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Jeanne L. Surface

University of Nebraska at Omaha, jsurface@unomaha.edu

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ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY RURAL SCHOOL CONSOLIDATION*

Jeanne Surface

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to make a qualitative assessment of the impact of school consolidation on several rural Nebraska communities that have recently lost their schools. This research uses a multiple-case study design with interviews conducted in three Nebraska communities. The data from this research fell into four broad themes: social capital changes resulting from consolidation, the effect of the consolidation on the children of the community, the future of the community, and circumstances driving consolidation. Data indicates very differing views about consolidation; respondents with children in school were generally supportive of the consolidation and felt that it benefited their children; the respondents all expressed a concern about the loss of the community although, the majority of the respondents did not have an alternative to the loss and decline of the community; the consolidations in the study were all second or third consolidations and respondents believed the original consolidation were the beginning of the decline of the community.



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1 Sumario en español

El propósito del estudio fue de hacer una evaluación cualitativa del impacto de consolidación de escuela en varias comunidades rurales de Nebraska que han perdido recientemente sus escuelas. Esta investigación utiliza un diseño de múltiple-caso con entrevistas realizadas en tres comunidades de Nebraska. Los datos de esta investigación se cayeron en cuatro temas anchos: Los cambios sociales de la capital que resultan de la consolidación, el efecto de la consolidación en los niños de la comunidad, el futuro de la comunidad, y las circunstancias que manejan consolidación. Los datos indican variando muy vistas acerca de consolidación; demandados con niños en la escuela fueron generalmente sostenedores de la consolidación y el fieltro que benefició a sus niños; los demandados todo expresó una preocupación acerca de la pérdida de la comunidad aunque, la mayoría de los demandados no tuviera una alternativa a la pérdida y el descenso de la comunidad; las consolidaciones en el estudio fueron todas consolidaciones y los demandados segundas o terceras creyeron el La consolidación original fue el principio del descenso de la comunidad.

NOTE: Esta es una traducción por computadora de la página web original. Se suministra como información general y no debe considerarse completa ni exacta.

2 Introduction

The theoretical framework driving this study stems from the work of Robert Putnam (1994, 2000) and others who have argued that formal education is vital to community life in the modern world and, further, that community life is a key determinant of the health of democracy in a modern state. In light of this theoretical perspective, it would seem as if educational researchers should know more than they do about what happens to communities that lose their schools. Given the tight community-democracy connection, this appears to be a serious deficiency, and by relaying the voices of community residents who have recently lost their school more light may be shed on the effects of rural school closings. Therefore, the purpose of the study was to make a qualitative assessment of the impact of school consolidation on several rural Nebraska communities that have recently lost their schools and, secondarily, to shed light on the socio-cultural roles played by schools in small rural communities.

3 History

In 1908 President Theodore Roosevelt created the Country Life Commission. The Country Life movement could be characterized as an attempt to improve the standard of living for rural people primarily through various educational initiatives (Theobald, 1995). Country Lifers worked to infuse the country school curriculum with an appreciation for country life. However, some members of the commission favored graded instruction and consolidation of township governance. Mable Carney, a leader in the movement, purported “what we need and must have, to solve the problem of rural education, is not an urban school whose influences lead young people from farms directly away from the land, but a country school, a country school improved, modernized, and adopted to the needs of present country life” (Theobald, 1995, pg 173). When World War I came along, the demand for agricultural products skyrocketed and maximizing production, while minimizing costs was praised for the war effort. Land stewardship, which was important to older farmers lost importance with the war effort. Along with this, farms became larger leaving fewer and fewer people in rural areas and consequently fewer rural schools (Theobald, 1995).

From a historical view, schooling from 1850 through 1930 was comprised of small, community run institutions, most employing one teacher. From 1930 through 1970, nearly two-thirds of all schools were eliminated through consolidation. To the progressives of the day, the concentration of authority over schools in the hands of educators seemed a cure for both the corruption of the city school systems and the parochialism of the rural ones (Berry & West, 2008). The thinking at that time was that larger schools would allow for more efficient, centralized administration by reducing the ratio of administration and school officials to teachers. At the same time, children were divided by grade level, with the promise of enabling instruction to be more

specialized by grade and subject area. Additionally, the promise of concentrating students and resources meant the possibility of better facilities at a lower cost. All in all, consolidation seemed to offer economies of scale in administration, instruction, and facilities. Consolidation also meant more centralized control over education by state and federal government. One of the consequences of moving to a centralized authority over public schools was removing the day-to-day authority over education from the school community and locally elected school boards (Tyack & Cuban, 1997).

