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Consolidation And Reform: Middle School Considerations -The Case Of The Lebanon R-III School District In Lebanon, Missouri

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CONSOLIDATION AND REFORM: MIDDLE SCHOOL CONSIDERATIONS -

THE CASE OF THE LEBANON R-III SCHOOL DISTRICT IN

LEBANON, MISSOURI

A Thesis Presented to the Graduate Faculty

of Fort Hays State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

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by

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ABSTRACT

This case study examined the implementation of a new public middle school following intra-district consolidation in rural Missouri. Lebanon R-III saw the intra-district consolidation of a sixth grade building, and a seventh/eighth grade building, creating a middle school. This initiative prepared students, faculty and staff to experience a middle school aiming to improve the learning experience for students in grades six through eight. The implementation of consolidation, school reform initiatives, and the current school status were discussed in this case study. Data was collected and examined regarding the perceptions of teachers about the effectiveness of implementation strategies used in the consolidation. It is clear from the data analysis that the overall perception was the consolidation of Lebanon Middle School was successful. Specifically, participants indicated that the emphasis of data-informed decision making, a safe, respectful, caring environment, a belief that all students can learn, a recognition that the two buildings consolidating faced unique challenges, and the importance of an atmosphere of collegiality and professionalism were the most effective strategies for the staff and students in the transition of the two buildings.

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INTRODUCTION

Consolidation of school districts and school buildings has been a challenging aspect of the educational landscape for over half a century. More recently, numerous school districts have consolidated buildings within their district to find greater fiscal efficiencies, often as a response to declining enrollments particularly seen in more rural areas of the country. Buildings have been combined to lessen the escalating costs of maintaining older buildings, as many that have over time fallen into disrepair, have become outdated in construction, class and program layout, and lack ready access to contemporary technology so much so that they fail to warrant the high cost of significant renovation or updating.

As the focal point of this study, a school district in rural Missouri decided in 2014 to combine two older school buildings into a single, newly constructed building. District leadership determined that greater efficiency for limited building fund availability could be found with the passage of a construction bond issue. The bond dollars were aimed at building a new middle school, thereby forcing the consolidation of the two old buildings into a single new facility.

This study explored the results of joining two school facilities, each well-established attendance center buildings, into one single attendance center. The two buildings, now united, had differing challenges unique to the grade levels they served, including the issues faced by a smaller faculty from one building in joining a much larger faculty from the other. The smaller faculty, from a sixth grade building that operated from a more elementary-based focus with a homeroom teacher emphasis, suddenly found

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itself sharing a facility with a seventh and eighth grade faculty building that operated with a traditional junior high philosophy. Both former faculties faced new challenges in working with each other in learning and teaching with a *middle school philosophy*.

The challenges and successes were examined in the establishment of the new building, including a review of the research regarding issues involved in the consolidation and merging of two buildings. Recommendations for consideration to strengthen future school building consolidation processes was developed. Additionally, a discussion of change issues involved in moving from the traditional junior high school model to the contemporary middle school model was presented, as well as applicable leadership theory drawn from school reform, as applied to the new setting.

Background and Statement of the Problem

School consolidation began in earnest in the United States, and in Missouri, during the years immediately following World War II. American soldiers, many raised in rural parts of the nation, returned from the European and Asian war zones with a new appreciation for a broader and more urbanized world. Some held the perception that bigger was better, as that was the central concept that eventually won the war for the West. The returning American servicemen brought along a new worldview to their rural communities and respective schools that now seemed very small in comparison to the urban world, and efforts were soon initiated across the country to combine smaller rural schools into larger operations (Hample, 2002). Rural residents began to leave in droves for the cities. The widespread efforts toward school consolidation that began in the mid to late 1940's, continue to this day as urban and suburban areas push for rural school

closures to gain sources of funding in an era of little public school funding support.

Hample (2002) noted that during the 1940's, one-room schoolhouses dotted the landscape across the entirety of the United States. In many areas of the country, small schools began to be abandoned as World War II came to a close, and as America worked to become an invigorated industrial nation. By the early 1950's, the nation's leadership began to eliminate thousands of small rural schools as a national movement for consolidation ensued. During the 1970's alone, the number of schools nation-wide declined 5% (Theobald, 1995). The result was virtually thousands of school closures and intra-district consolidations, brought about by either forced or mutual agreement. Opposition to school consolidation was often felt heavily in rural areas. Theobald (1995) noted that people in more rural areas, many used to living with lean resources, saw consolidation as a threat to independence and began to fight back against those pushing for what they saw as better by virtue of size and efficiency.

School consolidation is defined as the practice of combining two or more schools for educational or economic benefits. Many believe that a consolidated school could offer an expanded curriculum and a more prominent identity in the community while reducing costs through economy of scale (Nelson, 1985). There has historically been a trend to consolidate one-room schools into larger school districts, beginning as far back as 1918. This resulted from city dwellers assuming that a one-room school was academically weak in comparison to urban schools. Large numbers of small rural schools began to consolidate based on that generally held assumption that remains as a central pro-consolidation argument today. Ravitch (1984) reports that while total

enrollment in elementary and secondary schools nearly doubled from 1945 to 1980 (from 23 million to 40 million), the number of schools dropped from 185,000 to under 86,000, indicating a clear record for the American 20th century school consolidation experience.

There are two primary reasons that contemporary school districts use to justify consolidation: (a) a school larger in size is better and (b) the political necessity of broad-brush efforts toward economic efficiency (Theobald, 1995). Many districts also claim that one bigger school is better than two smaller schools. This philosophy assumes that bigger schools can provide a broader range of curriculum offerings, and they can offer a wider range of extracurricular opportunities, all due to greater resources – both in dollars and people. The idea that larger schools provide more opportunity for students has been widely used by proponents of consolidation for many decades. The assumption is that students exposed to a larger array of school opportunities will somehow become smarter and more competitive, particularly in a *global economy*.

It is widely known that it is more difficult for small schools to offer academic programs that include a multitude of electives. Additionally, schools operate on a daily basis with sorely inadequate finances, thus the argument of economic efficiency is the primary consideration for many district consolidations. It has become difficult for smaller schools to attract teachers, especially in those *hard to find* preparations that include special education, science, and mathematics. Rural schools have fewer financial resources and often pay lower salaries than their urban or suburban counterparts (Theobald, 2009). Rural communities often have housing shortages, making it difficult for teachers from the outside to find a place to live. Younger single teachers experience

social and recreational opportunities that may be limited. So, rural districts often face difficulties in recruiting and retaining highly qualified teachers.

American school districts continue to experience consolidation to this day as exampled by the Lebanon R-III's newly formed middle school in Lebanon, Missouri. While this particular situation did not involve full school district consolidation, it did on a much smaller scale, involve the complications common to suddenly thrusting the human beings connected to two school buildings into a brand new environment. In Lebanon, a rural community, two older buildings were closed and combined into one new contemporary middle school. Examining the challenges of unifying people from the formerly independent buildings was important to determine successful strategies and areas of weakness to address in subsequent years of operation.

Lebanon R-III District Background. The Lebanon R-III School District is located in Laclede County, Missouri. It is in a rural area about sixty miles northeast of the state's third largest city of Springfield. Like nearly all of Missouri's rural school districts today, Lebanon is *reorganized*, which essentially means that several smaller country schools were closed and as a result joined the larger Lebanon schools. Reorganized districts in Missouri have the letter *R* in their designated district number, as in Lebanon R-III. The *III* refers to the district being the third to reorganize in the county. Most of the smaller school closings, and subsequent mergers, occurred during the decade of the 1950's. Currently, as required by state law, seven elected school board members govern the Lebanon R-III School District.

