2021

STAKEHOLDER PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENT OPPORTUNITY IN CONSOLIDATED RURAL HIGH SCHOOLS

Bradley Smith
bradley.smith@lmunet.edu

LMU | Carter & Moyers School *of* Education
LINCOLN MEMORIAL UNIVERSITY

Final Dissertation Approval
Form 11

STAKEHOLDER PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENT OPPORTUNITY IN CONSOLIDATED RURAL HIGH SCHOOLS

This is to certify that I have examined this copy of the doctoral dissertation by

Brad S. Smith

and have found that it is complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by the final examining committee have been made.

Cherie Bauer — 11/20/2020
Committee Chair — Date

[signature] — 11/20/20
Committee Member — Date

[signature] — 11/20/20
Committee Member — Date

[signature] — 11/20/20
EdD Director — Date

Teresa A. Bickell — 11/20/2020
Dean, School of Education — Date

STAKEHOLDER PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENT OPPORTUNITY IN CONSOLIDATED RURAL HIGH SCHOOLS

Dissertation

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education
in the Carter and Moyers School of Education
at Lincoln Memorial University

by

Brad S. Smith

November 20, 2020

Dedication

I dedicate this effort to my daughter, Sloan. May you be as proud of me as I am always of you. I dedicate this to my wife, Jenny, for your love and belief in me, even when I might not have believed for myself. I dedicate this to my father, who showed me time and again that no matter my previous familiarity with a challenge, if I work at something, I can figure it out. I also dedicate this work to my mother, whose belief in meaningful education drove me to seeking continual personal development and pointed me to this fulfilling career in education.

Acknowledgments

This project was possible due to the wisdom, motivation, and support of many people. I would like to acknowledge a few who inspired and drove me to see this through to the end. To Dr. Clifford Davis, thank you for honoring me by being a part of my committee and lending your knowledge and experience to improving my research and writing. To Dr. Joshua Tipton, whose positivity was calming and reassuring, thank you for helping me contact individuals who made conducting this research possible. Thank you to Dr. John Bartlett, who as my administrative supervisor during this time, was ultra-supportive and made allowances for me to complete my job responsibilities, this research, and be a father and husband concurrently. Finally, to Dr. Cherie Gaines, who provided feedback, motivated me to set high expectations, provided her friendship, and assembled the *Fab Five* so we could support each other, I thank you dearly and hope that someday I can provide to someone else the mentoring and support you have given me and my peers.

Abstract

Since the early 1900s, educational leaders and policymakers looked to consolidation as a way for rural schools and school systems to overcome financial challenges and improve the educational experiences for students. Stakeholders were met with conflicting claims about the effects of school and system consolidation. Proponents of consolidation claimed a consolidation would provide students with more curricular and extracurricular options by way of financial savings experienced from economies of scale, while opponents of consolidation claimed the consolidation would not relieve financial stress but would risk more behavioral problems and a loss of community identity. In this case study of a rural school system in Tennessee, involving instrumental, semi-structured interviews, I aimed to uncover the perceptions stakeholders had on how a school consolidation impacts student opportunity. After 20 interviews with five administrators, five teachers, five parents, and five non-parent community members, I found stakeholders desired increased curriculum and extracurricular options for students but were wary of the impact consolidation might have on student engagement and positive student-teacher relationships.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

Table **Page**

List of Figures

Figures **Page**

Chapter I: Introduction

To combat dwindling enrollment, fatiguing facilities, and increasing academic performance expectations, educational leaders and policymakers in rural communities considered consolidating one or more local schools or entire systems (Berry, 2007; Surface, 2011). The claims of those in favor and of those against consolidation were in conflict and could not both be true. Proponents of consolidation claimed a combined school or system would improve financial stresses and lead to more opportunities for students (Guthrie, 1979; Ismail, 2020; Lindsay, 1982; Palattella, 2017; Pignolet, 2018; Rubin, 2005; Self, 2001; Shakrani, 2010; Slate & Jones, 2005; WVMetroNews Staff, 2017). Opponents claimed consolidation would not yield financial relief, therefore disabling efforts to improve student opportunities while creating additional concerns (Cooley & Floyd, 2013; Cox & Cox, 2010; Galway, 2012; Haller, 1992; Lawrence et al., 2002; Nelson, 1985; Peshkin, 1982; Rubin, 2005; Streifel et al., 1991; Superville, 2017; Warner et al., 2010).

Researchers suggested stakeholders perspectives are important to educational leaders and policymakers considering a consolidation decision and execution (Ackell, 2013; Thurman, 2012). While extensive literature existed on school and system consolidations, financial implications of consolidations, the impact of consolidations on student achievement, and the arguments from proponents and opponents of consolidation can be readily found in local news articles, I did not locate any research on how stakeholders perceive rural consolidation will impact student opportunity, defined operationally as the curriculum and extracurricular options provided to students, the access to

instructional technology, and impactful teacher development. In this case study, I conducted qualitative, instrumental, semi-structured interviews of four stakeholder groups within a county considering consolidating some or all of the local high schools. With the knowledge gained from this study, educational leaders may make more informed decisions to lead their schools and communities when considering consolidation.

Statement of the Problem

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported the number of school districts in the United States dropped from 177,108 to 13,862 from 1939 to 2006 (Duncombe & Yinger, 2010). Additionally, the NCES provided data on the website that showed the number of public elementary and secondary schools dropped 65% from 1929 to 2016, and the number of these schools only increased 0.3% from 2016 to 2018 (NCES, n.d.a).

In the state of Tennessee, school system consolidation was rampant. According to Brummett et al. (2004), Tennessee had 158 school districts as of 1950. In 2020, the state had 137 school districts operating 1,883 Pre-K through 12th grade schools (Tennessee Department of Education, n.d.b). Between 1962 and 2020, Tennessee experienced 18 school system-wide consolidations (Young & Green, 2005). With the national trend to consolidate, Tennessee started with the Nashville Metro–Davidson County consolidation in 1962 (Egerton & Leeson, 1967). Knox County Schools took control of Knoxville City Schools in 1987 when the city school system went bankrupt (Appalachia Educational Lab & Tennessee Education Association, 1988; Knox County Board of Education, 1987), followed by Hamilton County and Chattanooga City Schools consolidating

in 1996 (Bradley, 1995; Cox & Cox, 2010). With the Shelby County Schools and Memphis City Schools consolidation in 2013 (Frankenberg et al., 2017; Siegel-Hawley et al., 2018), nearly 30% of all Tennessee public school students attended school in one of these four major super-districts (see Table 1).

Table 1

Four Largest School Districts in Tennessee, 2020

District Name	Previous Districts	Number of Schools	Student Enrollment
Metro Nashville Public Schools	Nashville City / Davidson County	160	81,407
Knox County Schools	Knoxville City / Knox County	84	59,224
Hamilton County Schools	Chattanooga City / Hamilton County	79	44,376
Shelby County Schools	Memphis City / Shelby County	202	106,377
Tennessee	N/A	1,883	973,659

(District Enrollment and Schools from Tenneessee Department of Education, n.d.b).

This was a potential problem as at least 30% of Tennessee public school students were being educated in schools resulting from major consolidations.

Rural schools in the United States faced considerable challenges in the mid- to late-1900s, such as high administrator to teacher ratios, lack of specialized instruction, and poor facilities (Berry, 2007; Surface, 2011). In 1910, 54.4% of the U.S. population lived in areas designated as rural by the U.S. Census Bureau (Ratcliffe et al., 2016). As urbanization continued during the 1940s through

1970s, rural populace moved to the cities, and by 2010, only 19.3% of the U.S. population lived in rural areas (Ratcliffe et al., 2010). With this decline in population, rural communities experienced decreases in local tax revenue, making the ability to provide quality educational experiences to students more challenging (Berry, 2007).

Students and society benefitted when schools provided quality educational experiences (Pang, 2014; Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2012; Wolf, 2002). Practically, individuals experienced personal benefits of finding better jobs, higher income, reduced risk of illness, and longevity in employment (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2012). According to 2018 data from the NCES (n.d.b), individuals with a high school diploma earned about 25% more income than those without, and individuals with post-secondary degrees earned almost 107% more income than those without high school diplomas. Individuals also experienced existential benefits from quality educational experiences including personal development "intellectually, morally, socially, aesthetically, and spiritually" (Pang, 2014, p. 17). Whole societies also benefitted from the quality education of their populace. According to Pang (2014), education fostered societal benefits in the forms of social justice, responsibility, equity, and international competitiveness.

Despite the controversial nature of consolidation, a major concern for school leaders should be the perceptions of stakeholders. Due to the uniqueness of each community facing a consolidation situation, Ackell (2013) recommended educational leaders and policymakers seek to understand the perceptions of stakeholders about school or district consolidation. Ackell (2013) argued

community uniqueness and stakeholder perceptions may negate findings of past research on consolidation and its effects. According to Ackell (2013), each community facing a consolidation was very unique, and understanding the perceptions of the stakeholders can shed light on some of those unique community characteristics that would not have been addressed in previous literature. Stakeholders had great power and influence over the directions that a school or system took. In a case study, Thurman (2012) noted local school board members involved themselves heavily in the newly consolidated school—visiting frequently, questioning the administration's decisions—adding to the already difficult challenge of leading a consolidated school. Situational leadership involved adapting leadership strategies to fit the uniqueness of a situation (Ackell, 2013). Through listening to and incorporating stakeholders' perceptions in their decision making, school leaders can "undertake a responsive and context-sensitive prioritization of needs" (Thompson, 2018, p. 10).

A system or school consolidation was a controversial, complex, and impassioned topic for stakeholders to consider (Ackell, 2013). Proponents of consolidation claimed a consolidation would provide better financial stability for the school, the bigger school would attract new residents to the town, and students would have more options and opportunities in terms of extracurricular activities and an expanded curriculum (Guthrie, 1979; Ismail, 2020; Lindsay, 1982; Palattella, 2017; Pignolet, 2018; Rubin, 2005; Self, 2001; Shakrani, 2010; Slate & Jones, 2005; WVMetroNews Staff, 2017). Opponents to consolidation argued a consolidated school risked a loss of community identity, larger schools experience more truancy and behavior problems, and finances in the consolidated school

would not improve (Cooley & Floyd, 2013; Cox & Cox, 2010; Galway, 2012; Haller, 1992; Lawrence et al., 2002; Nelson, 1985; Peshkin, 1982; Rubin, 2005; Streifel et al., 1991; Superville, 2017; Warner et al., 2010). The arguments of proponents and opponents were in inherent conflict; if finances did not improve within a consolidation, the new, consolidated school would be impeded from expanding extracurricular and curriculum options, supplying innovative instructional technology, and providing teachers with effective training and development (e.g., student opportunity). Also, since the claims from proponents and opponents could come from a variety of sources, and stakeholders' perceptions are critical to the school leadership, what exactly are the perceptions of stakeholders amid varying viewpoints and claims? The purpose of this study was to examine stakeholders' perceptions of the impact of rural high school consolidation on opportunities for students.