As schools consolidated, they were directed by professionals with specialized knowledge and managed predominately by men who were trained in child development and scientific management. One of the consequences of this professionalized management of schools was the loss of voluntary contributions of parents and interested citizens (DeYoung & Howley, 1990). The duties that were once performed by parents in schools such as bringing in school lunches, sweeping floors, painting the classroom, driving a bus for a field trip were no longer necessary in these professionally managed schools. “Don’t underestimate the problem of school reform because the rural school today is in a state of arrested development, burdened by education traditions, lacking in effective supervision, controlled largely by rural people, who to often do not realize their own needs or the possibilities of rural education” (Cubberley, 1914, p.105-6). Eliminating waste in education was attempted by standardizing the school curricula and textbooks, fine tuning instructional periods, grouping students by chronological age and even removing subjects from the curriculum if they appeared either too difficult to teach or could not be determined relevant to students probable destinies (Kliebard, 1986).

The logic inherent in the scientific management of the schools led to the belief that one or two teacher schools were too inefficient. Rural high schools were often seen as being lower in quality because they did not serve the national interest. James B. Conant, chemistry professor and long-time Harvard University President proposed that only schools with a graduating class of 100 or more students could improve international competitiveness. He went a step further and called for a major structural reorganization by reducing the number of small high schools (DeYoung & Howley, 1990). Some believe today that the growth of consolidated schools has been a useful tool for national and international economic growth. Others contend, however, that this economic growth has led to greater national and global inequality, more intense misuse of the land, widespread pollution, and degradations of many other sorts (Berry, 1997).

3.1 Social Significance

A wealth of studies have discussed the social significance of school district organization in rural communities in the United States and highlight the importance of the rural school as the last stronghold of symbolic identity for the community (DeYoung, 1991; Fanning, 1995; Peshkin, 1982). Trust, networks and norms of reciprocity within a child’s family, school or peer group and community have significant effects on the child’s choices and opportunities and, on the behavior and development of the child (Putnam, 2000). According to the Kids Count reports that are published annually by the Annie E. Casey Foundation (1999), there is a connection between the state by state social capital index and profiles of child well being. States whose residents trust other people, join organizations, volunteer, vote, and socialize with friends are the same states where children flourish; where babies are born healthy; and where teenagers tend not to become parents, drop out of school, get involved in violent crime or die prematurely due to suicide or homicide. Statistically, the correlation between high social capital and positive child development is very high. In fact, Putnam indicates that social capital is second only to poverty in the breadth and depth of its effect on children’s lives. Overall, social capital is important for children’s successful development in life and Putnam draws the same conclusion about the link between social capital and school performance (Putnam, 2000). The opposite effect occurred in some cases when schools consolidated. When community interests were ignored during consolidation proceedings, education absenteeism and community disintegration increased. Schools were no longer seen as contributors to the local community, as the best and brightest students were leaving for higher paying jobs in urban areas (Henderson & Gomez, 1975).

Berry and West (2008) analyzed the effect of school consolidations that took place between 1930 and 1970. Berry and West were able to estimate the effects of changing school and district size on student outcomes using data from public-use micro sample of the 1980 U.S. Census. They concluded that students

educated in states with smaller districts obtained higher returns to education and completed more years of schooling. While larger districts were associated with modestly higher returns to education and increased educational attainment in most specifications, any gains from consolidation of districts were far outweighed by the harmful effects of larger schools. Reduced form estimates of the effects of consolidation on labor market outcomes confirm that students from states with larger schools earn significantly lower wages later in life (Berry & West, 2008). Ilvento (1990) said that the public school is important to the rural community both socially and economically. Rural schools tend to be the only source of social activity in the communities they serve and the school is often the largest employer. Anthony Bryk (1994) found that smaller schools are more productive work places for both adults and students. In the small school environment, teachers are more likely to report greater satisfaction with their work, higher levels of morale and greater commitment.