As the reorganized district in Lebanon grew with the return of the nation's veterans from World War II, and the *baby boom* years that saw the schooling of the children of that generation, a small number of new buildings were erected in the district and numerous more affordable building additions were made in order to better accommodate a growing number of students. As the years passed, and the student population growth leveled off, the school district found itself with an aging infrastructure that would require substantial financial expenditures to renovate and update.

In 2014, after two years of administrative and school board review, and numerous pre-planning discussions with citizens of the community, it was decided to close two older buildings and construct a new single attendance center for grades 6, 7, and 8. As planning details fell into place, the community involvement continued during a number of town hall meetings, and several discussions with focus groups that included parents and employees. The election was finally held, and the Lebanon R-III voters approved a $32 Million bond issue to construct a new middle school. The vote approved the closing of two older buildings and consolidation of grades six through eight into a single new middle school structure.

 There were six traditional attendance center school buildings in the district, as well as a number of other smaller buildings. The district enrollment totaled 4,600 students, including the 700 students from the seventh and eighth grade building, and the 350 students from the sixth grade building. Teaching staff in the seventh and eighth grade building numbered 60, with 30 teachers at the sixth grade. The new middle school

building opened in the fall of 2016, with both previous buildings' students, faculty, and staff combined. The new middle school housed over 1,000 students.

The two school facilities were each well-established attendance center buildings with their own philosophy and methods of operation. The sixth grade building operated from a more elementary-based focus, with a homeroom teacher emphasis. The seventh and eighth grade building operated with a traditional junior high philosophy. When the buildings were merged, the new building operated with a *middle school philosophy*. This posed considerable challenges in uniting two long-established buildings with unique internal cultures and their respective faculty and staff that had been separate for more than a half-century.

Theoretical Foundation

The theories that drive the foundation of this study were aimed at tools for tackling the challenges of instituting an operational model for intra-district consolidation. The theories included those primarily from school reform advocates for change and from school reform theorists who have had an impact on collaborative leadership. Both theory sets were used to develop a single building philosophy and improve schooling in the new middle school in Lebanon, Missouri.

Change issues encountered over a two-year period of intra-district school consolidation arose from efforts to combine a traditional sixth grade building with a traditional seventh and eighth grade junior high building into a single new middle school. It was understood by district administration, building administration, teaching faculty and all staff involved that the consolidation included not only the physical plant setting, but

also the consolidation of the two sets of people involved in the day to day instruction of the students that would soon be entering the doors of the newly constructed middle school.

During the planning year and implementation year, efforts were made within the two buildings to find a shared vision, mission and purpose. Effort was also made to frame and embrace a shared philosophy for the new school from such school reform leaders as Fullan, Edmonds, Sizer and Valentine. Fullan (2015) a noted researcher on school change, wrote that many challenges encountered in initiatives such as those met in the consolidated new middle school, could be met with success if properly guided through ongoing professional development and in-service opportunities. This would include not only the leadership of the school, but also faculty engaging in the realization that all could be change-agents during the planning year and in the implementation year of the new school, as efforts to bring the two separate faculties together began.

Edmonds' (1982) work proved foundational in the implementation of how to use the best from research and practice in starting a new school with students' success and overall school effectiveness as its central focus. Edmonds (1979) conducted nation-wide research concerning the foundational strands that all effective and successful schools shared in common. This was used during the planning year and implementation year to build common thinking among faculty about basic goals for a better future school. The basic goals and foundational correlates of Edmonds research (1979) of successful and effective schools included: instructional leadership, a clear and focused mission, a safe and orderly environment, a climate of high expectations, frequent monitoring of student

progress, positive home-school relations, opportunities to learn and student time on task.

Elements of this research may be found in many later school reform initiatives. More contemporary researchers, including Spady (2015), Lezotte (2002), McEwan (2009), and Andrews (1991), relied on Edmonds' work as basic to continued effective school research and practice. As late as 2012, Dunn referenced effective school research as central to the efforts toward improving teaching and learning under court ordered desegregation in the Kansas City, Missouri Public School System (Missouri v. Jenkins, 1990).

Sizer was one of the most noted researchers in school reform for the final two decades of the Twentieth Century. Sizer's (1992, 1996) ideas were introduced during the planning year, and were continually discussed during the implementation year. Sizer (1992) noted that a good school reflects their community, and is a creation of its faculty, including the idea that a school is successful when staff share a collective responsibility for the standards and values taught to its students. The coalition of essential schools shared nine common principles: students learn to use their minds well, students master a limited number of essential skills, a school's goals should apply to all students, teaching and learning should be personalized, the students are workers, graduation is based upon mastery, the climate of the school is one of trust and decency, the principal and teachers have multiple obligations and a sense of commitment to the entire school, and teachers have time for collective planning (Sizer, 1996). These principles were essential to the work being done in the new middle school, as it helped the faculty conceptualize ways to improve teaching and learning.

Valentine (2004) wrote specifically about the middle school, particularly about what instructional practices and the kind of curriculum best suited adolescents. This included aspects of academic, social, emotional and physical growth for middle school students. There is also a necessity of the establishment of a truly caring and collaborative culture in the middle school environment (Valentine, 2004). Valentine (2004) noted that systemic school improvement included components of school culture, climate leadership and organizational structure. This framework for success included defining faculty values, beliefs, and commitments while designing a school vision with goals for accomplishing that shared vision.

The best practice theories presented in this case study specifically suited for middle schools and the study of successful middle school reform measures served as the foundation for the philosophical structure regarding the consolidation of the faculty and staff of the new middle school in the rural city of Lebanon, Missouri. The knowledge presented by consolidation and school reform theorists led this school district to structure the actuality of consolidation and the resulting reform measures to positively meet the needs of their students, staff and faculty members during the planning, implementation and initial years of consolidation. Further, the reform measures and consolidation theories presented in this case study can benefit district to district and intra-district consolidation efforts in future school consolidation efforts.

Statement of the Purpose

Common beliefs concerning the primary purpose of educating students in the middle school were identified by the two faculties involved in the consolidation in

Lebanon R-III. Once the first year ensued in the operation of the new middle school, additional conversations were held with staff to explore examples of school change and reform that served to support the new building all hoped to establish. This case study explored school reform and change strategies that effectively addressed challenges in creating a positive school environment as encountered during intra-district consolidation in a rural middle school. Specifically, the study explored and analyzed the perceptions of the faculty and building leadership regarding the anticipated challenges, successful strategies, and overall school climate. The study intended to explain the challenges and effective strategies for the consolidation of school to help inform and assist other school districts that might embark upon intra-district consolidation.

Research Questions

The following research questions will be explored:

1. To what extent were the anticipated challenges addressed for assisting teachers in supporting change and successful school consolidation?

2. Which school reform initiatives were effective in assisting teachers in supporting change and successful school consolidation?

3. How do teachers and building leadership perceive the overall school climate after consolidating two distinct buildings into a single building?

Significance of the Study

The results of this study provided a better understanding of the challenges encountered by educators and the effective practices for implementing a school building consolidation, specifically at the middle school level. Research derived from the early

school reform theorists and consolidation efforts that took place nation-wide provided the foundation for the consolidation efforts at the Lebanon R-III Middle School. Examining the effectiveness of the research-based strategies that were used in this consolidation provides critical information to inform educational leaders. This research along with current school reform initiatives, has much potential to influence the school reform and school consolidations of today.

Summary

A brief history and overview of educational reform and school consolidation as it applied to the consolidation in Lebanon R-III School District were highlighted in this chapter. The noted school reform leader, Sizer (1989) explained that schools reflect their communities – both the students and teachers within the building and the wider neighborhood that it serves, "no two good schools are ever quite alike" (p. 3). The challenges of combining two distinct faculties into a cohesive middle school warrants exploration. The study has great implication for future intra-district school consolidation efforts.

