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# Academic Leadership Journal

## The Effect of Consolidation on Extracurricular Activity Participation

School reform initiatives have often included the controversial practice of school consolidation in an effort to limit the cost and improve the quality of the educational process. While there are both benefits and liabilities in consolidating schools, there are few studies that have determined the impact of consolidation on certain student behaviors such as participation in extracurricular activities (Blake, 2003; Clinchy, 1998; Eisner, 1995; Fanning, 1995; Hawkes, 1992; Hughes, 2003; Jonjak, 2003; Nelson, 1985; Reynolds, 1999; Seal & Harmon, 1995; Self, 2001a, 2001b). Findings are mixed in that some studies have indicated that consolidated schools offer a greater number and wider range of extracurricular activities, while other studies have indicated lower levels of participation among students in larger, consolidated schools (Blake, 2003; Coladarci & Cobb, 1996; Fanning, 1995). Regardless, participation in extracurricular activities has been linked to higher academic achievement among high school students (Cooper, Valentine, Nye, & Lindsay, 1999; Cosden, Morrison, Gutierrez, & Brown, 2004; Howley & Huang, 1991; Mahoney, Cairns, & Farmer, 2003; Nettles, Mucherah, & Jones, 2000).

### School Consolidation

School consolidation has often been defined as the practice of combining two or more schools for the purposes of decreasing cost and increasing educational opportunity (Blake, 2003; Jonjak, 2003; Nelson, 1985; Reynolds, 1999; The Public Education Reorganization Act, 2003). In practice, the definition of school consolidation has nearly always involved the merging of school districts; however, in some cases, as enrollments decrease or districts alter grade configurations, schools are merged within a single district, and for this study, the former definition is used. The logic behind school consolidation closely resembles the progressive industrial era of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in that the “economy of size” model was grounded in the idea that by increasing the size of an operation, financial liability would be reduced while productivity would be increased. Similarly, it was assumed that when this model was introduced into the educational setting, consolidation would allow school districts and states to reduce spending while increasing the quality of education received by students (Bickel, Howley, Williams, & Glascock, 2001; Clinchy, 1988; Eisner, 1995; Fanning, 1995; Reynolds, 1999; Seal & Harmon, 1995; Self, 2001a, 2001b).

School consolidation has been a rather controversial reform measure, and has received great attention from the public and the initiation of widespread debate in the educational community (Coladarci & Hancock, 2002; Irby, 1998; Seal & Harmon, 1995). Communities have viewed the issue as a choice between “society – educational opportunities for all individuals in the larger society” and “community – a sense of collective identity and a set of shared values and a means of reproducing them” (Reynolds, 1999, p. 242). The issue of school consolidation has traditionally been discussed by educators within the framework of school finance and school curriculum, while the general public has held to the view of school as the very heart and life of a community and has sought to maintain local control; thus, resisting consolidation (Fanning, 1995; Hughes, 2003; Irby, 1998; Kay, 1982; Reynolds, 1999). Many educators

and researchers have indicated that finances are the primary force driving consolidation (Bickel et al., 2001; Coladarci & Hancock, 2002; Fanning, 1995; Hughes, 2003; Nelson, 1985; Reynolds, 1999; Seal & Harmon, 1995). Communities that suffer from declining enrollments, reduced state funding, and a dwindling tax base are often compelled to merge with neighboring school districts. Also, some districts have reported that many educational reform initiatives mandated by the state have not been accompanied by adequate funding, forcing those that are struggling to consolidate (Benton, 1992; Seal & Harmon, 1995). Supporters of school consolidation have asserted that money is saved by a reduced need for teaching and administrative personnel and the resulting shared facilities also are believed to reduce costs (Benton, 1992; Nelson, 1985; Self, 2001a, 2001b). Others have asserted that there is growing evidence that little or no financial advantages are seen in the consolidation of schools as spending is reduced in certain areas, yet more money is required in other areas, such as transportation (Fanning, 1995; Killeen & Sipple, 2000; Vander Ark, 2002; Young, 1994).