3.2 Losing Schools

Consolidation has usually been carried out over fierce resistance of parents and residents of small communities. Schools are typically the center of community life, and prior to consolidations, bound neighbors and linked them to the larger social and cultural world around them (Reynolds 1999). As a result, the loss of a local school could threaten the economic vitality and cohesiveness of the community. Yet in these communities, despite the fractious, tempestuous conflicts that pitted a small number of professional educators and their allies against large segments of local community members, the professional educators almost always won (Monk & Haller, 1986; Peshkin, 1982; Tyack, 1974). Usually the professional perception was that consolidation must be sold to a skeptical and ignorant public. In New York, officials with school consolidation experience reported a firm conviction that rural residents resist mergers because they do not understand the benefits that will accrue to their children. In most states, reorganization or consolidation studies were carried out by hired consultants—almost always former or current state officials. The recommendations consistently pointed to equality or efficiency. Very often, the officials interpreted their understanding of residents' motives for resisting school consolidation. Besides ignorance, they explained that people oppose consolidations for capricious reasons such as old athletic rivalries, jealousies between communities, unwillingness to locate a new school to another town and “if it was good enough for me, it's good enough for my kids.” All of these were seen as “self interest” reasons (Haller & Monk, 1988). Studies that recommended against consolidation are imperceptible. The probability of school consolidations were substantially enhanced because powerful financial mechanisms supporting consolidations were in place. Officials in state departments of education called for consolidations in order to form improved, cost-efficient programs.

If the current trends continue, more and more young people will not be able to stay in rural America. Most students would like to stay in their communities, close to their families and live a life that is predictable and familiar. However, both students and their parents know this option is often not feasible. An important decision made by young adults in the Midwest is the decision to leave, stay or return to the community where they grew up. Researchers Carr and Kefalas (2009) found that youth choose from one of five separate pathways: Leavers, which consisted of achievers and seekers; returners which consisted of boomerangs and high flyers; and stayers. Some students will stay, some will go and come back, some will find success elsewhere and comeback to enjoy small town life and many others will never return. “The very culture of small towns assumes that the best and brightest will go on to achieve success someplace else” (Carr & Kefalas, 2006, p. 8). Not only are they given permission to leave, they are expected to do so. In fact, “The town's most successful young people start out as a community project and in a fundamental sense, future achievements belong back home” (Carr & Kefalas, 2006, p. 9).

The consequence for the communities young adults leave behind are struggles to find replacement physicians, business owners and teachers. In previous generations, family farms were the primary employers of rural areas in the Midwest. Currently, only 2% of Americans operate farms and 42% of Midwestern farms earn less than \$20,000 a year (Dudley, 2000). The farm crisis in the decades of 1970 and 1980 happened when agriculture became corporate and the credit crisis drove many farmers off the land looking for a new way to support themselves. Manufacturing jobs made their way into rural communities as corporations were looking for cheap labor. Farmers who had lost everything were relieved to have work. Unfortunately, many of those

jobs left the countryside to locate in China or Mexico where labor was even cheaper (Carr & Kefalas, 2009). The decline of rural areas parallels what Harvard University sociologist William Julius Wilson described as the processes that fueled the decline of cities: deindustrialization, unemployment, global market shifts, and the flight of the middle class giving rise to hyper-ghettos. The difference here is that rural areas have little political clout and the crisis has been virtually unnoticed by those who could have made a difference.

Rural population loss is mostly attributed to job availability. Three characteristics of counties that were likely to lose population in 1990-2000 include: location away from metropolitan areas, low population density, and a low level of natural amenities which are typically measured by climate, topography and the presence of lakes and ponds. Most counties that lost population are farming-dependent, although less because of their abundance of agriculture than because of the absence of other economic activities (McGranahan & Beale, 2002). The quality of life in remote, thinly settled areas is not easy, and people who consider moving to rural areas may choose these areas only if there are compensations such as natural amenities or family ties. Labor markets in these areas are very small and jobs tend to be low-pay.

While the number of school districts consolidated in the United States has not changed appreciably since 1970, the impact of the farm crisis the decade of 1980 may have had an impact on the number of consolidations of the Midwest. Data from the Nebraska Department of Education indicates that between 1990 and 2009 there were almost 600 cumulative district dissolutions. Since 2000, 365 districts have dissolved. The predominant cause of consolidation was the change of law that occurred in 2006 requiring a K-12 configuration for all Nebraska school districts. The trend toward consolidation continues in Nebraska in the name of economic efficiency.

