

Fall 2014

# The New Endangered Species: Community-Anchoring Public Schools

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THE NEW ENDANGERED SPECIES: COMMUNITY-ANCHORING PUBLIC  
SCHOOLS

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Education

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for

The degree of Doctorate in Education

By

Karen Ferrick-Roman

December 2014

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Karen Ferrick-Roman

2014

**DUQUESNE UNIVERSITY**  
**SCHOOL OF EDUCATION**  
**PROFESSIONAL DOCTORATE IN EDUCATIONAL**  
**LEADERSHIP PROGRAM**

***Dissertation***

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the degree of Doctor of Education (Ed.D.)

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**July 9, 2014**

THE NEW ENDANGERED SPECIES: COMMUNITY-ANCHORING PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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# ABSTRACT

## THE NEW ENDANGERED SPECIES: COMMUNITY-ANCHORING PUBLIC SCHOOLS

By

Karen Ferrick-Roman

December 2014

Dissertation supervised by Dr. Gretchen G. Generett

Often, school closures are seen as a “natural order” of events in communities with extreme economic struggles. This work challenges that premise.

In Pennsylvania, communities where schools are selected for closure are often either rural, largely white or urban, primarily minority populations living at the margins amid a growing and persistent economic divide. This work examines the forces driving the rise of charter schools, which siphon students and funding from traditional, community-anchoring public schools, and allows systematic power and economic inequities to survive, even to prosper. The persistent political and economic power structure allows the economic divide to further push individual students and their communities from the mainstream.

My work also establishes that K-12 schools threatened by closure not only provide core educational services but act as community anchors for other essential

functions, especially in areas of geographic and economic isolation. A literature review shows that the expected savings from school closures generally are overestimated and that school closures do not provide the savings anticipated. In fact, after a school closure, systems may cost more to operate, not only in terms of the district budget, but in the time, money and effort required for parents and children to fully participate in the learning experience.

To avert the “need” for closure and the loss of a community-anchoring institution, this work suggests that schools and districts quantify and share exactly what benefits the school provides to its neighborhood through a community and financial impact report, incorporating the many positive ways in which the school and community interact. This report could open the door to encourage further community discussion to improve K-12 education to best serve the needs of the particular community. While each community faces specific circumstances and contexts, similar communities focused on improvement, operating across different demographic and geographic boundaries, could be networked to share processes and procedures they have found helpful.

My hope is that this work will support schools and communities remaining intact as a way of promoting social justice through education.

## DEDICATION

To my beloved, DAN ROMAN, the Disc Doctor, who embraced the idea of another doctor in our house. In awe and appreciation of your undying support.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Completion of this work is the result of the kindness and efforts of family, friends, acquaintances and strangers — mirroring what is needed to complete the work that lies ahead. My appreciation goes first to my committee members, who have shaped me while they molded my pathways of learning: to the brilliant and compassionate Dr. Gretchen Generett, who passes her torch to students so that they can light the unexplored intellectual corners of their minds; to the exacting critical thinker that is Dr. Launcelot Brown, a lion of intellectual rigor; and to Dr. Fran Serenka, an energetic, well-versed practitioner-scholar who works inside schools, with parents, community and Academy, just as the ProDEL program espouses. Their collective wisdom has been vital to this project, along with the guidance of ProDEL Director Rick McCown, who exudes patience and optimism with wise counsel. I deeply appreciate the volunteerism of Education Professor Dr. James Schreiber and Psychology Professor Dr. Eva Simms, and the enthusiasm and support of the inaugural cohort.

In the community, Robert Cercone, Dr. Ron Sofu and Don Inman provided special support over the years of this project. I also could not have proceeded without the insights of key figures in the anonymous Middleton County and town of Omega that you are about to meet. Under other circumstances, I would be proud to thank them publicly. To produce this work, nearly 50 people have shared their lifetime of insights and their aspirations for their communities and children with a stranger.

Stalwart friends and family were integral as well. Patti Reda mastered Excel; Terri Gallagher and my sister, Diana Lund, proved to be critical friends and sounding



boards; my 80-something mother, Catherine Ferrick, compiled a database of over 200 email addresses and operated my personal clipping service. Their dedication was exemplar and they are excellent representatives of the top ranks of lifelong learners. I hope that my sons, Chris and Ted, my technical and emotional support team, carry something from this project into their own futures.

It has been a true School, Academy, Community effort, as our program promotes.

Dan, none of this would have happened without your support and encouragement.

My hope is these lessons learned together, these epiphany moments, prove enough reward to keep this project on track.

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## CHAPTER I

### Educational Access: A High-leverage Issue along an Economic Fault Line

#### A Research Roadmap

Community-anchoring public schools are becoming endangered in the communities that most need the stability that a school offers. In Pennsylvania, these economically stressed communities appear to be predominantly rural, largely white areas and urban, largely minority neighborhoods. This capstone project will examine commonalities of the school closure threat in light of the persistent economic achievement gap. In this study, I focus on a typical Western Pennsylvania area which, for the purposes of anonymity, I call Middleton County, and one of its districts, Omega. Examined underlying causes threatening schools and hastening possible closures include the decline of overall and student population, the decline of the tax base, and the rise of charter and cyber charter schools, which siphons students and money from traditional public schools. Specifically, I explore these issues and offer improvement suggestions in five chapters:

- Chapter I details overlapping concerns in two demographics usually not seen as sharing convergent issues: rural, primarily white communities and urban, largely minority neighborhoods, including Omega. Despite dissimilar cultures, these two demographics share persistent economic challenges and, as a result, the threatened survival of their community-anchoring schools. Rural and inner city areas, especially in Western Pennsylvania, face common challenges in the overall loss of population,

particularly school-age population(Yan, 2009); budget cuts and financial realities at state and local levels (Chute, 2011; Coyne, 2014; Young, 2008); and growth in charter and cyber charter schools that draws students and money from traditional community-anchoring schools (Ravitch, 2013). This chapter introduces the economic divide and its ever-growing influence on the educational system, acknowledging that the economic achievement gap is twice that of the racial achievement gap and growing (Rothstein, 2004), and its significance.

- Chapter II examines how the forces threatening schools, such as population and economic loss, are shaping budgets and academic decisions in Middleton County and Omega, where an unfortunate warning bell of impending change is ringing. Besides looking at how Omega and Middleton County are operating within the wider national context, this section incorporates information from conversations with state lawmakers, current and past school officials, professional employees; data compiled from state and federal governments, research foundations, the intermediate unit; newspaper and other media reports. Information from surveys conducted with 10 residents of Omega allows insights into how residents see their district, including a backlash on the emphasis on sports—an extracurricular that conventional wisdom holds as a unifying activity for the city.
- Chapter III focuses on national and local connections between educational and economic systems, and explores the cultural, social and financial

significance of school choice. By reviewing academic and general literature, it conveys the impacts of school closures across the perspectives of School, university Academy and Community, a triangulation advocated by the ProDEL program to effectively put research into action. After examining the impact of high-powered philanthropic and political support of school choice, this work demonstrates that past practices used to consider and execute school closures fail to serve learners from marginalized communities. Grounded in social justice, this work views data through multidisciplinary lenses such as distributive social theory, Freirean Pedagogy of the Oppressed, theories of power and Catholic social thought.

A look at the interrelationship of politics and philanthropy with education shows how two large funding sources, government and foundations, support a system designed to privatize public education, essentially transferring wealth from distressed areas to the pockets of politically connected, wealthy players (Fang, 2011; McKnight, 2011; Ravitch, 2013; Saltman, 2009). The education cartel of philanthropist “reformers” supports schools modeled after mega-corporations whose leaders head foundations contributing to this effort, weakening the educational system while serving as a driver for change (Fang, 2011; McKnight, 2011; Ravitch, 2013; Saltman, 2009). While this is a legal process, it can tempt illegal use of public money for private gain, as is alleged in the PA Cyber Charter School (*U.S. v. Trombetta and Prence*,

2013) and seen in Agora Cyber Charter (Fang, 2011; Woodall, 2013).

Evidence shows that economic status determines access to and opportunity for education and that our nation is not providing social justice to the most distressed children, families and communities. Even in a world of choice, the options for distressed families and communities are limited or cheaper (McKinsey & Company, 2009; Scott, 2005).

The positive power of schools is illustrated in how they provide skills for navigating life's journey (Fullilove, 2004) and contribute beyond their core function of educating youth (Democracy Collaborative, n.d.; Hungerford & Wasserman, 2004; Initiative for a Competitive Inner City, 2011; Lyson, 2002; Peshkin, 1982; Relph, 1976). Attachment to place provides context for the critical, mutual relationship of schools and communities.

- Chapter IV presents a design for action to further involve and invest community residents in the fight for their schools and academic improvements (Langley et al., 2009), and to kick-start an involved and informed public, which is needed for the sake of education, economic improvement and democracy itself (Vollmer, 2010). Establishing a Networked Improvement Community (NIC)— a small group of parents, school, government and university representatives that share strategies to work toward common community and academic goals — in Omega could help residents to prioritize their educational challenges and mine collective wisdom to consider joint uses of excess capacity in the district, mounting

political pressure to change state funding, collaborating with other traditional public and charter public schools, and expanding adult education opportunities. Through the design for action, this capstone encourages school and government officials to meet with parents beyond school walls and council chambers, as in Vollmer's *Schools cannot do it alone* (2010), building relationships that include those typically marginalized in discussions about education. Improvement communities could contribute to the stabilization of the health, wealth and quality of life for students, residents and their region. This work also promotes awareness of the benefits of a school in a community by developing and providing a checklist for K-12 schools and districts to readily compile a financial and community impact statement. An impact report could build capacity by examining and quantifying contributions of schools to their communities (Alam, 2010; MacFarland, 1999). This alternative means of assessing a school's impact can help form value-based decisions as school merger and closure issues are considered and have K-12 schools recognized by residents as anchoring institutions.

- Chapter V suggests next steps that might be generated from this work in hope of ultimately affecting policy and applying change management tactics to help schools in distressed communities reconfigure assets and public confidence. Initial and ongoing efforts will focus on greater public awareness of and sensitivity to social and financial issues, the persistence of poverty through generations and other challenges facing community-



anchoring public schools in distressed communities. To improve public awareness, I intend to write and publish articles, sharing information from this and ongoing community-school studies. A common knowledge base shared with School, Academy, Community and government could provide a window on the issue of threatened schools, its scope and importance. Awareness is a first step; contemplation, then action are subsequent steps. Ideas might be housed in an online space that could encourage rural white and urban minority residents — those most likely to be directly affected by school closure — to share collective wisdom and experiences that could be mutually beneficial despite geographic and demographic differences. Ideas of factors to consider in event of school closure discussions as well as awareness of other alternatives are discussed.

### Converging Interests in Rural, Urban Communities Face Economic and Demographic Pressures

The pattern of school closures and divestment of communities creates and/or threatens to create “no-man’s-lands” that further isolate communities already living on the margins — making them insulated and invisible to potential residents and businesses, and so advancing their downward spirals. This pattern is illustrated in closures across the country (Dowdall, 2011) and in a case study of Duquesne, Pa., which lost its high school in post-industrial decline:

Forty years ago, it was inconceivable that Duquesne City High School would cease to exist . . . It was never a thought that Duquesne City School District should merge in the days when mergers were occurring all over the county and state. Viable enough to remain alone when numerous other districts in the

surrounding area would be consolidated, Duquesne Public School District was serving far more students in their Kindergarten through grade 12 at that time (Serenka, 2010, pp. 6-7).

Industrialization made Duquesne a “have” community that didn’t need to align with “have-nots.” Since then, the window of opportunity for mutually agreeable mergers has closed and Duquesne, now distressed, stands alone.

My interest in community-anchoring schools and their economic viability is both personal and professional. As a first-grader, I remember feeling pride and community belonging as I walked toward country school that would be the focus of my and my family’s lives for the next five years — not only for education, but for concerts, fun fairs and playground activities. I could walk home for lunch or use the new cafeteria, where many nice neighborhood ladies worked. As an adult, I would see this red brick pride of 1950s consolidation efforts knocked to the ground. This tiny enclave, with a steel mill and a distillery as the main employers during its boom years, operated at its best on a less grand scale than industrial metros such as Chicago, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Detroit and others. My Western Pennsylvania school, like those in Middleton, keenly reflects the economic boom-and-bust saga repeated and amplified in hundreds of rural communities, small towns and the sprawling metro areas.

Who could foresee that in the intervening years, manufacturing areas’ fortunes would shrink and sink? In hindsight, what was seen as a stable way of life was a mere decades-long boom. Without robust job opportunities, residents fled the area, leaving far fewer children to fill the many classrooms and buildings that once housed baby boomers. The size of my hometown’s current graduating class is half that of my class of 1974, a

downsizing trend reflected in many other post-industrial areas. Between 2007 and 2012, enrollments in almost half of the nation's biggest districts dropped steadily, "triggering school closings that have destabilized neighborhoods, caused layoffs of essential staff and concerns in many cities that the students who remain are some of the neediest and most difficult to educate" (Rich, 2012). Across the heartland, the decaying mill sites and brownfields, in tandem with the acreage and empty lots where industry and homes used to be, serve as symbolic scars of the man-made, industrial past once intrinsic to hundreds of communities.

In my hometown, my former elementary school has been demolished and one other elementary in the district closed, leaving only one common K-12 campus. As in my hometown, a common response to demographic and economic decline has been to close schools. Yet research shows that large-scale closures in metro areas have not produced the anticipated savings from closures (Dowdall, 2011). Not only have state and local governments cut education budgets, but a growing portion of funds that would have been available to traditional districts has been diverted to alternative, public charter schools that operate by special permission of the home school districts or state (Gentzel, 2002). Because state funding is based upon average daily membership, or attendance, the loss of students hijacks a school's future ability to obtain additional state funding.

The growth of charter schools, which is encouraged by the (public) government and fueled by lobbying, political contributions and powerful philanthropies, allows public money to become a private benefit. Charter schools have been held up by politicians and media as the current saviors of the educational system — despite a lack of evidence or even evidence to the contrary (Fang, 2011; McKnight, 2011; Ravitch, 2013; Saltman,

2009). As a result of this sweeping trend, federal and state governments are driving local school agendas, which were once engineered by local school boards and their local electorates. With distressed communities having few assets available, they are unable to support their students, many of them with high needs (Education Law Center, 2007). This existing power structure creates divestiture not only in lower-income individuals, but in entire communities —contributing to, not improving, the income achievement gap.

As a journalist with more than thirty years in the field, I have covered twenty school boards in Pennsylvania and Ohio, and chronicled the genesis of a cyber charter school from the vestiges of steel-town demise. While this money is rerouted from the educational system, continued inequitable funding structures punish people and communities for their poverty. The situation is exceptionally damaging, especially when a school — a symbol of autonomy, shared experience and visions of grander days (Peshkin, 1982) — is amputated or threatened, as has been across the state, in major metro areas such as Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, as well as in rural Warren County. Yet, Pennsylvania is far from alone in this dilemma, which is repeating in hundreds of locales nationwide, including Omega and Middleton County.

Omega, with approximately 10,000 people, has a relatively small impact on the world. Still, Omega is expected to be part of an educational and political system that has proselytized education as a means to greater democracy around the world. Yet the system has produced Omega and areas like it, essentially pockets with limited educational accessibility and opportunity within our First World nation. Something significant is poised to happen in the Omegas of America, but what? Will it be a step toward shrinking the economic achievement gap or will it be an all-out victory for the government,

corporate and foundation billions that are now driving the American educational agenda away from community-anchoring schools?

This work is not intended to provide answers that would neatly tie up a messy, complex situation. The answers need to emerge from the communities themselves. This work hopes to reveal how towns like Omega — and equally isolated towns in rural areas — have come to be at the center of an educational maelstrom. My educational agenda aspires to achieve enough “involvement” from residents, especially in urban, minority and rural, white communities, to deal with educational challenges and changes for the sake of their children and their communities. The work has been undertaken to help communities themselves determine the value of schools in their neighborhoods, access alternative options, and participate in and prepare their children for democracy — overall, shaping their own educational landscapes.

### Research Roadmap

This research progresses in five parts. The first chapter highlights the surrounding potential school closure and its threat to communities. It defines the issue by including attributes of a K-12 anchor institution and by providing context for the critical, mutual relationship of schools and communities through studies of attachment to place.

Detailing the economic achievement gap and the impacts of economic differentials across districts, the work also discusses population shifts and explores the cultural, social and financial impacts of school choice. By reviewing academic and general literature, it conveys the impacts of school closures across the perspectives of School, Academy and Community. After examining the impact of high-powered philanthropic and political support of school choice, this work demonstrates that past

practices employed to consider and execute school closures fail to serve learners from marginalized communities. Grounded in social justice, this work views data through multidisciplinary lenses such as distributive social theory, Freirean Pedagogy of the Oppressed, theories of power and Catholic social thought.

The second section illustrates these points through the example of the Omega School District in Middleton County, which rings an unfortunate warning bell of impending change. Besides looking at how Omega and Middleton County are operating within the wider national context, this section incorporates information from conversations with state lawmakers, current and past school officials, parents and professional employees; data compiled from state and federal governments, the intermediate unit and its associated school districts; newspaper and other media reports; and research foundation reports.

The third section includes a design for action to further involve and invest community residents in the fight for their schools and academic improvements, in hope of ultimately affecting policy and applying change management tactics to help schools in distressed communities reconfigure assets and public confidence. Initial and ongoing efforts will focus on greater public awareness of and sensitivity to social and financial issues, the persistence of poverty through generations and other challenges facing community-anchoring public schools in distressed communities. To improve public awareness, I intend to write and publish articles, sharing information from this and ongoing community-school studies. A common knowledge base shared with School, Academy, Community and government could provide a window on the issue of threatened schools, its scope and importance. This work also will include promoting

awareness of the benefits of a school in a community by developing and providing a checklist for K-12 schools and districts to readily compile a financial and community impact statement. As a tool, an impact report could build capacity by examining and quantifying contributions of schools to their communities. Additionally, it could offer alternative means to help form value-based decisions as school merger and closure issues are considered. Through its design for action, this capstone will encourage school and government officials to meet with parents beyond school walls and council chambers, as in Vollmer's *Schools cannot do it alone* (2010), building relationships that include those typically marginalized in discussions about education. These gatherings could lay the groundwork to initiate NIC (Langley et al., 2009) — small groups of parents, school, government and university representatives that share strategies to work toward common community and academic goals. Improvement communities could contribute to the stabilization of the health, wealth and quality of life for students, residents and their region. Their ideas might be housed in an online space that could encourage rural white and urban minority residents — those most likely to be directly affected by school closure — to share collective wisdom and experiences that could be mutually beneficial despite geographic and demographic differences.

The overarching purpose of this work is to support equity in education by increasing the awareness that access to educational opportunities for students and neighborhoods of all socioeconomic strata has become a high-leverage problem of social justice demanding attention from School, Academy and the Community — especially in a nation based upon democracy and “justice for all.” The impact of educational divestment is palpable in economically underserved areas, which typically bear the

burden of school closures. Upheaval from school closures, mainly in economically disadvantaged communities, hits hardest the very neighborhoods eviscerated by economic depression and a lack of job. These communities become invisible to others, insular and forgotten. Crime, hopelessness and isolation become byproducts in these communities. While the idea of creating a new type of ghetto might keep problems contained far from the “have” communities, this short-sighted reaction sets a foundation for an explosion of future generations who are dependent on society for welfare, health care, food programs and housing either in the public realm or in the prison system. If society does not find the space to provide access to mainstream values and rewards for marginalized people, they are only left to create their own societies outside the mainstream. They have no reason to participate in our democracy. As a result, unabated educational divestment also will critically impact “have” communities, which will find themselves bearing the economic burden of having fostered “have-not” communities.

Not only does social justice form the basis for investing in this issue, it provides a theoretical and practical foundation to economically integrate our society for the good of democracy, for the good of national, regional and individual economic well-being and to strengthen communities. The intersection of theories and practicality drive this capstone. I have two sons, both Middleton public school graduates. One son graduated from a top-tier, Catholic university with a secondary math education degree, an instructional technology specialist certification and a business certificate. He plans to migrate east, where his girlfriend (a Middleton County, first-generation college graduate) will head to optometry school. For them, the migration represents personal opportunity; for Middleton, it represents ongoing brain drain.



The other son, a doctoral student in a STEM field at a highly ranked research university, graduated first in his high school class and attended a top-50 national university on an undergraduate academic scholarship. He was among the small percentage of his college peers who had attended public high school. When I would call him, we would have whispered conversations. He was in the library every night; why? “Not only do I have to learn what they’re teaching in class, I have to learn what everybody else already knows.” He had good teachers — teachers who came in early in the morning to work with him so he could fit nine subjects into an eight-period day, teachers who cared professionally and personally about him, and a supportive family. In Middleton County, he was a “have.” In the wider, more competitive world, he was a “have-not.”

What faces the kids who don’t have this kind of support? What faces the rest of our Middleton County students, those in Pittsburgh’s inner city and Pennsylvania’s remote northern tier?

### Disparate Investments Equal Disparate Outcomes: The Economic Achievement Gap Spares No One

“Although education is a major determinant of one’s lot in life, one’s lot in life is also a determinant of education,” concludes a policy paper of the Hamilton Project, an arm of the Brookings Institute (Greenstone, Harris, Li, Looney, & Patashnik, 2012, pp. 1-3). Our nation, led by the “have” elites, ignores data that consistently show “children’s skills can so clearly be predicted by their race and economic status” that it challenges the national illusion of democracy and equal opportunity (Rothstein, 2004, p. 1).

Misleadingly, these students, plus their schools and teachers, have been tagged as failing.

Income has replaced race as the greatest predictor of educational success (Reardon, 2011; Ravitch, 2013). In the last 50 years, educational attainment gaps between rich and poor have doubled the achievement gap between white and black students (Reardon, 2011). As the income gap has widened since the 1970s, it also has been reflected in a 30 to 40 percent larger achievement gap for those born in 2000 than those born 25 years prior (Reardon, 2011).

Amid the testing zeitgeist, even states with higher overall test scores do not appear to have smaller income achievement gaps (McKinsey & Company, 2009), testifying to the persistence, even the growth of this issue. The income gap does not grow or narrow between kindergarten and later years in school (Reardon, 2011), creating a line of demarcation between “haves” and “have-nots” — and illustrating the impact of income over at least two generations (Rothstein, 2004). The achievement gap, or differences in proficiency levels on standardized tests, most often is referenced by ethnic and racial subgroups. Differences remain between black and white student achievement levels, according to standardized tests results (which I do not support as indicators of learning but cite because of their widely accepted use as a benchmark) and other parameters (Rothstein, 2004). Without minimizing or discounting the persistence, longevity and significance of racial gaps and the overlap between race and socioeconomic status, my work focuses on the economic gap as related to educational access and opportunity — a commonality between many urban and rural schools.

Leaders who seek “no excuses” fail to acknowledge that “the academic achievement of lower-economic class children will, on average, almost inevitably be less than that of children from middle-class homes. The probability of this reduced

achievement increases as the characteristics of lower-social-class families accumulate,” with manifestations of academic effects ranging from poorer vision to poorer nutrition, likelihood of asthma and exposure to smoke, and less likelihood of adequate pediatric and oral health care (Rothstein, 2004, p. 2). This scenario describes Omega, which has been the lowest of Middleton County’s test scores for at least three decades. Despite improvements, it continues to hug the bottom of the county’s rankings. Omega, one of the poorest areas in the state, has one of the county’s largest minority populations. High-poverty areas are described as having 40 percent of the population living in poverty (Lippman, Burns, McArthur, & NCES, 1996). In Omega, 80 percent of students receive free or reduced-price lunches (Omega Superintendent, personal communication, January 10, 2014).

Omega is far from alone in the poverty-educational attainment cycle. While urban areas are overall more educated than other locales, they have “areas of concentrated economic malaise,” encompassing 19 percent of U.S. total poverty and an alarming 31 percent of minority poverty (Initiative for a Competitive Inner City, 2011). Only nine percent of freshmen in the top colleges are from the bottom half of the socioeconomic distribution (McKinsey & Company, 2009), illustrating the gaping hole in the long-held premise of bootstrap success. Higher education and income levels affect the quality of life for current and subsequent generations: whether individuals marry, how long they live, whether their children grow up inside two parent-households (Greenstone, Harris, Li, Looney, & Patashnik, 2012). Inequity in education lays the foundation for inequity in life, circumscribing the tradition of America as a land of achievement and opportunity (Greenstone, Harris, Li, Looney, & Patashnik, 2012).

