limitations restrict the picture of school consolidation to include only a small portion of personal experiences. Nevertheless, those who did participate offer valuable descriptions of and insights into their own experiences, all of which help to build our knowledge about the experience of school consolidation.

### **Recommendations and Suggestions for Future Research**

The children and families who chose to participate in this research study very generously shared their experiences of the Diana School closure. Although each person experienced the closure differently, they all felt a strong bond to their local community school, one which was lost in a battle that severed some relationships and caused deep and lasting wounds. The people in this study were generous enough to tell their stories so that we may learn more about how school consolidation effects community relationships at a very fundamental and personal level. Although the participants in this study have seemed to adapt to their new situation, they all agree that the social institution that is the school system could have done more to make the transition easier.

The Superintendent and Webster County Board of Education were given the opportunity to work with the communities affected by the school consolidation to create a plan that provided an appropriate and meaningful educational experience for all of its students. Unfortunately, the

county failed to manage this process effectively, creating a widespread mistrust in the political institution governing our schools. The families of Diana wanted a voice in their children's education and the community wanted to preserve their local school. Although the end result, the closure of Diana, may have been inescapable, a more engaged process in which all of the stakeholders had a voice may have offered both solace and buy-in.

Children were afraid of the unknown: a new school, new teachers, and new classmates, and although not all of them may have been able to articulate how to assuage these fears, many of them presented simple, logical, feasible solutions that may have created a smoother, more appropriate transition. The families echoed the ideas presented by their children, stating that a well-thought plan with contingencies in place would have been an easy fix to ease first day jitters for both the students and the parents. The promises of greater and more varied curricular offerings could have been more than mere lip service had the Board and the Superintendent admitted that they didn't hold all of the answers, and if they would have agreed to work with the stakeholders, children, teachers, and community alike, perhaps the mistrust and hard-feelings would now be a distant memory.

The closure of Diana Elementary and the reconfiguration of Webster Springs, Glade, and Webster County High School has caused emotional damage to the communities, and although there has been some healing, many still have strong doubts in their faith of a system that they feel has failed them and their children. The flood that occurred this summer, two years after the closure, has helped reunite some of the communities that were wounded as people came together to help their neighbors in a time of great need, but it is clear that more healing is needed.

Interestingly, the response to this summer's floods parallels part of the experience of losing Diana. When the flood occurred, people from around the United States pitched in to help;

unfortunately, some of their relief efforts were misguided. Too often, donations of clothes were untimely, as more imminent needs such as cleaning supplies and storage totes were most needed in the days immediately following the flood. Donated clothes and furniture became a hindrance because there was nowhere to store these items. Hot meals, water, cleaning supplies, and totes were necessities, but without an open dialogue, the aid workers did not realize this type of support became a burden. In some ways, we did something similar to the students of Diana when they came to Webster Springs. With the best of intentions, the additional staff that were poised to help the incoming students became an additional barrier to an already overwhelming situation. Additional research is needed in the rare cases where the school consolidation processes are handled effectively to determine what makes these transitions successful. How are the relationships in these situations different from the many contentious debates that often result in school closures?

### **Reflection**

Life is not static; it does not operate apart from the influence of outside forces and relationships. The intricacies that make life so complex—the choices, the reactions, the relationships—are often difficult to capture in a frozen moment or particular memory. It is the reflection on these moments that provide a sort of clarity; it is the reflection and discussion of these shared experiences that broaden the lens and put these moments into focus.

When I began this research, I knew that in operating with an emergent mindset, the design was likely to change and take shape based on the participants; however, looking back I realize that I did not fully understand what this truly meant. I knew that my design would afford the participants a certain degree of freedom, both in how they created the data, but also in how we understood and collectively made sense of the data. As I spoke with the families throughout

the adult focus group, I realized that my role as a teacher at Webster Springs during those first few days of the transition was profoundly intertwined with their experiences as parents and grandparents. Once the closing of Diana was final, we, the teachers at Webster Springs, wanted to make the students and families feel as comfortable and welcome as possible. Although we were unable to hold the traditional open house where families and teachers gather for an evening of festivities, food, school tours, and meet-and-greet, we knew that we must revamp our first day routine as we were going to be welcoming nearly one hundred new students, many of whom would be unfamiliar with both the school and the staff.

On that first day, we stocked the school with “helpers,” as teachers and other staff manned the hallways, gymnasium, and cafeteria to greet students and their families, escort them to their rooms, and introduce them to possible new friends. We more than tripled the number of personnel visible throughout the building in order to try to alleviate the fear of not knowing where to go or how to get there. It was with the best intentions that we planned our welcome; however, in hindsight, and brought to light during our discussion, we placed an additional obstacle on the students and families. We filled the new school’s strange hallways with big, unfamiliar adult bodies, who seemed overly friendly and “in your face”—the exact opposite effect of what was intended.

