

## School Consolidation in Nebraska: Economic Efficiency vs. Rural Community Life

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### **Abstract**

We examine the factors driving rural school consolidations, focusing our analysis on Nebraska. We consider statutory and case law, the school financing formulas that drive consolidation and the efforts by rural citizens to challenge those financing formulas in courts. We analyze how rural school consolidations have been framed in newspaper coverage, in order to see the dominant understandings of the cost-benefit tradeoffs in consolidating rural schools. Finally, we study three cases of rural Nebraska school districts for the insights these cases provide as to the challenges of sustaining rural community schools and the effects of consolidation on the students and the communities. Our conclusion is that schools play a vital role in sustaining rural community life, although the costs to the community when schools are consolidated are more difficult to quantify than the economies of scale that motivate those consolidations.

### **Rural Schools: Benefits and Challenges**

Sustaining educational quality in rural America is a considerable challenge, and it is one worth addressing. Studies document that student performance in small schools compares favorably with student performance in larger, mainly urban and suburban, schools. As Lawrence and her colleagues summarized, the research on the value of small schools shows that small schools are safer, graduate higher percentages of students, have lower drop-out rates, send larger proportions of their graduates on to post-secondary education, have better attendance rates, provide students with a stronger sense of belonging, produce higher student grade point averages, and provide greater opportunities for participation in extra-curricular activities (Lawrence *et al.*, 2002, pp. 8-9<sup>1</sup>). In Nebraska particularly, a study placed the graduation rate for districts with less than 100

high-school students at an average of 97%, compared to the statewide average of 85% (Funk & Bailey, 1999, p. 1<sup>2</sup>). This research supports the conclusion that rural schools “work”.

But beyond student performance measures, there are other arguments that favor rural education. Wendell Berry has argued that rural education is a key to ecological sustainability, because rurally educated citizens have a more intimate knowledge of and better understand their interdependence with the natural world (1990, pp. 153-169<sup>3</sup>). As Paul Theobald has argued (1990<sup>4</sup>), Berry’s educational philosophy represents a revitalization of interest in the fate of rural schools and their communities. This philosophy can be traced back to the Country Life movement (Theodore Roosevelt’s Country Life Commission, created in 1908) and even further back to Thomas Jefferson. In this vein, the argument for rural schools is about more than student performance. Without their local schools, rural communities find it difficult to remain sustainable. Their children increasingly migrate to urban areas, and the equilibrium between the people and the land becomes increasingly unbalanced.

The decline in the rural population creates formidable challenges to maintaining rural schools. Rural school districts are disadvantaged in that “the districts have limited funding, poor facilities, relatively low teacher salaries, few special program staff, and few central office staff” (Shavers, 2003, p. 144<sup>5</sup>). Faced with scarce resources available to address these disadvantages, policymakers commonly respond with a solution: school consolidation. But school consolidation is a budget fix that comes with high social costs. As DeYoung and Howley have argued, the decision to consolidate rural schools is contentious, because school reformers “have invariably failed to understand the distinction between school and schooling” (1990, p. 64<sup>6</sup>). As DeYoung & Howley put it, “This distinction – between *schools* as important *places* in which people construct a social reality, and *schooling* as an attempt at systematic *instruction* of predetermined bodies of knowledge – is crucial” (Ibid., p. 65, emphasis in original<sup>7</sup>). That sense of place intricately connects the local school to the very life of the community. Harmon and Schafft developed the point further:

Well-functioning schools help to increase the social integration of communities and neighborhoods by strengthening local identity and sense of commonly held purpose. Schools function as centers of community activity and nurture public participation in civic and community affairs. They also provide physical spaces that enable community members to come together as a community, for sporting events, theatrical productions, and school board meetings. Rural schools, in particular, serve as symbols of community autonomy, vitality, and identity. Given their essentially *integrative* and *interactive* nature, schools naturally tend to enhance a sense of collective identity and attachment to place, and thus have socially developmental outcomes (Harmon & Schafft, 2009, p. 5, emphasis in original<sup>8</sup>).

We would add that schools also provide a vital focus for community-building activities such as those performed by school-based organizations, like the P.T.A.s that put on fundraisers, charitable benefits, political rallies, and more (Putnam, 2000, pp. 301-302<sup>9</sup>). Thus, school consolidation makes schooling a more cost-effective enterprise, but it does so by rupturing the

connection between the school and its place in the local community. That loss harms both the students and the broader community.

School consolidation deprives rural communities of a vital site of community life, and it also fragments and destroys relationships that are vital to the maintenance of community life. The time and distance required for travel to a consolidated school affects the students, their families, and the educators. In their study of consolidated schools, Nitta et al. found that teachers who were forced to move to newly consolidated districts “expressed dissatisfaction with consolidation because of the disruption to their relationships, mourning the loss of the old ‘tight-knit family’” (2010, p. 14<sup>10</sup>). Is it possible to respond to population shifts and resource constraints in ways that recognize and value the local school’s central place in the life of a rural community?