While rural areas might not seem to have much in common with urban areas such as Omega, poverty is likewise endemic. The nation's 11 million rural students are more likely to live in poverty than those in any other geography and only 27 percent of these students go to college (Smarick, 2014). Smarick also said:

Rural students are at a significant disadvantage due to factors beyond their control — distance from services, state caps and prohibitions against charters, shortages of highly effective teachers, transportation and facilities challenges, and even federal policies that inadvertently raise roadblocks. Rural education is indeed, the next frontier in American school reform ... (with one goal being to) bridge the distance between students and their schools” (2014, pp. iii-v).

Clearly, both rural schools and urban schools share a stake in how the nation should invest to overcome what can be seen as an “education debt” instead of an achievement gap, combating social problems such as crime, low productivity, low wages and low labor force participation (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 5).

Societies, as well as individuals born into an environment of poverty, pay dearly for this debt. Yet society and its political agenda-setters have not taken a long-term strategy that could pay upfront for the educational debt that poverty accrues, stemming the social and financial pain surrounding this issue. Half of those born into poverty live in persistent poverty their entire lives. Poverty overshadows the lives of those born into it, with links to behavioral problems, lower IQ scores, lower academic achievement, lower levels of working memory and toxic stressors associated with poverty that may impair brain functioning:

If poverty and its associated stressors impair children's brain development and impede their future success, then poor children and approaches for helping them should be prominent in the national debate. Resources aimed at improving the well-being of poor children and their families today could have large future payoffs; the estimated economic cost of child poverty is more than \$500 billion a year (Ratcliffe & McKernan, 2012, pp. 1-2).

A major investment in the education of "have-not" children could have a significant public payoff, with at least a \$7 savings on incarceration, welfare and public health care costs for each \$1 invested in preschool (Grunewald & Roinick, 2003). Being born into poverty is such a powerful "accident of birth" that half of all instances of inequitable lifetime earnings in America are decided by age 18, according to Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman (2008). In regard to this finding, Ravitch (2013) observed: "this is bad not only for the individuals but for the society which loses their potential contributions" (2013, p. 231).

Socioeconomics affect more than academic learning; they mold critical "non-cognitive skills," such things as readiness for learning, self-discipline and motivation (Ravitch, 2013, p. 231). Socioeconomic-based differences in child-rearing methods shape how children learn to function. College-educated parents spend about an hour more with their children every day than high school-educated parents do—and the gap is largest in the crucial first three years of life (Brooks, 2012). While parental involvement is critical to a child's academic achievement, so are the ways in which parental involvement occurs. Higher-income parents prompt the development of thought processes and an awareness of choice in children. Lower-income parents more often prompt obedience rather than

options. The educational levels of parents and, sometimes, of grandparents who are raising a child, can affect a child's learning as well as the differences afforded by living in a good neighborhood, cumulative health disparities across generations and long-seated wealth and asset disparities. Health and wealth factors play significant roles in shaping what — and even more important, *how* — children are taught to think, act and learn (Rothstein, 2004, pp. 19-33).

As well as time investment, cash investment by economic stratification also is significant. Upper-income parents spend \$5,300 more inflation-adjusted dollars a year on their children's extracurriculars, tutoring and enrichment than they did 40 years ago compared with merely a \$480 inflation-adjusted increase for lower-class parents. While kids from the bottom and top quartiles of earners participated in roughly the same number of activities in 1972, "Today, it's a chasm" (Brooks, 2012, para.7). In a child's life, richer kids already run the show, being twice as likely to play after-school sports, most often being captains of their teams and enjoying activities from theater to religious groups. Extracurricular activities develop non-cognitive skills, or "character traits," such as perseverance, self-confidence, self-discipline, punctuality, communication skills, social responsibility, and the ability to work with others and resolve conflicts (Rothstein, 2004, pp.26-27). Social class affects academic learning — the readiness to learn, the inquiry methods, the development of critical analytic skills (Rothstein, 2004). These skills are so critical, and generations must pass before cumulative differences in non-cognitive characteristics are overcome (Rothstein, 2004).

Future generations are projected to have a wider stratification gap to cross. While white residents of various socioeconomic strata shared neighborhoods, ball games and

other leisure activities 50 years ago, today's consumer elitism has eliminated many once-common intersections (Murray, 2012). A counter-narrative from an African-American community from that same time frame tells a similar story of "every social class ... packed together" (Fullilove, 2004, p. 98). As a new upper class evolves with a lifestyle and tastes "apart from mainstream America, a new underclass is framed by "withdrawal from America's core cultural institutions," creating "a self-reinforcing loop" of social and class isolation (Murray, 2012, C1).

Pittsburgh's Hill District presents a prime example of social and class isolation, as it was isolated from Downtown by the development of the Civic Arena in the 1960s. Resident and former councilman Sala Udin said development was done "without regard to ... the marginalization that would occur because people so feared even entering the community" (Fullilove, 2004, p. 175). That type of fear, pitting community outsiders against community insiders, helps to keep neighborhoods and towns like Omega insular. Yet calamities such as urban renewal and school closure continually reshape society, scattering its members (Fullilove, 2004). School closures threaten to place lower-income children in larger-scale, more impersonal, environments that harm academic and critical non-cognitive skills — the exact opposite of what research suggests should be done — in an attempt to save money.

Social justice is inherent in the issue of educational access and school closures, given the interplay of poverty, access and success as viewed through Freire's lenses of equity, cultural context and inclusiveness, and Smith's distributive theory involving perpetuating income inequity. Smith proposed using taxes from both rich and poor "to provide public resources that will mostly benefit the poor" — most important, public

schooling (Fleischacker, 2004, p. 63). In the 1700s, Smith described education “as a way of providing the poor with the capacity for moral and political judgment” (Fleischacker, 2004, p. 63). Distributive social justice serves as a foundation for democracy — but requires equitable funding and access to provide education that includes marginalized children and neighborhoods in the mainstream. Otherwise, poverty leads to pessimism and detachment. For example, social trust plummeted between 1975 and 1995 among the poorest third of young Americans — the very demographic failed by the major social institutions of family, friends, church, school and community. “As a result, poorer kids are less likely to participate in voluntary service work that might give them a sense of purpose and responsibility. Their test scores are lagging. Their opportunities are more limited” (Brooks, 2012). Yet only by eliminating the opportunity gap will the achievement gaps be eliminated (Ravitch, 2013).

#### National and State Issues: Shrinking Student Base, Many Facilities

Not only is the life of community-anchoring schools dependent on what we think we can afford, but who can afford it — and for which students? In the struggle to balance population shifts and fiscally responsible school operations, public school closures grew nationwide from in 2000-2001 from fewer than 800 to 1,069 in the 2010-2011 school year — directly affecting 279,592 students, 18,854 teachers, plus other employees, in metropolitan areas including Washington, D.C., Chicago, Philadelphia and Tucson, Ariz. (Banchemo, 2012). School-age population declined by 11 percent in Philadelphia, 21 percent in Pittsburgh and a whopping 32 percent in Detroit (Dowdall & Warner, 2013). Pittsburgh Public Schools’ 2006 rash of closings eliminated about 10,000 of 13,700 excess seats, (Dowdall & Warner, 2013) — but still, in 2011, after the closures, only 70



percent of the district's seats were filled. Philadelphia has 70,000 school seats — nearly one-third of its capacity — empty (Dowdall & Warner, 2013).

A growing number of emptier buildings are expected to be seen across the state, primarily in Western Pennsylvania but also in the central part of the state. Excess capacity is expected to become an issue in both inner city and rural areas. In Pennsylvania, nearly half (235) of the state's 500 public school districts are rural, accounting for about 26 percent of the students (Center for Rural Pennsylvania, n.d.). On the whole, rural schools are expected to be among Pennsylvania's most severely underenrolled, with 82 percent of the state's rural secondary schools projected to have severe underenrollment by 2019 (Yan, 2009). More than half of the rural schools are expected to operate at 25 percent or more below facility capacity by 2019 (Yan, 2009). In the 24 counties of Western Pennsylvania, about 90 percent of the high schools and 70 percent of elementary schools are projected to be underenrolled by 2019; in Central Pennsylvania, over half of the elementary and more than 80 percent of the secondary schools are likely to be underenrolled by 2019 (Yan, 2009). But gains are anticipated in affluent secondary schools that have 20 percent or less of low-income students (Yan, 2009).

The stratification continues — and is expected to blossom.

## CHAPTER II

### Meet Middleton County and Omega: A Microcosm of Educational Inequity

Middleton County, Pennsylvania, provides an excellent opportunity to study the issue of community-anchoring schools — primarily because it initially appears so typical. It provides a chance to examine adjustments to financial stress because of the dwindling purchasing power of taxpayers in distressed districts as well as the reduced number of taxpayers and declining school enrollment within small towns, suburban and rural areas — the type of districts most common across the state, especially in severely declining, once-industrial Western Pennsylvania. Yet, Middleton County is textured with a growing charter and cyber charter school enrollment — and a loss in student population that matches online charter school enrollment.

Middleton County residents include those who work daily in the region’s biggest city as well as those who rarely venture into the city, so it is both a commuter community and a community of residents who rarely leave their immediate environs. Sports teams at all levels provide community identity and unity. Middleton County was a powerhouse of steel and industrial complexes springing from World War II’s heavy defense industries. Middleton’s residents tend to be less educated than the state and national average, despite having 16 institutions of higher education within an hour’s drive.

Middleton residents also earn less than the average Pennsylvanians and Americans, but have a lower poverty rate than the state and national averages — indicating that more people are working poor. For a two-adult, two-child family, an annual income of \$44,470 was considered “working poor” in 2010 — only \$87 less than the annual Middleton County median income (Roberts, Povich, & Mather, 2011-2012).

Middleton as a whole is struggling, but of all of its municipalities, Omega is the most left behind (see chart).

Table 1

*A Compilation of Key Economic Indicators for City, County, State and U.S.*

<u>KEY ECONOMIC INDICATORS</u>				
	Omega	Middleton County	PA	U.S.
Population 2012	9,351	170,245	12,764,475	313,873,685
Bachelor degree or higher	16.30%	20.90%	27.00%	28.50%
Household median income	\$32,146	\$48,311	\$52,267	\$53,046
Poverty rate	19.80%	12.40%	13.10%	14.90%

*Table 1: Note* Compiled from U.S. Census QuickFacts of key economic indicators for city, county, state and U.S. To maintain the anonymity of the areas involved, specific sources of retrieved information are not listed.

Job stability is particularly significant because Middleton, like many areas in the state (Trends in Rural PA, 2004), is still reeling from widespread mill closures in the 1980s. Besides losing giant employers that delivered livelihoods for a wide range of skill levels, the area forfeited the talents and volunteer leadership provided by the large numbers of civic-minded managerial and union leaders. In the wake of mill closings, scores of ancillary businesses, from bars to shoe shops and clothing stores, vanished. Human and business capital has not been replenished; economic opportunity has not rebounded, remaining depressed as in so many other industrial towns.

Public education is the single largest category of all state and local government expenditures (Matthews, 2010). Like other Pennsylvania taxpayers, the largest

investments in Middleton are in schools, with school real estate taxes at least double the amount paid to either local municipalities or to the county itself, according to tax bills from two districts.

The cyber charter movement initially provided hope for educational and economic opportunity in Middleton; with online education, the location of Middleton would not be a detriment. As a reporter documenting the birth of the cyber charter movement, I believed, like so many others, that the nascent cyber school movement held great promise for individualizing education and creating a new model for education reform in the 1980s. However, most cyber charter schools have not lived up to their promises of a solid education (Niederberger, 2013), except for the most motivated students (who also would do well in brick-and-mortar schools) and those with tremendous parental support. Additionally, charter schools, whether online or brick-and-mortar, can afford some level of selectivity, even though they are public schools. Their rosters can be filled so no additional students are admitted or manipulated so that students can be sent back to their home schools. For instance, the expulsion rate in the District of Columbia charter system is 72 times that of traditional public schools (Ravitch, 2013). This level of selectivity also tends to exclude students with disabilities, who are more likely to remain in their home schools (Ravitch, 2013) — a scenario that also impacts test scores, the criterion most cited in rating the effectiveness of schools, as well as the need to provide for higher-cost special education.

### Powerful Numbers

With the population declines, not a single district in Middleton County gained or retained student enrollment levels from 1981-1982 to 2011-2012. Only one district

showed mere single-digit losses but by 2013-2014, it too, had reached double digit losses (*Enrollment workbook*, n.d.; *Third day enrollment 2013-2014* Middleton Intermediate Unit XXX, n.d.). An enrollment recap shows that between 1981-1982 and 2001-20102, Middleton County lost 11,000 students. That is the approximate equivalent of:

- The county's current five largest school districts
- The county's current nine smallest school districts
- The total (statewide) enrollment of the state's largest cyber charter school.

Middleton County has escaped a rash of school closures since 2006-2007 although a rural elementary school in a suburban district closed, a rural elementary school in one of the county's smallest districts closed, a small-town elementary school closed before a merger; after the merger, another small-town elementary school closed and the former junior-senior high became a middle school (Middleton Intermediate Unit, personal communication, April 13, 2012). This merger, however, retained at least one operational school in the smaller and less economically advantaged of the merging districts.

In addition, two elementary school closures are pending for 2014-2015 in the Beta School District, which will add an elementary wing for 350 primary and Head Start students at its middle school, creating a single campus (Utterback, 2013). In Omega, the middle school closed, and the high school and middle school combined.

### Meet Omega

Omega, a town rich in tradition and toughness, now faces perhaps the toughest task of all: transforming itself in conjunction with — and despite — a past steeped in

economic disparity, hierarchical power structures, and decades of racism and ethnic bigotry with some intersections of social harmony. In the early 1900s, amid the flood of immigrants and manpower, the belching furnaces whose products girded America for battle and for growth felt like a forever way of life in Omega, as it did in many of the nation's powerhouses. Instead, it was a decades-long boom that permanently imprinted the town, the environment and the generations to come (Gallagher, 2013). Prosperity lasted long enough to build solid lives and lull a populace into corporate paternalism, with company support providing for schools, roads, bands, semi-pro sports teams and marvelous choirs. The last 8,000 of a workforce once nearly twice that number were put out of work when the plant closed in the 1980s (Inman, n.d.). Since then, the town has been drained of population, businesses, school enrollment, even losing the community hospital built by steelworkers' contributions (Gurman & Templeton, 2008). Much of its vibrancy evaporated, except for Friday night high school football, which fills its legendary stadium (Price, 2011).

For many decades, Omega and the mill essentially were one and the same. The mill's police, who served as the town's police, could make the brutal Coal & Iron Police look reasonable. For example in the 1920s, they made an example of a man who attended meetings to unionize by spiriting him away. Only after years of work by a judge and gubernatorial candidate was the man found in an insane asylum across the state (D. Inman, personal communication, January 10, 2014). A black man was killed on the pretext that he was robbing mill foremen and superintendents in the housing plan reserved exclusively for mill supervisors, where blacks and certain ethnic groups were not allowed (Casebeer, 1995). Visitors arriving by train would have to provide their

business and destination information to police or they wouldn't be allowed to disembark. Police even escorted a young Italian boy away from his friend's house in supervisors' plan, saying he could see his friend only in school (D. Inman, personal communication, January 10, 2014). It was easy to keep track of who was going where in this town built on the basis of segregation by ethnicity and race, (Inman, n.d.). This former company town, combined with a rugged topography of hills and valleys that naturally isolate parts of the city, remains largely segregated.

With the industrial hub gone, residents from neighboring communities have no reason to take the exit ramp, no reason to think about insular Omega, its boarded-up buildings and sorry Main Street. One of the best school districts in the nation in the 1930s (D. Inman, personal communication, January 10, 2014), Omega is now among the 20 percent least successful districts across the state. A small, urban district with a large African-American population and among the 2 percent highest concentrations of poverty in the state's 500 districts (Pennsylvania Budget and Policy Center, 2013), it is located amid a majority white mix of town-centered and rural schools.

Omega staved off being declared a financially distressed district by the state auditor general's office until November 2013. This status, tied to the district's poor fund balance (DePasquale, 2013), is considered an early warning system to identify struggling districts and municipalities and makes them eligible for state oversight. Although stimulus money and state funding have helped the district to balance past budgets, the state has essentially said that it cannot cover the district's current deficit of nearly \$1 million. Coincidentally, \$1 million is also the amount the district must pay for the tuition charges to charter schools. With an overlay of historically engineered residential

segregation (Inman, n.d.), and the financial and social liabilities of Omega, more prosperous adjacent districts with higher test scores have repeatedly rejected Omega's entreaties to merge (Omega Superintendent, personal communication, January 10, 2014).

Now the district faces cutting its already bare-bones budget while providing services that children in poverty need, such as nurses and full-day kindergarten (Duncan & Murnane, 2011; Rothstein, 2004). Many houses in Omega are falling apart in a town where the median housing value is \$68,800 (United State Census Bureau, 2014a). Some families' credit rating is so bad that they cannot qualify for the cable program intended to bring Internet into the homes of the economically disadvantaged (Omega Superintendent, personal communication, January 10, 2014). With a median income 60 percent of the national average (United States Census Bureau, 2014a), tough times are normalized in Omega.

#### A Poor Formula, a Poor Support System: The Educational Impact of Money

Deep-seated poverty has a plethora of educational implications. Using free and reduced lunch eligibility as a marker for poverty, on average, eligible students' learning is about two years behind that of average ineligible students (McKinsey & Company, 2009, p. 40). While outstanding individuals may excel and inspire others, on average, lower-income students never catch up; the learning gap persists over their lifetimes (McKinsey & Company, 2009, p. 40). Many Omega parents and family elders are lukewarm about the idea of their children or grandchildren graduating high school, let alone the thought of college education. After all, education did little for them (Omega Superintendent, personal communication, January 10, 2014). Keeping Omega insular and



isolated in a county of a largely white, small-town and rural majority, is convenient. But it is no longer affordable.

In analyzing Omega's \$928,556 deficit for the fiscal year ending in June 2012, (historically, not its largest deficit but a repeated occurrence for several years, previously resolved with state and/or federal help), the state auditor general report found the financial decline "was due primarily to (the district's) failure to control expenditures in accordance with its general fund budget" (DePasquale, 2013, p. 6). Yet the report noted that some financial problems were "out of the district's control" (Ciccocioppo, 2013, para.5). The state applauded the district's money-saving innovations (Ciccocioppo, 2013), such as sharing a business manager with a neighboring district at only \$1,000 a month, plus reciprocal expertise from Omega's technical director when needed (Omega Superintendent, personal communication, January 10, 2014). In a budget with 85 percent of its costs fixed by needs such as physical maintenance, debt service and labor, the Omega Superintendent believes the state's technical advisor cannot provide many more suggestions to cut costs.

Beyond Omega, the auditor general "noted that recent audits of other districts in the commonwealth showed similar situations," (Ciccocioppo, 2013, para.7). Yet, the same state government supports a funding formula that allows a single cyber charter school to spend \$3.5 million on advertising alone in 2013-2014 (Pennsylvania Cyber Charter School, 2012). A legislator notes that Pennsylvania stands alone as the only state without a uniform formula for funding basic education (State Lawmaker, personal communication, February 13, 2014).

What will happen to Omega and the school it renovated about five years ago? What will happen to the children inside the buildings? How can Omega — which already buses its high schools students to a neighboring school for advanced classes the first periods of the day, which now offers only one foreign language class, which is struggling to continue to climb up the state test score ladder to retain funding levels (Omega Superintendent, personal communication, January 10, 2014) — balance educational needs and educational dollars? Omega’s Superintendent thinks twice about closing the school for snow days, knowing that children of poverty will at least be warm, safe and have meals at school, asking, “Is that a terrible way to run a school?” Embarrassed by cutting full-day kindergarten to half-day in 2012-2013 for financial reasons, knowing that research shows the foundational gold standard of education lies in the preschool years, Omega’s Superintendent reinstated full-day kindergarten in 2013-2014 and would happily trade the senior year of high school for required early kindergarten to start an even stronger foundation earlier (Omega Superintendent, personal communication, January 10, 2014). With health issues inside the district of more than 1,000 students ranging from required vaccinations to teen pregnancies, Omega’s Superintendent cannot advocate cutting back to the state minimum of one nurse for the entire district. The district retains one nurse in each of its two buildings (Omega Superintendent, personal communication, January 10, 2014). The superintendent knows that some townspeople criticize these administrative decisions, particularly when made by a leader with no doctorate and no teaching experience (Omega Mayor, February 6, 2014; Omega Superintendent, personal communication, January 10, 2014). In hand are a corporate background, an MBA, a letter of superintendency and a long work history in the district,

which is also the superintendent's alma mater — no small factor in his commitment to the school, despite the stresses of the job (Omega Superintendent, personal communication, January 10, 2014).

### Community Input: How People See Themselves and the Educational Landscape

Adhering to the belief that community input is critical to this work, I sought the perspectives of more than 45 people, through individual face-to-face interviews supplemented by email correspondence, reaching across the boundaries of School, Academy and Community. The subjects included a higher education administrator, researchers; university faculty members and staff; parents; current and retired K-12 administrators; government experts; K-12 teachers and a principal; local and state elected officials; educational agencies; professional association representatives; foundation and agency researchers; historians and librarians; community activists; and local reporters. Additionally, I gleaned historical information and quantitative data through public records and news reports.

### Methodology and Instruments

Quantitative data in this work included the size and demographics of the districts' and county's changes in enrollment, including charter and cyber charter enrollment; funding issues and perceived future funding issues; changes anticipated in the face of declining student enrollment; and funding. Qualitative data employed "snowball sampling," a multi-stage technique that involved asking several participants and officials to refer others who would be interested in discussing this education-based topic (Neuman, 2007, p. 144). The overall purpose of the qualitative data is to find "a search for general statements about relationships and underlying themes," according to Strauss

& Corbin (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 154), which in this case, focused on community priorities for education. Given Guba and Lincoln's theory on multiple realities as viewed from multiple perspectives (1989), I have engaged a range of stakeholders and experts to integrate their thoughts with quantitative data, considering:

- Truth value, a quality not determined by the researcher in advance but the researcher's confidence "with the truth of the findings based upon the research design, informants, and context"
- Transferability, achieved "when the findings fit into contexts outside the study situation that are determined by the degree of similarity"
- Consistency, or repeatability, which allows the researcher "to learn from the informants rather than control for them"
- Neutrality, which allows findings to be "a function solely of the informants and condition of the research and not of other biases, motivations, and perspectives" (Krefting, 1991, pp. 215-217).

While many joined the discussion, the anonymous, confidential interviews around the financial, academic and community status of the Omega district and its interactions with nearby charter and other public schools, and the possibility of closure or merger were the most in-depth and revealing. In Omega, the participants included 10 community members, ranging in age from 26 to 68: five African-American and five white; five male and five female. All graduated high school or the international equivalent or received a GED; one graduated from community college, one graduated from college, two held advanced college degrees. One had been incarcerated. Their interaction with school districts ranged from picking up children or attending one community event at the school

to weekly volunteering. The number of children in a participant's families ranged from 0-4. Educational placements for the children, even within one family, ranged and included homeschooling, full-time public school, brick-and-mortar charter school and the county's career-technical (vo-tech) center for the usual half day off-site and the rest of the day in face-to-face and online classes at Omega High. Three participants were schooled in the Omega district themselves; one immigrated to the U.S. within the last five years, so was schooled outside the country. Community members, as well as school, civic and government officials, were provided a consent form explaining the research purpose and its voluntary, confidential and anonymous nature (see Appendix B). Nine interviews took place in various locations in Omega and neighboring communities, including coffee shops and another business, and public buildings, at the convenience of the subjects. One interview was by telephone, as was preferred by the subject. The length of the semi-structured interviews ranged from three to 90 minutes, and answers were recorded by notes. Questions varied with the individuals, based upon their personal interactions with the school district, such as whether they, their children or grandchildren attended school in the district, their thoughts about the academic programs in the district, their thoughts on the sports and extracurricular programs, the possibility of a merger or closure of Omega schools, their thoughts on the economic status of the district, and the relationship of the school with parents and other residents. While parents seemed aware of their option to send their children or grandchildren to charter school, including a brick-and-mortar school less than 15 minutes from Omega's high school, most children were being educated in the home district. Select study participants were asked to review transcripts for accuracy and indicate any needed revisions in a member-checking procedure (Lincoln

and Guba, 1989) as well as to guard against respondents' concerns of information being misinterpreted or miscommunicated.