Chapter two presented the literature review connecting historical research to this case study. This chapter presented relevant studies of school reform, consolidation and change theories. The intra-district consolidation that integrated school reform initiatives was discussed. The chapter concluded with a presentation of the change strategies used in the consolation of the Lebanon Middle School to provide the background for the case.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This case of a newly combined middle school resulting from intra-district school building consolidation required an examination of research relevant to school reform, consolidation, and change. The efforts to identify and embrace the philosophical underpinnings and common beliefs of the two building faculties was presented. This foundation sought to unify the faculty into one functioning group of educators. Effective consolidation strategies were implemented including providing opportunity for all educators to develop a common vision, mission and purpose.

This chapter presented (a) school reform research applicable to consolidation in Lebanon R-III; (b) research of school consolidation; and (c) the change process research involving consolidation. Consolidation efforts in Missouri were reviewed, and the account of the creation of the Lebanon Middle School was detailed. Background was also presented describing the research-based strategies used in the consolidation of the school.

School Reform

The *one size fits all philosophy* of The Goals 2000: Educate America Act (1994), and the No Child Left Behind Act [NCLB] (2002), followed the early national efforts to standardize and unify American education. These initiatives added requirements for standards and proficiency levels for all students. In addition, the laws added levels of required student achievement and building proficiency, which included annual standardized testing for public school students. Boser (2013) urged states to avoid a one-size-fits-all approach to maximizing school and district size. This outlines the importance of consolidation efforts being led by school districts at the local level, not by those at the state or national level.

Historically, these national efforts toward standards-based education arose as a matter of politics, and often became a part of the rhetoric aimed at gaining position in national leadership. Regardless of true purpose, the states have been accountable for meeting these various national standards, even when progressive educational reformers and passionate public school leaders worked to implement more exciting reform initiatives. The resulting tension between national standards, particularly those with funding attached, and progressive public school reform, has had varying impact on public education, including the middle school movement, for the past three decades.

Much of the reform discussion beginning in the 1980's centered on *restructuring*, or changing the basic philosophical nature of American schooling. Sagor (2000) focused on the work of Edmonds and Lezotte as foundational thinking for effective schooling. Levine and Lezotte (1990) helped identify school climate and culture, coupled with parental involvement, as crucial elements of school improvement. Gardner (1994) explained in length about seeing students as having *multiple intelligences* that needed attention in teaching, as well as the use of constructivist philosophy in understanding how students learn. Chrispeels (1992) discussed the necessity of involving teachers in change and planning.

Among the most noted early public school reform movements was *Effective Schools*, led by Edmonds. Edmonds (1979) proved that children in poor urban schools could perform as well as those in more affluent settings, if those schools met a series of indicators that were common to all effective schools, regardless of the setting. Among the effective school *correlates* were instructional leadership, high expectations, and a focus

on curriculum. In addition, Edmonds noted, leadership that ensured a safe and nurturing environment was essential for school effectiveness

Like Edmonds, Marzano (2003) placed emphasis on a sound system of student progress evaluation. Tucker (2005) expanded effective evaluation to directly connect thorough teacher evaluation aimed at instructional improvement, to student learning. Similar correlates were found in successful school reform that included creating the school culture, correlates of effective schools, site-based management, data collection and analysis, school improvement plans, organizing schools for students, building community support and an evaluation of student progress (Lezotte et al., 2002). The ongoing evaluation of school reform by researchers, aids schools involved in school consolidation efforts.

An early school reform movement known as, *Outcome Based Education* (OBE) asserted that, *all children can learn* (Spady,1993). In Missouri, as well as other states, OBE and many public school leaders, were highly skeptical in the early 1990's concerning putting into place the initiatives of Outcome Based Education most often thought to be radical. The movement failed to gain much formal ground, however, the core ideas were embedded in middle school philosophy. Currently, OBE is central to the philosophies of contemporary middle school education. This emphasizes that effective educators must teach to the hearts and souls of their students, which may not align with the national standards of education (Spady, 2015).

Other early reformers included Sizer, who launched the *Coalition of Essential Schools* relearning movement (Sizer, 1992). Like Spady, Sizer believed that all children can learn and purported that the *status quo*, as well as nationally mandated standardized

curricula and tests, interfered with quality education. Sizer (1996) agreed with Edmonds finding that young adolescents must have order in the school, which fosters a climate of trust and safety so necessary for learning. More recently, Blakenstein (2004) noted the principals in high performing schools included focused attention on the learning environment established in the core belief system of the school. These movements have particular relevance to middle school educators, as having effective principals to employ in educating these students.

Theobald (2009) found the *project method* was an effective approach for teaching middle school students. An element of this model of instruction included *place based learning*, which reflects current pedagogical reform. Theobald explained this strategy included using local resources to teach students and described it as *place based pedagogy*. This approach was found to be effective in working with mid-level students in most subject areas. Mills (2014) described implementing the place based model to engage students in a local historical site to bring relevance and interest outside the traditional classroom setting.   Place based learning, as described by Lambert (1998) encouraged breadth of student involvement in their learning, as well as deeper understanding gained from hands-on, eyes-on learning.

School Consolidation

Consolidation of schools has both curricular and financial advantages and disadvantages. One advantage of consolidated schools is the ability to share courses and facilities. Sharing results in a more varied curriculum because fewer classes are dropped due to low enrollment. Sports programs and extracurricular activities benefit in consolidated schools due to the increase in the combined economic funding.

Another advantage of school consolidations are the expenditures for capital improvements and basic maintenance are reduced because there is no need to upgrade or maintain duplicate facilities. Consolidation often combines classes and increases class sizes; thus fewer teachers need to be employed, and consolidated schools do not employ as many administrative personnel as did pre-consolidation and separate buildings.

Consolidation has also been known to bring about psychological advantages. When schools combine, students often gain confidence and a newly produced identity in the community they did not previously possess (Kay, 1982). However, some stress the benefits of smaller school settings and point out the disadvantages to school consolidation. Beckner and O'Neal (1980) suggest that small schools are able to perform functions that are impossible in larger schools. Those aspects would include but are not limited to: closer relationships between teachers and administrators, decreased/smaller teacher/student ratios in the classroom, and the greater potential for individualized instruction.

Those opposed to consolidation report that when schools combine, there are often more negative aspects than positive aspects. It is believed that within the larger system, the following aspects are increasingly evident: increased bureaucracy; less participation in shared decision making by teachers and administration; more tension between teachers and students; fewer situations for bringing about change; more time, effort and money devoted to discipline problems; less parent/teacher involvement; less human contact which produces frustration; and the weakening morale of both students and school staff.

Mills and Theobald (1995) discussed the potential for loss of community from consolidation and reported there is a deeper link between the necessity of schools for

gathering and maintaining community-wide values. Consolidation often became a factor

leading to the loss of community deliberation, as in local town hall meetings that

continually illuminated local community values (Mills & Theobald, 1995).

Effective School Consolidation Strategies

Theobald (1997) explained the necessity for schools and communities to

collaborate in order to preserve their physical place and connect to the multiple dynamics

that influence their existence. There is an important matter of discussion for school

districts considering consolidation, for school and community leadership to collaborate

and establish a clear agenda outlining the purpose of consolidation, as well as the

expected outcomes of consolidation. In a community planning for consolidation, it is

important that school leadership, parents, and civic leadership partner with one another,

to have discussions that clarify goals and support any shift in educational philosophy that

may serve to provide a positive future for all involved – particularly the district's

children.

The purposes of school consolidation required a shared belief system about what

matters most for the children of the district. School and community leadership, teachers,

and parents involved in the consolidation of two buildings must communicate and design

a well-developed mission and vision for the new building. Eaker and DuFour (1998)

placed a focus on a collaborative culture in schools, reporting that staff members working

together within interdependent teams pursuing common goals, and school instructional

leadership at all levels providing a safe and nurturing support system, was beneficial for

the efforts of consolidation and effective school reform. Further, Eaker, DuFour, and

DuFour (2002) stated that to, "develop shared mission, vision, values and goals: the staff

of each school should develop shared mission, vision, values (commitments), and goals, taking into account input from all appropriate groups. This must be done well, in writing, understood by all, and (most importantly) used" (p. 131).