Rural schools have their advocates, but that advocacy has produced few successes in resisting school consolidation. Financial forces largely dictate rural school consolidation, as Bastress details:

In general, financing systems that base additional allocations to school districts on a per-pupil amount of revenue, either through flat grants or categorical aid, are the least beneficial to small schools or small school districts, since such mechanisms usually generate an insufficient amount of revenue to provide the necessary services, to establish required programs, or to hire properly certified teachers. Some states, for example, pay for minimum teachers' salaries (at a state-established schedule) and other educational personnel, but cap the number of teachers they will fund according to the number of students to be served at particular grade levels or to a maximum teacher-student ratio. Rural districts, with their populations dispersed, have a more difficult time staying within the caps if they maintain local schools rather than consolidating to create larger student bodies and use fewer teachers. In North Dakota, districts got full funding for transportation, but only if they consolidated schools. In addition, Nebraska has revamped its school finance system in ways that pressure rural districts to consolidate schools. Evidence also indicates that enactment of open enrollment laws have tended to assert a negative impact on rural schools and have encouraged consolidation (Bastress, 2003, pp. 30-31<sup>11</sup>).

We see here that state policies for how schools are funded typically are formulated to benefit larger districts with higher population concentrations. As long as these policies remain in place, rural and small schools are unlikely to maintain themselves and avoid consolidation.

Their limited political power constrains rural citizens’ abilities to influence or alter these disadvantageous policies. More troubling still is the reality that rural citizens are subjected to discrimination. “Ruralism”, as Bassett has argued, “remains unacknowledged, indeed unrecognized, as a form of discrimination” (2003, p. 279<sup>12</sup>). Bassett bases her claim in part on the observation that rural people are geographically dispersed, constituting a majority in only five states (Maine, Mississippi, South Dakota, Vermont, and West Virginia).

Consequently, rural dwellers both occupy a minority position in our society and have less political power. It's difficult to influence the political system when you are a member of a minority – in this case, the rural minority. As we have democratized the country, we have taken this lack of political clout into consideration for the protection of minorities made up of various ethnic groups and even for women. But no such protection has been contemplated for the rural minority, whose values and traditions are now being voted into oblivion by the larger, urban population. Laws that now govern the rural culture – which covers 90 percent of the nation's landmass – are, in effect, being dictated by an urban majority that lives in the other 10 percent of the United States, a majority that is often ignorant of the ways of the people whose lives they are controlling. Rural people feel powerless and disenfranchised because they are powerless and disenfranchised. In short, because rural dwellers are fewer in number, they wield less political power (Bassett, 2003, pp. 291-292<sup>13</sup>).

Even though Nebraska is widely regarded as a rural state, the U.S. Census Bureau identified the population of Nebraska as 69.8% *urban*, according to the 2000 Census of Population and Housing (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003, p. 6<sup>14</sup>). The policies driving school consolidation in Nebraska represent the interests and values of the majority urban population in Omaha and Lincoln.

The estimates from the 2010 census indicate that the urbanization of Nebraska has increased. As reported in the *Lincoln Journal-Star*: “In 2000, there were 2.8 legal adults for every person younger than 18 in Nebraska counties lacking a town of at least 10,000 people. Nine years later, there were 3.2 adults for every youth, and the number of adults had declined, too” (Andersen, 2010, p. B1<sup>15</sup>). The declining rural population, especially among the youth, increases the threat to rural schools in Nebraska. Strange explained that “declining population in many rural areas is further diminishing rural political influence in some of the most characteristically rural regions – Appalachia, the Mississippi Delta, and especially the Great Plains. With reapportionment thinning the rural representation in most states, the rural minority will be politically ever more marginalized” (Strange, 2003, p. 8<sup>16</sup>). Because their minority status constitutes a profound disadvantage in seeking influence through the legislative process, Strange argues that it is essential for rural people to press their objections to school consolidations in the courts.

Despite Strange's admonition, the strategy to combat school consolidation through the courts does not appear promising. The preference for consolidated schools is well established by legislation and case law.

### **School Consolidation in Nebraska: Legal Framework**

While the phenomenon of school consolidation and its effects on rural community life are widespread, it is important to focus on a single state so that a depth of understanding can be developed. We focus on the legal framework in Nebraska in order to provide an in-depth analysis. The Nebraska Legislature mandated school consolidations by passing a statute to eliminate all elementary-school-only districts and all high-school-only districts, forcing those districts to merge into K-12 districts. The Nebraska Legislature also has incentivized school

consolidations through its framework for school financing. Although both of these laws driving Nebraska school consolidation have been challenged in the courts, the advocates for rural schools have received no help from the judiciary.

The Nebraska Legislature enacted Legislative Bill 126 in June, 2005. The statute eliminated Class I districts (districts with only elementary schools) and Class VI districts (districts with only high schools). All Nebraska school districts were required to offer K-12 grade by 2006, thus the Class I and VI districts were forced to merge with neighboring districts. This law was enacted over the veto of Nebraska Governor Dave Heineman. Opponents to L.B. 126 utilized the referendum process in Nebraska's Constitution (Article III, section 3) to try to rescind the legislation. Petitions to place a referendum on the ballot in Nebraska must be signed by at least 5% of the registered voters in the state; the opponents to L.B. 126 cleared that threshold, collecting signatures of 7.7% of registered voters. But they fell short of the constitutionally-mandated threshold of 10% that would have been needed to suspend L.B. 126 from being enforced until the voters had their say on the referendum. They turned to the Nebraska Supreme Court to have enforcement of L.B. 126 halted until after the referendum vote in November, 2006.