Research Questions

The development of research questions may be the most critical component of a research project, guiding the researcher to develop context, methods, and sophisticated analysis that stimulate knowledge (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013; Anfara & Mertz, 2015). Effective research questions drive a researcher's study, guiding the study toward noteworthy and impactful results (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013; Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). I used the following research questions to guide my study and to determine effective methods for data collection and analysis (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013).

Research Question 1

What are stakeholders' perceptions of the impact of rural high school consolidation on curriculum programming for students?

Research Question 2

What are stakeholders' perceptions of the impact of rural high school consolidation on extracurricular activities for students?

Research Question 3

What are stakeholders' perceptions of the impact of rural high school consolidation on teacher professional development?

Research Question 4

What are stakeholders' perceptions of the impact of rural high school consolidation on instructional technology?

Conceptual Framework

Anfara and Mertz (2015) defined theoretical frameworks as "an empirical or quasi-empirical theory of social and/or psychological processes, at a variety of levels, that can be applied to the understanding of a phenomena" (p. 15). A theoretical framework can support a researcher in making sense of myriad data and providing a framework for methods design and analysis, ultimately culminating in relevant and impactful results and implications from the researcher's study (Anfara & Mertz, 2015). The researchers recommended a deliberate and intentional use of the theoretical framework of a qualitative study to best ensure the study is objective and precise. Where a theory was an overarching dialogue about interrelated ideas, a concept was a word or phrase that connects the thoughts, often within a larger theory (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). I

elected to use a conceptual framework to further narrow the lens within which I examined the topic of student opportunity in rural high school consolidation.

I used the concept of economies and diseconomies of scale as a framework to guide this study. As part of the Production Theory in economics, economies and diseconomies of scale best fit this study because of the way that consolidation was viewed to be a prospect for school and system improvement. Proponents of school consolidation pointed to the potential benefits of economies of scale when positioning consolidation as a solution to cure existing financial or academic performance concerns in a school or district (Edwards, 2019; Reinstadler, 2010; Slate & Jones, 2005; Young & Green, 2005). Other facets of Production Theory and microeconomics may still have merited investigation within education but were not most appropriate for this particular study. Economies of scale referred to advantages that an organization realized as the level of production was increased, and in business, these advantages were normally associated to cost savings and increased revenues (Boser, 2013; Slate & Jones, 2005; Stigler, 1958; Zimmer et al., 2009). By combining or expanding organizations, some services and administrative redundancies may have been eliminated, causing the fixed costs per unit to decrease, thereby improving the financial efficiency of the overall production. Ideally, these cost savings were reinvested into the business to improve future products and services (Guthrie, 1979; Stigler, 1958).

In education, combining resources and organizational structures allowed for the elimination of redundancies (Zimmer et al., 2009). Researchers suggested combining resources and organizational structures reduced the need for supporting multiple older, less functional buildings and equipment, such as

multiple cafeterias, outdated laboratories, libraries, and sporting complexes (Guthrie, 1979; Shakrani, 2010). Also, in consolidated schools, support services (e.g., maintenance; heating, ventilation, and air conditioning; custodial), information technology (e.g., data processing, technicians), and financial departments (e.g., bookkeeping, internal audits, purchasing) could be combined and redundancies removed (Shakrani, 2010). Administrative costs were lowered by reducing executive leaders, school board members, and system-wide supervisors as compared to the quantity and costs of these items of the two separate organizations when added together (Bard et al., 2006; Durflinger & Haeffele, 2011; Young & Green, 2005). A school or district could use these costs savings to invest in resources, specialized personnel, and newer equipment that would enhance the student experience such as new instructional technology, innovative professional development for the staff, new and renovated buildings, modernized libraries, laboratories more conducive to the learning environment, and new equipment for fine arts and athletics (Guthrie, 1979; Shakrani, 2010; Young & Green, 2005).

Economies of scale may be measured in education by considering one instance of providing an educational experience to a student as a *unit*. Cost Per Unit is the total fixed and variable costs associated with producing one unit of a product or service. Indeed, Cost Per Pupil (CPP) was a term used in the literature when researchers were describing the financial impacts of programs and initiatives on students and comparing schools and districts of varying populations regarding financial efficiency (Hu & Yinger, 2008; Lawrence et al., 2002; McGuffey & Brown, 1978; Streifel et al., 1991). CPP included all the fixed costs

(e.g., buildings, utilities, furnishings) and variable costs (e.g., student lunches, expendable classroom supplies, instructional staff) of providing educational services to one student (Alberghini, 2017; Young & Green, 2005). As a district or school increased its enrollment and operations, CPP decreased if economies of scale existed (Duncombe & Yinger, 2010).

Zimmer et al. (2009) examined 292 Indiana school districts across three years, considering transportation costs, salaries, and CPP. The researchers (2009) sought to determine the optimum level of enrollment that maximized economies of scale. By analyzing cross-sectional data of the 292 schools, Zimmer et al. (2009) determined the optimum level of enrollment for an Indiana school in 2009 was 1,942 students, with a CPP of $9,414. Beyond the optimum enrollment size, a school or system could experience *diseconomies of scale*.

Streifel et al. (1991) defined diseconomies of scale as "the financial disadvantages associated with the increased size of an organization" (p. 14). Economists agreed there was a point where an organization grew so large that economies of scale no longer functioned, and an organization lost its advantages and began to experience disadvantages with increased production (Durflinger & Haeffele, 2011; Stigler, 1958; Streifal et al., 1991). As an organization grew larger, there were expenditures that appeared or grew along with it (e.g., costs of operating multiple plants, expanded distribution networks, increased legal scrutiny). Zimmer et al. (2009) noted diseconomies began in education as schools perpetually experienced larger student enrollment. In a consolidated school or school system, these diseconomies appeared as higher transportation costs, more operational costs for supplies and stationery, increased costs of administrative

oversight, additional security, maintenance, and custodial services (Durflinger & Haeffele, 2011; Young & Green, 2005). Duncombe and Yinger (2010) described reasons why cost savings were not realized in newly combined schools: student transportation spending, leveling up of salaries and benefits, and new capital projects (e.g., new construction, remodels).

"While efficiency of expenditure will, and should, always be a consideration, *enrichment of the* student—socially and educationally—should be the primary value" (Young & Green, 2005, p. 10). The student experience was not a simple product of which educators and policymakers strived to reduce the costs of productions to experience greater profits; educational leaders and policymakers must reinvest into the students' learning experience, continually innovating and improving, maximizing the experience to the furthest potential of the situation (Young & Green, 2005). Part of the argument made by proponents of school consolidation was the financial savings expected from consolidation would be reinvested into expanding the curriculum and educational experience for students (Ismail, 2020; Palattella, 2017; Pignolet, 2018; WVMetroNews Staff, 2017). Conversely, a key counterargument from opponents to consolidation was the financial windfall from a consolidation was not guaranteed, and a larger school would bring greater risks to the community identity (Adams, 2020; FOX56 Newsroom, 2020; Galway, 2012; Peshkin, 1982; Superville, 2017). According to Galway (2012), "Not everyone accepts that structural reform necessarily results in a higher quality educational experience" (p. 10).

Significance of the Study

Student opportunity was a recurring theme in proponents' claims for consolidation (Loughlin & Modesitt, 2017; McInerny, 2019; Thompson, 2020; WVMetroNews Staff, 2017; Young & Green, 2005). This study benefited communities by providing an analysis of stakeholder perceptions relating to student opportunity in a consolidation situation. In doing so, stakeholders were validated their perceptions that ran parallel with those discussed in this study, or stakeholders may increase their awareness of other key topics for discussion through perceptions and analyses in this study that may not have been considered otherwise. Communities and stakeholders would benefit in their own reflection and decision-making if presented with the option of consolidating their own local schools or systems (Ackell, 2013).

Educational leaders were more understanding of what the perceptions of stakeholders were regarding student opportunity as they considered potential for school consolidation or were working through a school consolidation. Educational leaders and policymakers considered these perceptions as they developed strategic planning for consolidation, prioritized the needs and concerns of stakeholders, and better communicated information and support for the schools (Thurman, 2012). Through effective and appropriate leadership, educational leaders provided all parties, especially the students, a smooth transition during a school or system consolidation.

This study expanded on existing literature and research by providing stakeholder perceptions specific to the impact a school consolidation would have on student opportunity (i.e., curriculum programming, extracurricular activities,

instructional technology, and teacher professional development). This pointed understanding of stakeholder perceptions of student opportunity within a school consolidation filled a gap in the literature, while other researchers asked about the perceptions of stakeholders regarding the consolidation as a whole, posed questions about a variety of facets of the consolidation issue (Ackell, 2013; Appalachia Educational Lab & Tennessee Education Association, 1988; Leisey et al., 1990; Rubin, 2005), or discussed student opportunity in absence of stakeholder perceptions (Cooley & Floyd, 2013; Haller et al., 1990; Rushing, 1967; Self, 2001).

At the time of this study, other literature focused on rural examples in other states throughout the United States (Ackell, 2013; Bailey et al., 1994; Bard et al., 2006; Blauwkamp et al., 2011; Henderson & Gomez, 1975; Jakubowski & Kulka, 2016; Lawrence, 1993; Leisey et al., 1990; Rubin, 2005; Self, 2001; Thurman, 2012; Warner et al., 2010) or discussed topics of urban consolidation in Tennessee (Bradley, 1995; Brummet et al., 2004; Cox & Cox, 2010; Egerton & Leeson, 1967; Frankenberg et al., 2017). Through this study, I filled a gap in regard to consolidation in the rural communities and schools in Tennessee.

Description of the Terms

In a qualitative study, researchers must clarify any terms that may have been ambiguous or had an unknown meaning (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). The following terms were operationally defined to lend clarity and understanding to the purpose, research questions, and overall study (Creswell, 2009).

Consolidation

For the purpose of this study, I defined consolidation as the merging of two or more schools or two or more school systems or districts. Bard et al. (2006) stated terms such as *unification* or *reorganization* were sometimes used interchangeably with *consolidation*. In this study, I referred only to the term consolidation. Peshkin (1982) defined consolidation as the "combining of two or more previously independent school [systems] in one new and larger school system" (p. 4); however, I considered multiple perspectives from the literature when defining consolidation. Researchers have studied the factors and impact of district-level consolidations and specific school-level consolidations. I explored the motivations and properties of both views, since the motivations and properties may be the same as seen from the lens of stakeholders.

