

ABSTRACT

Odessa Yanisha Mann, HOW WE DID IT: ACADEMIC, FINANCIAL, AND COMMUNITY ASPECTS OF RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICT CONSOLIDATION (Under the direction of Dr. Daniel Novey). Department of Educational Leadership, May, 2021.

This study explored the impact of rural school district consolidation in eastern North Carolina. Wilkins County is a low income, low performing county with an average daily membership (ADM) of 1,501 students. This county suffers from rural population decline, decreasing ADM, and is categorized as low performing, with only two of the six schools meeting an annual growth requirement in North Carolina for the 2016-2017 school year. In 2017-2018, the six schools in this system went through planning and input sessions to implement school consolidation. This case study reviews the process of consolidation one year after the 2017-2018 consolidation in terms of academic, financial, and community. It was determined that academics increased, the need for financial support increased, and the community perceived the event as positive overall. It was also concluded that additional years of data would be needed to determine the long term effects. This information is valuable for other school districts that are seeking to consolidate multiple campuses while maintaining community support.

HOW WE DID IT: ACADEMIC, FINANCIAL, AND COMMUNITY ASPECTS OF RURAL
SCHOOL DISTRICT CONSOLIDATION

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by

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SCHOOL DISTRICT CONSOLIDATION

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DEDICATION

To my mother, Janice Mann, and mentor/friend, Dr. May Hope Wilkins, you are gone but never forgotten. Both of these ladies have inspired me to be a conquer! From my first doctoral program to the completion of this degree, finally, several, several years later, they always knew I would do it. You saw my beginning and this is not the end! Sharp in wit, high in expectations, with a multi-faceted glare that needs no words, and always there for me...love you ladies! You are appreciated! I am forever grateful and humbled by our time together.

I thank you and I love you mommy!!!

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Take care!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
TITLE.....	i
COPYRIGHT.....	ii
SIGNATURE.....	iii
DEDICATION.....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	v
LIST OF TABLES.....	xiii
LIST OF FIGURES.....	xiv
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....	1
Background of the Problem.....	1
Problem Statement.....	5
Purpose of the Study.....	6
Research Questions.....	7
Theoretical Foundation.....	8
Definition of Key Terms.....	10
Assumptions.....	11
Scope/Delimitations.....	12
Limitations.....	12
Significance of the Study.....	14
Summary.....	17
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE.....	19
Theoretical Foundation.....	20

Social Learning Theory	20
Organizational Change Theory.....	21
History of School Consolidation.....	23
Before the 1830s: Pre-Common School Era	25
1830-1890: Emerging Common Schools Era	25
1890-1930: Urban vs Rural Schools, Centralization, and Efficiency ...	26
1940-1980: Centralization	28
1950-1970: Equity and Efficiency	28
1980-2000: Standardization	29
2000 to Present: 21 st Century Public Education	30
Summary.....	30
Perceptions on School Consolidation.....	31
Parents/Guardians	31
Students	32
Superintendent	32
School Staff	33
School Boards	33
Criticism, Size, Academics, Poverty, and Financial Impacts.....	35
School Size	35
Poverty and Race	38
Resources, Curriculum, and Courses	39
Financial Impacts	40
Equity in North Carolina Districts.....	43

Building Sustainable Impact.....	44
Community Consensus Building.....	46
Local Consensus Building in Wilkins County.....	49
Testing and Accountability in North Carolina School Districts.....	56
Proficiency.....	56
EOGs.....	56
EOCs.....	57
Overall Data.....	57
Summary and Conclusions.....	58
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY.....	60
Research Design and Rationale.....	61
Population.....	62
Sample and Sampling Procedure.....	63
Ethical Considerations and Informed Consent.....	64
Instrumentation.....	65
Procedure.....	66
Focus Groups.....	66
Survey of Parents and Staff	69
Document and Historical Data Analysis.....	69
Data Processing and Analysis.....	70
Methodological Assumptions and Limitations.....	71
Role of the Researcher.....	74
Summary.....	75

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS.....	76
Pilot Study.....	77
Pilot Focus Group Data.....	77
Survey Themes from Pilot Group.....	80
Data Collection.....	83
Data Analysis.....	85
Academic Data Analysis.....	85
Financial Data Analysis.....	85
Survey Analysis.....	86
Focus Group Analysis.....	86
Survey Demographics.....	87
Results.....	87
Analysis of Research Question #1.....	89
Proficiency and Growth in Reading, Math, and Science Scores.....	89
Attendance	95
Courses Offered	97
Analysis of Research Question #2.....	101
Operational Budgets	101
Focus group responses for financial data	106
Survey responses for financial data	106
Analysis of Research Question #3	108
Survey Demographic Information	108
Survey Data Analysis	110

Focus Group Analysis	111
Summary.....	114
CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	117
Summary of the Findings.....	118
Interpretation of the Findings.....	119
Theoretical Foundation: Self-Efficacy and Organizational Change...	119
Perceptions on School Consolidation	120
Criticism, Size, Academic, Poverty, and Financial Impacts	121
Limitations of the Study.....	123
Implications of the Findings for Practice.....	125
Academics.....	125
Fiscal.....	126
Community Perception.....	127
Future Planning for Wilkins County Schools.....	128
Recommendations.....	129
Conclusions.....	132
REFERENCES.....	134
APPENDIX A: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD.....	154
APPENDIX B: STAKEHOLDER FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS.....	155
APPENDIX C: REQUEST USAGE OF SURVEY TOOL FROM BUZZARD.....	156
APPENDIX D: QUALITATIVE IMPACT OF SCHOOL CLOSINGS ON RURAL COMMUNITIES SURVEY.....	157
APPENDIX E: REQUEST FOR PERMISSION FROM THE WILKINS COUNTY BOARD OF EDUCATION.....	159

APPENDIX F: ASSENT FORM.....	160
APPENDIX G: CONSENT FORM.....	162
APPENDIX H: PERMISSION FROM THE WILKINS COUNTY BOARD OF EDUCATION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH.....	165
APPENDIX I: ADVERTISEMENT FLIER TO CONDUCT RESEARCH.....	166
APPENDIX J: CONSENT FORM FOR SURVEY COLLECTION.....	167
APPENDIX K: PARENT CONSENT LETTER.....	170
APPENDIX L: WCS SCHOOL CONSOLIDATION FEEDBACK FORM.....	172
APPENDIX M: PILOT STUDY QUESTIONS.....	173

LIST OF TABLES

1. School Size Categories.....	37
2. School Cost Analysis: 2017-2018 Fiscal Year Budget Projections (Based on an ADM of 1498).....	52
3. Research Questions and Data Collection Alignment.....	72
4. Demographics of the Pilot Group.....	78
5. Emergent Themes Based on the Pilot Focus Group Responses.....	79
6. Emergent Themes Based on Pilot Group Survey Responses Categories - Survey Themes.....	81
7. Emergent Themes Based on Pilot Group Survey Responses Categories.....	82
8. Length of Time Pilot Group Lived in this Rural Community.....	88
9. School Performance Grades in Reading, Math, and Science.....	90
10. School Attendance Data	96
11. High School Course Offerings.....	98
12. District Funding Expenses 2016-2019 and Projection for 2019-2020.....	102
13. Emergent Themes Based on Focus Group Responses.....	112

LIST OF FIGURES

1. Wilkins County School’s school sites..... 4

2. Visual of an individual’s self-efficacy in social learning theory..... 22

3. Individuals within organizational change 24

4. Best practice models for using consensus-building process..... 48

5. School capacity..... 51

6. Teacher schedule..... 55

7. NCDPI Accountability Model/ESSA Plan..... 93

8. Overall school growth. 94

9. School expenses from 2016-2019..... 100

10. Participants survey data..... 107

11. Selection of this rural community..... 109

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Reynolds (2013) noted the historical struggles of small school districts to educate children and maintain their presence due to size. As small school districts struggle with the challenges of fiscal responsibilities due to size, they must find a way to manage enrollment. This would mean they increase funding or consider consolidating with other systems. This most often results in the closing of small rural schools (Imazeki & Reschovsky, 2003). A small school district in rural, northeastern North Carolina (NC) is facing this challenge.

This introduction will explore the problem associated with declining average daily membership (ADM) and limited resources in a rural county. The problem will be defined, and the purpose of researching this dilemma for the small district will be shared. A conceptual framework grounded in self-efficacy and organizational change will help to explore three research questions around the impact of academic, financial, and community perception of the district's transition. Key terms, assumptions, scope, delimitations, and limitations will be shared to provide the reader with a common understanding of clarity on terms, beliefs, and potential biases. The significance of the study will be explored in terms of the impact of researching this problem of practice. Finally, a summary of this introduction will conclude this section.

Background of the Problem

According to the United States Census Bureau (2019), in 1940, 43.5% of the United States (US) population lived in rural areas. Rural areas were defined as areas with a minimum population threshold of 2,500. By 2010, this proportion decreased to 19.3%. This means about one-quarter of the rural population has declined in the last 70 years. This trend can be seen in rural populations within the individual states.

Throughout several states, the population of the rural areas is declining, but there is a need to still provide an equitable education to all students who remain in the rural area (Buzzard, 2016). North Carolina is a relatively rural state, with 80 of the 100 counties being rural (Business for Educational Success and Transformation North Carolina, 2019). This has led to North Carolina legislators addressing a variety of issues with direct impact on rural areas, such as school resources and school funding (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction [NCDPI], 2013).

When resources and funding are provided to schools, equity becomes an issue in areas with small populations because funding is driven based on the number of students present at the school site. According to Berry (2006, p. 68), “larger schools provide a more uniform standard of education for low-achieving students, possibly by reducing the variation in school quality in rural areas, where one-room schools were the norm prior to consolidation.” The court case of *Leandro v. State* (*Leandro v. State*: Duke University School of Law, n.d.) brought this to the forefront in North Carolina when parents, children, and school districts argued that “Despite higher than average tax rates, schools in these counties [five low-wealth rural counties] ended up with lower than average tax revenue” (*Leandro v. State*: Duke University School of Law, n.d.). This prohibited them from having the funding to provide an equal education for their students.

A rural low wealth school cannot compete with wealthier schools in terms of teacher salary, services, or materials for student education. This means a school with 500 students and a school with 1,000 students will have different funding amounts, although some costs and needs are present regardless of the number of students. Since rural environments have less population per square footage as compared to suburban and urban communities, they have less funding to

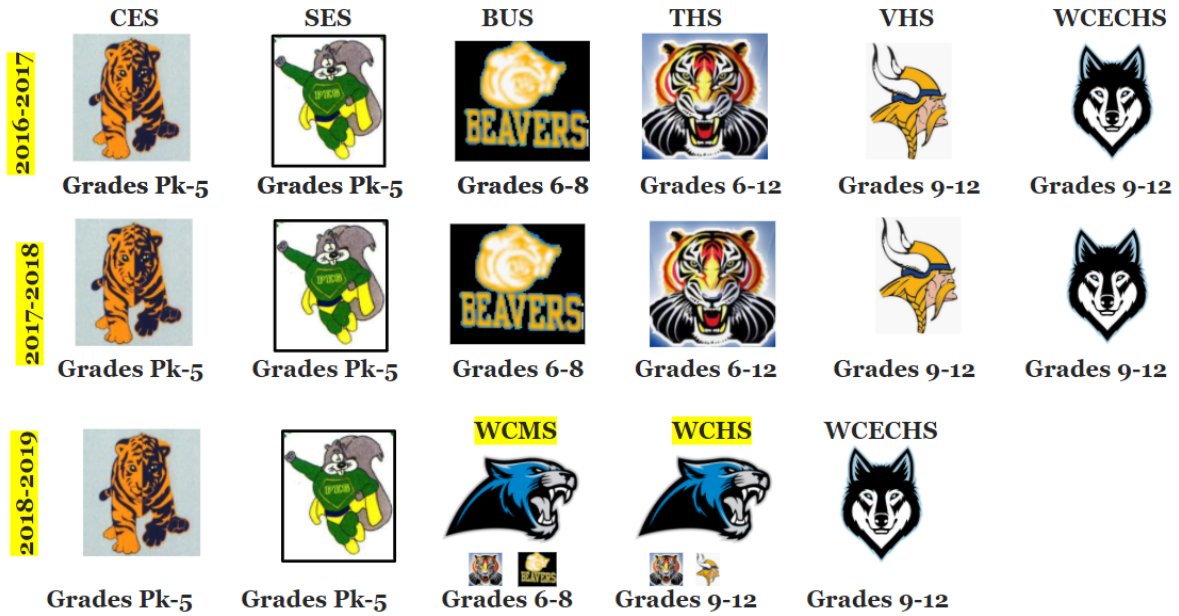
equally meet their student needs. As the population of a rural area declines, impacts can be seen in the fiscal capacity of the educational system.

Blauwkamp et al. (2011) express the critical need to address educational quality in rural areas. Rural population decline and fiscal constraints on the education sector have shifted the focus of rural area education over the last two decades towards school consolidation (Buzzard, 2016). School consolidation is seen as a way to increase population and, in doing so, provide increased resources to the consolidated school (Adams & Foster, 2002; Imazeki & Reschovsky, 2003; Reynolds, 2013).

According to Buzzard (2016), schools in rural areas can serve as an important place for the gathering of people, things [such as artifacts], and a place where ideas are harvested to shape the open-social systems of a community. In keeping with maintaining the importance of a rural school in the light of the trend towards consolidation, it is necessary to review the impact of consolidation on the school communities. To that end, I am proposing to explore the impact of the 2017-2018 consolidation of the Tiger High School (THS) Grade 6-12 site in Wilkins County, North Carolina.

Many of the residents of Wilkins County with students in the schools attended school in the county and returned to or stayed in the area. These residents attended the same elementary, middle, and high school. The Tiger community offered a Cub Elementary School (CES) Grade PK-5 and THS Grade 6-12 educational setting. The Citytown and Farmtown section of the county maintained a Squirrel Elementary School (SES) Grade Pk-5, Beaver Union School (BUS) Grade 6-8, and Viking High School (VHS) Grade 9-12 setting. Figure 1 shows each of these school sites.

Wilkins County Schools



Note. In 2018-2019 Grades 6-12 at THS was consolidated into the site of BUS and VHS. BUS was rebranded as BPMS. VHS was rebranded as WCHS.

Figure 1. Wilkins County Schools' school sites.

Consolidation was completed with the intention of addressing academic and fiscal concerns. Instructional concerns and decreased funding to maintain one particular school site, which only hosted an average of 153 students, were prevailing factors. The instructional concerns at that site were centered on the five teachers who taught Grades 6-12 English language arts, Grades 6-9 math, Grades 10-12 math, Grades 6-12 social studies, and Grades 6-12 science. With a 2017-2018 ADM of 1,501, maintaining six fully operating schools in Wilkins County was not economically responsible. Prior to consolidation, Wilkins County included one Grade 6-12 school (the school in question), one high school, one Early College campus, one middle school, and two elementary schools. At the end of the 2017-2018 school year, the Grade 6-12 site was closed and consolidated into the larger middle and high school already in the county.

Closing a school has direct impacts on the community. The students, parents, staff, administrators, and community are all stakeholders in this process. Hopefully, in the 2018-2019 school year, there will be evidence of academic improvement, fiscal stability, and the emergence of other opportunities to bring comfort to the residents in the area where the 6-12 site was closed. As Buzzard (2016) indicated, closing the school also closed an important gathering place where much social benefit was harvested. I will use the findings from my case study to provide a framework for district consolidation to future researchers and practitioners considering the consolidation of several schools into one site.

Problem Statement

There has been increased public awareness in the area of public education and finance, especially in the context of rural schools (Imazeki & Reschovsky, 2003). The push to increase efficiency in spending for educational expenses has dominated consolidation debates for years (Grier, 2012; Nitta et al., 2008). Although the debates do not point to results that show financial

gain (Silvernail et al., 2007), they do focus on the ability to increase resources for all students (Marchbank, 2015).

Wilkins County has consolidated a Grade 6-12 school with 153 students in the 2017-2018 school year. This case study is needed to determine the fiscal, academic, and social aspects of school consolidation in the rural eastern NC school district that occurred in 2017-2018 as a means to prepare for any consolidations in the future. This is a way to give all students a 21st-century educational facility, decrease staff openings that are present in the school with the larger ADM, and decrease negative perception in the community. If this case study is not conducted, the plans for future consolidations will replicate issues the district could have improved upon based on the first consolidation.

Purpose of the Study

When rural areas are faced with the practicality of consolidation, it is often around the premise of financial or academic concerns. The North Carolina General Statute for a school consolidation by local school boards (Consolidation of Districts and Discontinuance of Schools, NC G.S. 115C-72) states

In any question involving the closing or consolidation of any public school, the local board of education of the school administrative unit in which such school is located shall cause a thorough study of ...geographic conditions, anticipated increase or decrease in school enrollment, the inconvenience or hardship that might result to the pupils to be affected by such closing or consolidation, the cost of providing additional school facilities in the event of such closing or consolidation, and such other factors as the board shall consider germane.

This study will explore the fiscal aspects noted in the general statute. It will also examine the academic and perception impacts at the end of the 2018-2019 school year with the school being closed for one full year. The other impacts are seen on the local community pride, loss of identity, loss of a community space, and sometimes loss of residents. After the consolidation of a 6-12 school in the 2017-2018 school year, the purpose of my mixed methods case study is to determine the community, financial, and academic impacts of the local school board decision.

Data will be collected from informational materials promoting the consolidations, educational facts/figures, surveys, interviews, and financial records available from the residents and staff members in Wilkins County. Wilkins County is a small, rural district in Northeastern North Carolina with a total population of 12,012 (American Fact Finder, 2017) and with an ADM of 1,501 students enrolled in the K-12 public school system in the 2017-2018 school year.

Research Questions

The questions for my proposed study are as follows:

- Research Question One: How does school consolidation in a small rural community impact the academic performance of the school district, as measured by state testing data, local testing data, and staffing data?
- Research Question Two: How does school consolidation in a small rural community impact the financial state of the school district, as indicated by operational cost of the closed facility?
- Research Question Three: How does school consolidation in a small rural community impact the community perception after consolidation of the school district?

Given consolidation has impacted 153 students, within the 6-12 school site, I will gather both quantitative and qualitative data to support my contention that the district improved in academics, finances, and perception following the consolidation.

- Positive impacts on academic performance will be evident. This will be measured by a review of the academic performance of the 6-12 site in the 2017-18 school year compared with the performance of the 6-8 and 9-12 sites. We will also review the vacancy information for staff at each site due to its potential for impact on academic performance.
- Significant impact to the financial savings of building closure will be evident. This will be measured by a review of the financial cost savings with a school being closed and not subject to costs incurred for daily usage by students.
- Moderate impact to the perceptions of the closure of the 6-12 site will be evident. This will be measured by surveys and interviews from the parents after the consolidation. This will include data from the community as well as considerations for the future.

Theoretical Foundation

According to Buzzard (2016),

Authentic leaders who are aware of their own strengths and short-comings focus on team efforts and results and not on themselves... [These leaders] base their decisions on quantitative data and on human capital concerns [which] can provide the meaningful advice to policy-makers who must eventually make the decision to close a local rural school or not. (p. 27)

When seeking to approach school consolidation, leadership needs to have a shared vision, motivation, and engagement required for successful school consolidation. The concept of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977) and the theory of organizational change (Spector, 2010) can help to frame my conceptual approach to this study.

My study is grounded in two theories that provide a framework for the leadership and organizational challenges that impede school consolidation or present themselves during the process. The first focus is embedded within the Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977). This theory postulates that learning is derived from observing others. Within this theory, there is the specific belief that one's ability shapes influence over the events they can create. This is referred to as self-efficacy. Self-efficacy can be seen revealed in a person's confidence in their own abilities to control their own behavior and environment. People with high self-efficacy believe in their ability to achieve goals (Bandura, 1977).

A second focus is organizational change theory (Spector, 2010). This theory suggests that change, whether expected or unexpected, must be managed by the leader in the organization. A high functioning leader involved in organizational change will strategically guide their followers while analyzing employee motivation, employee resistance, and the positive impacts of change efforts (Spector, 2010). These two theories will be examined more in the literature review of this research.

Since my case study focuses on the academic, financial, and community impact of school closure, a high level of self-efficacy is needed during school consolidation. This leadership characteristic is needed to address complex issues that may arise. For instance, the academic performance of students has several variables that may impact outcomes. Also, the financial direction can be thwarted by state, federal, and local funding. Finally, the community perspective

can be swayed by past experiences. With these things in mind, the leader must be optimistic and project a high level of self-efficacy to engage the community in supporting this consolidation. During the consolidating, community and stakeholder input along with data is required to be successful. Surveys from focus groups, individual community members, and community meetings create informed decision making in the consolidation process. Together a focus on self-efficacy and organizational change creates constant attention to the stakeholders' needs while planning for this change. Chapter 2 will provide greater detail about how each of these theories is pertinent to school consolidation.

Definition of Key Terms

School Consolidation: A term used to describe the combining of more than one school site (Bard et al., 2006).

Average Daily Membership (ADM): The calculation of the number of days a student is in membership within a given timeframe, usually one month or one year (NCDPI, 2021b). This number fluctuates with the attendance and transfer of students.

PK-13 Site: This term describes a single school building that has grades Pre-Kindergarten to Grade 12 and Grade 13 for Early College students.

Student proficiency: This term is used to determine if students have scored at a level that indicates that they consistently demonstrate mastery of the content standards and are well prepared for the next grade or course. On the End-of-Grade and End-of-Course assessments, students are considered proficient if they score a Level III. A teacher can help students grow at high rates even though they do not reach proficiency. Effective educators can push students to make progress regardless of where they started (NCDPI, 2012).

Student growth: The amount of academic progress made over the course of a grade or class. Students enter grades and course at different places; some have struggled while some have excelled. Regardless of how they enter a grade or course, students can make progress over the course of the school year (NCDPI, 2012).

Assumptions

I recognize the impact of assumptions on this study. Assumptions critical to the meaningfulness of this study are the assumption that I am well-positioned to conduct the case study one year after the consolidation occurred. Another assumption is that the findings from this case study will be beneficial for future consolidations across the county.

As a district focus, and hopefully, in every school environment, there should be a foundation of supporting things that are best for students. These good intentions are what give students and parents hope for the future. As superintendent of this county, these intentions and input from stakeholders help to consolidate the Grade 6-12 site in 2017-2018. In the 2018-2019 school year, data will be collected as a comparison to the 2017-2018 school year. While this is a short time to adjust to changes from consolidation, it is the assumption that change will be evident in academics, finances, and community perspectives.

When choosing to consolidate, the assumption is that this is in the best interests of all children. There is also the assumption that this research will uncover beneficial aspects for the next major consolidation. Knowing the current health of school sites, including but not limited to light brown-tinted water, heating and cooling issues, and structural issues with the second-floor balcony of a detached building that prevents usage of the entire second floor, a solution is needed. However, data uncovered in this research may not provide beneficial input to support

what could have been done differently. The same problems of low performing schools and decreasing financial support may continue to further siphon off student enrollment.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope and delimitations of this research are grounded in rural educational settings. This research explores a small rural school district in which, over the past two years, the consolidation of exiting school facilities has been seen as a feasible response. This is based on the financial hardships, rural population decline, and a shrinking tax base, which is now composed of an aging population and a decreased number of residents with school-aged children.

Delimitations of this study are seen in the boundaries for data collection. These data will be collected from the 2017-2018 and the 2018-2019 school year. While impacts of the consolidation could change drastically beyond these years, this is the current focus for data collection.

The setting of the research provides an eastern NC location that is not a major hub of business or industry. One researcher described the predicament for rural school settings due to the isolation inherent in their location often lack resources and charitable business connections (Schmidt, 2011). The largest employers in this area are the school system, local paper mill, and county government (North Carolina Commerce, 2018).

Another unique view of school consolidation research afforded by this study is the number of sites impacted. It involves consolidating multiple sites into one campus in a rural setting. Most other consolidations are merging one site into another site in the district.

Limitations

Limitations of this study are found in the academic data collection, my connection to the community, and my leadership role in the school system. These limitations may create biases and

influences; therefore, it is imperative that I am explicit about my biases and how they may influence the overall findings.

The first limitation is how conclusive can I be when I analyze academic results that follow the consolidation. When trying to determine if the data collected show student growth or increased proficiency following the consolidation, there are several variables to be considered. First, I compare the academic data from one year to the next. I review the data from the 2016-2017 school year and compare it to the year after the consolidation, the 2017-2018 school year. Conclusions I draw from the comparison have to be reviewed by noting that there may be other factors involved in academic gains. For instance, when I compare grade levels from one year to the next, different variables may account for the gains. New teachers who are more skilled may have been hired. Students new to the system may also help improve growth and proficiency scores. Therefore, I must carefully consider the conclusions I make. Are academic gains the result of the consolidation or from other variables, such as teacher self-efficacy, quality, and experience or even an influx of students added to the sixth-grade cohort.

Second, I am not only a resident of this area but also a native of this county. I attended school in this district and know many of the residents personally or through family lineage due to the small size. I also worked with the state education department and a university to develop the capacity of school staff. These personal connections to the system can serve as a bias toward the sense of urgency for the consolidation. In order to address these limitations, I will work to utilize the district academic office, finance staff, and community stakeholders to ensure the information gathered is a representation of diverse and comprehensive input.

Third, my current role in senior leadership in this district can be another limitation of this study. As the superintendent of the district being studied, there is the bias that leadership may

take actions on the grounds of what I personally deem to be in the best interests of the students and the community. In this role as superintendent, I am also a current county resident, a native of the county who has attended and then taught in three of the five remaining schools. I also have resided here for 31+ years. This personal bias has the potential for creating leading questions in data collection. The questions may steer stakeholders towards the outcomes that the superintendent wants, even if those outcomes are a positive result for the school system. In order to address these limitations, I will work with a team of stakeholders to review questions for bias before they are used in stakeholder surveys.

The final limitation involves the size of the district being researched. While Wilkins County has 1,622 students in the district, only 1,501 students attend the district's public schools. There is also a strong chance a charter school will be opening in the 2019-2020 school year due to the consolidation of the school in that area. This limitation may impact since I may not be able to recruit proper sample sizes. In order to address these limitations, I will work to ensure that all efforts to gain at least 50% of the impacted population are pursued. With low parental engagement and high poverty schools, this will be a challenge, but it is essential to have a robust framework for future consolidations.

Significance of the Study

The process of school consolidation is not an easy task. After consolidation is completed, knowing the impacts can help with future planning. A study on the impact of consolidating a Grade 6-12 rural school has not been carried out for the Wilkins County School district. As a result, it is imperative that the measurable outcomes be assessed—particularly with respect to how the students performed, if there were cost savings relative to fiscal responsibilities, and if

the community is engaging in the new consolidated school setting. Findings from such a study could bring greater awareness for this district as it prepares for future consolidation plans.