These conversations fell into five broad themes, focusing upon: concern for the impacts of existing population and financial declines; the quality of education in Omega specifically and Middleton County generally; community values of provincialism, independence and insularity that impact education and Middleton's overall resistance to mergers, whether government, police or school; the supremacy of sports, particularly football, and its impact on stifling other interests and extracurriculars; the heavy weight of status quo, alongside the importance of tradition and a longing for what once was; and a feeling of inability to overcome obstacles seen in the way of educational change.

My overall impression from these discussions is that community members do not understand the impact of climbing charter school enrollment on the local district classes and funding. If they do grasp the financial and demographic impact, the overwhelming priority is concern about one's own children. Another consensus was that current high-stakes testing does not serve children, schools and communities; that the test-funding-reputation triangle exists at the expense of deep learning and complex thinking skills; that the way parents and students value — or dismiss — education is determined by income and educational level at home.

At least three participants considered the elementary school in Omega superior, but concerns surfaced, even by Omega school and municipal officials, about the rigor of high school preparation, limits on academic offerings and graduation rates. An additional concern from school and community officials and parents themselves is that parents are “not as involved” in school as they are with sports. Yet, there still is respect for the jobs

that teachers perform and a feeling that the greater community — Omega residents without children in the district as well as residents across Middleton — stereotype Omega’s low academic reputation.

### Sports: Unifying or Divisive?

Despite differing confidence levels in the administration and the district, one unifier among townspeople remains sports, although a backlash against sports seems to be fomenting. Football particularly remains the major draw of Omega, presenting a double-edged sword. Omega has won a national reputation as the cradle for National Football League players (Omega Mayor, personal communication, February 6, 2014; Price, 2011). Success has turned select former Omegans into rich men who return home with fancy cars and bling, a dream both children and their parents can latch onto as a ticket out of their dreary environment. But Omega residents don’t celebrate other successes, like the leadership of a former U.S. Surgeon General, the talent of a world renowned composer and any number of corporate and military leaders (Omega Mayor, personal communication, February 6, 2014). The statement that only sports matter, and of these, football is king, reads like Gospel across Middleton County, particularly in Omega. For some residents, though, this point is increasingly open for debate, prompting questions about what the girls have and why sciences aren’t stronger (Resident H, personal communication, March 15, 2014), and why the band is diminished and school instruments are no longer available (Resident D, personal communication, March 27, 2014). Yet another sees the competitiveness portrayed on the athletic field as action related to anger in the community (Resident I, personal communication, March 15, 2014).

Residents' opinions run the gamut of how education should be delivered in their town. One believes the town would be nothing without its school (Resident I, personal communication, March 15, 2014); another who enjoys the responsive, small-school atmosphere voices concerns about academic rigor in high school (Resident C, personal communication, February 22, 2014).

One resident promotes the generally unpalatable idea of a merger that could offer more academic and job-oriented options (Resident D, personal communication, March 27, 2014). If there were a merger, what neighboring district, without additional incentive, would assume the liability of educating the children of this financially distressed area, accepting the likelihood that Omega's scores, the lowest in Middleton, would drop their cumulative state testing scores? How would this impact both funding and reputation? A former board member notes that mergers that could lower a district's test scores and reputation are clearly off the table for local elected board members who could risk their re-elections (Former Epsilon Board Member, personal communication, January 10, 2014). Not insignificant are cultural differences. What middle-class parents would want their children in the socioeconomic cultural climate that their Omega friends would offer? These piercing issues for Omega and its neighbors, as well as for hundreds of schools across Pennsylvania, inflict superficial wounds compared to the scars caused by structures and systems long in place.



## CHAPTER III

### Ties that Bind Educational and Economic Systems

#### Scarce Resources: Traditional Schools Contend with Charters for Children and Money

The nation's first charter school opened in Minnesota in 1991; by 2010-2011, 41 states and the District of Columbia had established charter schools under the law. Maine had approved a law for charter schools but did not have any charter schools operating. Schools without laws allowing charter schools are Alabama, Kentucky, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont, Washington and West Virginia (National Institute of Education Sciences, n.d.).

Table 2

*A Table of U.S. Charter School Growth Over a Decade, 2000-2011*

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<b><u>U.S. CHARTER SCHOOL GROWTH</u></b>		
<b>Year</b>	<b>Number of schools</b>	<b>Charter school enrollment</b>
2000-2001	1,993	448,343
2010-2011	5,000	1,780,000

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*Table 2.* A table of charter school growth. Based on *Fast Facts: Charter Schools*, in National Center for Education Statistics, n.d. Retrieved March 10, 2014, from <http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=30>.

The trend of increasing charter school enrollment is growing across Pennsylvania as well as in Middleton County. In Pennsylvania as in many other states, local districts approve the opening of charter schools within their boundaries and the charter is up for review every three to five years (National Institute of Education Sciences, n.d.).

Decisions on charter applications may be appealed at the state level. To be approved, charter schools substantiate how they “will enhance student learning opportunities and

offer substantively unique and innovative educational options for the community”  
(Pennsylvania Department of Education, n.d.).

A year after Pennsylvania enacted its charter school law in 1997, a school superintendent in what we will call Delta, Middleton County, received a \$25,000 grant to put together a plan to address its educational crisis. Delta’s charter school was distinctive because it offered all of its classes online, through technology newly available for K-12. This provided convenience, flexible scheduling and a novel delivery to meet the needs of students and parents, tapping pent-up demand among home schoolers and homebound students (Ravitch, 2013).

Some charter school scenarios have allowed public money to flow through the system, but not return to the public (Fang, 2011; McKnight, 2011; Ravitch, 2013), and Delta’s charter school was not immune to this process, reporting \$65 million in total assets, offset with only \$7 million in liabilities (Delta Cyber Charter School, 2012). The charter system provided economically and emotionally worn Delta with new vitality and jobs, upgraded facilities and rekindled community pride. It provided redemption for the underdog. It provided hope and met success—at least financially.

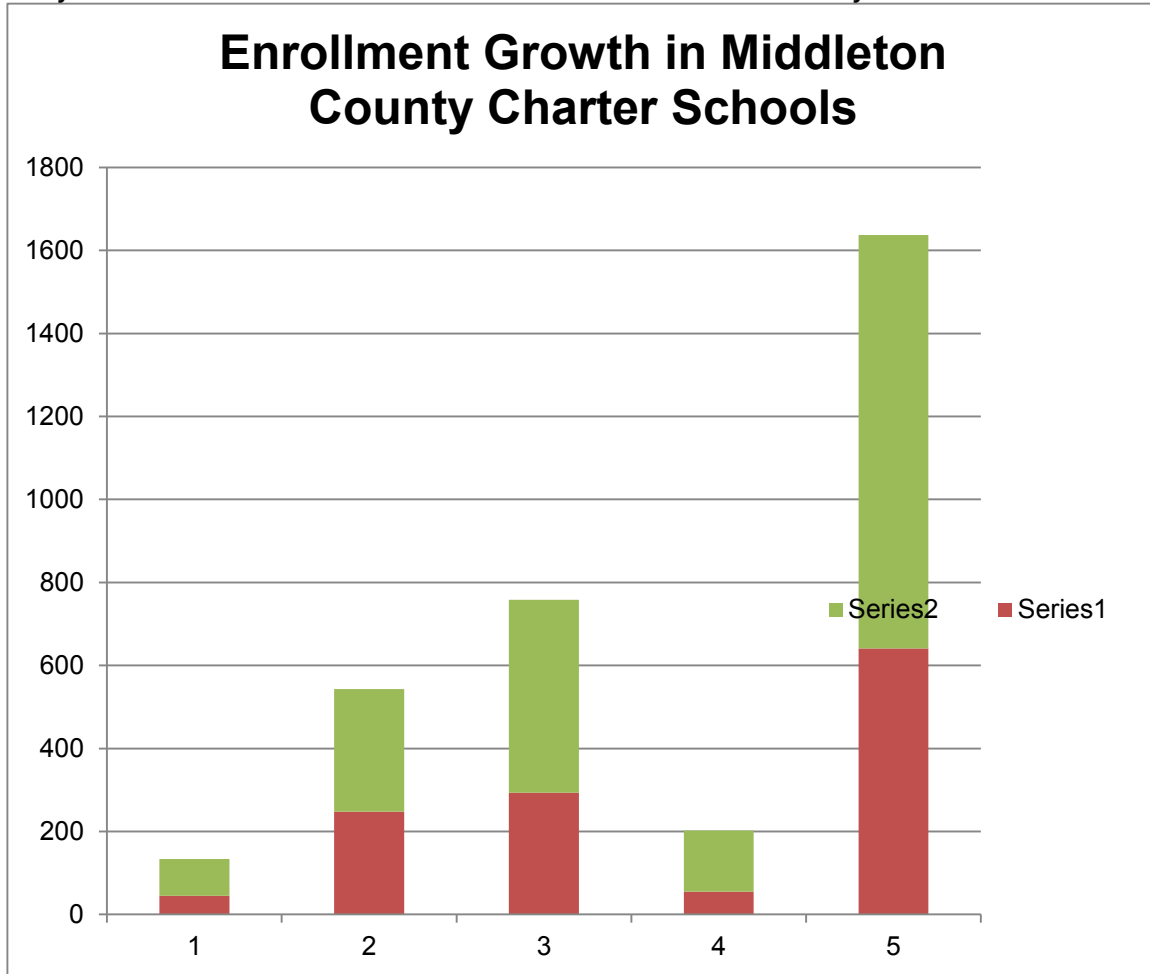
Nationwide, cyber charter education was projected to grow by 43 percent between 2010 and 2015, generating \$24.4 billion in revenue for grades K-12 (Woodall, 2013). The question arises whether a school invested in ethernet, not restrooms, cafeterias, gyms and bussing, needs the same amount of money to operate as those that have brick-and-mortar operations. The Pennsylvania Auditor General’s office issued a special report on how funding reform could save the state’s taxpayers \$365 million annually — the equivalent of \$1 million a day. It suggested a cyber charter tuition of \$6,500 per student (a \$105

million savings at \$3,500 per student) and a brick-and-mortar charter school tuition rate near the national average of \$10,000 per student (a \$210 million savings at \$3,000 per student). Eliminating contributions to the public school pension fund from both the charter and traditional district would save at least \$50 annually or \$500 per student (Wagner, 2012). While legal storms around cyber schools were escalating, Wagner's report showed the "Pennsylvania law is deficient on placing limits on contracts with and fees paid to private management companies, which can result in excessive profit making with public education dollars" (2012, p. 2). No savings estimate for this change was given, but Wagner's report noted the 42 percent of the state's cybers and 30 percent of its brick-and-mortar charters, with a propensity for charters particularly in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh regions, paid management companies in 2010-2011. One company was collecting the equivalent of about \$1,300 per student in management fees (Wagner, 2012). While cyber enrollments doubled between 2004-2005 and 2009-2010, tuition payments from traditional school district more than tripled from \$70 million statewide in 2004-2005 to more than \$250 million in 2009-2010 (Wagner, 2012).

These figures underscore the tremendous, cumulative impact of the still-growing charter system on local traditional schools. The loss of dollars and students has forced traditional public schools into a competitive market created by its own support system, government funding provided through the local tax base. One indirect result, coupled with aging facilities, has been an effort to physically upgrade schools, including at least five districts in Middleton County. A scant few districts also started their own charters as well. One succeeded in pulling the bulk of its enrollees from a nearby district, offsetting

some of its own charter school costs. The table below illustrates the growth of the charter sector in Middleton.

Figure 1  
*Five-year Growth in Charter School Enrollment in Middleton County*



*Figure 1.* A graph compiling charter school growth statistics for Middleton County, 2006-2007 to 2011-2012. Based on *Third-Day Enrollments*, n.d. *Enrollment workbook*, n.d.; *Third day enrollment 2011-2012 Intermediate Unit XXX*, n.d.). Retrieved October 4, 2013, from the intermediate website, which is not listed to maintain anonymity of place.

The tiniest signs of collaboration between districts and charter schools are emerging in Middleton, such as in food service, with the traditional school serving as a subcontractor of sorts. Yet essentially, the creation of the charter school system has resurrected the ideology that drove many schools before *Brown vs. the Board of*

*Education:* “separate but equal” tax-supported systems. As in the pre-*Brown* days, the rules do not mandate the same treatment for charter schools and traditional schools, nor for the “haves” and “have-nots.” Instead of creating a system that followed the original stated intention of allowing successful innovations developed through charter schools to be applied to the masses, funding and political power have created two distinct systems, with communities and anchoring schools pitted in life-and-death battles against charter schools and private interests. Instead of funneling best practices back into the traditional schools for wider usage, maximizing the power of the tax payer dollars through smaller investments in nimble environments, two separate systems are being maintained. Just as divorced couples soon discover, two separate homes are often more expensive than one. Money — in the system and in the community — is really what matters.

### The Root of Education’s Money: Millage Rates

Pennsylvania’s funding arrangement places districts and charter schools in competition with one another — opposing the idea of districts showcasing “portfolios” of options within and beyond the district, as promoted by the U.S. Department of Education (Shelton, 2012). In Pennsylvania, the per pupil cost of educating a child in the home district is essentially forwarded by traditional schools to charters the students attend (Pennsylvania School Boards Association [PSBA], 2006). Over the years, as the charter school system becomes more entrenched, its enrollment grows — and it receives more cumulative money from the traditional home districts. For instance, Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS) lost more than 10 percent of its 25,300-plus students to charter schools in 2010-2011, an increase from 304 students in 1998-1999 (E. Pugh, personal communication, October 11, 2011). Middleton County’s projected charter school growth

is largest for the youngest grades — an increase expected to occur in tandem with overall student population losses. In one of Middleton County’s smallest school districts, kindergarten and first-grade class enrollment each dropped to 44 students, which is 40 percent smaller than the current sophomore class (Utterback, 2011).

Pennsylvania communities use the measurement of a mill as a basis for property tax assessment. However, because property values differ from community to community, a mill of tax in one school district generates a different amount than a mill of tax in another. Taxes levied in distressed communities, including property tax, which serves as the primary revenue producer, and wage tax, which is based upon a percentage of earnings, cannot work as hard in economically struggling districts. For instance, 1 mill of tax in Middleton County can produce \$23,481 or, in its most commercial area, \$286,195 (Middleton Intermediate Unit, personal communication, February 14, 2013).

A chart below captures the range of charter school’s cost impacts on local Middleton County’s districts in 2008-2009. This depicts the cost as ranging from \$178,140 to \$935,017 per district and illustrates the wide-ranging local effort (1.14 to 7.86 mills of taxes) needed to support the charter school system. The countywide total topped \$6.9 million (Middleton Intermediate Unit, personal communication, February 14, 2013). Then, the county had only 767 students enrolled in charter schools; the costs and their tax-related impacts would be considerably higher now, with 1,272 students enrolled in the charter system (*Enrollment workbook*, n.d.; *Third day enrollment 2013-2014 Intermediate Unit XXX*, n.d.). One generative work will add to this body of information for the 2013-2014 school year to update this financial picture, reflecting increases in costs and charter enrollment.

Table 3

*A Table of Middleton County Charter School Costs, by District, for 2008-2009*

**MIDDLETON COUNTY CHARTER SCHOOL COSTS BY DISTRICT,**  
**2008-2009**

	<u>Charter School Cost</u>		# of Students	Total Tuition	Charter Tuition in Mills
	Reg Ed	Special Ed			
Alpha	\$7,882	\$16,380	110	\$935,017	3.93
Beta	\$7,905	\$13,934	24	\$178,140	1.41
Chi	\$8,060	\$16,865	85	\$755,541	3.56
Delta*					
Epsilon	\$8,024	\$13,363	73	\$614,532	2.65
Eta	\$8,216	\$13,624	23	\$210,597	1.14
Gamma	\$82,667	\$16,418	47	\$437,460	3.10
Iota	\$8,755	\$19,087	40	\$381,212	5.90
Kappa	\$7,832	\$13,196	102	\$884,717	4.48
Lambda	\$11,462	\$22,196	33	\$378,234	3.15
Mu	\$9,876	\$21,496	37	\$411,810	6.72
<b>Omega</b>	<b>\$8,996</b>	<b>\$19,641</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>\$492,380</b>	<b>5.53</b>
Sigma	\$7,986	\$14,936	56	\$447,209	2.10
Tau	\$9,155	\$18,459	39	\$394,267	7.86
Theta	\$7,824	\$14,553	48	\$422,647	4.70
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>\$120,240</b>	<b>\$234,148</b>	<b>767</b>	<b>\$6,943,763</b>	

\*Delta did not respond

*Middleton Intermediate Unit, personal communication, October 8, 2011*

Table 3. A table of Middleton County districts' charter school costs. Middleton Intermediate Unit, personal communication, October 8, 2011.

## How the State Slices Its School Funding Pie: Local Communities Are Left to Serve

In 1972, Pennsylvania provided 50 percent of instructional expenditures, though that share declined to 33.87 percent of instructional costs in 2003-2004 (PSBA, 2006). The largest sum of state funding is the basic instructional subsidy, accounting for more than \$4.36 billion in 2005-2006, in addition to school construction, special and vocational education, and pupil transportation funding (PSBA, 2006). The higher costs of special education are acknowledged only with a nod and typically harm the poorest districts, which are likely to have higher percentages of children with more — and more complex — health issues (Williams, 2001). Yet, the actual percentage of special needs students in any given district is immaterial to state funding. The state calculates 15 percent as the “average” number of special needs students in a district and provides an additional 1 percent overall for those who may be severely disabled (PSBA, 2006). Historically, charter schools have not shouldered the enrollment of as many special needs students comparable to home districts (Ravitch, 2013). The percentage of special needs students in Western Pennsylvania charter schools has risen from 8.2 percent in 1998-1999, when only three charter schools’ statistics were reported by the Pennsylvania Department of Education, to 15.4 percent in 2010-2011, with 27 schools reporting (Office of Budget Development, Management & Operations, 2011). Of these schools, five accounted for the bulk of the special education student enrollment: foremost, City Charter High, followed by Career Connections Charter, Northside Urban Pathways, The Academy and Manchester Academic Charter, and the Environmental Charter at Frick (Office of Budget Development, Management & Operations, 2011).



Pennsylvania provides a poverty supplement to the poorest districts and an equity supplement to districts that are poor but not poor enough to qualify for a poverty supplement or have high taxes. More than 35 percent of a district's students must be on welfare to qualify for this supplement (PSBA, 2006). At one point, districts received a guaranteed base minimum, but no current, single formula exists now (Middleton Lawmaker, personal communication, February 14, 2014). In touting support for charter schools throughout his campaign and administration, Gov. Tom Corbett has ignored community-anchoring public schools as the common denominators for many students and residents. For instance, his voucher proposal would have burdened taxpayers with the costs of middle-income families already sending their children to private school instead of offering public money to assist low-income families to seek options, costing an estimated \$1 billion — plus administrative costs — over four years, with most of the money funding students who aren't in public schools, diminishing resources further (Kletzien & Feinberg, 2011). Corbett's proposed education 2014-2015 budget has drawn criticism from three education-related organizations that often are in disagreement—the Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA); the Pennsylvania Campaign for Achievement Now, a nonprofit group backing reform; and the Education Policy and Leadership Center. Although the proposal included a 3.8 percent increase to raise public education funding by \$368.6 million, to \$10.1 billion, previous Corbett budgets had significantly cut education (Coyne, 2014). With the loss of federal stimulus funding and cutbacks, education funding is still about \$1 billion less, according to the PSEA (Coyne, 2014).

Pennsylvania lives as if schools are the primary responsibility of the local communities, as evidenced by its educational funding pullback (PSBA, 2006). Yet the state school funding system ignores that the flight of workers who contributed to the tax base and declining property values essentially prompt higher taxes for those who remain. In districts like Omega, housing values are so depressed that there is little to no advantage for the school district or the county to become landlords or sell properties for their taxes. The Omega School District suffers a high delinquency property tax rate, 23 percent. Records show that collectible real estate taxes in Omega grew by \$131,015 between 1993 and 2006, yet, Omega city lost nearly \$5 million in assessed valuation in 1991-1994, plus a \$100,000 drop in earned income tax collections in 1998 (Grass, 2007). Because property values have dropped and the delinquency rate has risen, the district can actually increase its tax rate, yet receive less income (Omega Superintendent, personal communication, January 14, 2014). This situation combines with cuts in basic subsidy, the disappearance of federal stimulus money and the increase in the number and enrollment of charter schools to fortify the negative impact on the community, according to a spokeswoman for the Pennsylvania Auditor General's Office (S. Woods, personal communication, January 30, 2014). "Unfortunately, the situation in Omega is out of their control. ... The Pennsylvania Department of Education really needs to step up and help them out" (S. Woods, personal communication, January 30, 2014). While this situation is unfortunate, it occurs in other districts across the state as well, according to the Pennsylvania Association of School Business Officials (J. Ammerman, personal communication, February 7, 2014). The ideology of the poor paying taxes dates to Smith, the economic giant of the 1700s — but so does the realization that those who are better

off need to help. Even with extra state aide, the most distressed communities are expected to foot their share of the bill for public education. The state's "follow the student" funding mechanism means that a single charter school could receive \$7,000 from District A for one typical student and \$16,000 from District B for that student's typical classmate, with higher per pupil calculations for special needs students. Across Pennsylvania, tuition ranges from \$6,405 per student in a Luzerne County district to \$16,390 per student in a Montgomery County district (Daniels, 2013). However, differentials exist in spending patterns as well as revenue patterns. Charters spend more on administration and top administrator salaries than do traditional schools, which spend more on instruction, student support services and teacher salaries. Traditional schools also spend on services that charters do not provide, line items such as special education, student support services, transportation and food services (Miron, 2011). Charter schools, on average nationwide, receive around 20 percent per pupil less in public money than do traditional schools (Miron, 2011). Yet Pennsylvania does not allow a "hold back" as do many other states; charters and traditional schools receive the same per pupil costs, despite the differences in expenses. Initially, Pennsylvania legislated the home district hold-back at 30 percent; some district officials contend that level of hold-back was never actually met. The level had been at 15 percent and now has vanished, correlating to neither charter nor home district expenses. For instance, a home district with 50 students enrolled in charter schools is not likely to see a mass exodus from a certain grade. Instead, the distribution is spread across K-12. As a result, the district will be unable to reduce teaching or custodial staff, drop a bus route or move to a smaller building; the home district's fixed costs remain the same (Middleton Intermediate Unit Executive Director, personal

communication, February 13, 2014). Still, a \$12,000 per pupil cost and charter school tuition translates to a district loss of \$600,000 to charter schools — and the district unable to cut its own expenses. Moving away from the hypothetical and into practical examples, in 2011, Pittsburgh Public School’s (PPS) \$17,680 per typical pupil price tag (then 85 percent of the per-pupil spending) multiplied by 2,654 charter school students equaled \$46.92 million, a rough calculation not counting for special needs students at charter schools, which would increase this bill. This rough estimate illustrates the money lost to PPS and gained by charter schools exceeded the \$38 million deficit reported by the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette for the 2011-2012 school year (Chute, 2011). A loss of more than \$8 million in the PPS budget was attributed to the opening of one charter school alone (Young, 2008). When cyber charter schools were in their infancy, a PSBA survey put the cost of 2,700 cyber school students across the state at approximately \$18 million for local districts. Much of this expense was for students who previously had not been part of the public school system; only 18 percent of cyber school students had enrolled in district-based public schools a year earlier, (Gentzel, 2002). Many state legislatures viewed cyber schools as a way to reduce educational costs (Baker & Bathon, 2013). Lobbyists often cite an analysis by Augenblick, Palaich and Associates to claim that costs of online and brick-and-mortar programs are similar, ignoring a critical fact in the report: “It is important to note, however, that (the company) did not look at costs related to building facilities or transportation in this study” (Baker & Bathon, 2013, p. 5).

Multimillion Dollar Questions Indict the System: PA Cyber Charter and Agora  
Stifled attempts have been made to address traditional and charter funding  
inequities in Pennsylvania, in system allowing PA Cyber Charter to carry a \$24 million

unrestricted fund balance and keep revenue exceeding \$20 million a year while some of the public schools that support it and other charters are cutting programs to save money. Then-State Auditor General Jack Wagner suggested a moratorium on the creation of charter and cyber charter schools until the state adjusted the formula to reflect lower costs of operating charter and cyber charter schools (Bumstead, 2010). Talk also included capping per student payment to cyber charter schools at \$6,500 (Herold, 2013). One cyber charter lists a teacher-student ratio of 56 to 1 (Teacher Salary Info, n.d.), more than double the teacher-student ratio of many brick-and-mortar schools. Plus, online teachers receive additional autonomy: the option of turning off students' ability to virtually raise their hands and ask questions.

