Stretching to Survive: District Autonomy in an Age of Dwindling Resources

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This case study focuses on a four-district collaborative that shared services for more than 15 years in an effort to retain rural schools and thereby to preserve community identity. With population losses in the four districts and suburbanization in the largest, the collaborative made extensive use of distance education in addition to itinerant teachers and shared administrators. Data concerning dynamics in the collaborative came from interviews with administrators, teachers, students, and parents. Qualitative data analysis surfaced two themes relating to shared services: tenacity in the face of decline, and strategies with limited sustainability. Findings also pointed to a disjuncture between the way administrators and parents, on the one hand and teachers and students, on the other viewed the success of shared services and the probable future of the collaborative. A review of changes in the written plans of the collaborative over a several-year period revealed that sharing of buildings through school consolidation was the inevitable next step. This finding fits with research showing that shared services in rural locales—a strategy initially used to forestall reorganization—often leads to consolidation.

Historically, schools have played a major role in the life of rural communities, transmitting important knowledge and values, serving as the locus for community events, and supporting economic and civic development (e.g., DeYoung, 1995a; Theobald, 1997). Not all schools, however, have been equally successful in supporting their communities, in part because business and government interests often push them toward other purposes (Budge, 2010). Contributing to the breakdown between schooling and community are several prominent modernization efforts—standardization of rural curricula and educational performances (e.g., Brandt, 2002; Wills & Sandholtz, 2009), consolidation of smaller schools into conglomerates serving several communities (Bard, Gardener, & Wieland, 2006), and enticement of talented students to leave their home communities for high-paying jobs elsewhere (Carr & Kefalas, 2009).

Some rural communities have been better able than others to retain their small schools and exert influence on their educational aims (Buikstra et al., 2010; DeYoung, 1995a; Duncan, 1999; Howley, Howley, Camper, & Perko, 2011; Shelton, 2005). In many regions of the United States, however, serious and prolonged economic decline in previously solid agrarian communities has weakened civic institutions, undermining community and eventually resulting in school closure (e.g., Salamon, 2003). Several studies suggest that school survival and community survival are linked: not only does community decline result from school closure (Lyson, 2002), school closure often results from community decline (Post & Stambach, 1999).

Commonly, rural schools and communities find themselves with little power to offset the consequences of changes they confront. Demographers continue to report population declines in many rural communities, as well as some rebounds associated with resettlement choices of

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retirees (Johnson, Nucci, & Long, 2005). Both dynamics contribute to lower school-age enrollments, and the push for school and district consolidation continues (Spradlin, Carson, Hess, & Plucker, 2010). Despite opposition to such arrangements, community members have limited strategies to offer effective resistance. One classic study (Peshkin, 1982) reported on the events leading to the eventual consolidation of several schools in one region of Illinois. Few studies in the last two decades, however, have investigated such dynamics.

The current study revisits the issue by reporting on school and community dynamics in a complex and long-standing inter-district arrangement—identified in the article with the pseudonym, the Confluence Collaborative—where explicit attention to citizens' interest in retaining separate community schools has resulted in the use of many strategies for sharing services. The study examines the character of these strategies and their consequences for the communities.

The Collaborative started in 1994, when a new superintendent assumed leadership in one of the districts, which we identify with the pseudonym Springfield-Elm. He remained in the position for 14 years, over the course of which three other districts joined Springfield-Elm to form the Collaborative. Three changes signaled the collaboration in each case: (1) replacement of the local superintendent with Springfield-Elm's superintendent; (2) sharing of administrators and teachers, and; (3) participation in Collaborative-wide planning.

The first district to join Springfield-Elm in the Collaborative was Roosevelt, in 2002-2003. The collaboration with Homestead took place in 2006-2007, and Pioneer joined the Collaborative in 2007-2008. With four districts trying to retain separate identities yet cooperate in an effort to share resources, the Collaborative saw a need for a more formalized planning mechanism—an annual planning retreat involving local board members, community members, teachers, and administrators from all four districts.

Related Literature

The following threads in the literature on rural schools and communities help contextualize the challenges facing the Confluence Collaborative: (1) rural districts' practice of sharing various educational services; (2) circumstances that lead to and result from the consolidation of rural schools and districts; and (3) dynamics that contribute to suburbanization in some rural communities. As the findings of the study show, these threads—suburbanization, resistance to consolidation, and the choice to share services across four districts—weave together to explain conditions in Confluence that have influenced the Collaborative's success in achieving a complex, and to some extent incompatible, set of goals. These dynamics also contribute to circumstances that are likely to shape the Collaborative's future.

Shared Services

Literature on shared services suggests that this strategy attempts to accomplish several purposes: improving course offerings, stretching limited funds, forestalling consolidation, or moving incrementally toward consolidation (Holmes, 1990). Whatever districts' purposes for choosing to share services, most studies show that this approach results from financial difficulties and often represents a form of retrenchment (Beem, 2006; Chance & Cummins, 1998; Dunn, 2001).

Districts use various approaches when they choose to share services—some central to the district mission and others more tangential (Alexander & Rogers, 1988; Beem, 2006; Clark, 1992; Decker & May, 1989; Decker & Talbot, 1991; Ditzler, 1984; Heath & Vik, 1993; Jolly & Deloney, 1993; Rees & Woodward, 1998). For example, the decision to share equipment or facilities is less central to the functioning of two cooperating school districts than the decision to share personnel, courses, or programs for special populations.

With less extensive shared services, each community retains its schools and school board, some or all of its administration, and often its athletic programs and other extra-curricular activities (Decker & May, 1989, Jolly & Deloney, 1993). More extensive arrangements involve the sharing of staff—often administrators and teachers of specialized subjects (e.g., music, industrial technology). The practices of course and grade sharing tighten the connections between districts to an even greater extent (Decker & Talbot, 1991). With these latter arrangements, two or more districts divide up the courses (or grade levels) they offer and bus students within and across districts to the schools offering the services they need.