It is the mission of Wilkins County Schools to create students who are college and career ready. In order to equip the leaders of tomorrow, a 21st-century learning environment, high-quality instructors, and community engagement are desirable if not necessary components. With costly investment in facilities required in each of the current five school sites, growing and unsustainable fiscal responsibilities are apparent.

The fiscal responsibility for maintenance in multiple school sites depletes funding for other priorities. This impacts the district's ability to provide equitable resources to all sites and access to a high-quality educational environment. There are many costly issues related to facilities: constant temporary repairs of heating and cooling systems, structural deficiencies that require major renovations, and many of the learning environments not fitted for 21st-century technologies. The impact of seemingly minor things such as multiple electrical outlets for devices, bandwidth to maintain elevated electrical power needs or Internet access, and water for updated science laboratory facilities are just a few areas of concern. The district is being placed in a situation where it can continue to patch the problem or seek a new structure.

The needs of the district have led to several conversations with the school board and stakeholders. According to school board meeting minutes, the school board has conducted recurring deliberations about the idea of consolidating schools since the 1990s. In the 2017-2018 school year, the WCS Board of Education chose to close a Grade 6-12 school to initiate cost and resource savings.

This small, rural Grade 6-12 school was in the eastern part of the county with an ADM of 153 students. This decision was made after a year of public presentations, a fiscal review of

current status, and after review of the needs for several resources in each school site. There was potential to fill vacancies in the Grade 9-12 site, which had a greater ADM with large classrooms with over 35 students, with staff from the Grade 6-12 site, which was overstaffed and had some classrooms with only three to 10 students per teacher. This allowed more students to have access to highly qualified teachers instead of classrooms with large numbers of students and a substitute teacher.

On a larger scale, rural school districts lack resources and have financial constraints. This makes considering consolidation a viable option. According to Bard et al. (2006), rural schools have to decide about balancing the benefits of expanding curricular programs and economic stability with community perception. For example, in the Grade 9-12 School, a nationally recognized nursing program that leads to certification is available. In contrast, the Grade 6-12 School has no certification programs because funding only supports having five teachers. If equity was present, rural schools would be able to have similar but not necessarily duplicated resources that support the functional needs of all children. The issues with equity and access for rural schools are very different from urban and suburban schools (Delph, 2015).

My study is significant to this county because it will review these aspects from the 2017-2018 consolidation. Researching the impacts of last year's consolidation in terms of academics, finances, and perception, is also a top priority to determine the impact of the consolidation and if the perceived benefits materialized. Is the consolidation of small school sites a means to create equity and access for the community of a rural school system? My research will help the district explore this process and the impact on students, staff, parents, and community members.

Summary

School consolidation is an option districts consider as they navigate a variety of problems in the education of 21st-century learners (Ackell, 2013). For a small, rural county in eastern North Carolina, my research outlines the progress and process used for school consolidation. These impacts are being felt in the first year after school consolidation, the school year 2018-2019.

This chapter reviewed information about a small rural school consolidated in the 2017-2018 school year. Generally, funding and resources are aligned with school membership. Low enrollment places a hardship on small rural schools that are funded based on the number of students present in the school site. This causes equity issues because some items are needed for students to be successful in any school regardless of funding. The pressure to provide supports for all schools lead to the consolidation of the Grade 6-12 site. This chapter summarizes the relevance of small schools to their rural communities while also acknowledging the financial constraints in providing an equitable education compared to larger schools, which have more funding.

This chapter also provides the background of a case study on what happened after the consolidation of a Grade 6-12 site and the impact of the anticipated events apparent in 2018-2019 one year later. This work will be of great importance to future rural school districts, who share similar dilemmas, which are planning to imitate this transition. There is hope that this research reveals positive impacts to the academic, fiscal, and community changes resulting from the consolidation.

Grounded in self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977) and organizational change theory (Spector, 2010), the leadership of Wilkins County and other stakeholders continue to engage in best

practices as they plan for consolidation. In order to ensure key terms, assumptions, scope and delimitations, and limitations outline a common understanding of how the initial consolidation was conducted, I have shared this information in Chapter 1. Known biases such as the role of myself as superintendent are also added here for clarity. It is significant that these be shared as the ultimate goal will be to be mindful of what is best for all stakeholders in the future.

As Chapter 1 closes, Chapter 2 will present an overview of research pertinent to the topic of school consolidation. In Chapter 2, I will review a variety of literature that informed the preparation for this study. It will (a) begin with a more in-depth analysis of the theoretical foundations, (b) provide a timeline of the history of school consolidation, (c) share perceptions on consolidation, (d) review past consolidation impacts, (e) explore community consensus building, (f) look at the potential sustainable impact of consolidation, and (g) review the past focus on equity in North Carolina School.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Consolidation of schools has been and is a topic that attracts researchers and practitioners alike. According to Flowers (2010), it is one of the most difficult challenges to face in a community. However, school consolidation is unsurpassed compared to other modern reform efforts in the drastic impact it has had on public schools (Berry, 2006; Duncombe & Yinger, 2010; Hayes, 2018). After the consolidation of a 1,501 ADM Grade 6-12-school in the 2017-2018 school year, this case study will assist Wilkins County Schools in determining if their perceived benefits materialized. The purpose of this mixed-methods case study is to determine the degree of community, financial, and academic impacts resulting from the local school board's decision about consolidating a Grade 6-12 school site.

This review of literature will begin with a theoretical framework grounded in social learning theory of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977) and organizational change theory (Spector, 2010). Next, the history of school consolidation will be explored with a timeline review from before the 1830s to the present. This will provide historical data on how school consolidation has shaped education. This section is followed by a view of perceptions about school consolidation. From the student level to the community level, each observer holds a valid perspective.

The next sections focus on the exploration of school consolidation in terms of academic performance, financial impacts, and community engagement is examined. This includes exploration of information on equity in North Carolina School districts. This section is followed by information about how to have a sustainable impact, build community consensus processes, and how academics are assessed in NC.

Theoretical Foundation

Nitta et al. (2008) described school consolidation as “a broad term applied to describe the combining of schools, districts, or administrative units... in an effort to create administrative efficiencies that provide a broader academic experience for students in sparsely-populated schools.” (p. 1). School consolidation can be a consideration for a variety of factors such as demands on individual schools, sparse population, state and federal priorities, potential opportunities, competitiveness, and efficiency (Grier, 2012; Self, 2001). Negative impacts of school consolidation can be found in factors such as increased class size, increased issues with discipline, higher staff to student ratios, and increased safety concerns (Grier, 2012). Nevertheless, school consolidation remains a consideration for school districts and systems seeking to change outcomes.

School consolidation involves dynamic leadership to lead change and support stakeholders throughout the process. Two relevant theories that provide a framework for leading stakeholders through school consolidation are the social learning theory of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977) and organizational change theory (Spector, 2010). These both require a leader to work in a complex environment to balance the needs of people and resources.

Social Learning Theory

Albert Bandura (1977) developed the social learning theory, which correlates with behavioral learning theories for classical conditioning (Pavlov, 1897) and operant conditioning (Skinner, 1938). Bandura’s (1977) theory posits that people learn from others via observation, modeling, and imitation. Within Bandura’s theory, there is a second theory of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is the belief in one’s ability to influence events and have control over the way events are experienced. This connects the confidence required by people to believe and control experiences.

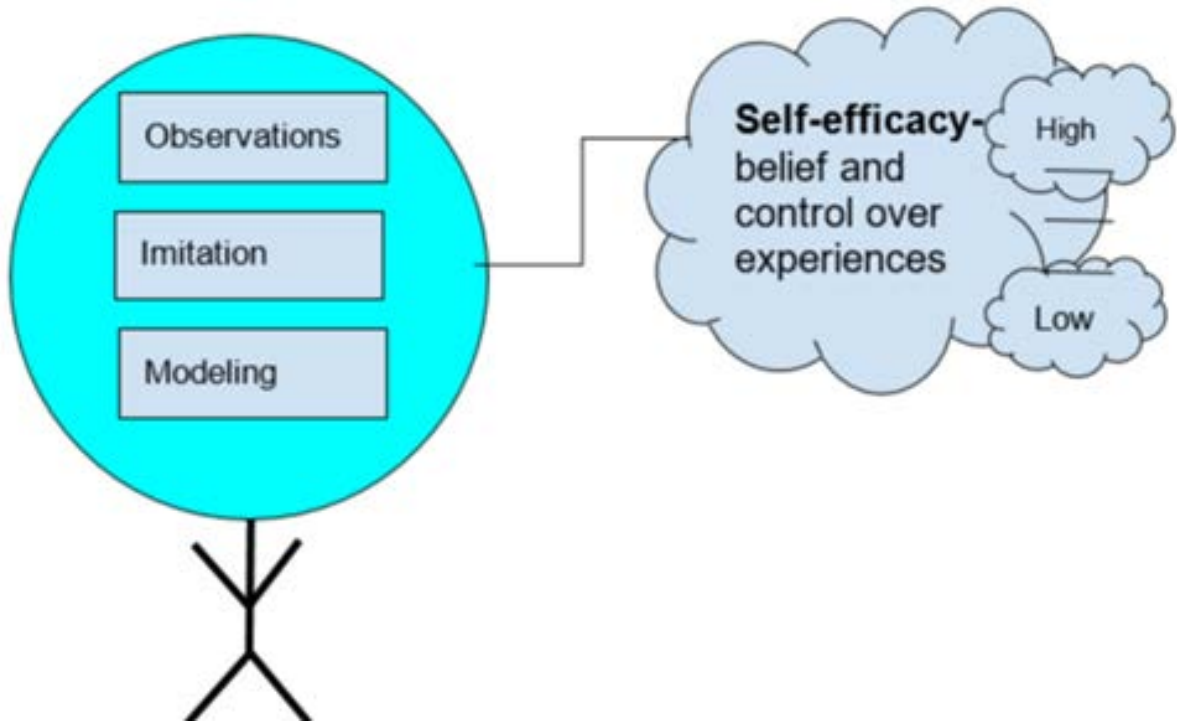
Figure 2 depicts a person's level of self-efficacy while learning. Self-efficacy is composed of observation, imitations, and modeling. Observation requires the person to watch others, imitations is the mimicking of others, and modeling is showing others how to do complete a task.

In terms of school consolidation, the leader needs to maintain influential skills to direct the overall terms and processes in the school consolidation plan. According to Bandura (1977), "the stronger the perceived self-efficacy, the higher the goal [desired]" (p. 118). The concept of the role of self-efficacy is grounded in the idea that people with high efficacy challenging goals are firm in their commitment to attaining them. With a strong sense of direction, the leader can assist stakeholders in making a stronger commitment to school consolidation and the implementation of the plan.

Organizational Change Theory

The second theory of focus for the theoretical framework of my study is organizational change theory (Spector, 2010). Leaders who manage change must be able to handle planned change and handle unexpected change. According to Spector (2010), organizational change is often viewed as a necessary means to ensure that organizational strategies continue to be viable. Change is an everyday part of today's organizations (Burke, 2018). Spector (2010) acknowledged the fact that leaders need to know when to maintain the norm and when change is needed.

Once this is discovered, they can develop a new plan in alignment with the overarching goal. Heifetz and Linsky (2002) outlined a technique, called operate in and above the fray that recommends leaders to step back and see the big picture when working with resistance to change. The success of organizational change is dependent on the complex interplay of multiple factors on various levels of analysis and timeframes (Buchanan et al., 2005).



Note. This image was created by the author to represent how an individual's self-efficacy is composed.

Figure 2. Visual of an individual's self-efficacy in social learning theory.

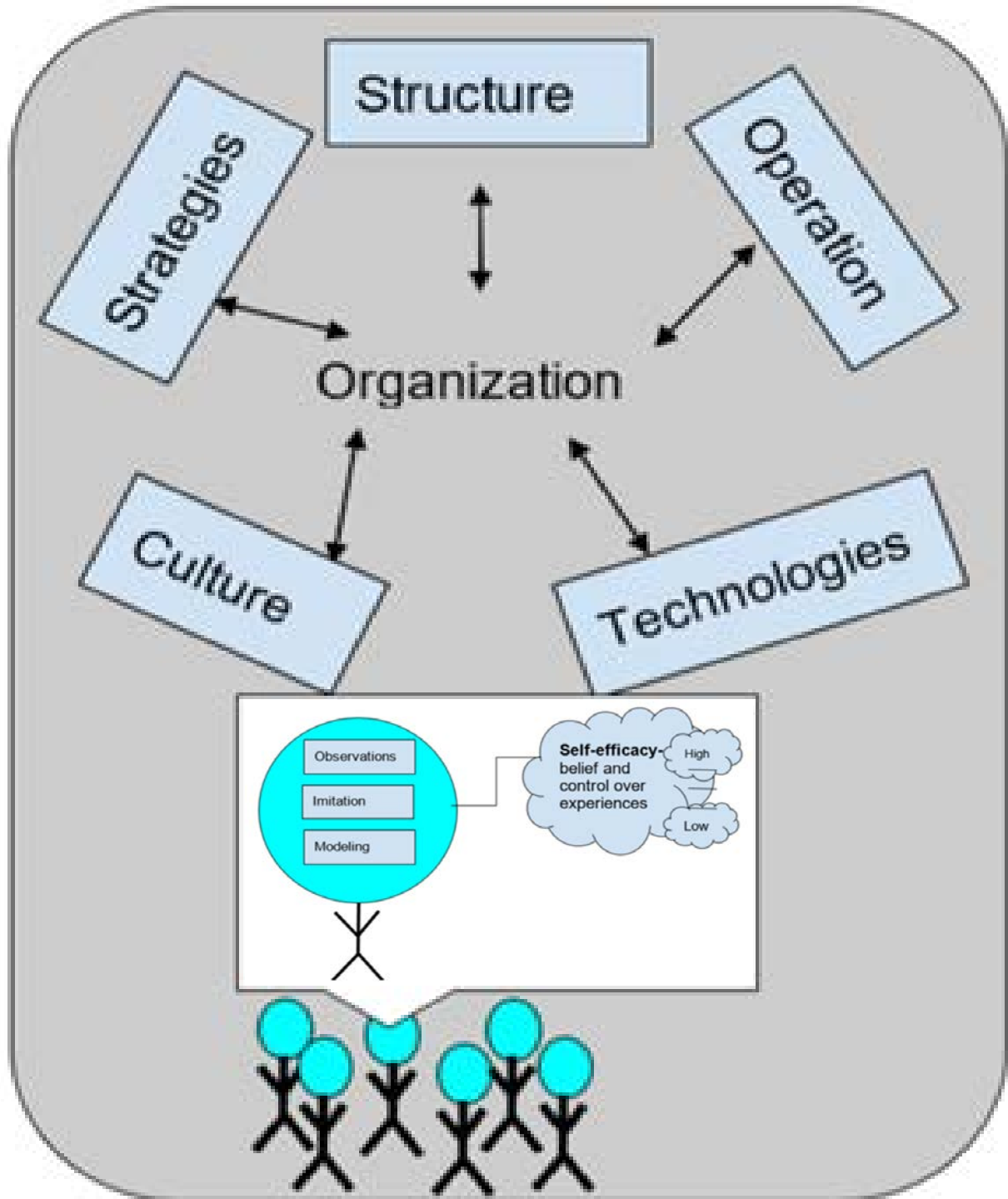
Seeing the big picture in Organizational Change Theory requires leadership to create connections. Figure 3 is a visual depiction of the role of individuals in organizational change theory. Each person's self-efficacy contributes to the strategies, structures, operation, technologies, and culture of an organization.

Although several stakeholders are involved, there is an assumption that a leader brings greater benefits when their self-efficacy is high. Strong leaders are savvy, goal-oriented, authentic, dedicated, and politically inclined (Adhanom, 2016). They seek to find solutions and do what is in the best interest of all. This connection requires the involvement of several stakeholders. The community and other involved stakeholders' shared input on the decision making for school consolidation help to increase the communication and implementation of a school consolidation plan (Marchbank, 2015).

Together, the theories of self-efficacy and organizational change are relevant to the design of my study. When the leader displays high self-efficacy and implements strong communication strategies, the implementation of an effective school consolidation plan is more likely. As stated by Baldwin (2015), communication and direction are critical in this process. The leader must keep parents and stakeholders informed. The information must be given with strong attention to factual detail, and information must be updated in a timely fashion. Analyzing data from Wilkins County Schools' stakeholders will reveal the impacts of consolidation through the lens of academic performance, financial impact and community impact.

History of School Consolidation

School consolidation is a term that is not new to the educational sector. School consolidations have been used to reduce the number of schools starting as early as 1939 (Ackell, 2013). There were over 117,108 school districts in the United States in the 1940s (Cotton, 1999).



Note. This image shows how each individual's self-efficacy contributes to the larger impacts on an organization.

Figure 3. Individuals within organizational change.

This number has decreased to 13,225 in 2017 (United States Census Bureau, 2018). Within a period of approximately 70 years, this is a reduction of 103,883 school districts or 87% of the school sites. This has been a topic of concern for state and local governments in the United States (Ackell, 2013). In the following sections, I will divide the history of school consolidation into timeframes.

Before the 1830s: Pre-Common School Era

Before the 1830s, districts were community-oriented and served a purpose based on geographic or neighborhood relations (Schmidt, 2011). This means many students attended schools based on the location of their house. The concept of attendance area schools was created based on students being enrolled in schools that were in the area in which the student resided. School funding at this time was supported through philanthropic- or tuition-based means (Nicklow, 2003). Students from the local area attended local schools that were supported by the local community and local tax dollars (Johnson, 2015; Schmidt, 2011).

1830-1890: Emerging Common Schools Era

When locally owned businesses began to be replaced with vendors and franchised stores, this led to decreased local dollars for school funding (Timar & Tyack, 1999; Johnson, 2015). Schools lacked funding and resources needed to support all local children. This created a need for the centralization of schools and the allocation of state funding for schools. Funding support continued to grow as directives and oversight began to come from the state level (Schmidt, 2011). According to Nicklow (2003), schools created under this governance were referred to as “common schools” and came with public funding as well as public concern about “moral vision” for school-aged students.

In the mid-1800s, there was a push to have “common schools.” These schools focused on political and organizational aspects of dominant groups in American culture (Nicklow, 2003). The goal was to ensure efficiency in operations, management, monitoring, and support for a normalized common culture (Nicklow, 2003). At this time, pedagogical and curricular details were not a focus, but the transfer of expectations, morals, and values was of great importance (Engelhardt, 2009; Nicklow, 2003). The efficiency of teaching and operations were impacted by political and economic influences. This became more prevalent as a centralized approach to public schooling began to emerge (Schmidt, 2011).

In 1869, while still focusing on school efficiency, political and economic factors began to be a more pressing focus for common schools (Schmidt, 2011). This increased focus led to pressure for combining resources such as transportation. According to Probst (as cited in Reynolds, 2013), the first documented consolidation occurred in Massachusetts in 1869 when an issue occurred with the transportation of students to and from school. In this situation, efficiency outweighed the focus on morals and values as the state sought to become more economically efficient (Steffes, 2008).

1890-1930: Urban vs Rural Schools, Centralization and Efficiency

In the 1890s, organizational structures produced increased disregard for individuality and a stronger focus on institutionalization. The Industrial Revolution pushed the notion that an “optimal social order” could be established through school structures that were similar (Grier, 2012). Larger city schools were advocated for at a time when economic depression, municipal corruption, and governmental reform were rising (Schmidt, 2011). This set the stage for arguments around the merging of school districts in the late 1800s (Cotton, 1999; Marchbank 2015; Reynolds, 2013). Schools were created and imbued with a corporate-like structure where

governance was under the control of a professional administrator and committee of successful community men (Schmidt, 2011). This structure prefigures the roles of superintendent and board of education that, with the exception of charter schools, largely persists in 21st-century public education.

One of the more notable arguments in the 1900s was a focus on larger schools providing better education and a focus on citizenship (Cubberley, 1914; Fullan, 2000). This “better education” was associated with the emergence of social stratification, a misleading sense of equity, and an influx of immigrants in the US (Cubberley, 1914; Schmidt, 2011). This led to racially segregated systems, rural versus urban systems, and socio-economically oriented systems (Schmidt, 2011). Rural schools were devalued by the emerging idea that decreasing the control of rural “locals” was a positive way to curtail less pertinent focuses (Grier, 2012; Schmidt, 2011).

In the 1930s, the devaluing of local control manifested itself in several arguments supporting the rationale for school consolidation as a way to increase diversity, democracy, and social justice/equity (Schmidt, 2011). This focus, combined with the increased involvement of state funding, state control, and federal influence, ensured that rural schools that lacked the political force and population would more than likely close (Li, 2009; Schmidt, 2011).

Supporters of larger consolidated schools supported the idea that consolidation was a way to have equal, not the same, resources for rural children while maintaining their distinctly rural education. This would promote the “rural” lifestyle in a consolidated school. According to Steffes (2008),

rural reformers recommended that whenever possible, rural consolidated schools should be located in the open country, offer agriculture and nature study, contain demonstration

farms and livestock, organize canning, corn growing, and other agricultural clubs, and exhibit their work to the community at farmers' institutes and county fairs (p. 193).

1940-1980: Centralization

By the 1940s, centralization began to be a standard mode of operation, and experts began to think in terms of “optimal school size” (Chavez, 2002; Reynolds, 2013). According to Reynolds (2013), experts who researched optimal school size suggested 4,000 students for a comprehensive program, but this was not replicated in other studies (Collins, 2019). At this time, opportunities for employment in the industry were increasing while the demand for laborers on farms was decreasing. Populations were also shifting from rural areas to urban areas to take advantage of greater employment opportunities (Brigman, 2009; Heinz, 2005; Marchbank, 2015). The overall number of schools was decreasing, but enrollment was increasing. Many small schools were also being closed and consolidated into larger school buildings for better use of resources (Marchbank, 2015).

1950-1970: Equity and Efficiency

From the 1950s through the 1970s, effectiveness and equity existed as two parallel reasons for widespread school consolidations (Schmidt, 2011). The education of Black children began to emerge, perhaps prompted by landmark court cases such as *Brown v. Board of Education* (*Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 1954), which adverted the nation’s consciousness to racial inequities and disadvantages for Black students (Brown, 2012; Nardone, 2009; Rice, 2003; Schmidt, 2011). While many historically Black schools had been created with Rosenwald Financial Aid in the 1912-1937 period, they were closed now due to the mandate to racially integrate schools (Nardone, 2009). This created a significant loss of Black teachers and principals in consolidated school sites. Researchers have suggested that, while the racial

integration of schools as a concept offered potentially positive outcomes, it is important to consider the disadvantages suffered by minority communities during the implementation of school district consolidations (Howley et al., 2011; Marchbank, 2015).

Parallel to the racial integration of schools, a nationalistic focus on outperforming other countries emerged in the wake of the space race with the USSR (Marchbank, 2015). In order to remain globally competitive, federal governments pushed for the elimination of small schools to ensure talented youth were given competitive opportunities in reorganized larger high schools. Curricular and vocational opportunities were viewed as exemplary in larger schools, while smaller schools lacked resources to sustain a comprehensive educational approach (Grier, 2012; Schmidt, 2011; Tangorra, 2013).

1980-2000: Standardization

The 1980s ushered in a period of effectiveness along with the standardization movement (Schmidt, 2011). No longer was there a need for numerous small districts once centralization was accomplished. Now the focus shifted to more state and federal control due to funding streams supporting the cost of schooling and state and federal mandates in place (Duncombe & Yinger, 2010; Johnson, 2015). With standardization, there was still a decrease in enrollment of students in urban and rural areas due to families that were not satisfied. According to Schmidt (2011),

few reasons provided for a family's secession from a district include: (a) the response by a community to a school closure, (b) a community terminating a relationship with a troubled district, (c) parents desire to gain control over the education of their children, and (d) 'white tax flight.'

2000 to Present: 21st Century Public Education

According to Collins (2019), “between 2000 and 2015, there were 909 school district consolidation events in the US” (p. 60). The twenty-first century was impacted by No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Legislation (2002), which combined all three emphases: efficiency, equity, and effectiveness (Schmidt, 2011). Efficiency was a means to ensure education was provided but at an efficient cost to the public. Equity involved a focus on ensuring students' individual needs are met. Effectiveness is the measure of academic benefit to students who are being provided instruction. At this time, state and federal control persisted and included the unique use of grant funding to encourage curriculum focuses and consolidation of school sites (Budzilek, 2008; Johnson, 2015; Marchbank, 2015). Still to this day, school consolidation provides a financial rationale to assist with these emphases. School consolidation, however, still elicits emotional responses to its goals and remains a source of tension in communities (Marchbank, 2015; Reynolds, 2013).

Summary

Evolutions within these decades have required school districts to change over time (Johnson, 2015). This latest period further underscores the trends, especially with the implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) (USDE, 2015). Through ESSA, President Obama continued the focus on the federal role in supporting school settings (USDE, 2015).

During the history and evolution as outlined, schools have transformed from one-room schoolhouses to modernized, multiple buildings, and technology-enhanced buildings (Johnson, 2015; Marchbank, 2015). Likewise, teachers have had to shift from teaching multiple grades in one classroom to multiple teachers teaching individual grades of students, all with a variety of

low to high technology resources as supports (Houston, 2001). In conclusion, Cox and Cox (2010) asserted that, as communities continue to face reduced budgets, school consolidation would continue to be a recommendation of governance to facilitate fiscally responsible decisions related to educational costs.

Perceptions on School Consolidation

Several scholars have referred to school consolidation as school redistricting, school mapping restructure, school merger, school deactivation, and school district reorganization (Alberghini, 2017; Bard et al., 2006; DeYoung & Howley, 1990; Durant, 2016; Johnson, 2015; Zhao & Parolin, 2014). Nonetheless, each term defines the process of combining school sites due to a variety of reasons. The process, however, is ultimately perceived as a means for school districts to meet increasing demands.

These demands can sometimes be more easily met at a larger school that has more supplemental funding as compared to a smaller school (Schwartzbeck, 2003). With reasons varying from student choice to financial reasons, the perception of this topic differs based on the stakeholders involved. These stakeholders include parents/guardians, students, superintendents, school staff, and school boards.

Parents/Guardians

Parents/guardians show variation depending upon if they attended the school site that is considered for consolidation. Former attendees are often connected to the school via traditions and mascots (Burack, 2019). Baldwin (2015) agrees that this increases the complexity of closing a school. The parent usually feels the need to advocate for what is in the best interest of their child. This may be centered on the need for maintaining stability of the current site. This is in alignment with their hope to decrease the impact of change on their child (Durant, 2016).

Parents can also be impacted by taxes during school consolidation. According to Flynn-Trace (2011), “Escalating school expenditures, resulting in ever increasing and burdensome property taxes, are most often what drive initial efforts to consider the merger of school districts” (p. 18). This actually offers relief of unnecessary payments due to trying to invest in schools that are declining in ADM.