Curriculum Programming

For the purposes of this study, the researcher defined curriculum programming as a comprehensive offering of courses, categorized into base courses, advanced courses, and alternate courses that allows options for students (Haller et al., 1990). A comprehensive curriculum should also strive to meet students' needs and interests by providing Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), dual-enrollment (DE) (i.e., students enrolled in both the high school and the college at the same time, while maintaining distinction between the college and high school credits being earned), dual credit (DC) (i.e., students earn a college credit and a high school credit for the same class, while still enrolled in the high school), and Career and Technical Education (CTE) pathways (Dougherty, 2106; Iatarola et al., 2011; Piontek et al., 2016). A

comprehensive curriculum of programming would also include robust fine arts and special education programs (Dolph, 2008; Thomas et al., 2013).

Extracurricular Activities

Extracurricular activities were opportunities, provided by the school, for students to engage in a variety of activities outside of normal school hours (Croft & Moore, 2019). These activities included individual and team athletic sports, social and academic clubs, fine arts groups, and competitive challenge teams (Croft & Moore, 2019). Researchers claimed students who participated in extracurricular activities benefited from social and emotional growth and development and were generally more engaged in school (Ackell, 2013; Caldarella et al., 2019; Croft & Moore, 2019; Mahoney et al., 2003).

Instructional Technology

For the purposes of this study, the researcher defined instructional technology as the technical infrastructure and support; the classroom hardware, software, and internet connectivity; and the materials, tools, and resources necessary to train teachers how to creatively and effectively engage students with technology in their learning. Margolin et al. (2019) expressed the importance that educators be provided with the technical infrastructure and support they can count on when preparing lessons and instruction. Tarbutton (2018) noted teachers were consistently met with expectations to infuse technology with their lessons but could be overwhelmed by the myriad software, programs, and content available. In agreement, Margolin et al. (2019) claimed effective teacher professional development should be technology-focused to support teachers as they filter and integrate technology into their lessons.

Small Rural High Schools

Small, rural high schools served less than 1,000 students in 9th through 12th grades, within non-urban communities of 49,999 people or less (Haller, 1992; Ratcliffe, 2016; Slate & Jones, 2005). According to Lawrence et al. (2002), a high school with 9th through 12th grades should have approximately 75 students per grade level or a total enrollment of 300 students to be considered *small*; however, Slate and Jones (2005) argued schools between 500 and 1,000 students operated at peak efficiency. Boser (2013) noted NCES defined *rural* as territories that are more than 25 miles from urbanized areas and more than 10 miles away from urban clusters. According to Ratcliffe et al. (2016), the U.S. Census Bureau defines anything not considered urban as rural. The U.S. Census Bureau calculates urban areas based on population density and other factors to adjust for the geography of the landscape and the ability for a geographic area to urbanize (Ratcliffe et al., 2016). In general, areas of 50,000 people or more were considered urban; however, the U.S. Census did have procedures to account for density, land use, and distance between urban clusters.

Stakeholders

For the purpose of this study, I used Ackell's (2013) definition of stakeholders as the school administrators, teachers, parents, and community residents. Likewise, Thurman (2012) included students, parents, teachers, and staff into the group of stakeholders in his study of leadership in a rural school consolidation. Thurman (2012) stated stakeholders' perceptions are a critical component of what an effective school leader must understand to develop a positive school culture while *leading for learning* during a school consolidation.

"Stakeholders must be allowed to engage in the governance process, which requires trust on the part of the principal, teachers, district administrators, and school board" (Thurman, 2012, p. 9).

Student Opportunity

Notably, opportunity was a term used throughout the literature in varying ways. For this project, it was paramount that opportunity was carefully defined to create a clear frame for the research (Booth et al., 2016). In this study, opportunity was not looked at through a lens of race, ethnic background, or socio-economic status; student opportunity was considered holistically, to include all students of a school or school system. For this study, student opportunity included the driving factors of programming, extracurricular activities, instructional technology, and teacher professional development to improve and enhance student learning and success (Boser, 2013; Margolin, 2019; Haller et al., 1990; Rushing, 1967; Thurman, 2012).

Teacher Professional Development

Teacher professional development was the deliberate, thoughtful, and continual organizing, training, and monitoring of teachers with the goal of improving instruction and enhancing student learning (Hallinger, 2005; Margolin et al., 2019). Teacher professional development included a variety of things, including Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), formal seminar / conference trainings, and online learning and certifications (Thurman, 2012).

Organization of the Study

In Chapter I of this document, I introduced the topic of school and district consolidation in small, rural school districts; the Statement of the Problem;

research questions on stakeholder perceptions of the impact of consolidation on student opportunity; the Conceptual Framework of economies of scale; the Significance of the Study; and a description of important terms. In Chapter II, I provided a review of related literature regarding school and district consolidation, pressures and claims for and against consolidation, and the concept of student opportunity. Following the review of literature, in Chapter III, I provided a description of the qualitative, semi-structured interview research design where stakeholders in a small, rural county were asked to respond about their perceptions of consolidation on student opportunity. Further in Chapter III, I discussed the collection, transcription, and analysis of the interview data. In Chapter IV, I reported the results of the interview data collection and analysis. Finally, in Chapter V, I summarized the findings, discussed implications for practical application and made recommendations for future research on consolidations and student opportunity.

This introductory chapter described an overview of the research study, its purpose. In the following chapter, Review of the Literature, I provided detailed histories, explanations, and clarifications for topics and contexts relevant to stakeholder perceptions of student opportunity within rural high school consolidations.

Chapter II: Review of the Literature

Since the 1940s, the number of public school systems, Kindergarten through 12th Grade, in the United States decreased by almost 90% (Ackell, 2013; Duncombe & Yinger, 2010). The NCES provided data on their website that showed the number of public elementary and secondary schools dropped 65% from 1929 to 2016, and the number of these schools only increased 0.3% from 2016 to 2018 (NCES, n.d.a), even as the total number of public school students increased two-fold. Increasingly, schools and districts have met with demands for academic achievement while encountering financial constraints (Cooley & Floyd, 2013; Shakrani, 2010; Slate & Jones, 2005). According to researchers, school policymakers and educational leaders positioned consolidation as an option to decrease per student expenditures while increasing student achievement and opportunities (Blauwkamp et al., 2011; Cooley & Floyd, 2013; Nitta et al., 2010).

As small, rural high schools continued to experience academic, financial, community, and student engagement issues, policymakers and educational leaders considered consolidating small schools as an option to achieve economies of scale and reconcile these concerns (Blauwkamp et al., 2011; Cooley & Floyd, 2013; Nitta et al., 2010). According to Thurman (2012), a school or district consolidation was one of the most challenging events for an instructional leader's career. The purpose of this study was to examine stakeholders' perceptions of the impact of rural high school consolidation on opportunities for students, including curriculum programming, extracurricular options, instructional technology, and teacher professional development. To fully understand the rationale behind the conclusions and recommendations in this study, one needed to understand the

historical relevance of consolidation, the pressures and arguments made for and against school and district consolidation, and the perceptions of the stakeholders.

I began this literature review with the historical context of the research. Next, I discussed contemporary pressures for consolidation. The situations and pressures that urged policymakers to initially consider consolidation were described, including financial, enrollment, resources, achievement, and state accountability. Each concept has been sufficiently studied by others, so in the literature review, I attempted to summarize each factor and connect them. Following this, I discussed and compared the claims made by the proponents and the opponents of consolidation. Additionally, I explored the concept of opportunity as it relates to students impacted by a consolidation. Finally, this chapter concludes with a brief summary that clearly emphasizes the need for this research and guides the reader into the next chapter, Methodology.

I investigated the topic of school and district consolidation and student opportunity by searching peer reviewed articles in the online databases Elton B. Stephens Co. and the Education Resources Information Center. I made use of Boolean search strings that included words such as consolidation, success, opportunity, programming, curriculum, improvement, schools, public schools, effect, principal, administration, and leadership. I evaluated the results of these searches by looking for articles about school and district consolidations, avoiding consolidation topics related to equity and racial discrimination in the early 20th century and avoiding consolidations in foreign countries, focusing on studies where the researchers investigated the quantitative and qualitative effects during or after a consolidation in the United States since 1980. Additionally, I made use

of Google to search for online news stories related to consolidations specifically in Tennessee since 2005.

Past Examples of Consolidations

Instances of district consolidation included the combination of multiple schools of different grade levels, or the schools may have been left as they were, and district level services and administration may have merged or been annexed (Alberghini, 2017; Bailey et al., 1994; Boser, 2013; Bradley, 1995; Cooley & Floyd, 2013; Cox & Cox, 2010; DeLuca, 2013; Duncombe & Yinger, 2010; Durflinger & Haeffele, 2011; Leisey et al., 1990; Shakrani, 2010; Zimmer et al., 2009). When discussing annexation, researchers described situations when one district closed and the students or operations of that district were absorbed into another district (Nitta et al., 2010). This occurred when financial or performance pressures forced district leaders to close a lower performing district and focus attention and resources on the larger, more stable district (Nitta et al., 2010).

Other researchers focused their studies of consolidation to the school level (Ackell, 2013; Bard et al., 2006; Blauwkamp et al., 2011; Lawrence, 1993; Rubin, 2005; Thurman, 2012; Warner et al., 2010). In these cases, multiple schools merged within a single district, consolidating or combining two or more schools into one new location with one new school identity and with the intent of improving the educational experience and financial situation for the overall affected school populations.

Past examples of school and school system consolidation in the United States showed the objectives of consolidation—improved financial stability of the school system and improved academic performance—were met with mixed

results. The following was not an exhaustive list of school and system consolidations but an organization of some notable consolidations signified by either positive or negative criticism. Here I provided a brief introduction to these examples; I described each example in more detail within the following sections. Haller (1992) studied discipline in different sized schools and found little change because of a school's enrollment. Zimmer et al. (2009) produced analyses of various enrollment sizes of school districts and discovered relationships between different sizes of schools and school districts with financial efficiency, educator salaries, transportation costs, and attendance. After studying four schools in Arkansas, Nitta et al. (2010) reported on the social transitions of the students and teachers in consolidated schools.