The legacy of twentieth-century industrial logic is evident in the rationale used to invoke consolidation as a kind of school reform. In the past century, larger schools were seen as more efficient and economical which fit perfectly into the desire to increase the economies of scale. This outmoded way of thinking about consolidation has not changed as the politics of the free market and global competitiveness have moved to a system of quantifiable accountability. The economic gain of consolidation is limited to the school and is often lost in increased administration and transportation costs.

4 Three Nebraska Communities

4.1 Community #1

Community #1 has the unique distinction of being the home of a college but no K-12 school is housed in the community. The elementary attendance center was closed seven years ago. At that time, each grade held approximately twenty students. The college currently has 1,210 full time students. The predominant employment sector of the community is post-secondary education. The median age of the residents in the community is 28.7 years compared to a state median age of 35.3 years, indicating that the college is likely to bring young people into the community to live while they attend school. The median household income of the community was \$38,857 compared to a state level average of \$49,693. In 2008, 20.5% of the community lived below the poverty line while at the state level was only 9.7%. The community is homogeneous with 96% of the population Caucasian and 3% Hispanic. The community is well educated; 27.7% have a Bachelors degree or higher and 11.9% a graduate or professional degree. The average person travels 19.7 miles to work. The High School in this community closed in 1966 and the elementary school closed as a result of the district losing 5% of their budget because of changes in the state aid formula in 2002. The district attempted to pass a levy over-ride but, it failed and the district had to make significant cuts to make up for the short fall. At the time of the closure there were 52 children who attended the elementary school (Advameg, 2010).

4.2 Community # 2

In Community #2 the median family income in 2008 was \$36,585. The ethnicity was predominately German and the religion was ELCA Lutheran. According to the 2000 US Census, 13% of the population held a bachelor's degree or higher and the median home value is \$41, 166 which was considered significantly below the state average home value. Residents of this community would need to travel 12 miles to the nearest

hospital and the median age of the community residents is 37.5 years. The community has two churches, a Co-op elevator, a public library, post office and a bank. The high school closed in 1968 and the elementary school in this community was closed in 2006 as a result of incentive money to unify school districts into K-12 configurations across the state (Advameg, 2010).

4.3 Community #3

Community #3 reported a population of 175 persons in 2008 predominately of German descent. The median household income for community families is \$38,775 and the median home value is \$46,271. Residents of the community needed to travel 11 miles to the nearest hospital and the median age of residents is 42.4 years. This school district attempted several levy overrides as a result of the state aid formula. The levy over-ride passed twice, but failed a third time. During the last three years of operation, landowners began to 'free-hold' their land which caused even more monetary losses for the district. According to the legislation, if landowners are adjacent to land in a neighboring district and the district average daily membership falls below 60 students in the high school, the distance to another high school is less than 15 miles and the district has engaged in a levy over-ride for three years, landowners have the option of transferring their property into the neighboring district. Many landowners did this and it appeared that once the "free holding" began, others quickly jumped on board. Students from this community now attend one of three area districts (Advameg, 2010).

4.4 Methods, Techniques, or Modes of Inquiry

A multiple-case study design was selected to match the research problem and questions. To address the problem appropriately, an inductive research strategy was used to illustrate and understand these communities. Specifically creating theory from observations and intuitive understanding gained in the field. Merriam (1998) described this research as "research in the forms of theses, categories, typologies, concepts, tentative hypothesis, even theory are inductively derived from data" (p.7-8). The design was chosen in order to deeply understand the view of community members about their community pre and post consolidation. Interviews were conducted in three Nebraska communities where there were no longer schools. The communities were chosen for the proximity to each other and the potential for an interesting story. The research for this article includes one quadrant of the state. The study will be repeated in subsequent years in additional quadrants.

Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed word for word. The guiding questions provided a framework and were used to direct comments to a specific area of interest coupled closely with the research questions. Data was collected and compared to ensure a match between identified categories and participant realities. The analysis incorporated the reflection, introduction and self monitoring, exposing all phases of the research to continual questioning. A strategy suggested by Merriam (1998) was peer debriefing. Through peer debriefing the researcher was able to step out of the context to insights and analysis with other professionals outside the context.