The practice most often studied in the literature on shared services involves the employment of one administrator to serve as superintendent in two or more districts (Bratlie, 1992; Decker & McCumsey, 1990; Decker & Talbot, 1991; Heath & Vik, 1993; Winchester, 2003). Despite efforts in some states to encourage this arrangement (Beem, 2006; Bratlie, 1992), studies have found that it is not always welcome: communities tend to be apprehensive about sharing a superintendent, worrying that the arrangement will give the district less visibility, limit community members' access to the superintendent, and lead to cuts in educational services (Decker & McCumsey, 1990; Decker & Talbot, 1991). Moreover, evidence from some rural communities suggests that the practice of sharing one superintendent across two or more districts has not represented a workable long-term solution (Heath & Vik, 1993; Sederberg, 1988).

Although the reasons for considering shared services and consolidation are often the same, districts that implement

shared services tend to receive more community support than those that close schools or merge with other districts (Decker & McCumsey, 1990; Jolly & Deloney, 1993). School boards may, therefore, agree to such arrangements in order to diminish the threat of consolidation (e.g., Holmes, 1990). Based on a survey conducted by Rees and Woodward (1998), community members in two Ontario districts supported shared services as a way to retain their community schools while at the same time bringing the two communities closer together.

Despite some positive claims about the practice (e.g., Furtwengler, Furtwengler, Turk, & Hurst, 1997; Schrader, 1989), most studies of shared services have shown that districts contemplate this approach only as a last-ditch effort (Alexander & Rogers, 1988; Beem 2006; Bowden, 1994; Decker & Talbot, 1991; Jolly & Deloney, 1993). According to Beem (2006), critics of consolidation often view sharing of services as an indirect route to consolidation, but those who favor consolidation see it as a way to avoid prolonged, emotional debates.

Dynamics of School and District Consolidation

Many states have encouraged the consolidation of rural schools and districts (e.g., Buchanan, 2004; Eyre & Finn, 2002; Roberts, 2001; Self, 2001; Streifel, Holman, & Foldesy, 1992; Thompson, 1990); in recent years, such policies have responded to diminishing enrollments in rural schools and the declining political influence of rural constituents. Although the consolidation literature is large, most studies address the academic outcomes of consolidation, focusing on matters such as the relationship between school size and student achievement (for a concise overview of this literature see Howley, Johnson, & Petrie, 2011). A recent study of all districts across two states employed econometric procedures—spatial autocorrelation and spatial heterogeneity analysis—to show the extent to which geographical and regional conditions affected students' reading and math achievement (Haddad & Alsbury, 2006). Findings suggested that earlier research on the impact of consolidation on achievement omitted important contributions associated with spatial clustering.

Although studies of the impact of district consolidation on academic achievement obviously address an important concern, studies of the community impact of consolidation—while fewer in number—are also relevant. Most closely linked to our study is research focusing on two interrelated dynamics: community efforts to oppose consolidation and the feared and real consequences of consolidation for communities.

Studies of resistance to consolidation include several case studies describing the strategies that community members have used, including campaigns involving news media and public meetings (Hall et al., 2004; Sher, 1995), legal action (Buchanan, 2004; Eyre & Finn, 2002), and direct pressure on elected officials (Peshkin, 1982; Scott, 1999;). Some of these studies have also shown that, even when community members realize that consolidation will happen eventually, they do what they can to delay it (Hall et al., 2004; Self, 2001; Ward & Rink, 1992). Roberts's (2001) history of school consolidation in Randolph County, WV, for example, showed that the community stalled consolidation for a year before succumbing to pressures from the state and school board. A decade later, community members were still resentful.

According to some research, residents may fight hardest to retain elementary schools (Hall et al., 2004; Manzo, 1999). After a year of resisting consolidation, a community in North Dakota agreed to the closure of the high school so long as the elementary school could remain open (Manzo, 1999). And the few studies of parents' concerns about the potential of lengthy school-bus rides to consolidated schools have drawn attention to worries about younger children (Howley, Howley, & Shamblen, 2001; Spence, 2000).

Residents often oppose consolidation because of the symbolic and practical consequences of losing an institution that serves as a community center (Bryant & Grady, 1990; Buchanan, 2004; Chance & Cummins, 1998; Glascock, 1998; Self, 2001). For these community members, the school binds them to a place and set of traditions (DeYoung, 1995b; Howley, A. et al., 2011; Warner & Lindle, 2009) and serves as the locus for important community activities (e.g., Howley, Howley, Burgess, & Pusateri, 2008). In a symbolic sense, the loss of a school represents the loss of the community's identity and hopes for the future (e.g., Peshkin, 1982). Confirming Peshkin's findings, a recent qualitative study of superintendents from rural districts across the nation showed that, according to respondents, community members' fears about the loss of unique community identities and ways of life comprised the most significant reasons for their opposition to district consolidation (Alsbury & Shaw, 2005). This same study concluded that, while school consolidation might provide greater opportunities for social justice inside of schools, it did so at the expense of social equity for local communities.

Despite community members' fears, research on the impact of school closure on community viability has produced inconclusive findings. Lyson's (2002) and DeYoung's (1995b) work offered evidence of community decline following consolidation; but Sell, Leitstritz, and Thompson (1996) found that while community involvement in the school decreased after consolidation, quality of life remained constant. In a more recent case study of consolidation, the authors reported that residents saw their community as more secure after their schools had been consolidated (Hall et al., 2004).

Suburbanization

Changes in patterns of land use sometimes result

in the suburbanization of rural places. One such change involves the decentralization of cities—a phenomenon that turns farmland into sites for light industry and housing developments (Berry, Krannich, & Greider, 1990; Krannich & Greider, 1984; Thompson, Reynolds, & Wilkinson, 1980). Another change involves the relocation of some urban and suburban residents to rural communities—either to pursue retirement or to remain in the workforce as telecommuters (Bushnell, 1999; Dunn, 2001; Hobbs, 1994; Howley et al., 2005; Salamon, 2003; Theobald, 1988; Vail, 2000). For school systems in suburbanizing rural communities, three dynamics may produce tension and eventual accommodation to new circumstances.

