“Successful Reorganization of Rural North Dakota Schools with Declining Enrollment”

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Family:

Linda, Spouse
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Educational Background:

- 1977 – Graduated from Concordia College, Moorhead, MN
  - BA in Social Studies and Physical Education
- 1986 – Graduated from Tri-College University, Fargo, ND
  - Master’s of Science in Educational Leadership
- 2014 – Graduated from University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, ND
  - Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Leadership
Professional Background:

- Teacher/Athletic Director/Coach – Tioga Public Schools, Tioga, ND

- Dean of Academic Affairs – Oak Grove Lutheran Schools, Fargo, ND

- Superintendent of Schools – Lisbon Public Schools, Lisbon, ND
Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to identify the perceptions of successful reorganized school districts due to declining enrollments and reduced resources. All the newly formed school districts in this study have witnessed serious declining enrollments in their respective rural communities, which have forced them to either reorganize or no longer exist. The successfully reorganized school districts developed a reorganization plan and a positive culture within their communities that resulted in the plan being passed by the voting citizenship.
The study was not!

- Quality of education
- Large school vs. small school
- Financial efficiency
- Student Performance

- The study was about schools trying to SURVIVE!
Why this study?

- Family History
- Deb & Frank Popper, John Keller, and others
- My own professional experiences
Mixed Methods Research

- Quantitative data – Survey of 21 Successful reorganized school districts’ superintendents, principals, business managers and school board members

- Qualitative data – county committee hearing minutes and follow up phone interviews of school leaders who completed the survey
Research Questions

1. What critical factors caused the beginning of the reorganization process?
2. What incentives were key to the decision to reorganize?
3. What aspects of the reorganization process were positive or effective in terms of enhancing the process for all involved?
4. What aspects of the reorganization process were negative or ineffective strategies?
Definition of Terms

- Big Eight – eight largest school districts in ND including: Bismarck, Dickinson, Fargo, Grand Forks, Mandan, Minot, West Fargo and Williston
- Consolidation – old term used by ND law that means to combine two or more districts
- Reorganization – formation of a new school district through the combination, in whole or in part, of two or more districts
- Reorganization Plan - NDCC 15.1-12-10 requires the plan to address and report: maps, enrollment, enrollment projections, buildings, course offerings, administration, transportation, taxable valuation, CTC, Special Education, indebtedness, property, proposed budget, name and any other information requested by county committee or state board
- Rural District – k-12 enrollment less than 1,000 students
Review of Literature

- ND Reorganization Laws
- Evolutionary Change Theory
- Population Shifts
- School Funding
- Reorganization in Other States
- Emotional Aspects of Issues
- Federal and State Standards
Evolutionary Change Theory

- An organization’s process of finding new structure, stability and activities when faced with gradual changes to their organization over time; i.e. adopting to decline in enrollment and shifts of population within a community (Bolman & Deal, 2003)
- Organizational evolutionary change becomes difficult when resources are plentiful. People are not concerned with change and/or do not want to cause conflict with others
- The role of school leaders during reorganization efforts must be one of managers the public and of language
- Expansion of knowledge base on managing change allows opportunities to address and mend issues during the process. Do not allow a problems to get so large it cannot be fixed. Build a contingency process
The total number of public school districts in North Dakota in the year 1918 was 4,700. The number of public school districts in 2013 was 179.

**ND School Districts Decline in Number**

**SOURCE:** 2013 North Dakota Department of Public Instruction
Early 1900s in North Dakota

- Less than 25% of farm children finished eighth grade while more than 75% of city children finished eighth grade.
- High School Diplomas – more than 60% of city children achieved a diploma as compared to less than 10% of farm children.
- Neil C. MacDonald, ND Superintendent of Public Instruction “A Square Deal for the Country Boy”
ND “Consolidation” Begins

- 1911 ND law gave state aid to elementary schools and initially provided $100 per consolidated school.

- 1913 ND law increased that amount to $600 for building substantial schools with classroom, library, gymnasium, vocational classes and new heating systems.
Post WWII Consolidation

- Due to huge population shifts caused by the 30s and the need to improve rural education to meet the needs of changing America – ND passed new reorganization laws.

- The new laws required a plan with provisions for – transportation, curriculum, staffing, administration, board membership and budget projections.
In 1973, ND had 136,404 students k-12. In 2007, the number fell to 95,600. The number grew in 2012-13 to 99,192.

Total Number of North Dakota Students Enrolled in Public Schools

136404 119803 118094 113929 95600 99192

Number of Students


SOURCE: 2013 North Dakota Department of Public Instruction
2,500 New Students! (12-13 to 13-14)

- 80 out of the 179 Districts - enrollments were the same or decreased

- 91 out of the 179 Districts - enrollments increased by 549 (WC 167)

- 8 (Big Eight) of the 179 Districts - enrollments increased by 1,951 (WF 492)
What is the critical need?