By providing multiple avenues to share their voices and experiences, I thought that I would be given a plethora of rich and meaningful information that would transform how I thought about school consolidation. Although, I learned a lot about how families experienced the consolidation, it was not until I started to reflect on the data in the larger scheme of the community, the relationships, and the environmental challenges that I began to understand the intricacies of how relationships evolve and shape our experiences.

Although I regularly work with young children, the interview process was uncharted territory for me. In the beginning, I found it difficult to allow the children to freely express themselves without unintentionally leading them. Unfortunately, my first interview was with the youngest child in the study, and although I know the importance of wait time and attention span for young children, in transcribing the interview, I realized that I was unintentionally trying to get the child to where I thought the answers would lead, rather than allowing her to take me where she wanted to go. As I interviewed more children, I was acutely aware of the dance that goes on, the give and take between the two of us, and I focused on allowing the child to take the lead. Sometimes, the children would take me to a place that seemed unrelated to the prepared questions I wanted to ask, but later, I realized that even these antidotes and stories had particular meaning to that child, something that they held onto, giving the memory a special place and power over their psyche.

The visual media that was a large part of my research design actually ended up being a small part of the data set. I found that there were few places, mementos, and physical artifacts that held special meaning for the families. Instead, as is common in Appalachian lore, it was the tradition of oral story-telling of memories that held the most meaning to the families with whom I worked. When asked about mementos, most families just offered to share pictures from past yearbooks, but each family had special events or memories that they were more than willing to illustrate with a storied retelling. This showed me that it is not so much the “stuff” but the memories of shared experiences that held the greatest meaning.

As the research progressed, and I began to get in touch with the families, I found that many outside influences hindered the momentum of the project. As time passed, people who were initially interested in participating began to lose interest and became involved in other



commitments to family and work. They were no longer willing to commit their time for focus group discussions and interviews, although they wished me luck in my endeavors. I also began to realize how the interconnectedness of small communities influences people and their relationships. One marital dissolution led me to lose five participants: one child and four adults. When communities are small and close-knit, like those in Diana and Webster Springs, the relationships extend beyond family lines, and when a traumatic event occurs, the delicate strings that bind people together can be broken.

As I was faced with setbacks in the research, trying to be patient, as I worked in and among others' schedules, trying to find a place where I fit, I became frustrated with the lack of progress toward my goal. I wanted people to want to tell their stories, and I began to fear that too much time had passed, and people had moved on, leaving their stories buried in the rubble of the relationships destroyed by the consolidation. Those who had accepted the consolidation had moved on and were at peace, not wanting to disrupt the equilibrium they had found, and those who had not accepted the consolidation remained resentful and angry, not wanting to discuss their grief and loss. Eventually, I pushed on and expanded my scope, allowing family members like grandparents and past Diana community members to join, reviving the research and opening up the door to new perspectives.

After the flood, I began to look beyond the raw data into how everything fit into the bigger picture. I began to look at how the relationships between people and among communities changed when faced with a challenge. When the talk of closing Diana School began, the entire community banded together towards a common goal. Relationships were built out of adversity, the shared experiences of a group of people brought them together to fight, not just for a school, but for the symbol that represented their collective history. 2016 brought about many hardships

for the citizens of Webster County, the loss of Brooks Run and the flooding in June changed both the physical and social landscape of the county. As a researcher I cannot discount how the relationships that were built during these tumultuous times may have influenced people by helping to ease the tensions that were created during the consolidation. Although the consolidation may have left a scar that will always remain to many in the community of Diana, the adversity faced in 2016 began to bring people back together as they worked to help others in neighboring towns rebuild after the physical damage caused by the flood.

In the end, I had a personal revelation as I came to the understanding of the true beauty of the story that is qualitative research; the story where the researcher is uniquely connected to the participants. In the beginning, I saw myself as the proxy through which the participants could tell their side of the story, the human side of school consolidation. However, I quickly saw my role change from researcher to participant as I came to realize that I was an interconnected player in this story because I too experienced the consolidation. I had to wrestle with how my emotions, biases, and reflections influenced how I told their stories. Eventually, I came to realize that together we were painting a picture where the highs and lows of our stories combined like the light that casts shadows on an image, giving it depth. My story became situated as a part of theirs; our experiences, though different, were uniquely connected, and it was together in conversation that we intricately weaved them together to craft a human picture of school consolidation.