First is the need in some cases to handle the increased enrollment caused by in-migration (Bushnell, 1999; Vail, 2000). Some outsiders choose to move to rural places for their safe and close-knit communities, small schools, opportunities to own land, proximity to recreation, and low property tax rates (Bushnell, 1999; Dunn, 2001; Hobbs, 1994; Howley et al., 2005; Salamon, 2003; Theobald, 1988; Vail, 2000). Although some in-migration occurs because urbanites and suburbanites seek these amenities (Dunn, 2001), other in-migration results from the seasonal or year-round residency of workers in agriculture and related industries (e.g., Brunn, 2002). According to some research, population growth in rural places affects local schools first by producing overcrowding in elementary classrooms (Theobald, 1988). Often such overcrowding encourages the building of new schools (Bushnell, 1999; Salamon, 2003; Vail, 2000)—a choice that is sometimes unpopular with longtime residents.

A second situation occurs when communities lose students because families either move away or choose to send their children to schools outside the district (Bryant & Grady, 1990; Cook, 2008; Salamon, 2003). Researchers often attribute rural out-migration to limited job prospects in non-metro communities as compared to those available in cities and suburbs (e.g., Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Cook, 2008; Corbett, 2007; Salamon, 2003). Some research also shows that out-migration results in the loss of human resources that might otherwise serve to sustain rural communities (e.g., Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Lyson, 2002). This circumstance leads to a vicious cycle in which declining enrollments force rural schools to consolidate or close, and then communities lose identity and vibrancy in response to the loss of a local school (Lyson, 2002).

A third situation relates to alterations in community power structures accompanying the in-migration of relatively affluent new residents (Bushnell, 1999; Howley et al., 2005; Vail, 2000). Often, power struggles between new and longtime residents concern school priorities (Howley et al., 2005; Theobald, 1988; Vail, 2000). Newcomers, for example, may view the school primarily in terms of preparation for college and careers and therefore push the district to provide AP classes, gifted programs, and other elite academic curricula (Vail, 2000). By contrast, longtime residents often value the social activities that the school provides for students and community and resent changes in school priorities, particularly when these changes require the reallocation of resources or the generation of new funds through levies (e.g., Theobald, 1988).

The four-district Confluence Collaborative, to one degree or another, was responding to each of the dynamics discussed above. The largest and most influential district in the Collaborative was facing suburbanization; two of the four districts had experienced consolidation in the past and all were facing the threat of future consolidation; and the Collaborative had mobilized all of the districts to develop and use strategies for sharing services, resources, teachers, and administrative staff.

Methods

The case study of four rural districts working as one collaborative unit—a unit we identify with the pseudonym, Confluence Collaborative—is part of a larger investigation of seven districts across the United States. Under the auspices of an NSF initiative, the study of the seven districts examined the intersection between mathematics education and rural education, operationalized as "place- and community-based math instruction." At most sites, the math education efforts represented the central focus of the data collected and the themes emerging from the analysis of data. By contrast, local circumstances in the Confluence Collaborative were so unusual that participants directed many of their comments to broader contextual issues.

As was the case for all of the sites studied, one member of the research team visited for approximately one week to conduct interviews with teachers, administrators, students, parents, and other community members, as well as to observe in classrooms and other school locations and to collect artifacts. Although the interviews covered a range of topics, several questions elicited responses that described the challenges facing the Collaborative and the strategies directed toward addressing those challenges.

For teachers, three questions stimulated especially rich discussion:

> What goes into the process of teaching that draws on the local place and/or community?
>
> How has this way of teaching evolved in your own work and in the work of the school in general?
>
> What forces interfere with teaching in this way?

For administrators, the questions that encouraged disclosures about the Collaborative's circumstances were:

> Could you talk about the school-community connection?

> Place-and community-based instruction is the focus of this study. How does teaching at this school fit in with this way of thinking about instruction?
>
> What do you see as the challenges of this approach to teaching?
>
> What role do you see yourself playing as the principal of a school where one or more teachers use this approach not only in mathematics but in other subjects too?

Parents and community members shared perspectives about circumstances in their local districts and in the Collaborative as a whole in response to the following questions:

> Tell me about yourself and your connection to the school.
>
> What do you think about a type of teaching that brings students into the community or into the local environment?
>
> Do you think this kind of teaching will continue at the school? Please explain.

By contrast to the individual interviews with adult participants, those with focus groups of students were more free-ranging. In response to questions about the methods of instruction their teachers were using, participating students provided extensive commentary about the Collaborative's educational strategies, most notably, distance education and itinerant teachers. The students also offered theories as to why the districts were facing challenges and opinions about the degree to which the strategies the Collaborative had been using were actually successful in addressing those challenges.

Altogether, the researcher conducted interviews with 4 administrators, 11 teachers, 4 focus groups of students (with 4 to 5 students per group), and 3 parents. Table 1 presents these participants by district, and Table 2 presents them by role. The researcher recorded all interviews with a digital voice recorder, and another member of the research team produced verbatim transcripts from the audio recordings. He also developed field notes capturing information from participant observation and direct observation in classrooms and gathered relevant artifacts. See Appendix A for a complete list of field notes and artifacts as well as the on-line documents that were assembled after the site visit.

Two members of the research team analyzed data from the Collaborative, focusing initially on interview transcripts and seeking supportive evidence from field notes, documents, and on-line data about district demographics and performance. Using a broad coding scheme, they first organized data by district, next by participant group, and finally by category. In this way the team members developed portraits characterizing each district, identified the most pressing concerns of different groups of participants, and ascertained the extensiveness of data in different categories (e.g., distance learning, shared administrators, and so on). This analysis revealed two broad themes: (1) tenacity in the face of decline; and (2) strategies with limited sustainability.

With these two broad themes in mind, the researchers then engaged in fine-grained coding followed by the display of codes and supporting data in analytic matrices. This process enabled the researchers to derive tentative explanations of how the sharing of resources and services, the fight to maintain independent community identities and avoid school consolidation, and the dynamics of suburbanization and outmigration functioned in the Collaborative. The researchers went back and forth between the data and these tentative explanations (e.g., the emerging themes) to make sure ample evidence from the interviews, field notes, and artifacts supported each explanatory claim.

Findings

Two themes were particularly relevant to an understanding of how shared services across the schools of the Confluence Collaborative influenced stakeholder responses to community change. We describe each below—tenacity in the face of decline and strategies with limited sustainability.

Tenacity in the Face of Decline

The tenacity of the districts and their communities' struggles to maintain separate identities in the face of economic change and population decline explained much of what had been going on in the Collaborative for the past 15 years. Diminishing resources and declining enrollments threatened the sustainability of all districts in the Collaborative although each district faced unique challenges.