What has transpired is PA Cyber and others cyber schools receive well over \$100 million a year (Herold, 2013). Pressure to change the funding formula and to seek the actual cost of a cyber school education might now spring from 11 federal indictments against PA Cyber's founder and accountant. The indictment details how a \$50 per computer kickback alone amounted to \$500,000, alleges that the private spending of public dollars involved the purchase of two houses, one of them a Florida condo worth nearly \$1 million; a \$300,000 twin-engine private; an account that acted like an ATM; and retirement plans (Conti, 2013; Herold, 2013; Lord, 2013; Wagner & Doerschner, 2013) through a convoluted system that passed money from PA Cyber Charter to at least six other "management" systems that did no or little work (Bowling, 2013; Herold, 2013; Wagner & Doerschner, 2013). As an additional note, the indictments were based upon enrollment figures and reimbursements dating from 2007 to 2011, (*U.S. v. Trombetta and Prence*, 2013), so the actual amounts of money involved, exceeding this timeframe, could

be even larger. The law also does not provide *quid pro quo* reparations in the pending indictments involving PA Cyber Charter School or any other charter school leadership. Even with the amounts of money reportedly involved in the case, the top executive could face a fine up to only \$3.25 million and/or up to 100 years in prison, or both (Wagner & Doerschner, 2013).

While shocking in its audacity and scope, the case involving PA Cyber officials, as Ravitch recounts (2013), is not the first fraud case related to cyber schools in Pennsylvania. With free-flowing dollars amounting to huge temptations, it likely will not be the last. A 5,000-student school and two others have been charged with defrauding the Pennsylvania school system and its taxpayers of more than \$6.5 million (Herold, 2013). The Agora Cyber Charter School, whose founder was involved in a fraud case involving the theft of \$6.7 million (Woodall, 2013), generated \$31.6 million in revenue for Agora's for-profit K12 management company in 2010 (Fang, 2011).

Financials prove to be moving targets because of changes in law, policy, reimbursements and the flow of students away from district schools to charters, then back again. In another financial case involving cyber charters, on Nov. 23, 2011, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court overturned a previous ruling from a 2007 case requiring home districts to pay charter school tuition costs for 4-year-olds attending kindergartens even if the home districts did not offer kindergarten to 4-year-olds, thus would not be shouldering that educational cost normally (*Slippery Rock Area School District v PA Cyber Charter School*, 2011). Though the ruling calls for the cyber school to bear the cost of educating a student it has enrolled, the decision does not address the issue of retroactive repayment for Slippery Rock and other schools caught in the same situation.

Yet, the state and national system continues to support charter school startups and operations, with more aggressive states receiving more national funding by encouraging charter school startups and operations (PSBA, 2006). This promotion of charter schools comes at a time when education budgets statewide were slashed by more than \$900 million in 2011-2012. The greatest impact was on poorer districts, as basic education funding was cut by \$421.5 million (7.3 percent) and reimbursement to school districts for charter school expenses dropped from \$224 million to zero (Pennsylvania School Funding Campaign, 2011-2012 Budget Update, 2011).

### Learning Subordination: Governing by Philanthropy Perpetuates Power Imbalances

The discussion of competition for students and funding shows how power has departed the home district — once the gold standard and sole public-funded option for education — and has become subordinate to school choice. As the power shift becomes more exaggerated, it does disservice to disadvantaged children in the "left behind" public schools, ineffective charter schools and to privileged children likely to grow up isolated from the rest of society.

Now, rogue funding drives the educational agendas. Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg's \$100 million gift announced in 2010 to Newark, N.J., public schools is an exception as large-scale philanthropy to public schools (Perez-Pena, 2010). Typically, philanthropic donations are skewed toward "options" and "reform" instead of shoring up physically deteriorating or academically weak links in public education. Why champion the school choice cause? Could it be that an overlay of inequity would benefit those already in power?

Some administrators, including U.S. Department of Education leader James Shelton, advocate eliminating — instead of investing in — community schools (Shelton, 2012 conference). Instead of giving each community an anchor — a school and students to be proud of — choice perpetuates systemic inequities, simply moving or ignoring students who aren't being served and relocating ineffective educators. The best evidence produced by independent analysts show that “reform” schools will be unsuccessful (Fang, 2011). None of the dozen cyber charters reviewed in 2011-2013 met federally mandated academic performance improvements (Herold, 2013). Conversely, Chicago schools operated by councils composed of school administrators, teachers and community members that select and evaluate the school principal, monitor the improvement plan, approve the budget and build community relations, have out-performed “turnaround” schools operated by the business model of top-down authoritative style — and done so in 33 high-poverty public schools compared with 12 “turnaround” elementary schools (Ravitch, 2013).

Such is not the case in Pennsylvania, where Ravitch notes “a willingness to give fiscally unsound schools over to charter management,” essentially ending public education in these select towns (2013, p. 178). Clearly, just as not all public schools can be construed as “failing,” not all charter schools can be considered privateers’ money machines, but a trend is evident. As the indictments of PA Cyber officials illustrate, power, politics and philanthropy walk arm in arm in the name of school reform. The potential personal benefits are obvious, yet the foundations’ out-sized contributions often make critics look the other way. The Walton Family Foundation, derived from Wal-Mart Stores Inc., announced its donation of \$25.5 million to the national Knowledge is Power



Program (K.I.P.P.) charter school network, intending to double the number of students attending these schools to 59,000 by 2015, (McKnight, 2011). The heavyweight Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (Microsoft), the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation (suburban homebuilding and life insurance companies) (McKnight, 2011) and the Michael and Susan Dell Foundation (personal computers) (Fang, 2011) back “reform.” By walking hand-in-hand with politicians who set the rules for schools and their funding, philanthropies drive the educational agenda with initiatives hostile to public schools, pushing toward privatization and dismantling the public school system. In essence, this is the “corporate hijacking of public institutions” (Saltman, 2009, p. 70). Most ironic of all is that these “reform” initiatives began with public money, including publicly subsidized tax incentives given to corporations. While charter schools may be nonprofit, the companies that manage them are not necessarily so — and they can be astoundingly supportive of politicians.

Once a “reform” supporter, Ravitch views the movement as a means to convert public assets into private ones, calling out the philanthropic ties to campaigns and strongly criticizing the Race to the Top as “the first time in history that the U.S. Department of Education designed programs with the intent of stimulating private sector investors to create for-profit ventures in American education” (2013, p. 17). In this landscape, federal aid is no longer based upon equity. Schools in some districts spend 20 percent of the school year preparing for tests, which reward those that play the game the best, while select states and districts are helped along the way by hiring Gates-funded grant-writing professionals to tilt the field in their favor (Ravitch, 2013). As the PA Cyber Charter indictment shows, the pay-to-play scenario is not only happening in D.C.

A \$50 kickback per computer can add up quickly for an 11,000-student school. Employees and their spouses can be persuaded to “give” \$40,000 each in political campaign contributions, which can be refunded with payments ultimately generated through tax dollars (*U.S. v Trombetta and Prence*, 2013).

The philanthropic-political system feeds itself, with little risk for philanthropic leaders’ reputations, the potential for considerable control and little backlash in event of failure (McKnight, 2011). This approach entitles donors to make public policy (Katz, 2012), and new billionaire philanthropists have matched their bankrolls with their policy preferences for “reform,” just as they did when U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan was superintendent of Chicago’s schools (Katz, 2012). Management companies and lobbying powers riding the wave of politics and policy include White Hat Management, an Ohio-based for-profit charter school management company; online learning companies such as K12 Inc.; Pearson; Apex Learning, with Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen; and StudentsFirst, with former Washington, D.C., school chancellor Michelle Rhee, part of the reform organization that raises hundreds of millions for campaign contributions and election lobbyists (Fang, 2011).

Unfortunately, the level of control exerted by gigantic foundations has even more unsettling implications. Quoting Joanne Barken, McKnight shares that reform “undermines democracy just as surely as it damages public education” (McKnight, 17 Nov. 2011, para.7). No real oversight is enlisted because those involved in the funding process serve as the oversight committee (Ravitch, 2013), leading to the conclusion that the hidden agenda may be sharing the wealth with the already-wealthy and working toward corporate-style success — disregarding the initial experimental, startup

atmosphere that birthed charter schools. The agenda certainly is not necessarily based upon educational improvements, enhanced democracy or stronger communities.

### Dominant Power, Dominant Culture, Fewer Real Choices: Whose Neighborhood School Is It, Anyway?

Remembering that the education of children and the support of community are critical social justice concerns can be difficult, given the overwhelming power of some institutional forces in educational, political, philanthropic, regulatory and judicial institutional networks compared with subordinate networks of community and children, who are obviously nonvoting and whose parents may be nonvoting. Catholic Social Thought considers broad issues such as options for the poor, common good, individual growth within the community and assured level of participation in the community (Freeman, 2003). Does the scenario of a new corporate-education complex hold room for John Rawls' principles of Catholic Social Thought, for:

Social and economic inequalities ...to be arranged so that they are both: (a) to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged, consistent with the just savings principle, and (b) attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity (Fleischacker, 2004, p. 114).

Morally, this is a question we are required to ask, though it is not often posed during "reform" discussions. The public-charter system, rife with inequity in funding and stifling of taxpayer voice in its operations, harbors inequity in opportunities as well. If poorer students are "left behind" in public schools, as they are likely to be, these "options," in effect, block the input of economically disadvantaged residents whose lives are critically impacted by others' decisions. Being left behind once is left behind forever (Murray, 2012). Without the grounding and boost provided by both schools and

community norms, our students in poverty will not be able to even reach the wall that holds the gated community, let alone scale it. Disadvantaged, less educated members of our community are heard less often and attributed credibility less often by more affluent mainstream powers and media. The voices of our poor may be seen as inconvenient slowdowns to the chain of command hierarchy instead of as contributors:

...When sitting in a room with people who might look tattered and torn and sound noisy and inchoate, we can become quite uncomfortable with the silence needed to wait for their words to emerge, for their ideas to be formed, for simple responses to shape themselves into group-imagined, owned, and driven directives toward action. Building trust in a community of people quite different from those typically seen in the halls of academe is labor-intensive, long-term, and full of back-and-forth failure and success, a very inefficient path. It is counter to the US culture's passion for the cost-effective mode of operation (Normore, Rodriguez, & Wynne, 2007, p. 656).

Culture — expressed by race, class, gender, ability, language and mission — can be studied at the intersection of school choice and used to help explain the projected further widening income gap. Scott believes that expanding school choice:

Often coincides with the increased segregation of students and schools by race, social class, gender, ability, and language. ... Parents with better access to information, resources, and social networks have more power to secure the schools of their choosing than do parents with less access. Meanwhile, many charter schools engage in formal and informal choice processes when shaping

their student populations, and high-poverty families are often the least desirable (Scott, 2005, p. 2).

Instead of public schools being the schools of choice, they can become schools of last resort by default because of the double-edge sword of selectivity. Where public schools used to send students to alternative schools, now the alternative schools are doing the sorting. Choice rests with charter schools, which have as much option of selectivity as families have option of choice, yet choice, as it currently stands, is more difficult for low-income families to utilize. Even for low-income families that want school choice and value academics, decisions may not be “based on the same amount or kind of information as do families with greater economic resources” (Scott, 2005, p. 81). The percentage of low-income charter students remained at 37 percent, slightly under the average for all public schools (Scott, 2005). As a result, charter schools have higher percentage of white students and a lower percentage of low-income students overall, (Scott, 2005) — and income and race are so often linked. For instance, income parameters are not available for the 520,000 students on charter school waiting lists nationwide, but about one-tenth of the students are in California and more than 18,000 of them live in Los Angeles County (California Charter Schools Association, 2013), which has a poverty level higher than the state average: 16.3 percent vs. 14.4 percent and a median income of \$56,266, compared to the state average of \$61,632 (United States Census Bureau, 2014b).

### Educating the Public on Making Sense of Life: ‘The Most Important Thing They’ve Got’

The cumulative impact of education offers both private returns to individuals and social returns to communities and political divisions. Private returns include higher earnings and greater fringe benefits over a lifetime, and a greater sense of self-worth and

accomplishment (Hungerford & Wasserman, 2004). Yet the greater good benefits from individual payment of higher taxes in support of public projects, an informed electorate, a decrease in criminal activity as educational levels rise, and enhanced human capital and capacities affecting economic development (Hungerford & Wasserman, 2004). These “spillover” benefits to society as a whole essentially are *twice* the individual benefits (Hungerford & Wasserman, 2004, p. 20). A cost-benefit analysis of preschool offers another economic view of investing in education: For every \$1 spent on quality preschool, society saves at least \$7 from future public spending to support their less educated brothers and sisters (Grunewald & Roinick, 2003). Because of the economic and educational challenges of rural and urban communities, greater opportunity exists for schools and other anchor institutions to make a difference in sustaining their communities (*National Trust for Historic Preservation*, n.d.), serving as community focal points, antidotes to suburban sprawl and physical reminders of our connectedness and reliance upon one another. As human-scale institutions, neighborhood schools are close to the heart perhaps because they are close at hand. A 2011 Phi Delta Kappa-Gallup Poll showed that respondents rated public schools in their own neighborhoods higher than public schools as a whole, with 43 percent of the respondents saying their answers were based on their knowledge of the community and its schools (Phi Delta Kappa/International, 2011).

A school serves as a significant symbol because over time, students develop a psychological investment to the school, integrating it with their self-identity, self-esteem and increased feelings of belonging (Vaske & Kobrin, 2001). A person’s locale has significant consequences, such as quality of and returns from education, the status of

local culture, average wages, crime levels and geographic mobility, which also relates to educational attainment as do identity and economics (Dahl & Sorensen, 2009). While attachments to specific places vary in strength and most often relate to financial opportunity and higher wages, sociologists find people often prefer to stay where they have lived for 20 or more years. They base location decisions on nearness to parents and siblings, particularly in families with children, and proximity to friends (Dahl & Sorenson, 2009).

As distinctive centers, schools are part of human memory and experience (Relph, 1976). After helping to shape individuals through personal and common symbols and patterns, (Relph, 1976), schools can be a reservoir for “deep care and concern” (Relph, 1976, p. 37). This phenomenon commonly produces affection for the alma mater and hometown, even from the town’s diaspora, and establishes the importance of school as an emotional, physical and financial anchor — a place where people feel belonging and significance, nostalgia and attachment. Attachment to place helps to explain why, for more than 15 years, residents in one Midwestern community fought to retain their elementary school, threatening to cede from the district (Peshkin, 1982)— even though the school the students were targeted to attend would have provided undisputed academic improvement.

According to Peshkin (1982):

Certainly no window-boarded, shut-down school can compete with a still vital school in evoking the life and liveliness of the unabandoned pasts of its many graduates who drive past it, tread its halls as parents or are touched by it as their children come home with stories of the present (p. 160).

The result is community, team and student pride, a sign of community autonomy and vitality, a feeling that parents and other adults play a part in local control (Peshkin, 1982). Residency is the only requirement to be a member of “the most important thing they’ve got” (Peshkin, 1982, pp. 149-163). Such community pride, exhibited in Omega, illustrates place attachment, according to the Omega Principal:

There is a lot of pride in football. Unfortunately, the community lived and died by the steel mills, by the industrial base. There was that dependency that, ‘when I finished high school, I was going to go to the mill.’ They haven’t gotten over the fact that that’s not there right now. A kid who graduates from high school is 18 years old. If they have won a (league) championship in a sport and gone to the prom, they think they have hit their life’s climax, even though they’ve only lived a small part of their life at that time (Omega Principal, personal communication, May 1, 2014).

The fight for a school is so emotional because school closure disrupts a crucial “mazeway,” the physical and relational way people navigate the external environment based upon singular and collective trial-and-error experiences. Psychiatrist Dr. Mindy Fullilove stated, “When the mazeway, the external system of protection, is damaged, the person will go into root shock,” just as they go into physical shock, (2004, pp. 11-12, p. 28). “The experience of root shock — like the aftermath of a severe burn — does not end with emergency treatment, but will stay with the individual for a lifetime” (Fullilove, 2004, p. 12). For those with fewer resources, the impact can be even more devastating. “Research also suggests that impoverished regions in particular often benefit from



smaller schools and districts, and they can suffer *irreversible damage* (emphasis added) if consolidation occurs” (Howley, Johnson, & Petrie, 2011, p. i).

Yet the top-down oversight of testing and accountability mandates offers local communities limited options. With schools, as with so many other life experiences — from piano lessons and tutoring, to attending concerts and athletic events, taking vacations and getting medical attention — exercising options generally requires money, even if it’s money in the form of time and transportation.

### Multitalented Anchors: Largely Unsung, K-12 Schools Perform Key Community Functions

Community-anchoring public schools are critical to their communities' cultural and economic existence, improving the quality of life for adults and children (*Community-centered schools offer numerous benefits*, n.d.; Hungerford & Wasserman, 2004; Lyson, 2002; Texas A&M University, n.d.) and shaping how their communities grow (Council of Educational Facility Planners International & U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2004). The continued existence of schools most often is threatened amid inner city and rural settings, as growth areas move in concentric rings beyond traditional cities and towns (Council of Educational Facility Planners International & U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2004). Schools are critical to the fabric of the community, a driving force for economic development and tied to a physical location, just as other anchor institutions are (Democracy Collaborative, n.d.). Research from 1946 through 2000 consistently shows that strong civic infrastructure aligns with higher levels of well-being and welfare, and that schools serve the broadest constituency, providing employment, social, cultural and recreational opportunities for all ages, a place where generations converge and “community identity is forged”(Lyson, 2002, p. 132). At least a

decade of research underscores that a school serves as a rallying point for the community through its positive impact on property values, neighborhood prosperity, economic well-being for individuals and government agencies, social and cultural values, and building community capacity (Dowdall, 2011; Initiative for a Competitive Inner City, 2011; Lyson, 2002).

As an anchor, a school interacts with the community (Initiative for a Competitive Inner City, 2011) in ways that produce educational and economic impacts that can be magnified in chronically economically distressed areas (Evergreen Cooperative, n.d.).

Among them are:

- **Provider of Services.** Clearly, in its mission to educate children, the school helps them to develop academic and social competencies for productive citizenship (Coalition for Community Schools, n.d.), and serves as a hub for adult learning and socialization (Lyson, 2002). The benefit of education carries from one generation to the next. Higher educational attainment allows for more efficient decision-making, improved health outcomes, longevity of the person's spouse and children, and a lower likelihood that teen daughters will have children. With higher educational attainment, parents, grandparents and neighboring adults more positively affect children's development, their completion of high school and further education. Even the likelihood of voting increases, along with higher trust and increased social cohesion (Hungerford & Wasserman, 2004).
- **Real Estate Developer and Cluster Anchor.** Development around a school can be documented by observation. For instance, within a two-block radius of my local school in Middleton are a convenience store, four hair stylists, a barber, an

insurance company, a carriage home complex in various stages of residency and construction, apartments in a former school building, a laundry and dry cleaner, a karate studio, a yoga studio and a chiropractic office. The commercial and high-density residential pocket centers around the elementary school in this community filled primarily with single-family homes. Compared with communities that have lost schools, communities with schools have a lower percentage of households on public assistance (Council of Educational Facility Planners International & U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2004). A 20-year study in rural Iowa showed that half of the communities with a high school gained population while three-fourths of the communities without a high school lost population (Council of Educational Facility Planners International & U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2004; Rural School and Community Trust, n.d.). Who wants to live in a community without a school? The residents are those who cannot afford to live elsewhere and lack the labor-related skill set to support relocation. Yet areas of poverty likely will see rising populations, while areas of economic prosperity may not. Approximately 47 percent of women ages 22-44, with bachelor's degrees or higher, have no children. Conversely, 47 percent of women ages 22-44, with no high school diploma, have three or more children (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012). Given the link between education and earning power, the 47 percent of women with the most children are likely to be those living in poverty. This trend puts the projected growing population at the most risk.

- Employer and Work Force Developer. In many communities, a school provides substantial employment opportunities. For instance, only one in five adults in

rural Pennsylvania has a college degree, compared with one in three urban dwellers (The State of Rural PA, 2008), self-limiting employment opportunities in areas typically not flush with jobs. Because more than half of rural workers are employed by organizations with five or fewer employees (Center for Rural Pennsylvania, 2004), schools are among the larger local organizations.

Nationwide, schools employed 2,953,000 teachers in 91,961 public primary and secondary schools in 2000, up from 2,198,000 full-time equivalent teachers in 87,034 schools in 1975 (Hungerford & Wasserman, 2004). In 1982, Pittsburgh - area schools employed 48,315 workers, making them collectively the top employer (Toland, 2013). But the number has been shrinking; K-12 education jobs statewide dropped by 30,900 since December 2010 (Keever, February 6, 2014, 11 a.m.), making these jobs all the more valuable. In Middleton County's Beta School District (pseudonym), a larger district across a river from Omega abutting a high-growth area, about one-third of the 226 full- and part-time employees resided within the district in 2013. Of these 72 district resident employees, 75 percent were nonprofessionals, holding positions as aides, secretaries, custodial and cafeteria workers and monitors (Middleton's Beta School District, personal communication, October 17, 2013). If schools vanish, so do employment opportunities, with attendant incomes, tax base and housing values (Hungerford & Wasserman, 2004; Lyson, 2002), as well as the opportunity to build workforce skill levels and capacities.

- Purchaser. Schools purchase an array of items: letter openers and lawn mowers, cleaning supplies and computers, electricity and fitness equipment, textbooks and

window blinds, public-address systems and paper clips. Schools “have sizeable operations and properties to manage and they are a key part of every local community” (Education Appendix, Westchester County Climate Change Task Force Action Plans For K-12 Schools & Higher Education, 2008). Nationwide, K-12 schools wield \$600 billion in annual purchasing power, with a district average of \$30 million a year (American Association of School Administrators, 2013).

- Community infrastructure builder. As a result of their other functions, schools also fulfill the anchoring role of building community infrastructure and face the challenge of continuing to improve the economic, social and environmental milieu. This might be achieved in a very physical sense; for instance, by providing busing, schools improve access through transportation. By having more people on the street who enter and leave a building, schools improve safety on the streets. The act of having a school improves housing values (Hungerford & Wasserman, 2004; Lyson, 2002). Community infrastructure can take a turn into knowledge-based areas of expertise, such as tapping teacher know-how to improve community services (Initiative for a Competitive Inner City, 2011, p. 8).

### Closure Concerns, Building Concerns: What Actions Are Responsible?

Educational opportunity may arrive not only via school options but through the learning environment, which can extend from the community itself to the building and spaces inside it. Building age, condition and maintenance as well as location of the structure may play roles in school closure decisions. Yet physical condition as the sole reason for closure is hard to justify when more than 40 percent of closed schools in six

urban communities have found re-use as charter schools (Dowdall, 2011). A survey conducted for the Center for Rural Pennsylvania (Yan, 2009) reinforces the complexities of determining building functionality. Rural school respondents in the west and in low-income areas were less satisfied with their school’s major building features and water supply (Yan, 2009). While the age of rural buildings was higher than the state average (44 vs. 41 years), functional age based upon the last major renovations brought the average of rural Pennsylvania schools to 16 years. In rural communities, “functional age did not vary by region or percentage of low-income students” (Yan, 2009 p. 8). But rural schools, as well as urban schools — especially those in lower income areas — tend to be older, with maintenance deferred or mechanical and water system issues prevalent. A national survey showed that student poverty was related to condition of school buildings and outdoor play and athletic areas (Alexander & Lewis, 2014):

Table 4

*A Table Correlating the Condition of American Schools to Surrounding Poverty*

Poverty Correlated to U.S. School Conditions

Low-income students*	Good/excellent building condition**	Fair/poor outdoor play areas	Fair/poor outdoor athletic facilities
<35%	80%	25%	27%
35-49%	81%	21%	25%
50 to 74%	76%	29%	35%
75% or more	68%	34%	39%

\*based on free/reduced lunch eligibility

\*\*permanent buildings only

*Table 4.* A table of how poverty correlates to school condition in the U.S. Adapted from Alexander & Lewis, 2014, pp. 6-9.