In an Illinois-based school case study, Thurman (2012) found critical insights on how instructional leaders can maintain focus on learning through the first year of leading a newly consolidated school. After analyzing 10 years of data from Illinois school systems, Billger and Beck (2012) found consolidations and school closures were less driven by opportunity for students but more by enrollment, population, and local property tax revenues. Durflinger and Haeffele (2011) also studied Illinois schools, recommending consolidations be considered carefully, individually, and based off categorization of the schools. Both Shakrani (2010) and DeLuca (2013) researched consolidations in Michigan from a financial perspective; neither found school consolidation nor service consolidation positively impacted the financial situations of the schools and systems. In Tennessee, all four of the largest school systems were the result of some type of consolidation. Egerton and Leeson (1967) discussed how the Metro Nashville

consolidation became a model system for other cities. In 1987, Knox County Schools, Tennessee, was required by state statute to take over the Knoxville City Schools when the city system essentially went bankrupt (Knox County Board of Education, 1987). Additionally, with an assortment of arguments, some researchers criticized the Tennessee district consolidations of Tennessee's Hamilton County Schools and Shelby County Schools (Bradley, 1995; Brummett et al., 2004; Campbell & Binder, 2014; Cooley & Floyd, 2013; Cox & Cox, 2010; Frankenberg et al., 2017; Siegal-Hawley et al., 2018).

Positive Examples

Haller (1992) analyzed U.S. national data from *High School and Beyond* surveys and reported student misbehavior was not likely driven more by school consolidation or school size than any other factor (e.g., rural versus non-rural, school disorderliness, race demographics). Haller (1992) posited a school with 443 students could double in size and only experience a 0.20% increase in discipline. According to the researcher, an enrollment of 443 was noteworthy because that was the average size of rural high schools in 1992. Kohler et al. (2015) studied student data across 842 Texas middle schools, finding school size only moderately impacted student involvement in violent behavior and noting systemic and administrative strategies may work to offset negative impacts of school size to student indiscipline.

Zimmer et al. (2009) reported on Indiana school district consolidations, analyzing the districts' and schools' CPP, enrollment, and salaries. The researchers found consolidated districts with student enrollment up to 2,000 were operating at an optimum financial efficiency, and educator salaries increased as

enrollment levels increased up to 4,000 students. Zimmer et al. (2009) also noted transportation costs in consolidated districts did not appear to be a large source of diseconomies.

Nitta et al. (2010) discussed the perspectives of teachers and students in four Arkansas schools. Specifically, the researchers investigated the social disruption of teachers and students shorty after recent school consolidations. The students and teachers of these consolidations created a *blended* community—a result of the combination of different social groups, customs, traditions, and community cultures. According to Nitta et al. (2010), students experienced more curriculum and social opportunities. Nitta et al. noted a benefit to the individual teachers in that they had fewer courses for which to prepare activities and materials. The moving student and teacher had the most difficult time transitioning, the teachers more so than the students mainly due to the teachers' experiences of social disruption and having trouble making new relationships in the consolidated environment (Nitta et al., 2010). The researchers established a need for continual professional development and staff support during transitional times.

Thurman (2012) conducted a case study focusing on the first year of leading a consolidation of an Illinois public high school, where the principal was interviewed over the course of the first year. Thurman considered the reflections in the interviews with observations notes to determine how a school leader can manage the challenge of leading a consolidated school. Thurman (2012) identified key themes in his findings: governance of the school to maintain a focus on learning, strategic communication, and fostering a positive school culture.

Regarding school governance, Thurman noted the challenges a school leader experienced in maintaining a focus on learning while managing the day-to-day challenges of operating a newly consolidated school. In the study, Thurman described how the principal was met with situations where school board members, often reactionary to unexpected issues, interfered with the principal's management of the school, causing distraction to the learning environment. Strategic communication was needed for the policy makers, educational leaders, faculty, and stakeholders to build trust and understanding among each other, so the focus and vision of student-centered learning in the newly consolidated school maintained priority (Thurman, 2012). The third key theme in Thurman's research was a positive school culture must be driven by leadership and shared by faculty and stakeholders. Thurman described instances where some faculty members and stakeholders, who were initially against the consolidation, continued to resist leadership even once the decision to consolidate was made and implemented. Policymakers and educational leaders of future, potential consolidations should be mindful of these three key themes as Thurman (2012) noted the challenges by individuals within his case study made successful execution of the consolidation more difficult for the school leader to keep focus on student learning.

According to Brummett et al. (2004), there were 158 school districts in Tennessee in 1950. As of 2020, Tennessee operated 137 school districts (Tennessee Department of Education, n.d.b). Four of these districts included Metro Nashville Public Schools, Knox County Schools, Hamilton County Schools, and Shelby County Schools, all of which were the result of district consolidations and serve nearly 30% of the state's total student population

(Tennessee Department of Education, n.d.b). Young and Green (2005) provided a brief history of major Tennessee school system changes from 1970 to 2014 (see Table 2).

Table 2

Tennessee School System Consolidations

Year	System Closed	System Consolidated With
1962-63	Nashville City Davidson County	Both merged to form Metro, or Nashville-Davidson Metro
1970-71	Brownsville	Haywood County
1970-71	Sparta	White County
1980-81	Watertown	Wilson County
1981-82	Atwood Trezevant	Both merged with the newly created West Carroll Special School District
1981-82	Gibson County	Gibson County ceased to function as a regular school system. A new Gibson County Special School District was opened, and students were assigned to municipal or special school districts within the county
1983-84	Crockett Mills Friendship Gadsden	All three merged with Crockett County
1985-86	Morristown	Hamblen County
1987-88	Knoxville	Knox County
1990-91	Jackson	Madison County
1996-97	Chattanooga	Hamilton County
2002-03	Covington	Tipton County
2002-03	Harriman	Roane County
2013-14	Memphis	Shelby County

(Young & Green, 2005)

On April 3, 1963, Davidson County and Nashville City ceased to exist. According to Egerton and Leeson (1967), the combined Nashville Metro was "the nation's first complete amalgamation of all branches of city and county government" (p. 323). For the education systems, the pressures to consolidate included oversized class rosters, low teacher pay, limited vocational experiences,

and high dropout rates (Egerton & Leeson, 1967). According to the researchers, the idea of merging into such a relatively massive district was unheard of at the time, and the process of consolidating was an 18-month affair. Four years after the consolidation, leaders in other cities considered Metro Nashville to be a model to follow (Egerton & Leeson, 1967). Researchers were less favorable to the remaining three major district consolidations in Tennessee, which are discussed in the next section (Bradley, 1995; Brummett et al., 2004; Campbell & Binder, 2014; Cooley & Floyd, 2013; Cox & Cox, 2010; Frankenberg et al., 2017; Siegal-Hawley et al., 2018).

Negative Examples

Shakrani (2010) and DeLuca (2013) researched consolidation specific to Michigan. Shakrani (2010) studied the cost effectiveness of school consolidation, and DeLuca (2013) studied service consolidation. Shakrani (2010) researched 10 Michigan counties, specifically in relation to cost effectiveness. Shakrani (2010) and DeLuca (2013) presented results indicating consolidation did little to improve the financial stress that public school districts in Michigan experienced, and any improvement experienced may have been offset by the community and social angst that consolidation created, such as the desire of some community members to retain the smaller, community school environment, the concerns over indiscernible differences in budget cuts versus the reduction in redundant staff and services, and risks of increases in student travel time. Shakrani (2010) suggested alternatives to consolidation to improve finances, such as the consolidation of some services, program coordination, and the sharing of resources across multiple districts. DeLuca (2013), however, described examples

of failed attempts at reducing costs and improving student outcomes through the consolidation of services rather than total consolidation. DeLuca surveyed business officials in the Michigan Department of Education and pulled financial data from Michigan's public school database to analyze the extent to which service consolidation impacted educational spending. The service consolidation model made no impact on improved instructional spending (DeLuca, 2013).

While Zimmer et al. (2009) reported benefits to district consolidation in Indiana, the researchers (2009) also noted some drawbacks. As a district's student enrollment met 3,000 students, the district experienced diseconomies of scale due to increased administrative costs, and once a district experienced student enrollment of 4,000 students, educator salaries appeared to steadily decrease. The researchers reported student attendance began to decline as student enrollment levels passed 2,000 (Zimmer et al., 2009).

Billger and Beck (2012) focused their study on the economic causes for considering and closing schools in Illinois from 1986-2006. The researchers (2012) suggested CPP, demographics, and test scores were not the primary pressures leading to school closings. According to Billger and Beck (2012), the main determinants for closing and consolidating schools included enrollment, population, and the proportion of property tax revenues allocated to the district. Durflinger and Haeffele (2011) also reported on consolidation in Illinois. The researchers considered finance, CPP, and achievement within consolidation and recommended four tiers within which the Illinois schools could be categorized, ranging from *Sustained Academic and Financial Difficulty* to *No Academic or Financial Difficulties*. Specifically, Durflinger and Haeffele noted state incentives

were a factor in local decision-making regarding consolidation. Specially, the researchers (2011) noted how the Illinois State Board of Education offered "eliminating negative fund balances and providing teacher salary incentives over a period of years" (p. 6) as incentives to school and district consolidation. Durflinger and Haeffele (2011) concluded state incentives and scrutiny over consolidation should be investigated on a case-by-case basis with general guidelines and recommendations on tiers of consolidation.

In Tennessee, the Knoxville City School district ceased to exist on July 1, 1987 (Appalachia Educational Lab & Tennessee Education Association, 1988). Leo Cooper, former chairman for Knox County Commission, stated the consolidation did not save money and was "a mess" (Brummett et al., 2004, p. 6). Bradley (1995) called the consolidation in Knox County a "raft of problems" (p. 3) after making the transition from two systems to one system too quickly. According to the Knox County Board of Education (1987) minutes, a "political clique" (p. 871) bankrupted the city system through a number of questionable decisions, namely awarding irresponsibly high pensions to a privileged few employees. During the general election in November of 1986, Knoxville voters voted to discontinue the operations of the Knoxville City School Board, thereby legally assigning the Knox County Board of Education the responsibility of educating the city's youth (Knox County Board of Education, 1987). The city students left for the summer of 1987 and returned in the fall as part of the combined single school system. The system's total budget increased 61% in six years, and the county tax rates also increased (Cox & Cox, 2010). Issues and concerns around the handling of former city school employees lingered in the

Knox County Board meeting agendas, with some individual concerns never being resolved (Knox County Board of Education, 1988).