If the primary motivation for school consolidation has been cost-reduction, increasing academic achievement has been a close second (Fanning, 1995). Some have cited broader curricular and extracurricular offerings as major advantages of consolidated schools (Nelson, 1985; Self, 2001a, 2001b), and teachers have also been found to be able to take advantage of greater resources in receiving more professional development following consolidation (Self, 2001a, 2001b). Yet others have suggested that there are additional liabilities that result from mergers, as smaller schools were also more capable of providing closer relations between faculty, administration, students, and parents, all enhancing the opportunity for individualized instruction (Nelson, 1985). Also, smaller schools had higher attendance rates, lower dropout rates, higher grade point averages, and greater student and teacher satisfaction with the school experience (Gardner, Ritblatt, & Beatty, 2000; Vander Ark, 2002). Larger schools do have some advantages, such as higher Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores (Gardner et al., 2000), yet the impersonal climate of larger schools leads to lower levels of parental involvement and student participation (Beckner & O'Neal, 1980; Fanning, 1995; Gardner et al.). Further, a growing body of research has indicated that schools with broad grade-span configurations demonstrate significantly higher student achievement (Bickel et al.; Coladarci & Hancock, 2002; Franklin & Glascock, 1998; Wihry, Coladarci, & Meadow, 1992), and these schools are typically smaller schools that have not undergone consolidation.

A third consideration of school consolidation has been the effect on the community as a whole. Some have asserted that many schools are the only source of community services provided to residents (Irby, 1998; Nelson, 1985; Kay, 1982). Many communities rely heavily upon schools for facilities, entertainment, and information networking. In many cases school programs were the lifeblood of the community and this sentiment has been shared through consolidation efforts nationwide dating back to the earliest movements (Brantley, 1983; Coladarci & Hancock, 2002; Hughes, 2003; Reynolds, 1999). Others, however, have described communities in which the citizens had overwhelmingly positive responses to the consolidation of their schools (Benton, 1992; Self, 2001a, 2001b). As reform issues such as consolidation are expressed almost entirely in economic and educational terms, powerful cultural considerations are often overlooked. Several have stated that character and behavioral problems in students are blamed on the disintegration of the family and the loss of the stable communities that support them; however, a significant question in the issue of consolidation that remains to be adequately addressed is whether the dying community results in school closure or if school closure results in the death of a community (Fanning, 1995; Kay, 1982; Nelson, 1985; Sell, Leistritz, & Thompson, 1996).

## Extracurricular Activities

Extracurricular activities have long been viewed as a valuable extension of the classroom where knowledge and skills gained can be put into action. Mahoney et al. (2003) defined extracurricular activities as structured, voluntary activities sponsored by the school which were under the direction of one or more adults. A growing body of research supports the positive effect of extracurricular activity participation on student achievement (Cooper et al., 1999; Cosden et al., 2004; Howley & Huang, 1991; Mahoney et al.; Nettles et al., 2000); and with this connection between participation in extracurricular activities and student success, further research is needed to examine factors that influence student participation in such valuable programs.

Significantly more extracurricular activities are able to be offered in schools that have undergone consolidation as sports programs and other types of extracurricular activities flourish due to the combining of financial resources; and in some case studies of consolidated schools, it has been found that there was up to twice as many extracurricular activities as previously available to students (Nelson, 1985; Self, 2001a, 2001b). Prior findings have supported the fact that consolidated schools provide a wider range of extracurricular activities; however, there is more debate regarding the level of student participation in these activities. Some activities, such as sports teams, have a prescribed limit to the number of students who are able to participate; and when two schools combine, the total number of positions in these activities is cut in half. On the other hand, these lost positions may be replaced by the addition of new sports teams. A lower level of student participation is an area of concern in the consolidated school; a key issue in the school size debate (Blake, 2003; Coladarci & Cobb, 1996; Fanning, 1995).

Most of the research that has examined consolidated schools has approached the issue in terms of finances, academic offerings, and community concerns (Blake, 2003; Clinchy, 1998; Eisner, 1995; Fanning, 1995; Hawkes, 1992; Hughes, 2003; Jonjak, 2003; Nelson, 1985; Reynolds, 1999; Seal & Harmon, 1995; Self, 2001a, 2001b), and the results have been mixed due to the complex nature of consolidation. Very little is known about how students respond to the changes brought about by school consolidation, yet it has been determined that extracurricular activity participation is a strong indicator of academic achievement (Cooper et al.; Cosden et al.; Howley & Huang, 1991; Mahoney et al.; Nettles et al.), and consolidated schools usually have been able to offer a greater number and wider range of extracurricular activities (Benton, 1992; Nelson, 1985; Self, 2001a, 2001b).