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## APPENDIX A: MARSHALL UNIVERSITY IRB APPROVAL



w w w . m a r s h a l l . e d u

**Office of Research Integrity**  
Institutional Review Board  
One John Marshall Drive  
Huntington, WV 25755

FWA 00002704

IRB1 #00002205  
IRB2 #00003206

February 19, 2016

Elizabeth Campbell, Ph.D.  
Elementary and Secondary Education, MUGC

RE: IRBNet ID# 856430-1

At: Marshall University Institutional Review Board #2 (Social/Behavioral)

Dear Dr. Campbell:

**Protocol Title:** [856430-1] LOSING DIANA: CHILDREN AND PARENTS REFLECT ON THE CLOSING OF A SCHOOL IN RURAL WEST VIRGINIA

**Expiration Date:** February 19, 2017

**Site Location:** MUGC

**Submission Type:** New Project APPROVED

**Review Type:** Expedited Review

In accordance with 45CFR46.110(a)(6)&(7), the above study and informed consent were granted Expedited approval today by the Marshall University Institutional Review Board #2 (Social/Behavioral) Chair for the period of 12 months. The approval will expire February 19, 2017. A continuing review request for this study must be submitted no later than 30 days prior to the expiration date.

This study is for student Allison Pyle.

If you have any questions, please contact the Marshall University Institutional Review Board #2 (Social/Behavioral) Coordinator Bruce Day, ThD, CIP at 304-696-4303 or day50@marshall.edu. Please include your study title and reference number in all correspondence with this office.

## **APPENDIX B: RESEARCH PROTOCOL**

### Research Protocol: Phase One Individual Interviews

#### A. Group Session

- a. Introduction of Researcher
- b. Introduction of Study
  - i. Description
  - ii. Goals
  - iii. Logistics
    1. Extent and Limits
    2. IRB
    3. Interviews
    4. Interpretation/Analysis
    5. Dissemination
- c. Questions
- d. Consent to Participate

#### B. Individual Interviews with students- Diana experience

- a. Introduction of Researcher and overall researcher goal
- b. Introduction of Task
  - i. Create a collage of experiences, events and/or memories of Diana Elementary
    1. Draw/Outline Body
    2. Parameters & directions (draw, cut out, print pictures; create a map based on specific body areas-heart, mind, hands, etc.; random collage)
- c. Questions: In addition to clarifying/ probing questions about pictures/collage the following interview questions will be asked:
  - i. Tell me about one thing you really liked about Diana Elementary School.
  - ii. Describe a special day or your best memory from Diana Elementary.
  - iii. What opportunities to participate in clubs or sports did you have at DES?
    1. Which of these, if any did you do?
  - iv. Tell me about your favorite teacher at DES. What made him/her your favorite?
  - v. Tell me about a typical day at DES.
  - vi. Tell me how you felt when you first heard about Diana Elementary School closing.

- vii. What do you miss most about DES?
  - 1. What were some of the challenges you faced as you transitioned from DES to WSES?

C. Individual interviews with students- Webster Springs Experience

- a. Introduction of Task
  - i. Create a collage of experiences, events and/or memories of Diana Elementary
    - 1. Draw/Outline Body
    - 2. Parameters & directions (draw, cut out, print pictures; create a map based on specific body areas-heart, mind, hands, etc.; random collage)
- b. Questions: In addition to clarifying/ probing questions about pictures/collage the following interview questions will be asked
  - i. Tell me about one thing you really like about Webster Springs Elementary School.
  - ii. Tell me about a special day or your best memory from Webster Springs Elementary.
  - iii. What opportunities to participate in clubs or sports do you have at WSES?
    - 1. Which of these, if any do you do?
  - iv. Tell me about a typical day at WSES.
  - v. Tell me about your favorite teacher at WSES. What makes him/her your favorite?
  - vi. How did you feel about WSES before the consolidation? How have your thoughts/feelings changed since then?
  - vii. If you could travel back in time to before the consolidation, what advice would you give other students about starting over at a new school? What would you tell the adults to help make the transition easier?

Research Protocol: Phase Two  
Photoelicitation

A. Introduction of Photoelicitation task- Time capsule DES

- a. Parents
  - i. Bring in 3-5 photographs of items or places to put in a time capsule to show what life was like as a parent of Diana School.
  - ii. Create a label or caption for each photo.
- b. Students
  - i. Bring in 3-5 photographs of items or places to put in a time capsule to show what life was like as a student of Diana School.
  - ii. Create a label or caption for each photo.

B. Introduction of Photoelicitation task- Time capsule WSES

- a. Parents
  - i. Bring in 3-5 photographs of items or places to put in a time capsule to show what life is like as a parent of Webster Springs Elementary School.
  - ii. Create a label or caption for each photo.
- b. Students
  - i. Bring in 3-5 photographs of items or places to put in a time capsule to show what life is like as a student of Webster Springs Elementary School.
  - ii. Create a label or caption for each photo.