Springfield-Elm, the largest and best provisioned of the districts, faced the encroachment of an urban center. Residents were moving out of the district, and increasing numbers who remained were commuting to work in the city. The rural tradition of grounding cultural life in the school was losing force as other, more cosmopolitan activities diverted attention away from local pursuits. Furthermore, the need for Springfield-Elm to share its more ample resources with three other districts had taken a toll on capacity and morale.

Roosevelt, the second largest district, was nonetheless small and continuing to lose population. As a result, it was most in danger of being absorbed by Springfield-Elm through consolidation. Already, the district shared administrators with the Springfield-Elm district and sent its K-2 students to a building there. And the Collaborative was constructing

Table 1
Participants by District

Springfield-Elm	Roosevelt	Shared Across Two Districts	Shared Across Four Districts
HS Principal	HS Principal	Springfield-Elm-Roosevelt Elementary Principal	Superintendent
HS Math Teacher	HS Math Teacher	Springfield-Elm-Roosevelt Science Teacher	HS Industrial Technology Teacher
HS Science Teacher	HS Business Teacher	Homestead-Pioneer Math Teacher	
MS Math Teacher	HS Student Focus Group		
7th-8th Grade Student Focus Group	Parent		
9th-10th Grade Student Focus Group			
11th-12th Grade Student Focus Group			
Parent #1			
Parent #2			

Note. The researchers are sensitive to the fact that the data may be skewed toward Springfield-Elm because the interviewer was able to interview more participants there than in any of the other districts. None of the participants was employed solely by the Homestead or the Pioneer district.

a middle school that would bring together students from the two districts into one facility.

Homestead and Pioneer were the smallest and most remote of the four districts, and they faced the sharpest financial challenges. Educators reported that the formation of the Collaborative had allowed these districts to survive at a time when they would not have been able to do so on their own. Their distance from Roosevelt and Springfield-Elm, however, protected them from possible consolidation with either of those larger districts, even if the residents of one or both communities would have seen that option as acceptable.

Based on these dynamics, we might be tempted to view Springfield-Elm as less vulnerable than the other districts to the forces affecting the Collaborative. It did, after all, wield the most power: it was the seat of the superintendency and the location for Collaborative meetings and cross-district activities that involved students and families. In addition, it was the most affluent district, and the community of Springfield had the most extensive infrastructure (e.g., the Adult Learning Center and Library, the Fitness Center).

But despite its comparative position of power, the Springfield-Elm district showed evidence of vulnerability. Of the districts, it was the only one with a history of district-level consolidation. Its connection to a single community, therefore, had already been eroded. Furthermore, as the best provisioned, Springfield-Elm had been the one to give over resources to the other districts. Efforts such as distance learning, shared services, and itinerant teachers, which had been put in place to help the other districts, arguably hurt Springfield-Elm. Certainly, its students saw it that way. An interchange from the Springfield-Elm High School ninth and tenth grade focus-group interview illustrated students' acknowledgement of and frustration with this circumstance[1]:

> Student 3: Well, since we're from a bigger school, and the superintendent, he's the head of the other schools now, too. So, that's probably why we got into this distance-learning thing. But, sometimes,

[1]We saw no evidence in any of the focus-group interviews that students shared preservationist beliefs expressed by many of the adults.

Table 2
Participants by Role

Administrator	Teacher	Student	Parent
Superintendent	Springfield-Elm HS Math Teacher	Springfield-Elm 7th-8th Grade Student Focus Group	Springfield-Elm Parent #1
Springfield-Elm HS Principal	Springfield-Elm HS Science Teacher	Springfield-Elm 9th-10th Student Focus Group	Springfield-Elm Parent #2
Roosevelt HS Principal	Springfield-Elm HS Business Teacher	Springfield-Elm 11th-12th Grade Student Focus Group	Roosevelt Parent
Springfield-Elm-Roosevelt Elementary Principal	Springfield-Elm MS Math Teacher	Roosevelt HS Student Focus Group	
Superintendent	Springfield-Elm HS Math Teacher	Springfield-Elm 7th-8th Grade Student Focus Group	Springfield-Elm Parent #1
	Roosevelt HS Business Teacher		
	HS Industrial Technology Teacher		
	Homestead-Pioneer Science Teacher		
	Homestead-Pioneer Math Teacher		
	Springfield-Elm Roosevelt Science Teacher		

> you just think it's not for the education of the student, it's for saving money.
>
> Student 5: Yeah, it's just to save the school.
>
> Student 6: And, if anything, it might be worse because of it. But, we're getting by.
>
> Student 4: We're not having to close those schools and bring them here.

In contrast to students' appraisal of the losses inevitably associated with the Collaborative's sharing of services, the perspective of some adult participants was more hopeful. Parents, the superintendent, the principals, and some teachers expressed the view that hardships across all schools in the Collaborative were being tolerated for the sake of keeping a school in every community and thereby preserving each community's history and separate identity. A comment from the Springfield-Elm High School principal articulates a point of view that was voiced by many of the adults:

> One of the top three goals … is to keep a school in each community …. The perception from my standpoint as an educator, from my school's standpoint, is connection to the community. Community ownership in the school, what goes on inside this brick building that the community can buy in and support. Because obviously some of it is financial … with rising expenses and lower student population, how do you keep things going?

The tension between the perspective of many adults and that of students illustrated the underlying dynamics of stakeholder tenacity in the face of decline and irrevocable change. On the one hand, the Collaborative would not continue to deploy strategies for sharing services if its aspirations were tangential to community life. On the other, the strategies would begin to produce results—slowing down school and community erosion—if alternatives to decline were really possible. In our review of the data, we found ample evidence of this fundamental contradiction, which circumscribed the struggles the Collaborative faced and pointed to its likely trajectory.

Despite differences in how adult participants, on the

one hand, and students, on the other, tended to perceive the likely outcome of the districts' struggles, they were united in their characterization of the four rural communities and their citizens as strong and resilient. Nevertheless, many interviewees seemed to believe that the tenacity prompting the four districts to construct the Collaborative as a hedge against school closure and community decline was a characteristic that would eventually lead to change. In other words, these interviewees expressed the view that, considering their resourcefulness and their place as the rising generation of adults, students would inevitably lobby for schooling arrangements that moved beyond the fragile approaches currently in use.