Thus, schools that tend to be overlooked for upgrades and vigilant maintenance are in areas of poverty — and a school closure decision based on the status of the physical property could become a reason for closure in an already underserved community. The physical condition of a school building, particularly given high replacement costs of roofs and boilers, along with factors such as enrollment, the percent of building space filled vs. its capacity, and the percentage of neighborhood children attending a school were prevalent factors in the Pew Charitable Trusts' 2011 study of closures — all taking precedence over attention given to academic achievement inside the building (E. Dowdall, personal communication, September 24, 2013). The status of the building was weighted more heavily in most cases; some districts did not even consider academic achievement, the study found (E. Dowdall, personal communication, September 24, 2013). Thus, while academic quality is desired by so many stakeholders in the system, from students themselves to parents, administrators and funding bodies, the actual act of education may have little to do with a school closure. Yet it could be as devastating to a community as a closure for academic reasons.

### Dollars and Sense in School Closures from Chicago to West Virginia

How can a district hit the escape button when its financial picture is dim, buildings need updates, and both its tax base and student population are declining? Across the nation and the state, closures are becoming epidemic. The map below, with dots in various colors for ease of viewing, shows closures for five years statewide, based on statistics, latitude and longitude collected by the Center for Rural Pennsylvania. The map below, with dots in various colors for ease of viewing, shows closures for five years statewide, based on statistics, latitude and longitude collected by the Center for Rural

Pennsylvania. The map is intended to provide a visual depiction of how urban areas, focused around Pittsburgh, Philadelphia and Erie, have faced closures, but that closures are not limited to these metropolitan areas, and indeed, are spread across rural areas of the state as well.

Figure 2

### School Closures across Pennsylvania, 2005-2006 to 2010-2011

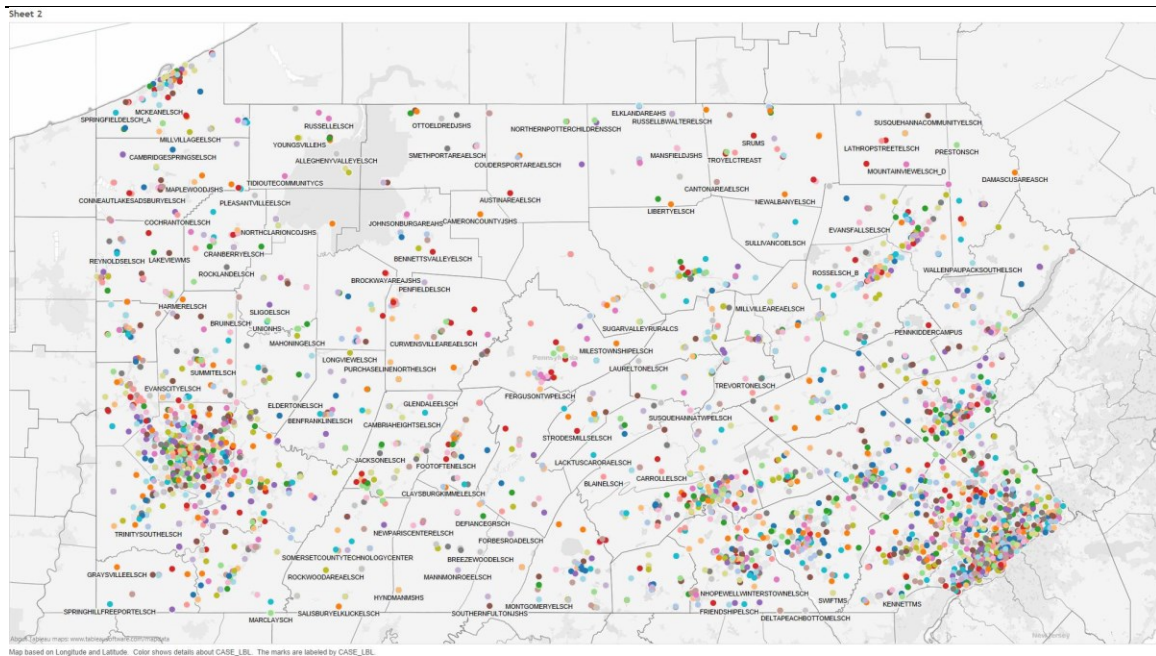


Figure 2. Data from Demographics: Rural School Districts, in *The Center of Rural Pennsylvania*, n.d.

Closing a school seems to be common sense in times of fiscal restrictions — but evidence supporting this position is scant. Instead, a comprehensive Pew study shows that closing schools does save some money for large districts but consistently does not reap anticipated financial gains — and, in fact, may leave struggling communities in worse shape.

Chicago announced the nation’s most massive school closures in March 2013, with more than 50 schools to be shuttered in one swoop. Prior to the announcement, the



Pew Charitable Trusts' Philadelphia Research Initiative published its study of what then was the largest closure: 37 in Philadelphia, announced in December 2012 (Dowdall & Warner, 2013). The Pew Trusts examined school closings in Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Chicago, Milwaukee, Detroit, Washington, D.C., and Kansas City, Mo. — all districts that closed at least 20 schools in the last decade. Overall, the Pew (2013) report said:

The money saved as the result of closing schools, at least in the short run, has been relatively small in the context of big-city school-district budgets, with the largest savings achieved when closings were combined with large-scale layoffs. Longer-term savings are difficult to project...selling or leasing surplus school buildings, many of which are located in declining neighborhoods, tends to be extremely difficult” (p. 1).

Many buildings, the report said, “were shut down precisely because they were in areas suffering depopulation and disinvestment” (Dowdall & Warner, 2013, p. 15), making them hard to sell or lease. The Pew report did not detail costs to the community but noted persistent, across-the-board over-estimations of closure savings. For instance, Milwaukee realized only \$6.6 million in savings by closing 20 schools, though it anticipated saving \$10 million a year; Washington saved \$16.7 million a year, not the projected \$23 million; and Pittsburgh’s savings of \$14.7 million from closing 22 schools reached that level only because it was intertwined with 279 staff layoffs (Dowdall, 2011).

Ironically, many of the closed schools — 42 percent — are used for their original intended purpose, but as charter schools. Yet, because of the competition for dollars and students, some districts ban charter organizations from using their vacated buildings

(Dowdall & Warner, 2013). Such bans may contribute to buildings and neighborhoods languishing, according to a Pew report:

As of the summer of 2011, at least 200 school properties stood vacant in the six cities studied — including 92 in Detroit alone — with most having been empty for several years. If left unused for long, the buildings can become eyesores that cast a pall over neighborhoods and attract vandalism and other illicit activity (Dowdall, 2011, p. 1).

School administrators, perhaps naïve about property dealings (E. Dowdall, personal communication, September 24, 2013), perhaps bending figures to support recommendations for closure, may not include or may downplay the costs associated with unused buildings. Even with the closure of a 12-room school in 1983, a former Middleton superintendent recalled that expenses for mothballing the school were four times greater than anticipated (Former Middleton Superintendent, personal communication, February 22, 2014). The Pew study provides supporting examples: Pittsburgh has spent \$2 million to maintain vacant buildings each year, Milwaukee, about \$1 million and Kansas City, close to \$3 million. A Pittsburgh update places the costs of maintaining 19 closed schools at \$60,000 — and the city's Urban Redevelopment Authority will contribute \$150,000 toward a study of options for only three of those buildings (URA pays \$150K to study unused schools, 2014.) Plus, money from building sales, at least in Pennsylvania, doesn't necessarily provide discretionary cash flow because state law requires that revenue from building sales be deposited into a capital fund or to help pay off bonds (Dowdall, 2011). These costs may not include the possible cost of higher transportation, as was found in statewide West Virginia consolidations when more than 300 schools were closed. The

savings were estimated without accounting for increased travel time for students, generally inconsequential to districts but critical to students and parents, and the cost in time and money of increased travel for parents to the school (Rural School and Community Trust, 2002). In this way, consolidation had a negative impact on both parent and student involvement; a child's involvement in school activities often prompts parental involvement (Council of Educational Facility Planners International & U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2004). Another offsetting cost occurs when districts increase middle management as a school administration struggles to juggle increasingly disperse issues and more of them. For instance, while West Virginia closed more than 300 schools in the 1990s to 2000s, spending more than \$1 billion on consolidations, and even with a 13 percent decline in student enrollment (minus 41,000 students), the number of administrators increased by 16 percent and the salaries of state-level administrators nearly doubled (Rural School and Community Trust, 2002).

Consistent with the Pew Trusts' findings and illustrative of the considerations that might face communities like Omega, Chicago's initially enormous projected savings were eroded by attendant costs of shifting students and staff, beefing up safety patrols, renovating accepting schools and other expenses associated with building closures. Chicago Public Schools (CPS) faced a \$1 billion deficit by summer, which would not be mitigated by the closures (*Editorial: Closing 54 schools so soon means pain*, 2013) — despite the claim that each closed school is anticipated to shave \$500,000 to \$800,000 from the budget (\$27 million to \$43.2 million total), though not in the first year of closure. Already, some of the mismatched math uncovered in the Pew reports and the West Virginia Gazette's *Closing Costs* series are surfacing in Chicago. The CPS closures

are estimated to save \$560 million in capital costs plus \$43 million in operating costs over the next 10 years. Meanwhile, the district will spend \$233 million on the 55 schools receiving the dislocated children — \$155 million in capital costs plus the \$43 million in operating costs, which entirely offsets the total anticipated savings on operating costs. (FitzPatrick, 2013a). The Chicago Teachers Union claims that instead of saving money, the closures actually will cost \$1 billion (*Chicago school closings anger teachers, parents*, 2013). Some of the debate revolves around refinement of terms, as can be seen in select claims questions below that were raised in Chicago and serve as points for others to consider:

**Underutilized schools.** CPS Chief Barbara Byrd-Bennett claims the district has 100,000 more seats than students (FitzPatrick, 2013a). Yet, because classrooms are full at Courtenay Elementary, the community was surprised to find its school was on the closure list (FitzPatrick & Spielman, 2013) and the *Chicago Sun Times* editorialized that “certain schools aren’t nearly as underused as they appear on paper” and “certain consolidations will harm the receiving schools” (FitzPatrick, 2013a).

**Teacher cooperation.** The Chicago teacher’s union was willing to give concessions to help keep schools open (FitzPatrick & Spielman, 2013). In Omega, the superintendent has stated that flexibility in teaching schedules could ease some of the district’s financial issues (Omega Superintendent, personal communication, January 7, 2014).

**Academic considerations.** Schools showing signs of turnaround are slated to close (FitzPatrick & Spielman, 2013) while schools with an upward trend in academic

scores but lower proficiency levels are remaining open (*Editorial: What a 'half-empty' school really looks like*, 2013).

**Safety considerations.** Parents and aldermen have voiced strident concerns about the safety of children now needing to pass through different gang territories. The district will nearly double the amount it spends on safety patrols, increasing annual costs of \$8.3 million by another \$7.7 million (FitzPatrick, 2013b). The drastic case of a 15-year-old being severely beaten and raped because she intended to arrive at school early adds a face to this emotional element (Martinez & Howell, 2013). Other violence happens on the way to and from school, more routinely in some neighborhoods than others. Parents and students establish a texting and talking routine to try to ascertain daily safety (Martinez & Howell, 2013; Perez Jr., Manchir, & Sege, 2013). Media note that these scary burdens have long been a normal part of life for families in economically distressed areas of the city, without elaborating that “have” students in “have” neighborhoods often live closer to schools, in safer neighborhoods and, if they had the inconvenience of a long bus ride or walk to school, likely would be driven.

**Students' after-school care arrangements.** Family routines face upheaval if students are ripped away from routine after-school care (FitzPatrick & Spielman, 2013). This is particularly key as research shows family instability has a negative impact on academics, even at early ages (Sandstrom & Huerta, 2013).

**Impact on special education.** The proposed benchmark of 30 to 40 children in a classroom is not academically optimal; a class size of 15 students in early grades positively correlated with higher graduate rates, completion of honors diplomas and a reduction in drop-outs (Chicago Teachers Union, 2013; Spielman, 2013).

These impacts in Chicago may be considerations in Pennsylvania if districts feel pressure to consolidate as the school-age population bottoms-out in Western Pennsylvania and declines moderately in central Pennsylvania (Yan, 2009). Duncombe and Yinger find that the optimal size of a school for financial (as opposed to academic) benefit is between 400 and 1,500 students. The declining per pupil costs of instruction and administration dropped by 61.7 percent when two 300-student districts merged in New York state and by 49.6 percent when two 1,500-student districts merged (2010). Yet, these costs dropped to about 31 percent and to just over 14 percent, respectively, when transition costs were considered (Yinger, 2008). Transition costs persist for about 10 years, and large adjustments in capital spending disappear even more slowly (Duncombe & Yinger, 2010). The financial picture, Duncombe and Yinger note, includes the importance of community preference and academic values. A 2012 School Planning & Management annual construction report observes a disconnection between the knowledge that “students do better in smaller learning environments” and the “gap between educational understanding and educational construction” (Abramson 2013, CR10). The report notes that one-fourth of the elementary schools constructed, on average, provided 60,000 square feet for 400 students, costing \$10 million. Yet, another one-fourth of the elementary schools averaged 104,500 square feet built for 900 students in a space costing \$19.5 million — almost \$9 more per square foot than the smaller schools (Abramson, 2013). Overall, districts stand to gain from economies of scale if schools with fewer than 1,500 students combine (Duncombe & Yinger, 2010). The percentage of net savings (about 30 percent) is greater over a 30-year period for smaller schools than for larger schools (Duncombe & Yinger, 2010). The term “small school”

remains undefined, although research indicates an effective size for elementary schools is 300 to 400 students and for secondary schools, 400 to 800 (Cotton, 1996). While much consolidation is based upon the belief that a larger school has lower operating expense and larger curricula, research indicates that neither of these “common sense” beliefs is true (Cotton, 1996). For instance, in rural Tidioute, Warren County, Pennsylvania, only 295 PK to 12 students attend a charter school operating in a former traditional school. Although the enrollment is much smaller than Cotton proscribes, the school was declared a national Blue Ribbon School in 2013 (The National Blue Ribbon Schools Program: Tidioute Community Charter School, n.d.). Functionally, Cotton’s review of research shows student attendance drop-out, involvement, interpersonal relations and parental involvement rates are all generally higher in small schools. However, poor and minority students who could most benefit from the small-school environment may end up in large schools (Cotton, 1996). While each community must decide individually a successful size for its school, the Council of Educational Facility Planners International & U.S. Environmental Protection Agency declared, “The reality is that the size of the school is not as critical as the delivery systems used in meeting the educational needs of students” (2004, p. 11).

Transition and other costs warranting discussion in advance of closure or consolidation include “non-cost effects,” such as breaking parents’ valued connections with existing schools, higher transportation costs for parents and students, increased costs for improved academic outcomes (Duncombe & Yinger, May 2010). Property values drop by about \$3,000 on average, with high income neighborhoods bearing the most significant decline, but the values are boosted by about 25 percent in very small districts

(Duncombe & Yinger, May 2010). With high-income (and more influential) residents the losers in this arrangement, consolidations become unlikely (Duncombe & Yinger, May 2010) — and as discussed, residents have many other reasons to harbor neighborhood-anchoring schools. But if schools do not consolidate and cannot fiscally afford to stand alone as they are operating, will they be closed anyway? What is the larger cost? Social justice could be a consideration related to tax burdens, as Duncombe and Yinger pointed out:

Policymakers sometimes may confront a situation in which consolidation makes sense on equity grounds but does not result in decreased costs from society's point of view. A small, poor district would undoubtedly experience a decline in cost per pupil if it merged with a richer neighbor. ... Moreover, the increase in the average property tax base from such a merger would lower the property tax burden on this district's residents. As a result, this type of consolidation would improve the fairness of the education finance system in the state (2010, p. 15).

Overall, closure proposals demand that attention is given to details because research lacks evidence in guaranteeing closure will save money for school districts and research supports smaller schools as better systems for children of poverty. The inclusion of time and money costs as well as other quality of life issues, for parents and children, the academic landscape and social justice issues of equity all deserve consideration.

### Does a Publicly Supported System Thwart Democracy?

The act of closing schools does not fit with the country's foundational beliefs, according to Ravitch :



Schools don't improve if they are closed. ... It is an admission of failure by those in charge, an acknowledgement that they do not have the knowledge and experience to evaluate the needs of the school, help the student, strengthen the staff, and provide the essential ingredients needed for a great school. ... We must decide if we truly want to eliminate poverty and establish equal educational opportunity" (2013, pp. 214-225).

Shifting Ravitch's frame slightly, do we as citizens and officials currently abdicate our responsibility for contributing to democracy in the making? Do we doom democracy to the static status of a completed process instead of a living, changing system? (P. Arneson, personal communication, January 23, 2014). To what ends are schools being closed? To entirely gut certain areas and render them hopeless because "it is faster, simpler and less expensive to privatize the public school than to do anything substantive to reduce poverty and racial isolation or to provide the nurturing environments and well-rounded education that children from prosperous families receive" (Ravitch, 2013, p. 37)?

As a country, what will we do with this young, increasingly disenfranchised populace? Will these students remain outside the economic main stream to create their own societies or to become part of the public/prison system? Will we continue to segregate them, not allowing them full participation in their own lives? A better answer than the one we have now becomes viable only if oars from *all* socioeconomic positions row in the same direction. Wealthy America and white America need to understand that what happens in distressed communities — whether urban, rural and/or poor — does, in fact, impact them. According to Fullilove:

White America has often taken the stance that it is not involved in the crisis of the inner city or the problems of minority citizens. In fact, by ordering the landscape so that the poorest and most vulnerable are hidden out of sight, white America has ‘invisibilized’ ... the problems of poverty and racial discrimination ... but, paradoxically, the creation of an apartheid system actually accelerates the spread of calamity, rather than reining it in (2004, p. 238).

This isolation creates a “system of inherent inequality” in which, “as shocking as it may seem, it turns out that even the most privileged people suffer” (Fullilove, 2013, p. 12). Fullilove offers her insight as a psychiatrist, urbanist, believer in community organizations and African-American woman. Yet Charles Murray, seemingly her polar opposite as a male, Harvard-educated, white libertarian author and conservative, posits a similar view: “The only thing that can make a difference is the recognition among Americans of all classes that problem of cultural inequality exists and that something has to be done about it” (Murray, 2012). If schools are the community anchors with the broadest reach (Lyson, 2002), schools are where educational and cultural inequities such as the income achievement gap; educational debt; persistent poverty and correlated non-cognitive skills; and the widening chasm between “haves” and “have-nots” must be addressed. Through social justice and moral imperatives as well as legal covenants, we are called to provide children — not just children of the elite — with solid educational foundations. All children must gain the ability to interpret and deal with their own environments, as Freire espouses, “to live more fulfilling lives” and “to construct new futures for themselves” (Miller & Kirkland, 2010, pp. 42-43). Scott (2005) cites the landmark 1966 Coleman Report as finding "academic outcomes were better for Blacks

who attended desegregated schools," referencing numerous scholars who conclude that "students who learn in diverse schools are likely to gain an education superior to that of students who do not have this opportunity" (pp. 130-131). The view is supported by McKinsey & Company's study (2009) and the importance of peer influence (Peshkin, 2001).

Poverty's harsh reality transcends racial boundaries, yet the tie between Black America and poverty — especially in the Pittsburgh region, the nation's least economically accessible and productive area for African-Americans (Generett, 2011), must be noted. The American Community Survey of child poverty, comparing 2009 and 2010, showed that over twice as many white children were caught up in the year-to-year increase of poverty (507,000) than were black children (259,000), but poverty was disproportionately high among black children (Macartney, 2011). With more than one in five children in the U.S. (15.75 million) living in poverty in 2010 (Macartney, 2011), the impact of poverty on education is not diminishing.

Education think-tank leader Richard Kahlenberg is among those providing educational reasons for supporting economic integration in schools:

Allowing poor students to attend middle-class schools will increase their academic achievement and attainment, provide them access to better social connections, and improve their chances of long-run success without reducing the achievement of middle-class children ... Classmates provide a 'hidden curriculum' in all schools. In high-poverty schools, peers are likely to have smaller vocabularies and less knowledge to share; they tend to have lower aspirations and negative attitudes toward achievement and to and to engage in anti-achievement

behavior (cutting classes, failing to do homework). Similarly, levels of student disruption are higher, and student mobility and absences are greater, all of which interferes with teaching. Among parents, the poor are less likely to be involved in school affairs, to ensure high standards, and to put pressure on administrators to fire or transfer bad teachers. These parents are less likely than parents in middle-class schools to volunteer in class, to have the ability to apply political pressure to ensure adequate funding, or to provide private financial support (2001, p. 8).

Economic integration benefits have students in terms of social responsibility, as well as understanding the world and national citizenship, disconnecting from issues in other areas; instead they also could be part of a more effective learning community, illustrating that "an important outcome of equity is diversity (Willie, Edwards, & Alves, 2002, pp. 1-6). "The problem of urban schools is not the problem of the city, the problem of people of color; rather it is America's problem" (Normore, Rodriguez, & Wynne, 2007, p. 664). Yet, a lack of diverse experiences is already showing up as an excuse for egregious behavior in the legal system with the creation of a legal defense of "affluenza" — the inability to cope with consequences and to believe that money would provide a way out of life's messes. A "have" Texas teen's blood alcohol level was three times the adult limit when his speeding truck killed four people and injured nine more trying to help a woman whose car had stalled (Strauss, 2014). Despite previous drug/alcohol infractions, he received no jail time — proving that the "haves" operate in a different world. Nearly a generation before this term was created, Peshkin discussed the isolation of affluent students through elite classifications adding to societal fragmentation and the lack of pursuit of common good (2001).

As the system works to keep certain students and communities on the margins, and privatization and fragmentation grow, so does the alarming loss of credibility and reputation for all schools, whether schools valued by their communities or those underserving students (Kohn, 2011). The threat against the very existence of schools in distressed neighborhoods brings Freire’s pedagogy of the oppressed into our current school system. The investment to improve these schools can provide tremendous public and individual payback, with the previously cited \$7 return on preschool investment not accounting for positive impact on future generations (Grunewald & Roinick, 2003). The investment in quality K-12 education produces students “more likely to find gainful employment, have stable families, and be active and productive citizens,” even to live longer — and less likely to commit serious crimes, place high demands on the public health care system and be enrolled in welfare programs” (Mitra, n.d., p. 3). These impacts benefit all of society, “not just those living within the boundaries of struggling school districts” — and may actually be estimated as a payoff of up to \$17 societally and individually for every \$1 spent on quality preschool (Mitra, n.d., p. 29).

The idea that education is an avenue for upward mobility is time-honored and has been put into practice long before cost-benefit analyses were completed. In 1878, an ideology similar to Freire’s led to the founding of Duquesne University amid the squalor of immigrant ghettos during Pittsburgh’s industrial age. By default — no other entity stepped forward to tackle this daunting challenge — a Catholic congregation of Spiritan missionaries founded the forerunner of Duquesne University. The purpose was simple: education was seen as the only means to lift the children and future generations from poverty (Rishel, 1997). Though today’s K-12 schools provide a different context, the

reasons for paying special attention and providing extra investment in educating children of poverty remain relevant.

American schools have long been charged with the intrinsic moral obligation of education to promote democracy (Grunewald & Roinick, 2003). A more recent societal goal is to prepare students for jobs and to support continued economic development (Christensen, Horn, & Johnson, 2008). Thank to globalization, this phenomenon places what happens inside each classroom across America on an international stage — and drives socioeconomic-related gaps in achievement (Rothstein, 2004). Most parents want their children to succeed; in our current system, only the financially secure can assure this will happen. Generationally, as Murray (2012) stated, each class marries a mate of relative success. In two-earner families, this magnifies the earnings gap between high school and college-educated couples. Income and aspirations, often reflected through choice of residence, more frequently and more clearly defines communities of “haves” and “have-nots” (Hungerford & Wasserman, 2004; Murray, 2012).