Research Protocol: Phase Three  
Focus Groups

A. Student Focus Group-

- a. Set ground rules for focus group discussion
- b. Ice Breaker Activity
- c. Questions:
  - i. Tell me about the relationships you had with your teachers at DES. How are the relationships with the teachers at WSES the same? And different?
  - ii. Do you feel that it is easier to be involved in activities at DES or WSES? Why?
  - iii. How has your peer group changed as a result of moving to WSES?
  - iv. How has the size of classes affected your learning?
  - v. How has the way the teachers teach affected your learning? What learning activities from DES do you miss most? What new learning activities from WSES are your favorite?
  - vi. How do you feel about your bus trip, and how has it changed since you were at DES?
  - vii. If you could change anything about your new school what would it be? Why?
  - viii. Tell me the best thing that has happened as a result of the school consolidation.
- d. Data discussion from time capsule photoelicitation.
  - i. What similarities do you see between the pictures from DES? What differences do you see? Why do you think that is?
  - ii. What similarities do you see between the pictures from WSES? What differences do you see? Why do you think that is?
  - iii. What similarities do you see between the pictures from DES and WSES? Why do you think that is the case?



- iv. What differences do you see between the pictures from DES and WSES?  
Why do you think so?
- e. Recommendations-
  - i. What do you want adults/people who make decisions to know or learn from kids about this experience?

B. Parent Focus Group Session One-

- a. Set ground rules for focus group discussion
- b. Ice Breaker Activity
- c. Questions:
  - i. Tell me how you felt when you first heard about Diana Elementary School closing.
  - ii. What avenues did you pursue to address the closing?
  - iii. How did you feel about WSES before the consolidation? How have your thoughts/feelings changed since then?
  - iv. Did you consider other options than sending your child(ren) to Webster Springs Elementary School?
    - 1. What were they?
    - 2. How/Why did you ultimately decided to send your child(ren) to WSES?
  - v. What are the most important things that you feel your child should receive from school? How did DES meet this need? How does WSES meet this need?
  - vi. Describe the relationships you had with the teachers, staff, and administration at DES. How are the relationships with the teachers, staff, and administration at WSES the same? And different?
  - vii. Tell me the most difficult thing that has happened as a result of the consolidation.
  - viii. Tell me the best thing that has happened as a result of the consolidation.

C. Parent Focus Group Session Two-

- a. Review ground rules for focus group discussion
- b. Data discussion from time capsule photoelicitation.
  - i. What similarities do you notice in your mementos/ photos from DES?  
What differences do you see? Why do you think that is?
  - ii. What similarities do you notice in your mementos/photos from WSES?  
What differences do you see? Why do you think that is?
  - iii. What similarities do you see between the pictures from DES and WSES?  
Why do you think that is the case?
  - iv. What differences do you see between the pictures from DES and WSES?  
Why do you think so?


c. Recommendations

- i. If you could travel back in time to before the consolidation, what advice would you give (to teachers/other parents/administrators/ or children) who are faced with school consolidation? What would you want them to know to help make the transition from a closing school to a consolidated school easier?
- ii. What do you want others/people who make decisions to know or learn from your experience as a parent who experienced school consolidation?

# APPENDIX C: CHILD ASSENT FORM

## Marshall University Child's Assent for Being in a Research Study

Title: *Losing Diana*

	Marshall University IRB	
	Approved on:	2/19/16
	Expires on:	2/19/17
	Study number:	856430

Why are you here?

We are asking you to take part in a research study because we are trying to learn more about how students experience school consolidation. We are inviting you to be in the study because you have important insight into how students experienced the closing of Diana Elementary School and its consolidation into Webster Springs Elementary School.

Why are they doing this study?

There have been lots of studies about school consolidation and how that affects student learning, but there are very few studies that use students' own voices to tell the stories about how they understand and think about the loss of their school and the consolidation into a different school. We are asking you to take part in this study so that we can learn from your experience and help others who may be faced with the same thing.

What will happen to you?

This study will happen at different meetings with the researcher. In the first meeting, you will be talking with the researcher about being a student at Diana Elementary. You will be given the opportunity to make a collage by drawing, printing, or cutting out pictures, or writing. You will do the same activity (either on the same day or a different day) while talking with the researcher about being a student at Webster Springs Elementary.

Another activity you will be asked to complete is a time capsule activity. You will be asked to bring pictures that you have of places or things from Diana Elementary that could be put in a time capsule to show others what it was like to be a student at Diana.

*Initials* \_\_\_\_\_

You will do this activity by yourself. Then you will get to make a movie with your parents. In this activity, you will work with your parents to make a movie about places or things from Diana that had special meaning to you as a family or community. You and your parents can take a picture of the place or thing and then use the video recording to tell the story about why it is so special to you.

You will also be asked to take pictures of places or things at Webster Springs Elementary that show what life is like as a student at WSES. You will also do the video making activity with your parent, just like before, but this time, you will use the pictures and videos to tell about life as a student at Webster Springs.