Students

According to Sell et al. (1996), students are more immediately impacted by consolidation compared to the later impacts to the community. Students may gain things like new courses and new friends, but they are impacted by longer bus routes, less attention in larger classes, and reduced parental involvement (Boddington, 2010; Delph, 2015; Durant, 2016; Tieken, 2016). Johnson (2015) provided more positive student outcomes, concluding that low-income students showed academic gains in larger settings due to additional services that can be offered. The students should be a top priority in the superintendent’s planning for consolidation.

Superintendents

Superintendents, along with administrators and teachers, play a large role in providing the activities for communication and student involvement in re-branding. This includes the selection of colors, mascots, and other items (Burrack, 2019; Witt, 2011). These items develop the culture and pride of the schools.

Both Durant (2016) and Baldwin (2015) note the importance of the superintendent and teachers to focus on curricular expectations as well as extracurricular activities. Baldwin (2015) noted from his research that all superintendents saw an “increase in extra-curricular activities, choices in academics, social opportunities, specialized teaching and enhanced economics for the

district” (p. 17). These things could not be possible without a staff that supports goals aligned with the consolidation plan.

School Staff

While following the consolidation plan, some staff positions may be eliminated, and others may gain different duties. When new programs are introduced or specialized courses are provided, school leaders often need to provide specialized staff. Johnson (2015) notes that some teachers benefit from the end of combined or blended classes.

Finances are a major factor in determining staff impacts of consolidation. The financial capacity of a small school site to host a variety of courses may be limited due to the state requirements to have core courses (Ackell, 2013; Delph, 2015, Flynn-Trace, 2011). For example, when a school gets the funding, it has to make sure the core course teachers are accounted for before looking at the arts and other electives. When there is a financial choice to be made between core curriculum and specialized courses, smaller schools will sacrifice the specialized courses to be state compliant with core courses (Lowen et al., 2010; Reynolds, 2013; Rice, 2003). Although this ensures compliance, this eliminates staff positions that can provide an enhanced core and supplemental curriculum choices for a school site. For this reason, some administrators and teachers note the lack of voice they have in a decision to consolidate schools. The voice of consolidation is primarily an action within the jurisdiction of the duties and powers of the local school board (Delph, 2015).

School Boards

Although local school boards are the larger governing body of school systems, school consolidation impacts them during the onset when choosing to vote for or against it. If some community members are not in agreement with consolidation, this increases the possibility that

board members will not be re-elected after consolidation (Budzilek, 2008; Sargent & Handy, 1974). The cultural and fiscal impacts are apparent too.

Some boards recognize the negative effects such as the loss of control of things like cultural norms. School sites are often used for cultural/community purposes such as reunions, weddings, dances, civic activities, and other social ventures (Delph, 2015, Koziol et al., 2015). When schools are closed, residents often find other places for these activities, and some residents are disconnected from the new consolidated site (Grier, 2012; Howley et al., 2012; Marchbank, 2015). This decreases participation in activities and usage of the school for events (Lyson, 2002). Furthermore, this impacts the perception of the school site as a place of shared experiences (Ackell, 2013; Noble, 2010). This sometimes decreases their trust in the board who has voted to consolidate the community school (Sargent & Handy, 1974).

Beyond cultural impacts, board members are entrusted with ensuring fiscal responsibility of the system (Johnson, 2015). When assessing the school's direct fiscal cost, Witt (2011) found that consolidation does not correlate to reducing per-pupil expenditures. While there is little research that shows excessive financial gain as an impact of school consolidation, there are data that show the impacts on the local area tax base. These impacts change due to the relocation of some community members based on their dissatisfaction or excitement. This impacts the tax base negatively if members leave or positively if new members come (Andrews et al., 2002; Schmidt, 2011). New members add to the tax base, which supports school funding in North Carolina.

Consolidation of schools focuses on the opportunity to expand extra-curricular activities, increase academic course offerings, provide adequate facilities, and increase financial efficiency for materials (Ackell, 2013; Lowen et al., 2010). Likewise, Ackell (2013) indicated this also increases the ability to provide more student supports when resources are combined. When

working with an accurate representation of voices from the parents/guardians, students, superintendents, and the local school board, a positive impact can prevail.

Criticism, Size, Academics, Poverty, and Financial Impacts

Research about school consolidation is positive and negative in regard to its impact on academic and financial issues. Overall there appears to be a chorus of critics who view consolidation at the very least with skepticism. Within this skepticism, critics of consolidation argue that “under the rubric of school improvement, many places that once provided school no longer do; for they have been improved out of existence” (DeYoung & Howley, 1990, p. 3). Although according to DeYoung and Howley (1990), there is much-perceived loss of value in the community during consolidation, most successful consolidations maintain a school in each town to lessen the socioeconomic and fiscal impact in each area (Bard et al., 2006). In some successful consolidations, efforts are made to involve community meetings, share plans, and have all student bodies interact prior to consolidation. Despite those glimmers of successful consolidations, agreement for maintaining smaller schools seemed to thrive from the association of smaller class sizes, more extracurricular involvement, stronger community connections, and the lack of research that showed increased school quality after consolidation (Bard et al., 2006; Cutshall, 2003). This section will explore school consolidation in terms of school size, poverty and race, resources, curriculum, and courses, and financial impacts.

School Size

Since the 1940s, school size has been a factor in determining if schools will be consolidated (Chavez, 2002; Reynolds, 2013). District enrollment can increase or decrease depending on the parent’s perception of the consolidated site, population growth, and/or school reorganization (Chavez, 2002). Factors such as the low performance of the school sites, the lack

of jobs, and the lack of resources in Wilkins County could have been a contributing factor to the declining enrollment. There are also a significant number of students from the Tiger area that attend private schools and schools within another county that have not to be considered as a part of the district enrollment because they have never been enrolled in Wilkins County Schools. Based on data from the 2017-2018 Wilkins County Schools student transfers request, 40 students transfer out of Wilkins County, with 63% of the students transferring to a school in the neighboring district. This decreases the school system's overall enrollment.

Budgets are increased or decreased depending on the number of students enrolled. These aspects shape the conditions for student achievement to be fostered (Greeney, 2010; Lenear, 2013; Zimmer et al., 2009). Studies agree on the following three recurring points acknowledging (a) no relationship between school size and quality; (b) larger schools yielding low achievement and decreased student satisfaction; and (c) small schools having no impact but better social benefits (Bakioglu & Geyin, 2009; Bard et al., 2006; Chavez, 2002; Grier, 2012; Lenear, 2013; Machesky, 2006; Raywid, 1999; Riha, 2011).

Researchers also commonly sought to arrange school size into categories of small, medium, and large. For example, Lenear (2013) noted larger school districts (with 10,000 or more students) have statistically significantly higher passing rates than medium districts (1,600-9,999 students) and bottom ranking smaller districts (1,599-100 students). Additional factors noted by other researchers include the relationship between completion rates and economic factors with school size (Chavez, 2002; Forbes et al., 1993). In Table 1, these data summarize several researchers' attempts to recommend ranges for school size.

Table 1

School Size Categories

Researcher	Generic	Elementary	Secondary
Howley, 1994			400 students
Maine State Planning Council on Developmental Disabilities & National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1996			Limit of 600
Lee & Smith 1997			600 – 900 students
Raywid, 1999	More than 300, less than 900		
Lashway & Educational Resources Information Center, 1999	Under 1000, even 200 may be too many		
Cotton, 1999		300-400	400-800
Ark, 2002	No more than 100 per grade level		No more than 400 students
Grier, 2012			Less than 1,000
Bard et al., 2006	Small school size 300-500		
Bard et al., 2006; Duncombe & Yinger, 2010; Howley et al., 2011; Inerman & Otto, 2003; Bingle et al., 2002	Minimum 400- 2,000 per district Maximum 4,000-6,000		
Garret, 2015			Large high school is greater than 2000 students Small high school is 500-800 students

According to multiple sources such as DeYoung and Howley (1990), Bingler et al. (2002), Inerman & Otto (2003), Augenblick et al. (2001), Bard et al. (2006), there appears to be no correct size of a school. Those sources indicated that schools have a minimally evident size to purpose value, but no consistent optimal data are agreed upon when it comes to what should be the standard size of a school system. Size-to-purpose value supports the thought that, with a certain number of students, you will find greater value in the school outcomes. However, with ranges from 5,000 in a district (Bingler et al., 2002), between 260 and 2,925 students (Augenblick et al., 2001), and a recommendation that school systems should not be smaller than 750 children (Inerman & Otto, 2003), these recommendations varied significantly.

Regardless of the school size, the general focus must remain on the education of students. While there is no consensus on what school size has the most academic benefits, there is a substantial notation that small schools minimize negative social effects of larger schools such as alienation, personal connections, and decreased participation in the school (Fine & Somerville, 1998; Machesky, 2006; Raywid, 1996; Visher et al., 1999). Each of these items can impact the academic performance of students.

Poverty and Race

According to Irvin et al. (2011), poverty has a major impact on rural communities due to the lack of resources available as compared to many suburban and urban areas. The long-lasting impacts express themselves in generational, non-Caucasian, remotely located communities. Irvin et al. (2011) stated, “The poverty encountered by numerous rural youths substantially increases their chances for educational problems including underachievement and school dropout” (p. 1,225). According to Irmsher (1997), when looking at the achievement level of high poverty areas, it is even more apparent that developmental issues, geographical isolation in the location,

scarcity of economic supports, and expectations for educational attainment beyond high school are great impacts in rural areas. There are benefits of community and social support which lead to close relationships, but when these impacts are overarched by the need for daily living requirements and competition for resources, students suffer (Irmsher, 1997). Howley (1994) additionally used formulas to show the negative effects of students with low socioeconomic status (SES) being located in larger schools.

In 2013, Leneer conducted a six-year study on the effect of school district size on academic performance. The performance was gauged based on achievement in reading, math, science, social studies, and writing. Leneer's (2013) data indicated Black, Hispanic, and White student performance is related to the size of the district. This same data is also found in race data from Grier (2012). Grier's data supported the research that Black students perform lower than their peers in a larger setting. Furthermore, Black and special needs (at-risk, gifted, or disadvantaged) students perform better in smaller schools (Irmsher, 1997; Machesky, 2006).

Resources, Curriculum, and Courses

In other studies, school size has a positive relationship with achievement when referenced to resources and courses (Crosnoe et al., 2004; Greeney, 2010; Grier, 2012; Howley, 1994; Ketchum & Slate, 2012; Riha et al., 2013; Slate & Jones, 2005; Zoda et al., 2011). This relationship is positive but not strong due to the enrollment needing to double in order to see an increase in the selection of courses (Machesky, 2006). Alberghini (2017) points out the lack of programming diversity, insufficient curriculum, and limited opportunities as a major lack of resources for small schools. Benefits in respect to curriculum and resources come in the ability to provide more interaction in extra-curricular activities and socialization opportunities (Baldwin, 2015). To that end, according to studies, smaller schools engage students and staff with social

connections that increase attendance, engagement, and shared responsibilities around success (Baldwin, 2015; Hayes, 2018). In addition, smaller schools operate with fewer courses, but the quality of the course is better sustained within a focused curriculum (Slate & Jones, 2005).

In larger schools it is easier to see that curriculum in a school has a direct relationship to school size. Larger schools have more depth and breadth than small schools (Chavez, 2002). The factors linked to school size are “design and implementation of programs, classroom instruction, instructional quality, and school climate” (Chavez, 2002, p. 2). These factors are not to be excluded when discussing curriculum and resources.

While resources can be supplemental to curriculum, the curriculum is the content packaged into courses. According to Nelson (2010), rural schools have unique challenges with the creation and implementation of the curriculum especially in the age of standards-based curriculum reform. This also lends to rural educators wanting a curriculum that is designed for rural student needs (Toavs, 2017). With more urban areas, an increased number of courses proves efficient for larger school size (Cox & Cox, 2010; Slate & Jones, 2005) as compared to a rural school with smaller enrollment. With more offerings of courses, larger schools were seen as more effective (Machesky, 2006). Monk (1992) notes that these courses are traditionally introductory level and electives. Courses like Advanced Placement courses are elective courses that can be added with more students (Grier, 2012). These courses are seen in a higher rank as compared to general education courses.

Financial Impacts

Finances are discussed as an obvious impact of closing schools in theory. In actuality, there are still costs encountered in the consolidation that must be accounted for from busing to rebranding. According to Boddington (2010), “An argument might be made that this dispute

[may represent] the problems and difficulties involved in a shift from rural life, with its unique sorts of interpersonal relationships built on the strength of local community and co-operative spirit, to a much more urbanized and structured existence” (p. 17). In this case, there is a focus on efficiency regardless of the community spirit in rural communities. Several researchers point out the obvious reductions for these communities when consolidating. These are seen in cost from administration and services for smaller settings, increased class sizes for maximization of classroom teachers, and coordination of staff and maintenance services for efficiency (Alberghini, 2017; Andrews et al., 2002; Duncombe & Yinger, 2010; Fox, 1981).

Districts are primarily funded with per-student cost; however, maintenance and service will not decrease with decreases in enrollment. The staff required for operations also does not decrease (Schwartzbeck, 2003). Savings can be seen in facilities construction, duplication services, maintenance management, community relations, and employment readiness. It can also be seen in electricity, heating, cooling, decreased maintenance, and staff salary and benefit decreases (Grier, 2012).

Common themes that support school consolidation emerge around increasing enrollment to decrease per-pupil cost and repurposing funds that are saved in the process of consolidation to improve education (Bard et al., 2006; Duncombe & Yinger, 2010; Hayes, 2018). For example, Flaherty (2013) found a statistically positive relationship between expenditures in the classroom and school instruction (Hayes, 2018). At the same time, criticism of consolidation evolves around these same points. Researchers (Andrews et al., 2002; Gordon & Knight, 2008; Hayes, 2018) supports the notion that increasing school size through consolidation is not the most appropriate solution to increasing student achievement and decreasing the cost of running a school system. However, proponents of consolidation believe that curricular and financial

advantages outweigh the negatives of school closings (Nelson, 2010). Grier (2012) acknowledges the need for schools to constantly focus on budget trimming, stretching resources, and still providing high academic standards for students. This must, however, all be done without raising taxes.

The district per-pupil cost is also known as the average daily membership or average daily attendance. This is the number used by the state and federal government, which takes into account the number of enrolled students in a school. The more students in a classroom with one teacher, the greater the savings. As rural areas began to see more economic decline, the population of these areas decreased along with school enrollment (Grier, 2012). This leads to a greater need to have a maximized number of students per class to keep costs low. Other potentially practical solutions do not yield these actual results. For example, a consolidation project in Maine intended to show a decrease in spending for transportation when creating “regional centers.” Evidence was found that there was not a significant decrease, and after new school construction, the costs were similar to those before consolidation (Grier, 2012; Silvernail et al., 2007).

When questions arise about the financial impact of building new smaller schools or larger schools, they have to be answered by policymakers at the local and state level. This is becoming a challenge with the limited capacity to support consolidation with empirical evidence (Hayes, 2018). Applying economies of scale may influence decisions and policy (Chavez, 2002). This may lead researchers to assume economies of scale will come from creating a larger base of students to service in one site (Flowers, 2010; Gershenson & Langbein, 2015; Hayes, 2018; Parrish, 2015; Preston et al., 2013; Riha et al., 2013; Rogers et al., 2014; Weldon, 2012). In some states, such as North Carolina, bonds are being discussed to build schools. If the need for a new

site is present in several locations, the decision-makers have to determine the economic feasibility of multiple site options such as PK-13 or PK-5 and 6-12 or PK-8 and 9-12 in order to be financially efficient.

In summary, schools and districts are challenged with funding the growing cost of an adequate education while budgets are decreasing. When looking at impacts, researchers have varied points depending upon perceived impact, school size, poverty and race, and resources (Alberghini, 2017; Baldwin, 2015; Bard et al., 2006; Irvin et al., 2011). While some researchers in this area also looked at per-pupil cost to analyze the data, other researchers looked at the grade spans served and whole child focus areas such as poverty and social-emotional aspects (Lowen et al., 2010; Lyson, 2005; Woods et al., 2005). No matter the lens used, the divided consensus prevails when looking at the criticism, size, academic and financial impacts of school consolidation.

Equity in North Carolina Districts

As mentioned earlier in the background section, a major court case impacting North Carolina schools was the case of *Leandro v. State of North Carolina* (Leandro v. State: Duke University School of Law, n.d.). This case brought to light the fiscal inequity of wealthy districts as compared to small rural districts. The five school districts involved in this case were Hoke, Halifax, Robeson, Vance, and Cumberland. The underlying premise of this case was that the quality of a child's education should not be dependent on the wealth of the community or family of the child's origin. The plaintiff in the case proposed that higher levels of funding needed to stabilize low-wealth counties.

In North Carolina, the State Constitution mandates the funding of adequate resources for all schools in the state. While the outcome unanimously stated that "neither school district nor

counties have any constitutional right to equal funding, ...all children...have a fundamental constitutional right to the opportunity to receive a sound basic education” (Leandro v. State of North Carolina (Leandro v. State: Duke University School of Law, n.d.). A sound education was defined as providing opportunities for children to become adults that are literate, make informed choices, and have sufficient academic and vocational skills to engage in additional education or gainful employment.

Wilkins County is a small low wealth county with similar issues to the five counties named in the court case. Furthermore, in 2006 Judge Howard Manning Jr. warned that the Grade 9-12 site reviewed in this research, along with 18 other poor performing high schools, would be closed unless they made drastic changes to provide for their students (Associated Press, 2006). With the pressure to perform academically while thriving in a fiscally challenged setting, school sites consider closure as a means to increase fiscal and academic resources.

Building Sustainable Impact

Evidence for consolidation comes from financial issues, decreasing enrollment, maintenance of facilities, inequities between schools, and centralizing administrative responsibilities (Britt, 2013). These may seem to be negative impacts, but when consolidating, there are potential benefits that contribute to a sustainable positive impact. These benefits can be seen in sharing of staff for efficiency, increasing PK-13 student-to-student interaction, and benefit Teacher Cadet Programs. Each of these brings greater benefits to a small rural area where it is typically hard to attract highly qualified staff.

When reviewing school staffing at both of the high schools, as stated previously, there were some vacancies at one site that had a teacher at the other site. For example, a biology class in one school had 10 students with a teacher, while at the other site, three sections of biology

with more than 20 students per class had no teacher. This coordination and collaboration of district resources lead to improvements in the quality of education received (Britt, 2013). This decreases duplication across classrooms and programs, which increases the efficiency of staff. While this may involve job loss for some staff, this can also create better salaries for those needed. Most importantly, for a rural school struggling to staff all teacher positions, is the ability to decrease vacancies. Decreased vacancies contribute to shared ownership and commitment to all students' education.

Students in the consolidated environment will have greater student-to-student interaction due the increase in ADM. As shared in Nitta et al. (2008), although students share they are not interested in attending the new school initially, they adjust to the new environment and make friends. Sell et al. (1996) note that students integrated into larger schools often become a member of the diverse student population and broaden their networking and social experiences. This gives the school more opportunities to use students to help other students improve.

Students' helping student is a way to have a sustainable impact in a consolidated school site. Peer intervention and cooperative group reinforcement are two interventions that promote positive behaviors and increase interactions with student peers (Fantuzzo et al., 1990). When students help each other, it builds relationships and helps to show the strengths of individual students. Cross-Age Tutoring, as identified by Levin et al. (1988) and Yeh (2010), is one-way students can improve student achievement. This requires students who are above grade level to be partnered with students in lower grades for instructional support. This type of successful tutoring ultimately leads to stronger support for teacher cadet programs where students take on teacher roles.

According to Gist et al. (2018), grow your own programs (GYOs) are a viable solution for teacher shortages and a way to increase the diversity of staff. Gist et al. (2018) also note having staff that is native to the community creates “community cultural wealth.” The most important aspect of a teacher cadet program in a small rural district is that it develops a pipeline of teachers in a hard-to-staff area.

When consolidating, there is often the thought of what the community may lose. Attention must also be given to the potential benefits that contribute to a positive sustainable impact. Efficient staffing, increased PK-13 student to student interaction, and Teacher Cadet Programs help to develop the community of a consolidated site.

Community Consensus Building

Consolidation will always be a pivotal issue in education, especially in rural areas (Gordon & Knight, 2008). When consolidating, the impact extends beyond the physical building (Hyndman et al., 2010). The community can be filled with mixed viewpoints on school consolidation due to sentimental memories and bonding experiences with the school site (Putnam et al., 2004).

To build consensus, leaders must invest time learning about the needs and wants of the community. Several schools maintained educational legacies and customs that created relationships and make connections to the global world around the community (Reynolds, 2013). Rural communities connect with mascots and traditions (Baldwin, 2015; Burrack, 2019; Witt, 2011). When a community’s school is within a small rural culture, this serves as a gathering place for public forums, reunions, celebrations, emergency management usage, funerals, and several other ceremonies. In some areas, there are no other facilities large enough to maintain larger crowds (Baldwin, 2015). Bard et al. (2006) noted when consolidating, there should be

attention given to ensuring the maintenance of the community's values, and if all possible, keep one school open in each town to continue with school-related traditions.

Another area of focus that will impact community consensus building is understanding the characteristics present in the neighborhood of the school (Lyson, 2002). With the school sometimes being a major employer in a small rural area, the staff will populate the area near the school. This leads to higher home values in the vicinity (Lyson, 2002). As a result of shared values and a blend of professional to managerial staff in the area, both social and economic vitality can co-exist (Baldwin, 2015; Bard et al., 2006; Lyson, 2002).

In seeking to build understanding and a consensus in the community, a framework can be used. Marshall et al. (2001) derived a process to assist with building consensus. This process is rolled out in 3 phases in Figure 4. “Phase I: Identifying Needs and Barrier to Addressing Those Need, Phase II: Knowledge Development Activities, and Phase III: Reaching Consensus” (Marshall et al., 2001, p. 115).

This process engages stakeholders in a variety of ways to gain input. Although the final decision is made by the board of education, it would be irresponsible not to gain community input prior to deciding. This process parallels the ideas found in Eichler’s (2007) *Consensus Organizing*, where he explores the connection of self-interest from the community to individual self-interest. Consensus organizers use political, economic, and social power to achieve a goal together (Eichler, 2007).

In Appendix B, the *Consensus-Building Process* (Marshall et al., 2001) gives greater detail on each of the three phases. It begins with the identification of key stakeholders critical to establishing the goal. These stakeholders should have a common interest and want to support the direction. With this group, there is a framework for operation and a list of priorities. In Phase 1,

Phase I: Identifying Needs and the Barriers to Addressing those Needs

- Encourage community members to share their experiences
- Provide feedback and encourage discussions
- Facilitate action planning

Phase II: Knowledge Development Activities

- Identify community groups that have goals which complement project goals
- Partner with community members to pilot Knowledge Development Activities
- Evaluate Knowledge Development Activities to assess how well they meet local needs

Phase III: Reaching Consensus

- Allow key stakeholders to advocate for implementation strategies
- Draft the implementation plan and the ballot
- Arrange a final consensus meeting

Note. This figure represents the three major phases in building consensus in a community.

Figure 4. Best practice models for using consensus-building process.

this information is introduced to the public. With the key stakeholders and input on the prioritized list from the public, next, the focus groups and interviews are completed. From this, needs and barriers to the goal are established. Another meeting is then required to help gain feedback on Phase 1.

In Phase II, Knowledge Development Activities are created. This gives the opportunity to have focused feedback after departing knowledge to the targeted groups. Feedback is gathered, options are created based on feedback, and strategies are developed for implementation. This is pulled together into a draft implementation plan.

In the final phase, Phase III, the goal is to reach a consensus. A public meeting is created to share the process and information gained. This is where a review of the project is present, and comments from the public are welcomed. As a final step, the implementation plan is revised and then taken for a vote to gain community consensus (Marshall et al., 2001).

This process, as a whole, overviews best practices in building a common focus for school consolidation. The process is constructive in building consensus because it involves stakeholders, meets with key groups, brings back a plan for feedback, develops common knowledge, and then creates a plan. This gives stakeholders input about the direction and ensures they understand the content explored. This will also serve as a checklist of last year's items that have been completed and those that need to be a part of the planning and implementation.

Local Consensus Building in Wilkins County

In an attempt to explore the past happenings toward consolidation, it is important to know what has been done up to this timeframe. As an entering superintendent in September 2017 and a former employee in the district, I have past knowledge of the needs of this community. As a













former student, teacher, principal, district administrator, and now superintendent, I have been able to interact with a plethora of stakeholders in the community.

The push to consolidate the schools in the system is not a new idea. Since the 1990s, the former Wilkins County Schools Superintendent has noted this need. In 2017, the current ADM in one school site proved to be declining, and with grade levels with only 10 students, there was a notion of exploring the possibility of consolidation of the site by the board of education. Figure 5 shows the ADM of each school site and the new ADM after consolidation for the 18-19 school year. The figure also shows the gain or loss by school site. Overall the district lost 136 students from the 2017-2018 to 2018-2019 school year in which the consolidation occurred.

As shown in Table 2, the Grade 6-12 THS, is projected to spend about \$12,691.10 per student. State funding per pupil is \$7,225.87. This means the state commits to spending this amount per child. Any amount above this will require the district to use other funding sources to meet their school's individual needs. When compared to other district sites, more funds are being spent at the THS site. This also means that larger schools will have less staff or funding in efforts to ensure the smaller sites are appropriately supplied with staff or school needs. The major differences in expenses were partially due to the cost of staff salaries. The only other school exceeding \$10,000 per student was a Grade 9-13 specialty school, Wilkins County Early College High School (WCECHS).

Another consideration other than the cost per pupil for each site is the quality of teachers in the district as noted by highly qualified status. In North Carolina, high qualified teachers are those that are licensed to teach in the area they are employed (North Carolina State Board of Education General Licensure Requirements, Licensure, 2018). In the Grade 6-12 School, teachers were assigned to teach grades six to twelfth, for all core subjects (English Language

Wilkins County Schools

School Name in 2017	ADM in 2017	Change to ADM from 2017 to 2018	ADM 2018	School Name in 2018
 Cub Elementary School (CES)	191	-35	156	Cub Elementary School (CES) 
 Tiger High School (THS)	153	-	-	consolidated 
 Squirrel Elementary School (SES)	651	-24	627	Squirrel Elementary School (SES) 
 Beaver Union School (BUS)	258	+40	292	Wilkins County Middle School School (WCMS) 
 Viking High School (VHS)	346	+23	369	Wilkins County High School (WCHS) 
 Wilkins County Early College High School (WCECHS)	38	+13	51	Wilkins County Early College High School (WCECHS) 
Total	1,480	-136	1,501	

Note. This figure displays the change in ADM for each school site from the 2017-2018 school year in January 2018 to the 2018-2019 school year in September 2018.

Figure 5. School capacity.