#### Without Citizen Input, Democracy May Cheapen Educational Choice

For those on the down side of the income gap, “choice” is in danger of becoming a code word for “cheaper,” with those in power establishing inadequate schools for marginal populations to ensure that they stay at the margins (Glass & Welner, 2011). Otherwise, advances in charter, particularly cyber charter, education could result in fewer actual choices, merely providing a cheaper way to impact how and what students learn. A linchpin in bringing together increasingly polarized “have” and “have-not” worlds, is a greater role to be played by parents, students and the wider community in determining the educational agenda (Normore, Rodriguez, & Wynne, 2007) — a triangulation missing but

critical to reform at this juncture. All school discussions are moral dialogues “because in one way or another, sooner or later, they relate to the well-being (e.g., practical, economic, cognitive, emotional, social) of students, parents, community and society” (Peshkin, 2001, p. 4). In America, grounded in the obedience-bound industrial-era and Jeffersonian sorting of elite leaders from workers, current educational lessons focus on unfairness instead of possibilities (Peshkin, 2001). “As a nation, we more readily construe other priorities, problems, rationales, and justifications for sustaining educational injustice than for overcoming it” (Peshkin, 2001, p. iii). Divestment and school closures in distressed communities expand the sorting and labeling process beyond individuals to entire communities. Says researcher Rod Wallace:

Well, the powers that rule American have always used divide and conquer to maintain their power. That’s the purpose of the sorting process — to divide the mass of people so that the powers that be can control everything. ... What we’re proposing is the opposite, to unite people, to share what we have (Fullilove, 2013, p. 32).

Applying this concept to threatened community-anchoring schools would mitigate the power to sort which communities are worthy of investment and which are not, which rests in the hands of school boards, legislators and political contributors. Urban planning, once based upon growth, is now “about disinvestment patterns to help determine which depopulated neighborhoods are worth saving...” (Williams, 2013). Without community engagement, a school board becomes the defacto Oz-like gatekeeper for community destiny. The school board alone decides whether its schools — which of these anchoring public buildings critical to stabilizing a community and gathering in its citizenry — will

continue to be used by the public, which specific schools will close and which residents will be most impacted. Without community input, this discussion typically does not include how economic inequities translate to educational inequities, lack of access and future opportunity, nor does it pick up threads of Freirean connections between individual lives and broader social context. Miller and Kirkland stated:

Freire pointed toward the need to create positive learning environments in which individuals can recognize their oppression(s) and take active roles, collectively constructing their futures as they consider the histories of their collective and unique contexts. ...Freire's educational vision centered on disrupting debilitating internalizations of socioculturally and historically constructed structures among oppressed people that perpetuate their circumstances *over a series of generations* (emphasis added) (Miller and Kirkland, 2010, pp. 46-47).

In conjunction with the rise of cyber and charter schools, I have observed traditional, *public* schools failing to engage their *publics* — students, teachers, parents, taxpayers. Until recent state budget cuts, many local schools had operated seemingly apart from the economic upheavals, rising expenses and health care coverage issues that community residents faced. Local schools responded slowly to the competitive marketplace, though administrative efforts led to savings through group purchasing, a novel self-insurance program and professional development opportunities. A grant afforded Middleton County the occasion to build a regional system that allowed students from one district to enroll in singular, specialized classes not available in the home district but in another county school. Another effort to distinguish public schools examined the possibility of a common STEM (science, technology, engineering and



mathematics) curriculum at participating schools within a consortium, pioneering a new path within the county along the improvement science ideology of assessing, developing, studying and improving, then adjusting in mid-course instead of at the conclusion of a program (Bryk, Gomez, & Grunow, 2010). However, this proposal lost its champion when the proposing superintendent departed the area, followed shortly by the retirement of the intermediate unit director. The discussion ended; inertia was not overcome. Resurrected, it still could offer options, as discussed later, but it is an educational vision deferred. No community discussion or influence has occurred.

Those with children in the existing system —whether biological or neighborhood children — must understand the rewards that could come to future generations with an educated populace that can continue to develop democracy and/or continue to benefit personally and across society as a whole from continued economic opportunities. An important aspect of public schools is an involved public.

Businessman-turned-school-advocate Jamie Vollmer encourages school leaders to build an internal audience and culture of viewing schools as changing institutions and as agents of change. Vollmer promotes the idea of engaging with the public on their turf, beyond the walls of the school building (2010). In Middleton County's economically disadvantaged Omega community, residents themselves, municipal leaders and school leaders talk of the "lack of involvement" from residents and parents (Omega Mayor, personal communication, February 7, 2014, February 21, 2014; Omega School Board Member, personal communication, March 13, 2014; Omega Superintendent, personal communication, February 21, 2014; Resident T, personal communication, February 21,

2014). An observation from a 20-year professional employee of Omega schools, a teacher who became a principal, summarized:

They're involved, but are they engaged? Parents are aware that this event or that event is going on and their child has a PSSA test this week, the next test the following week. I think, overall, they are aware of those things, but are they doing what they're supposed to be doing at home to help them be prepared? Are they making sure they get a good breakfast or getting to bed at a good time? They're signing off on homework plans, but it doesn't look like there's any kind of dialogue with students regarding what they need to fix, when you look at the things marked wrong (on the schoolwork) (Omega Principal, personal communication, May 1, 2014).

How could the school approach learning differently? "If we know students have deficiencies in reading or math, are we trying to address those needs?" asked the Omega Principal:

Are we trying to make them proficient in those things or are we just moving them on? If they move on, they might never catch up. ... We could educate parents on what they could be doing at home, educate parents on everything that's occurring. One thing that has come about (at the school) is conversation regarding how to get parents more involved. In any type of initiative, anything new, do we have parents involved as part of that committee? Then they would have more of a vested interest (Omega Principal, personal communication, May 1, 2014).

With Omega moving toward a new approach to educational issues related to access, equity and economic challenges, this community might serve as the starter group for educational conversations in Middleton County and beyond, devising locally appropriate ways to foster higher academic quality and relevance, sharing information and strategies with similar groups through Networked Improvement Communities [NIC] (Langley et al., 2009) that reach across economic and geographic borders.

## CHAPTER IV

### Designs for Action to Move Forward and Meet the Challenge

#### The Heart of the Matter: Harnessing Emotions and Building Relationships to Foster Improvement

Across the sectors of School, Academy and Community, gathering input is the first — and yet, an ongoing — action step, one that ideally would take place before a community is threatened by divestment. What kind of schools do communities want, producing what kind of students ready for what futures? What supports are stakeholders willing to provide to meet their desired level of academic and cultural student success? What role can community-anchoring public schools themselves play in developing community trust, support and engagement? Ravitch highlights the success of local councils in high poverty areas of Chicago (2013). Jamie Vollmer's *Schools cannot do it alone* (2010) provides excellent suggestions for building "low tech-high touch" relationships that schools can use to foster community understanding and welcome input. With the variance in academic need among students, parents expect more individualized treatment by schools and more state and federal mandates are requiring schools to do more (The ever increasing burden on America's public schools, n.d.). Community-anchoring schools must consider constructive change if they are to survive and if their community residents are to enjoy the benefits of schools in their neighborhoods. As in the Midwestern town whose 15-year struggle to retain its elementary school was detailed by Peshkin in *Imperfect union*, community support is key to change. A goal for community-anchoring schools might be to emphasize "a more personal/caring relationship, student to student and student to faculty" (Former Middleton Superintendent, personal communication, February 15, 2012). Contagious commitment is also promoted by

businessman-turned-public education advocate Vollmer, who pushes schools to veer from the dated “select-and-sort” structure (The Great Conversation, n.d., para. 3), said:

We must break the mental, emotional and cultural grip of the status quo and create schools that unfold the full potential of every child. But we cannot.

America’s educators and their allies cannot change the system and dramatically increase student success until we secure the four Prerequisites of Progress:

community understanding, trust, permission and support (n.d.).

Vollmer suggests that this state can be reached by a combination of formal and informal strategies, first with school administrators engaging teachers informally, then by school personnel, professionals and nonprofessionals, engaging small groups of community members — importantly, on their turf (Vollmer, n.d.). Vollmer details how support grows through community engagement built around understanding the issues a district faces, how members will step up to offer their talents and resources only if they are aware of the need and feel that they are invited to contribute to the cause (Vollmer, n.d.)

Other books on change leadership offer similar advice, touting the strength of emotional attachment as well as rationale to foster agents of change. Peer behavior and values — key community and leadership inputs — play critical roles in sustaining change (Fullan, 2011, pp. 53-54). The impact of community culture and creativity is emphasized by behavioral economics researcher Dan Ariely, who was part of a federal committee to re-examine No Child Left Behind. He stated:

Social norms are the focus that can make a difference in the long run. Instead of focusing the attention of the teachers, parents, and kids on test scores, salaries, and competition, it might be better to instill in all of us a sense of purpose,

mission, and pride in education. To do this we certainly can't take the path of market norms" (2008, p. 85).

As a result, the actual mind, not just the mindset, may change. New behavior "sticks" because of emotional meaning and literally can change the reactions of neurons in adult brains as well as those of children and babies (Fullan, 2011, pp. 112-113). This is universally true, but critically important in distressed environments, where many lurking obstacles might impede positive change. Against this background, the timeline for educational and societal changes place our future generations' and our country's well-being at a pivotal crossroads that needs to be acknowledged by the general public to retain public education within its purview.

Modeling upon the observations of MacArthur Genius Grant winner and surgeon Atul Gawande, substitute the word "education" for "medicine" and "learning" for "disease" in the following:

Medicine is a trying profession, but less because of the difficulties of disease than because of the difficulties of having to work with other human beings under circumstances only partly in one's control. Ours is a team sport, but with two key differences from the kinds with the lighted scoreboards; the stakes are people's lives and we have no coaches (Gawande, 2007, p. 253).

He writes of the importance of "collective know-how with far greater power than any individual could have achieved" and the importance of seeking opportunity to change (2007, p. 257). Substituting the word "educator" for "doctor" in the thoughts below brings the sense of his words alive to the field of education, from positional leaders to in the classroom and grass-roots leaders in the community:

The choices a doctor makes are necessarily imperfect but they alter people's lives. Because of that reality, it often seems safest to do what everyone else is doing. ... But a doctor must not let that happen—nor should anyone who takes on risk and responsibility in society (Gawande, 2007, p. 257).

If society is to respect its industrial past, and the communities and industries that literally built a super power, if it is to make good on promises of justice for all, our choices must start with preserving hope and providing educational opportunity and access in distressed communities. A caveat to facing these issues is that cultural change takes time; mitigating an educational and income achievement gap may take generations. The time required is unfriendly to supporting the current test-funding-reputation triangle, the needs of politicians elected every four years or the demands of an impatient public. But given the polarizing economic divide plus future costs for welfare, public healthcare, public housing and prison, along with needs and wants of students and parents, it seems both economically wise and socially to invest in change.

### Developing an Improvement Science Mindset and Networked Improvement Communities

Taking a page from improvement science strategies, Omega residents can start to organize themselves around discussions of educational priorities. As a member of the Academy, I could contribute to this cause by writing and publishing articles about the educational questions facing Omega and Middleton, working in news, feature and opinion-editorial articles to share information from this and ongoing community-school studies. A common knowledge base shared with School, Academy, Community and government could provide a window on the issue of threatened schools, its scope and importance. This work also will include promoting awareness of the benefits of a school

in a community by developing and providing a checklist for K-12 schools and districts to readily compile a financial and community impact statement. However, the call for a meeting must be brought by community members — not by an outside academic, not by school administrators, not by municipal officials. This could be modeled on the example of a successful McKeesport School-Academy-Community meeting at a church in this nearby Western Pennsylvania community to discuss reasons for and antidotes to disproportional African-American participation in advanced high school classes. The meeting did not require residents to come to the school, but had school leadership come to the people (T. Wanzo, personal communication, March 15, 2014). As Vollmer maintains, the meeting should be placed outside the business-as-normal operational realm to attract stakeholders who may not normally attend sessions that limit community input to a spot on the agenda, a tactic that at least one resident noted as off-putting (Resident A, personal communication, January 17, 2014). To gather in different Omega voices, the meeting would need to be publicized within the school and community by various methods: announcements in church, school, city and board meetings, as well as at community and athletic events; newspapers, websites and Facebook, flyers and posters. Encouraging input from various stakeholders in the educational system and community aligns with Bryk, Gomez, & Grunow's problem-centered approach to establish better infrastructure to match educational problems with improvements (instead of solutions) through such interactions (2010). An NIC starts with a small trial and continues rapid cycles of analysis, planning, execution, adjustments and ongoing cycles leading to other refinements (Bryk, Gomez, & Grunow, 2010). A NIC model begins with the task of defining the educational issues to be resolved, then determining whose expertise is



needed to attack the issues and what social arrangements will enable the work (Bryk, Gomez, & Grunow, 2010). Because both school and community leaders, as well as residents themselves, have voiced concerns about parental apathy and fear of being unable to change the system, care must be taken to welcome the voices from a variety of stakeholders so that change, whatever its shape, is not seen as another top-down mandate. The initial step is to generate interest and conversation about educational issues, focusing on how the community views schools/education. What do community members envision for their local schools? What is working and what is not working to meet their needs and desires? What is the balance between what people can and are willing to pay in support of schools, their desire to continue local independence and their vision of academic quality?

Thus, taking a lesson from *Courageous conversations about race* (Singleton & Linton, 2006), foundational agreements will guide the development of the conversation. The Four Agreements of Courageous Conversation, intended to move people beyond the most basic understanding and shape how the conversation will develop, are: stay engaged, speak your truth, experience discomfort and sustain the conversation, and expect and accept non-closure (Singleton & Linton, 2006, p. 17). Non-closure implies that an amazing “solution” will not be discovered initially but a desired improvement will come to light through the course of the dialogue (Singleton & Linton, 2006, p. 64). If open, honest dialogue erodes obstacles to student achievement based upon race (Singleton & Linton, 2006), these same tactics are likely to succeed around similarly disquieting economic disparities. The point of these agreements and supportive six conditions are to support conversations that allow those who would normally feel unsafe to feel safer, despite experiencing discomfort, because the foundational agreements are in

place and enable meaningful dialogue (Singleton & Linton, 2006). The conditions of *Courageous conversation*, adapted to economic instead of racial challenges, would include: Establishing a context that is personal, local and immediate; isolating economic educational issues while acknowledging the many contributing factors and conditions; developing an understanding of the economic educational power system as it exists and as a sociopolitical construct; examining the role of privilege and its impact on the conversation; establishing a working definition or specific economic educational issue as a focal point (Singleton & Linton, 2006, pp. 18-19).

Additionally, as with such discussions about race, it is important for the group to be “explicit and intentional about the number of participants, prompts for discussion, and time allotted for listening, speaking and reflecting” (Singleton and Linton, 2006, p. 18). Those in the group should be prepared to have themselves and other participants respond emotionally, through their feelings; intellectually, through their thoughts; morally, from gut reactions; and socially, through specific behaviors and reactions (Singleton & Linton, 2006). Acknowledging and exploring these responses in ourselves and in small group settings of three or four people will set groundwork for discussions and perspective sharing, starting with the emotional groundswell to this call to action with Singleton and Linton’s “Got Passion” exercise (2006, pp. 23-24).

The group would purposefully start small, but because enacting structural educational shifts and cultural changes are complex and can be deconstructed into multiple strands of issues “that play out over time and other interact with one another” (Bryk, Gomez, & Grunow, 2010, p. 5), different stakeholders could focus on different aspects of the system. This could create a series of NICs within Omega. As I discovered

with my own process of creating a the community and financial impact checklist in collaboration with the School and Community stakeholders, the inputs of voices from other perspectives is a journey of capacity and relationship building, one that produces a stronger final product. I would hope that the same type of journey could come to the stakeholders of Omega, and would recommend that they examine the following topics, based upon my years of research:

#### Possible Joint Use Capitalizing on a School's Anchoring Abilities

Who owns the school? Who has the power to dictate its use? Some writings obliquely raise the question of whether school boards have the right to close buildings that were paid for and belong to the general public, not just the current school board or the parents with students in currently the school. Ownership is by “the entire community and to future students and parents” (Ravitch, 2013, p. 213). Municipalities may decide to “abandon their investments in existing neighborhoods (The Council of Educational Facility Planners International & U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2004, p. 7), and their decisions, as demonstrated, are far from inconsequential to community and to taxpayers. The walkability, pre-existence of utility access and infrastructures, green space, transportation and fiscal capacity should be considered. Water, sewer, electricity, connectivity and other utilities are cheaper to provide and maintain in more compact neighborhoods (Council of Educational Facility Planners International & U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2004). Architects and contractors have a vested interest in proposing spiffy new buildings or extensive renovations amid rising construction costs. Nationwide, more than \$12.24 billion was spent on school construction in 2011, including over \$2.6 billion each on additions and renovations

(Abramson, 2012). In the region composed of Pennsylvania, New York and New Jersey, \$1 billion less was invested than in the previous year, with most school construction money covering upgrades versus new construction (Abramson, 2012). Part of the argument for community-anchoring schools includes maximizing the investment already put into a school and honoring the historic economic sacrifices made in support of and by the community. Every organization needs and wants functional space to sustain its mission.

While the percentage of households with children nationwide dropped from 47 percent in 1960 to 31 percent in 2008, nearly 55 million students and staff nationwide — about one-sixth of the total U.S. population — are in a school on a weekday, helping to make it one of the country’s leading assets (Filardo, Vincent, Allen, & Frank, 2010). With declining space demands inside schools, space could be available for joint use (Filardo, Vincent, Allen, & Frank, 2010), further solidifying the school’s position as an anchor of the community. Joint use has not been piloted in Pennsylvania (E. Dowdall, personal communication, September 24, 2013), but some other areas are exploring how to best use pre-existing schools in areas of population decline for other services. A decade before Chicago’s mass closures, Anne Arundel County, Maryland, co-jointly created a middle school and community center incorporating a senior center, police-sponsored programs and a performing arts facility. A community school in Neptune, New Jersey, envisioned a health and dental clinic, a community center, and art and music studios with its school, an example of “a facility that accommodates more uses at a lower cost than any single party could have produced alone” (Council of Educational Facility Planners International & U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2004, p. 18). Some

states incentivize such efficiency (Council of Educational Facility Planners International & U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2004).

Given the needs in underserved areas for health care and other services, schools have opportunity to grasp their roles of creating robust, healthy neighborhoods, thus have opportunity also to share their building and grounds with other nonprofits or for-profit uses, adding the possibility of additional income from leasees. “Demographic shifts, changing housing patterns, and new school capital investments present an unprecedented opportunity to reshape the ways local government and schools work together to provide for the people who depend on them and the resources they manage (Filardo, Vincent, Allen, & Franklin, 2010, p. 2). While especially important for low-income, low-resource urban communities who disproportionately struggle to meet community needs, this strategy also could positively impact rural areas likewise caught in the vise of economic and population loss (Filardo, Vincent, Allen, & Franklin, 2010). Joint use strategies hold the potential not just to impact building usage and rental income, but “can directly enhance a school’s curriculum-related activities,” (Filardo, Vincent, Allen, & Franklin, 2010, p. 7), with museums, libraries and other partners becoming readily available to students and faculty. The extent of joint use runs from services that desire a full-time location within a school to those that merely want to use the building in “off” hours, a mutually agreeable joint use and joint development decision that could be reached by a school and interested stakeholders (Filardo, Vincent, Allen, & Franklin, 2010). In San Francisco, for instance, foundation support has helped to provide joint use arrangements with nonprofits in low-income areas, although arrangements could include use of exterior spaces and play equipment; civic groups using the building and grounds for events,

voting and community meetings; public agencies that may not have programs in common with the school; private nonprofit organizations such as after-school programs, health clinics or adult education classes; and private for-profit groups such as private offices or private testing services (Filardo, Vincent, Allen, & Franklin, 2010). The report notes that Pittsburgh is among the land-locked cities where non-district school use has increased, whether via charter schools, housing development and commercial/retail development (Filardo, Vincent, Allen, & Franklin, 2010).

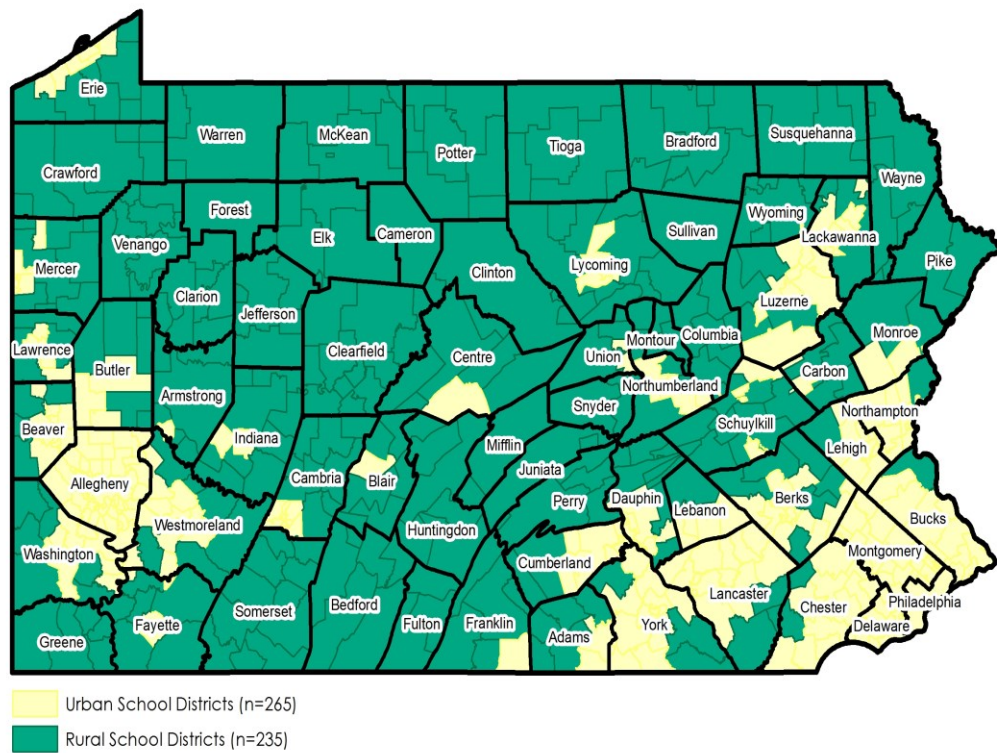
In Middleton County, at least two districts have or are planning to incorporate Head Start programs as rent-paying leases within schools (Beta Superintendent, board meeting, October 3, 2013; Omega Superintendent, personal communication, January 10, 2014), inching toward a “school as community” concept. Besides creating an income stream for the school and offsetting the cost of retaining the building, joint use allows mutual benefit for the programs and a convenience to parents who may have children already in the building. Additionally, parents and school staff have an early opportunity to become familiar with each other.

Could other ideas be explored in this realm, increasing the convenience families and residents with a “one-stop shop” for various services? This tactic could influence how communities grow, the resurgence of urban neighborhoods and the struggles of rural communities to stay intact (The Council of Educational Facility Planners International & U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2004). Joint use could encourage “community-centered schools as resources and enhancements for the entire community, not just for students” (The Council of Educational Facility Planners International & U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2004, p. 7). Given the rural geography of much of

Pennsylvania, as well as the isolated nature of many inner city areas, joint use could be a powerful positive strategy for many areas and people. (See Figure 3).

Figure 3

*Pennsylvania Urban and Rural Counties*



*Figure 3. A map of urban and rural counties in Pennsylvania. Reprinted from Demographics: Rural School Districts, in *The Center of Rural Pennsylvania*, n.d. Retrieved March 14, 2014, from: [http://www.ruralpa2.org/rural\\_muni\\_sd.cfm](http://www.ruralpa2.org/rural_muni_sd.cfm)*

## Producing Public Pressure to Reshape Funding and Allow More Administrative Flexibility

The current educational funding system does not appear sustainable in the Middleton and other environments across the state — yet is ripe for questioning, given the interactions between lobbyists and lawmakers. Could enough grassroots voices, vis-à-vis Networked Improvement Communities, help to change the funding formula?

Pennsylvania pays a smaller percent of the public education than many other states do, and the case has been made in this paper and other research that the state system is not serving economically disadvantaged/distressed communities by requiring a primary local effort to support schools. With a percentage of residents paying discount tax rates and a high level of delinquent taxes, Omega city estimates it received 47 percent of the total assessment (Omega Mayor, personal communication, March 14, 2014). The city has a higher-than-desired inventory of homes available through tax upset sales, sheriff's sales and, ultimately, the county repository. If one can buy a livable house in an Omega neighborhood for \$1,200 through the repository, the economic picture presented is that the house and neighborhood are not desirable, nor will they generate much taxable income for the town and school district (Omega Mayor, personal communication, March 14, 2014). Yet with only about 15 percent of the Omega school district's budget outside fixed costs (Omega Business Manager, board meeting, February 19, 2014), where can the district be expected to make up its nearly \$1 million deficit? The district already has looked at some innovative structural changes, but others could be considered. Could professionals have staggered start times during the day, incorporating after-school help into the district's contracted costs instead of requiring extra after-hours payment for them? If teacher contracts are negotiated for the number of hours in a day, versus a set



workday schedule, schools such as Omega could maximize their contract work and minimize additional supplementary payments while providing additional instruction and support to students — and doing so without burdening or endangering teacher union relationships. For instance, Beta School District has had this option for years, though it has not been put to use (Former Beta Superintendent, personal communication, March 15 2014).