The last activity you will do will involve your friends and classmates. You, the researcher, and the other students in the study will all meet in a group to talk about life at Diana Elementary School, life at Webster Springs Elementary School, and the photo and video activities you did.

Will the study hurt?

This study will not hurt you. There will be no tests or activities that will cause you any pain, and if you do not feel comfortable answering a question or participating in an activity, you do not have to. Nothing bad will happen to you, and no one will be mad at you if you decide to not participate in all of the activities or if you decide to quit the study before it is over.

Will the study help you?

There is no money or gifts involved in this study. This study will help others learn about how students experience school consolidation. It may help you by giving you a place to tell your story.

What if you have any questions?

You can ask any questions that you have about the study. If you have a question later that you didn't think of now, you can call me at (304) 644-9064 or ask me next time.

*Initials* \_\_\_\_\_

Do your parents know about this?

This study was explained to your parents and they said that you could be in it if you want. You can talk this over with them before you decide.

Do you have to be in the study?

You do not have to be in the study. No one will be upset if you don't want to do this. If you don't want to be in this study, you just have to tell them. You can say yes now and change your mind later. It's up to you.

Putting a checkmark by the word YES and writing your name after that means that that you agree to be in the study, and know what will happen to you. If you decide to quit the study all you have to do is tell the person in charge.

---

You have talked to your parents and the researcher about the study. You have had all of your questions answered. You understand that you can withdraw from this study at any time and no one will be angry or upset with you. Indicate your choice below:

*(Check One)*

\_\_\_ **YES**, you want to be in the study.      \_\_\_ **NO**, you do not want to be in the study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Child *(Print)*

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Child

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Witness *(Print)*

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Witness

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Researcher *(Print)*

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

*Initials* \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX D: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Page 1 of 3

### Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

#### *Losing Diana: Children and Parents Reflect on the Closing of a School in Rural West Virginia*

*Elizabeth Campbell, Ph.D.*, Principal Investigator

*Allison Pyle, Ed.S.*, Co-Investigator



Marshall University IRB

Approved on:	2/19/16
Expires on:	2/19/17
Study number:	856430

#### Introduction

You are invited to be in a research study. Research studies are designed to gain scientific knowledge that may help other people in the future. You may or may not receive any benefit from being part of the study. Your participation is voluntary. Please take your time to make your decision, and ask your research investigator or research staff to explain any words or information that you do not understand.

#### Why Is This Study Being Done?

There is much research about school consolidation and how it affects student achievement, curricular offerings, and its effects on communities; however, little of that research utilizes the voices of parents and students to tell how they experience it. The purpose of this study is to explore school consolidation through the perspectives of students and parents by examining your and your child's experiences of the closing of Diana Elementary School and subsequent merger consolidation into Webster Springs Elementary School.

#### How Many People Will Take Part In The Study?

About thirty people will take part in this study. A total of fifty six people, including students and parents are the most that would be able to enter the study.

#### What Is Involved In This Research Study?

This study will take part in phases. The first phase for parents will utilize photographs and videos. You will be asked to bring in photographs of places or items from Diana Elementary that could be used in a time capsule to show others what life was like as a parent of a Diana student. For the video phase, the students will work with you (the parent) to record 3-5 places or items that had special meaning to you as a family or community. You may take a photograph of the place/item and then use the video to describe or tell the story about why it had special meaning. The above activities will be repeated, this time focusing on experiences at Webster Springs Elementary. If you don't have any photographs at WSES, you will be given the opportunity to take some.

Subject's Initials \_\_\_\_\_

The next phase will consist of focus group interviews in which you will gather in a group with the researcher to discuss the closing of Diana Elementary and the subsequent merger into Webster Springs Elementary. Depending on time and attention, the data from the pictures and videos that were taken will be discussed at this meeting or a subsequent group session.

### *How Long Will You Be In The Study?*

You will be in the study for about two months. The research will not be conducted continuously; however, the total amount of time shouldn't exceed two months. Each individual phase of the research will vary. The photographic and video activities should take no more than two hours each, and the focus group meeting(s) should be expected to take about an hour.

You can decide to stop participating at any time. If you decide to stop participating in the study we encourage you to talk to the study investigator or study staff as soon as possible.

The study investigator may stop you from taking part in this study at any time if he/she believes it is in your best interest; if you do not follow the study rules; or if the study is stopped.

### *What Are The Risks Of The Study?*

There are no known risks to those who take part in this study.

### *Are There Benefits To Taking Part In The Study?*

If you agree to take part in this study, there may or may not be direct benefit to you. We hope the information learned from this study will benefit other people in the future. The benefits of participating in this study may be that others will learn more about how students and their parents are affected by school consolidation. It may directly benefit you by giving you an outlet to tell your story and share the experience of school consolidation to help others faced with a similar situation.