Danielson (2007) found there was the necessity for professional collaboration and practice in consolidated schools that was led by teachers, with an expectation that master teachers would contribute to the development and strengthening of a professional community essential to a newly consolidated building. Strong teacher leadership, supported by engaged building and district leadership, cultivated strong supportive relationships with their colleagues by assuming leadership roles among faculty. The necessity for the formation of collaborative teams was found to create a culture of school effectiveness (Larson & LaFasto, 1989). Effective teaching teams had clear, elevated goals, results-driven structure, competent members, unified commitment, a collaborative climate, standards of excellence and principled leadership. Studies found this clarity of purpose served consolidated buildings' students and eventually the community at large.

School connectedness, as outlined by McNeely, Nonnemaker, and Blum (2002), is another strand of current research. Finding a genuine sense of connectedness to the school, the classroom, and to the materials encountered in classrooms were found to be crucial elements related to student success, as well as building blocks for essential parental support. This connectedness for students to their school remains a basic need for middle school students emotionally and academically, and especially in a new setting with a newly designed philosophy.

Kay (1982), states that a school system, "Considering consolidation ought to investigate the nature, extent, and strength of other community institutions and social

service agencies serving the community facing possible loss of its schools" (p. 8). In many rural locations, the school is the primary or single source of community service, and the disappearance of the school would be negatively felt. The other side of this issue would be communities that have multiple organizations and multiple community entities that would continue to withstand the loss of the actual school.

Discussions and town hall meetings include all stakeholders to determine the aspects regarding consolidation that are of the greatest importance to the local entity. Concerns for economic efficiency and school size must not outweigh the effect of school consolidation on the whole of the community. Only by granting equal importance to all factors can decision-makers ensure that, "narrow concerns about formal schooling do not unconsciously override the broader educational concerns and the general well-being of the community to which those broader educational concerns are intimately connected" (Kay, 1982, p.8-10).

Missouri School Consolidation

Missouri was not unlike virtually every other state in the country in embarking on what has now become nearly a century long effort to close smaller schools in order to create larger ones. The primary goal was generally to find economic and human resource savings so often touted as necessary by some school leaders, as well as politicians. During the years from 1950 to 2016, Missouri closed and/or consolidated thousands of rural schools, dropping them in number from more than 5,000 to just over 500, as documented by the Missouri School Directory (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2017).

The two largest public school districts in Missouri, located in Kansas City and St. Louis, relied upon school consolidation to meet requirements for court-ordered desegregation, and found significant state funding which was used to close scores of smaller neighborhood schools in favor of larger, consolidated *intra-district* schools. Both districts experienced a general loss of the neighborhood schools that held local communities together. These districts soon felt the resulting disintegration of community identity and unity that had been historically effective in supporting healthy child-rearing environments.

Launching the Effort

The 2015 academic year, immediately following the successful school bond election in Lebanon, Missouri, initiated a year of planning for the teachers who were part of the new consolidated middle school. Leadership from both buildings to be merged, supported by central office personnel, embarked on a series of faculty meetings that included planning to make sure the transition of the combination of two school buildings moved to a middle school philosophy. In addition, theories on change and school reform were introduced and became part of ongoing discussion. Numerous exercises took place aimed at bringing the two building faculties together with a shared purpose in line with the mission of the district.

Team building for faculty, as well as building leadership, was important during the planning year, and continued to be important during the first year of middle school operation. The overall goal continued to be addressed for faculty and staff unification. In-service included theory as applied to practice as well as fresh thinking about the purpose, philosophy, vision and the mission of education at the middle school level. The new

middle school opened in August 2016. Initial faculty and staff workshops of the new school year included substantial content aimed at embracing change, teaming, roles and shared responsibilities expected of all faculty, staff, and administration.

The Middle School in Lebanon

The middle school had historically been modeled to provide opportunity for planned *transition* of adolescents from elementary school to high school. Considerable research was conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of a middle school model as compared to the traditional junior high school. Armstrong (2006) wrote of the essential function of middle school education, as necessary to place the age group in a supportive learning environment that helped them learn, as well as the place to deal with the significant life impact of puberty on relative thinking, learning, and living challenges.

Forte and Schurr (2002) explained that in recent years, the middle school concept had proven to be effective in educating young adolescents. In addition, time-proven innovations including interdisciplinary teaming and cooperative learning were visible components of the organization in a middle school. The goal of the middle school movement was to collaboratively develop a shared vision with pedagogical focus (Valentine, 2005), both necessary in concert with appropriate climate to nurture young people in a middle school in such a way that they persist, survive adolescence, and learn.

Consequently, middle school teachers require special training, as well as the patience and understanding so necessary in meeting the broadly varied, quickly changing, needs of the students they work with on a daily basis. Even accreditors for educator preparation standards, including the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, now the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP),

adopted the 2012 Association of Middle Level Educator standards, recognizing the necessity for preparing middle school teachers to embrace a shared vision consistent with district mission (Starnes, 2010).

With the construction of its new building, the two building faculties in Lebanon, Missouri, decided to engage the middle school concept, as opposed to the junior high school model that had formerly been in place. In theory, a middle school philosophy is not the same as a junior high school philosophy. Wormeli (2003), a well-known researcher regarding the middle school model, differentiated between the middle school and the junior high school, saying that middle schools deliberately embrace a shared vision, advisory programs, interdisciplinary teaming, developmentally appropriate teaching, programs that emphasize student initiative and exploration, and a high value on parental involvement in the school. Junior high schools were truly high schools with younger aged students, and the structure departed from the elementary school single teacher, self-contained classroom, opting instead for grade level subject classrooms, each with a separate subject area teacher.

Erb (2001) stated that middle schools were more effective in meeting the needs of the adolescent age group. The necessity of developing a middle school mission statement to include district philosophy was essential, and also structured around the building's student demographics, along with specific school building goals. In the Lebanon Middle School, teachers had similar classroom philosophies in wanting to engage students in the learning process including the identification from Ryan and Deci (2004) of four key elements that help developed student engagement: autonomy, competence or self-efficacy, relatedness, and relevance.

Additionally, the National Middle School Association (2001) reported that holding high expectations for all and translating those expectations into daily actions would not be simple, but that schools should hold to an ongoing effort that would be ever changing as new challenges are brought to light. High expectations for all within the building, becomes the foundation that honors the students, encouraging them to become all that they can be.

Change Theories Applied to Consolidation

Marzano (2005) discussed the ever-present factor in schooling of having all sorts of people continue to want to change it in some way, with new academic structures, new curriculum, new philosophies, new technologies, and of course, new buildings. It was evident that combining two school buildings, two faculties, two staffs, and two sets of student bodies, involved significant change. Leadership at the middle school level in Lebanon, Missouri, spent a year engaged in discussions of the research not only involving curriculum models, but also on the challenges of stewardship for change. Navigating the challenges of consolidation requires practice that drive discussions of theory, rather than the converse, and successful practice, that when proven effective over time, should become central to the organizational theory (Fullan & Quinn, 2015).

In an organization like Lebanon, R-III, change was a commonality. Combining traditionally separate schools into a single new building required broad levels of change. The middle school leadership team at Lebanon R-III included a principal, two assistant principals, and a group of curricula leaders from faculty. This team met weekly throughout the 2015-16 academic year to discuss all aspects of the coming transition to a new, single building middle school, and on a regular basis during the following year. The

research relative to reform was repeatedly discussed by the leadership team, and those ideas were shared with the faculty during regular meetings.