Chattanooga City Schools, Tennessee, merged with the surrounding Hamilton County Schools on July 1, 1997 (Cox & Cox, 2010). The researchers considered data from before consolidation and eight years after. The consolidated Hamilton County Schools served 43,830 students within 78 schools (Tennessee Department of Education, n.d.b). According to Cox and Cox (2010), proponents of the Chattanooga City and Hamilton County Schools consolidation believed a larger school system would provide economies of scale that would lead to more and better opportunities for students while reducing the financial costs of providing education on a per pupil basis. In Hamilton County, Cox and Cox (2010) found the consolidation "produced a less efficient and effective school district" (p. 91) in four key areas: the student population declined, daily attendance declined, academic performance increased "negligibly" (p. 89), and the district's expenses increased substantially across the board.

Cooley and Floyd (2013) referenced a *New York Times* article that described the Shelby County, Tennessee, and Memphis City consolidation as the largest school district consolidation in U.S. history. In July 2013, Memphis City Schools merged into Shelby County Schools (Campbell & Binder, 2014). Critics claimed this consolidation was politically motivated and would disadvantage some minority groups (Frankenberg et al., 2017; Siegel-Hawley et al., 2018). According to Frankenberg et al. (2017), the drawing of school zones and boundaries did not help in mitigating school segregation and created disparities in the revenue and resources allocated to some schools. A 2010 law made it easier

for communities to break off from larger districts and create their own independent district (Camera, 2017). Within a year, six municipalities seceded from the larger Shelby County Schools, taking with them the wealthier property and sales tax base. According to Camera (2017), the remaining Shelby County School district experienced a 20% decrease in its budget and was forced into laying off about 500 teachers across 2015 and 2016 News media considerably criticized the Shelby County Schools consolidation for its secession and colorblindness when drawing the school zones and district lines, then allowing white, wealthy communities to secede and form their own districts, thereby cordoning off their community's wealth from the larger, more economically and more ethnically diverse Shelby County School System (Camera, 2017; Picchi, 2019; Strauss, 2018).

Historical Context that Drove to Consolidations

The NCES reported the quantity of districts in the United States dropped from 177,108 in 1939 to 13,551 in 2018 (Duncombe & Yinger, 2010; NCES, n.d.c). Additionally, the NCES provided data on the website that showed the number of public elementary and secondary schools dropped from the years 1929 to 2016 (see Table 3).

Table 3

Number of Public Schools in the United States

Year	Elementary	Secondary	Total Schools
1929-1930	238,306	23,930	262,236
1990-1991	61,340	22,731	84,071
2015-2016	66,758	24,040	90,798

Note: Data retrieved from NCES (n.d.a) and Snyder (1993).

The NCES data represented a 65% drop in the number of public schools in the United States since 1929-1930, though there was an 8% increase since 1990-1991 (NCES, n.d.a; Snyder, 1993).

Rural One-Teacher Schools

From 1850 to 1930, U.S. schooling was represented by a single, small community school, typically with one teacher to educate all of the children in attendance (Surface, 2011). According to Berry (2007), 60% of all public schools in 1927 were one-teacher schools. Henderson and Gomez (1975) cited a report from the National Education Association, which described the unsanitary, dilapidated, poorly resourced one-teacher schools in rural America. When discussing consolidation, education leaders expressed the *cure* for the problems in small rural schools as "the advent of a more effective education system was envisioned as a vehicle to cure a multiplicity of rural ills" (Henderson & Gomez, 1975, p. 17). Berry (2007) also used the word "cure" (p. 50) to describe how consolidation was perceived as a method to improve the professionalization of U.S. education. More educators in the larger schools could serve students in different grade levels, thus specializing the instruction (Surface, 2011). Surface

(2011) described the evolution from the small, one-teacher schools into larger schools as driven by pressures to professionalize and standardize teaching. According to Berry (2007), only 400 one-teacher schools were left by 1999.

Professionalization and Standards

In the late 1800s, educators were urged to be more professional and research-based in their practice as a result of education reform (Berry, 2007; Surface, 2011). Berry (2007) argued consolidation was a result of this reform and the professionalization of the practice. Education reformers envisioned larger, more professionally run schools to replace the "inefficient, unprofessional, backward practices" (Berry, 2007, p. 50) of the smaller schools. Surface (2011) concurred, describing the reform as a *scientific management* movement of the schools. This began in the urban communities, but as the awareness of the increased performance of urban schools reached rural areas, education reformers increased pressure for rural schools to abandon their less-formal practices in favor of professional education (Berry, 2007; Surface, 2011).

Proponents of the scientific management of schools deemed one-teacher schools as too inefficient to compete with international education systems (Surface, 2011). Efforts to reduce costs in education and in larger schools required the scientific management of the administrative and curriculum aspects of the school (Surface, 2011). Policymakers implemented standards, class periods, and textbooks as means of controlling the educational process and removing inefficiencies (Surface, 2011). Larger schools with more staff would reduce the student-to-teacher ratio, provide specialized staff and instruction, and include better facilities (Berry, 2007). Additionally, schools with larger faculty were able

to group students by age and curriculum subjects (Surface, 2011). Thereby, decision makers explored the concept of economies of scale and of what an optimum school enrollment should be (Surface, 2011). Berry (2007) claimed the consolidation of schools had a direct relationship with the consolidation of school districts. The reformers, most notably Cubberley, claimed as many as five or seven schools should be consolidated to achieve the economies of scale in instruction, administration, and facilities (Berry, 2007). According to Berry, school districts in the early 1900s consisted of only one or two schools; therefore, reformers encouraged multiple districts to consolidate to achieve the desired economies of scale.

Impact of School Size

As school and district consolidations occurred from the 1920s to the 1970s, the number of public schools dropped from 217,000 to 83,000 in the United States (Berry, 2007). Meanwhile, the total national student enrollment increased from 21 million in 1929 to 42 million in 1969, leading the average school enrollment to increase from 87 students to 440 students (Berry, 2007). Beginning in the 1970s, researchers began questioning the impact of larger school size on student completion rates, economic efficiency, professionalization of teachers, geographic distribution of resources, disproportionate disadvantages for low-income and minority students, and student travel time to and from school (Guthrie, 1979).

Werblow and Duesberry (2009) reported enrollment in high schools increased in the 2000s. The researchers discussed economies of scale as a theory to support larger schools, contending larger schools operated more efficiently,

provided more resources, and offered more opportunities for students (Werblow & Duesberry, 2009). In their review of literature, Slate and Jones (2005) cited research that schools between 500 and 1,000 students were most likely to operate at peak efficiency. Slate and Jones (2005) argued as schools became larger, they became more expensive, although not impossible, to operate on a per pupil basis. The researchers recommended careful examination of the per pupil costs and expenditures when considering the size of a school, as larger schools may require additional costs to maintain academic achievement.

Additionally, Slate and Jones (2005) identified higher attendance rates in smaller schools, and if a community experienced issues with truancy or dropouts, a school consolidation would likely "aggravate" (p. 14) those issues. Fitzgerald et al. (2013) produced inconclusive results for the impact that school size has on student completion. These researchers identified statistically significant differences in completion rates for Black, Hispanic, and White students in some academic years and no statistically significant results for other years. For example, the researchers saw no statistically significant difference in completion rates for small or medium schools in 2008 ($X^2[2] = 0.90$, $p = .637$, $X^2[2] = 4.07$, $p = .131$), but there was a statistically significant difference with larger schools in 2008 ($X^2[2] = 120.80$, $p < .0001$) (Fitzgerald et al., 2013). For the 2009 academic year, Fitzgerald et al. (2013) found no statistically significant differences in small or medium schools ($X^2[2] = 2.91$, $p = .236$, $X^2[2] = 3.25$, $p = .197$) but a statistically significant difference for large schools ($X^2[2] = 68.71$, $p < .0001$). The researchers also saw differing results in 2010; there was a statistically significant difference in all three categories of schools (small: $X^2[2] = 4.28$,

p = .003, medium: X2[2] = 30.93, p < .0001, large: X^2[2] = 172.40, p < .0001) (Fitzgerald et al., 2013).

Contemporary Pressures to Consolidate

From 1970s to the 2010s, consolidation continued to be a topic in education, and local school boards and county and city commissions across the United States considered the option to improve the public education for their communities in the face of increasing economic challenges (Ismail, 2020; Loughlin & Modesitt, 2017; McInerny, 2019; Pignolet, 2018; Thompson, 2020; WVMetroNews Staff, 2017). Researchers agreed enrollment and taxpayer base heavily influenced school and district consolidation (Billger & Beck, 2012; Haller, 1992; Rubin, 2005), as educational leaders and policymakers were pressured to consider consolidation by academic performance and financial demands (Berry, 2007; Boser, 2013; 2002; Dolph, 2008; Henderson & Gomez, 1975; Lawrence et al., 2002; Ornstein, 1992; Surface, 2011; Warner et al., 2010; Young & Green, 2005).

State regulations and incentives further encouraged local systems to contemplate the consolidation of schools and systems (Blauwkamp et al., 2011; Duncombe & Yinger, 2010; Durflinger & Haeffele, 2011; Grider & Verstegen, 2000; Hu & Yinger, 2008; Lawrence et al., 2002; Rubin, 2005; Thurman & Hackmann, 2015). Consolidating districts in New York state received a 40% increase in their operating aid for five years, a decreasing percentage increase in aid for nine additional years, and up to a 30% increase in aid for capital projects that start within 10 years of the consolidation (Duncombe & Yinger, 2010). Some states paid teacher salaries up to a cap, a cap that was difficult for low population

density districts and schools to stay below (Blaukampf et al., 2011). North Dakota paid for all transportation costs of consolidated schools (Bastress, 2003). In Nebraska, a 2005 legislative bill eliminated Class I (elementary only schools) and Class IV (secondary only schools) districts, mandating all districts provide Kindergarten through 12th grade education, thereby forcing Class I and Class IV districts to consolidate with a neighboring district (Blaukampf et al., 2011).

Enrollment and Taxpayer Base Influences on Consolidation

According to researchers, a key factor driving consolidation was enrollment numbers and the corresponding taxpayer base (Billger & Beck, 2012; Haller, 1992; Rubin, 2005). Haller (1992) stated a decline in the rural population since the 1970s increased the burden of maintaining small schools on a shrinking taxpayer base. In agreement, Billger and Beck (2012) argued CPP, demographics, and test scores were not substantial to school closings. According to the researchers, "Enrollment, population, [and] proportion of tax revenues allocated to the district are the most influential factors leading to school closings" (Billger & Beck, 2012, p. 83). A third source concurred; Rubin (2005) "cite[d] two factors fueling school consolidation in rural America today: declines in population and school enrollment, as well as a shrinking tax base" (p. 2).