### *What About Confidentiality?*

We will do our best to make sure that your personal information is kept confidential. However, we cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Federal law says we must keep your study records private. Nevertheless, under unforeseen and rare circumstances, we may be required by law to allow certain agencies to view your records. Those agencies would include the Marshall University IRB, Office of Research Integrity (ORI) and the federal Office of Human Research Protection (OHRP). This is to make sure that we are protecting your rights and your safety. If we publish the information we learn from this study, you will not be identified by name or in any other way unless you tell the researcher that you do want to be identified, and that you want your words and ideas to be acknowledged.

### *What Are The Costs Of Taking Part In This Study?*

There are no costs to you for taking part in this study. All the study costs, including any study tests, supplies and procedures related directly to the study, will be paid for by the study.

Subject's Initials \_\_\_\_\_

Will You Be Paid For Participating?

You will receive no payment or other compensation for taking part in this study.

What Are Your Rights As A Research Study Participant?

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part or you may leave the study at any time. Refusing to participate or leaving the study will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled. If you decide to stop participating in the study we encourage you to talk to the investigators or study staff first.

Whom Do You Call If You Have Questions Or Problems?

For questions about the study or in the event of a research-related injury, contact the study investigator, *Elizabeth Campbell* at (304) 746-1984. You should also call the investigator if you have a concern or complaint about the research.

For questions about your rights as a research participant, contact the Marshall University IRB#2 Chairman Dr. Stephen Cooper or ORI at (304) 696-4303. You may also call this number if:

- o You have concerns or complaints about the research.
- o The research staff cannot be reached.
- o You want to talk to someone other than the research staff.

You will be given a signed and dated copy of this consent form.

**SIGNATURES**

You agree to take part in this study and confirm that you are 18 years of age or older. You have had a chance to ask questions about being in this study and have had those questions answered. By signing this consent form you are not giving up any legal rights to which you are entitled.

\_\_\_\_\_

Subject Name (Printed)

\_\_\_\_\_

Subject Signature

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

\_\_\_\_\_

Person Obtaining Consent (Printed)

\_\_\_\_\_

Person Obtaining Consent Signature

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

Subject's Initials \_\_\_\_\_



## APPENDIX E: PARENT CONSENT FORM

Page 1 of 3

### Parent Consent for Child to Participate in a Research Study

#### *Losing Diana: Children and Parents Reflect on Losing a School in Rural West Virginia*

*Elizabeth Campbell, Ph.D.*, Principal Investigator

*Allison Pyle, Ed.S.*, Co-Investigator



Marshall University IRB

Approved on:	2/19/18
Expires on:	2/19/17
Study number:	856430

#### Introduction

Your child is invited (with your permission) to be in a research study. Research studies are designed to gain scientific knowledge that may help other people in the future. Your child may or may not receive any benefit from being part of the study. There may also be risks associated with being part of research studies. If there are any risks involved in this study then they will be described in this consent. Participation is voluntary so please take your time to make your decision, and ask your research investigator or research staff to explain any words or information that you do not understand.

#### Why Is This Study Being Done?

There is much research about school consolidation and how it affects student achievement, curricular offerings, and its effects on communities; however, little of that research utilizes the voices of parents and students to tell how they experience it. The purpose of this study is to explore school consolidation through the perspectives of students and parents by examining your and your child's experiences of the closing of Diana Elementary School and subsequent merger consolidation into Webster Springs Elementary School.

#### How Many Will Take Part In The Study?

About twenty children will take part in this study. A total of 28 student subjects are the most that would be able to enter the study. Only students from Diana Elementary that now attend Webster Springs, or attended last year, will be included in this study.

#### What Is Involved In This Research Study?

This study will take part in three phases. The first phase will include individual student interviews. In these interviews, the students will speak with the researcher about their experiences at Diana Elementary School. They will be asked to create a collage of their experiences, memories, or events from Diana Elementary. This activity will be repeated, this time focusing on their experiences at Webster Springs Elementary.

The second phase of research will utilize photographs and videos. The children will be asked to bring in photographs of places or items from Diana Elementary that could be used in a time capsule to show others what life was like as a Diana student. For the video phase, the students will work with you (the parent) to record 3-5 places or items that had special meaning to you as a family or community. You may take a photograph of the place/item and then use the video to describe or tell the story about why it had special meaning. Again, the activities will be repeated, this time focusing on experiences at Webster Springs Elementary.

Initial \_\_\_\_\_

The third phase will consist of focus group interviews in which the students will gather in a group with the researcher to discuss life as a student at Diana and at Webster Springs, as well as talk about the pictures and videos that were taken.