In the case of *Pony Lake School District 30 v. State Committee for the Reorganization of School Districts* (271 Neb. 173 [2006]), the Nebraska Supreme Court ruled against the referendum organizers, refusing to grant an injunction to suspend enforcement of L.B. 126. The court ruled that the Nebraska Constitution set out an unambiguous standard for suspending the enforcement of a statute that might be repealed by referendum. Article III, section 3 required the signatures of 10% of the registered voters in the state; the petitioners fell short of that mark. As noted by Miewald *et al.* (2010, p. 109<sup>17</sup>): the petitioners “unsuccessfully argued that the pre-referendum dissolution of small schools stripped them of their right to conduct a referendum, violated their right to vote, violated their right to free speech, and made the referendum into an advisory vote.” L.B. 126 ultimately was repealed by the voters in November, 2006, by a vote of 56% to repeal against 44% to retain (Vote on Referendum Measure 422, 2006<sup>18</sup>); but by then, one-fourth of the Class I districts had already been closed. A compromise bill to permit additional Class I districts to be created through the petition process was approved by the Nebraska Legislature in 2007 but did not survive a veto by Governor Dave Heineman. The legislation to eliminate elementary-school-only and high-school-only districts had its intended effect, despite the referendum that later repealed L.B. 126. The referendum victory did not restore the districts that had been forced to consolidate to their previous condition. The pace of school consolidation accelerated, and a large number of rural Nebraska schools were closed.

Nebraska's Legislature simply mandated consolidation of the Class I and Class VI districts, but it also uses school financing to provide incentives for rural school districts to consolidate. Nebraska's school financing law, R.R.S. Neb. § 79-1007.02 (2010, amended several times since 2003), details the statutory formula for school financing, dividing school districts into three categories based on the geographic concentration of their student populations: standard, sparse, and very sparse. Low-enrollment rural schools are imperiled by the statutory formula for financing, especially those schools that do not qualify for the “very sparse” or “sparse” cost groupings. As Bastress notes: The “‘standard cost grouping’ ... lumps together for funding all schools with more than two ‘formula students’ per square mile and, in doing so, underfunds rural schools” (2003, p. 31, footnote 12<sup>19</sup>).

Although it might seem surprising that the standard cost grouping poses the greatest threat for rural schools, Bailey and Preston explain how the school funding formula works: “For school year 2006-07 and thereafter, systems that have fewer than 390 students, are not in the sparse or very sparse cost groupings, and do not receive federal funds in excess of 25 percent of their general fund budget of expenditures, will see a reduction in state aid. Some systems with fewer than 390 students stand to lose up to half of their per student state aid for each student below the 390 mark” (Bailey & Preston, 2005, p. 2<sup>20</sup>). This so-called “local choice adjustment” is designed to penalize, in particular, school districts that are small “by choice”; that is, the local choice adjustment exempts the districts in the sparse and very sparse cost groupings. But it also targets those districts that are rural but have more than 2 “formula students” per square mile.

Consolidation is driven primarily by the school financing formula that disadvantages rural schools; however, an attempt to challenge the Nebraska school financing law in court was unsuccessful. The case, *The Nebraska Coalition for Educational Equity and Adequacy v. Heineman* (273 Neb. 531 [2007]), was brought by 43 mainly rural school districts under the umbrella of the Nebraska Coalition for Educational Equity & Adequacy. The Coalition argued that Nebraska’s school financing law is inadequate in providing small schools with the resources necessary to provide the quality education mandated by the Nebraska Constitution:

To show that the funding was inadequate, the Coalition alleged that the plaintiff districts were unable to (1) adequately pay and retain teachers; (2) purchase necessary textbooks, equipment, and supplies; (3) replace or renovate facilities; and (4) offer college-bound courses, advanced courses for high-ability students, technology, and other extra-curricular courses, or adequate services for special education, English language learners, and vocational programs (273 Neb. 531, p. 536).

Coverage of the lawsuit in Nebraska’s leading newspaper sets the political backdrop of the case. The Coalition announced its suit from the site of a 1917 school building in Sterling, Nebraska, that was scheduled to be closed by the state fire marshal for safety violations (Glissman & Hord, 2004, p. 01A<sup>21</sup>). The *Omaha World-Herald* article went on to quote Nebraska Attorney General Jon Bruning and State Senator Ron Raikes, the Lincoln representative who served as chairman of the Legislature’s Education Committee, who expressed interest in and sympathy for the plight of rural schools, but nonetheless asserted that the issue of school funding needed to be settled in the state legislature, not in the courts. Raikes was quoted as saying: “I suspect there’s an effort to shortcut that difficult, knuckle grinding process of politically hammering these things out” (Ibid.<sup>22</sup>). Senator Raikes’s characterization of the lawsuit as an illegitimate attempt to shortcut the political process is notable, considering the representational advantage of Omaha and Lincoln in the state legislature.

This news account indicates that the political forces were stacked against the Coalition in its suit. Not surprisingly then, the Nebraska Supreme Court rejected the Coalition’s position, finding that the school financing issue was a non-justifiable political question. (For extensive treatment of this case and analysis of the political-question doctrine, see Sitorius, 2007<sup>23</sup>.) In rejecting the Coalition’s petition, the court concluded:

... the relationship between school funding and educational quality requires a policy determination that is clearly for the legislative branch. Although an overall goal of state aid to schools is to reduce reliance on property tax, there are a multitude of policy decisions that go into state funding decisions, including consideration of federal mandates, the school district's local efforts and ability to support its schools, and the State's ability to provide funding. In brief, it is beyond our ken to determine what is adequate funding for public schools. This court is simply not the proper forum for resolving broad and complicated policy decisions or balancing competing political interests (273 Neb. 531, pp. 553-554).