Table 2

School Cost Analysis: 2017-2018 Fiscal Year Budget Projections (Based on an ADM of 1498)

Categories	Cub Elementary School (CES)	Tiger High School (THS)	Squirrel Elementary School (SES)	Viking High School (VHS)	Beaver Union School (BUS)	Wilkins County Early College High School (WCECHS)
Salaries	\$1,196,657.46	\$1,471,350.29	\$3,436,124.55	\$2,394,625.11	\$1,956,094.35	\$435,385.84
Water	\$6,500.00	\$6,000.00	\$53,000.00	\$11,000.00	\$8,000.00	\$0.00
Fuel	\$17,500.00	\$17,500.00	\$25,000.00	\$50,000.00	\$25,000.00	\$0.00
Electricity	\$39,000.00	\$74,000.00	\$81,000.00	\$104,000.00	\$64,000.00	\$0.00
Maintenance	\$49,276.77	\$28,893.00	\$40,746.00	\$144,381.04	\$49,796.20	\$217.00
Instructional Supplies	\$27,533.40	\$32,096.17	\$200,959.33	\$81,308.02	\$58,791.13	\$46,146.32
Cafeteria – Non Salary	*All Cafeteria is included with THS	\$159,650.00	\$282,800.00	\$108,050.00	\$93,550.00	\$0.00
Total Cost	\$1,336,467.63	\$1,789,445.46	\$4,119,629.88	\$2,893,364.17	\$2,255,204.16	\$481,749.16
Estimate of Total Students	179	141	590	316	240	32
Cost Per Student	\$7,466.30	\$12,691.10	\$6,982.42	\$9,156.22	\$9,396.68	\$15,054.66

Table 2 (continued)

Categories	Cub Elementary School (CES)	Tiger High School (THS)	Squirrel Elementary School (SES)	Viking High School (VHS)	Beaver Union School (BUS)	Wilkins County Early College High School (WCECHS)
Difference Between District Cost per Student and State Allotment per Student	\$240.43	<u>\$5,465.23</u>	<u>-\$243.45</u>	\$1,930.35	\$2,170.81	<u>\$7,828.79</u>
Percentage of Budget Spent on Students at this Site	10%	14%	32%	22%	18%	4%

Note. 1,498 Total Students; \$12,875,860.46 Total Cost; \$7,225.87 WCS Per Child Allotment. This table displays the cost of each site in the 2017-2018 school year with the WCECHS and THS noted with an underline to show the increased cost at each of these school sites.

Arts, Math, Science, and Social Studies) teachers. This is due to the limited number of members of staff that can be placed at a site with minimal impact to the allotments of other school sites. Typically, the funding ratio is 15 to 35 students per teacher, depending on the grade level served. This equates to situations like having one teacher who is responsible for teaching ELA grades 6, 7, 8, English I, II, III, and IV. According to Chavez (2002), students in families with limited resources underachieve compared to families with appropriate resources. Therefore, in this small, low-performing district that lacked resources, it was assumed that it would not be best practice to have one teacher preparing to teach six courses.

Another consideration was the use of substitutes for classroom teachers on one site while the same position at a different site was not maximized. It was not economically feasible to employ substitute teachers from local funds in one school for an area like biology, while the other school had a biology teacher with only eighth students enrolled being paid by state allotments. Figure 6 shows the biology enrollments for one school. Typically, an allotment for high school teachers would serve 25-35 students in the district.

To begin the process of establishing a team, a series of meetings were initiated with a variety of stakeholders. These meetings were held by the superintendent and support staff to include a variety of stakeholders in the planning for school consolidation. These meetings included an executive leadership team, key district leaders, principals, curriculum leaders, teachers, parents and community stakeholders, and business leaders in the county. A faith-based group was also added as the year continued. All of these individual meetings led to the planning and knowledge development activities (Marshall et al., 2001) to be presented at the community meeting nights on October 2017, January 2018, March 2018. These meetings served to summarize progress, share direction, and gain input from

Teacher Schedule - [REDACTED]

Expression	Term	Course #	Course	Sec #	Room	Enrollment	School Name
8(A)	17-18	30062Y0	Science Grade 6	11	72	18	[REDACTED] High
6(A)	17-18	30072Y0	Science Grade 7	71	148	15	[REDACTED] High
7(A)	17-18	30082Y0	Science Grade 8	81	148	27	[REDACTED] High
4(A)	S1	33202X0	Biology	11	148	7	[REDACTED] High
4(A)	S1	33205X0	Biology Honors	14	72	1	[REDACTED] High
14(A)	17-18	99329Y07	7th Grade Homeroom	71	72	15	[REDACTED] High

Note. This figure displays the class size for second semester Biology classes at the Grade 6-12 high school.

Figure 6. Teacher schedule.

stakeholders. They were also held and repeated in each of the three main town areas of Wilkins County: Citytown, Farmtown, and Tiger.

Testing and Accountability in North Carolina School Districts

Early on in the research, the perceived academic gains for students were a strong rationale for why board members shared some consensus with the community. Wilkins County Schools had been on the state's low performing school districts list since 2011 (NCPDI, 2018a). With hopes to increase performance, consolidation is viewed as a potential solution.

NCDPI (2012) provides expectations for schools in terms of growth, proficiency, and school letter grades from End-of-Grade (EOG) and End-of-Course (EOC) state assessments. These assessments are a major indicator of academic success and are tracked in a research report called the NCDPI School Accountability Model. Each of these assessments gives the state an indicator of how students in that grade level performed on standards they were taught in the school year.

Proficiency

Proficiency is defined as the number of students that receive a passing score on this assessment for EOGs and EOCs. In NC, students can score level 1, 2, 3, 4, or 5 on these assessments. Proficiency starts at level 3, and stronger mastery of content is shown with a higher level (the highest is at level 5). In terms of growth, this is only measured in the EOG assessments, not the EOC assessments, due to the sequence of assessments required to determine growth.

EOGs

EOGs are given in grades 3-8. There is a test for Reading grade 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, Math grade 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8, and Science Grades 5 and 8. Growth for EOGs is calculated by a

complex formula based on a progress scale that has ranges from grade 3 to 8 that are expected to be achieved with one year of academic growth as compared to their peers. NC utilized a statistical analysis program called Educator Value-Added Assessment System within their Educator Effectiveness Model (NCDPI, 2012), which tracks students and creates predictions about student performance based on historical data. If a student grows one academic unit of growth each year, this is noted as “meeting growth.” Students could also “not meet” growth or “exceed expected growth” based on these measurements.

EOCs

EOCs are assessments for grades 9-12 in the areas of English II, Math I, and Biology. In Year 3, Math III was added to these assessments for high school data collection. The process of collecting the data is much like EOGs for students; however, unlike EOGs, there is no progression of standards revealing a growth indicator for high school assessments. Therefore, high schools are evaluated on the proficiency of EOC and additional measurements such as Graduation Cohort Rate (GCR), ACT Workkeys Assessments, and English Learner Targets.

Overall Data

As a final measure of academic progress, schools are given an overall measurement for schools in terms of them meeting their academic goals. These data create the final designation as a school of “not met,” “met,” or “exceed” expected growth annually. Letter grades are also given to each school site based on data.

In summary, of the many reasons for school consolidation, academic performance is often a consideration. With a history of low performing schools in Wilkins County Schools, data from NCDPI assessments such as EOGs and EOCs are an indicator of outcomes for the school

district. In the context of this case study, the local school board hypothesized positive gains for students impacted by school consolidation.

Summary and Conclusions

There is an abundance of research around school consolidation, from those in support to those who disagree with such an approach. Hayes (2018) noted,

With increasing claims of a failing and broken system, as well as the expansion of state involvement in local education, the accountability, financial support, and most importantly the need to increase student achievement while lowering the tax-burden will continue to keep consolidation reform a popular solution with policymakers, as well as a need for a better understanding of its effects (p. 4).

With the conflicting research, it may be best to be enlightened by the notion that consolidation has great context as a situational venture. The needs of the community and future of the students vary from place to place, and with that should be considered on a case-by-case basis. Nevertheless, all across the US, rural districts continue to close schools. Rural communities thrive around the school systems within the area. When consolidation occurs, and these structures are no longer in place, the culture and climate of the communities diminishes too. When there is a planned change, a consensus-building process can be used to include the needs and wants of a variety of stakeholders (Marshall et al., 2001).

The review of literature has explored the historical precedence that justified the use of consolidation in the 21st century. This includes decades of review and its impact on education. This research has a framework involving two critical theories for leadership. These leadership theories are self-efficacy and organizational change theory. Community consensus is also critical to this framework because it allows for the input of stakeholders. Perceptions of stakeholders

from the community to students involved were discussed as well as the academic and financial impact of school closure. Lastly, the positive, sustainable impacts were reviewed along with the exploration of equity for rural low wealth schools.

In closing this review of literature, there was much to be digested about the impact and connections to school consolidation. The information gained here will better inform the data collection and analysis processes. This mixed-methods case study will seek to create an understanding of the academic, financial, and community impacts of the Wilkins County School Board's decision to consolidate a Grade 6-12 site in the 2017-2018 school year.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

According to Buzzard (2016), “The school is the center of the community, and all of its components interact with one another and the rural community to form the ever-evolving open-social system of people, things, and ideas” (p. 3). This center was, however, disappearing in rural areas as school mergers and consolidations have taken a priority to save resources and funding. The purpose of this study was to analyze the research gathered on the consolidation of a rural school in eastern North Carolina.

This study may intrigue others considering the consolidation of sites. The major difference between this case study and others about school consolidation was the plan to use these data to inform the consolidation of multiple buildings in the future. In 2017-2018 the district completed phase one of its consolidation plan involving a small rural high school in Eastern NC.

This case study reviewed the closing one year after the consolidation has taken place. The latter plans for phase two will involve the closure of several school sites to re-emerge into one Pk-13 consolidated site for all county students. The data collected from phase one will be used to make the second transition, in phase two, smoother for the students, parents, staff, and community. This case study explored data on the academic performance, financial state, and community perception of the phase one consolidation. There were hopes that increased academic focus, financial savings, and community acceptance would be found in the data.

This chapter focused on the methodology used in this study. This study was a mixed-methods case study. Data have been retrieved from state and local finance auditing data and stakeholders impacted via community focus sessions and surveys. The data included site data,

population data, research design, rationale, and the parameters for data collection. There was also a section to detail the Institutional Review Board (IRB) process and ethical considerations.

Research Design and Rationale

The ultimate goal of this research was to assist small, rural school districts with a practical plan for the consolidation of multiple school sites. In the research context, the school district was in dire need of several new facilities at one time. School construction cost can be extremely expensive, with new schools ranging from \$7 million to \$60 million per site depending upon the size and grade range (NCDPI, 2021a). This dilemma has helped the district to change its focus from developing five individual new sites over the next 50 years to building one site to hold all student PK-13. This brought us to the current case study. Through a mixed-methods approach, I explored the consolidation of the Grade 6-12 site through the lens of academic, financial, and community impacts. This study also provided significant research about the impact of site consolidation for small districts.

The mixed-methods approach was the most suitable based on the allowance for a variety of data to be analyzed. This approach allowed me to combine qualitative and quantitative data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This included local data on academic outcomes, financial records, and anecdotal data from interviews and meetings.

Qualitative designs impacted the descriptive, open-ended, narrative capabilities of this data collection process (Creswell et al., 2007). Qualitative methods also encouraged the use of emerging methods of data collection as well as seeking themes and patterns for interpretation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Qualitative data provided rich, detailed accounts of stakeholders' perspectives regarding the processes and impacts of school closure and site creation. I conducted community meeting focus groups to gain group feedback on the consolidation process. Surveys

were also be used to gauge the community perspective. These surveys included areas that require a written response for feedback. Coding of these data was completed when collected to support analysis of each participant and categorization into common themes.

Quantitative methods required an instrument to be used for data collection, statistical analysis, and statistical interpretation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Quantitative data in this research was explored in outcomes that have pre- and post-data structures. Data on the construction of buildings, school report card data, academic performance of local and state benchmarks/assessments, enrollment data, staffing data, and coded data from community forms helped to provide a quantitative view of changes.

The overarching goal of the research was to use a variety of data to paint a whole picture of school consolidation impacts in a small, rural district. Qualitative and quantitative data set a stronger foundation for analysis when used complementarily. By combining qualitative and quantitative methods, I identified the weakness of each collection type (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Population

This research studied the population of a small, rural school district in Wilkins County, NC. According to North Carolina Commerce (2018), 2016 data indicate Wilkins County had approximately 12,503 residents. Its racial makeup was 48.7% Black, 42.11% White, 5.6% were Hispanic or Latino, 1.8% from two or more races, 1.66% from other races, 0.09% Native American, and 0.04% Asian (United States Census Bureau, 2018). It was located in the northeast region of the state. There were approximately 1,501 students attending school in this area. These students came from the three towns in the 424 square mile county: Tiger, Citytown, and Farmtown.

Minority enrollment in Wilkins County Schools was reported as 82% (majority Black), and the student: teacher ratio is just under 15:1. Wilkins County was a Tier 1 county, which means it was in an economically distressed area. According to North Carolina Commerce (2018), in 2016 (the most recent figures) the median family income for the 12,503 residents was just under \$36,171—an increase of 0.6% over 2015—and 26% of incomes were below the poverty level. The Public School Forum and North Carolina Center for Afterschool Programs (2018) ranked its 100 counties based on a variety of data with the larger number meaning the more severe impact of data. The scale for these data ranked one as highly favorable and 100 as not favorable. Wilkins County was ranked as 73rd in overall health rating in the state, 73rd in child fatality, 79th in child abuse and neglect, and 66th in child food insecurity. Both county and school level data were included in this population data due to the impact of consolidation on both the school and community.

Sample and Sampling Procedures

From this population, a small group of stakeholders was identified to share data about consolidation impacts. A single-stage sampling design according to Creswell and Creswell (2018), allowed for direct sampling of individuals in the community. Wilkins County School represented three communities: Tiger, Citytown, and Farmtown. All community members were invited to the community meetings, which will then allow for a selection of participants in the focus group.

Convenience sampling targeted feedback from the community, staff, students, and parent stakeholders that were available to participate in the focus group. Ideally, the eight focus groups were composed of two 6-8-member groups of students, two 6-8-member groups of parents, two 6-8-member groups of staff members, and two 6-8-member groups of community members.

For the survey, all parents and staff members received an invitation to participate in this research. The invitation was shared on the local radio, on the phone auto calling system, and with a letter sent home to parents and given to staff (see Appendix I). In research, it was ideal to test the full population, but historically participation in feedback opportunities yields small numbers of stakeholder input. I was hopeful that using convenience sampling of the full staff and parent population would yield greater results.

Ethical Considerations and Informed Consent

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) provides governance and assurance that the highest standards of protection and consent were taken to protect research participants (see Appendix A). This ensured the rights and welfare of all participants are respected. To maintain compliance with these goals, I received approval from the local board to conduct research. Given my current as the district's superintendent, this second layer of the request was obtained to ensure the district leadership was fully informed of the data collected. An official letter was presented to the board to note the voluntary participation required for this research (see Appendix E).

There were ethical considerations included to increase anonymity as the data are compiled for submission (see Appendix F, G, and K). I acknowledged the participants giving informed assent or consent and assurance about the masking of data to increase anonymity. Additionally, a survey consent form (see Appendix J) was sent with the survey that ensured consent to use the information gained. In a small setting, it was easier to identify comments obtained from stakeholders; therefore, any personal data was removed or masked depending on content and context from qualitative sources. Additionally, no participants refused or withdrew from the data collection process. This would have required the removal of data or for me to refrain from contact to respect their request for the survey. Data collected in community forums

was group-oriented and no participants chose to give additional feedback privately through individualized phone calls.

Data retrieved from several of the quantitative sources came in the form of state reports, vendor approximations/estimates, and academic scores. Most of this information was public knowledge. When student or teacher-specific data are utilized for data reporting, this was analyzed at the school level. This was done to ensure no direct connection with a specific teacher or student was created. All data was stored in a secure electronic platform accessible only by password security protection for the site-based administrator and me.

Instrumentation

For data collection, I used a variety of questions for focus groups and community member surveying. Focus groups conducted at three community meetings with parent stakeholders and staff stakeholders focused on four questions. Question 1: What impacts have you noticed after year one of consolidation? Question 2: What things could we have done differently? Question 3: What things did we do well? Question 4: Are there any other items you want to share? Appendix B has the questions used for the focus groups. These questions were used to initiate conversation in focus groups, and based on responses, no additional questions were asked. Data was recorded on an audio recording and captured in my notes during the session. Data were analyzed by listening for common themes in the participant response.

For community member surveying, I requested permission to modify a developed survey used by Buzzard (2016) to collect data on consolidated schools' systems in New York (see Appendix C). This survey was utilized previously by a third-party research company in a telephone survey (Buzzard, 2016). Eight of these questions created by Buzzard began with an informational focus on the participant. The participant disclosed the amount of time they had

been in the community and why they moved here if they were not native to the area. It also asked them to think through the changes they have seen in the community and the impact on their “quality of life” after the building closed.

Next, the instrument asked how that change had been compensated for by the community. I had duplicated this question to create three additional questions that asked specifically about the fiscal, academic, and perception impacts to the community. The final three questions asked about changes in the children, tax savings, and gave the interviewee an opportunity to give any additional information. While I had three main research questions that focused on the impact of academic performance, fiscal impacts, and community perception, the eleven questions posed in the modified instrument provided additional data (see Appendix D). From the data obtained in the stakeholder focus groups and surveys, I was able to create a coding system to thoroughly analyze the data collected from the participants.

Procedures

Provided in this section are processes for future scholars whom seek to duplicate this research. More immediately, these procedures demonstrated the processes used to gather data. This section first outlined the initial setup of focus groups in community meetings. Next, this section detailed the surveying protocol used for individual input of parents and staff members.

Focus Groups

Based on the research of Krueger and Casey (2000), focus groups followed a four-step design for implementation. These steps were (1) Decide if focus groups are appropriate, (2) Decide who to involve, (3) Listen to your target audience, and (4) Put your thoughts in writing. Focus groups were specifically included in this research to encourage participation among the participants.

There was also a pilot focus group. Creswell and Creswell (2018) notes that pilot testing is “important to establish content validity of scores on an instrument, to provide an initial evaluation of internal consistency of items; and to improve questions, format, and instruction” (p. 154). This pilot stakeholder group also helped to identify the length of time needed to complete the focus group. Based on feedback from this group, revisions to questions and time for the process were established.

Focus group implementation required preparation for the group and designing the process. My goals were to understand the participants' perspectives about consolidation in order to inform future plans for a district-wide consolidation. As suggested in Kruger and Casey (2000) and Creswell and Creswell (2018), six to eight participants were an ideal size. Open-ended questions limited to two or three in a setting were also best practice for focus group settings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In this group, there were three questions, and a final follow up question to gauge any additional information shared from the participants.

The location of the community meetings was set at the beginning of the year for all community members' awareness. The first meetings were conducted in a community church for each of the towns of Tiger, Citytown, and Farmtown. These were the chosen venues because they gauged student, parent, staff, and community member input from each area. The community meetings were already structured in a format to start with a reminder of the district's mission and vision. Next, they transitioned into stations. For interested parties, one of the stations was a focus group. Additional focus groups were scheduled for data collection. Invitations for the community meeting were sent out via newspaper and auto calling tree systems to invite the community to give feedback on what happened and the future direction for WCS.

In the community meeting, when the group rotated to the school consolidation input stations, consent or assent for participation in the case study was reviewed. When the focus groups were conducted online with students, the process also started with consent and assent forms.

As group facilitation began, there was a general overview of the purpose given, and a consent form was shared for those who wanted to give input. I stressed to the participants their ability to opt out of the research collection at any time and about the confidentiality required in data collection with the survey.

When implementing the focus group, the initial face-to-face focus group with parents required room preparation. The room was prepared with markers, chart paper, and seating arranged in a circle for discussion. To provide an incentive and motivate attendance, refreshments were served. The refreshments were available before, during, and after the focus group sessions were completed.

For the online focus groups, a shared Google document was visible on the screen as students shared data about the consolidation process on the Zoom call. This was the only difference between the face-to-face group and the Zoom group. A reminder of ground rules followed this to include respect for other people's views and share the importance of participants being willing to be honest. I captured the feedback from the group on the chart paper and the Google doc.

While the facilitation occurred, my role was to listen to the group while being observant of body language and group interactions. According to Kruger and Casey (2000), the researcher needed to remain unbiased to the information presented and encourage the reluctant and shy participants to engage more in the conversation. When conversations began to end, I used the

shared information to probe deeper into the thoughts of the interviewees. I also ensured redirection to the research question being asked while eliminating non-verbal cues that may signal personal opinion. It was also important to be sensitive to the culture and climate of the group while maintaining a friendly session. The final steps of analysis, interpretation, and use of results are detailed in the upcoming sections of this study.

Survey of Parents and Staff

For the second data collection aspect of this study, I focused on a survey sent to parents and staff. This survey was advertised to parents and staff in an auto call before the consent letter and survey were sent home and staff. The survey was sent home for data collection for three weeks to ensure proper time for a response from all participants. The survey was available in hard copy, and any surveys collected within the three-week window were used to inform this research. In order to incentivize the return of the survey, entry into a \$20.00 gas card raffle was offered for completed surveys. All surveys collected were entered into the drawing. One was selected and identified based on the student ID and stakeholder identifier number to reward the participant.

Document and Historical Data Analysis

The last source of data collection procedures involved the review of financial statements, audits, state release academic data, and attendance data. Each of these sources was reviewed to look for trends within a three-year time frame (2016-2017, 2017-2018, and 2018-2019). There was a cost analysis on the financial impact of school closure using audit information each year compared to the next year. This information came in the end-of-the-year financial audit required by each local education agency.

Course audit data was also compiled to show the change in course offerings for students. This information came from the state course reporting system, PowerSchool. EOG/EOC testing data was analyzed from the state released test. Last but not least, attendance data for each site was included from PowerSchool, the authoritative attendance data sources for the state of North Carolina.

In order to ensure appropriate permissions were gained for access to data, I requested access to school and district data from the Wilkins County Board of Education (see Appendix E). After this permission was obtained, groups were established for data collection. Fiscal and academic information was also be obtained. For the use of the survey, a letter was sent to Buzzard to request permission to use and modify her resource.

Data Processing and Analysis

As stated in Chapter 1, this dissertation answered the following research questions.

- How does school consolidation in a small rural community impact the academic performance of the school district?
- How does school consolidation in a small rural community impact the financial state of the school district?
- How does school consolidation in a small rural community impact the community perception of the school district?

For question one, state and local data was analyzed to show trends in data present from the previous three years and the current school year. This included the courses that were offered each year. These course offerings should have increased due to the consolidation of staff. Each question used in the focus group and in the survey was correlated to a research question.

For question two, financial information on the cost to run each school site and the current cost after consolidation was compared. This included a variety of variables such as water, electricity, gas, site maintenance, transportation, staffing cost, and annual budget increases and decreases.

For question three, data were collected from focus groups and the survey to determine the community perception of school consolidation. Feedback from the sessions and survey was coded based on the information from the data analysis. Yin (1994) explained that one way to enhance internal validity was by using pattern-matching. With a small sample size (less than 1,400 max responses due to an ADM of 1,501 students), these items were coded via hand.

When coding the focus groups, charted details, my notes, and the transcription of the focus group were reviewed for common themes. When coding the surveys, responses from participants were also reviewed for common themes. This allowed me to develop a theory based on the reoccurring themes present in the responses. There was also data from community participation about the number of participants in each focus group, the number of sent surveys, and the number of completed surveys. The data matrix in Table 3 aligned each of the surveys and focus group questions with the three research questions.

Methodological Assumptions and Limitations

It was my intent to provide accurate and trustworthy research for usage by other scholars in the future. Merriam (1995) noted how many facts such as measurements, observations, and interpretations could be incorrect, and even shared experiences do not equate to validity or reliability. Based on Lincoln and Guba (1985), trustworthiness was a critical element of its overall worthiness. Trustworthiness can be determined through four elements: credibility,

Table 3

Research Questions and Data Collection Alignment

Research Question	Data Collection	Data Analysis
How does school consolidation in a small rural community impact the academic performance of the school district?	Focus Group Questions 1-4 Survey Question 3, 7, 9, 11 Collection of four years of academic data	Coding of focus group and survey responses using frequency distributions and common words
How does school consolidation in a small rural community impact the financial state of the school district?	Focus Group Questions 1-4 Survey Question 3, 5, 6, 10, 11 Cost analysis of fiscal expenses	Coding of focus group and survey responses using frequency distributions and common words
How does school consolidation in a small rural community impact the community perception of the school district?	Focus Group Questions 1-4 Survey Question 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 11 Collection data, response data	Coding of focus group and survey responses using common words, themes and phrases

transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The aspects to conclude that this research as valid and reliable are present in this section.

The credibility of research was established in a variety of ways, which all gave confidence to the research I was conducting. The seven techniques to establish credibility included prolonged engagement in understanding the topic at a broader scope. I used persistent observation to focus on the identification of relevant information and the topic that showed depth of understanding. Triangulation was used to fact check multiple sources of data. Peer debriefing provided enlightenment through analytical probing and addressing biases. Negative case analysis required the discussion of contradictory data analysis. Referential Adequacy involved creating preliminary findings and testing them against archived data for validation. Finally, there were member checks which required the data discovered to be tested by members who are highly knowledgeable of the research.

Of these seven techniques, the credibility aspect of this research was found in prolonged engagement, persistent observation, and triangulation. I am confident in these findings due to persistent observations into school consolidation at a depth of understanding where triangulation was naturally apparent in the research discovered. Prolonged engagement in the research has also helped me to connect school consolidation to rural population decline, the advanced performance of rural schools, and the need to look beyond fiscal advantages as a rationale for consolidation. Credibility has increased as I thought beyond the initial preconceptions and found the data to support the actual impacts.

The second technique for evaluating criteria was to have high transferability. Connecting to external evaluation sources for validation of research was a way to show both depth and breadth. A thick description (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) reviewed the cultural and social patterns in

context. When using transferability, the thick description content was paralleled to other experiences. Although this research was specifically focused on a small rural Eastern NC, its findings have meaning for other small rural districts.

When establishing dependability, the third criteria for evaluation, the goal was to have highly replicable findings. This was similar to member checking in its focus on support for the fellow researchers as all-knowing with fixed truth in regard to their studies. External audits justified data validation as a means to examine research. Dependability in my findings is seen in the comparative data found in between this research and other researcher practitioner's findings.

The fourth evaluative criterion was confirmability. This confirmed that bias, motivation, and interest do not contribute to inaccurate research. For this criterion, techniques included a confirmability audit, which was conducted to determine accuracy and facts. Audit trails showed a transparent process for completing the project and reporting the data. Triangulation was conducted to provide validation of information through confirming sources with other data sources. Reflexivity was present in the knowledge found at each step of the process. Confirmability of was seen in numerous research studies that inform this paper.