### *How Long Will Your Child Be In The Study?*

Your child will be in the study for about two months. The research will not be conducted continuously; however, the total amount of time shouldn't exceed two months. Each individual phase of the research will vary. The individual interviews should be expected to last 30 minutes to an hour. The photographic and video activities should take no more than two hours, and the focus group meeting(s) should be expected to take about an hour.

You or your child can decide to stop participation at any time. If you decide to stop your child's participation in the study we encourage you to talk to the study investigator or study staff as soon as possible.

The study investigator may stop your child from taking part in this study at any time if he/she believes it is in your child's best interest; if your child does not follow the study rules; or if the study is stopped.

### *What Are The Risks Of The Study?*

There are no known risks to those who take part in this study.

### *Are There Benefits To Taking Part In The Study?*

If you agree to allow your child to take part in this study, there may or may not be direct benefit to them. We hope the information learned from this study will benefit other people in the future. The benefits of participating in this study may be that others will learn more about how students are affected by school consolidation. It may directly benefit your child by giving him/her an outlet to tell his/her story and share the experience of school consolidation to help others faced with a similar situation.

### *What About Confidentiality?*

We will do our best to make sure that your child's personal information is kept confidential. However, we cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Federal law says we must keep your child's study records private. Nevertheless, under unforeseen and rare circumstances, we may be required by law to allow certain agencies to view your child's records. Those agencies would include the Marshall University IRB, Office of Research Integrity (ORI) and the federal Office of Human Research Protection (OHRP). This is to make sure that we are protecting your child's rights and safety. If we publish the information we learn from this study, your child will not be identified by name or in any other way.

### *What Are The Costs Of Taking Part In This Study?*

Initial \_\_\_\_\_

There are no costs to you for allowing your child to take part in this study. All the study costs, including any study tests, supplies and procedures related directly to the study, will be paid for by the study.

*Will You Be Paid For Participation?*

You will receive no payment or other compensation for your child's participation in this study.

*What Are Your Rights As A Research Study Participant?*

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to allow your child to take part or you may withdraw them from the study at any time. Refusing to participate or leaving the study will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you or your child are entitled. If you decide to stop your child's participation in the study we encourage you to talk to the investigators or study staff first.

*Whom Do You Call If You Have Questions Or Problems?*

For questions about the study or in the event of a research-related injury, contact the study investigator, Elizabeth Campbell at (304) 746-1984. You should also call the investigator if you have a concern or complaint about the research.

For questions about your rights as a research participant, contact the Marshall University IRB#2 Chairman Dr. Stephen Cooper at (304) 696-7320. You may also call this number if:

- o You have concerns or complaints about the research.
- o The research staff cannot be reached.
- o You want to talk to someone other than the research staff.

You will be given a signed and dated copy of this consent form.

**SIGNATURES**

You grant permission for your child \_\_\_\_\_ to take part in this study. You have had a chance to ask questions about this study and have had those questions answered. By signing this consent form you are stating that you are not giving up any legal rights to which you or your child are entitled.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent Name (Printed)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Person Obtaining Consent (Printed)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Person Obtaining Consent Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Initial \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX F: WEBSTER COUNTY BOARD OF EDUCATION PERMISSION

### Webster County Board of Education

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**Superintendent**

Scott L. Cochran

*January 21, 2016*

**Board Members**

Harold D. Carpenter  
Susan Chericalo  
Lisa Clutter  
Heather Davis  
Joyce Markle

315 South Main Street  
Webster Springs, WV  
26288

Phone: 304-847-5638  
Fax: 304-847-2538

This letter is to document that Allison Pyle has permission to conduct a research study at Webster Springs Elementary School, in Webster Springs, WV once Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval has been obtained. I understand that this study involves individual student interviews, focus group meetings, photoelicitation activities and videography. I have spoken with Mrs. Pyle and she understands that no one is allowed to be photographed without their express written consent. I also understand that this project is part of school requirements for her dissertation at Marshall University. The instructor for this course is Elizabeth Campbell.

Mr. Jeremy Pyle, principal, will act as the on-site supervisor and can be contacted by phone at (304) 847-5321 ext. 1103 or by email at [jpyle@k12.wv.us](mailto:jpyle@k12.wv.us). If you have any questions, you may contact me at (304) 847-5638, ext. 113.