### Reshaping the Delivery and Support of Learning:

#### Charter-Traditional and Other Collaborations, Rethinking Secondary Education

In one collaboration, Middleton County's largest district has been contracted to provide food service for a nearby charter school. Central operations provided on a chargeback basis to school districts by the intermediate unit include self-pay insurance, group purchasing of utilities and supplies, professional development (particularly sessions or updates mandated by the state), special education and career/technology schools and teachers, and printing and graphic services. Could collaborative efforts grow, saving on clerical processes, such as payroll, tuition payment management, and other administrative and support services, to maximize money and staffing? For instance, Omega and neighboring Chi District already share a business manager and technology skills. Omega's students are bused to Chi to attend advanced level classes in the morning. Could other districts employ such collaborations?

Some curricular collaborations, such as allowing enrollment of high school students in schools other than their home schools for particular course, has occurred face to face and through video and/or internet technology (Middleton Intermediate Unit Executive Director, personal communication, February 13, 2014). This concept could be

further developed to benefit from the close proximity of some schools. For instance Omega and two other districts are within a 15-minute drive of each other, although the 400-plus square mile area covered by Middleton County entails about an hour-long drive between schools at the furthest points of the county.

High school education, on average, costs \$1,103 more per pupil than elementary school in Pennsylvania districts (Pennsylvania Department of Education, Data Collection Team, 2012). In Middleton County, the \$831 higher per pupil differential for high school includes three notable outliers. Two of the 14 districts spend more on elementary schooling, including one district without a high school (\$1,673) and a largely rural district (\$1,544) and an outlier district (\$2,502). Statewide, only 65 of the 500 total districts—about 13 percent—spend more on elementary per pupil than on high school (Pennsylvania Department of Education, Data Collection Team, 2012). About 60 percent of the Middleton County charter school enrollees are in grades 8-12, accounting for the majority of tuition loss to charter schools (*Third day enrollment 2013-2014 Middleton Intermediate Unit XXX*, n.d.). The expense differential between elementary and high school grade levels also emerges in construction costs; the national median for construction was \$181 per square foot for elementary school in 2011 compared with \$195 for middle schools and \$219 for high schools. Costs in the low quartile were \$145 per square foot for elementary, \$162 for middle school and \$162 for high school (Abramson, 2012).

Remembering that the largest projected declines statewide are for Western Pennsylvania high schools, the biggest potential for financial savings — and academic strides — point to change at the high school level if instructional, technological and

administrative resources such as curriculum are shared. For instance, could professional specialty teachers be used on an itinerant basis, from art to physics, to share costs? This possibly could bolster science and math, which remain areas of academic and employment opportunity. By employing a story-based curriculum as advocated by Schank (2011), students could team together to work on projects that would utilize “book smart” students as well as “hands on” students at the career/technology school, piggybacking upon buses and scheduling already in place. The educational experience could imitate the workforce model of bringing projects to fruition, as student designer/engineers/architects interact and exchange ideas with the builders, whose skills and input would resolve front-line issues as projects are developed at the career and technology center. In addition, improving a real-life situation in the community, such as rehabilitating housing, might prove central to this work and multiply the value of the effort.

Such steps could move Middleton toward eventually establishing regional high schools. Students could be based within their own districts but share software, curriculum and instruction across the connected schools. Another alternative would be to attend one of three or four regional schools, arranged as magnet schools emphasizing certain fields or practically designed by geographic area for travel time and parents and student convenience. The Middleton career and technology center now serves as the half-day educational home for students who most often head from high school into jobs. Because a system already is in place to bus and pay for students to attend this facility, a model is established that could allow this facility to serve as a “common ground” area for actual design/building of projects, calculating and collecting costs involved, involving a range

of students in STEM-related projects. This would encourage inclusion in a burgeoning field across income, geographic, interest and skill levels, providing students with experiences in interacting with others who may not be like them, giving opportunities for faculty, students and the community to acknowledge skills and learning across these boundaries — particularly if students were actively involved in helping to improve situations and quality of life in their own communities in meaningful, experiential learning, as students involved in the national Y+PLAN program do. Youth+Plan, Learn, Act, Now! Is an educational and action-based research initiative to build students’ knowledge, skills and citizenry “while creating healthy, sustainable, and joyful communities (Center for Cities+Schools, University of California Berkley, 2014). Supported by the University of California-Berkley’s Graduate School of Education and the College of Environmental Design, Y+PLAN partners with city planning agencies (Center for Cities+Schools, University of California Berkley, 2014).

While such collaborations for Omega and Middleton might sound wonderful on paper, care must be taken to hear community voices and concern. Omega students soon will be able to play on Chi’s soccer team and Omega has used Chi’s athletic fields for events. Even with these extracurricular and the previously discussed collaborations, courageous conversations are needed to move any other collaborations forward. For instance, the attitude that Chi is “better” than Omega, can be traced, in part, to long-seated racism and economic divisions among adults, (Resident Y, personal communication, March 22, 2014). This Chi native believes that Chi’s parents would vehemently oppose any merger with Omega. At least one resident in a community near Omega voiced displeasure, when moving years ago, simply about having the ZIP Code of

the Omega post office. Parochialism has ebbed and flowed during Middleton County's voluntary merger. Parents were seen as more resistant to the merger than were their children, voicing concerns over whose child would get to play what position on which sports team and whose National Honor Society was more rigorous, as opposed to global merger issues. The debate of a sports mascot, school colors and a school name were brought up at initial meetings of the merger but wisely diverted until groundwork was laid for a broader vision (State Lawmaker, personal communication, February 14, 2014). Yet economic issues ultimately won parents and school officials to accept the reality of the merger and might again play a role in strengthening collaborations.

To be clear, these questions are points of consideration only. I have not sought a single solution—*my* single solution—to respond to the threats on community-anchoring schools. Instead, my work looks to involve the community and its leadership voicing *their* ideas to act upon improvements in *their* educational landscape for their children and grandchildren, neighbors, friends and future generations.

Once these probe questions help Omega's NIC to select its focus and appropriate people are at the table, Omega's NIC could initiate a Plan Do Study Act cycle, as advocated and detailed by Langley et al. (2009, p. 98). These rapid-fire cycles include questions to be answered, predictions of answers (to allow a clear view of why or how a situation is different than anticipated, as well as to prevent perfect hindsight) and plans for collecting data. The Do portion includes the attempt to make improvements and observations, as well as to record information and actions not part of the plan. Study allows time to compare data with predictions and examine results, while Act entails making a rational move based on the information gathered and learning that has occurred

(Langley et al., 2009, pp. 98-99). The cycle then can begin again, with the purpose of refining the action, building both knowledge base and capacity. After the initial community meeting, core committees could be established to synthesize focal issues and determine tactics for academic and community improvements with pilot groups to further bridging school and community. Subsequent community meetings would continue to be held off the school property to continue to foster a growing community trust/involvement level on neutral ground. The stakeholders would discuss their efforts and determine the next paths to take on the road to improvement, whether it be change within the existing pilot or an expansion of the pilot group.

If Omega sustains its NIC, it could partner with and encourage others to be involved toward the similar goal of educational improvement in Middleton County. For instance, Omega's superintendent, school board and community might want to develop and test-run ideas with other Middletown superintendents, school boards and communities, forming NICs across the county. Or it could choose to reach out to others in similar — or demographically different — circumstances to continue to refine the focal improvements. Ideally, this could create formal and informal groups across the region and state, all working toward educational improvement. Over time, the work of the NIC could possibly mitigate the observation of one long-time college administrator that, overall, the least prepared Middleton County students come from the districts with the fewest assets, districts like Omega and smaller Mu (College Administrator, personal communication, Feb. 14, 2014).

## Expanding Adult Education Possibilities

The NIC meetings should be broad-based enough to include what educational opportunities are desired for adults, not just by adults, as Resident D suggested.

Community-anchoring schools can provide hands-on environments for adults as well as children, capitalizing on experiential learning that is shown to impact human minds and mindsets at all ages. If learning is seen to have value because it helps adults as well as children to stay healthier and feel better, if it provides a means to stabilize or increase income and assets, if it makes using the computer, fixing a faucet or connecting with friends and family easier, parents who enjoy learning will become better advocates of education for their children. Practice is what drives theory, according to any number of change experts, including educational leader Michael Fullan, (2011), who sees “deliberate practice as the crucible of learning” (2011, p. 51). Fullan illustrates his point with athletics, noting that NFL receiver Jerry Rice “spent very little time playing football, compared to practicing... it requires ten years of deep development to become an expert in anything” (Fullan, 2011, pp. 46-47). A literal hands-on approach fosters desirable success-breeds-success results, according to Fullan (2011):

... It is not inspiring visions, moral exhortation or mounds of irrefutable evidence that convince people to change, it is the actual experience of being more effective that spurs them to repeat and build on the behavior.

... Helping people accomplish something that they have never accomplished before causes motivation to increase deeply. Such newly found motivation is tantamount to passionate commitment that is further contagious to others” (pp. 51-52).

In towns like Omega, where sports are highly valued, experiential opportunities could provide an entrée to increase educational motivation for both adults and students. “If only the coaches touched the ball, the kids wouldn’t get any better. If the kids only watched the director play an instrument, they wouldn’t develop” (Former Beta Superintendent, personal communication, February 15, 2012). If Omega and other schools incorporated leadership learning into summer football training, for instance, more might be accomplished during the academic season as well as the lifetimes of these students (Resident B, personal communication, January 17, 2014). Instead of having football as the end-all, be-all, football could become a tool to help provide the non-cognitive skills critical to success.

Community involvement, which is fraught with both positive and negative exchanges, could lead to overall support and understanding of educational aspirations on both sides of the school entrance doors — eventually giving the district and the students the support they need in the face of a threatening financial situation.

#### How the Community Regards Its School: Assigning a Quantitative Value

If people take the time and energy to devote to improving their schools, as outlined above in *Courageous conversations* and NICs, they will be prioritizing what they value in their schools and in their towns. One step to help determine this value is by creating a financial/community impact statement, which many nonprofit anchors compile to illustrate purchasing power, volunteerism and payroll impact. For instance, Duquesne University tracks the financial impact of its purchases in the local community; its total payroll in the region, the tax contributions of employees, and the volunteer efforts of employees and students, including the number of hours contributed, the market value of



the donated hours and outcomes in communities (Duquesne University community engagement report 2007-2009, n.d.; Duquesne University economic impact report, n.d.; Duquesne University impact report 2011, n.d.). The New England Association of Schools and Colleges likewise completes an economic impact report for all accredited schools in the region, including K-12 schools, and encourages universities to assist K-12 schools to document their community and financial impact (Alam, 2010). The point of the report is to showcase “that educational institutions are more than mere economic contributors—they are vital to New England’s economic development” (Alam, Oct. 15, 2010, p. 3). The association “recognizes a need to understand and subsequently inform members of the public about the powerful link between educational institutions and regional economic well-being” (Alam, 2010, p. 3). The NEASC report, compiled annually since 2004, showed an economic impact of more than \$135 billion for the 2006-2007 academic year for preK-16, with accredited K-12 schools alone accounting for \$17 billion (Alam, 2010). K-12 schooling in the region impacted about 884,000 students — plus their parents (Alam, 2010). The total impact of education in the region topped the expenditures of many locally based Fortune 500 companies, with over \$5.1 billion spent on public school teacher and staff salaries and another \$2 billion on benefits in Fiscal 2007, plus millions more spent on student transportation and food services (Alam, 2010). At least one K-12 school within NEASC, the elite, independent private boarding school Choate Rosemary Hall, makes its economic impact report readily available online. The school is among the largest employers of the Wallingford area (374 faculty and staff, plus 128 contracted food service and janitorial workers) with a payroll of \$13 million in the Wallingford area — plus another \$2.5 million for contracted workers. Building and renovation investments

(capital projects) totaled \$9.1 million in the 2012-2013 school year, with utility bills hitting \$2.5 million and its purchases in Wallingford itself topping \$13.2 million. Choate Rosemary Hall provides a sampling of volunteer efforts by faculty, staff and students, and discusses ways the campus absorbs other costs, ranging from housing a symphony to providing hockey time at the local rink (Economic Impact, n.d.). The report effectively paints a broad, summative portrait of the school's investment in the area with easy-to-digest data.

One potential generative impact of my work has included developing an economic and community impact report checklist (Appendix E), drawing on insights from university faculty and institutional research staff, current and former school administrators, school district business managers, and residential and commercial real estate agents. Impact reports allow schools to establish, clearly and quantitatively, some of their anchoring abilities “to broaden community understanding of how an educational institution benefits a local service area... in addition to educational and social contributions,” while also illustrating the impact on the local area if the school did not exist (MacFarland, 1999, pp. 1-5). These elements could include operational expenditures for payroll, including retirement; supplies and services for local and state businesses; outside resources or private grants; identification of the number and type of jobs at the institution; increases in skills and earning opportunities for local workers; and a sense of volunteer contributions to and by the school, including use of facilities (MacFarland, 1999). It helps people to better understand the value of their school, provides data-based reasons for why the school is important and paints a picture of the void that would be felt in the community if the school would close.

## CHAPTER V

### Generative Impacts, Possible Considerations

#### Could Networked Improvement Communities Maximize Generative Impacts?

My work builds upon Lyson's seminal work (2002) showing that schools bring more than education to neighborhoods and upon the work of the Center for Rural Pennsylvania, as it looks for ways to help districts balance fiscal responsibility with academic opportunity and economic well-being in areas farther from city centers and their many educational options. In seeking input from adult residents and parents, as well as school administrators and board members, this research has explored a number of perspectives on school population declines and a nuanced understanding of the importance of schools in communities, which accounts for some of the often-encountered resistance to closure of neighborhood schools for reasons of tradition, acknowledgement of mazes and attachment to place, despite fiscal restrictions.

One goal of this work is to raise awareness of the roles of the economic divide and depopulation, particularly in Western Pennsylvania, to improve understanding so action might be taken to mitigate the issue.

A second generative impact calls to action those from communities in Middleton County, and those like them across the state and nation. Generative impacts also further the academic foundation of this work, setting the stage for additional research into areas of bright spots (Heath & Heath, 2010) and reconsidering the impact of school size, particularly with the reminders that students at risk do better in small schools and their parents tend to be more involved (Cotton, 2006; Council of Educational Facility Planners International & U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2004). Because part of this work involves looking at the value and accounting of "intangible" assets of K-12 schools as

community anchors, I developed a checklist that could be used by single schools or districts to assess and account for their impact in the community. Future work could include ways to take a similar look at schools amid closure debates.

First, the generative impacts of this work enhance the awareness of government agencies, elected officials, students, Academy and residents about how and why schools are valued in their communities, beyond the core function of educating children. My intent is that greater understanding will spark action to improve schools and narrow the economic achievement gap. Generative products could include writing and distributing articles with local media, spreading the word about this issue to a wider audience and promoting the idea of Networked Improvement Communities within schools. Residents could work together, with the support of the Academy, to tackle this complex issue, looking through different lenses and perspectives.

NICs working in Omega and Middleton County could generate a breakdown of parochialism and encourage residents and officials to gather together with a common willingness to improve educational access and quality, working toward a vision of Middleton County as a region with educational resources to share, to the advantage of its tax-paying residents, its parents and its students. As NICs grow, they ultimately could be leveraged across the state, even the country, as participants across School, Academy and Community boundaries become participants united across geographic boundaries, too. Technology provides a bonus for collaboration because of the relative ease of information and idea exchanges over distance; a base website, blog or social media page could be used to aggregate and exchange this information.

Generative impacts also include examining existing financial and educational assets by evaluating a school's anchoring benefits. Community and financial impact reports could initiate a different way of framing the value of anchoring schools, accounting for benefits often considered as "intangible" or immaterial, as well as purely financial advantages. As a starting point for valuation, impact reports represent a pressing need because, at least empirically, distressed communities, both urban and rural, will face pressures for closures based upon projected population declines and a sedentary state funding formula.

Because some marginalized communities already have lost their schools and others are on the verge of losing them, this is a fight for their futures. "For some time now, we have noticed the decline in rural school enrollment and have speculated that this is going to result in some school closings. These closings will likely have significant impact on rural communities" (J. Johnson, Center for Rural Pennsylvania, personal communication, March 16, 2013).

#### Factors to Consider Before Closure, Based on the Chicago Example

More voices from communities where schools have been closed or where closure is a threat need to be heard in order to learn what factors of school life are given the communities' highest considerations and the impact of closure. In a retrospective look at closures, were the factors considered the "right" ones to examine? What worked? What didn't? What has the impact been? Alternatively, what else could have been done? Could a rubric or checklist, similar to the checklist developed for the impact report, be developed to weigh factors in a school closure that has faced so many communities and

might face the likes of Omega? Could alternatives to closure have been realistically pursued?

Based on questions raised in Chicago, the rubric might consider factors such as:

**Cost:** What are projected savings and how are they determined? Does the estimate include hidden costs, such as needed additional investment in safety; potential legal challenges; outside vendors to help manage community expectations and marketing issues for properties; possible bond funding for renovations, including infrastructure (computer) upgrades; professional fees for upgrading the consolidated schools; necessary legal advertisements; realistic estimates of maintenance of mothballed schools; costs of marketing or disposing of schools (razing or sale)?

**Buildings themselves:** When were buildings constructed? Last renovated? How does physical condition play into closure decisions? If physical status is an issue, why were some buildings neglected in deference to others? Is that related to the economic status of the neighborhood? What is the school's capacity? Could buildings with excess capacity be used in new ways? Are these adaptations providing an improved learning environment? Could other organizations share the space?

**Physical location:** If several schools are in proximity, how is a particular school selected for closure? Many of Chicago's schools were located in the low socioeconomic areas of South and West Chicago. Why should these already distressed areas bear the brunt of the closure plan?

**Academic performance:** Is academic performance a snapshot in time, as in Chicago, or an analysis of trends? What aspects of academic performance should be

considered? If academic performance is tied to socioeconomic status, should not the neighborhood be considered as well as the school?

In investigating the endangerment of community schools as a matter of social justice and a point of unity between rural white and urban minority districts and families, I plan next to further document where schools are closing across Pennsylvania and overlay economic data. This will reveal whether the empirical observations of school closures in distressed communities are, indeed, accurate. Also, I plan to update the current tax effort supporting charter school tuition in Middleton County, working with state officials and agencies to obtain the necessary statistical information to update the spending and tax trends.

#### How Do the ‘Bright Spots’ Function?

Exceptions are always worthy of study as the “bright spots” in the landscape (Heath & Heath, 2010, pp.28-48). As an example, the Tidioute Community Charter School in Warren County warrants further examination to determine how a small, remote community kept a school in its environs alive — especially when a traditional public school was deemed unable to survive. This charter school, which emphasizes environmental studies, was recognized nationally in 2013 as a Blue Ribbon School though it serves less than 300 students PreK-12 (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). The evolving situations in Omega and surrounding Middleton County, as well as in greater Pittsburgh are worth watching. Additional study in these areas could weave threads more closely between urban and rural schools, expanding the work of Lyson and Yan, as well as building upon questions raised in the latest work of Diane Ravitch’s

*Reign of error* (2013). Collective knowledge could be tapped to document and further understand this issue for different settings.

A retired Middleton superintendent asks, “Does the school make the community or does the community make the school?” (Retired Middleton Superintendent, personal communication, February 22, 2014). As with every human endeavor of significant learning, it is hoped that the past will inform better future decisions within local communities.



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## Appendices

### Appendix A

#### Glossary

**Achievement gap** is the difference in the measure of collective student academic success by standardized test scores, grades, high school completion rates, and college enrollment and completion rates, compared with the dominant group. Persistent achievement gaps have existed over decades among racial and ethnic groups, but the academic achievement gap between have and have-not students has grown to be greater than the racial achievement gap (Reardon, 2013, pp. 10-13).

**Anchor institutions**, often nonprofit organizations, tend not to move once they are established in the community and often correlate to local economics, surpassing traditional manufacturing corporations as leading employers in many areas (Democracy Collaborative, n.d.). These include K-12 schools (Texas A&M University, n.d.).

**Community-anchoring schools** are centrally located and used by nearby residents (*Community-centered schools offer numerous benefits*, n.d.). Based on trends observed as an experienced journalist, I would modify this definition to include schools located in neighborhoods and small communities. Residents, not only in urban areas, but in suburbs and small towns, have "moved out," leaving schools in small towns, which historically would have been central to most of the district's population, in an area perhaps no longer central. For instance, Middleton County census data show that the historic population centers — river towns — have been losing population to outlying areas. But these river town schools remain significant to the community fabric. As the National Trust observes:

Residents walk around the track while children play on the playgrounds.

Community groups use the school for after-school programs and events. ... In addition to providing a place to educate our children, schools are also important anchors that help define and sustain our neighborhoods.

**Charter schools**, according to the National Charter School Resource Center, "are publicly funded, independently operated schools that are allowed to operate with more autonomy than traditional public schools in exchange for increased accountability. In 1991, Minnesota became the first state to pass a charter school law. Today, 41 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico have similar laws" (National Charter School Resource Center, n.d.). In Pennsylvania, payment made by the home district to the charter school is based upon each individual school district's average cost per pupil (Former Beta superintendent, personal communication, November 1, 2011). Additionally, if students have learning disabilities or special-education needs, home districts pay almost double that tuition.

**Cyber charter schools**, are typically "organized under the authority of a charter granted by one district and then recruiting students from throughout the state," with lessons delivered online (Gentzel, 2002). As with other charter schools, payment springs from the home district at the rate of the cost per pupil by district (Former Beta Superintendent, personal communication, November 1, 2011).

**Economically disadvantaged**, a term used interchangeably with low-income, quantified by federal definition as an income of \$37,060 for a family of three, \$44,700 for a family of four and \$52,340 for a family of five (Health Resources and Services

Administration “Low Income Levels” Used for Various Health Professions and Nursing Programs Included in Titles III, VII and VIII of the Public Health Service Act, 2011).

**For-profit education** encompasses PK-12 schools being operated by companies with the intent of producing revenue based upon their services. More than 100,000 students attended for-profit schools in 2000, according to Carrie Lipps of the Cato Institute. The institute pointed out that, "Increasingly, entrepreneurs recognize that the public's dissatisfaction with one-size-fits-all schools is more than just fodder for political debates. It is a tremendous business opportunity" (Lipps, 2000). In Pennsylvania, charter schools must be nonprofit organizations themselves, but they can be operated by for-profit management companies.



## Appendix B



Duquesne University School of Education  
600 Forbes Ave.  
Pittsburgh, PA 15282

### CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

**TITLE:** *The New Endangered Species: Community-Centered Public Schools*

**INVESTIGATOR:** Karen Ferrick-Roman, 600 Forbes Ave., Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15282

ferrickromank@duq.edu

412.736.1877

**ADVISOR:** Dr. Gretchen Generett

Department of Foundations and Leadership

103B Canevin Hall

PHONE: 412.396.1890

#### **Purpose**

You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to determine the endangerment of community schools as a matter of social justice. This project will collect pre-existing data on school closures across Pennsylvania, then through surveys and interviews with school officials, parents and adult residents, document individuals' observations about the impact of school closings on families and communities. Schools bring more than education to neighborhoods; they are learning centers for adults as well as for children, provide jobs and stability, and serve as a cultural and identity anchors.

#### **Significance of the study**

Western Pennsylvania is expected to face the state's most severe, continued decline in school-aged population, and Central Pennsylvania's student population is also expected to decline. This situation, combined with marketplace competition from cyber charter and brick-and-mortar charter schools, plus financial/budgetary stresses are pressuring school systems to consolidate operations. Yet, questions abound as to whether school closure actually saves money—and whether communities are needlessly disrupted. Western Pennsylvania provides an opportunity to examine what this new closure/consolidation scenario may look like in small towns, suburban and rural areas. Educational programs can be influenced by community context. However, any findings of successes or shortcomings in response to current and growing socioeconomic, demographic and marketplace pressures might prove to be useful starting points for other schools in similar situations.

**Source of Support**

This study is being performed as partial fulfillment of the requirement for the doctoral degree in educational leadership at Duquesne University.