Gabriel (2005) explained the idea of viewing teachers as leaders, and the need for this to be a part of the philosophy in developing the new middle school. Fullan and Quinn (2015) examined the necessity of bringing coherence to the new school, and deliberate methods to incorporate in action to avoid potential chaos. The leadership team was committed to the ideals of collective purpose, collaborative culture, clarity of individuals in team roles, and fostering a climate of accountability.

The two faculties from the two buildings sought a collective and single purpose regarding a shared mission, and a shared vision in not only the physical consolidation, but in educating students; knowing that to accomplish such required a commitment to continuous improvement by all involved. The fall in-service workshops included a clear and focused philosophy presented by the building leadership that reflected the idea that *we will never be there, but we are on our way*, because perfecting the craft of teaching and educating students was a process of continual improvement. This reflected the reform ideals of Valentine (2005) regarding middle school level education and educators, and Marzano's (2003) research of middle level actions of working from day one and forward with students.

Collaborative culture was an ongoing theme in the Lebanon R-III School District for many years. The teaching staff had always been included in decisions that impacted the classroom. Planning included members of faculty, and all faculty members had been continually informed of the decisions and progress toward the consolidation. Teachers were involved in the design of the building, the location of classrooms, the available

technology resources, library essentials, subject matter areas, and grade level locations. Faculty were also involved in discussion as detailed as establishing the school day opening and closing times for the building.

It was believed as essential that every member of faculty and staff embrace their role as an individual, as well as a member of an assigned team. Teams met during workshops throughout the year, and leadership detailed team roles at initial meetings, as well as ongoing review and confirmation throughout the year. In addition, teams of teachers shared a common planning time each day to plan and discuss the direction of the curriculum for students. Eaker, DuFour, and DuFour (2002) discussed the need for Professional Learning Communities of faculty that teach a common subject area and suggested weekly meetings for coordination, discussion, and ongoing program evaluation. These meetings emphasized the fact that every faculty and staff member in the new middle school had a role in serving students, and those roles were continually discussed and articulated on a regular basis.

Edmonds (1979) explained that full individual accountability was the foundation for any school that seeks to be effective. All of the adults in the building had a role in serving students, and all adults are accountable for following through with the defined responsibilities of their role. The responsibility for serving students, once again, reached widely from the lead principal to the people working in food service. All employees in the building were reviewed primarily based on the quality of individual service to students.

One Additional Challenge

Poverty and low socio-economic background among students in the middle school is no stranger to the Lebanon R-III School District. Over 60% of the student population qualifies for free or reduced lunch. The rate of identification for students with special needs also is great. While there was little racial diversity in the school district student population, there was a range of socio-economic conditions that impacted student readiness for school, as well as rates of persistence. Students were bused from the entire district to the new middle school, regardless of students' socio-economic status, creating an immediate mix of all socio-economic groups within one building.

Discussions during in-service workshops always included references to Payne's work (2005, 2008) for providing educators with stronger understandings about children coming from poverty. Payne (2005) provided a clear framework for educators regarding students from impoverished settings. Payne (2008) also provided insight to educators about how impoverished children not only came from homes with few of the resources common to middle and upper class families – many of which are basic necessities, such as adequate clothing, shoes, glasses, communication and reading skills, and sometimes even basic hygiene mastery so necessary for early success in school (Payne, 2008).

Strickland (2008) explained how to reach students, particularly those who are at risk, and were from impoverished backgrounds. The use of place-based learning was effective in connecting with inner-city students. Strickland's work was made available for faculty in the new middle school along with other recommended readings.

Summary

School reform has been a reality in Missouri since the 1980's. The middle school leadership in Lebanon used *Effective Schools* research, the *Coalition of Essential Schools* principles, *Outcome Based Education* research on effective instructional strategies, and change research to shape the efforts of consolidation as central operational and instructional models. The reform initiatives selected were directly discussed at initial faculty meetings, and then indirectly infused in during every general faculty meeting, and in every grade level meeting. The intra-district consolidation of two buildings held to a basic belief that to be truly responsive to young adolescents, and the holding of high expectations would not be limited to views about students, but high expectations would also be held for themselves and for one another. Effort was also made to frame and embrace a shared philosophy for the new school from school reform theories. The two faculties in Lebanon found they held similar beliefs in that they instructed students using lessons of best practice.

Chapter three explained the methodology for conducting this case study. This chapter outlined the sample group, the survey questionnaire and interview questions to effectively achieve knowledge of the perceptions of the teachers of a rural middle school in Missouri regarding school consolidation and the reform measures involved within that intra-district consolidation. Chapter 4 presented the information gained from the survey to summarize the participants survey submissions.

METHODOLOGY

This chapter explained the methods used in this case study. The survey design purposed to reveal perceptions of the participants about the planning and success of the launch of the newly established Lebanon R-III Middle School. The teachers and administrators of the new consolidated school were invited to participate on a voluntary basis. The survey collected data correlated to the research questions to identify the challenges and anticipated challenges of school consolidation; effective and successful school reform initiatives; and the participants' perception of the overall school climate.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

This study explored the perceptions of faculty and building leadership of a newly combined middle school resulting from intra-district consolidation in the Lebanon R-III School District in Lebanon, Missouri. School reform and change strategies that effectively addressed challenges in creating a positive school environment as encountered during intra-district consolidation in a rural middle school were explored. Specifically, the study explored and analyzed the perceptions of the faculty and building leadership regarding the anticipated challenges, successful strategies, and overall school climate. The study intended to explain the challenges and effective strategies for the consolidation of school to help inform and assist other school districts that might embark upon intra-district consolidation.

The following research questions were explored:

1. To what extent were the anticipated challenges addressed for assisting teachers in supporting change and successful school consolidation?

2. Which school reform initiatives were effective in assisting teachers in supporting change and successful school consolidation?

3. How do teachers and building leadership perceive the overall school climate after consolidating two distinct buildings into a single building?

Research Design

This case study was designed to incorporate the administration of a descriptive survey to determine the perceptions of teachers and building administrators regarding successful school reform measures within intra-district school building consolidation for a middle school in rural Missouri. Previous research identified best practices regarding consolidation from the viewpoint of outsiders. The survey was designed to rate the perceptions of faculty and staff directly involved in the process of a forced intra-district consolidation of a sixth grade building and a seventh and eighth grade building into a single middle school building.

This case study used a descriptive instrument to collect information from participants. The perceptions of the faculty and administration associated with the newly combined middle school were collected to identify the challenges and effective strategies for school consolidation. The perceptions of unity of combined purpose were explored including: intra-district consolidation of two buildings, faculties, students, staff and administration; education effectiveness following consolidation; the processes of school consolidation; and the ending results brought about from consolidation. This design provided the most efficient way of identifying the positive and negative perceptions resulting from the forced consolidation. Participation was anonymous, providing opportunity for participant to provide honest opinions without retribution.

Participants and Research Environment

The participants involved in this study consisted of the entire population of sixth, seventh and eighth grade teachers and building level administrators at Lebanon Middle School in the Lebanon R-III School District located in Lebanon, Missouri. The sample of respondents was comprised of voluntary participants from the consolidated middle school. Previous to consolidation the participants were housed in two separate buildings: a sixth grade school, and a seventh/eighth grade school. These two buildings were consolidated to become a newly formed middle school that would house sixth, seventh and eighth grade students.

Seventy teachers from the newly consolidated middle school building were invited to participate in the case study survey. The seventy teachers included 23 sixth grade teachers, 24 seventh grade teachers, and 23 eighth grade teachers. Within the population of the 23 sixth grade teachers, 21 were female, and 2 were male. The population of the 24 seventh grade teachers was 16 female teachers, and 8 male teachers. The population of the eighth grade teachers was 14 female teachers and 9 male teachers. The experience level of the participants was: 38 teachers had ten years of more of teaching experience, and 32 teachers had less than ten years of teaching experience.