We found evidence of the perceived tenacity of community members and students in many interview transcripts. The following quote illustrates this perspective:

> We got a good bunch of kids ... we're small in numbers, but we hang together. I mean, you have behavior problems, you have all the little things, but ... we move together …. Because we're small in numbers we care about each other more, in a sense. (Roosevelt MS Math Teacher)

Some participants seemed to pin a great deal of hope on the Collaborative, acknowledging that the smaller schools would not be able to survive without the strategies that the Collaborative made possible. But the assessment of the situation, even from the most hopeful participants, such as the teacher who commented below, revealed that survival was dependent on the more centralized—and therefore less locally responsive—approach that the Collaborative made possible:

> I remember when my kids were little, they said it would be closed definitely before they graduated. Here, they're all graduated, and we're still here …. But, I do think the distance learning and the working together with other schools is going to hold a strong future for us. I think without that, it would be hard to survive. (Homestead/Pioneer HS Math teacher)

Many participants, however, saw the students' tenacity as a force that would eventually lead to change. For example, one of the elementary school principals remarked, "Our kids are changing and we have to keep up with them. I really believe that. We can't say, 'no, it has to be this way;' we have to move with our kids."

The comment above from the elementary school principal did not specify the sorts of changes that might lie ahead, but statements from other participants predicted that community change would lead to a more cosmopolitan way of life. Two quotes, one from a teacher and one from a student, illustrate this perspective:

> I want people to go get a great education, come back, and live in this village … because the internet can bring all that stuff right back here …. But not if you don't send them out there to get a good education ... and see all the different vision(s). If you're just going to have enough skills to get a job at the local gas station, that's not a lot of vision. (Springfield-Elm HS science teacher)

> It's kind of nice having a small town and everything, but—if we were in a big town, there's so many more businesses and careers, so that would help with the organization of getting people lined up for that, because there's way more careers out there. Where, here, you have such a small town. (Springfield-Elm HS 9th and 10th grade focus group)

Several participants also linked the diminished economic potential of the communities to the shift in focus away from rural concerns. As the Springfield-Elm principal put it,

> We don't have the kinds of industries that attract great numbers of employees. So, we're … pretty much a rural, agricultural society, here …. Our school population is declining because of that. You know, the family farm isn't what it used to be. The family farm is now more of a corporate farm, many acres farmed by a corporation. So, we have a lot of our students that live in the country, but are not farmers. You know, parents may commute to [the city]

Not only did the communities appear to be giving up rural concerns, outmigration was also taking a toll. According to one of the principals, "as our numbers go, we need our community members to help us. And it's just going to be a process of working with the community to make sure we keep the schools we want." Another principal noted, "You know, your [financial expenses] go up as your numbers of students go down. You have to find more cost-effective ways of education."

In fact, most participants reported on the difficulties that resulted from diminished resources. Some also described the tendency of the Collaborative to move resources from Springfield-Elm to the other districts. As one Springfield-Elm High School student commented, "We're almost sacrificing *our* education to make *their* education a little bit better." A similar sentiment, albeit from a different perspective, came from the Industrial Technology teacher, who served all of the high schools in the Collaborative:

> [The benefit of sharing resources] depends on which community you're talking to. If you're talking to the people up in Homestead and Pioneer, it's fantastic, because [now] they have a program.

> They couldn't afford me up here—mine would be a half-time position. But … by doing this, they get an Industrial Tech teacher here, they get a Science teacher there, they get the CAD people ….

Resource sharing not only led to dissatisfaction among Springfield-Elm educators and students, it also produced other negative consequences. First, it prompted a relatively large number of teachers to find other jobs or retire. Second, it necessitated standardization across the four districts, resulting in greater uniformity of curricula, schedules, and extracurricular offerings. In fact, the systematization that collaboration seemed to require led one principal to characterize the Collaborative's educators as "interchangeable parts." Finally, the effort required to share resources and the need to conform to more standardized procedures across the Collaborative reduced teachers' agency and, thereby, limited their capacity to develop innovative curricula and pedagogies.

Interestingly, despite efforts to create standardization across the districts and to share resources, Springfield-Elm still had access to the greatest number of services, the best equipment, and the newest instructional materials. For example, observation of classrooms in Homestead and Pioneer revealed that students were using textbooks from the 1980s. And elementary school teachers in the outlying districts, according to some participants, were increasingly being asked to teach middle-school classes.

Nevertheless, students in Roosevelt, Homestead, and Pioneer had the benefit of smaller class sizes than were possible at Springfield-Elm. As one Roosevelt student noted, "In our class, it's really nice because we only have three people, so you're not really afraid to ask a question on something, because we all know each other."

But educators were beginning to see these arrangements as untenable. The Roosevelt High School principal, for instance, argued:

> If we go by research, if we don't change, we're in trouble. And, when I say, "in trouble," I think that we're going to lose more kids, we're going to have a disconnect with more kids than we already have, which is huge

And according to the superintendent, declining resources were about to force the Collaborative to combine athletic teams, a move that he claimed was tantamount to district consolidation. One student from Springfield-Elm summed up the devolution in the quote below. His analysis came from observations of what had been happening in the Collaborative and then, in dialog with the interviewer, extended its scope to take stock of the likely fate of other rural communities as well:

> You were saying something about how there's not going to be very many small schools left? Well, there's not. And I can see, in 10-15 years, all it's going to be is big cities. We're not going to have any small towns left anymore

Strategies with Limited Sustainability

As noted in the discussion above, the Collaborative was in league with the four communities to find ways to preserve separate schools and, thereby, safeguard the distinctiveness of each community. Sharing resources was the general approach, and the Collaborative used several strategies to divide scarce resources across the four districts. We found that only some resources could be shared, however. For example, the quality of textbooks and related materials varied across the districts, with Springfield-Elm having the most ample resources and Homestead and Pioneer the least adequate. The Collaborative seemed able to take only a few steps to redress this situation, however. Access to other educational services beyond those available in the schools (e.g., the library, the community learning center) also was much greater in Springfield-Elm than in the other districts because these services were housed in facilities located in Springfield.