Role of the Researcher

In this process, it was important to remain unbiased, be a good listener, and collect accurate data for analysis. As a collector of data, with significant benefits to gain from this process, it was imperative to maintain a focus on credibility. As the superintendent of this district, this research was personally and professionally a benefit to me. There was also the importance of using these results to inform future consolidations. Therefore, it was critical to use only the data found through observation, studies, and research versus self-reliance on intuition and what has worked previously to problem-solve issues. For example, when I conducted the

focus groups, it was imperative to allow the stakeholders to participate authentically without prompting answers. I understood the importance of remaining unbiased and open to the research discovered as the research was completed.

Summary

Chapter 3 focused on the methodology of the research being conducted in regards to school consolidation impacts. This study used mixed methods to explore state finances, local finance, and academic data. It also used qualitative surveying and focus groups to establish data. With a combination of site data, sample information, research design, and parameters for data collection, a more detailed plan for research conducting was established. Within the confines of the IRB rules, ethical practices, and with great attention to trustworthy research, I have detailed methodology for future scholarly consumption. The results from the methods described in this study will be explored in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

School consolidation is a consideration for many rural districts struggling to provide a quality education for all school sites. A small rural district completing school consolidation at the end of the 2017-2018 school year is the focus of this dissertation. The purpose of this case study was to review the academic, fiscal, and community perceptions after the consolidation.

Research question 1 required me to review the academic performance of each school and the district as a whole. The rationale underpinning the change was that academic performance would increase within the consolidated schools. I assessed the impact by comparing the end-of-the-year performance data, attendance, and courses offered information.

Research question 2 necessitated my reviewing the operational cost prior to and after school consolidation. It was hypothesized that with one less building, there would be financial savings for the district. I gathered data from daily operational bills, transportation costs, and salaries.

The final research question 3 focused on the perception of the school community. It was thought that, although this may be challenging for the community directly impacted by the consolidated school, overall, the community would express positive feedback. I gathered data from focus groups and surveys to help determine the impact.

Beyond the direct focus on the three research questions, this chapter is structured first to share information from the pilot study conducted with a small focus group. Next, the chapter gives insight into the data collection process, demographics of the participants, results from the study, and concludes with a summary of this section. Within this chapter, the school years were referred to as Year 1 for 2016-2017, Year 2 for 2017-2018, and Year 3 for 2018-2019.

Pilot Study

In order to ensure the questions posed for the focus group and survey were easy to understand and not biased in how they were written, I conducted a pilot study. Materials from the consent forms and hard copies of the survey and focus group questions were printed for review (see Appendix M). All 10 of the 10 central office staff were invited to participate as the pilot group.

In the initial planning, I wanted to use community stakeholders for the pilot group. This group of community stakeholders was replaced by a group of participants from the central office because the central office personnel were all community members or directly supporting district efforts. The central office group consisted of four males and six females.

Table 4 represents the demographics of the pilot group. Since this focus group was being conducted after the district leadership team meeting, a determining factor of their participation was their attendance in the prior meeting. The participants also all had knowledge about school processes and functions, making this a well-informed group of participants to gauge responses. This group was also used to predict the potential responses of research participants to the survey and focus group questions. The group was split, with half of the group having more than 26 years in this community while the remaining participants were in the community for fewer than 5 years.

Pilot Focus Group Data

Table 5 shows the emergent themes based on the pilot focus group responses. Based on the feedback from the focus group questions, all four questions were appropriate. They were appropriate because they yielded answers about consolidation impacts that included economic factors, academic factors, change, rebranding, and relationships. When asked about what could

Table 4

Demographics of the Pilot Group

Sex	Role	Years lived in this rural community
Male	Chief Academic Officer	I don't live here
Male	Chief Technology Officer	I don't live here
Male	Transportation Director	31+
Male	Chief Finance Officer	0-5
Female	Chief Personnel Officer	I don't live here
Female	Exceptional Children's Director	0-5
Female	Career and Technical Ed. Director	31+
Female	Director of Testing and Accountability	26-30
Female	Coordinator of Communication, Logistics, and Grants	31+
Female	Director of Maintenance	26-30

Table 5

Emergent Themes Based on Pilot Focus Group Responses

Question Focus	Example Focus Group Themes
Impacts after Year 1 of consolidation	<p>Economic impacts (water bill increasing)</p> <p>Academics impacts (increased student achievement, better use of resources)</p> <p>Change impacts (change is hard, HS is no longer Vikings/Tigers, why did this happen, the school will always be Viking High School, homecoming detachment)</p> <p>Future questions (Tiger -fear of elementary closure coming)</p> <p>Relationship impacts (students have more friends, two years ago, they would not have allowed kids to go to HS, students are blending and enjoying each other)</p>
Things to be done differently	<p>More time needed to process what was happening</p> <p>Give stakeholders the opportunity to have more input</p> <p>Allow more transparency in what will happen</p> <p>Better notification of timelines</p>
Things done well	<p>Everything is completed (It's done, survived this process, respect for completing the process, discussed this for many years, but it is finally completed)</p> <p>Rebranding</p> <p>Unity created in the county (students are all WCHS students)</p> <p>Listened to stakeholders (allowed adults and students have a voice)</p>
Other items to share	<p>Success to be determined in the future (in a few more years we will be able to see the benefits more clearly)</p>

be done differently, participants agreed that timelines for feedback could have been longer and transparency for stakeholders with all parts of the process could have been greater. In this process, this group also noted the completion of the process and unity were things done well. Lastly, when asked if there were any additional items the group wanted to share, they commented about the need for future years of data collection to really see the progress made Year 3 and beyond.

Survey Themes from the Pilot Group

Table 6 and 7 shows the emergent themes based on the pilot group survey responses. Data from the pilot survey revealed responses that were logical responses based on the question asked. This made me feel comfortable with the language used in each question asked. When they answered the survey questions, participants were clearly divided in some responses. For example, in question 4, participants were asked, “Has the closing of the school building affected your perception of ‘quality of life’ in your community?” Some participants stated they get less communication from the district since the school has been consolidated while others noted they get more communication now. Some participants also noted they have fewer opportunities to interact with others from the Tiger community and a decrease of people in Tiger area. Others noted they have better opportunities since they have more courses and more students to interact with since the schools are consolidated.

Feedback from this pilot study revealed that the questions can be sorted into open-ended or categorical data. Table 6 shows Questions 2, 3, 4, and 11 were more open-ended responses. Participants noted they were able to add more information to a peer's response with this style of feedback. The remaining questions in Table 7—1, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10--all had responses that could be sorted into categories. The pilot group also recommended developing categories for the

Table 6

Emergent Themes Based on Pilot Group Survey Responses Categories-Survey Themes

Question Focus	Example Survey Themes
Question 2. If you moved here, why did you select this rural community?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Job • Family (taking care of relatives, raising children in the country area) • Environment (cheaper housing, country living) • Crisis in other location • Other
Question 3. What changes, if any, have you noticed in the community since the school building closed?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transportation (longer travel) • Increased communication • Better opportunities • Fewer opportunities • Loss of local traffic in stores (less foot traffic in Tony's/Grocery store) • Other
Question 4. Has the closing of the school building affected your perception of "quality of life" in your community?	<p>Transportation (longer travel) Fewer people More communication Less communication Better opportunities Fewer opportunities Loss of a social space Loss of pride Other</p>

Table 7

Emergent Themes Based on Pilot Group Survey Responses Categories

Question Focus	No	I don't know	Categories	
			Yes	Other
Question 5. Has your community tried to compensate for the loss of your school building and the students?	8	2	0	n/a
Question 6. Do you feel that the closing of your school building has had a financial impact on your community?	10	0	0	n/a
Question 7. Do you feel that the closing of your school building has had an academic impact on your community?	0	4	6	n/a
Question 8. Do you feel that the closing of your school building has had an impact on your community's perception of Wilkins County Schools?	2	6	2	n/a
Question 9. Have you noticed any changes in your school children that have moved to a host school?	8	2	0	n/a
Question 10. Do you see any school tax savings since your school building closed?	5	4	1	n/a
Question 11. Is there any other information that you would like to add to your interview about the effect of the closing of the local school building on your rural community?	0	0	0	Negative (sad that the school closed, wishes it was still open) Neutral (this has not impacted me) Positive (hopeful that this will bring progress to the district)

responses when they are collected. This would be on a scale of “no, I don’t know, or yes.” The categories could also include “negative, neutral, or positive.”

At the conclusion of this pilot, there were no recommendations for changing the focus group questions or the survey. The data collected matched the expected language of each question, and the participants agreed they were asked relevant questions that would provide informative details for consolidation feedback. The group did, however, recommend a cover letter and color coding to explain all the materials used for data collection (see Appendix L).

Data Collection

I collected data for this research from October 2019 to May 2020. As recommended by the pilot group to give parents an overview of the forms, I sent a School Consolidation Feedback Form (see Appendix L) home at the end of October 2019. This mailing included several items attached as appendices (see Appendices D, J, and K).

A Parent Consent Letter (see Appendix K) requested parents' consent to use their child's data in a focus group. The Consent Form for Survey (see Appendix J) gave information on the survey entitled “Qualitative Impact of School Closings on Rural Communities” (see Appendix D) and requested consent to participate in the survey. Although the survey was initially to be shared for three weeks, data from these appendices were collected from October 2019 to December 2019. Only 8% of the surveys were returned (121 respondents from the 1,501 surveys carried to each home by every student in Wilkins County Schools). I anticipated this low return rate in the data collection due to traditional low response rates of other items sent home from the district level. Of 121 respondents, 3% chose not to participate in the survey and not to have their child's data included.

While these items were sent to each home, I also advertised on the radio station with messages aired from October to November, including the language from the flier (see Appendix I). This flier documented the research I conducted and announced a community meeting date that would give more detail about this research. Appendix I was also sent home on October 17th as a reminder to parents about the community meeting, and a district-wide call was placed to all WCS stakeholders regarding this information.

At the first community meeting, held on October 22, 2019, I engaged an initial focus group with four participants (see Appendix B). The second community meeting was cancelled due to a lack of stakeholder interest in the community meeting of that area. Therefore, the second focus group did not occur. Two people came to the community meeting, and they were not interested in being a part of a focus group. An additional district-wide call was placed on November 4th to remind stakeholders about the upcoming community meeting and the potential for them to participate in a focus group about school consolidation.

The third focus group occurred with four students after the community meeting. Opportunities for adding additional feedback were provided, but there were no private requests for an individualized phone call to give feedback on the focus group questions. The fourth focus group occurred on August 18, 2019. After COVID-19 plans were completed, I was able to get this additional group of students to give feedback on the focus questions.

While most of the data collection involving the physical grouping of stakeholders was conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, some data collected from Wilkins County Schools were significantly delayed due to this crisis. The focus groups I planned for December were rescheduled to March. Then, the March date had to be moved to August. When COVID-19 occurred, all district operations transitioned to a remote setting, and due to this transition, many

employees were displaced during data collection. Employees from the personnel department, testing and accountability office, and the finance department were able to share copies of the data I requested from December 2019 to May 2020.

Data Analysis

As stated previously, there was a variety of data sources to be analyzed in this research. The data were analyzed to determine if the perceived benefits of increased academic gains, decreased financial cost, and increased positivity from community perception were achieved in this district's school consolidation. Based on the data I collected in this research, some of the benefits materialized, and some did not.

Academic Data Analysis

For academic data, I gathered these data from the testing and accountability director. These data include attendance data, end of grade/course assessment data, and options for high school choices. These data were compiled from a variety of PDF files and Excel spreadsheets into one Google document. After compilation, I reviewed the data for trends to determine if there was an increase or decrease over the timeframe. The outcomes of these data collections will be discussed later in this chapter.

Financial Data Analysis

To begin analysis of the fiscal data, I started by collecting data from the finance officer of WCS. This information was delivered on a flash drive with a variety of PDF formatted reports. Each of these reports was reformatted into a large Google spreadsheet for review. Next, I compiled three years of data into one spreadsheet to show and compare annual changes. With this layout, changes from Year 1, Year 2, and Year 3 were established in separate columns for

analysis. This data was formatted into a table which will be reviewed later in this section with the academic data.

Survey Analysis

To begin analyzing data from all of the surveys sent home (see Appendix D, K, and L), I coded this data into a spreadsheet. The spreadsheet collected data (see Appendix K, J, and K), contained the consent information used for demographics, and then the actual survey responses. As stated previously, with the small sample size of 8%, which was fewer than the 1,400 maximum responses due to an ADM of 1,501 students, these items were then coded by hand to look for common themes.

There was an 8% response rate with only 121 surveys returned. Within these surveys, 3% chose not to complete the survey. From the responses, I recorded the students' self-identified gender. There was also an additional opportunity for those who completed the survey to be entered into a raffle for a \$20.00 gift card. Twenty-one percent of the 121 survey responses wanted to be entered into the raffle for completing the survey.

The informed consent letter (see Appendix J) was coded for demographic data based on the students' self-identified gender and "yes or no" answers. I coded the written responses into categories based on the responses and how many times the same words and phrases were repeated. Next, I converted student and parent names to numbers to mask their identity.

Focus Groups Analysis

To start the analysis, I first reviewed and then transcribed the data from the focus groups. For the first group, I transcribed the notes and chart paper into one document. This group consisted of four parents of WCS students. The focus group session was conducted for 45 minutes. Analyzing data from this group required reviewing the notes and inserting the notes

taken from the chart into one document. For the second and third focus groups, I replayed the audio from the students' Google Voice transcribed the focus group discussion. These group sessions comprised 17 minutes with three students and 37 minutes with five students. Because of the accuracy of Google Voice, I made minimal corrections to the transcription. To analyze all focus group data, I searched transcriptions looking for common themes and keywords. From the transcriptions, I classified similar phrases into categories that seemed to have a common theme. Although the other three focus groups had to be cancelled or did not occur during the research timeframe, I was able to gain valuable insight from the pilot group, parent group, and the two student groups.

Survey Demographics

The demographic data collected in this study is from the survey about the participants' community experience. Table 8 shows the gender demographics of the participants: the respondent's children were 46% female and 54% male. This was obtained from Appendix K. The table also shows the length of time each participant in the pilot group lived in the community. The largest number of participants have lived in the Wilkins County area for 31+ years at 36%. The second-largest number of participants have been in Wilkins County for 0-5 years at 30%. The remaining participants were in Wilkins County in a range from 6 to 30 years at 30%. The last group represented in these data collections showed that 3% did not live in Wilkins County.

Results

The results of this study will answer research questions about the impact of school consolidation in a small rural community on academics, financial state, and community

Table 8

Length of Time Lived in this Rural Community

Years	Number	Sex-based on Student (see Appendix K)	Percentage
I don't live here	2	Females	2%
	2	Males	2%
0-5	18	Females	15%
	18	Males	15%
6-10	2	Females	2%
	8	Males	7%
11-15	2	Females	2%
	6	Males	5%
16-20	3	Females	2%
	1	Males	1%
21-25	4	Females	3%
	5	Males	4%
26-30	4	Females	3%
	3	Males	2%
31+	21	Females	17%
	22	Males	18%
Total	121		100%

perception of the school district. As noted in Chapter 3, Table 3 displays the alignment of each research question with the data collection methods and data analysis.

Analysis of Research Question #1

For research question one, state and local data have been analyzed to show trends in the previous three years of data. These trends have been compiled for each school within the county in the areas of reading, mathematics, and science. When reviewing these data, it is important to remember the information shared regarding EOGs and EOCs. In Grades 3-8, there are growth scores present due to the ability to track annual progressive data from assessments that occur annually. At the high school level, Grades 9-12, only performance data are present, not growth, because there is not an annual source for data collection from sequenced assessment in the previous grades. Overall, performance grades for reading, math, and science assessments are also not considered a data point for Grades 9-12 due to this same reason.

Proficiency and Growth in Reading, Math, and Science Scores

Table 9 reading scores show that within the three years, only one school (12% of students) showed a decline in growth each year. The other schools were able to show an increase in school growth. As for performance, all schools decreased in performance from Year 1 to Year 2. However, all schools then increased in performance from Year 2 to Year 3 after consolidation. One school, BPMS, also showed a letter grade improvement from a grade of D to a C.

Table 9 math scores show a similar growth trend, with only one school (12%) failing to show growth each year. The performance in math showed that 60% of the schools show a decrease from Year 1 to Year 2; then these data change in Year 2 to Year 3 to show 60% of the schools increasing when consolidated. A letter grade increase was also seen in the change from a D to a C at CES.

Table 9

School Performance Grades in Reading, Math, and Science

School	Subject	2016-2017			2017-2018			2018-2019		
		Growth	Performance	Grade	Growth	Performance	Grade	Growth	Performance	Grade
Cub ES	Reading	77.6	51	D	84.5	49	D	79	50	D
	Math	79.2	51	D	84.3	50	D	87.3	59	C
	Science	n/a	57	n/a	n/a	64	n/a	n/a	56.6	n/a
Squirrel ES	Reading	70.7	48	D	77.2	46	D	80.3	48	D
	Math	58.6	41	D	74.3	48	D	58.2	40	D
	Science	n/a	51	n/a	n/a	46.3	n/a	n/a	46.7	n/a
Beaver US	Reading	89	51	D	75.5	49	D	n/a	n/a	n/a
	Math	87.4	42	D	75.4	35	F	n/a	n/a	n/a
	Science	n/a	67	n/a	n/a	58.4	n/a	n/a	69.3	n/a
Wilkins County MS	Reading	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	87.2	55	C
	Math	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	82.5	40	D
	Science	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Tiger HS	Reading	72.3	51	D	74.1	45	D	n/a	n/a	n/a
	Math	67.5	31	F	86.3	41	D	n/a	n/a	n/a
	Science	n/a	55	n/a	n/a	29.6	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Viking HS	Reading	n/a	33	n/a	n/a	23	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
	Math	n/a	29	n/a	n/a	26.3	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
	Science	n/a	25	n/a	n/a	5.8	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a

Table 9 (continued)

School	Subject	2016-2017			2017-2018			2018-2019		
		Growth	Performance	Grade	Growth	Performance	Grade	Growth	Performance	Grade
Wilkins County HS	Reading	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	36.4	n/a
	Math	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	11.8	n/a
	Science	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	38.5	n/a
Wilkins County ECHS	Reading	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	56	n/a	n/a	71.4	n/a
	Math	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	53.3	n/a	n/a	81.8	n/a
	Science	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	52	n/a	n/a	>95	n/a

Note. *There were no letter grades for individual subjects in the 2016-2019 school year for high schools. **There are no high school growth scores because there is not an annual source for data collection from sequenced assessments in the previous grade.

Table 9 science scores showed that only 20% of the schools recorded an increase in performance from Year 1 to Year 2. In the Year 2 to Year 3-time frame after consolidation, 80% of the schools showed an increase. Since there is no sequential assessment for science, there is not growth data available for this area.

In summary, a review of the reading, math, and science data showed greater gains by a school site in terms of performance after consolidation. More students were performing at a higher proficiency after the schools were consolidated based on Year 3 data. This collective proficiency is based on the total of each student who has a proficiency level of level three, four, or five. The fluctuation in growth with only one school not growing for both reading and math also shows that most schools were able to individually grow each student even though they may not have made it to proficiency by the end of the school year.

Beyond the individual subject data, each school has comprehensive data too. Schools in North Carolina are also recognized as not met, met, or exceeded growth. This is based on the combination of performance and growth factors. The NCDPI School Accountability Model/ Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) Plan (see Figure 7), as referenced in Chapter 2, requires the use of a formula to determine overall school performance grades. This is the combination of 80% of the school's achievement score (performance) and 20% of the school's growth of the students served within the school.

Figure 8 shows school growth data from Year 1, 2, and 3 (2016-2019). Based on these data, the consolidation of schools led to an increase in schools meeting growth. In Year 1, CES, SES, BUS, THS, VHS, and WCECHS were all open. WCECHS was not open this year and only CES and BUS met growth. This means that 40% of the schools (two of the five sites) met or exceeded growth. In Year 2, CES, SES, BUS, THS, VHS, and WCECHS were open. All schools

ESSA PLAN

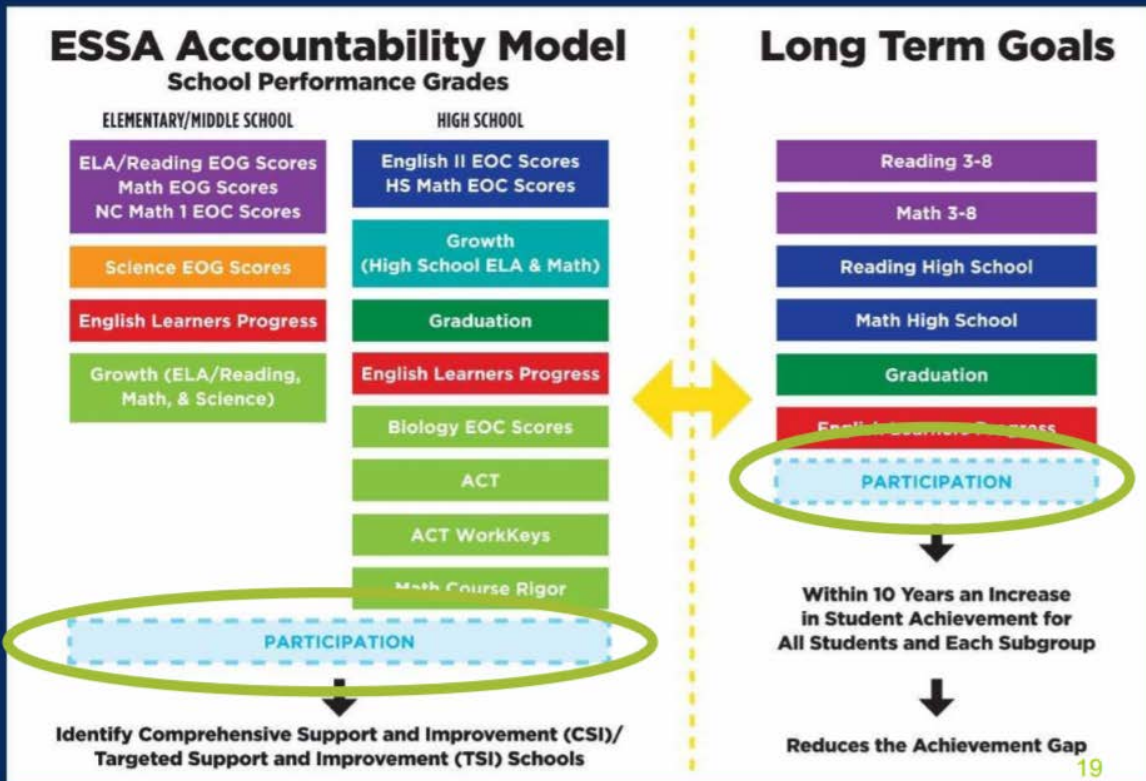


Figure 7. NCDPI Accountability Model/ESSA Plan.

Overall School Growth

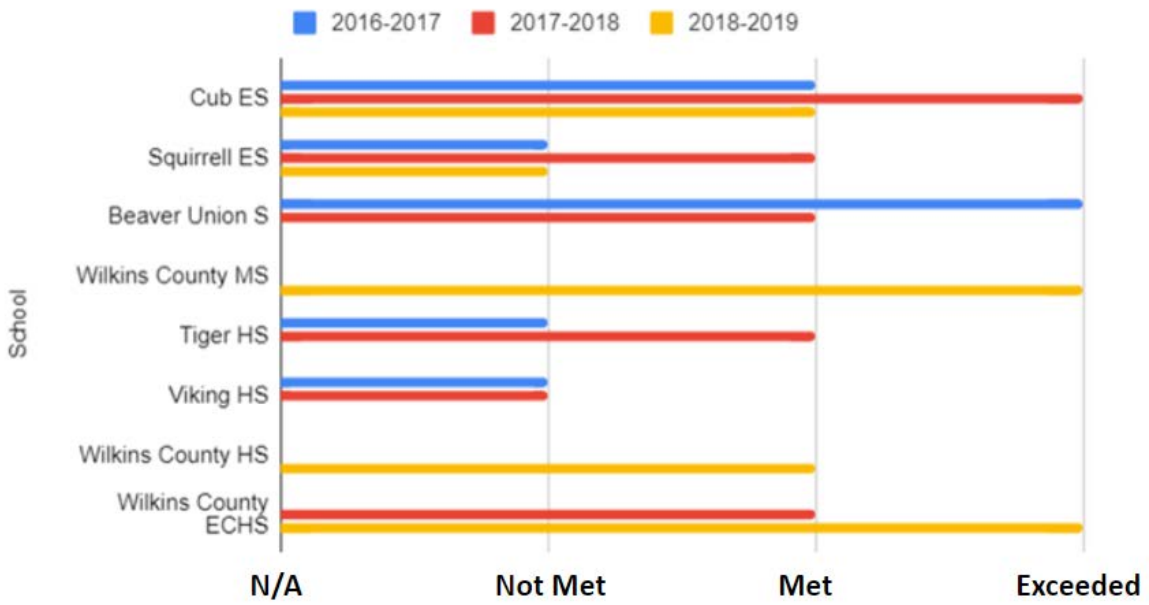


Figure 8. Overall school growth.

were eligible to return a growth calculation this year. Of these schools, CES, SES, BUS, THS, and WCECHS met or exceeded growth. This is equivalent to 83% of the schools (five of the six sites). In Year 3, CES, SES, WCMS, WCHS, and WCECHS were open. Of these schools, CES, WCMS, WCHS, and WCECHS met or exceeded growth. This means that 80% of the schools (four of the five sites) met or exceeded growth.

Attendance

Academic improvement is difficult to make happen if students are not attending school regularly. According to McBride (2009), “positive relationship existed between students' reading, mathematics, and science scores, and their attendance” (p. 82). This is why it is also important to look at attendance. A constant battle with population decline, as referenced early in the literature, can be seen in the average membership data in Table 10. Table 10 clearly shows the decrease in enrollment each year from Year 1 with 1,688 students, to Year 2 with 1,637 students, and finally Year 3 with 1,501 students.