An email inviting the participants to respond to the survey contained the reason for the study, an emphasis of the confidentiality of the information provided by participants, encouragement for completion of the survey instrument, and information that participation of the survey was voluntary. Those willing to participate had access to an electronic survey within a Google form which contained the survey questions. The responses of those participating remained anonymous due to the nature of the submission

using a Google form format. This provided access to the survey for all respondents at times that were personally convenient. It is expected the survey environment was comfortable for the participants.

Data Collection Procedures and Analysis

The participants responded to a 20-item survey administered electronically. The survey asked participants to rate their perceptions of each statement that related to the research questions using a 4-point Likert Scale. Each of the 20 questions asked participants to rank their viewpoint by choosing: A - strongly agreed; B - agreed; C - disagreed; and D - strongly disagreed.

The survey rated the importance that participants' identified regarding components of effective school reform measures and school consolidation. The questions of the survey incorporated the components of the three research questions concerning the challenges of forced school consolidation, successful school reform initiatives, and aspects of school climate after consolidation had taken place. The data collected from the survey identified participants' perceptions regarding aspects of policy and best practice within the topics of school consolidation, school reform measures and school climate.

The following conditions within the survey addressed the concerns of survey error: the answers participants gave accurately described characteristics of the respondents; and the subset of persons participating in the survey had characteristics similar to those of a larger population (Groves et al., 2009). The survey was designed using a Likert scale of four responses to offer accurate perceptions of the participants.

Groves et al. (2009) stated that, "surveys gain their inferential power from the ability to measure groups of persons that form a microcosm of large populations" (p.33).

The participants included a subset of the actual population of the consolidated school. This survey design addressed concerns of survey error and provided opportunity to collect valuable results.

The identity of the participants of the survey was completely anonymous and bore no identifying markers. The data was collected using an electronic format via a Google form. The data collection window was open for two weeks. The use of an electronic survey format provided a convenient method of responding to the survey for those participating.

The data collected was analyzed according to the topic of the research questions. The topics of the research questions focused on: the anticipated challenges of the school consolidation; the reform initiatives that were successful and effective in the consolidation; and the participant perceptions regarding the overall school climate after consolidation. Means were calculated for each survey question within the three research question categories and the means were used to rank the descriptors within those categories. The data was analyzed using the Google Forms software to create average percentages of answers for each of the questions and the use of the four choices of the Likert scale. The results were used to draw conclusions about the impact of the strategies used in the intra-district school consolidation.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to determine perceptions of intra-district school building consolidation and school reform resulting from consolidation. The concerns, issues, and successes from that consolidation were analyzed from an anonymous survey

provided to all teachers and building administrators. The participants responded to a 20-item survey correlated to each of the three research questions.

Chapter four presented the findings of this case study. The findings were organized utilizing the information gained from participants' answers to the 20-item anonymous survey. The 20-item survey included questions that held a direct correlation to each of the three research questions posed in Chapter 1 of this case study. The results of the survey were organized using a 4-point Likert scale of answers ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. The results of the survey were used to draw conclusions about the participants' perceptions regarding the impact of the intra-district consolidation. The results were further organized into the findings of the three original research questions with a correlating table to highlight those findings.

FINDINGS

This chapter presented the results of the data collected and research findings. The data regarding the participants, response rate, findings relevant to each research question, and a summary are included. The data collected from this study provided information to identify participants' perceptions regarding the success of the consolidation efforts of Lebanon Middle School.

The purpose of this study was to identify faculty perceptions of anticipated challenges, successful reform strategies, and overall school climate within a forced intra-district school consolidation. Specifically, the participants' perceptions regarding the change process within school consolidation; successful school reform initiatives in supporting change; and the overall school climate after the consolidation were collected.

Participant Response Rate

The data was collected using a survey sent to 70 faculty members, which included 23 teachers from the sixth grade level, 24 teachers from the seventh grade level and 23 teachers from the eighth grade level. The sixth grade teachers included 21 females and 2 males. The seventh grade teachers included 16 females and 8 males. The eighth grade teachers included 14 female and 9 male teachers.

There were 42 teachers who voluntarily completed the survey for an overall response rate of 60%. These participants were asked to rate their perception based upon a four-point Likert scale, ranging from (a) strongly agree, (b) agree, (c) disagree, to (d) strongly disagree for each survey question. The responses were analyzed by calculating the percentages of responses in each category. The percentage of responses were reported

according to the correlated research question. The survey questions were correlated to each of the three research questions.

Supporting School Consolidation Results

To what extent were the anticipated challenges addressed for assisting teachers in supporting change and successful school consolidation? Research question 1 focused on participants' perceptions regarding the change process of school consolidation. The survey included five questions concerning this aspect of the case study. The responses to questions 1, 5, 6, 17 and 18 of the survey were analyzed by calculating the percentages of responses in each category and reported in Table 1. The average response in each category was also calculated.

Table 1

Perceptions of School Consolidation Supports as a Percentage of the Sample

Question	SA	A	D	SD
1. In-service training during 2016	14.3	38.1	38.1	9.5
5. Professional development opportunities	12.2	34.1	46.3	7.3
6. Logistics support	26.2	45.2	26.2	0.0
17. Data-informed decision making	21.4	59.5	16.7	2.4
18. Overall success	26.2	64.3	4.8	4.7
Mean Perceptions	20.1	48.2	26.4	4.8

Note. SA=Strongly Agree; A=Agree; D=Disagree; SD=Strongly Disagree

Overall, the faculty perceived the school consolidation supports were successful. The mean perceptions in Table 1 show that the highest percentage of participants selected the Agree category regarding school consolidation. The mean perceptions presented in

Table 1 show the lowest percentage of selection was the Strongly Disagree category. The

categories of Strongly Agree and Disagree were selected almost equally by participants.

Effective School Initiative Results

To what extent were the anticipated challenges addressed for assisting teachers in

supporting effective school reform initiatives? Research question 2 focused on survey

participants' perceptions regarding school reform initiatives used within the consolidation

effort. The survey included eight questions concerning this aspect of the survey. The

responses to questions 3, 4, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, and 14 were analyzed by calculating the

percentage of responses in each category and reported in Table 2. The average response

in each category was also calculated.

Table 2

Perceptions of School Reform Initiative Supports as a Percentage of the Sample

Question	SA	A	D	SD
3. Academic benefits for students	35.7	59.5	4.8	0.0
4. District economic benefits	40.5	52.4	0.0	0.0
9. Safe school environment	63.4	34.1	2.5	0.0
10. Focus on curriculum	51.2	46.3	2.5	0.0
11. All students can learn	47.5	47.5	2.5	2.5
12. Communication to parents	33.3	57.1	4.8	4.8
13. Staff unity of purpose	33.3	50.0	14.3	2.4
14. Student curricular mastery	35.7	61.9	0.0	2.4
Mean Perceptions	42.6	51.1	3.9	1.5

Note. SA=Strongly Agree; A=Agree; D=Disagree; SD=Strongly Disagree

Overall, the faculty perceived the school reform initiative efforts were successful. The highest percentages of participant survey responses were reflected within the two categories of Agree, and Strongly Agree. The mean perceptions in Table 2 highlight that participant responses regarding school reform initiatives with the highest percentage of selection was the Agree category. The mean perceptions in Table 2 show participant survey responses regarding school reform initiatives with the lowest percentage of selection was the Strongly Disagree category. The category of Strongly Agree had a high percentage of responses while the category of Disagree had a small percentage of selection from survey participants.