Signed,



Scott Cochran  
Superintendent, Webster County Schools

Rev. 06/2013

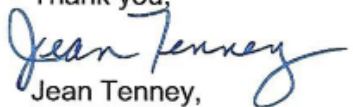
## APPENDIX G: DIANA EAGLES COMMUNITY CENTER PERMISSION

Diana Eagles Community Center  
1488 Guardian Dr.  
Diana, WV 262217

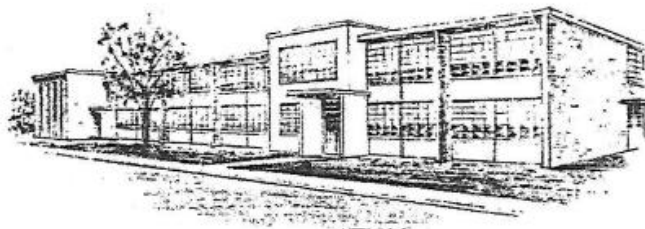
To whom it may concern:

Allison Pyle has my permission to conduct research regarding the Webster Springs Elementary and Diana Elementary consolidation and merger. She will be allowed to use the Diana Eagles Community Center, pending Marshall University IRB approval, to conduct individual interviews with students, focus group interviews with parents and students, and conduct photoelicitation and videography activities within the building. I have spoken with Mrs. Pyle, and she understands that no one is allowed to be photographed or videoed without their express written consent. If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact me at (304) 847-5511.

Thank you,

  
Jean Tenney,  
Board of Directors, DECC

## APPENDIX H: WEBSTER SPRINGS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PERMISSION



**WEBSTER SPRINGS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL**  
318 RIVER DRIVE WEBSTER SPRINGS, WEST VIRGINIA 26288  
Jeremy Pyle, Principal  
Phone (304) 847-5321 FAX (304) 847-5364

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To whom it may concern:

Allison Pyle has my permission to conduct research regarding the Webster Springs Elementary and Diana Elementary consolidation and merger. She will be allowed to use Webster Springs Elementary School to conduct individual interviews with students, focus group interviews with parents and students, and conduct photoelicitation and videography activities within the building. I have spoken with Mrs. Pyle, and she understands that no one is allowed to be photographed or videoed without their express written consent. If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact me at (304) 847-5321, ext. 1103.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Jeremy Pyle".

Jeremy Pyle  
Principal, WSES

## APPENDIX I: CURRICULUM VITAE

Allison Nicole Pyle  
301 S. Main St.  
Webster Springs, WV 26288  
(304) 644-9064  
pyle10@marshall.edu

### Academic Degrees

**Education Specialist, 2015**

[Marshall University](#)

**Master of Arts in Leadership Studies, 2010**

[Marshall University](#)

**Bachelor of Arts in Education (with honors), 2004**

Major: Elementary Education K-6

Minor: Early Childhood Education Pre K-K

Minor: Special Education Multicategorical: MI, LD, BD

[Glenville State College](#)

### Professional Experience

**Director of Administrative and Student Services (July 2016-present)**

Webster County Board of Education

**Preschool Teacher (August 2014- June 2016)**

Webster Springs Elementary School

**Academic Interventionist (August 2007-June 2013)**

Reading and Math Interventionist

Kindergarten- 8<sup>th</sup> Grade

Webster Springs Elementary/Middle School

**Special Education Teacher (August 2006- June 2007)**

5<sup>th</sup> Grade and 8<sup>th</sup> Grade

Webster Springs Elementary/Middle School

EXCEL Academy-Webster County Board of Education

**Special Education Teacher/Reading Interventionist (August 2005-June 2006)**

Webster Springs Elementary/Middle School

**Special Education Teacher/Timeline Coordinator (August 2004 – June 2005)**

Webster County High School

### Presentations and Workshops

May, 2014, International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, IL



April, 2014, West Virginia Reading Association Early Literacy Conference, Days Hotel, Flatwoods, WV  
August, 2013, West Virginia State Technology Conference, Waterfront Hotel, Morgantown, WV  
August, 2011, West Virginia State Technology Conference, Charleston, WV  
August, 2011, Summer Technology Integration Academy, Webster Springs Elementary School, Webster Springs, WV  
August, 2011, WVMPSC Program Overview/ New Teacher Training, Diana Elementary School, Diana, WV  
August, 2010, WVMPSC Program Overview/New Teacher Training, Webster Springs Elementary School, Webster Springs, WV  
August, 2010, Using student response systems, West Virginia State Technology Conference, Charleston, WV  
August, 2009, WVMPSC Program Overview/New Teacher Training, Webster Springs Elementary School, Webster Springs, WV  
August, 2008, WVMPSC Program Overview/New Teacher Training, Webster Springs Elementary School, Webster Springs, WV  
August, 2007, WVMPSC Program Overview/New Teacher Training, Webster Springs Elementary School, Webster Springs, WV

## **Service Related Activities**

### **School Service**

Faculty Senate Treasurer/ Secretary (2015-2016)  
School Leadership team (2015-2016)  
Member of the WV and IRA (2004-present)  
Trainer of Trainers for the WVMPSC (2010)  
Teacher Leadership Institute (2009)

## **Honors and Awards**

Graduated Summa Cum Laude with a Master's Degree in Leadership Studies from Marshall University (December 2010)

Graduated Summa Cum Laude with a Bachelor's of Arts Degree in Elementary Education from Glenville State College (May 2004)