The purpose of this study, therefore, was to determine the effect of consolidation on extracurricular activity participation in select high schools, and although it was not examined in this study, it was assumed that there was an indirect effect on student achievement, a necessary outcome of all schools, consolidated or not. It was hypothesized that an increase in offerings would have an impact on student participation in these activities. Specifically, it was hypothesized that there would be a greater number of activities themselves offered in the consolidated schools, yet a lower number of overall students who participated in these activities, and no difference in the number of activities in which individual students participated.

## Method

### Participants and Procedure

Data were collected from administrators and students in grades 11 and 12 in consolidated high schools in the state (two small schools that merged together, considered as one, and a small school that merged with a larger school, considered as two, all less than 500 students; respectively). The three administrators in the sample had access to information regarding extracurricular activity offerings in the prior affected schools and the newly consolidated schools. The sample also included 78 randomly selected students that participated in extracurricular activities from the three consolidated schools (19 in school 1, 44 in school 2, and 15 in school 3) who had also attended grades 10 or 11 at an affected high school prior to consolidation.

Both the administrators and students received a cover letter in which details of the study were discussed, and any questions regarding the study were answered before a questionnaire was given. A questionnaire was developed specifically for the study that contained an exhaustive list of possible activities that were provided in the schools. The panel of experts containing two university professors with expertise on school consolidation, two principals of consolidated schools, and one administrator of the Department of Education of the state helped in the development of the surveys. Content and accuracy of each survey question was examined by the panel to ensure the validity of the instruments. Revisions were made in the survey. Following the panel study, a pilot study including 5 principals and 20 students was administered. Questions of each survey and survey as a whole were tested for reliability. The Cronbach alpha was 0.87. Revisions were made after both panel suggestions and pilot test.

The final survey asked administrators about the number and nature of extracurricular activities available to students in the affected and consolidated schools. Students were specifically asked about the number and nature of extracurricular activities in which they themselves participated before and after school consolidation; and demographic data including grade level in school, gender, and ethnicity. Semi-structured interviews with both principals and students to gather in-depth information about the impact of school consolidation. Interviews offered triangulation and improved the validity of the findings.

## Data Analysis

It was hypothesized earlier that there would be a greater number of activities themselves offered in the consolidated schools, a lower number of overall students who participated in these activities, and no difference in the number of activities in which individual students participated. The Chi-square statistic was used to determine if there were statistically significant differences between the schools before and after consolidation on the number of activities offered and the number of overall students who participated in them. The paired samples t-test was used in order to determine if there was a statistically significant difference between the number of activities in which individual students participated before and after consolidation, and the effect size was determined using Cohen's d.

## Results

In this study, the administrators reported little difference in the number of activities available to students in the first two schools (21 and 22, 18 and 22, for the affected and consolidated schools, respectively), but there was a noticeable difference in the number of activities available in the third school (19 and 31 for the affected and consolidated schools, respectively), but all 31 activities were present in the existing larger school before consolidation [ $\chi^2(2, n = 133) = 1.15, p > .05$ ]. Regarding the overall number of

students who participated in extracurricular activities, again there was no statistically significant difference in the number of students participating before and after consolidation,  $\chi^2(2, n = 145) = .23, p = .89$ . Further analysis of the data by gender and grade level also yielded no statistically significant difference in participation for these groups [Females,  $\chi^2(2, n = 71) = .09, p = .96$ ; Males,  $\chi^2(2, n = 74) = .11, p = .95$ ; grade 11,  $\chi^2(2, n = 49) = .18, p = .91$ ; grade 12,  $\chi^2(2, n = 84) = .01, p = .99$ ], but the total number of students actually participating decreased overall from 75 to 70. Regarding the number of activities in which the 78 students participated, 44 (56.4%) reported a decrease in the number of extracurricular activities, 20 (25.6%) reported an increase in the number of extracurricular activities, and 14 (17.9%) reported no change in the number of extracurricular activities in which they participated after consolidation (see Table 1). The number of extracurricular activities in which individual students participated in the affected school before high school consolidation (  $M = 4.28, SD = 3.33$ ) was statistically significantly lower than the number of extracurricular activities in which individual students participated in the consolidated high school (  $M = 3.44, SD = 2.62$ ),  $t(77) = 3.37, p < .01$ , and the effect size was moderate (  $d = .28$ ).