4.5 Population, Sampling and Data Collection

The sampling method used was purposeful sampling where "the standard used in choosing participants and sites is whether they are information rich" (Patton, 1990, p. 169). The interviews began with the mayor who then gave his/her recommendation for others who might be interested in being interviewed. The mayor was instructed to suggest people that were not currently a school district employee and had lived in the community both pre and post school consolidation. The respondents were nine members of three communities and the interviews were conducted face to face within their communities at a location that was convenient for the respondents. The Superintendent of each of the three communities was contacted for a telephone interview to gain additional information about the dissolution of the school. The researcher, a former rural superintendent, and the one on one questions asked in the interviews were considered the instruments of the study. To ensure validity of the data, bracketing techniques including a reflective journal were used to prevent any distraction that might be caused by the researchers' personal views on rural schools

and communities. Self reflection prior to and between interviews allowed the researcher to set aside feelings and emotions that might be carried into and away from the interviews. This self monitoring enabled the researcher to focus intensely on the interviews. Field notes were kept with each interview and were helpful in analyzing the data and providing contextual detail.

Grounded Theory research was used with a constant comparative data analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Tesch, 1990) described a coding process which was used to systematically analyze the data. First, all of the transcripts were read and re-read carefully. Next, an interview was chosen and examined closely for substance, themes and metaphors that emerged. This was repeated for all of the interviews. Finally, a list of topics or themes that emerged was created. These comparisons lead to tentative categories that are compared to each other and to other instances. Comparisons were made within and between levels of data.

5 Results

The data from this study adds to the growing understanding of the links that exist between schools and community and community and democracy. The data from the interview fell into four broad themes: Social capital changes resulting from consolidation; the effect of the consolidation on the children of the community; the circumstances of the consolidation; what will become of this place?

5.1 Social Capital Changes

In all three communities, social life declined sharply after the first round of consolidations, most occurring in the decade of 1960. The respondents had all experienced the decline and recognized that the organizations that continued to exist were predominately comprised of elderly community members. They were also aware that community events and traditions are not as robust as they had been in past years, as reflected in the words of a respondent from community #1.

5.1.1

They do a lot of fund raisers; they had a fund raiser for a lady who had cancer just last week. When I first came to town they had what's called Old Man River Days. But, the event is much smaller. We used to have carnival rides but, they can't afford to do this anymore because of insurance. They still have a street dance but, it's pretty bad that my girl friend and her fiancé got married this summer and their wedding dance was bigger than our street dance. (Respondent community #1)

Community organizations in community #1 included a very active Kiwanis club which meets twice a month, a Chamber of Commerce, a Historical Society, and several ecumenical women's guilds. Since the community continues to host a college, the influence of post-secondary education brings a fairly significant amount of social capital within the community. The community continues to have bank, a post office, a college, a grocery store, beauty shop, a bar and grill, a convenience store and a gas station with auto repair.

According to one respondent from community #2, a business owner in the community, regarding the aftermath of the first consolidation:

5.1.2

Our town just dwindled. When the first consolidation took place we had the middle school and all the elementary. They consolidated the middle school around 1980 and additional decline occurred. My husband and I were in business, and we owned the locker plant and grocery store. We sold it, but it did not work out for the person who bought it so it closed, which hurt our town a lot. If you go to the edge of town and look down the street you can see what our town looks like now, buildings are falling down and businesses are gone. But, the town continues to have community celebrations, including an antique car show. (Respondent Community #2)

Respondent from community #3 saw the significance of the social capital that remained in the community. The community building is a gathering spot for people to have coffee each morning.