In affirming the district court's decision that the case should be dismissed because the issue was a political question, the Nebraska Supreme Court avoided making a judicial determination of what would be adequate financing for rural schools or equitable allocation of state resources for education. The court declined to weigh in on educational policy and directed the aggrieved rural school districts to take their objections to the school financing law to "the proper forum" – the legislature.

### **Lessons from Beyond Nebraska**

A case in Indiana communicates a similar message that a state constitution's education clause provides no guarantee that the courts will be receptive to pleas from rural schools or the students who attend them over funding inadequacies. That case, *Bonner v. Daniels* (907 N.E.2d 516 [2009]), was brought by Indiana public school students, who claimed that Indiana's school financing provisions violated the education clause of the Indiana Constitution. The Rural and Community Trust filed an *amicus curiae* brief in support of the students' position.

In affirming the lower court's dismissal, the Indiana Supreme Court also declined to weigh in on educational policy, finding the adequacy of school financing and the quality of public education to be matters for Indiana's legislature to determine:

[T]he plaintiffs point to no historical evidence that the framers intended ... to require the establishment of a public education system with any particular standards of educational output. We decline the plaintiffs' invitation to amplify the words and meaning of our Constitution as crafted by its framers and approved by its ratifiers. Guided as we are by the text of the constitutional provision in the context of its history, we conclude that the Education Clause of the Indiana Constitution does not impose upon government an affirmative duty to achieve any particular standard of resulting educational quality. This determination is delegated to the sound legislative discretion of the General Assembly. And in the absence of such a constitutional duty, there is no basis for the judiciary to evaluate whether it has been breached. The plaintiffs are not entitled to the declaratory relief sought regarding the Education Clause (907 N.E.2d 516, p. 522).

By rejecting the constitutional challenge to its state school financing provisions, the court illustrated a substantial difficulty for those who would follow Strange's advice and seek to protect their rural community schools through judicial action – the judiciary in many states has proven reluctant to wade into those contentious waters. Such reluctance is problematic for any

citizen, rural or urban, who is concerned about the majoritarianism reflected in school financing policies.

Despite the negative outcomes for rural schools and students in the Nebraska and Indiana cases described above, the thorough research of Shavers (2003<sup>24</sup>) documents that lawsuits challenging state school financing procedures have some success stories as well. Equity challenges in Vermont and Wyoming succeeded in persuading those states' supreme courts to declare their states' school financing procedures unconstitutional. In the Vermont case, *Brigham v. State* (692 A.2d 384 [Vt. 1997]), the Vermont Supreme Court held that the education clause in the Vermont Constitution defined education as a fundamental right that the state was obliged to provide to its residents, and that it was "unable to fathom a legitimate governmental purpose to justify the gross inequities in educational opportunities" that were produced by the state's school financing procedures (quoted in Shavers, 2003, p. 166<sup>25</sup>). The Vermont legislature was directed by the court to devise a new framework for school financing that would meet the standards of equity required by the state constitution.

In the Wyoming case, *Campbell County School District v. Wyoming* (907 P.2d 1238 [Wyo. 1995]), the Wyoming Supreme Court too ruled that education is a fundamental right protected by the Wyoming Constitution and that its equal protection guarantees made substantial inequities in school funding unconstitutional. An earlier case also had resulted in the Wyoming Supreme Court declaring its school finance system unconstitutional (*Washakie County School District Number One v. Herschler*, 606 P.2d 310 [Wyo. 1980]). In issuing directions to the Wyoming legislature on how to comply with constitutional requirements, the Wyoming Supreme Court made this statement in the *Herschler* case: "Whatever system is adopted by the legislature, it must not create a level of spending which is a function of wealth other than the wealth of the state as a whole" (quoted in Shavers, 2003, p. 170<sup>26</sup>). In other words, the Wyoming legislature was charged with the obligation to equalize educational resources across the state, so that the survival and vitality of community schools do not hinge predominantly on the local community's property tax base, which varies widely.

Shavers concluded that the Vermont and Wyoming cases may be applicable to other states as well. Although each state constitution differs, the tactics employed by the plaintiffs in these cases are adaptable:

A thorough and searching inquiry into the historical and legal origins of the inclusion of the state educational clause in the constitution in conjunction with the equal protection clause, and recognition of the fact that education is specifically mentioned while other benefits are not, could lead to successful arguments even in states that have previously rejected constitutional claims (Shavers, 2003, p. 176<sup>27</sup>).

Shavers also observed that "the equity-based arguments that have succeeded in the courts in some states may be persuasive arguments in the political process by directing arguments to the legislature or the governor" in those states where the courts have been reluctant to intervene (*Ibid.*, p. 179<sup>28</sup>).

The strategy to fight rural school consolidation through the courts may be workable if the state constitution's language is sufficiently directive and the appropriate evidence of inequities can be gathered. Furthermore, despite their disadvantaged minority status, rural residents and rural school advocates should not abandon the route of legislative action either. School financing schemes may be revised, subject to new understandings of the benefits and costs of school closings and consolidations.

Insights into the dominant understandings of those benefits and costs may be gleaned from how school consolidations have been framed in the news coverage, when a rural school district is facing consolidation.