School Climate Results

To what extent were the anticipated challenges addressed in teachers' perceptions of the overall school climate regarding the intra-district consolidation? Research question 3 focused on survey participants' perceptions regarding the overall school climate during and after the consolidation effort. The survey included seven questions concerning this aspect of the case study. The responses to questions 2, 7, 8, 15, 16, 19, and 20 were analyzed by calculating the percentage of responses in each category and reported in Table 3. The average response in each category was also calculated.

Table 3

Perceptions of Overall School Climate as a Percentage of the Sample

Question	SA	A	D	SD
2. Staff input opportunities	21.4	47.6	23.8	7.2
7. Challenges of faculty	58.5	41.5	0.0	0.0
8. Efforts to improve climate	26.2	57.1	9.5	7.2
15. Collegiality and professionalism	66.7	33.3	0.0	0.0
16. Shared norms, beliefs	38.1	54.8	5.8	1.3
19. Middle school unique	66.7	31.0	2.3	0.0
20. Classroom respect	42.9	54.8	2.3	0.0
Mean Perceptions	45.8	45.7	6.2	2.2

Note. SA=Strongly Agree; A=Agree; D=Disagree; SD=Strongly Disagree

Overall, the faculty perceived the efforts concerning the overall school climate were successful. The highest percentages of participant survey responses were reflected within the two categories of Strongly Agree, and Agree. The mean perceptions in Table 3 highlight that participant responses regarding the overall school climate with the highest percentage of selection was the Strongly Agree category, while the category of Agree had almost the exact same percentage of participant selection. The mean perceptions in Table 3 highlight that participant survey responses regarding the overall school climate following the forced intra-district school consolidation with the lowest percentage of selection was the Strongly Disagree category. The category of Disagree also had a minimal percentage of participant responses as a selection from survey participants.

Qualitative Survey Comments

Participants that completed the survey were offered the opportunity to include additional narrative comments related to the survey. Those additional comments included the following statements.

- "In our move from Hillcrest (6th grade center) and the old Junior High building (7th and 8th grade center), we had many obstacles to overcome. I believe overall the successes we had this school year are related to the commitment of our faculty and staff to come together to do what is best for students. Not everything has been perfect, but those moments of frustration and angst are easily overlooked when you see what we have done. "Go Yellowjackets!""

- "A universal challenge that was not mentioned is the difficulty staff and students have experienced with malfunctioning equipment and technology in the new building. These have become less of a problem as the school year has progressed."

- "The process has been an experience. Things have come up that we couldn't have planned for, and we have handled each situation. (Some better than others!) The only thing I have had a hard time with is we were given the chance to give input when usually the decisions had already been made. I don't like lip service. We will continue to grow and mesh as a staff and over time it will all come together. What a great building we have!"

- "I believe there could have been better communication with 6th grade teachers. For the most part, 7th and 8th grade teachers already knew how things worked in a junior high/middle school environment. It is my observation that most teachers and support staff get along well in this building."

- "My hope is that timely communication at all levels be improved."

- "The move to the new middle school has been mostly positive. However, there is still a feel of a separate 6th and 7th and 8th. For example, 6th grade this year was not allowed to participate in the plays/musicals, and there were 6th grade groups (Kindness Club) that were only for 6th grade, not for the other grades. This is only the first year, so I am sure there will be changes made of what to improve on."

- "I believe there should have been transition training for all staff when merging two buildings. The staff is professional, yet there needs to be more communication-the majority of the building came from the 7/8 building-the 6th grade staff was unfamiliar with policies and protocol that was maintained form the junior high, yet were expected to follow what they were unaware of."

- "We were blessed in our transition due to the unique qualities of the administration that were in place when this move happened. I believe it would have been a different outcome under different leadership."

Summary

This chapter presented the results of a study of representation of two faculties from separate buildings that were consolidated into one new middle school building in a

rural community in Missouri.   This chapter also included the results of survey

submissions offered to faculty involved in the consolidation. The survey was presented

to 70 faculty members, and was completed and submitted by 42 respondents who used an

electronic, anonymous Google form. Presented in Chapter 5 are the conclusions of this

case study, a summary of the findings gained from the topic of research, the implications

and limitations of the study, and the recommendations for future research concerning

intra-district school consolidation.

CONCLUSIONS

School consolidation in America has taken place for many decades. By the 1950's, thousands of small rural schools were consolidated. Consolidation continues today including the intra-district consolidation of two buildings as in this case study. There are many reasons for consolidations including declining enrollment, declining economic funding, or a drive from rural districts to join urban districts. There are two main reasons used to justify school consolidations: larger sized schools can offer more academic choices, and larger schools often include economic efficiencies. It is important for school leaders to understand effective strategies to successfully consolidate schools.

This case study explored school reform strategies that effectively addressed the challenges in creating a brand new school environment after a forced intra-district school consolidation. Further, this case study explored and analyzed the perceptions of the faculty regarding the challenges, successful school reform measures and the overall school climate immediately following the consolidation. Also examined was the reform process and change needed for the two distinct faculties to transition from a junior high philosophy to a middle school philosophy.

Interpretations and Implications

Overall, the findings of this case study revealed that survey generally participants had positive perceptions regarding the forced intra-district consolidation, school reform initiatives and beliefs concerning the overall school climate in the new combined school building. The data analysis of survey answers disclosed that the views of the majority of participants completing survey believed the consolidation effort was an overall success.

Survey participants through the use of the survey instrument indicated there were two key aspects of the consolidation effort perceived as representative of the school climate after the consolidation. All participants agreed the atmosphere in the new consolidated building was collegial and professional. Additionally, almost all of the participants agreed with the belief in the uniqueness of the student population in the new school building. These two perceptions indicate the strategies used to focus the staff upon the students that would be brought together into one building, and the potential of the newly constructed building to better serve those students and the community were successful.

Supporting School Consolidation. The results of the survey clearly indicated teachers believed that the challenges of the intra-district consolidation effort were completed somewhat successfully. It is important to note that more than half of the participants agreed that the emphasis on data-informed decision making, and the perception of teachers that the task of the actual successful completion of the new building were the most successful strategies, and thus became the strengths of the results for research question 1.

The weakest strategy was the provision of professional development prior to the intra-district consolidation. It is clear that additional professional development opportunities concerning the consolidation of two separate faculties would be helpful in minimizing the added stress of combining two faculties, two building missions, two building visions, and two building cultures. Other districts should consider the importance of the inclusion of an emphasis on data-informed decisions, and the addition

of opportunities for professional development for the two faculties that will be joining together before the actual consolidation.

Effective School Initiatives. The results of the survey clearly indicated teachers believed the school reform initiatives that were implemented before the intra-district consolidation were successful. It is important to note that more than half of the participants agreed that the middle school faculty and administration worked to provide a safe and trusting environment for all students, and that the newly consolidated middle school had a focus on helping adolescents gain curricular mastery on a defined set of skills. These two points were found to be the most successful strategies of the school reform initiatives for the survey participants.

The weakest strategy was perceived to be the development of a unity of purpose in bringing the two faculties together. It is clear that additional time to focus upon the development of a shared vision, mission and culture would be helpful in minimizing the communication discord between the two faculties. Other districts considering consolidation should consider the importance of the focus upon providing students a safe and trusting environment, and the pre-development of a shared vision and culture when bringing two separate faculties together.

School Climate. The results of the survey clearly indicated teachers believed the overall school climate of the newly combined school was positive. It is important to note that almost all of the participants agreed that an atmosphere of professionalism and the realization that the middle school was unique in educating adolescents were the most successful strategies regarding the school climate. Additionally, more than 90% of the

participants agreed that there were unique challenges, the practices to develop common

beliefs promoted trust, and that students adhered to a climate that was respectful and fair.