5.1.3

The faces of the people are changing radically. The World War II veterans are in their upper 80's and continue to fill positions in the American Legion. During the past few years many of them are no longer serve as an officer. There aren't as many younger ones to take leadership positions, but thank goodness some people are stepping forward and it will continue. She continued, Most everyone is willing to participate in small towns and they are welcomed in our community. The community has a fire department, rescue group, a community action group and a group that provides leadership for the county fair each year. Every other year we have a 'welcome to our community day' and someone in the community adopts a new person and they bring them into the community action group. We also have various community groups that volunteer for highway clean-up. A Chamber of Commerce group that had been inactive for many years has been revitalized and is currently having regular meetings. (Respondent Community #3)

A history book was created for the 125th birthday of the community. The same respondent spoke proudly of the 240 photographs that recorded the history of the community. Each year, the alumni of the school host an Alumni dinner. She was concerned that the "movers and shakers who make community activities happen are getting older so the ramifications for those kinds of things, each time they fall onto a smaller group of people to carry out because the population has decreased. There are a few new people who come to the community to live and work elsewhere and don't wish to participate.

The loss of youth in the community was concerning to a respondent from community #3:

5.1.4

When that school closes, these people lost their social connections. And I think from my point of view that's a difficult thing to overcome. Since the school closed last summer, he noticed the loss of young people in the community. I used to see a bunch of young people eating at the Sparrow Station between the end of the school day and the beginning of night activities. The school is consolidated and located in another community he indicates; it's a real adjustment to become a part of a community with other towns. (Respondent Community #3)

The same respondent laments about the recent loss of the school.

5.1.5

We can't let this community get away from us; we are witnessing the change right now. Everyone knew that there weren't enough students. Now we have an empty school and we can't let it sit empty. My philosophy is you have to be an economic developer. There is a nuclear power plant close by and 15 more of them across the Midwest. We are bringing in training to work in nuclear stations, starting with a boot camp and then an online program for a portion of the training. (Respondent Community #3)

The respondent continued by indicating that they were getting a new cell phone tower in the community to improve communication in the area and he showed me a lot adjacent to the school where lodging could be built for use during the training period. Training has taken place and another one will be happening by mid-April. Since he has been a college administrator, he is aware of the accrediting process and was involved in making this happen for the new training site.

Other respondents had differing views of the community. One couple from community #3, a young farm family had returned to the community recently. They moved back to the community in 1993 to take over the family farm. When asked them about community activities, they couldn't really think of any, "The town is so small that there aren't any." They knew that the senior citizens got together and then they remembered the 'garden club'. The couple was busy with their two children and active in the activities of the newly consolidated school district. They were not particularly concerned about the community and were aware that in order to farm they would have to live a significant distance from schools and trade areas.

5.2 The Children

Respondents with children in community #1 had mixed feelings about the consolidation. Two of them felt that the move was important for the athletic teams in particular and felt that the opportunities for their children increased significantly with the merger. One respondent, however, was very opposed to the consolidation and chose to find a different district with a very small school, and multi-grade classrooms in which to send her children. The respondent indicated that this came at great cost to the family because she had to transport the children a great distance from their home herself.

In the newly consolidated community #3, the process sounded very painful. The farm family I interviewed had lived for a time in Minnesota. He was a suit [sic] as he called it, before he came back to take over the family farm. A neighbor down the road talked to them about sending their children to school when the couple first moved back, the young farmers' response was,

5.2.1

It's not going to matter. This school is not going to be here for our children. You look around; there are no youth around here. When we have children, our children will probably never go to the school around here. I guarantee you, they will not graduate from this high school.

When the district began to have levy overrides, the couple attended board meetings and voiced their concern. He indicated that he wasn't in strong favor of the levy override, but felt a sense of obligation because he graduated from the school. But, he was concerned about his son.

5.2.2

Part of growing up is having friends and having classmates, being able to hand out valentines, and playing sports, and having best friends to go to movies with. My son is the one and only boy in his class. How can he have a best friend? (Respondent Community #3)

She commented, "It's true that schools are for academics but socialization is a huge part of that as well." She said that someone commented that "he won't have to worry about a prom date." The conversation continued,

5.2.3

Part of school is having buddies. I still remember my buddies and the things we did growing up in grade school and junior high and high school and I said he'll never have that at this school. It ended up that the override passed and I ended up voting for it the first time and decided to let the levy override happen for three years and then after that, we'll probably do something different. It passed again and he was in third grade. We took him out in fourth grade. The second override ended up passing and should not have. The district was trying to merge with another district and the district wasn't interested. Then the district waited too long. Incentive money from the state was gone and people were option enrolling their students into the next closest district. (Respondent Community #3)