- Enrollment shifts
  - largest eight (8) school districts in North Dakota realized an increase in k-12 enrollment
  - decline in student enrollment in districts that today have fewer than 1000 students
  - school enrollment impacted by rapidly growing areas
Population shifts

- Elderly – 50% increase in population over the age of 65
- Increase Size of Farms – 2012 1,268 acres with average net income $147,128 in North Dakota
- Loss of manufacturing.
- 20’s-30’s age group – HS and College graduates where do they go?
Effects of Population Shifts

- Increase population of the elderly – less support for local schools, infrastructure, parks and recreation and workforce development. While at the same time increase cost of long term health care
- Agriculturally dependent areas are at greatest risk of persistent enrollment decline as farms increase in size and less dependence on labor
- “metro” counties of the Great Plains States
CASS POPULATION JUMPS 13K

ND Top 10 Growth Counties 2010-2013

- Cass: 13,051
- Williams: 7,197
- Burleigh: 7,149
- Ward: 6,315
- Stark: 4,013
- McKenzie: 2,954
- Grand Forks: 2,318
- Mountrail: 1,703
- Morton: 1,519
- Rolette: 645
Kids Count Data Center

- K-12 student enrollment by county 2008-2012
- During that period 31 counties (58%) out of 53 counties lost enrollment
- 22 counties (42%) had enrollment increases
- Largest growth during that period was Cass County with 1,593 new students
Educational Issues

- Opportunities for Students – curricular and extra-curricular
- Effective teachers, classified staff and administrators
- Facilities
- Transportation
Size Doesn’t Matter

- Typically Rural Districts suffer from two things – economic loss and population decline. Is that true in ND?
- Rural teacher shortage – this has become one of my #1 concerns
- State funding – per pupil payments with the only adjustment for size through weighted factors
- Federal and State Standards – NCLB, IDEA and Accreditation Standards
Survey Demographics

- 162 surveys with 77 returned 47.5%
  School board members 30.3%,
  principals 21.1%
  superintendents 14.5%
  business managers 7.9%
- Educational Background – 41.46% with a Master’s Degree
- Enrollment – 35% 301-400 students
- Gender – 64.94% males
Results – Begin the process?

Research Q1. #1 reason for districts to start the process “DECLINING ENROLLMENTS” – “…Nobody likes to lose their school. Nobody wants their school to close. If we had our choice we would chose [sic] to keep our schools in our community but we realize with dwindling school populations, with one and two kids per class in lower grades that we need to something. (Lind, 2000, pp. 2-3)”
Results – Begin the process?

- Pooling resources would provide better opportunities for students like – curriculum and extracurricular activities, teachers, tax base, facilities, administration, etc.
- Minutes reflected multiple times that if the reorganization plan was not passed, the school and community would not “survive.”
- Fear of losing their school through the dissolution process
Results – What incentives were key?

Research Q2. The opportunity to maximize educational opportunities for students was the main incentive to beginning the process of reorganization.

- ND’s $500,000 bonus paid reorganized districts when a district served a physical areas of at least 800 square miles.
- Willingness of each district to take funds out of their ending fund balance and place those funds in the new district.
Results – Positive aspects?

Research Q3. Survey results revealed that having representation on the new school board from all former district with second most important positive part of the plan was retention of teachers. (Administrators not so lucky)

- History of sharing – extracurricular, special education, teachers, technology
Research Q4. Open enrollment and new district’s choice of mascot were NOT factors. However, retention of school buildings and location of buildings in the new district were key strategies.

- Research indicated that mandated reorganization for the purpose of reducing administrative costs and saving tax $ does nothing but create strong opposition. Rural residents recognize the positive benefits of small rural districts for their students as more important than negative financial arguments.
Conclusions

- Rural school districts with many of the community characteristics described in the literature have and will continue to see declining enrollment.
- Student enrollment will shift from rural districts to urban districts and also to districts impacted by the energy industry.
- The “Big 8” will continue to enroll the majority of all students.
- North Dakota will continue to lose small rural school districts.
- A successful reorganization plan must include school board representation from former districts.
- Successful plans include retention of teaching staff from all schools.
- Success or failure of the plan was dependent on the school leadership.
Recommendations

• Future research should include school districts who have had failed reorganization attempts and also districts that have gone through dissolution.
• that additional research be done on other organizations experiencing population shifts.
• Evaluation by law makers of state policies used to deal with reorganization, dissolutions and annexations.
• Student enrollment trends should be continually monitored, reported to the public for financial equity issues.
• Communication by educational leaders focused on opportunities for students.