Academic Performance

From the late 1800s through the early 2000s, societies and reformers pressured educational leaders and policymakers to provide better and more advanced specialized instruction to all students (Berry, 2007; Henderson & Gomez, 1975; Surface, 2011). These performance pressures in the early 1900s brought about the need for standardization and improved efficiency of the

educational system. Through the 1908 Country Life movement, developed by U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt, rural educators strived to combine country life with educational expectations (Surface, 2011). According to Surface (2011), the intent of the Country Life Commission was to improve the quality of life of poor and rural Americans through educational initiatives. The Country Life Commission encouraged graded academic instruction and consolidation of local town government. After two world wars, the importance of land ownership had diminished, individual farms became larger, some rural community members moved away, and both the total community populations and student enrollments became sparser (Surface, 2011).

School systems continued to feel academic performance pressures through the latter half of the 20th century. During the Cold War era, Americans felt pressured to educate the youth to be competitive in all subject areas, specifically math and science (Lawrence et al., 2002). The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), passed during U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson's administration as a component of the *War on Drugs*, increased federal aid for schools (Jakubowski & Kulka, 2016). In 1983, a commission appointed by the United States National Commission on Excellence in Education, published *A Nation at Risk*, which depicted falling student performances, increased illiteracy rates, and drops in adults' *higher-order thinking skills* and called attention to a declining competitiveness of the United States on the global stage (U.S. National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). As a result, *A Nation at Risk* encouraged additional federal, state, and local funding (and oversight) of local schools and systems (Mehta, 2015). After the ESEA became the No Child Left

Behind Act (NCLB) of 2002, federal and state funding was tied to educational accountability (Jackson & Gaudet, 2010). While states could develop their own standards for education, schools were required to employ only teachers who were *highly qualified* to teach their assigned subject areas (Jakubowski & Kulka, 2016). NCLB tied educational accountability to standardized test scores; these test scores became indicative of a school's, district's, and state's ability to provide sufficient academic programming and instruction to students (Jackson & Gaudet, 2010). In 2015, NCLB was reauthorized as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which reduced the accountability and funding from the federal level and left those responsibilities on the state level, while still requiring standardized testing as evidence of effective academic programming and instruction (Penuel et al., 2016).

Financial Demands

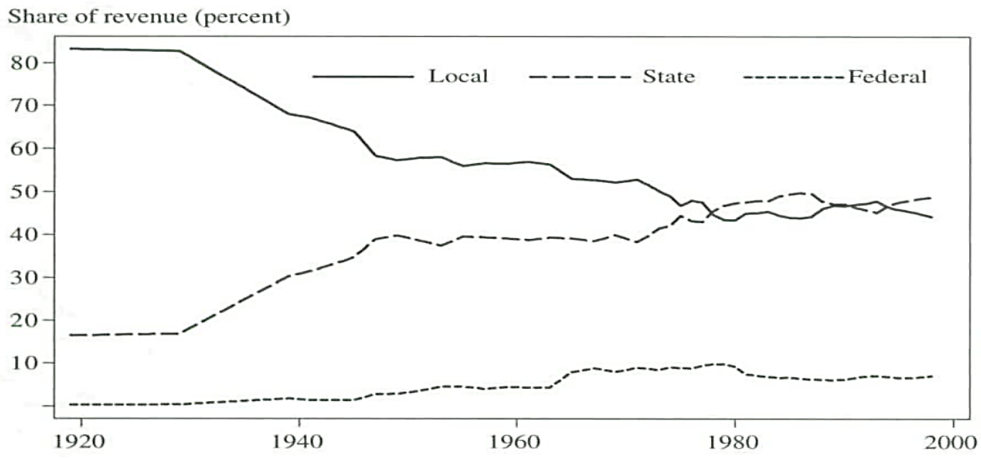
As academic performance pressures pushed educators to develop more advanced, specialized instruction, the financial requirements of providing quality education to students also increased (Blauwkamp, 2011; Nitta et al., 2010). Rushing (1967) mentioned the need for schools to provide specialized and expanded services; Young and Green (2005) and Dolph (2008) corroborated and modernized Rushing's (1967) propositions by going into more detail as to the challenges that a larger, more diverse student population creates, such as increased administrative and capital costs, loss of community that was based around the school, loss of local control, less community support, increased pressure on tax base, mixed results of improvement by students on standardized tests, higher transportation costs and travel time, impersonal atmosphere, and decreased individual attention to students. Young and Green (2005) and Dolph

(2008) concurred a larger school, with a larger budget, and a centralized location for specialized staff, facilities, and equipment may have been better able to handle the challenges that stakeholders demanded from modern education systems. In addition, Boser (2013) investigated the *lost capacity* that school systems created as they operated small districts and schools, estimating "New Jersey lost over $100 million or about $1000 per classroom teacher" (p. 2) due to administrative inefficiencies in smaller school systems. Boser (2013) concluded most school systems experienced shortcomings in the management of their finances, and consolidation, regionalization, and the sharing of services should be considered.

Furthermore, while the demand for expanded and specialized services increased and some school systems were not managing their finances at an optimum level, the sources of funding for education changed drastically in the 1900s and early 2000s. Berry (2007) presented the changes over time of local versus state funding and the financial influence of states over local systems (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Sources of Public Education Funding, 1919-1998



Source: Berry, 2007, p. 55

In the 1920s, over 80% of the funding for public education came from local funds, and less than 20% came from state funds. By 2000, less than 50% of the financial resources for public education came from local funds, and approximately 50% came from state funds. Summarized, the financial support from state funding increased 30% while local funding decreased 30%. As the amount of local funding decreased, the funding from states increased, essentially reversing the shares from funding sources. Berry (2007) suggested local systems became more reliant on state funding and were, therefore, less autonomous in the decisions they made. According to Berry (2007), consolidation was seen as a way to expand state control over education. In view of this, states often developed regulations or incentives to encourage consolidation. Ornstein (1992) described how a school consolidation created a larger tax base from which to draw locally sourced tax revenue, decreasing the local system's reliance on state funding, thus

decreasing the state's influence over the local system.

State Regulations and Incentives for Consolidation

In the United States, Arkansas, California, Georgia, Illinois, Kentucky, Ohio, and West Virginia had regulations that restricted minimum or maximum enrollment and promoted the building of larger schools while discouraging the maintaining of older, smaller schools (Lawrence et al., 2002). "In 1948, the state of Arkansas mandated dissolution of districts containing fewer than 350 students, which resulted in reduction in the number of school districts from 2,451 in 1948 to 421 in 1949" (Davis, as cited by Thurman & Hackmann, 2015, p. 2). Lawrence et al. (2002) noted other states (e.g., Georgia, Kentucky, West Virginia) had similar policies that promoted school consolidation. According to Durflinger and Haeffele (2011), California and Illinois had minimum enrollment requirements for districts. Lawrence et al. (2002) also described how states such as Florida, Maryland, North Carolina, and Vermont acted in the opposite direction, developing incentives to reduce the size of the schools, noting a North Carolina report as rationale: "There is no universal agreement on the ideal size for a school. What is clear from the research, however, is the positive relationship between smaller school size and a number of variables associated with school climate" (p. 4).

According to Grider and Verstegen (2000), educational leaders and policymakers were also driven toward consolidation by voluntary incentive programs. Nebraska used statutory formulas to categorize schools, with preferential financial incentives to the larger group (Blauwkamp et al., 2011). According to Blauwkamp et al. (2011), schools in the smaller categories (i.e.,

sparse or *very sparse*) were provided inadequate funding to pay employees, purchase instructional materials, and maintain or improve facilities. Therein, smaller schools and systems were encouraged to consolidate to be categorized in the larger groups that were provided more financial funding (Blauwkamp et al., 2011). Likewise, New York state provided additional financial aid to consolidated districts for over 14 years (Hu & Yinger, 2008).

Even if there were no particular regulations in place that promoted consolidation or larger schools, states encouraged consolidation through funding, increased scrutiny, and standards. Duncombe and Yinger (2010) stated the following:

> The most common form of policy is a state aid program designed to encourage district reorganization, typically in the form of consolidation, by providing extra money for operations or capital projects during the transition to the new form of organization. (p. 0)

A state was motivated by trying to save money where it could by increasing the local tax base attached to one school or district (Rubin, 2005).

Proponents' Claims

When reviewing literature, I found four common themes of proponents of consolidation. Proponents most frequently argued for consolidation by proposing bigger schools provided more curricular and extracurricular opportunities (Guthrie, 1979; Ismail, 2020; Lindsay, 1982; Palattella, 2017; Pignolet, 2018; Rubin, 2005; Self, 2001; Shakrani, 2010; Slate & Jones, 2005; WVMetroNews Staff, 2017). Local leaders and educators in favor of consolidation also claimed consolidating schools would improve the financial efficiency of delivering quality

instruction and opportunity to students (Cooley & Floyd, 2013; Loughlin & Modesitt, 2017; McInerny, 2019; WVMetroNews Staff, 2017; Young & Green, 2005). Lastly, politicians and policymakers frequently encouraged school consolidation by claiming the new, larger school would attract residents and businesses and spur economic growth for the community (Dolph, 2008; McInerny, 2019; Self, 2001; Thompson, 2020; Thurman & Hackmann, 2015).

Bigger is Better—Economies of Scale

In the 1920s politicians thought bigger schools would bring better everything—curriculum, teachers, and facilities (Rubin, 2005). Researchers clearly stated "bigger is better" (Guthrie, 1979, p. 18; Lindsay, 1982, p. 57). Also, Shakrani (2010) discovered economic benefits of consolidation in the study of 10 Michigan counties where "significant savings" (p. 8) occurred when consolidation happened within a district. Specifically, Shakrani (2010) realized these financial savings when more than one school within the same district closed to form a very large *super school*. Self (2001) explicitly stated a case study example of a district consolidation benefitted the students and community from opportunity and CPP perspectives. The consolidation allowed for more extracurricular opportunities, additional programming, and better finances, while garnering positive reflections from teachers involved (Self, 2001). Perhaps the concept of economies of scale were valid.

Proponents touted the benefits of having additional resources and savings from consolidation to redirect toward student opportunities (Ismail, 2020; Palattella, 2017; Pignolet, 2018; WVMetroNews Staff, 2017). According to

Palattella (2017), Erie County, Pennsylvania, district officials claimed the following:

> The amount of savings would grow as the district also gradually realizes new revenue under the plan. Most of the savings from the consolidation will come from the elimination of jobs, including those for 21 elementary school teachers and 33 high school teachers. (Palattella, 2017, para. 12)

Similarly, Fayette County, West Virginia, Superintendent George said the consolidation plan would benefit students by allowing them to have more opportunities and resources (WVMetroNews Staff, 2017).