5.3 The Circumstances of the Consolidations

In each of the communities the consolidations took place because of declining enrollment and loss of revenue. In community #1, the first consolidation was done as a result of declining enrollment in 1966. The closure at that time was very personal and painful for the community. The last consolidation occurred in 2002 after a roller coaster of state aid issues in Nebraska. In 2002 the district enrollment had declined in the district and they ended up losing 5% of their entire budget. The district attempted a levy override which failed. The elementary school had 52 children in the K-6 building which continued to house approximately 15-20 children in each classroom. At the same time, the district implemented other cuts and fees to make up for the significant loss of revenue. In Community #2, a second consolidation occurred in the decade of 1980 when the elementary children went to a site in a neighboring community. This community maintained its

middle school attendance center in 2006. When the third consolidation occurred, it was a result of incentive money from the Nebraska Department of Education. There were approximately 35 children who attended the middle school attendance center when it closed.

In the words of a respondent from community #2:

5.3.1

If your high school leaves your community, there is a much bigger effect on the community than if you lose your elementary. It was very difficult for the community to accept. Some of the people still carry those opinions today. The people who adjust the best are the ones that have children in school. The group that it is easiest for are the children. They go on with their lives and make new friends in the newly consolidated school. It is somewhat determined by the teacher in the classroom of the newly consolidated school if they accepted the kids that came from the other community. (Respondent Community #2)

The third district closed a very short time ago. The community was splintering apart because the school district had barely enough money to survive year to year. Some families wanted to hold onto the district, others were sending their children to neighboring districts and some land owners began to option their land into a neighboring district, through a process called free holding, in order to save tax dollars. The result of all of this splintered the community. The effect of free holding caused irreparable loss to the school district. One respondent explained this to me:

5.3.2

When the high school drops below 65 students for two consecutive years, and you're in a levy override, and we were for six years, then if you border a neighboring school districts land, you can opt that land out. Now, if you're 3 sections deep you can't but if it starts going and then this guy opts to the adjoining district then eventually it might get to your land. We chose not to option our land out of the district, though we could have. Now our tax money follows our kids. When they finally made a decision to merge, the free holding stopped. (Respondent Community #3)

5.4 Concerns about the Future of the Community

Most of the respondents accepted the fact that the community will not recover to pre-consolidation vibrancy. A respondent from community #2 laments:

5.4.1

Consolidation is a total mover and shaker of the situation. Your community is continuing to change because of other things that are in there. Demographics are changing. We have fewer farmers and price of gas has increased dramatically so people are more likely to live where they work. The merger allowed us to continue a quality education program for our kids. Financially, I think it helped the district. I'm sure it is much better with the two schools together than with just each one of them trying to maintain. Our state has a responsibility for helping our communities. We should do the best we can to bring things into smaller communities and encourage people to live in these. Because I have a concern; when all of our good farm, community people have been drained out of Nebraska, Kansas, and Iowa it is the heartland that will save places like New York and California.(Respondent Community #2)

Another respondent from community #2 expressed her concern as well. "I don't know what we can do to draw people into the community. We are a farming community and no one can afford to go into farming unless it's owned by their family."

Thinking about the future of the community one of the respondents from community #1 said,

5.4.2

I think it's just going to be humdrum. You know, people are just going to go about their lives. We go out, do our farming, and come home. I don't think it's going to get any bigger, we might lose a few more businesses, but we don't have too many more to lose. I don't know, I just think everyone is going to live one day at a time. Do what they have to do to survive. (Respondent Community #2)

The future of the community was different for one of the respondents, from community #2 also a tireless economic developer.

5.4.3

I think communities can die quickly if the community doesn't work to prevent additional loss. In our community one of the most important assets that we have is the railroad which carried 8-10 trainloads of grain each day. The tax revenue from this is 19% of our town's budget. I think we need to identify and do more things through the railroad and this town could flourish as it did years and years ago. You've got to think outside the box. We are not going to let this town fold away. We are going to press hard now. There are other possibilities, besides training for the nuclear power industry; we could provide similar training for 'wind energy' farms. (Respondent Community #2)

The respondent was hoping to bring a training facility into the community to take advantage of the empty school building and help the town; others in the same community were a bit more skeptical.