### **Pros and Cons of Nebraska School Consolidation: Media Framing**

We selected a sample of nine consolidated schools districts within Nebraska, scattered throughout the state: two in western Nebraska (Gordon-Rushville Public Schools, Wauneta-Palisade Public Schools); four in central Nebraska (Southern Valley Schools, Anselmo-Merna Public Schools, Rock County Public Schools, and Wood River Rural Schools); and three in eastern Nebraska (Syracuse-Dunbar-Avoca Schools, Humboldt-Table Rock-Steinauer Schools, and North Bend Central Public Schools).

For each consolidated district in our sample, we identified a local newspaper within the county and/or within one of the towns being included in the consolidation. [Appendix 1](#) shows the districts, counties, and newspapers included in the sample. For each newspaper, we examined all articles about the school consolidation within the year that the consolidated district was formed, the year previous, and the year following. For example, the Wauneta-Palisade district was consolidated in 1991, so our data include all the articles on the school consolidation that were published in the *Wauneta Breeze* newspaper in 1990, 1991, or 1992. We identified 380 articles in total for the nine consolidated districts; then we performed content analyses on each article.

In the content analyses of the articles, we distinguished between news articles, editorials, and letters to the editor. We also coded anything that the article identified as reasons to favor consolidation or reasons to oppose consolidation. We then made a determination as to whether, on balance, the article was pro-consolidation, anti-consolidation, or neutral/ambivalent about consolidation. Given that one research assistant did all the coding, intercoder reliability was not considered an issue. Each article was evaluated first for any statements that gave a reason to favor consolidation or to oppose it, coding each reason separately. Then the overall score simply weighed the pro and con reasons. An article with more reasons to favor consolidation was deemed "pro"; an article with more reasons to oppose consolidation was "con". An article that gave no reasons to favor or to oppose or gave equal numbers of reasons on both sides was deemed "neutral/ambivalent". Since it is a fairly objective act to determine whether a reason to favor consolidation was given or not, we do not regard reliability as a major concern for this variable. Thus, we did not run tests of coder reliability.

The large majority of articles (more than 80%) were news articles; 5% were editorials, and about 14% were letters to the editor. The news articles generally were objective in their reporting about the school consolidation; 90% classified as neutral/ambivalent. Most of those articles did not

provide any reasons either to favor or to oppose the consolidation, but they simply described factual information about the consolidation: what communities' schools were consolidating, when the merger would occur, and so on. For the few news articles that were classified as pro- or anti-consolidation, there were five times as many pro-consolidation as anti-consolidation news articles (8.2% compared to 1.6%). The editorials and letters to the editor, as would be expected, generally advocated for or against the consolidation, but with rather different patterns. The editorials were mainly pro-consolidation (68%). However, a plurality of letters to the editor were anti-consolidation (41%), with only 24% pro-consolidation and the rest (35%) neutral/ambivalent.

We examined the subset of articles that were classified as either pro-consolidation or anti-consolidation, in order to see what specific arguments were most frequently offered as reasons to favor or to oppose the school consolidation. The most common reason given to favor school consolidation was money; 100% of the pro-consolidation articles mentioned money. Other reasons to favor consolidation included: the quality of education would improve in a larger school (e.g., a broader range of courses could be offered); the local population is too small to support its own school; the school facilities would be better; and the athletics programs would improve. Educational quality was given as a reason to support consolidation in 59% of the pro-consolidation articles; low population was a reason given in 16% of the pro-consolidation articles; improved facilities was a reason given in 11% of the pro-consolidation articles; and 5% of the pro-consolidation articles mentioned athletics.

The most common reason given to oppose school consolidation was the loss of local control over the schools; 96% of the anti-consolidation articles lamented the loss to the local community. Other reasons to oppose consolidation included: the quality of education would decline in a larger school (e.g., bigger class sizes), and students would have to be bused, spending too much time traveling to and from school. Decline in educational quality was given as a reason to oppose consolidation in 40% of the anti-consolidation articles; and 20% of the anti-consolidation articles mentioned transportation.

From our analyses of articles about school consolidation in these nine cases, it is clear that these Nebraska school consolidations most commonly were framed as a tradeoff between financial exigencies (the dominant argument in favor of consolidation) and the benefits to the local community of retaining its own school (the dominant argument against consolidation). Other arguments pro or con appeared less frequently or, in the matter of educational quality, were subject to varying interpretations. While the news articles tended to present the consolidation as a *fait accompli*, limiting their coverage to describing who, what, when, and where, the opinions of editorial writers appeared to diverge from the opinions of the community at large, or at least of those who were motivated to write letters, though the smaller numbers of editorials and letters in our sample must make those conclusions tentative.