**Information about the participant's involvement in the study**

My surveys and interviews of school administrators/board members, as well as adult residents and parents, intend to collect real and perceived outcomes from school closures, and to provide a peek into the future options regarding building closures. This discussion could be expanded and shared with school leaders, politicians and residents in areas facing possible closure so they can, within their communities, explore possible alternative solutions that are more amenable to students, citizenry and budgets.

You will be encouraged to share your experiences, thoughts and concerns. A series of pre-guided questions will be used in the initial survey and guide select follow-up phone/in-person interviews. Study participants will be asked to review select transcripts for accuracy and indicate any needed revisions.

**Risks**

This is seen as no- to low-risk research, with the greatest risks to school employees, board members, residents and business owners who might feel political pressure to answer in a specific way. There are no risks greater than those encountered in everyday life.

**Benefits**

This study may contribute to strategies, tactics and outcomes that may impact school closures or alternative decisions in the community. It also will advance scholarship related to the interaction of community and schools.

**Compensation**

Participants will not be compensated for participation in this study.

**Confidentiality**

For the purpose of this study, all conversations will be kept confidential. In an effort to protect your identity, you will be given an alias that will be used to reference your comments. Other participants also will be assigned an alias that will be used to reference their responses. All information pertaining to this study will be locked in a secure office at Duquesne University. Only the researcher and faculty advisor will have access to interview information. After the completion of the study, this information will be destroyed.

**Contact Information**

If you have any questions about the study or procedures, you may contact Karen Ferrick-Roman at Duquesne University, 600 Forbes Avenue, Pittsburgh, PA 15282, or call 412.736.1877. If you have any questions pertaining to your rights as a participant, you may contact the office of research at 412.396.6326.

**Participation**

Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may decline to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may remove yourself from the study at any time. Participation is limited to adults over the age of 18 and is uncompensated.

**Summary of Results**

A summary of the results of this research will be supplied to you, at no cost, upon request.

**Consent**

I have read the above statements and understand what is being requested of me. I also understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my consent at any time, for any reason. On these terms, I certify that I am willing to participate in this research project.

I understand that should I have further questions about my participation in this study, I may call Karen Ferrick-Roman, 412.736.1877, Dr. Gretchen Generett, 412.396.1890, and Dr. Linda Goodfellow, Chair of the Duquesne University Institutional Review Board, 412.396.6326.

**Participant's Signature** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date** \_\_\_\_\_

**Researcher's Signature** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date** \_\_\_\_\_



Duquesne University School of Education

600 Forbes Ave.  
Pittsburgh, PA 15282

School Closure Survey for Parents, Community Residents and Business Owners

This survey is being conducted as part of a research project in the Duquesne University School of Education educational leadership doctorate program to examine the impact and possibility of school closures. Participation is voluntary, limited to those over 18 years old and uncompensated.

If, at any point, you don't wish to continue participation, you may opt out. You also may be invited to participate in follow-up survey/questions/focus group, which is also limited to those over 18 years old, uncompensated and voluntary. Again, you may opt out at any time.

Thank you for taking the time to participate and for sharing insights on this topic.  
If you would like to know the results of this survey or have further questions, please email me at [ferrickromank@duq.edu](mailto:ferrickromank@duq.edu) or call 412.736.1877.

Karen Ferrick-Roman

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COMMUNITY VIEWS ON SCHOOL CLOSURE

1. Did you have any children in school at the time of the closing?                      Yes                      No

If so, what were their grade levels and buildings?

2. Do you have any children in the school system now?                      Yes                      No

If so, what are their grade levels and buildings?

Were they displaced by the school closing?                      Yes                      No

3. Did you support the school closing?                      Yes                      No

Why or why not?

Who else felt the same as you about the closing? (Groups or individuals)

4. Did you see any other option to the school closing? Yes                      No  
If so, what?

5. Have you seen a change in your community since the school closing?

Yes                      No

If so, what?

6. What do you see as the most significant factors to consider when weighing a school closure? (Check all that apply)

Budgetary reductions

Staffing implications

Transportation schedules

Student safety

Community input

Community need/ desire for a school

Distance between schools

Location of athletic facilities

Economic status of the community

Level of activism and support in the community

Physical condition of building

Community/student traditions

Number of students in the community

Other (please list) \_\_\_\_\_

7. Overall, do you think the closing has left your community better, worse or the same?

Better          Worse          Same

Why?

8. Are you satisfied with what has been done with the closed schools?

Yes          No

Why or why not?

9. Are you willing to participate in a follow-up survey, by email, phone or in person?  
If so, please share your contact information:

Name:

Email and phone:

10. Any other comments?

Questions? Contact: Karen Ferrick-Roman, Duquesne University 412.736.1877  
[ferrickromank@duq.edu](mailto:ferrickromank@duq.edu)

Appendix C  
Policy Brief for Local Legislators

Hi Representative NAME,

Thanks for talking with me last week and agreeing to meet with me on Friday.

I want to share that I have no strong political affiliations and agendas other than to see Middleton County and other areas like it across the state to succeed and flourish more than they currently are. I was a reporter at the Middleton County News for 25 years, from 1980 to 2006, when I went to work for University Public Affairs. At the News, I covered many communities and schools, including the birth of PA Cyber Charter; in my career, I've covered about 30 different school boards in Ohio and PA and received many regional, state and national awards for my journalistic work.

In Middleton County, I've been witnessing a growing divide between the "haves" and the "have-nots. National research shows the income gap is DOUBLE the racial achievement gap. Research also shows that for every \$1 spent on quality pre-school education, \$7 is saved down the road in welfare payments, medical coverage, housing and jail costs.

Middleton County and particularly schools in western PA are losing population and more extreme losses are predicted. School funding is reduced. Charter and cyber charter schools are draining more students and resources from public community-anchoring schools. Testing has become its own industry within the educational sector.

Decades of research support the idea that a school anchors the community. It provides a public meeting place, a place where adults as well as children can be educated and entertained; it provides jobs and makes purchases in the local community. It can stabilize

housing values. Just as many other nonprofits, higher ed and med, a public school is an anchor institution.

But, with the alarm sounded by Omega being on financial watch, what is the domino effect? What is the future for all of the schools in Middleton County? Distressed communities are the ones MOST in need of the amenities of a school—yet, across the state, distressed communities have been the ones most often to bear the burden of losing schools. (I have been working with the Center for Rural PA in an attempt to actually map school closures across the state.)

Before referring you to the information I've collected around this issue, I'd like to share one more story to highlight my concern with Middleton County's insularity and growing have-not status.

I have two sons, both local school district graduates. One son will graduate from a top-tier, private Catholic university in May, with a secondary math education degree, an instructional technology specialist certification and a business certificate. A National Honor Society student in high school, he has achieved his math goals only with tutoring and an enormous amount of work and encouragement. He plans to migrate east, where his girlfriend (a Middleton County, first-generation college graduate) will head to optometry school.



The other son, a Ph.D. student in a STEM field at a highly ranked research university, graduated first in his high school class and attended a top-50 national university on academic scholarship. He was among the small percentage of his peers who had attended public high school. When I would call him, we would have whispered conversations; he was in the library. Every night. Why? “Not only do I have to learn what they’re teaching in class, I have to learn what everybody else already knows.”

He had good teachers—teachers who came in early in the morning to work with him so he could fit 9 subjects into an 8-period day. Teachers who cared professionally and personally about him. A supportive family.

In Middleton County, he was a “have.” In the wider, more competitive world, he was a “have-not.”

What faces the rest of our Middleton County kids?

I’m willing to do what I can to keep our Middleton County kids from falling into the income inequality gap. I look forward to talking with you,

Karen Ferrick-Roman  
412.736.1877  
Feb. 5, 2014

*\*\*Shared with three state lawmakers*

**Education & the Income**

**Achievement Gap:**

**A Critical Intersection for**

**Middleton County**



Karen Ferrick-Roman  
February 2014

## **Education & the Income Achievement Gap:**

### **A Critical Intersection for Middleton County**

Community-anchoring public schools are becoming endangered in the communities that most need the stability that a school offers. In Pennsylvania, economically stressed communities appear predominately as rural, largely white areas and urban, largely minority neighborhoods. The threat of school closures exists alongside a persistent economic achievement gap. Going forward, in Middleton County and the state, how can we address the gap without falling into tried and yet, oftentimes unproven, patterns? How can we maximize the use of our educational dollars to benefit students and their communities?

**Now the top predictor of academic achievement, the income gap sets a permanent stage for what and how children learn—and how, as adults, they contribute to society.**

- The economic achievement gap has grown to double the achievement gap between black and white students in the last 50 years—and is 30 to 40% larger for those born in 2000 than those born in the 1970s. Poor students, on average, lag two years behind the academic achievement of other students. Though high-achieving individuals may inspire us, the income gap average is never crossed.
- Half of those born into poverty live in persistent poverty their entire lives; poverty overshadows their lives, with links to behavioral and health problems, working memory, even impacting marriage and longevity.

- Middleton County significantly lags the state and the nation in key indicators.

**MIDDLETON COUNTY: FALLING BEHIND**

	<b>Middleton County</b>	<b>PA</b>	<b>U.S.</b>
College degrees	18.90%	26.90%	27.90%
Poverty rate	11.50%	12.50%	15.10%
Median income	\$44,557	\$49,501	\$49,445

U.S. Census Bureau

- Poor children do better in smaller schools and when they are enriched by extra- and co-curricular activities. In areas where transportation issues are a concern — either where people do not have access to vehicles or the distance is challenging — student and parent participation in schools can drop.

***Yet, the loss of student population threatens many schools.***

- Nationwide, public school closures grew from fewer than 800 in 2000-2001 to 1,069 10 years later — directly impacting 279,592 students, 18,854 teachers, plus other employees. The steady drop in enrollments are “triggering school closings that have destabilized neighborhoods, caused layoffs of essential staff and concerns in many cities that the students who remain are some of the neediest and most difficult to educate” (Rich, 2012 July 23).
- Pennsylvania is no exception to this trend. Schools will become emptier buildings in western and central PA, in inner city and rural areas. PA’s rural schools account for about half of the state’s districts, and 82 percent of the state’s rural

secondary schools will be severely under-enrolled by 2019. More than half are expected to operate at 25% or more below capacity.

**PROJECTED UNDERENROLLMENT in PA by 2019**

<b>Region</b>	<b>High School</b>	<b>Elementary</b>
<b>Western PA</b>	<b>90%</b>	<b>70%</b>
<b>Central PA</b>	<b>80%</b>	<b>50%</b>

**Source: Yan, 2009, Center for Rural PA**

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**Powerful Numbers for Middleton County**

In 30 years, between 1981-1982 and 2001-2010, Middleton County lost 11,000 students.

That is the approximate equivalent of:

The county's current five largest school districts

- The county's current nine smallest school districts
- The total (statewide) enrollment of the PA Cyber Charter School.

## MIDDLETON COUNTY ENROLLMENT DECLINE

DISTRICT	% DECREASE	ENROLLMENT	
	30 year	2001-2002	2013-2014
Alpha	-34.17	2,793	2,637
Beta	-33.25	1,520	1,491
Chi	-29.88	2,347	2,225
Delta	-42.32	323	285
Epsilon	-30.69	2,489	2,509
Eta	-36.53	1,560	1,515
Gamma	-40.58	1,751	1,718
Iota	-45.02	718	698
Kappa	-15.39	1,995	1,981
Lambda	-29.65	1,177	1,156
Mu	-39.04	890	770
Omega	-43.21	1,162	1,132
Sigma*	-29.13	2,413	2,410
Theta	-29.01	1,657	1,528

\*Merger of Sigma and Tau

Middleton Intermediate Unit, n.d.

### **Charter School Losses**

For home districts, population declines are exacerbated by the numbers of students enrolling in charter schools. Nationwide, the number of charter schools grew from 1,993 in 2000-2001 to 5,300 10 years later, with student enrollment increasing from 448,343 to more than 1.78 million students. Charter school enrollment also is growing across Middleton County, with the cyber charter school's two brick-and-mortar sisters, a performing arts high school and an elementary level charter, which opened in 2012-13.

## ENROLLMENT IN MIDDLETON CHARTER SCHOOLS

Charter School	2006-2007	2010-2011	2011-2012	2013-2014
Kappa Area Academic Charter	45	125	89	91
Elementary Academy Charter				331
High School Performing Arts Center	248	327	295	309
Cyber Charter School	293	404	465	407
All others	55	96	147	134
<b>Totals</b>	<b>641</b>	<b>952</b>	<b>996</b>	<b>1272</b>

### *Middleton Intermediate Unit, 2013*

The opening of the nearby Elementary Academy jumped charter enrollment from Omega from 100 to 149—high, but not the highest number of seats in the county. Thus, for the financially strapped district, which already shares a business manager with a neighboring district, buses students in advanced high school classes to the neighboring district and sold its the buses to contract with a bus company, is suffering more loss.

**For Omega, the amount of deficit (\$1 million) that garnered the unwanted attention of financial watch is equal to the amount of tuition (\$1 million) paid for charter school students,** according to the state auditor general’s report. And the state cannot/will not pay the difference. This example illustrates how charter costs are rising for local districts, which still have overhead in buildings and transportation, as well as other regulations/expectations that charter schools may not.

The Intermediate Unit calculated home district’s charter costs in terms of mills for 2008-2009.

**MIDDLETON COUNTY CHARTER SCHOOL COSTS BY  
DISTRICT, 2008-2009**

District	<u>Charter School Cost</u>		# of Students	Total Tuition	Charter Tuition in Mills
	Reg Ed	Special Ed			
Alpha	\$7,882	\$16,380	110	\$935,017	3.93
Beta	\$7,905	\$13,934	24	\$178,140	1.41
Chi	\$8,060	\$16,865	85	\$755,541	3.56
Delta*					
Epsilon	\$8,024	\$13,363	73	\$614,532	2.65
Eta	\$8,216	\$13,624	23	\$210,597	1.14
Gamma	\$82,667	\$16,418	47	\$437,460	3.10
Iota	\$8,755	\$19,087	40	\$381,212	5.90
Kappa	\$7,832	\$13,196	102	\$884,717	4.48
Lambda	\$11,462	\$22,196	33	\$378,234	3.15
Mu	\$9,876	\$21,496	37	\$411,810	6.72
<b>Omega</b>	<b>\$8,996</b>	<b>\$19,641</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>\$492,380</b>	<b>5.53</b>
Sigma	\$7,986	\$14,936	56	\$447,209	2.10
Tau	\$9,155	\$18,459	39	\$394,267	7.86
Theta	\$7,824	\$14,553	48	\$422,647	4.70
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>\$120,240</b>	<b>\$234,148</b>	<b>767</b>	<b>\$6,943,763</b>	

\*Delta did not respond

Middleton Intermediate Unit, 8 October 2011

**Balancing Act: Education, Economy and Quality of Life**

The typical answer to financial issues in districts is to close schools.

But is that the best answer?

Schools serve the broadest constituency with education, employment, social, cultural and recreational opportunities for all ages. Yet, have-not areas across the country have seen



their community schools close for cost savings. But the savings for closing schools are not as great as anticipated, with many schools

“...Shut down precisely because they were in areas suffering depopulation and disinvestment.”

--Pew Charitable Trusts

Economies of scale are not always as productive as they may seem; oftentimes the benefits are presumed, not actually proven. West Virginia serves as an example where consolidation cost more, not fewer, educational dollars, and families and students were inconvenienced by transportation issues and lengthy travel times. Empirical data shows that the more impoverished and exploited a region, the more likely consolidation is.

Decision-makers can close schools in the poorest communities, but to what point? To officially deem individuals and entire communities not worthy of investment?

Yet, by signing orders to close schools, they can divest and isolate entire communities, while removing the local voice from school district operations.

## **Call for discussion**

Middleton County and other areas statewide will need to address the issues of declining populations and resources. Research shows that local communities, both haves and have-nots, should be involved in these discussions before a crisis is reached, allowing ownership, buy-in and the possibility to pilot a project before scaling it up.

The dialogue could include:

- How school funding could be changed? Could funding encourage traditional districts and charters to collaborate instead of compete? Could formulas be changed for cyber charters, which have much lower costs than brick-and-mortar schools? Could funding be used to encourage districts to collaborate instead of to outdo each other in the Race to the Top?
- If schools become under-utilized, what other services/agencies that benefit students and the community could enter that space? Some districts already are housing rent-paying Head Start programs within their buildings. What are other possibilities?
- Could some mandates be lifted from home districts to allow them operate more like successful charter schools, allowing the lessons learned to benefit more students?

- Could regional high schools be established to build the area as a region and better share opportunities and access?

- Could the state encourage voluntary mergers or regional collaborations?

How can we place a value on having a school in a community? One way is to share the contributions to and from the school through an economic and community financial impact report, based on a model used by higher education institutions. To encourage the value of local schools, I have developed a checklist, based upon readily available information. This may initiate dialogue about the importance of a school to anchor a community and strengthen bonds with the community—serving as a starting point for further discussion.



# **Why Create An Impact Report?**

The goal of your financial/community impact report is to account for the value of the school in its interactions with its employees, students and community. This checklist was developed with input from university research officers, a retired school superintendent, several district-level business managers and two real estate agents in an effort to provide insightful information that would illustrate the relationship of YOUR school to YOUR community and the value of YOUR school in YOUR community. While each school/district will need to devise a way to account for volunteer hours within the school and by school units in the community, other pieces of information that would quantify YOUR school-community interaction should be readily available to school business managers. A distinct effort was made to utilize readily available information, not to create new reporting responsibilities for staff.

## **Impact reporting provides a way to:**

- Illustrate the significance of your school
- Show accountability
- Demonstrate a return on investment
- Improve public understanding of the school's mission for teaching, service and educating the whole child
- Obtain future funding
- Provide a useful tool to assess or benchmark your school district against others
- Increase awareness of programs and school involvement

## **Consider:**

- What did this activity do for the community's economy or quality of life?
- What is my anecdotal evidence or example?
- What is the *potential* for impact? How did this work lay a foundation for the future? The checklist can be useful in developing your own strategic plan.



# Community and Financial Impact Checklist for Schools and Districts

## **TOTAL ECONOMIC IMPACT**

***Total Payroll + Total healthcare coverage + Total Volunteer Hourly Value = Economic Impact***

## **A Community Economic Force**

### **Community and Financial Impact Checklist for Schools and Districts**

*The term resident refers to those who live within the school/district boundaries.*

#### **Demographic Information**

- Total area of school/district boundaries
- Total number of students
  - Student enrollment trends
- Building permits trend
- Earned Income Tax trend

#### **A Community Economic Force**

##### ***As an employer***

- Total payroll
  - Payroll for resident employees
- Total number of employees
  - Number of resident employees
- Total number of professional employees
  - Number of resident employees
  - Number of females, heads of households
- Total number of employees and family members covered by health insurance
  - Number of resident employees and family members covered by health insurance
- Total value of health insurance
  - Value of health insurance for resident employees and family members

##### ***As a buyer***

- Total of purchases
  - Total purchased locally
- Total contracted services
  - Total local contracted services
- Total utility bills
  - Green/sustainability initiatives

### *As a service provider*

- Number of times students are served by school nurses
- Number of special education children served and cost
- Number of children provided Head Start and/or kindergarten
- Number of schools to which the district provides bus transportation and cost
- Any incoming rental fees or grant revenue

### **Serving as a Community Hub**

#### *Events*

- Total number of school /district events hosted by school
- Total number of students participating in events hosted by school
- Total number of students participating in field trips
- Total number of public attending school events, including athletic and musical/theatrical events
- Total number of community events at school (other outside nonprofit meetings, such as Scouts, church organizations, benefits, other nonprofits)
- Value of activities provided by school to students (use of musical instruments, uniforms, athletic and art equipment, cost of theatrical stagings)

#### *Volunteerism*

- Total number of hours volunteered at school (benefiting children, such as PTA, mentors, tutoring)
  - Examples of volunteerism at school
  - Total value of hours volunteered (based on [www.independentsector.org](http://www.independentsector.org))
  - Examples of impact of volunteerism (such as X number of children receiving winter coats from firefighters)
- Total number of projects students/employees participate in to give back to community (including students working with other students, community cleanup, benefits, etc.)
  - Total number of hours students volunteer in community
  - Examples of volunteerism in community
  - Examples of impact of volunteerism
  - Total value of hours volunteered (based on [www.independentsector.org](http://www.independentsector.org))

### **Demographic Information**

- Total area of school/district boundaries
- Total number of students

### **Summary**

Your school likely has many of these statistics on file, but in some cases, you may have to establish a system to allow easy compilation of statistics, particularly volunteer statistics. YOUR school may not require all of these categories. While tracking some statistics may be a challenge, it should not be impede you from sharing what valuations are available. Please check the Duquesne University and Choate examples in the Reference section for samples.

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## Appendix D

### Community and Financial Impact Checklist



# Why Create An Impact Report?

The goal of your financial/community impact report is to account for the value of the school in its interactions with its employees, students and community. This checklist was developed with input from university research officers, a retired school superintendent, several district-level business managers and two real estate agents in an effort to provide insightful information that would illustrate the relationship of YOUR school to YOUR community and the value of YOUR school in YOUR community. While each school/district will need to devise a way to account for volunteer hours within the school and by school units in the community, other pieces of information that would quantify YOUR school-community interaction should be readily available to school business managers. A distinct effort was made to utilize readily available information, not to create new reporting responsibilities for staff.

#### **Impact reporting provides a way to:**

- Illustrate the significance of your school
- Show accountability
- Demonstrate a return on investment
- Improve public understanding of the school's mission for teaching, service and educating the whole child
- Obtain future funding
- Provide a useful tool to assess or benchmark your school district against others
- Increase awareness of programs and school involvement

#### **Consider:**

- What did this activity do for the community's economy or quality of life?
- What is my anecdotal evidence or example?
- What is the *potential* for impact? How did this work lay a foundation for the future? The checklist can be useful in developing your own strategic plan.



# Community and Financial Impact Checklist for Schools and Districts

***TOTAL ECONOMIC IMPACT=Total Payroll + Total healthcare coverage  
+Total Volunteer Hourly Value***

## **A Community Economic Force**

### **Community and Financial Impact Checklist for Schools and Districts**

*The term resident refers to those who live within the school/district boundaries.*

#### **Demographic Information**

- Total area of school/district boundaries
- Total number of students
  - Student enrollment trends
- Building permits trend
- Earned Income Tax trend

#### **A Community Economic Force**

##### ***As an employer***

- Total payroll
  - Payroll for resident employees
- Total number of employees
  - Number of resident employees
- Total number of professional employees
  - Number of resident employees
  - Number of females, heads of households
- Total number of employees and family members covered by health insurance
  - Number of resident employees and family members covered by health insurance
- Total value of health insurance
  - Value of health insurance for resident employees and family members

##### ***As a buyer***

- Total of purchases
  - Total purchased locally
- Total contracted services
  - Total local contracted services
- Total utility bills
  - Green/sustainability initiatives

### *As a service provider*

- Number of times students are served by school nurses
- Number of special education children served and cost
- Number of children provided Head Start and/or kindergarten
- Number of schools to which the district provides bus transportation and cost
- Any incoming rental fees or grant revenue

### **Serving as a Community Hub**

#### *Events*

- Total number of school /district events hosted by school
- Total number of students participating in events hosted by school
- Total number of students participating in field trips
- Total number of public attending school events, including athletic and musical/theatrical events
- Total number of community events at school (other outside nonprofit meetings, such as Scouts, church organizations, benefits, other nonprofits)
- Value of activities provided by school to students (use of musical instruments, uniforms, athletic and art equipment, cost of theatrical stagings)

#### *Volunteerism*

- Total number of hours volunteered at school (benefiting children, such as PTA, mentors, tutoring)
  - Examples of volunteerism at school
  - Total value of hours volunteered (based on [www.independentsector.org](http://www.independentsector.org))
  - Examples of impact of volunteerism (such as X number of children receiving winter coats from firefighters)
- Total number of projects students/employees participate in to give back to community (including students working with other students, community cleanup, benefits, etc.)
  - Total number of hours students volunteer in community
  - Examples of volunteerism in community
  - Examples of impact of volunteerism
  - Total value of hours volunteered (based on [www.independentsector.org](http://www.independentsector.org))

### **Demographic Information**

- Total area of school/district boundaries
- Total number of students

### **Summary**

Your school likely has many of these statistics on file, but in some cases, you may have to establish a system to allow easy compilation of statistics, particularly volunteer statistics. YOUR school may not require all of these categories. While tracking some statistics may be a challenge, it should not be impede you from sharing what valuations are available. Please check the Duquesne University and Choate examples in the Reference section for samples.

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