5.4.4

Our state is agriculturally related and in so many ways, we just do not have anything to offer. High paying jobs are on the coasts. We do get some good jobs in Omaha and Lincoln, especially high tech jobs, but try to get people to come to these small towns. They don't want to. They want to be on the outskirts of Omaha so that they have quick access to the airport. (Respondent Community #2)

6 Conclusions

In order to facilitate grassroots democracy, Thomas Jefferson proposed a constitutional amendment that "counties be divided into wards of such size that every citizen can attend, when called on, and act in person" (Putnam, 2000, p. 336). He believed that "making every citizen an acting member of government in the offices nearest and most interesting to him will attach him by his strongest feelings to the independence of his country and its republican constitution" (p. 336). Jefferson understood that informal networks of civic engagement and community organizations inspired habits of cooperation and responsibility. Following World War II, patriotism and solidarity were ubiquitous, and membership in community organizations was robust. Unfortunately, by the late 1950's membership in organizations quit growing. Putnam (2000) indicates that public institutions in a democracy depend upon widespread participation. "The performance of our democratic institutions depends in measureable ways upon our social capital" (Putnam, 2000, p. 349). One could assume, based upon Putnam's work in *Bowling Alone (2000)*, that American democracy was most healthy when small towns had schools. The organizations that remained in these rural communities continued to advance community life and help citizens care for one another.

Child development is powerfully shaped by social capital (Brennfodder, 1984). Additionally, social capital seems to hold a key to the overall welfare of children and adults in communities. According to parents in the study, consolidation was a positive outcome for their children. They found that the children quickly adjusted to the change and had a larger group of friends, had more competitive athletics, and more opportunities. Because they are more likely to find someone with similar interests, perhaps having a larger group of friends helps children form a better connection to school. While the children are attending schools in nearby communities, they seem to continue to benefit from the social capital that remains within the communities. Adults, including those who no longer have children in school, still support their activities, care for them, and celebrate their academic success.

All of the communities continue to have a degree of social capital that appears to hold the people of the community together. While the depth of this varied between communities, all of the communities had organizations that were dedicated to the well being of the community and helped those who were in need. Community members, despite the aging population, seem to come together to care for each other and to take care of their communities.

The communities will not recover from their pre-consolidation vibrancy. The respondents were all aware of the loss of vibrancy and attributed it directly to the loss of the school. Two of communities lost their high schools in the 1960's and the respondents saw the loss of vibrancy most pronounced at that time. The community members seem to have accepted that as farms have become larger there will be fewer communities and they will have to travel longer distances for basic services. The decline of these rural communities is evident throughout the country. Consolidation is merely a symptom of a larger problem. The decline of rural schools and communities started with the industrialization of agriculture. Farms became larger and land stewardship declined. Efficiency and cutting the bottom-line was prized. Rural schools had to become larger in order to be efficient.

Why is rural decline so troubling? The decline of rural places mirrors what is happening in the rest of our society. Social connectedness is one of the most powerful determinants in our well-being. In fact, one group of researchers, (House, Landis & Umberson (1988), found that a decline in social support and social integration can rival the detrimental contributions of well established biomedical risk factors such as cigarette smoking, obesity, elevated blood pressure and physical inactivity. Statistically the evidence for the health consequence of social connectedness is as strong today as was the evidence for the health consequences of smoking at the time of the first Surgeon General's report on smoking (Putnam, 2000). Places that have high levels of social capital are healthier in many ways: residents trust each other, they join organizations, volunteer, vote, socialize with friends; there are fewer teen pregnancies and fewer suicides and homicides. In schools, the beneficial effects of social capital persist even after accounting for a host of other factors that might affect educational success: racial composition, affluence, economic inequality, adult educational levels, poverty rates, educational spending, teacher salaries, class size, family structure, and religious affiliation. There is a correlation between community infrastructure on one hand and student and parental engagement in schools. This correlation is very substantial even after taking into account economic, social and education factors like poverty, racial composition, family structure, educational spending, and class size. Jennifer Sumner may have said it best in her warning about the decline of rural communities:

6.1

Rural communities are a canary in the mine that warns us impending disaster, the feedback loop that tells us all is not well. The sustainability of our rural communities is, in the end, a reflection of our overall sustainability. We can actively choose our sustainability by following a life-values perspective or we can passively leave it to the money values of those who dominate the global economy. (Sumner, 2007, p. 13).

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