Although the sharing of tangible resources proved difficult, the Collaborative put considerable effort into sharing instructional and leadership resources. Curriculum of sufficient breadth seemed to be the resource that was of most concern, and the Collaborative used three strategies for distributing curriculum to students in all districts: (1) distance learning; (2) relocation of some teachers, and; (3) the requirement that some teachers divide their time between two or more schools. Leadership was shared across the districts as well. Not only had the three other districts ceded top leadership to the superintendent of Springfield-Elm, the districts were also sharing principals in various ways. For example, Springfield-Elm and Roosevelt shared an elementary school principal. And the arrangement in Pioneer and Homestead was for one administrator in each district to serve as principal of all three of the district's schools (e.g., elementary, middle, and high school). Specific arrangements for sharing leadership had changed somewhat over time, and anticipated completion of a middle school that would be shared by Springfield-Elm and Roosevelt opened up another possibility for distributing leaders across the Collaborative.

Despite the faith that the superintendent, other school leaders, and community members put in these strategies, neither teachers nor students saw them as adequate. Teachers resented relocations from one district to another and also the requirement to travel to several schools to provide support to students who were receiving most of their instruction via web-based courseware or video conferencing. Whereas these circumstances did prompt some teachers to leave, they affected the morale of others who chose to stay. Despite their

frustrations, these teachers were sympathetic to the heroic effort to keep all of the districts alive. The students, by contrast, saw the struggle as a losing battle and the strategies as inadequate. Even though they functioned tenaciously under the prevailing arrangements, many students expressed the view that the effort to preserve community identity was not ultimately in their best interests.

To illustrate these dynamics, the discussion below describes each strategy, provides examples of leaders' generally positive assertions about each, and also documents teachers' and students' mostly negative assertions. The discussion concludes with a consideration of what the Collaborative's written plans suggest about the long-term viability of these approaches.

Over time, the Collaborative had come to address the four districts' needs for varied curriculum offerings by using video transmissions and internet-based courseware supported by on-site facilitators and occasional visits from itinerant teachers. At the time of our interviews, we heard from various participants that a large number of courses were being delivered in these ways. According to the Springfield-Elm High School principal, "We have interconnectivity with the four schools, and I don't even know—what is it—50, 60 classes a day that are interconnected between the four school districts via distance learning."

The use of the internet as one vehicle for providing distance education enabled the Collaborative not only to offer a broad curriculum but also to differentiate course offerings based on students' interests and needs. As the Roosevelt High School principal commented,

> We have such a broad base of classes, from elementary math to some of the higher levels of math that our kids have been really struggling to get, and I think they're just tickled with it. And, even though we're going to have classes with two or three kids in them, it's meeting the needs of the kids

Despite the individualization possible through the on-line approach, low-enrollment classes, nevertheless, posed certain challenges. A comment from a Roosevelt student showed how one such challenge was addressed: "My brother is taking a class with a teacher [at Springfield-Elm]. And she never comes here, so to get help, you know, hands-on, with math, he goes to a teacher that stays here all day."

Participants held different views about the seriousness of the difficulties associated with distance education and the degree to which the Collaborative's responses to these difficulties were actually effective. As suggested above, school leaders tended to downplay problems that many students and teachers seemed to find troubling. Illustrating the contrast between positive and negative assessments of the distance learning initiative are two sets of quotes:

> Positive: We want a school in every community, and we want to make sure that we're getting an education that will meet the needs of our students. And, so, when they go into college, they really have a good foundation from that [on-line] Calculus class. And, so, we think we're going to do that to meet their needs. (Roosevelt HS principal)

> Negative: ... we got into this distance learning thing. But, like, sometimes you just think it's not for the education of the student, it's for saving money. (Springfield-Elm HS student)

> Positive: The community has been very supportive of everything we've done…. They know the enrollment's down. And, so, I would probably sum it up, like, we have a need, we're the ones that are, you might say, out there on the edge of the limb. So, if we do not have the support of distance education and the other schools, we would go away. (Roosevelt HS principal)

> Negative: Teachers, here especially, have more responsibilities, as far as teaching in two places, or trying to teach distance classes—things are changing. So, I think, their style of teaching has also changed because of time constraints. (Springfield/Roosevelt science teacher)

As these and numerous other comments revealed, participants who emphasized the benefits of distance learning primarily pointed to its role in sustaining schools in all four communities by enabling the schools to offer a curriculum with sufficient breadth and depth. One student also noted that the distance learning arrangement gave him a chance to work with a greater variety of teachers than would otherwise have been possible. Overall, however, comments focusing on drawbacks outnumbered by a considerable margin those focusing on benefits.

Participants saw the following as restrictions resulting from the need to offer much of the curriculum through distance education. First, students in the more remote schools had limited access to assistance from teachers. Second, with distance education, teachers were unable to observe many of their students. As a consequence, they had a difficult time determining the extent to which their students actually were learning the material that was presented. Third, despite efforts to distribute materials to students and collect work from them on a daily basis, this arrangement was difficult to sustain. Students often had to wait several days to receive feedback on their work because the distribution and collection processes were so inefficient. Fourth, distance education required teachers to use direct instructional methods—lecture, recitation,

practice, homework, and review. It kept teachers from using project-based or place-based approaches. Finally, even with paraprofessionals assigned to monitor students who were participating in distance learning, classroom management seemed to represent a challenge in schools in which teachers were not on site.

Although it posed challenges, distance education seemed, to district leaders, the only way for schools in the four districts to sustain curricular offerings comparable to those in urban and suburban schools. Therefore, despite serious financial difficulties, the Collaborative had recently employed an administrator whose part-time role as technology coordinator involved providing oversight to the distance-learning operation.

In part to support distance learning and in part to provide instructional capacity across the four districts, the Collaborative instituted two related strategies involving the assignment of teachers. First, school leaders changed some teachers' instructional assignments—grade-level, subject-matter, school, and even district assignments. According to a student, for example, the computer teacher at one of the high schools had recently been asked to teach a fifth-grade class for part of each day; and the grade 3-8 math teacher at one of the schools also spent some of her time teaching reading and language arts to students in the sixth grade while a paraprofessional kept watch over her math students. Coupled with this strategy was an overall downsizing of the teaching staff across the districts. Not only did the districts allow natural attrition to reduce the size of the teaching force, they also provided monetary incentives in order to encourage seasoned teachers to retire.