Table 1

Change in Extracurricular Activity Participation

| School | Group    | Increased | Decreased | Unchanged |
|--------|----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| 1      | Female   | 2         | 7         | 1         |
|        | Male     | 2         | 5         | 2         |
|        | Grade 11 | 1         | 1         | 1         |
|        | Grade 12 | 3         | 11        | 2         |
|        | Total    | 4         | 12        | 3         |
|        | Female   | 5         | 12        | 4         |
|        | Male     | 7         | 11        | 5         |
|        | Grade 11 | 9         | 4         | 7         |
|        | Grade 12 | 3         | 19        | 2         |

|   |          |    |    |    |
|---|----------|----|----|----|
|   | Total    | 12 | 23 | 9  |
| 3 | Female   | 2  | 4  | 2  |
|   | Male     | 2  | 5  | 0  |
|   | Grade 11 | 1  | 3  | 1  |
|   | Grade 12 | 3  | 6  | 1  |
|   | Total    | 4  | 9  | 2  |
|   | Total    | 20 | 44 | 14 |

Note. n = 78

### Conclusions

It was hypothesized that there would be a greater number of activities themselves offered in the consolidated schools, a lower number of overall students who participated in these activities, and no difference in the number of activities in which individual students participated. As demonstrated in this study there was no statistically significant difference in the number of activities themselves offered or in the number of overall students who participated, even though there was an actual decrease on the latter. As for the difference in the number of activities in which individual students participated, there was a statistically significant decrease in the number engaged, which is consistent with the results found in the second hypothesis.

It was stated earlier that there are few studies that have determined the impact of consolidation on certain student behaviors such as participation in extracurricular activities (Blake, 2003; Clinchy, 1998; Eisner, 1995; Fanning, 1995; Hawkes, 1992; Hughes, 2003; Jonjak, 2003; Nelson, 1985; Reynolds, 1999; Seal & Harmon, 1995; Self, 2001a, 2001b) and the findings are mixed in that some studies have indicated that consolidated schools offer a greater number and wider range of extracurricular activities, while others have indicated lower levels of participation among students in larger, consolidated schools (Blake, 2003; Coladarci & Cobb, 1996; Fanning, 1995). The findings of this study are also somewhat inconsistent in that one school did offer a greater range of activities, but for all schools combined there was no significant increase. Also, somewhat inconsistent with the above was the drop in the overall

level of participation, although the change was not significant. One result that is consistent is the significant drop in the level of individual participation, as the impersonal climate of larger schools leads to lower levels of parental involvement and student participation (Beckner & O'Neal, 1980; Fanning, 1995; Gardner et al.) and is a key concern in the school size debate (Blake, 2003; Coladarci & Cobb, 1996; Fanning, 1995). In fact, more than twice as many students reported a decrease in the individual number of extracurricular activities as those reporting an increase.

While it can be argued by supporters of high school consolidation that no practical significant effect was obtained, it stands to reason that those opposed may have an equally valid argument. If the goal of school reform measures, including school consolidation, is to provide greater opportunity for students then consolidation efforts may have failed to meet this purpose regarding this one particular aspect of the educational process, which of course does not imply that consolidation efforts have been unsuccessful overall. The possibility remains that studies of other areas of the educational process may yield favorable results following consolidation, most importantly, the impact on student achievement, but also the cultural impact on the community.

One limitation of this study is that student achievement data could not be examined, even though participation in extracurricular activities has been linked to higher academic achievement among high school students (Cooper et al.; Cosden et al., Howley & Huang, 1991; Mahoney et al.; Cairns, & Farmer, 2003; Nettles et al.). Because high school consolidation in the state was a highly controversial political issue, student academic achievement data and socioeconomic data were not obtainable for this study; such data in future studies will undoubtedly be vital to a deeper understanding of this issue. Another limitation of this study was the sample size, since only three schools were affected by consolidation when this study was conducted. More high schools will consolidate in the next several years as school districts are shaped by The Public Education Reorganization Act (2003).

Regardless, this study has provided some insight for both educators and lawmakers as they continue to develop programs to provide a more efficient and effective education for students. Many schools that are now receiving an affected high school in the coming years have implemented programs to ease the transition for students into their new settings. School officials, teachers, and coaches continue to meet with students and parents to foster relationships and develop familiarity with the new school programs. In order to provide a new direction for examining consolidation efforts, perhaps these schools should undergo further examination to determine if any significant and practical differences resulted from such programs when compared to schools that do not have such a plan of action in place. Areas for future research should include both quantitative and qualitative data collection to explore more fully how consolidation affects opportunities for student engagement in extracurricular activities and the impact on their social bonding with the school, discipline, and achievement.

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