Also touting the benefit of additional resources, North Central Parke Community (NCPC), Indiana, School Superintendent Rohr reacted to the NCPC Board's decision to consolidate two schools into one, saying, "It's in the best interest of the students to not only consolidate the schools, but their resources" (Loughlin & Modesitt, 2017, para. 7). Politicians also spoke about the potential for increased resources: Taylor, school board District 1 candidate in North Nashville, Tennessee, said, "It's been about providing the resources necessary to have high quality educators in our schools" (Ismail, 2020, para. 9). In Shelby County, Tennessee, board member and facilities committee chairman Orgel said, "It improves opportunities for our students and their families" (Pignolet, 2018, para. 10). According to Pignolet (2018), the Shelby County Superintendent Dorsey Hopson, in 2018, also claimed larger schools would provide additional resources for student opportunities: "Money can't be the only driving force behind closing schools. Students have fewer resources at smaller schools, like access to advanced classes" (para. 6).

More Programming Equaled Better Achievement

Young and Green (2005) described the *specialists* benefit to consolidation. A school could hire staff with more specialized qualifications to teach a more specialized course or a foreign language that was previously not offered. As instructors handled a more focused curriculum, they gained more depth and breadth of the content knowledge. Young and Green (2005) also described how larger systems and schools were able to develop more innovation because the collective staff knowledge and experience was greater with a large faculty than with a small faculty. Proponents asserted student achievement improved with a more specialized instructional staff who had better access to innovative and modern development resources (Loughlin & Modesitt, 2017; McInerny, 2019; WVMetroNews Staff, 2017). "It's hard to operate a comprehensive academic program" (Loughlin & Modesitt, 2017, para. 19) with so few students, NCPC Superintendent Tom Rohr said. Rohr added, the goal is to "give students every opportunity we can give them. One way of doing that is to have larger class sizes and grade-level class sizes, so when we schedule students, they have more than one choice" (Loughlin & Modesitt, 2017, para. 20). In parallel, WVMetroNews Staff (2017) reported on Fayette County Superintendent George's commenting, "[Consolidation] will provide our students an enhanced curriculum" (WVMetroNews Staff, 2017, para. 4).

In a *Guiding Principles* document published by the Austin Independent School District, Texas, the school board outlined four goals specific to programming and comprehensiveness for proposed consolidations:

- Ensure equitable access to programmatic opportunities that engage and inspire all students
- Increase the comprehensive menu of rich options to appeal to diverse student interests that mitigate programmatic deserts
- Strengthen the connection of programming within the feeder pattern
- Put more students in reimagined, 21st-century learning environments that engage and inspire. (McInerny, 2019, para. 9)

More, Varied Activities Equaled Better Engagement

It seemed natural that a larger organization, seeking to serve a larger student population, should be better able to provide more extracurricular opportunities for the students. "One rationale promotes the infusion of sufficient student numbers to provide enriched curricular and extracurricular opportunities, particularly in high schools" (Thurman & Hackmann, 2015, p. 2). Self (2001) argued the additional opportunities brought about by the consolidation benefitted the students, as they had more than twice the number of activities from which to choose. As the student population increased, the enrollment also became more diversified, and students who would not have found others who shared similar interests before found peers to share a hobby, sport, or philanthropic interest (Dolph, 2008).

Thus, proponents of consolidation argued a consolidated school provided more extracurricular opportunities and encouraged more participation from students (McInerny, 2019; Thompson, 2020). In Cherokee County, North

Carolina, students did not have access to some extracurriculars (Thompson, 2020). Cherokee County Superintendent Jeana Conley said the following:

> Kids at Hiwassee Dam deserve to have the opportunity to participate in all the sports, and I know at Andrews, they did not have enough girls for a [junior varsity] basketball team last season . . . The consolidation will lend more consistency for more students. (Thompson, 2020, para. 9)

In the *Guiding Principles* document from the Austin, Texas, Independent School District, the board acknowledged the importance of extracurricular activities stating a goal of consolidation was to "increase the number of students who have after school and extracurricular offerings" (McInerny, 2019, para. 9).

Bigger, Better Schools Attracted Residents and Increased Home Value

Through extensive studies in the late 1960s and 1970s, researchers explored how property values were impacted by the local municipality's spending of public funds (Oates, 1969, 1973). Oates (1969, 1973) found property values increased when communities invested their tax funds into improving their schools. New residents would be incentivized when communities invested into a proposed larger, more capable school (Oates, 1969, 1973). Contradictorily, Hu and Yinger (2008) investigated the claim that parents were more interested in living in a district where the schools were combined, achieved more proficient economies of scale, and provided more opportunities for students. The researchers also found consolidation did not impact housing prices (Hu & Yinger, 2008).

Nonetheless, proponents continued to claim consolidation would increase home values and attract new residents (Edwards, 2019; Reinstadler, 2010; Young, 2020), perhaps signaling a need for more visibility of Hu and Yinger's (2008)

findings and additional studies that reinforced these results. Gail Audier, parent and Hamilton County, Tennessee, community member, believed the growth of Chattanooga (inside Hamilton County) was tied to education (Edwards, 2019). Audier recommended, if the Chattanooga community wanted businesses to invest in the city, the schools must meet the needs of modern education with quality education and facilities (Edwards, 2019). Tom Oxholm, vice president of Wake Stone Corporation and a former school board member in Raleigh, North Carolina, stated, "There's no economic development engine better than good schools" (Reinstadler, 2010, para. 20).

According to Young (2020), parents in Roane County, Tennessee, distributed a survey in response to the schools' *not* consolidating and continued declines in enrollment. Out of 172 respondents, 25% said they withdrew [from Roane County Schools] or were considering [withdrawing] due to more opportunities in nearby counties (Young, 2020). The perceptions from Hamilton County, Raleigh, and Roane County stakeholders corroborated researchers' claims that investment in improving a community's public schools has a positive impact on the community's housing market (Hu & Yinger, 2008; Oates, 1969, 1973).

Opponents' Claims

Opponents of consolidation fiercely and passionately met the claims of proponents. Often, opponents to consolidation perceived a potential consolidation as a "win-lose situation" (Bard et al., 2006, p. 42). Opponents to consolidation felt they were fighting for the continued existence of their community; if a consolidation occurred, the community as they knew it would cease to exist

(Young & Green, 2005). While specific consolidation situations had varying levels of intensity regarding the priorities of the claims against consolidation, I connected the literature to three main themes: Smaller schools fostered better student behavior, engagement, and achievement (Cooley & Floyd, 2013; Galway, 2012; Haller, 1992; Lawrence et al., 2002; Nelson, 1985; Rubin, 2005); per pupil expenditures did not improve from a consolidation (Cooley & Floyd, 2013; Cox & Cox, 2010; Galway, 2012; Lawrence et al., 2002; Streifel et al., 1991); and consolidation risked a loss of community identity (Galway, 2012; Peshkin, 1982; Superville, 2017; Surface, 2011; Warner et al., 2010).

Smaller Schools Fostered Better Student Behavior, Engagement, and Achievement

Researchers focused on arguments to this point: smaller schools were better and, therefore, larger consolidated schools were worse regarding school climate, student behavior, and achievement (Cooley & Floyd, 2013; Galway, 2012; Haller, 1992; Lawrence et al., 2002; Nelson, 1985; Rubin, 2005). Cooley and Floyd (2013) studied the financial and academic implications of consolidations in multiple districts in Texas across a 10-year time period. The researchers found the combined schools in Texas experienced a decrease in student achievement compared to the non-consolidated schools (Cooley & Floyd, 2013). In agreement, Rubin (2005) presented data suggesting smaller schools provided a better educational experience for students, particularly those of lower income. Lawrence et al. (2002) concurred, citing a 2000 Florida policy that explicitly stated the following:

> Smaller schools provide benefits of reduced discipline problems and crime, reduced truancy and gang participation, reduced dropout rates, improved teacher and student attitudes, improved student self-perception, student academic achievement equal to or superior to that of students at larger schools and increased parental involvement. (p. 6)

According to Lawrence et al. (2002), an individual in a larger school may experience feelings of isolation. A larger variety of teams, clubs, and organizations did not necessarily correlate with a higher percentage of student engagement, and some students who transitioned from a smaller school to a larger school reduced the amount of activities, clubs, sports in which they participated (Lawrence et al., 2002). According to the researchers, smaller schools fostered better engagement with higher participation rates from students than in larger schools. In larger schools, some students became even more involved, while other students became even more isolated (Lawrence et al., 2002). Rubin (2005) made a connection of extracurricular engagement to dropouts, stating some districts in West Virginia experienced a 50% dropout rate from students who were bussed long distances to a consolidated school. Because of the long bus travel times, the students were not able to participate in before or after school activities (Rubin, 2005).

Other researchers made claims against consolidating schools focused on the idea that smaller schools had fewer behavior issues (Galway, 2012; Nelson, 1985). Nelson stated opponents of school consolidation suggested more tensions between students and teachers and less parent-teacher involvement gave way to more student discipline issues. Likewise, Galway (2012) stated opponents of

consolidation cite student safety, truancy, busing, and discipline as drawbacks to consolidation; however, opponents' sentiments about student discipline may be invalid. Haller (1992) argued, "Truancy and more serious forms of misconduct are likely to become worse when small rural schools are consolidated . . . but barely" (p. 154). The researcher continued by describing his idea that carefully developed school policies and procedures would likely defray any noticeable increase in behavior issues (Haller, 1992). Kohler et al. (2015) researched instances of and student participation in violent behaviors across middle schools of various sizes; the researchers' analysis and discussion agreed with Haller (1992) in that school size only moderately impacts violent student behavior, and creating smaller learning communities or separating students into smaller grade level cohorts "so that students are known among their teachers to provide an environment where students feel welcome, decreasing the feeling of isolation" (p. 160), may offset the impact of school size on student misbehavior.

Per Pupil Expenditures Did Not Improve

As more consolidations have matured beyond decades from their initial inception, researchers have conducted studies to measure the financial effects of the consolidation (Cooley & Floyd, 2013; Cox & Cox, 2010; Lawrence et al., 2002; Streifel et al., 1991). "The logic of consolidation, which seems self-evident—create[d] economies of scale and redirect savings to improve and expand educational programs—is flawed" (Galway, 2012, p. 26). In some cases, financial situations worsened. Streifel et al. (1991) studied 19 consolidations across 10 states to find there was no savings realized overall. The researchers found while increase in administrative costs of consolidated schools (10%) was

less than the state average increase in administrative costs (31%), other categories, including instruction, transportation, operations and maintenance, total costs, and capital projects did not reveal any practical savings (Streifel et al., 1991).