Second, school leaders had asked some teachers to travel to two or more schools. In certain cases, itinerant teachers played a role in supporting distance learning. In others, they provided similar classes in different sites. Pioneer and Homestead, for example, shared a math teacher whose role was to offer a variety of classes to beginning through advanced-level students.

The most extreme case in which itinerant teaching was used to spread instructional resources across the districts involved the Industrial Technology teacher, who actually visited three of the high schools on an established rotation. As his comments revealed, he found the situation troubling, in part because he thought the arrangement short-changed Springfield-Elm.

> The trouble with what we're doing right now is … I can do Homestead today, I'll be in Springfield tomorrow, and then Roosevelt on Friday. I'm in Springfield two days a week, and sometimes, if Mr. P. has basketball, or a track meet, or something, I may not be in Springfield but one day a week

Other teachers were so distressed by the need to travel to several schools or to work at different schools from the ones where they had accepted employment that they left the district. These circumstances were evident to most participants in the Collaborative, including students, as the following excerpt from the transcript of one of the focus group interviews demonstrates:

> Interviewer: So, they retired?
>
> Student 5: Or went somewhere else.
>
> Student 3: They didn't want to drive to Homestead or Roosevelt, and then come back to Springfield, like a lot of the teachers have to do. They didn't want to have to do that.

Students, particularly those from Springfield-Elm, resented the need to share teachers because they believed it eroded the quality of the education they were receiving:

> … maybe I'm too selfish or something, but … since we're from the bigger school, we have all the teachers, and now we're going to have to share them. So … it's not helping us at all. Because the teacher that moved—we liked that teacher a lot—and now that we've got the new teacher … that's probably going … to slow down our learning process …. (Springfield-Elm 9th and 10th grade focus group)

Teachers also viewed their reassignments with concern. Although they supported the aim of the districts to retain separate schools, several felt that the need to travel had limited their creativity and diverted energy from the instructional mission. From their perspective, they were now being spread too thin. In addition, a few teachers expressed the view that current arrangements kept them from serving their home communities. According to the Homestead-Pioneer science teacher, for example, "I went to school in Springfield and so I know stuff around Springfield." This teacher was clearly willing to adjust to working in schools other than Springfield-Elm, where he originally had been placed, but found the arrangement disorienting and less than ideal. Another teacher made the comment that the need for itinerant teachers and distance education would discourage talented teachers from applying for positions that might become available in any of the four high schools in the Collaborative.

Some teachers, however, were more hopeful. The Industrial Technology teacher commented, for example,

> Is it perfect? No. Is it going to get better? Yes. Mr. P. and I have talked about it. We've gone through this—this is our infancy this year. And as we get better at this, and as we do it year after year, I think you'll see more progress than what you're seeing now.

Along the same lines, but even more optimistic, were

comments from school leaders, such as one from the Springfield-Elm High School principal:

> So, as we go down the road … I see us sharing some of those most experienced teachers from each of the districts more widely, broadening our community, and hopefully, broadening our aspects for … students in general.

Prospects for the Future

Documents from annual planning workshops (2006-07, 2007-08, and 2008-09) illuminated educators' and community members' sentiments about the future of the Collaborative. Analysis of these documents revealed some similarities in perspective across the three years, but also some changes over time. For example, the emphasis on retaining community identity seemed to be stronger in 2006-07 than in the two subsequent years. The recommendation for actual consolidation of buildings was absent from the 2006-07 plans and was only mentioned once in 2007-08; by 2008-09, however, the plan listed several consolidation possibilities. Interestingly, as well, we saw a shift in the way the documents discussed community identity across the three years. In 2006-07, the plan positioned the maintenance of a school in each community as the way to preserve community identity. By 2008-09, the maintenance of separate athletic teams "for as long as possible" appeared to serve the same function.

In all three years, the plans focused on financial shortfalls and on approaches that would make operations across the districts more efficient. By 2007-08, planners seemed to address the concern for efficiency through initiatives not only for sharing resources but also for establishing more consistent practices in the four districts. Because distance education supported one set of curriculum offerings in the four high schools and required coordination of schedules and sharing of teachers, it seemed to push the districts toward uniformity. Interestingly, this strategy, which originally had been undertaken as a way to preserve the distinct identities of the four districts, actually seemed to set the stage for greater similarity across the districts.

If shifts in the recommendations from the planning workshops can be taken as evidence of actual trends, we might have a basis for imagining some future prospects for the district. This approach is speculative; nevertheless, considering the recommendations in the 2008-09 plan along with financial information showing the continuing need for budget cuts, we suspect that in future years the Collaborative will try to expand the distance-education initiative. In fact, several recommendations in the 2008-09 plan called for the increased use of distance education not only at the high schools but at the middle and elementary schools as well. We expect also that consolidation efforts will continue to move forward. The construction of the combined Springfield-Elm and Roosevelt Middle School may signal the inevitability of this approach, and one of the recommendations in the 2008-09 plan was for the consolidation of the high schools in these two districts. With increased uniformity across the districts, moreover, the salience of the claim that the districts need to preserve "distinct identities" may be losing force.

Discussion

Findings from the case study of the Confluence Collaborative added to previously published literature on the influence of suburbanization on rural communities, the dynamics of school and district consolidation efforts, and the opportunities and challenges associated with the sharing of services across districts. With regard to suburbanization, the findings here tended to confirm reports from earlier studies. The current study, however, offered new insights about how the practice of sharing services functions to delay, but eventually facilitate consolidation efforts.

As other researchers have reported (e.g., Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Salamon, 2003), suburbanizing rural districts often lose residents to neighboring urban enclaves—losses that cut into school enrollments and sometimes lower the tax base on which school funding depends. In our study, these conditions were most pronounced in the Springfield-Elm district. Furthermore, like residents of other suburbanizing districts, Springfield-Elm residents tended to look to the city for job opportunities, recreation, and even for their sense of identity (e.g., Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Lyson, 2002). Because the three smaller districts depended on Springfield-Elm but were not experiencing suburbanization in the same way, their well-being was compromised by changes in their larger, more affluent neighbor. Springfield-Elm residents, moreover, were becoming less sympathetic to the plight of the more remote rural districts in the Collaborative. These dynamics resembled to some degree the shifts in community power structure that some researchers have observed in other suburbanizing rural communities (Bushnell, 1999; Howley et al., 2005; Vail, 2000).