With these enrollment numbers, the average daily attendance of students is based on the students being physically present at school. Based on the data in Table 10, the majority of the schools showed an increase in their average daily attendance percent each year except for two sites. The sites showing increases from year to year include

- CES, which increased from 89% in Year 1 to 92% in Year 2 to 93% in Year 3.
- THS, which increased from 85% in Year 1 to 87% in Year 2 (closed in Year 3).
- WCHS, which added students from VHS and THS to create WCHS in Year 3, still showed increases from 83% in Year 1 to 85% in Year 2 to 88% in Year 3.
- WCECHS, which had not opened in Year 1, increase from 92% in Year 2 to 97% in Year 3

Table 10

School Attendance Data

School	Year	School Days	Average Daily Membership	Actual Days	Days Absent	Days Attended	Average Daily Attendance	Average Daily Attendance Percent
CES	8/2016-9/2017	170	215	36,550	46,581	361,010	2,124	89%
	8/2017-6/2018	171	191	32,319	23,788	267,451	1,564	92%
	8/2018-6/2019	169	156	26,364	9,451	129,815	768	93%
SES	8/2016-6/2017	171	674	115,083	95,269	1,184,096	6,925	93%
	8/2017-6/2018	169	651	109,343	7,150	865,183	5,119	92%
	8/2018-6/2019	169	627	105,287	23,849	360,486	2,133	95%
THS	8/2016-6/2017	170	182	30,600	96,131	557,893	3,282	85%
	8/2017-6/2018	171	153	26,163	53,913	357,529	2,091	87%
VHS to WCHS	8/2016-6/2017	171	357	60,876	46,221	228,639	1,337	83%
	8/2017-6/2018	169	346	57,798	72,286	416,433	2,464	85%
	8/2018-5/2019	174	369	62,466	24,561	184,555	1,061	88%
BUS to WCMS	8/2016-6/2017	171	260	44,289	44,055	297,737	1,741	87%
	8/2017-6/2018	170	258	43,010	7,174	132,808	781	93%
	8/2018-6/2019	169	298	50,193	13,044	99,965	592	88%
WCECHS	8/2017-6/2018	182	38	6,916	4,311	5,056	28	92%
	8/2018-6/2019	176	51	8,800	222	7,757	4	97%

The sites that showed a decrease within Year 1 to Year 3 are

- SES which started at 93% in Year 1, then decreased to 92% in Year 2 and then increased to 95% in Year 3
- BUS, which added students from BUS and THS to create WCMS in Year 3, started at 87% in Year 1, increased to 93% in Year 2, and then decreased to 88% in Year 3

Overall, after comparing the initial and the final year, the table shows that each site did show an increase of 1% to 5% in average daily attendance.

Courses Offered

Another point of reference for academics is the number of courses offered at the school sites. The more courses offered, the more opportunity for exposure to new content (Hettie, 1988; McMahon, 1986; Witt, 2011). At the same time, duplication of courses with low enrollment numbers should be eliminated or combined to serve a greater number of students. For these data, I pulled course information for all high schools. Based on the data in Table 11, there were 11 additional courses offered in the 2019 school year after consolidation. The decrease in the number of English and Math courses offered was seen in remediation courses (English Essentials, Foundations of Math I, Foundations of Math II) that were removed. The one Elective lost was Physical Education (PE): Lifetime Sports. There is also a significant increase in Career and Technical Education (CTE) Courses, which increased from 15 to 26 courses offered (an increase of 11 courses). The data suggest that access to additional courses were available after the consolidation of the initial sites.

In the focus group questions, adult and student group participants shared academic perceptions. The adult groups noted hearing about the progress of the schools as far as scores in the community. One adult who was also a parent noted, “The newspaper showed graphs of the

Table 11

High School Course Offerings

Subject Area	Number of courses offered in 2016	Number of courses offered in 2019	Change
English	12	11	-1
Math	13	11	-2
Science	8	9	1
Social Studies	10	13	3
World Languages	9	9	0
CTE	15	26	11
Electives/Internships	23	22	-1
Grand Total	90	101	11

school improving based on last year's [Year 2:2017-2018 compared to Year 3: 2018-2019] data, but not doing as well as before the curriculum changed." The students seemed more aware of improvements academically too. They shared comments, such as, "We got better; at first, we were not doing well, then we got better as far as grades."

Table 7 displays data from the survey which questioned participants about academic data. In survey question 7, participants are asked if they feel that the closing of the school building has had an academic impact on the community. Four of the 121 respondents (3%) stated they did not want to participate in the survey. Many of the participants (64%) stated they do not feel the closing of the school building has had an academic impact on the community. Of the remaining responses, 14% stated they did not know or have not noticed any changes.

An additional survey question (survey question 9) asks about noticing any changes in your school children that have moved to a host school. It was reported that 24% saw no change and 27% report seeing changes. Within the 27% reporting seeing a change, 12 of those 30 participants in this category specifically stated bullying is the change they are seeing. The remaining participants were minimally impacted: 7% were indifferent about any changes, and 42% of the respondents did not change schools during the consolidation process; therefore, they answered as non-applicable.

In summary, a review of research question 1 data shows an overall positive impact on academics for school consolidation in a small rural community. The actual end-of-course assessment data for reading, math, and science (see Table 9) as well as the overall school data (see Figure 8) showed an increase. In addition to this, attendance improved and more courses were offered.

Year 1, 2, and 3 School Expenses

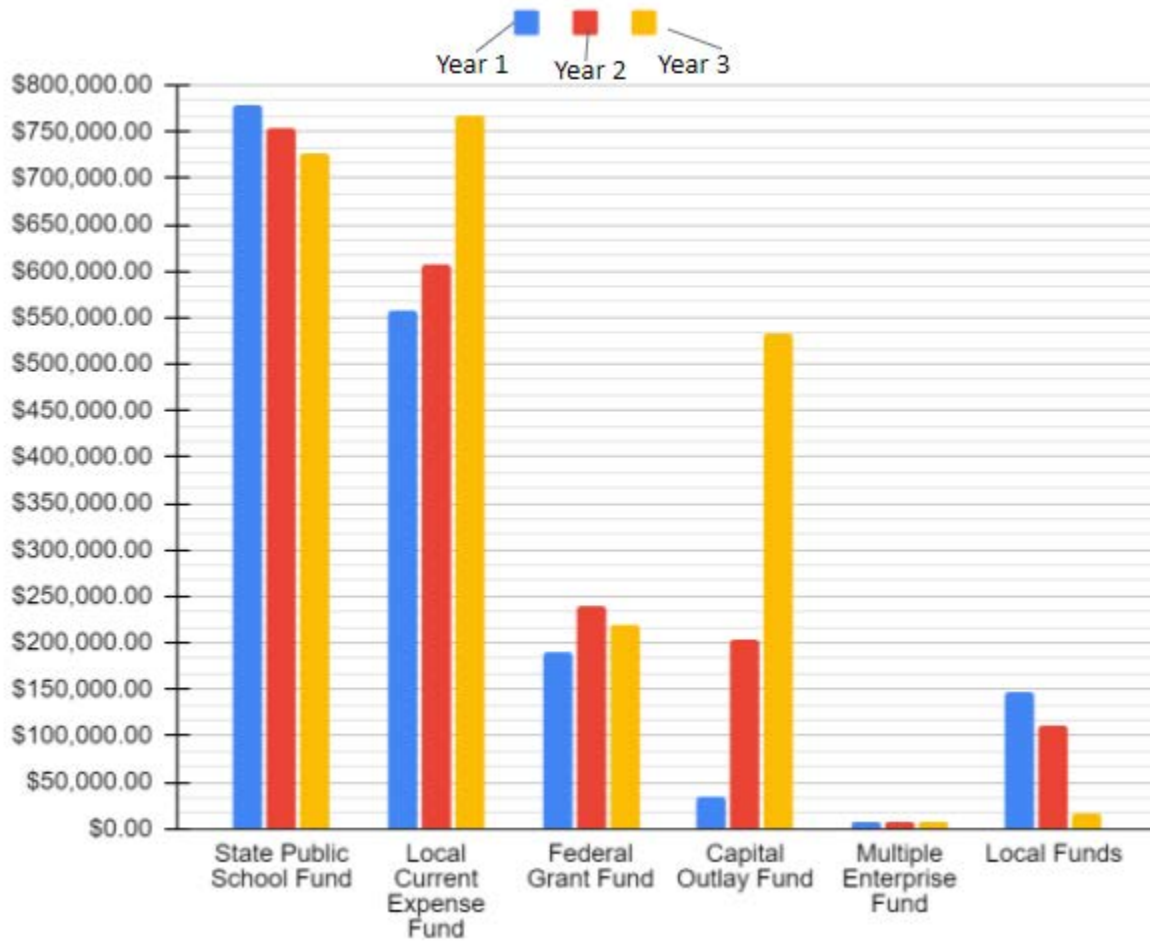


Figure 9. School expenses from 2016-2019.

Analysis of Research Question #2

For research question two, I collected data to determine how does school consolidation in a small rural community impact the financial state of the school district? I examined data from fiscal district reports, focus group responses, and survey responses. This examination provided quantitative direct cost information and quantitative response data from research participants.

Operational Budgets

In order to review fiscal district reports, I began with the operational budgets for each school site and the current cost after consolidation for each site are compared in Table 12. This includes a variety of variables such as water, electricity, gas, site maintenance, transportation, staffing cost, and annual budget increases and decreases. In order to organize these purchases, data were collected and analyzed by the seven school funding sources and purpose codes. The funding source lets you know if these funds are from federal funds, state funds, local funds, grants, specified for capital outlay, only for programs that bring in revenue (enterprise funds), or in local savings.

According to the State Public School Fund, the subtotal expenses of all-purpose codes decreased by \$52,393.23. These funds are utilized to purchase items like computers and software, instructional supplies, copier costs, electrical services, heating/fuel, and telephones. Local Current expenses include the same items, but these funds come from the county. There was an increased need of \$208,596.32 in this area. Federal Grant Funds increased by \$29,095.05. The federal funds cover instructional supplies, computer software, and supplies. Federal funding is also an area that has increased funding available due to the district actively seeking grants to fund school purchases. Capital Outlay Funds, which stem from the county, pay for items like rebranding costs for the BPMS and VHS site, new athletic uniforms, and roof repairs at the CES

Table 12

District Funding Expenses 2016-2019 and Projection for 2019-2020

102

Funding Source	Purpose Codes (Fund Use)	2017	Change from Year 1 to 2	2018	Change from Year 2 to 3	2019	Change from Year 1 to 3	Projected 2020
State Public School Fund	Instructional Services	\$362,167.67	-\$58,442.33	\$303,725.34	-\$1,334.98	\$302,390.36	-\$59,777.31	\$302,390.36
	System Wide Support Services	\$416,003.83	\$33,630.70	\$449,634.53	-\$26,409.86	\$423,224.67	\$7,220.84	\$423,224.67
	Ancillary Services	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$163.24	\$163.24	\$163.24	\$163.24
	Subtotal	\$778,171.50	-\$24,811.63	\$753,359.87	-\$27,581.60	\$725,778.27	-\$52,393.23	\$725,778.27
Local Current Expense Fund	Instructional Services	\$4,697.70	-\$2,655.88	\$2,041.82	\$13,067.71	\$15,109.53	\$10,411.83	\$5,000.00
	System Wide Support Services	\$551,670.98	\$50,045.74	\$601,716.72	\$149,856.48	\$751,573.20	\$199,902.22	\$751,573.20
	Ancillary Services	\$2,317.73	\$700.93	\$3,018.66	-\$2,418.66	\$600.00	-\$1,717.73	\$600.00
	Subtotal	\$558,686.41	\$48,090.79	\$606,777.20	\$160,505.53	\$767,282.73	\$208,596.32	\$757,173.20

Table 12 (continued)

Funding Source	Purpose Codes (Fund Use)	2017	Change from Year 1 to 2	2018	Change from Year 2 to 3	2019	Change from Year 1 to 3	Projected 2020
Federal Grant Fund	Instructional Services	\$151,976.64	\$52,939.12	\$204,915.76	-\$11,565.09	\$193,350.67	\$41,374.03	\$193,350.67
	System Wide Support Services	\$38,984.08	-\$4,697.98	\$34,286.10	-\$7,581.00	\$26,705.10	-\$12,278.98	\$26,705.10
	Subtotal	\$190,960.72	\$48,241.14	\$239,201.86	-\$19,146.09	\$220,055.77	\$29,095.05	\$220,055.77
Capital Outlay Fund	Instructional Services	\$11,940.05	-\$7473.73	\$4,466.32	\$73,914.97	\$78,381.29	\$66,441.24	\$15,000.00
	System Wide Support Services	\$21,604.07	\$176,558.28	\$198,162.35	\$256,604.83	\$454,767.18	\$433,163.11	\$15,000.00
	Subtotal	\$33,544.12	\$169,084.55	\$202,628.67	\$330,519.80	\$533,148.47	\$499,604.35	\$30,000.00
Multiple Enterprise Fund	Ancillary Services	\$6,447.69	\$316.57	\$6,764.26	\$30.75	\$6,795.01	\$347.32	\$6,795.01
	Subtotal	\$6,447.69	\$316.57	\$6,764.26	\$30.75	\$6,795.01	\$347.32	\$6,795.01

Table 12 (continued)

Funding Source	Purpose Codes (Fund Use)	2017	Change from Year 1 to 2	2018	Change from Year 2 to 3	2019	Change from Year 1 to 3	Projected 2020
Local Funds	Instructional Services	\$13,501.57	\$17,704.27	\$31,205.84	-\$14,238.42	\$16,967.42	\$3,465.85	\$16,967.42
	System Wide Support Services	\$134,669.42	-\$55,429.26	\$79,240.16	-\$79,240.16	\$0.00	-\$134,669.42	\$0.00
	Subtotal	\$148,170.99	-\$37,724.99	\$110,446.00	-\$93,478.58	\$16,967.42	-\$131,203.57	\$16,967.42
	Total for All Funds	\$1,715,981.43	\$203,196.43	\$1,919,177.86	\$350,849.81	\$2,270,027.67	\$554,046.24	\$1,756,769.67

Note. Bold means there was decreased cost.

site. This was an increase of \$499,604.35. The Multiple Enterprise Fund had the least change with the amount spent per year remaining relatively the same range. In a wealthy school district, this enterprise fund generates revenue from students who pay for lunch each day. However, it is important to understand high poverty districts like Wilkins County Schools. All of the schools in this district provide free lunch to all students due to the high poverty level in this area. Therefore, the system pays for the operational cost with local funds and then requests reimbursement funding to maintain the cost of the student meals and staffing of the school nutrition department. This fund had an increase of \$347.32. Finally, Local Funds showed a decrease of \$131,203.57. The Local Fund covers purchases for instructional supplies, office and file supplies, participant materials, and school district communications.

Overall, there was an increased fiscal need of \$554,046.24. As seen in Figure 9, the school system is funded by a variety of sources. These sources placed in order from the smallest to the largest funding source are as follows: Multiple Enterprise Fund, Capital Outlay Funds, Federal Grant Funds, Local Current Expense Fund, and State Public School Fund. Analysis of these sources shows that this district depends heavily on state funds for support. The smallest sources of funding occur in enterprise funding. The funds impacted during the school consolidation process in order from least impact to most impact are as follows: Local Funds, State Public School Fund, Multiple Enterprise Funds, Federal Grant Fund, Local Current Expense Fund, and Capital Outlay Funds. Analysis of these sources reflects the high need for physical equipment and rebranding when consolidation occurs. The overall increased need reveals that there was an increased fiscal need when consolidation occurred in this case study.

Focus Group Responses for Financial Data

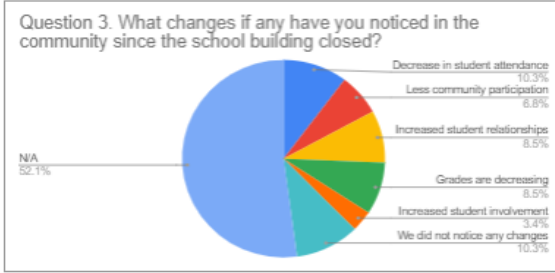
The next source of data for fiscal review is the focus group responses. In the focus group questions, perceptions about fiscal impacts from the parent groups were not noted other than the lack of physical traffic to the local stores in the area of the school that closed. One of the parent group participants stated, “Now I don’t see many kids going to the local grocery store or the pizza place, so I know it has impacted their business.” The student focus groups did not note any fiscal impacts.

Survey Responses for Financial Data

The final source of data for the fiscal review is the answer to the survey questions. Fiscal impacts were apparent in questions 5, 6, and 10 from the survey. As seen in Figure 10, 81% of the survey respondents felt that the community has not tried to compensate for the loss of the school building and students. When asked if they felt the closing of the school building had a financial impact on the community, 75% stated there was no impact, 11% were unsure, and 14% noticed an impact. The final question related to seeing any school tax savings since the school building closed. Respondents noted that 58% saw no impact, and 41% were unsure if there was any impact. Overall, the majority of the respondents saw no impact or little impact fiscally after the consolidation of the school.

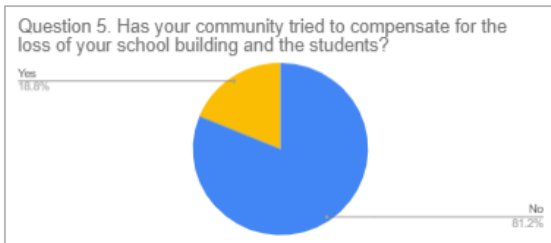
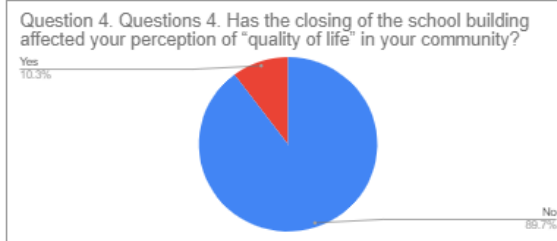
In summary, the consolidation of the school did have an impact on the district finances and local expenses. I hypothesized that with one fewer building, there would be financial savings for the district. Data for this question were collected from multiple funds, which are used to pay rural community impacts the financial state of the school district's funding. However, based on qualitative respondent’s data, there was a perception of little to no impact for instructional

Survey Data



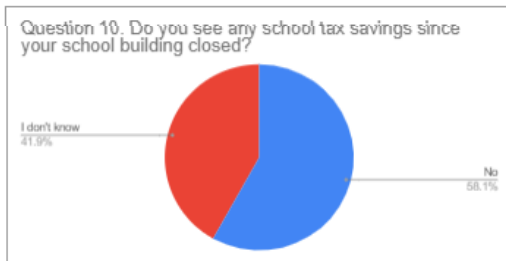
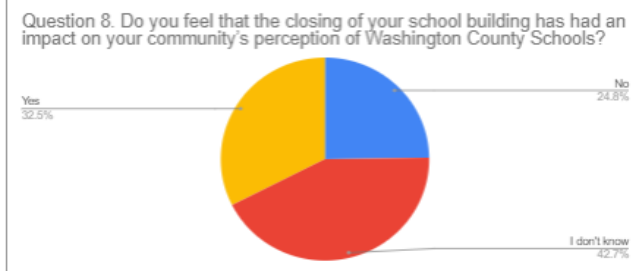
#3 Theme	Percentage	Count
Decrease in student attendance	10%	12
Less community participation	7%	8
Increased student relationships	9%	10
Grades are decreasing	9%	10
Increased student involvement	3%	4
We did not notice any changes	10%	12
N/A	52%	61

#4	No	Yes
Quality of Life	105	12
	89.70%	10.30%



#5	No	I don't know	Yes
Community Compensation	95	0	22
	81.20%	0.00%	19.80%

#8	No	I don't know	Yes
Community Perception	29	50	38
	24.80%	42.70%	32.50%



#10	No	I don't know	Yes
Tax Savings	68	49	0
	58.10%	41.90%	0%

#11 Theme	Percentage	Count
Indifferent	5%	6
N/A	54%	63
No	34%	40
Benefits in the future	7%	8

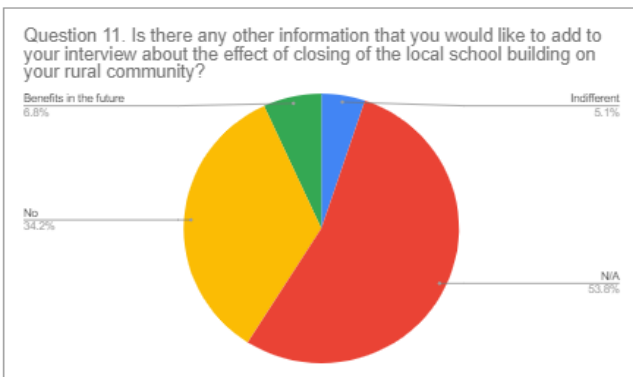


Figure 10. Participants survey data.

supplies, daily operational bills, transportation costs, salaries, rebranding, and repairs. A review of the operational costs before and after school consolidation along with research participant data shows that my hypothesis was false.

Analysis of Research Question #3

According to Kramer (1994), effective citizens have common values, motivations, and shared commitment of energy. They also recognize potential concerns in their environment. This is the power of perception of community members. I explored community perception in research question 3: How does school consolidation in a small rural community impact the community perception of the school district? The groups of research participants in this rural area contributed to the data collected in the individualized survey and in the focus group. I analyzed these data to determine the community perception about school consolidation.

Survey Demographic Information

As stated in the Survey Demographics section of this research, Figure 11 shows the largest number of participants who have lived in the Wilkins County area for 31+ years at 36%. The second-largest number of participants have lived in Wilkins County for 0-5 years at 30%. The remaining participants lived in Wilkins County for 6-30 years at 30%. A final group lived in Wilkins County or did not participate at 4%. The participants also shared their reason for selecting this rural community. From these data, the reasons were as follows: 52% N/A, 16% family-related reasons, 9% reporting less crime, 7% bought a home, 7% were raised in the area, 6% relocated closer to their church, and 3% were relocated due to family.

Question 2. If you moved here why did you select this rural community?

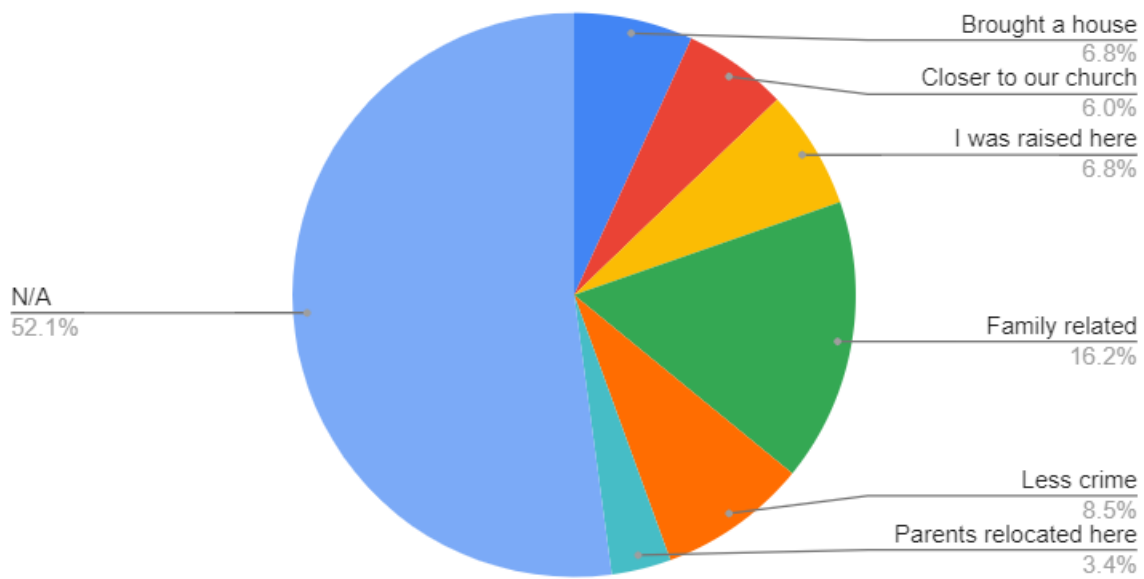


Figure 11. Selection of this rural community.

Survey Data Analysis

Within the individual survey, six questions were asked which related to community perception. As stated previously, the coding of the survey data would be reported by theme (keywords and phrases) or in categories of No, I don't know, or Yes responses. Figure 10 shows the themes that were related to survey questions three, four, five, eight, ten, and eleven.

In survey question three, I asked participants about changes they have noted in the community since the school building closed. Half of the respondents noted non-applicable. Ten percent of the respondents noted a decrease in student attendance, with a matching 10% noting they did not notice any changes. Increased student relationships, decreasing grades, and less community participation were around 9% to 7%. There was also a report by 3% of the participants that student involvement increased.

Questions four, five, eight, and ten all required No, I don't know, or Yes responses. Of all of the respondents to question four, 89.7% noted closing the school has not affected their perception of "quality of life" in their community. Eighty-one percent of the participants noticed in question five that the community does not try to compensate for the loss of the school building and the students. When asked about the impact of closing the school building on the community's perception of Wilkins County Schools in question eight, only 32.5% saw any impact. When it came to any school tax savings in question 10, none (0%) of the participants noticed any impact on school tax savings.

In the last survey question with perception data, question 11, I asked participants if there was any other information they would like to add to the interview about the effect of closing the local school building on their rural community. Responses to this question revealed that 88% of the respondents did not have any additional things to add using "no" or "N/A" as a response.

Five percent responded with an indifferent response (neither positive nor negative), such as “Thank you for letting us give feedback.” The remaining participants (7%) noted potential benefits for the future. For example, one participant stated, “We are excited that our kids have a cooking class.” Another stated, “I am happy my child has had more classes to pick from.”

Focus Group Analysis

In a final attempt to review data about the participants' perception of school consolidation, I analyzed data from focus groups. As stated previously, focus groups were to be conducted at three community meetings utilizing the same open-ended questions for each focus group. Initially, the eight focus groups were to be created from two 6-8-member groups of students, two 6-8-member groups of parents, two 6-8-member groups of staff members, and two 6-8-member groups of community members. Four of the eight meetings materialized. One of the staff groups was used for the initial pilot group detailed previously in this study. The second meeting with students was impacted by COVID-19 and therefore was conducted in an online Zoom meeting. The questions for each group remained the same.

In order to analyze the data, I developed common themes from the participant's responses. In Table 13, the responses from the three focus groups have been combined. They yielded answers about consolidation impacts that included logistical information, relationships, timing, traditions, increased opportunities, communication, rebranding, and appreciation.

Based on the focus group responses, after one year of impact, participants noted longer bus routes, increased opportunities for students, loss of people in the town of the consolidation, and increased student relationships. One participant noted she thought some bullying occurred, but it was minimal and addressed early. As far as things to be done differently, responses were themed as nothing, timing changes, opportunities to accept each other and traditions and increase

Table 13

Emergent Themes Based on Focus Group Responses

Question Focus	Focus Group Themes
Impacts after year 1 of consolidation	<p>Longer bus routes (students return home after dark)</p> <p>Increased opportunities (classes, better schools, progressing in academics)</p> <p>Bullying (minimal and handled early)</p> <p>Loss of people in the town of the consolidation (empty buildings, less traffic)</p> <p>Increased student relationships (students have more interactions, happier, more communication, new people, diversity, family-oriented, more attention)</p>
Things to be done differently	<p>Nothing</p> <p>Timing (extra year, allow 9th-grade cohort to finish)</p> <p>Opportunities to accept each other and traditions (diversity, acceptance, take advantage of opportunities)</p> <p>Increase student and parent interaction prior to consolidation (increased comfort level with new families, small county)</p>
Things done well	<p>Informing the public (communication, town meetings)</p> <p>Stakeholder Input (share views, collaborations, planning, opportunity to have a voice, long-awaited and needed step, sharing pros and cons)</p> <p>Combine community's culture (collaboration, different learning styles, more teammates for sports, no inferiority within schools)</p> <p>Rebranding (uniforms, gym, technology, new items)</p> <p>Opportunities (cooking classes, more help with academics)</p>

Table 13 (continued)

Question Focus	Focus Group Themes
Other items to share	No Suggestions (students should be home before dark) Appreciations (bring schools together, better than when separated, good process, bringing the county together, desire to reclaim more students)

student and parent interactions prior to consolidating. Things done well during school consolidation included informing the public, gathering stakeholder input, combining the community's culture, rebranding, and providing opportunities.