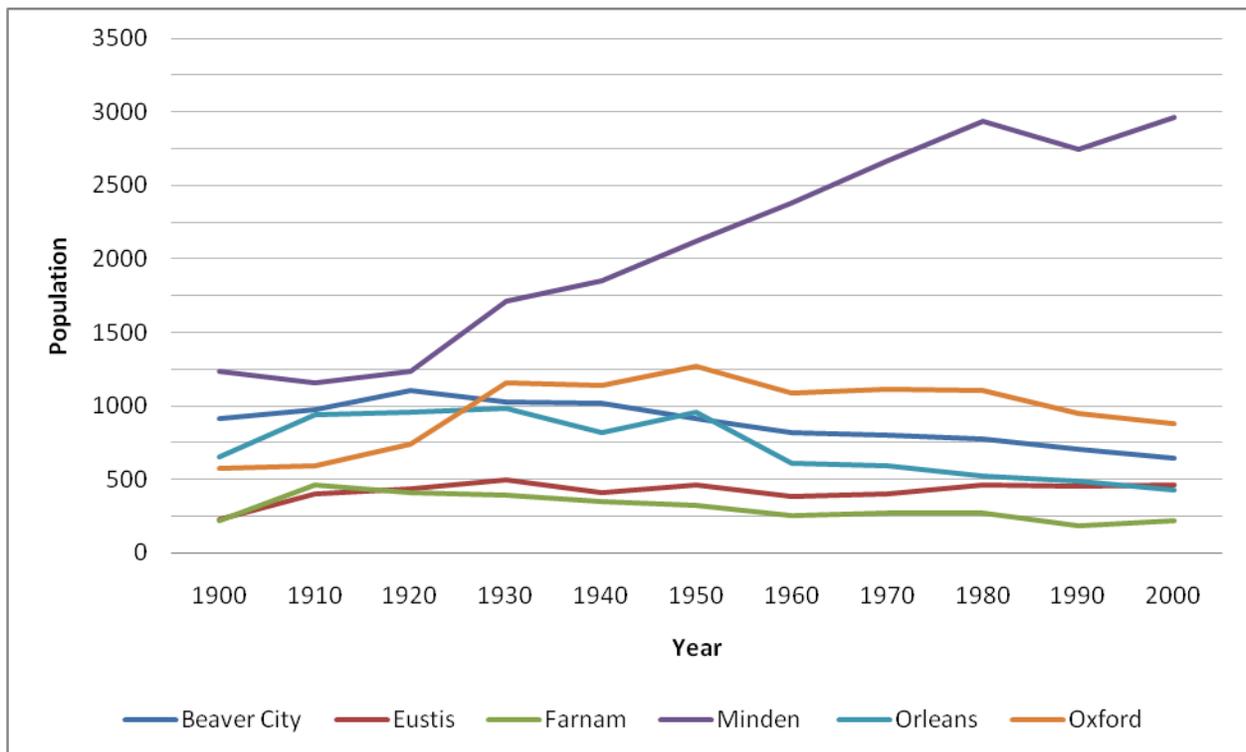
For further insights into the conditions driving school consolidations in Nebraska and the effects of those consolidations, we turn to case studies of three south central Nebraska districts: Minden, Eustis-Farnam, and Southern Valley. Minden is a rural community that has not yet undergone a school consolidation, so Minden is used as a baseline for comparison with the consolidated districts of Eustis-Farnam and Southern Valley. These three cases were chosen because the

authors have conducted community surveys there or worked with students and teachers in the schools on community-improvement projects. The information in these case studies that is not part of the public record is derived from our observations or from interviews and community surveys.

**A Tale of Three School Districts: Case Studies**

South central Nebraska is a region dominated by large-scale agricultural operations: growing grains (corn, milo, wheat, and soybeans) and raising meat (poultry, hogs, and cattle). Beside agriculture, there are several light industrial plants and three or four regional shopping centers. The towns that comprise the school districts in our case studies are not regional shopping centers but rather have to compete with them; retail business in these towns is impacted negatively by the regional shopping centers, especially their Wal-Mart Super Centers and other chain stores. Each regional shopping center siphons business, labor, and the associated sales taxes from the other communities. Industrial agriculture (larger farms using fewer and fewer laborers) and regional shopping centers nearby have contributed to declining populations in some communities as well as declining incomes.

Figure 1: Populations of South Central Nebraska Towns in Case Study Districts



Source: The U.S. Census Bureau (See also [Appendix 2](#))

Figure 1 depicts the population changes in the towns that comprise our three school district cases. The actual population numbers for each community are also reported in [Appendix 2](#).

Minden schools are not consolidated, and as Figure 1 shows, Minden's population increased approximately 40% between 1950 and 2000. Eustis and Farnam consolidated into a unified school district in 1997. The population of Eustis remained fairly stable between 1950 and 2000, but Farnam's population declined from 323 to 223. The towns of Oxford, Beaver City, and Orleans were consolidated, along with some even smaller communities, into the Southern Valley Schools in 1994. All three communities have experienced population declines with the steepest decline in Orleans, which lost more than half of its population between 1950, when it had 956 residents, and 2000, when it had 425.

Even the towns that have maintained stable populations have seen declines in their school enrollments. As was previously documented, the population of rural Nebraska is aging; fewer young families and smaller family sizes mean fewer children attending school. Our prior discussion of the school financing formula demonstrated that, in Nebraska (as elsewhere), the state budget allocation for a school district depends on the number of enrolled students, as well as the number of students receiving free or reduced lunch (a measure of poverty). While initially it may be possible for a small rural school to cope with falling enrollments by seeking efficiencies, at a certain point, the situation becomes unworkable. A school, no matter its size, has certain sunken costs, e.g., well-qualified persons (who meet state and federal standards) to teach the different subjects. Absent compensatory local sources of revenue, the state financing scheme forces many communities to consolidate their school with other nearby communities, even if they were old rivals. The story of these three communities illustrates the forces driving school consolidation.