Although the current study appeared to confirm findings from earlier reports about how districts have used shared services to forestall consolidation (Beem 2006; Decker & Talbot, 1991; Holmes, 1990), it also provided a more nuanced analysis, particularly in terms of the varying perspectives of different groups within the community. Whereas other studies have shown that cosmopolitan residents (e.g., professionals) tend to oppose consolidation less vigorously than localist residents (e.g., Peshkin, 1982), few have pointed to the generation-based differences in perspective that our study surfaced (but cf. Nitta, Holley, & Wrobel, 2010). In particular, the current study showed a disconnect between participants whose focus was on community heritage—mostly parents and school administrators—and those whose focus was on present

circumstances and future prospects—mostly students and teachers. The two distinct foci, moreover, influenced interpretations of the viability of the educational strategies that the district had adopted: the use of distance education and the sharing of instructional services. While students felt shortchanged by these approaches and many teachers believed they were being stretched beyond their capacities, parents and a number of administrators experienced a sense of accomplishment at having been able to sustain schools in all four of the communities.

The slow morphing of shared services into school consolidation in the Collaborative also demonstrated how schooling practices often respond to competing views of educational aims (e.g., Corbett, 2007). For many adult community members in the districts, schooling was an engine of community sustenance. Their view of sustenance was more symbolic than tangible, however, and adolescents who were trying to make realistic plans based on available options viewed the conflation of symbol with substance as untenable. Whereas many of them expressed regret over the decline of their rural communities and the attendant sacrifice of small-town life, none saw viable alternatives to these seemingly inevitable consequences of economic change.

Furthermore, findings from the study suggested that students in the Collaborative were patient, yet discerning clients. They clearly distinguished between sustainable and make-shift practices, preferring to receive instruction from capable teachers on-site than to participate in a combination of distance learning options with tutorial support. At the same time, they were willing to take advantage of whatever arrangements adults had put in place. Despite their views about the make-shift arrangements, students did not show outward signs of resistance. They appeared to value the opportunity to learn, even via less-than-ideal mechanisms. And their efforts resulted in consistently strong educational outcomes, despite the economic challenges that many of their families faced. We speculate that the tenacity of the Collaborative's students will serve them well even in environments different from those of their upbringing.

Community resilience, in contrast to students' individual resilience, seemed less in evidence (e.g., Buikstra et al., 2010). Notably, many adults in the communities drew on strong social networks, were adaptable in the face of change, grounded their actions in strong commitments to an agrarian way of life, and shared a sense of purpose in their commitment to sustain schools in all communities, but they nevertheless had little ability to stem population declines, shifts in the economy, and changes in school leadership—the forces that are likely to have the greatest influence on the future of the Collaborative.

Implications for Future Research

Our study provided evidence of how the practice of sharing services helped sustain some level of district autonomy in the face of population loss and suburbanization in four rural communities. Moreover, our review of the extant literature showed how sharing services related to school consolidation—both as a way to delay it and as a way to make it more palatable. Additional research, however, is needed to identify which features of such collaborations make them successful for the long term. For example, studies of districts with long and stable histories of collaboration might help researchers uncover the types of leadership arrangements that work best to promote efficiency without sacrificing either district autonomy or educational quality.

Studies of community responses to shared services also are important, particularly when the focus is on the perspectives of students as well as those of parents and older citizens. In our study, we saw a clear disconnect between students and their elders, with students appearing to prefer consolidation to the makeshift arrangements necessary to implement the Collaborative's decision to use distance education and itinerant teachers. Because our findings came from a case study, however, we cannot know if these dynamics would be salient in other rural communities or with other types of shared services. In addition, future studies might explore the following questions that have thus far been investigated to a limited degree: How do various distance technologies contribute to the effectiveness of shared instructional services? How do state policies assist and impede the sharing of services across rural districts? Finally, what contextual conditions support the use of shared services and what conditions make it too difficult to implement?

Implications for Practice

Considering the scope of the challenges it faced, the Confluence Collaborative was using shared services in ways that fit with the expectations of at least some stakeholders and that also kept academic performance high. These findings support the conclusion that, under some circumstances, shared administrative and instructional services across districts function as a workable compromise between complete district autonomy and extensive consolidation. Furthermore, of the strategies that Confluence had adopted, some were more palatable than others. Notably, the use of distance education at the high school provided learning opportunities without straining the capacity of teachers, while the requirement that teachers travel from school to school took a toll on morale and kept teachers from spending their full days in the classroom. Sharing administrators across buildings within a district also seemed somewhat preferable to participants than sharing building administrators across districts.

Because these conclusions reflect findings from a case study of a group of rural districts that confronted particular conditions at a specific point in time, it is unwise to view them as recommendations for other rural districts. Nevertheless,

the overarching story line—including its portrait of more and less workable strategies—offers powerful testimony to the resourcefulness that rural districts exhibit in the face of all-too-prevalent challenges—population decline, suburbanization, fear of losing community identity, and the growing belief among youth that their communities can no longer offer sufficient opportunities to sustain them as adults (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Corbett, 2007).

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Appendix
Field Notes, Artifacts, and On-line Documents

Field Notes

- Field Notes (3/30/08)
- Field Notes (3/31/08)
- Field Notes (4/1/08)
- Field Notes (4/2/08)
- Fields Notes (4/3/08)
- Direct Observation Notes (4/4/08)
- Field Notes (4/4/08)

Artifacts

- 42 photographers
- List of courses available through distance education and numbers of students enrolled in each course (identified by district)
- Results from student, parent, and staff satisfaction survey
- Class schedule
- Newspaper article about community planning session

On-line Documents

- Notes from community planning sessions (2006-07, 2007-08, 2008-09)
- Collaborative's Newsletter (retrieved on-line 9/2/09)
- Enrollment data by school (retrieved on-line 9/2/09)
- State report cards for each district (retrieved on-line 9/2/09)