In closing, participants were asked if they had any additional items to share. These responses yielded answers that were categorized as "no" I have nothing to share. They also gave suggestions like shorten the time for bus routes and offered appreciations. These appreciations included things like thank you for bringing schools together, schools are better than when separated, and this was a good process, etc.

The focus groups in this research provided a time for stakeholders to give reflective feedback on the school consolidation process in Wilkins County Schools. As a whole, the focus groups revealed a strong perspective around the positive impact on student relationships, acceptance, and increased engagement. Overall, the majority of the stakeholder's perceptions of the school district were positive and in support of school consolidation in a small rural community.

In summary, research question three explored how school consolidation in a small rural community impacts the community perception of the school district. The data from research participants in this rural area were gathered from surveys and focus groups to summarize the stakeholder's results. The results of this collection yielded little to no impact of school consolidation on the community's perception when a school is consolidated.

Summary

Making decisions about school consolidation can be complex. In order to determine the impact of school consolidation on a rural school system in eastern NC, qualitative and quantitative data methodologies were deployed. In this case study, I specifically reviewed the

academic, fiscal, and community perception impacts that materialized after school consolidation occurred at the end of Year 2.

Research question 1 required me to review quantitative data about the academic performance of each school and the district as a whole. My hypothesis for academic impact was that academic performance would improve within the consolidated schools. This proved to be correct with data showing an overall positive impact on academics. The assessments given during this period showed an increase in growth and proficiency, attendance improved, and more courses were offered. However, as acknowledged in the limitations of this study, this is not a comparison of direct cohorts of students, nor is it considering other possible variables impacting student outcomes like teacher quality. Based solely on the data, there is an increase, but the scope of this study includes a limited time frame for academic performance to show improvement. Nonetheless, improvement in academic measures emerged after the consolidation.

For research question 2, I reviewed the operational cost prior to and after school consolidation. I hypothesized that with one fewer building, there would be financial savings for the district. My hypothesis was proven false. The consolidation of the school did have an impact on the district finances and local expenses, showing increased funding needed. Although the stakeholders did not perceive any fiscal impact, the financial analysis shows that school consolidation in a small rural community does impact the financial state of the district's funding.

Lastly, in research question 3, I focused on the perception of the school community about school consolidation. Data from focus groups and surveys helped me to determine this impact. The results of this collection yielded evidence to support the fact that when a school is consolidated, there is little to no impact on the community's perception of the district.

In summary, school consolidation is a process that has impacts on academic, fiscal, and community perceptions of a school district. In the area of academics and community perception, it is evident that the impact can be seen as positive due to increased opportunities for students for this shortened timeframe. When looking at fiscal impacts, however, there is an increase in funding required which was not initially hypothesized in this case study. With all things considered in the consolidation of a small rural school district, there are benefits but additional time is needed to study this longitudinally due to the many variables impacting academics, perception, and finance to ensure a smooth consolidation process.

In Chapter 4, I have shared the results of this case study. In the upcoming Chapter 5, I will present a summary of this research. Chapter 5 will also include conclusions drawn based on the results of this case study, literature reviewed to inform this study, and limitations occurring during this process. Chapter 5 will conclude with recommendations for future practitioners.

CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

School consolidation is a process used to combine schools with perceived benefits from the local education agency closing the school. For school districts with declining ADM, this is often a called upon solution with many promises of what the future of the system will hold after this process. This case study focused on the materialization of benefits in academic, fiscal, and community perception when school consolidation occurs in a small school district.

The major problem this research centered around is an old debate of how does consolidation benefit a school district. With efforts to increase efficiency in educational expenses, declining ADM, and more recently, a tethering of face-to-face versus virtual learning post-COVID-19, the K-12 sector is seeking solutions to a way to maintain high standards for a 21st-century learning environment.

For Wilkins County School district, the consolidation of a 6-12 site in 2017-2018 (Year 2) was studied to determine the academic, fiscal, and community perception impacts of the local school board's decision. With future consolidations being considered, the results of this study will provide valuable information for future consolidation decisions. With this information in mind, I used the following research questions in this study:

- Research Question 1: How does school consolidation in a small rural community impact the academic performance of the school district?
- Research Question 2: How does school consolidation in a small rural community impact the financial state of the school district?
- Research Question 3: How does school consolidation in a small rural community impact the community perception of the school district?

For Wilkins County Schools specifically, it was imperative that the measurable outcomes be assessed. Findings from this study can bring greater awareness to this district as it prepares for future consolidation plans.

Summary of the Findings

At the onset of this case study, Wilkins County Schools was preparing to consolidate a small, rural school located in Tiger, NC. This Grade 6-12 site closed in the 2017-2018 school year with perceived benefits to the school district. These benefits were based on academic, fiscal, and community perception. Taking into account only the data collected during the process, without a longitudinal study to review long-term results, the following items materialized.

For research question 1, a review of the academic performance of each school and the district as a whole was conducted. The hypothesis was that academic performance would increase within the consolidated schools. After a review of the end-of-the-year performance data, attendance, and courses, I found an overall positive impact on academics for school consolidation in a small rural community. The end-of-course assessment and overall school data increased, attendance improved, and more courses were offered.

For research question 2, a review of the operational cost prior to and after school consolidation was conducted. It was hypothesized that having one less school site would ensure financial savings for the district. After a review of data from daily operational bills, transportation costs, salaries, survey data, and focus group data, I found that there was an increased impact on the district finances and local expenses.

In opposition to the hypothesized outcome, school consolidation does require increased financial need, especially during the year of consolidation (Year 2) in preparation for the consolidated year (Year 3). Although the surveyed participants did not notice a fiscal increase,

reported finances showed the increase of monetary need. Without a longitudinal study, it is hard to determine if there would be projected savings in time to offset the initial increased fiscal expenditures.

With the last research question 3, the perception of the school community was examined. It was hypothesized that the community would express positive feedback after the consolidation. Data from focus groups and surveys were utilized to help to determine the impact of consolidation on the school community. These data revealed little to no negative impact on the community when school consolidation occurs.

In summary, school consolidation does have an impact on the school district. This case study explicitly focused on what materialized in Wilkins County Schools after the consolidation of a 6-12 site in the 2017-2018 (Year 2) school year. This impact can be seen in increased academic gains, increased financial cost, and increased positivity from community perception.

Interpretation of the Findings

When seeking to better understand the data collected and analyzed, a review of theoretical frameworks and the literature in this case study is imperative. With a focus on leadership, perception, and communication during consolidation, most of the research I retrieved prior to the study in the literature review is supported within this research gathered in this case study. Below you will find ways in which this study's findings confirm, refute, and extend knowledge around school consolidation as compared to the literature in Chapter 2.

Theoretical Foundation: Self-Efficacy and Organizational Change

In Chapter 2, I initially approach consolidation as a way to create efficiencies that increase academic experiences (Nitta et al., 2008), but also reveals an awareness of its impact on discipline issues and increased safety concerns (Grier, 2012). The focus on discipline and safety

is minimized by the capacity of school leaders and the climate they develop in the school system. This case study is grounded with a theoretical framework focused on Self-Efficacy and Organizational Change partially due to the agreement that the leadership in the building shapes the climate and culture of the school or district.

The success of school consolidation correlates with the leadership's ability to believe in and influence others. This is also why perception is studied within this case study. Leadership during school consolidation requires a leader with a strong sense of direction and commitment to obtain those goals. The stronger the presence of self-efficacy, the higher the achievement (Bandura, 1977). This is supported by the data collected from surveys where the participants from the community noted the process was an overall positive experience. The leadership in place has high control and belief in the goals of the consolidation process.

Secondary to self-efficacy, organizational change is a major underpinning of school consolidation processes. Organizational change is created through the strategies, structures, operations, technologies, and culture of an organization. A strategic plan is set forth in school consolidation with detailed timelines, budgets, and communication about the process to the district staff and community to ensure that the organization has focus. As reverberated through the overall positive feedback from focus groups and surveys, the community and stakeholders were given an opportunity to give input on this change process. This created an easier way to reach the end goal: consolidate the 6-12 site in Wilkins County Schools.

Perceptions on School Consolidation

While the theoretical framework's focus on self-efficacy and organizational change details the abilities of leadership during school consolidation, perception is viewed from leadership and a variety of stakeholders. When looking at the results of the survey and focus

group data, there is clear evidence to support the research from Baldwin (2015) that things like stability may impact stakeholders' thoughts about consolidation based on connections to the school's traditions. In this case, the parent's perception that the student will have the same experience as they did because they are at the same physical site is revealed.

In this case study, survey participants from the school area where the consolidation occurred noted the feeling of loss and a desire to have students attend the same school where they are now alumni. As noted by Boddington (2010), Delph (2015), Durant (2016), and Ticken (2016), parents have issues with longer bus routes. In the focus group, parents specifically pointed out issues with longer bus routes for their children. Each of these items about the potential perception of stakeholders (stability and longer bus routes) emerged in this case study, confirming what was shared in the literature review.

Criticism, Size, Academic, and Financial Impacts

The onset of literature reviewed in this area focused on the complexity of their being ambivalent research that supports or opposes school consolidation in terms of size of the school closing, academic gains, and financial impacts. This is a large part of why this case study occurred, to see if the perceived benefits materialized. As identified in the research of DeYoung and Howley (1990) and Bard et al. (2006), the perception of loss by the participants in terms of traditions (for example, mascots, ceremonies, reunions, etc.) was apparent in the area of the school that was closed due to the schools consolidating.

Consolidation offers some benefits to a community, which can be an opportunity for criticism or support. For example, integration occurs when districts with different racial or ethnic backgrounds are combined together. However, this can also be seen as a loss of opportunity for minorities to lead and control their schools (Collins, 2019; Diem et al., 2015; Jimerson, 2005).

These data also collected from the literature review, and based on what materialized in this research, there was an elevated perceived increase in social benefits by the students but refuted the claim that larger schools yield low achievement and decreased student satisfaction (Bakioglu & Geyin, 2009; Bard et al., 2006; Chavez, 2002; Grier, 2012; Leneer, 2013; Machesky, 2006; Raywid, 1999; Riha, 2011).

There is also an understanding based on school size that both of the schools, when consolidated, did not create a significantly large school. The consolidated school site added fewer than 100 students to the site when combined due to its prior small size and ADM of only 153 of the students displaced from Tiger High School (see Figure 5). In addition to this, poverty did impact the offerings in the smaller school (Irmsher, 1997) and the ability of the school to provide 21st-century resources, more courses, and improved instruction. This can be seen in the data collected showing an increased number of courses offered after schools were consolidated. Finally, the financial need did increase during the process of school consolidation for the district.

In summary, future disparagement of school consolidation will continue in the area of school size. This is seen in this case study as well as literature collected to examine school consolidation. Despite this, there are clear, direct impacts present for the areas of academics, poverty, and finances that correspond with the research collected in this study.

The research gained in this case study showed strong parallels to the data uncovered in the literature. The most notable confirmation of these data is seen in the correct hypothesis of school consolidation's impact on academics. The hypothesis that ultimately did not materialize was the cost savings in Year 3 of consolidation. Overall perception was positive with little to no impact on the stakeholder view of the school district in this consolidation process.

Limitations of the Study

As data yielded conclusions in this study, I am aware of limitations to be considered in terms of generalizability, validity, trustworthiness, and reliability from the study's execution. Generalizability refers to the ability to generalize the same data being reported when applied to another study (Leung, 2015). For this case study, the results are applicable to several situations. Much of the literature in Chapter 2 also supported this notion. In order to assess generalizability, the same characteristics of validity need to be applied. When looking at validity, the overall appropriateness of the tools, processes, and data utilized in this research-based study shows alignment in providing data relevant to the research questions. For academic data, test scores, attendance, and courses data were used. For fiscal data, operational budgets and salary information was used. For perception data, surveys and focus groups were used to ensure participants had an opportunity to give input. With the correct tools, processes, and data, we can now look at trustworthiness. Trustworthiness is a demonstrated measure of the study's ability to have the appropriate methodology and data collection instruments to collect the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, the methodology proved effective at allowing me to collect the data even with adjustments to COVID-19 requirements.

In a review of reliability, this study does prove to be replicable and trustworthy as stated previously. There is a recommendation for future research to actually replicate this study with other districts considering consolidation. The same data can be collected in the focus groups and survey groups. Academic and fiscal data are also trackable expenses that can be reproduced in a different school district. Not only does the data show conclusive impacts, patterns can be found in multiple sources.

Triangulation of data from state reports, local reports, surveys, and focus groups supports the research uncovered in Chapter 2. The data in Chapter 2 identifies the limitations in academic data collection, my connection to the community, and my leadership role in the school system. Each of these items was present. The data collected was from each of the schools in Wilkins County. However, as noted, there will not be a directly comparable data point. This is due to the fact that students test in cohorts, and they would not be repeating the same grade. Therefore, it cannot be assumed that the increased academic performance was only due to school consolidation. Academic growth can be attributed to several variables: new leadership, new teachers, students that are new to the district, a new cohort that performs marginally better than the one that preceded it, the cohort that had preceded the new one may have done deplorably poor. With all these potential reasons for increased academic performance, there were still positive gains made in the system. These gains are still worthy of recognition and overall, the consolidation did not appear to hurt the effort.

As for my connection to the community and role as the superintendent, these items were able to be minimized by ensuring that only the questions posted for focus group and the survey were used. There were no additional follow up questions. This ensures that as a stakeholder of the district, I maintain a non-biased focus group and only use the research of the questions within the survey directly.

The only new item that emerged as a limitation during this study was the COVID-19 pandemic. At the time the pandemic occurred I was in the middle of trying to conduct focus groups and receiving data back from the surveys. Four of the eight focus groups had to be cancelled due to no turnout and because requirements were put in place for quarantine. One focus group was modified to accommodate a virtual format based on the new quarantine

requirements. This limitation impacted the ability of the full focus group to interact in a face to face session due to its restructure on Zoom.

Implications of the Findings for Practice

After careful review and analysis of the summary, interpretations, and limitations, there are several implications of the findings for practice. In current times where school consolidations are becoming more prominent, it is important to understand the potential outcomes and prepare for them accordingly. The following items should be considered by local boards of education considering school consolidations.

Academics

In research question 1 about the academic impact of school consolidation, there are advantages that may have a positive academic impact in this case study. For school districts looking for options to combine the course with low enrollment, this solution offers a means to fill what could be potentially several vacancies. If the school to be closed during the consolidation and the currently open school are to combine, common scheduling issues are decreased at the same time an opportunity for more courses emerges. This often helps those schools looking to diversify course options without having the staff to maintain current sections. Once combined, a class of five to seven students at one site can be combined with another low enrollment course at the remaining school. With a free period, the teacher can now entertain remediation or enrichment courses new to the school site.

With courses being combined and the engagement of remediation and enrichment, it may also follow, based on this case study, that increased academic outcomes developed. With greater flexibility in scheduling, supports are included in the traditional day that allows students to be

grouped based on mastery of instruction and intervention. This may have positive impacts on end-of-grade testing results.

Fiscal

In research question 2 about the financial impact of school consolidation, there were highlights and shortfalls based on fiscal reports and perception data. Parallel to the ability of the district to offer new courses comes the addition of students to the physical school site. The size of the school, as noted in Chapter 2, can have major ramifications on a system's consolidation process. In this case study, the consolidating schools were small schools (fewer than 500 ADM). The school to be utilized also had the capacity to add additional students with no major changes. This was due to the ADM decline that impacted the entire district. Therefore, the schools were not greatly impacted by adding an additional small school (fewer than 500 ADM) for the overall growth of ADM <100 students. If school systems are considering consolidating medium-sized or schools that are larger, strategic planning needs to occur to ensure you have space to fit all students when the sites are combined.

A critical part of any planned activity is having a budget to support the full operation. It has been identified by researchers (Andrews et al., 2002; Gordon & Knight, 2008; Hayes, 2018) that increasing school size is not the best solution to increasing student achievement and decreasing the fiscal demands of running a school system. For school districts seeking to consolidate schools, it is counterproductive for a school board to assume school closure is a simple process. Financially, this can be a very complex process that is not the direct reduction of school funds for a closed school and additional funds added to the maintained schools. Traditional fiscal needs for maintenance as well as increased funding for rebranding are major financial investments that occurred during this case study. Financial expenses were impacted by

a number of things like changing the physical structure of the district, the cost of emergency heating issues due to older buildings, money spent on creating new mascots, etc. It is imperative for rural school districts, especially those in financial need or distress, to have strategic conversations with county commissioners and other stakeholders who can support increases in the overall cost to run the school site and any remnants of the old site when it is closed.

Community Perception

In research question 3 about the perception of the community when it is impacted by school consolidation, there was little to no evidence of any major impacts.

Regardless of any noted impacts, communication is critical during any time of change in an organization (Burrack, 2019). The theoretical framework's focus on organizational change intentionally focuses on the structures, operations, technologies, culture, and strategies that need to be addressed to ensure viability (Spector, 2010). The community and its stakeholders in this case study appreciated being informed. At the same time, there were a few surveys that noted they wanted to be more informed. As a district, the key is to create open, honest, two-way communication lines with stakeholders to ensure greater trust and continuing collective effort during the process of consolidation.

Of those respondents with negative reviews around the process, it was clear that there was a sense of loss in the community and a loss of tradition. It may benefit a district planning to consolidate school to make conscientious efforts in the area of the school closing to keep them informed, honor their heritage and traditions from the closed site, and provide sessions for former graduates to maintain some way of connecting to their alma mater. Although the physical building may no longer be in use, the new site can host class reunions and traditional events.

Future Planning for Wilkins County Schools

This case study was initiated to determine if the perceived results of school consolidation in the 2017-2018 school year for a Grade 6-12 site materialized. Similar to other small districts saddled with decreasing enrollment and resource issues, the more knowledge about the benefits and shortcomings, the greater prepared the school district can be in the planning for this process. The Wilkins County Schools' case study is unique because the consolidation is being done in phases.

Phase one was the consolidation of the Grade 6-12, completed in 2018. These data are meaningful to the districts' long-term plans. The second phase is to consolidate all five remaining schools into one PK-13 site. This site would hold pre-kindergarten, elementary, middle, high school, and early college students for all county residents. As stated in the methodology, this new facility will eliminate the need to make major repairs in each of the antiquated buildings. It is also more cost-effective to build one new site versus awaiting the building of five individual sites to replace each of the five current antiquated sites. With this phase planned for in the future, it is important for the school board and the community to understand the school consolidation process. Community engagement in planning, feedback on the present state of schools, and considerations for future planning, all impact the community's perception.

In summary, the findings of this case study about school consolidation revealed several implications for school districts seeking to consolidate schools. These implications include planning for increasing course offerings, possible increases in academic performance, considerations of school size and increased operational cost, strategic planning with an organizational change framework, and planning for those who feel marginalized. It also reviewed

the district-specific plans for future consolidations. All of these items represent the academic, fiscal, and community perceptions impacts that practitioners should be aware of when considering school consolidation.

Recommendations

In evaluating the process of uncovering the impacts of school consolidation, there are a few areas that are recommended as additional research topics for future practitioners. In my research, there was confirmation of research shared in the review of literature in Chapter 2, as well as the onset of a mass pandemic that could drastically shape the future of education. These items specifically include researching another district from an outside perspective, determining standards for school size, lengthening the collection of data periods, and gathering data on COVID-19 impacts on future education plans. I will examine each of these items below.

For starters, if I were to conduct this study again, I would begin by researching another school district. By studying a different school system than the one I led, I would bring to the research an outside, perhaps more objective perspective. As noted in the limitations, I am also the superintendent and a native of this area with 31+ years living here. Due to my experience in these roles, there may be additional assumptions or prior knowledge that I have a deeper understanding of. If I were doing this study again, I would recommend looking at the data from a different district to see if there were similar outcomes.

Within this research, I would recommend using the same data items from the initial research. The data collection items are able to be reproduced from any state-level report for academic scores and fiscal expenditures. The survey and focus group questions are also accessible in the appendix of this dissertation. Replication of this exact study will ensure we are able to create comparable scenarios for research practitioners and other stakeholders wishing to

learn the impact of consolidation in different districts. I have found several case studies with similar replication of academic and fiscal gain in other states. However, at this time, there are a limited number of dissertations on file in regards to school consolidation, specifically in North Carolina.

While this research is being conducted, it would also be a recommendation for future practitioners to determining standards for school size. When comparing data from school site sizes and school district sizes, there is a need to have comparable data. The headers of these data should entail the range of grades covered in the school and the number of students within the school. There will then need to be scales created to determine the range in ADM required to represent small, medium, and large schools and districts. My research concludes that there are benefits that come from combining two small schools, both with fewer than 500 students attending each site. As referenced in Table 1, many of the school size categories do not address schools with less than 500 students. This school size, fewer than 500 students, would be found more frequently in rural school settings.

The data from other researchers on perception confirmed the perceived increased social benefits for students. These benefits are in terms of interactions with additional peer groups. However, some data refuted this claim, revealing decreased student satisfaction due to the loss of traditions present in the consolidated school (Lenear, 2013; Machesky, 2006; Raywid, 1999; Riha, 2011).

When reviewing academic impacts and their connection to school size, this case study supported data from other studies. The data from the literature review supported the notion that larger school consolidations did not yield lower academic achievements for students. With small rural schools (fewer than 500 students), the school consolidation process can add a small number

of students and staff, keeping them relatively small (fewer than 500 students). In this case study specifically, THS had less than 100 students to be relocated to the new site after consolidations. Leneer (2013) also supported the results that minorities perform better in smaller schools, which was comparable to this case study conducted in a predominantly minority district. A suggestion to conduct additional reviews of small school sites that are consolidating is the recommendation. These schools, due to their rural location, may still remain small (fewer than 500 students) and may not be able to offer greater opportunities or fill current vacancies.

For this case study, I would also recommend pulling data from the next school year to see if trends continue. By increasing the collection of data to year four, it may reveal a lesser impact in the finance category once major consolidation items have been paid for in the first three years of consolidation. For example, School Expenses (see Figure 9) captures fiscal data from Year 1, Year 2, and Year 3. It may be a hypothesis that the Year 4 cost would see a decrease. At a bare minimum, this would account for the rebranding cost being removed from the budget. Table 12 shows potential impacts and savings in Year 4. The cost for items such as uniforms, re-branding, paint repairs, and roof repairs was removed from the local current expense funds and capital outlay funds. This would already generate a savings in Year 4 (2019-2020) of approximately \$513,231. Exploring the fiscal collection process in the upcoming years would prove critical to seeing a true picture of the fiscal impact of consolidation.

Finally, a major area for a recommended study about school consolidation is the impact of COVID-19. When the world began to quarantine under stay at home orders, the use of the school buildings diminished extensively. These actions also impacted the data collection of this research. Since no students could come on-site, parents were then engaged in opportunities to

have educational opportunities anytime and anywhere. It will be a strong recommendation to determine if school consolidation rates increase as students take on virtual learning opportunities.

Conclusions

The choice of local school boards in North Carolina to consolidate schools is one of the most controversial decisions a district can make. Nevertheless, rural school systems seeing declining enrollments and budget cuts, which ultimately lead to school closures (Baldwin, 2015). The decision to consolidate impacts students, staff, parents, and community stakeholders.

A case study was conducted in Wilkins County Schools, NC, to determine if the perceived benefits of school consolidating materialized after closing a Grade 6-12 school in Tiger, NC. This consolidation occurred in Year 2 (2017-2018) of the three years covered by this case study. The impact of school consolidation was measured in terms of academic, fiscal, and community perception impact.

Based on the findings, there appeared to be academic gains, gains that occurred because of the smaller size of the district: fewer than 500 students. This is partially due to the strategic use of resources across the district. Another noteworthy gain attributed to the consolidation was increased access to a variety of academic courses and resources.

When reviewing fiscal gains, my study revealed increased costs during the year of closure. Items that contributed to the increased expenditures were rebranding costs and transportation costs for students who now have longer bus routes. Despite the increased cost, residents indicated that there were little to no perceived changes in the financial impacts other than less traffic in the area where the school was closed.

Lastly, community perception overall was not impacted by the close of the school site, with only 30% of the surveyed stakeholders reporting some impact. Of the participants in the

focus group and survey data, 10% of the candidates noted an impact on their quality of life, and 100% noted they did not know or did not experience any tax savings.

Overall, the research collected in this process matched the research being conducted in other states around school consolidation. As rural districts have to make these tough decisions more often, we will be able to better identify the direct impacts by district size for academic, financial, and community perception indicators. In this current approach of face-to-face and virtual education opportunities, the results from this study might provide much-needed guidance for North Carolina and other states' school systems and complementation schools. These data could be a game-changer for school districts across NC.

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APPENDIX A: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL LETTER



EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY
University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board
4N-64 Brody Medical Sciences Building · Mail Stop 682
600 Moye Boulevard · Greenville, NC 27834
Office 252-744-2914 · Fax 252-744-2284 ·
rede.ecu.edu/umcirb/

Notification of Initial Approval: Expedited

From: Social/Behavioral IRB
To: [Odessa Mann](#)
CC: [Daniel Novey](#)
[Odessa Mann](#)
Date: 10/7/2019
Re: [UMCIRB 19-001964](#)
HOW WE DID IT: ACADEMIC, FINANCIAL, AND COMMUNITY ASPECTS OF RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICT CONSOLIDATION

I am pleased to inform you that your Expedited Application was approved. Approval of the study and any consent form(s) occurred on 10/7/2019. The research study is eligible for review under expedited category # 6, 7. The Chairperson (or designee) deemed this study no more than minimal risk.

Changes to this approved research may not be initiated without UMCIRB review except when necessary to eliminate an apparent immediate hazard to the participant. All unanticipated problems involving risks to participants and others must be promptly reported to the UMCIRB. The investigator must submit a Final Report application to the UMCIRB prior to the Expected End Date provided in the IRB application. If the study is not completed by this date, an Amendment will need to be submitted to extend the Expected End Date. The Investigator must adhere to all reporting requirements for this study.

Approved consent documents with the IRB approval date stamped on the document should be used to consent participants (consent documents with the IRB approval date stamp are found under the Documents tab in the study workspace).