The weakest strategy perceived by participants was the level of input in the

consolidation process. The responses indicate participants believed they did not have

enough input into the processes. It is clear that the provision of additional

communication opportunities for teachers before the impending move to the new building

would have been helpful in minimizing that perception of having minimal input in the

decisions of the intra-district consolidation. Other districts should consider the

importance of all teachers participating in frequent input regarding the impending

consolidation, and further, the importance of collegiality and professionalism in

providing students and faculty a seamless transition to the newly combined building.

Limitations of the Study

Certain limitations in this case study existed. One limitation of the results due to

the percentage of participants that completed the survey. While the results reflect more

than half of the population of the consolidated building, it may not reflect the perceptions

of the other 40% of faculty. Further, survey items may have only collected the personal

opinions of participants instead of accurate success indicators regarding the strategies

used to implement the consolidation. Additional data collection procedures could have

expanded the findings and revealed more indicators.

This case study was limited to one intra-district consolidation. The data

collection could have been extended to include additional faculties across the state that

may have experienced a similar intra-district consolidation. The additional data could

have provided more specific insights. Finally, this case study could be duplicated with

additional survey questions to allow for the collection of more specific results of the outcomes of consolidation.

Recommendations for Future Research

There has been research concerning school consolidation in the past half-century, yet there have been few studies that addressed a forced intra-district consolidation. New questions remain about such a consolidation. The review of literature regarding school consolidation reveals the need to further identify successful reform initiatives and consolidation strategies specific to the middle school level. A further review of data acquired from administrators, faculty and staff members who planned and executed a multi-building school consolidation would provide important information that could be useful in developing additional knowledge for schools to use in the future for similar endeavors. This study only begins to reveal the educational potential for future school districts facing such a consolidation effort.

Final Thoughts

This case study examined factors leading to success for a newly combined middle school resulting from an intra-district school building consolidation. The study researched and reviewed current and historical literature on the topic, looked at trends in school consolidation, the effects of consolidation upon teachers and students, effective school reform initiatives related to consolidation, the educational effectiveness following the process of consolidation, and the overall school climate at the completion of the consolidation. It is clear that the newly consolidated middle school has found a unity of purpose. The school has a focus upon student success, an atmosphere of professionalism among the faculty, and the intention of helping students to gain curricular mastery.

Prior to the consolidation, the two faculties considered issues faced by most consolidation efforts, including such questions as: how to clarify and communicate a shared purpose, vision and values; how to initiate, implement and sustain a change process in becoming one building; and how to foster an environment that is results-oriented yet encourages students to grow academically. This case study shows these issues can be addressed successfully by the two faculties, before and after the consolidation process. The findings of this study indicate the types of practices that will enhance a smooth transition from an intra-district consolidation bringing about a shared vision, mission and culture to benefit the children of the consolidated school.

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APPENDIX A

IRB Board Approval Letter

FORT HAYS STATE UNIVERSITY

Forward thinking. World ready.

OFFICE OF SCHOLARSHIP AND SPONSORED PROJECTS

DATE: May 11, 2017

TO: Janci Mills, MS and District Leadership-Superintendent
FROM: Fort Hays State University IRB

STUDY TITLE: [1055411-1] Consolidation and Reform: Middle School Considerations
IRB REFERENCE #: 17-135
SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS
DECISION DATE: May 11, 2017

REVIEW CATEGORY: Exemption category # 2

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this research study. The departmental human subjects research committee and/or the Fort Hays State University IRB/IRB Administrator has determined that this project is EXEMPT FROM IRB REVIEW according to federal regulations.

Please note that any changes to this study may result in a change in exempt status. Any changes must be submitted to the IRB for review prior to implementation. In the event of a change, please follow the Instructions for Revisions at http://www.fhsu.edu/academic/gradschl/irb/.

The IRB administrator should be notified of adverse events or circumstances that meet the definition of unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects. See http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/policy/AdvEvntGuid.htm.

We will put a copy of this correspondence on file in our office. Exempt studies are not subject to continuing review.

If you have any questions, please contact Leslie Paige at lpaige@fhsu.edu or 785-628-4349. Please include your study title and reference number in all correspondence with this office.

APPENDIX B

Survey Instrument

1. I was provided in-service training during the 2016 Academic Year that was helpful for preparing me for consolidation and adoption of a middle school concept.

    A. Strongly Agree   B. Agree   C. Disagree   D. Strongly Disagree

2. I was provided adequate opportunities for input regarding the consolidation and impending move to the new middle school.

    A. Strongly Agree   B. Agree   C. Disagree   D. Strongly Disagree

3. The Lebanon R-III School District expected there would be academic benefits for students from the intra-district consolidation of school buildings.

    A. Strongly Agree   B. Agree   C. Disagree   D. Strongly Disagree

4. The Lebanon R-III School District expected there would be economic benefits from the intra-district consolidation of the two school buildings.

    A. Strongly Agree   B. Agree   C. Disagree   D. Strongly Disagree

5. Adequate professional development was provided to me in preparation for the intra-district consolidation.

    A. Strongly Agree   B. Agree   C. Disagree   D. Strongly Disagree

6. I was provided sufficient support in the logistics of moving from my previous school building to the new middle school.

    A. Strongly Agree   B. Agree   C. Disagree   D. Strongly Disagree

7. I believe there were unique challenges in bringing two distinct building faculties together.

    A. Strongly Agree   B. Agree   C. Disagree   D. Strongly Disagree

8. I believe there were efforts made to meet the challenges posed by bringing two distinct building faculties together that improved the school climate after consolidation.

    A. Strongly Agree   B. Agree   C. Disagree   D. Strongly Disagree

9. I believe the new middle school faculty and building administration are working to provide a safe and trusting environment for the students in grades 6-8.

    A. Strongly Agree   B. Agree   C. Disagree   D. Strongly Disagree

10. I believe the new middle school provides a focus on curriculum and instruction, with each grade level teaching to the standards prescribed by the state of Missouri.

    A. Strongly Agree   B. Agree   C. Disagree   D. Strongly Disagree

11. It is my belief that all students can learn in the consolidated middle school building.

    A. Strongly Agree   B. Agree   C. Disagree   D. Strongly Disagree

12. The faculty and administration at the new middle school work to provide appropriate communications to parents regarding the progress of their children.

    A. Strongly Agree   B. Agree   C. Disagree   D. Strongly Disagree

13. The newly consolidated faculties seem to be developing a unity of purpose with a common vision and mission in educating the students in grades 6-8 and I believe that these goals should apply to all students.

    A. Strongly Agree   B. Agree   C. Disagree   D. Strongly Disagree

14. I believe the newly consolidated middle school has a focus on helping adolescents in grades 6-8 gain curricular mastery on a defined set of skills.

    A. Strongly Agree   B. Agree   C. Disagree   D. Strongly Disagree

15. I believe that a basic atmosphere of collegiality and professionalism is present within the newly combined school faculty.

    A. Strongly Agree   B. Agree   C. Disagree   D. Strongly Disagree

16. Practices to develop shared norms, values, beliefs, and attitudes among the newly combined faculty are promoted to support an atmosphere of trust and collaboration.

    A. Strongly Agree   B. Agree   C. Disagree   D. Strongly Disagree

17. I believe there is an emphasis on data-informed decision making in the new middle school.

    A. Strongly Agree   B. Agree   C. Disagree   D. Strongly Disagree

18. Overall, I believe the intra-district consolidation for the new middle school has been successfully accomplished.

    A. Strongly Agree   B. Agree   C. Disagree   D. Strongly Disagree

19. I believe that teaching in the newly combined middle school is unique due to the transitional nature of adolescent students.

    A. Strongly Agree   B. Agree   C. Disagree   D. Strongly Disagree

20. Students in the classrooms of the newly combined middle school generally demonstrate a climate characterized by respect and fairness.

    A. Strongly Agree   B. Agree   C. Disagree   D. Strongly Disagree

Please add any additional comments you wish to express related to the survey.