## **Minden**

Minden had a population of 2,964 in 2000. It has remained a vibrant community with its own school primarily because the town is large enough to sustain a school. One key factor in Minden's population growth is its favorable location along the I-80 corridor. This transportation corridor is one of the busiest in the world, which means that it is an ideal location for businesses that collect and process farm products for transportation to larger market centers. For example, a principal line of the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railroad runs through Minden, and a newly-constructed ethanol plant that uses the rail line sits within the city limits. Also, a substantial number of community residents work in the larger towns nearby (Kearney, Grand Island, and Hastings); according to a community survey conducted by one of the authors, in 2000, 33.4% of the respondents from Minden commuted to another place to work. Minden benefits from a location that permits its residents to choose the community as a good place to live, while gaining meaningful employment in the larger towns nearby.

A sizeable population and a good economic base provide sufficient state and local resources to support Minden Public Schools. There is no indication that a school consolidation may soon be needed in Minden. The problems faced by Minden Public Schools are more mundane. Should they do more to make sure their teachers don't leave to teach in the larger towns? Is it important for the teachers to live in Minden, or should they be allowed to commute (like many do)? Is there a need to initiate a bond issue to build a new gym? How are their students doing on the newly mandated statewide exams? These are important issues, but none threatens the survival of Minden's community schools.

## **Eustis and Farnam**

Both Eustis and Farnam are much smaller than Minden and long ago faced the need to consolidate. In 2000, Eustis had a population of 464, and Farnam had a population of 223. Their school enrollments have continued to decline since the district was consolidated in 1997, and the prospect of a further consolidation looms. When the two districts were initially consolidated, there were questions about which communities might make the best partners. Eustis is actually closer (by about a mile) to the community of Elwood, so a consolidation with Elwood might have been an option. But Elwood is twice as large, leading some Eustis residents to fear that Elwood would dominate the relationship. Of course, Farnam residents had similar fears of being dominated by Eustis. Another option would have been for both Eustis and Farnam to consolidate with the larger school district in Cozad, Nebraska. Cozad is a town of about 5,000 people, so a consolidation with Cozad would have resulted in the closing of the community schools in Eustis and Farnam, which would have hurt those communities. Instead, the deal to consolidate Eustis and Farnam schools was struck so that Eustis houses the elementary and high schools, and Farnam houses the junior high school. Nonetheless, the community members in Farnam worried about the loss of the high school within their own community; in a survey done by one of the authors, a Farnam resident wrote: “We have totally lost Farnam [High] School. Schools bring young people to small communities and young people start business. Many businesses have moved or closed due to people in Farnam having to drive for supply and buy for less as long as they are going out of town anyway.” The stresses from regional shopping centers and the school consolidation combine to threaten Farnam’s ability to sustain itself. But the school consolidation with Eustis at least allowed Farnam to retain the junior high school within its own community; however, an expected further consolidation puts this arrangement in jeopardy.

## **Southern Valley Schools**

At Southern Valley Schools, the consolidation was complicated by the number of communities involved. The largest of the communities are included in Figure 1: Oxford, Beaver City, and Orleans. These three communities have experienced some declines in their populations since 1950, with the steepest decline in Orleans. The Southern Valley district also includes students from Edison, Hendley, Stamford, and the surrounding farming region. The resulting consolidated district is similar in enrollments to the (unconsolidated) Minden district. But in contrast to the Eustis-Farnam consolidation, Southern Valley built new school buildings out in the country, at an intersection of two rural roads roughly 8 to 10 miles from any of the larger feeder communities. So the consolidation of the Southern Valley Schools has left all of these communities without a school in their town or village. These new facilities certainly provide some benefits to the students they serve, but just as certainly, they represent a loss to the communities.

Schools do more than prepare students to be workers; they also help to prepare students to be citizens. The students of Southern Valley are torn because being citizens at Southern Valley means that they cannot simultaneously be citizens of their town or village. In Minden, being a school supporter is synonymous with being a citizen of the community, but that is not true at Southern Valley. For example, when a class at Southern Valley High School was challenged to

do something that would improve their community, they found themselves at a loss, because they knew that they couldn't start a project in Beaver City without upsetting people in the towns of Orleans and Oxford or vice versa. The students also understood that they could not work on simultaneous projects in each community, because they didn't have the time or resources for such extensive engagement. Rather than doing a community-improvement project, the students and their teacher decided instead to do a school-improvement project, which would not cause problems with any of the people in the towns and villages. This dilemma highlights the loss that communities and students suffer when school consolidation pulls the schools out of the local communities.

### **Case Study Lessons**

These three cases illustrate many of the problems of school consolidation. Declining populations and aging populations portend increasing challenges for rural communities to maintain their schools. Even towns like Minden that, at present, are large enough to sustain a school may one day be too small, if these discouraging population trends continue. Small towns and villages may choose the lesser of many evils and consolidate with a similarly-sized community, but that arrangement may be nothing more than a stop-gap measure on the path to further consolidation, as community residents in Eustis and Farnam are discovering. One way to solve the dilemma of consolidating schools without favoritism toward the largest community or communities is to do what Southern Valley did – build new schools in a location removed from any of the feeder communities. But as we have seen, that approach produces its own set of educational and community challenges. And, if the major argument against school consolidation is the alienation that is created between the students and their communities, when the students lose the sense of place that the community schools provide, the Southern Valley model may be the worst solution of all.