The approval includes the following items:

Name	Description
HOW WE DID IT: ACADEMIC, FINANCIAL, AND COMMUNITY ASPECTS OF RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICT CONSOLIDATION	Study Protocol or Grant Application
Mann- Appendix B	Interview/Focus Group Scripts/Questions
Mann- Appendix D	Surveys and Questionnaires
Mann- Appendix E	Dataset Use
Mann- Appendix F (Assent), G (Consent) , J(Survey Consent), K (Parent Letter)	Approval/Permission Consent Forms
Mann- Appendix I	Recruitment Documents/Scripts

The Chairperson (or designee) does not have a potential for conflict of interest on this study.

APPENDIX B: STAKEHOLDER FOCUS GROUPS QUESTIONS

Hello!

I am Yanisha Mann, an Ed.D student at East Carolina University. I am writing my dissertation on the impact of school a small rural school in Wilkins County. This information will be used to better inform a future consolidation planned by the Board of Education. As a community stakeholder, I seek to collect data from community members that have been impacted by the school's closing. The questions below will be asked to a group of 3-5 community stakeholders. The participants have the right to not respond to any question below.

Question 1: What impacts have you noticed after year 1 of consolidation?

Question 2: What things could we have done differently?

Question 3: What things did we do well?

Question 4: Are there any other items you want to share?

Please sign below to note your consent to participation.

I, _____ (please print), give my consent for my information as a focus group participant, to be used in the research for this rural consolidation dissertation.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX C: REQUEST USAGE OF SURVEY TOOL FROM BUZZARD

Hello Dr. Buzzard!

I am Yanisha Mann, an Ed.D student at East Carolina University. I am writing my dissertation on the impact of school consolidation on a small rural school in Wilkins County. I have found your dissertation “What Every Policy Maker, School Leader, Parent, and Community Member Needs to Know About the Social, Economic, and Human Capital Costs of Closing a Rural School: A Comprehensive Multi-Faceted Investigation,” to be a great value add to my research.

In your research you used a survey tool to request data from a focus group. I would like to request your permission to use the same tool with modifications to directly suit my research questions. I have attached a sample of the tool modified below. Please allow me to use your tool to collect data for my dissertation. If there is no objection or contact made to deter my usage, I will continue with this survey as designed below.

Sincerely,

O. Yanisha Mann
Superintendent, Wilkins County Schools
ECU Doctoral Learner

APPENDIX D: QUALITATIVE IMPACT OF SCHOOL CLOSINGS ON RURAL COMMUNITIES SURVEY

Interview Protocol: Qualitative Impact of School Closings on Rural Communities (modified from Buzzard, 2016).

Modified Survey from Buzzard, R. A. (2016). *What every policy maker, school leader, parent, and community member needs to know about the social, economic, and human capital costs of closing a rural school: A comprehensive multi-faceted investigation* (Order No. 10127581). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (1808515598).

<http://search.proquest.com.jproxy.lib.ecu.edu/docview/1808515598?accountid=10639>

Hello!

I am Yanisha Mann, an Ed.D student at East Carolina University. I am writing my dissertation on the impact of school a small rural school in Wilkins County. This information will be used to better inform a future consolidation planned by the Board of Education. Beyond community meeting feedback, I seek to collect data from community members that have been impacted by the school's closing. Each interviewee will need to consent to this research by signing the bottom of the form to note their permission to be a part of this research. As a participant of this survey all completed surveys will be entered into a gas raffle for \$20.00 if you choose to add your information at the bottom of the surveys (this is optional). All responses will remain anonymous. The interviewee has the right to skip any question he or she may choose.

1. How long have you lived in the rural community?
2. If you moved here, why did you select this rural community?
3. What changes if any have you noticed in the community since the school building closed?
4. Has the closing of the school building affected your perception of "quality of life" in your community?
5. Has your community tried to compensate for the loss of your school building and the students?
6. Do you feel that the closing of your school building has had a financial impact on your community?

7. Do you feel that the closing of your school building has had an academic impact on your community?
8. Do you feel that the closing of your school building has had an impact on your community's perception of Wilkins County Schools?
9. Have you noticed any changes in your school children that have moved to a host school?
10. Do you see any school tax savings since your school building closed?
11. Is there any other information that you would like to add to your interview about the effect of closing of the local school building on your rural community?

Thank you for taking part of this survey. Please check the consent line below. If you are interested in participating in the raffle, please also sign below for entrance into the \$20.00 gas raffle.

_____ I give my consent for my information as a survey respondent to be used in the research for this rural consolidation dissertation.

Signature for Raffle: _____ Date: _____

Student ID or Staff ID Number or Name: _____

Attendance area (please circle one): Tiger Farmtown or Citytown

**APPENDIX E: REQUEST FOR PERMISSION FROM THE
WILKINS COUNTY BOARD OF EDUCATION**

Odessa Yanisha Mann
11 Pond Pine Dr.
Plymouth, NC 26962

Wilkins County Board of Education
802 Washington Street
Citytown NC 27962

Hello Wilkins County Board of Education!

I am Yanisha Mann, an Ed.D student at East Carolina University. I am writing my dissertation on the impact of the consolidation of a small rural school in Wilkins County.

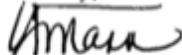
This information will be used to better inform the impact of school consolidation that occurred in the 2017-2018 school year. I am hoping to gain significant insight into the fiscal, academic, and community perspective that have been developed as a result of the 2017-2018 consolidation of Tiger High School.

Within this research I plan to collect data from community members that have been impacted by the school's closing. There will be focus group data collection with light refreshments served as well as parent and staff surveys sent home for input. Each interviewee consenting to the survey research will be entered into a gas raffle for \$20.00. All responses will remain confidential. The interviewee has the right to skip any question he or she may choose.

Quantitative data will also be collected from the district to review fiscal and academic progress. This will include but not limited to NC EOG assessment data, local testing data, course rosters, and WCS audit/finance data for utilities.

I am requesting your permission to collect this data from Wilkins County Schools stakeholders. Since this is traditionally a request approved by the superintendent, I am seeking a higher approval level from the WCS Board of Education. Please let me know at your earliest convenience if you have any objections.

Sincerely,



O. Yanisha Mann
Superintendent, Wilkins County Schools
Doctoral Graduate Learner, East Carolina University

APPENDIX F: ASSENT FORMS



Assent Form

Things You Should Know Before You Agree To Take Part in this Research

IRB Study # _____

Title of Study: HOW WE DID IT: ACADEMIC, FINANCIAL, AND COMMUNITY ASPECTS OF RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICT CONSOLIDATION

Person in charge of study: *Debra Vanisha Mann*

Where they work: *Wilkins County Schools*

Study contact phone number: *252-793-5171*

Study contact E-mail Address: *ymann@wcsnc.org*

People at ECU study ways to make people's lives better. These studies are called research. This research is trying to find out how consolidating *Tizer* High School impacted students. Your parent(s) needs to give permission for you to be in this research. You do not have to be in this research if you don't want to, even if your parent(s) has already given permission. You may stop being in the study at any time. If you decide to stop, no one will be angry or upset with you.

Why are you doing this research study?

The reason for doing this research is to see how people were impacted by closing *Tizer* High School at the end of the 2017-2018 school year.

Why am I being asked to be in this research study?

We are asking you to take part in this research because you are a student in *Wilkins County Schools*.

How many people will take part in this study?

If you decide to be in this research, you will be one of about 16 students taking part in it.

What will happen during this study?

In this study, we will have you in a small group with 6-8 students to talk about how closing *Tizer* High School impacted you. There will be no follow up times after this session is completed. I will record the sessions with an audio recorder so that after we are done, I can review what you stated in the group. If you want me to turn the audio off at any time, I will do this. I will ask you four questions

Question 1: What impacts have you noticed after year 1 of consolidation?

Question 2: What things could we have done differently?

Question 3: What things did we do well?

Question 4: Are there any other items you want to share?

As a group, you will take turns responding to one question, then moved on to the next question after everyone has given input.

Check the line that best matches your choice:

OK to record me during the study

Not OK to record me during the study

This study will take place at the Wilkins County High School and Wilkins County Middle School. The session will last for about 60 minutes with additional time given if students have more to say.

Who will be told the things we learn about you in this study?

All information that we learn about you in this study will be shared with the board of education and some central office members who are assisting with this project. Teachers and parents will not see your individual data but may see the whole group's input after the study is completed.

What are the good things that might happen?

Sometimes good things happen to people who take part in research. These are called "benefits." There is little chance you will benefit from being in this research because we are studying the past, but your input about what has happened is greatly valued.

What are the bad things that might happen?

Sometimes things we may not like happen to people in research studies. These things may even make them feel bad. These are called "risks." These are the risks of this study are that someone in your focus group may not like what you say or not want to be your friend because of something you say. You may or may not have these things happen to you. Things may also happen that the researchers do not know about right now. You should report any problems to your parents and to the researcher.

Will you get any money or gifts for being in this research study?

You will not receive any money or gifts for being in this research study.

Who should you ask if you have any questions?

If you have questions about the research, you should ask the people listed on the first page of this form. If you have other questions about your rights while you are in this research study you may call the Institutional Review Board at 252-744-2914.

If you decide to take part in this research, you should sign your name below. It means that you agree to take part in this research study.

Sign your name here if you want to be in the study

Date

Print your name here if you want to be in the study

Signature of Person Obtaining Assent

Date

Printed Name of Person Obtaining Assent

APPENDIX G: CONSENT FORMS

East Carolina University



Informed Consent to Participate in Research

Information to consider before taking part in research that has no more than minimal risk.

Title of Research Study: HOW WE DID IT: ACADEMIC, FINANCIAL, AND COMMUNITY ASPECTS OF RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICT CONSOLIDATION

Principal Investigator: Odessa Yanisha Mann

Institution/Department or Division: Department of Education

Address: 802 Washington Street Citytown NC 27962

Telephone #: 252-793-5171

Study Sponsor/Funding Source: Daniel Novey; East Carolina University

Researchers at East Carolina University (ECU) study problems in society, health problems, environmental problems, behavior problems and the human condition. Our goal is to try to find ways to improve the lives of you and others. To do this, we need the help of volunteers who are willing to take part in research.

Why is this research being done?

The purpose of this research is to determine the academic, fiscal, and community impact of consolidating Tiger High School in the 2017-2018 school year. The decision to take part in this research is yours to make. By doing this research, we hope to learn how does school consolidation in a small rural community impact the community perception after consolidation of the school facility.

Why am I being invited to take part in this research?

You are being invited to take part in this research because you are a resident of Wilkins County that has a child within this school system. If you volunteer to take part in this research, you will be one of about 50 students, adults, and staff members to do so.

What other choices do I have if I do not take part in this research?

You can choose not to participate. There will also be a survey sent home to each school connected family which will ask similar questions.

Where is the research going to take place and how long will it last?

The research procedures will be conducted at the Wilkins County Board of Education. You will need to come to the conference room in this site to participate one time during the study. The total amount of time you will be asked

Page 1 of 3

Consent Version # or Date: 7/22/19

Participant's Initials

Title of Study: HOW WE DID IT: ACADEMIC, FINANCIAL, AND COMMUNITY ASPECTS OF RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICT CONSOLIDATION

to volunteer for this study is 60 minutes for one session within one month pending the time for responses of other participants in the focus group.

What will I be asked to do?

You are being asked to do the following:

Meet in a small group with 6-8 adults to talk about how closing Tiger Creek School impacted you. There will be no follow up times after this session is completed. I will record the session on an audio recorder. This is so common that themes and quotes from your information can be retrieved after the group session. If you want me to turn the audio off at any time, I will do this. The recordings will be kept for up to one year after completion of the research. They will be destroyed by deleting them from the file holding all recorded focus group sessions. All information collected is strictly for research purposes. No names will be directly used in the research. I will ask you four questions:

Question 1: What impacts have you noticed after year one of consolidation?

Question 2: What things could we have done differently?

Question 3: What things did we do well?

Question 4: Are there any other items you want to share?

As a group, you will take turns responding to one question, then moved on to the next question after everyone has given input.

What possible harms or discomforts might I experience if I take part in the research?

It has been determined that the risks associated with this research are no more than what you would experience in everyday life.

What are the possible benefits I may experience from taking part in this research?

We do not know if you will get any benefits by taking part in this study. This research might help us learn more about how community members are impacted by closing a school in their community. There may be no personal benefit from your participation but the information gained by doing this research may help others in the future.

Will I be paid for taking part in this research?

We will not be able to pay you for the time you volunteer while being in this study. However, we will enter each adult participant into a raffle for a \$20 gas card. There are also refreshments available to anyone who participates during the focus group time.

What will it cost me to take part in this research?

It will not cost you any money to be part of the research.

Who will know that I took part in this research and learn personal information about me?

To do this research, ECU and the people and organizations listed below may know that you took part in this research and may see information about you that is normally kept private. With your permission, these people may use your private information to do this research:

- Any agency of the federal, state, or local government that regulates human research. This includes the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), the North Carolina Department of Health, and the Office for Human Research Protections.
- The University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board (UMCIRB) and its staff, who have responsibility for overseeing your welfare during this research, and other ECU staff who oversee this research.

Page 2 of 3

Consent Version # or Date: 7/22/19

Participant's Initials

Title of Study: HOW WE DID IT: ACADEMIC, FINANCIAL, AND COMMUNITY ASPECTS OF RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICT CONSOLIDATION

How will you keep the information you collect about me secure? How long will you keep it?

The audio recordings from the focus groups will be kept for up to one year after completion of the research. They will be destroyed by deleting them from the file holding all recorded focus group sessions. All information collected is strictly for research purposes. No names will be directly used in the research.

Who should I contact if I have questions?

The people conducting this study will be available to answer any questions concerning this research, now or in the future. You may contact the Principal Investigator at 252-793-5171 Monday to Friday, between 8:00 am to 5:00 pm.

If you have questions about your rights as someone taking part in research, you may call the Office for Human Research Integrity (OHRI) at phone number 252-744-2914 (days, 8:00 am-5:00 pm). If you would like to report a complaint or concern about this research study, you may call the Director of the OHRI, at 252-744-1971.

I have decided I want to take part in this research. What should I do now?

The person obtaining informed consent will ask you to read the following and if you agree, you should sign this form:

- I have read (or had read to me) all of the above information.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions about things in this research I did not understand and have received satisfactory answers.
- I know that I can stop taking part in this study at any time before the focus group starts.
- By signing this informed consent form, I am not giving up any of my rights.
- I have been given a copy of this consent document, and it is mine to keep.

Participant's Name (PRINT)

Signature

Date

Person Obtaining Informed Consent: I have conducted the initial informed consent process. I have orally reviewed the contents of the consent document with the person who has signed above, and answered all of the person's questions about the research.

Person Obtaining Consent (PRINT)

Signature

Date

**APPENDIX H: PERMISSION FROM THE WILKINS COUNTY BOARD OF
EDUCATION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH**

W

WILKINS COUNTY SCHOOLS

802 Washington Street Citytown North Carolina 27962
Phone: 252.793.5171 Fax: 252.793.5062

Dear Superintendent Mann,

The Wilkins County Board of Education encourages agencies and individuals to conduct research on issues related to student achievement and the effective operation of the school system (Policy Code: 5230 Participation in Research Projects).

Traditionally, the superintendent may approve a request for participation in a research project if:

1. the research results ultimately may benefit students of the school system
2. the project's purpose and methodology are compatible with the goals and objectives of the board and school system
3. the project will not disrupt instructional time.
4. the project involving a survey of students must comply with policy 4720, Surveys of Students.
5. the project complies with the confidentiality requirements of policy 4700, Student Records, and policy 4705/7825, Confidentiality of Personal Identifying Information.

Approved research projects are then reported at the next regularly-scheduled board meeting.

With this information being critical to determining the impact of the 2017-2018 school consolidation in our county, the Wilkins County Board of Education has accepted this request.

We look forward to hearing about your findings!

Sincerely,

APPENDIX I: ADVERTISEMENT FLIER TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

W

YOUR INPUT IS NEEDED!!

W

Hello Wilkins County Schools Community,
The Wilkins County Board of Education has authorized a case study to be conducted on the consolidation of Tiger High School. Superintendent Yanisha Mann will be conducting this study to see if the desired outcomes in the area of academic, fiscal, and community perception were achieved. If you are a Wilkins County Schools student, parent, or community member, your participation would be greatly appreciated. Please come out on

**Tuesday, October 22nd to St. Johns Missionary Baptist Church,
601 W Main St, Tiger, NC 27928**

OR

**Monday, October 28th to Pentecostal Temple COGIC,
200 Rankin Ln, Citytown, NC 27962**

OR

**Wednesday, November 13th to Eastern NC & VA Assembly
101 June Street Farmtown, NC 27970**

After these meeting, we will arrange a time to gain insight from you as a valuable stakeholder in this process if you choose to participate. We hope to see you there!

Sincerely,

O. Yanisha Mann, WCS Superintendent

APPENDIX J: CONSENT FORM FOR SURVEY COLLECTION

East Carolina University



Informed Consent to Participate in Research

Information to consider before taking part in research that has no more than minimal risk.

Title of Research Study: HOW WE DID IT: ACADEMIC, FINANCIAL, AND COMMUNITY ASPECTS OF RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICT CONSOLIDATION

Principal Investigator: Odessa Yanisha Mann

Institution/Department or Division: Department of Education

Address: 802 Washington Street, Citytown 27962

Telephone #: 252-793-5171

Study Sponsor/Funding Source: Daniel Novey; East Carolina University

Researchers at East Carolina University (ECU) study problems in society, health problems, environmental problems, behavior problems and the human condition. Our goal is to try to find ways to improve the lives of you and others. To do this, we need the help of volunteers who are willing to take part in research.

Why is this research being done?

The purpose of this research is to determine the academic, fiscal, and community impact of consolidating Tiger High School in the 2017-2018 school year. The decision to take part in this research is yours to make. By doing this research, we hope to learn how does school consolidation in a small rural community impact the community perception after consolidation of the school facility.

Why am I being invited to take part in this research?

You are being invited to take part in this research because you are a resident Wilkin County that is 18 years or older, or have a child within this school system. If you volunteer to take part in this research, you will be one of about 200 adults, and staff members to do so.

What other choices do I have if I do not take part in this research?

You can choose not to participate. If you choose not to participate please return this form noting that you do not chse to participate.

Where is the research going to take place and how long will it last?

The research will be conducted by completing this survey. It should take approximately 5 to 10 minutes to complete.

What will I be asked to do?

You will be asked to complete the survey that is attached to this form.

What possible harms or discomforts might I experience if I take part in the research?

It has been determined that the risks associated with this research are no more than what you would experience in everyday life.

Page 1 of 3

Consent Version # or Date: 7/22/19

Participant's Initials

Title of Study: HOW WE DID IT: ACADEMIC, FINANCIAL, AND COMMUNITY ASPECTS OF RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICT CONSOLIDATION

What are the possible benefits I may experience from taking part in this research?

We do not know if you will get any benefits by taking part in this study. This research might help us learn more about how community members are impacted by closing a school in their community. There may be no personal benefit from your participation but the information gained by doing this research may help others in the future.

Will I be paid for taking part in this research?

We will not be able to pay you for the time you volunteer while being in this study.

What will it cost me to take part in this research?

It will not cost you any money to be part of the research.

Who will know that I took part in this research and learn personal information about me?

To do this research, ECU and the people and organizations listed below may know that you took part in this research and may see information about you that is normally kept private. With your permission, these people may use your private information to do this research:

- Any agency of the federal, state, or local government that regulates human research. This includes the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), the North Carolina Department of Health, and the Office for Human Research Protections.
- The University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board (UMCIRB) and its staff, who have responsibility for overseeing your welfare during this research, and other ECU staff who oversee this research.

How will you keep the information you collect about me secure? How long will you keep it?

In order to keep all information secure, all surveys will be compilation into one file of responses. The individual survey responses will then be coded for commonalities and exceptionalities. The information obtained here will be kept up to one year after completion of the research. After the research is completed, all files will be destroyed by shredding individual results. All information collected is strictly for research purposes. No names will be directly used in the research.

Who should I contact if I have questions?

The people conducting this study will be available to answer any questions concerning this research, now or in the future. You may contact the Principal Investigator at 252-793-5171 Monday to Friday, between 8:00 am to 5:00 pm.

If you have questions about your rights as someone taking part in research, you may call the Office for Human Research Integrity (OHRI) at phone number 252-744-2914 (days, 8:00 am-5:00 pm). If you would like to report a complaint or concern about this research study, you may call the Director of the OHRI, at 252-744-1971.

I have decided I want to take part in this research. What should I do now?

The person obtaining informed consent will need you to read the following and if you agree, you should sign this form:

- I have read (or had read to me) all of the above information.
- I am at least 18 years of age and can give consent to complete this form.
- I know that I can stop taking part in this study at any time.
- By signing this informed consent form, I am not giving up any of my rights.
- I have been given a copy of this consent document (the information on page 1 of 2 and 2 of 3, and it is mine to keep).
- I am giving consent by signing page 3 and returning this along with the completed survey.

Page 2 of 3

Consent Version # or Date: 7/22/19

Participant's Initials

Title of Study: HOW WE DID IT: ACADEMIC, FINANCIAL, AND COMMUNITY ASPECTS OF RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICT CONSOLIDATION

THIS PAGE IS TO BE COMPLETED AND SUBMITTED WITH THE SURVEY TO THE RESEARCHER

I have decided I want to take part in this research. What should I do now?

The person obtaining informed consent will need you to read the following and if you agree, you should sign this form:

- I have read (or had read to me) all of the above information.
- I am at least 18 years of age and can give consent to complete this form.
-
- I know that I can stop taking part in this study at any time.
- By signing this informed consent form, I am not giving up any of my rights.
- I have been given a copy of this consent document (the information on page 1 of 2 and 2 of 3, and it is mine to keep).
- I am giving consent by signing page 3 and returning this page along with the completed survey.

Participant's Name (PRINT)

Signature

Date

Person Obtaining Informed Consent: I have conducted the initial informed consent process. I have orally reviewed the contents of the consent document with the person who has signed above, and answered all of the person's questions about the research.

Person Obtaining Consent (PRINT)

Signature

Date

Page 3 of 3

Consent Version # or Date: 7/22/19

Participant's Initials

APPENDIX K: PARENT CONSENT LETTER

W

WASHINGTON COUNTY SCHOOLS

802 Washington Street • Plymouth, North Carolina 27962
Phone: 252.793.5171 Fax: 252.793.5062

September 23, 2019

To Whom It May Concern,

Dear Parent/Guardian,

I am presently working on my Doctoral degree in Educational Leadership at East Carolina University. As part of my degree requirements, I am planning an educational research project to take place the school district that will help me to learn more about school consolidation in a rural setting. The fundamental goal of this research study is to determine the impact of consolidation Tiger High School in the 2017-2018 school year.

As part of this research project, your child will participate in a focus group over the next six to eight weeks that will allow me to track how students feel about the school closing. As this study is for educational research purposes only, the results of your child's participation will not affect your child's grade.

I am requesting permission from you to use your child's data in my research study.


Please know that participation is entirely voluntary.

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me at school at 252-793-5171 or by emailing me at yman@wcsnc.org. If you have questions about your child's rights as someone taking part in research, you may call the University and Medical Center Institutional Review Board (UMCIRB) at phone number 252-744-2914 (days, 8:00 am-5:00 pm). If you would like to report a complaint or concern about this research study, you may call the Director for Human Research Protections, at 252-744-2914.

If you permit your child's data to be used in my study, please return the attached form by November 1, 2019.

Thank you for your interest in my educational research study.

Your Partner in Education,



O. Yanisha Mann

As the parent or guardian of _____,
(write your student's name above)

I grant my permission for Ms. Mann to use my child's data in his/her educational research project regarding school consolidation. I fully understand that my child's data will be kept completely confidential and will be used only for the purposes of Ms. Mann's research study. I also understand that I or my child may at any time decide to withdraw my/our permission and that my child's grade will not be affected by withdrawing from the study.

I do NOT grant my permission for Ms. Mann to use my child's data in his/her educational research project regarding school consolidation.

Signature of Parent/Guardian: _____ Date _____

APPENDIX L: WCS SCHOOL CONSOLIDATION FEEDBACK FORM

WCS School Consolidation Feedback Forms

Hello Wilkins County Schools Community,

The Wilkins County Board of Education has authorized a case study to be conducted on the consolidation of Tiger High School. Superintendent Yanisha Mann will be conducting this study to see if the desired outcomes in the area of academic, fiscal, and community perception were achieved. Attached you will find 3 forms...

1. **Parent Letter (green- 1A, 2A)**- please read, sign, and return page 2A. This will give me consent to use your student's information in the research. All names will be removed from any data collected.
2. **Informed Consent to Participate in Research (pink, 1J, 2J, 3J)**- please read, sign and return page 3J. This will allow me to use the information you write in the next attachment- the survey.
3. **Appendix D: Qualitative Impact of School Closings on Rural Communities (blue 1D, 2D)**- please read and answer questions 1-11, then return both pages D1, D2. You can also fill out the bottom section to be entered to a \$20.00 gas card raffle,

Thank you for your time and your feedback. The flier for our last community meeting for the fall is attached below. We hope to see you Farmtown on November 13 if you have not attended any other meetings!

Sincerely,
O. Yanisha Mann, WCS Superintendent

W

YOUR INPUT IS NEEDED!!

W

Hello Wilkins County Schools Community,

The Wilkins County Board of Education has authorized a case study to be conducted on the consolidation of Tiger High School. Superintendent Yanisha Mann will be conducting this study to see if the desired outcomes in the area of academic, fiscal, and community perception were achieved. If you are a Wilkins County Schools student, parent, or community member, your participation would be greatly appreciated. Please come out on

Wednesday, November 13th to Eastern NC. & VA Assembly

101 June Street Farmtown, NC

6:00 pm

After this meeting, we will arrange a time to gain insight from you as a valuable stakeholder in this process if you choose to participate. We will also send a survey home to all families to collect additional data next week. We hope to see you at the community meeting!

APPENDIX M: PILOT STUDY QUESTIONS

Focus Group Questions

Question 1: What impacts have you noticed after year 1 of consolidation?

Question 2: What things could we have done differently?

Question 3: What things did we do well?

Question 4: Are there any other items you want to share?

Survey Questions

1. How long have you lived in the rural community?
2. If you moved here, why did you select this rural community?
3. What changes if any have you noticed in the community since the school building closed?
4. Has the closing of the school building affected your perception of “quality of life” in your community?
5. Has your community tried to compensate for the loss of your school building and the students?
6. Do you feel that the closing of your school building has had a financial impact on your community?
7. Do you feel that the closing of your school building has had an academic impact on your community?
8. Do you feel that the closing of your school building has had an impact on your community’s perception of Wilkins County Schools?
9. Have you noticed any changes in your school children that have moved to a host school?
10. Do you see any school tax savings since your school building closed?
11. Is there any other information that you would like to add to your interview about the effect of closing of the local school building on your rural community?