### **Conclusions**

The future does not look bright for rural communities to avoid school consolidations and retain their local community schools. State policies for school funding tend to provide insufficient support to local schools to permit them to meet their expenses without consolidating. The public officials who set school funding formulas favor consolidations as a cost-saving measure, and rural citizens typically do not have sufficient representation in state legislatures to counter those policies. Many state constitutions have education and equal-protection clauses that can form the basis for legal challenges to school funding policies that result in inequitable educational opportunities for rural students. But too often the judiciary has refused to protect the interests and needs of the rural minority, leaving the matters of school funding and educational quality to be determined by the legislature, based on majoritarian preferences. As populations in rural America grow thinner, further school consolidations appear inevitable.

The best hope for sustaining rural community schools lies in halting or reversing the decline in the rural population. Rural school consolidations and rural population decline are linked in a vicious circle: the rural population declines, so schools are consolidated. Consolidated schools weaken the bonds between rural youth and their home towns, making it more likely that they will migrate elsewhere as adults – and the population declines even further. There are numerous

factors contributing to the decline of the rural population, but chief among them are the dearth of economic opportunities and, as Wendell Berry put it in his typically pithy way, the fact that “the child is not educated to return home and be of use to the place and community; he or she is educated to *leave* home and earn money in a provisional future that has nothing to do with place or community” (Berry, 1990, p. 163, emphasis in original<sup>29</sup>). To reverse this trend, revitalization of the local economy in rural communities is needed. Also needed is a rethinking of some of our educational practices – How might we educate people to stay in their communities, rather than educating them to leave?

While proposing means to enhance economic opportunities in rural America clearly lies beyond the scope of this article, some rays of hope are visible. First, the growth of the virtual economy holds the potential for more jobs to be created that do not require the employee to live in any particular location. Thus, it would be possible to have employment with a company located across the state, across the country, or across the world, and still live in a rural community, if the employee wished. Second, we pointed previously to the industrialization of agriculture as a factor contributing to the decline of rural America – larger farms and fewer farmers. But recently there has been a renewal of interest in and support for locally grown and small-scale agriculture, such as community-supported agriculture (CSA) projects, farmers markets, organic farms, and food cooperatives. Rural communities stand to benefit from an alignment of interests among people concerned about the environment, people interested in public health and food safety, and people involved in agriculture. The locavore movement, that is: people who seek to rely on locally-grown food supplies, and related initiatives may result in smaller farms, less industrial techniques, and more laborers; hence, the populations in rural areas could stabilize or grow.

Sentimentality ought not to guide public policy. Some of the appeal of rural schools might derive from the positive images of bygone days that we can conjure up: the one-room school house a la *Little House on the Prairie*. But the value of rural schools is not found in their quaintness; the value of rural schools is found in the contributions that they make to the life of their community and the contributions that their students make, when their schooling (instruction) grounds them in their place. As Simone Weil reminds us, we have a need for roots in communities that work; a just society is one that nurtures our connection with and obligation to other people (Weil, 1952<sup>30</sup>). Rootlessness, alienation, and selfishness are not healthy for our democratic body politic.

Balancing spending on education with other policy commitments is a challenge. Our state governments have many needs to address and limited revenues from which to address them. But in the cost-benefit analyses of school funding, the budget efficiencies of school consolidation are easy to quantify; the normative value of rural community schools is not so easy to quantify. No matter how many mounds of data are crunched, every person and every community is valuable. Rural citizens are connected to urban citizens: our existence shared and our flourishing interlinked. There is much to be gained by the preservation of rural communities and rural schools; the survival of the former is inextricably bound to the maintenance of the latter. School consolidations are antithetical to both.

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**Appendix 1**Sample of Consolidated School Districts, Counties, and Newspapers  
Used for Content Analyses

DISTRICT	COUNTY	NEWSPAPER
Anselmo-Merna Public Schools	Custer	Custer County Chief
Gordon-Rushville Public Schools	Sheridan	Gordon Journal; Sheridan County Journal-Star
Humboldt-Table Rock-Steinauer Schools	Richardson	Humboldt Standard
North Bend Central Public Schools	Dodge	North Bend Eagle
Rock County Public Schools	Rock	Rock County Leader
Southern Valley Schools	Furnas	Oxford Standard
Syracuse-Dunbar-Avoca Schools	Otoe	Syracuse Journal-Democrat
Wauneta-Palisade Public Schools	Chase	Wauneta Breeze
Wood River Rural Schools	Hall	Wood River Sunbeam

[\[back to top\]](#)

**Appendix 2**Population Numbers Over Time for South Central Nebraska Towns  
in Case Study Districts

TOWN	YEAR										
	1900	1910	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000
Beaver City	911	975	1103	1024	1015	913	818	802	775	707	641
Eustis	232	403	434	497	413	459	386	400	460	452	464
Farnam	218	462	408	394	346	323	258	270	268	188	223
Minden	1238	1159	1238	1716	1848	2120	2383	2669	2939	2749	2964
Orleans	656	942	954	985	815	956	608	592	527	490	425
Oxford	576	593	739	1155	1141	1270	1090	1116	1109	949	846

Source: US Census Bureau

[\[back to top\]](#)

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John Anderson is a Professor of Political Science and he has been a member of the University of Nebraska at Kearney faculty since 1993. Anderson received his Ph.D. from Washington State University in 1993. Anderson's wife is an Episcopal priest in Holdrege and Arapahoe, Nebraska which ties him intimately to life in the state. Also, Anderson's research has focused upon how democracy works in small communities—specializing in community development and structure as witnessed in dozens of Nebraska towns. Most of Anderson's teaching is linked to political thought as it relates to good governance.