In their study of multiple Texas systems across a 10-year time period, Cooley and Floyd (2013) found per pupil expenditures did not improve in the consolidated districts. Cooley and Floyd (2013) studied how per pupil expenditures compared in consolidated and non-consolidated districts before and after consolidation. Also, the researchers questioned how student achievement compared in consolidated and non-consolidated districts both before and after consolidation (Cooley & Floyd, 2013). The researchers collected data from the Texas Education Association (TEA) website, specifically using a TEA website feature called Snapshot to view the expenditure and achievement data for the 20 districts in the study. Cooley and Floyd (2013) found there was no statistically significant difference in per-pupil expenditures between consolidated (M = 10,395, SD = 3,653.48) and non-consolidate(M = 9,586, SD = 1,661.20) districts. The researchers found there was no statistically significant difference in financial efficiencies in districts before (M = 9,764, SD = 3,823.03) or after (M = 10,395, SD = 3,653.48) consolidation (Cooley & Floyd, 2013). Also, the researchers found there was no statistically significant difference in student achievement between consolidated (M = 72, SD = 10.69) and non-consolidated (M = 74, SD = 11.39) districts. Lastly, Cooley and Floyd (2013) found there was a statistically significant *decrease* in student achievement in districts after

consolidation (*M* = 72, *SD* = 10.69) compared to those before (M = 75, *SD* = 10.16) consolidation.

Lawrence et al. (2002) discussed diseconomies that existed with larger schools that smaller schools were less likely to experience. In concurrence with the point about student feelings of isolation, Lawrence et al. (2002) claimed larger schools required more guidance counselors and advisors per student than smaller schools. Additionally, researchers noted increased transportation costs of bussing students long distances to attend a distant, consolidated school (Afterschool Alliance, 2018; Bradley, 1995; DeLuca, 2013; Lawrence et al., 2002; Rubin, 2005).

Loss of Community Identity

Galway (2012) argued the financial impact of consolidation must not be the only factor considered when making a consolidation decision. The "intangible costs of education reform" (Galway, 2012, p. 26) must be equally weighted in the decision-making process. Peshkin (1982) described the emotional connection that a close-proximity school provides the community:

> When the school is down the street, parents feel they can be instrumental in what happens to their children, in physical, moral and intellectual terms. The school's physical proximity . . . creates the impression of security and safety; distance creates the impression of inaccessibility; if not powerlessness. (p. 163)

Superville (2017) investigated closures in West Memphis, Arkansas, where communities were struggling with failing schools, and since the schools closed, were challenged by maintaining a sense of community. The researcher

quoted an Arkansas resident, “This town is really poverty-stricken, but at least we had our schools, and they ended up taking that away from us” (Superville, 2017, p. 3). Surface (2011) explained the impact of school closures to the community: “The loss of a local school could threaten the economic vitality and cohesiveness of the community” (p. 4). Surface noted social life declined in the three Nebraska communities in which schools consolidated.

Warner et al. (2010) also discussed community identity that was lost when a school closed in a smaller community. In a case study of an Appalachian school district consolidation, Warner et al. (2010) noted how the communities involved in the consolidation used micropolitics to preserve their respective community identities, both before and after the consolidation. Opponents of consolidation used claims in alignment to these studies’ findings to impassionedly argue against consolidation (Adams, 2020; FOX56 Newsroom, 2020; Superville, 2017).

Student Opportunity

Researchers positioned opportunity in many forms throughout the literature (Frankenberg et al., 2017; Hawkins, 2018). Frankenberg et al. (2017) described the consolidation of Memphis City, Tennessee, and Shelby County, Tennessee, from a racial disparities perspective, positing the drawing of boundary lines followed legal and political trends, resulting in unbalanced school performances between schools of varied socioeconomic areas. Hawkins (2018) discussed racial disparities in higher education institutions such as Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and in a secondary public school in New York City, New York, where students of certain racial backgrounds made up disproportionate percentages of the schools’ student populations. For the purposes

of this study, opportunity was considered holistically to include all student demographics of the small, rural schools and systems studied.

For this study, I included four factors in the concept of student opportunity: comprehensive programming, increased variety of extracurricular activities, innovative staff professional development, and enhanced instructional technology. I synthesized four factors of student opportunity from the necessity to observe or measure items the literature described as impacting student opportunity (Booth et al., 2016). The following describes the evolution of the term and the synthesis of multiple sources to create a common and inclusive meaning for student opportunity as it was considered in this study. Additionally, I discussed each factor of student opportunity to provide operational definitions of what *enhanced* and *innovative* might look like for the respective factors—comprehensive programming, extracurricular options, teacher professional development, and instructional technology.

In his 1967 speech, Donald Rushing provided a practical, experience-based view of opportunity. Rushing (1967) described what comprehensive programming and effective extracurricular activities looked like for his consolidated schools in the 1950s and 1960s, where opportunity included breadth and depth of curriculum and extracurricular activities. The views of Rushing (1967) should be modernized to account for the passage of time and the evolution of public education. Additional research suggested the definition of student opportunity could be further modernized by incorporating instructional technology and teacher professional development (Boser, 2013; Margolin et al., 2019; Thurman, 2012).

Curriculum Programming

Rushing (1967) described opportunity in the realm of curriculum as comprehensive programming that considered the raw quantity of course offerings in core, foreign language, and vocational subject areas. In view of comprehensive programming, other researchers supported and further enhanced Rushing's (1967) definition of opportunity (Dolph, 2008; Dougherty, 2016; Haller et al., 1990; Holian et al., 2014; Iatarola et al., 2011; Packard et al., 2012; Piontek et al., 2016; Thomas et al., 2013; Warne, 2017). Haller et al. (1990) categorized the definitions of program comprehensiveness. The researchers (1990) described base, advanced, and alternate course offerings within a subject area and examined how *carefully designed* the master schedule was to not restrict students from taking the advanced courses. According to Haller et al. (1990), the base course within a subject was the introductory level course, often taken by underclassmen exploring the subject. Examples of possible base courses for Business Education have been included in Table 4.

Table 4

Example Course Offerings in a Business Education Subject Path

Elective Path	**Base Course**	**Advanced Course**	**Alternate Course**
Office Management	Introduction to Business	Business Management	Computer Applications
Accounting	Accounting I	Accounting II	Business Communications
Marketing Management	Marketing I	Marketing II	Entrepreneurism

Note: Elective paths and course titles from TN Department of Education (n.d.a).

As the student progressed within the subject, he may have taken the advanced courses or alternate courses. Advanced courses included the higher-level courses on a traditional path. Warne (2017) considered College Board's AP courses and IB programs as additional effective examples of advanced courses within a comprehensive curriculum schedule. Finally, alternative courses within a comprehensive program of study were the courses that a student could take if he was not interested in taking the advanced courses within the traditional subject path (Haller et al., 1990).

Access to fine arts courses was another consideration that has contributed to the debate about larger, consolidated schools' ability to provide increased programming opportunities to students. Large quantities of arts courses offered do not necessarily indicate a high student participation rate; however, Thomas et al. (2013) indicated high schools with large student bodies rank at the top. Thomas et al. (2013) measured the quantity of arts courses offered and the percentage of student population who participated in the arts classes across 870 schools. According to Thomas et al. (2013), the average high school in the top quartile of their fine arts curriculum and participation ranking method had nearly eight times the enrollment of the average high school in the bottom quartile. While the percentage of students participating in the arts programs were similar (40.9% in the top quartile versus 39.8% in the bottom quartile), schools in the bottom quartile offered an average of 7.9 arts courses where schools in the top quartile offered an average of 40.4 courses.

> According to our Course Only Index, the number of arts courses is overwhelmingly a function of the size of the student body, and no small

high school could ever score well on such a ranking, regardless of the program in place. (Thomas et al., 2013, p. 7)

Increasingly, schools and systems were driven by academic pressures from communities and educational accountability from state education boards to continually find ways to improve (Jakubowski & Kulka, 2016). According to Jakubowski and Kulka (2016), the perceptions of a quality school differed between state requirements and community expectations. School leaders must balance the competing expectations by meeting state curricula expectations while listening to and providing programming opportunities that parents and other community stakeholders demand. Proponents of consolidation often argued a larger, consolidated school may be able to more efficiently resolve what both groups seemingly expect: Early Postsecondary Opportunities (EPSOs), CTE paths, AP courses, IB programs, DE courses, and DC courses (Loughlin & Modesitt, 2017; McInerny, 2019; Pignolet, 2018; WVMetroNews Staff, 2017).

States such as Tennessee responded to the federal ESSA by increasing focus on college and career readiness. The Tennessee Department of Education included a Ready Graduate criterion for school accountability (Tennessee Department of Education, 2018). Within this criteria, high school graduates were expected to earn some combination of ACT scores, levels of EPSOs, and/or industry certifications (Tennessee Department of Education, 2018). One critical area for some students to achieve college and career readiness was participation in AP and IB courses. According to Iatarola et al. (2011), some states began using participation rates in AP courses as a measurement of school effectiveness, affecting state and national rankings, grant opportunities, and access to funding.

The researchers' goal was to identify primary drivers for schools offering AP/IB courses. According to the Iatarola et al., larger school staffs increased the likelihood that more teachers have qualifications to teach AP courses. Thus, a larger school with more enrollment was more likely to offer AP or IB programming due to greater student demand and more specialized teacher supply (Iatarola et al., 2011).

CTE pathways offered additional programming opportunities for students. Dougherty (2016) claimed more professions require postsecondary education. CTE graduates within a specific path, such as health science, were much more likely to go to college. Additionally, high schools offering higher level math and science courses and dual enrollment courses may have helped CTE graduates better acclimate to college (Packard et al., 2012).

According to Piontek et al. (2016), a *central feature* in College and Career Readiness plans included DE and DC courses that allowed opportunities for students to earn college credit, further preparing them for college and a career. According to Holian et al. (2014), small schools experienced challenges in implementing DE/DC and AP courses. These challenges included insufficient financial and technological resources, small student enrollment, and difficulty recruiting and retaining qualified teachers (Holian et al., 2014). To address these challenges, smaller schools used online and distance learning courses primarily to offer dual enrollment and increase student access to DE/DC and AP courses. "Online and distance learning courses offer[ed] rural schools a means of exposing students to a diversity of courses they might not otherwise have access to" (Holian et al., 2014, p. 9).

An additional area of school programming considered was how larger, consolidated schools could serve students with special needs. According to Dolph (2008), the needs and requirements of providing for expanded special education programs in small schools was increasingly challenging, and larger schools may have combined resources to provide these specialized services. Dolph (2008) noted there were benefits of having all these services, specialized staff, and students in one location.

School programming was often the first factor considered within the definition of student opportunity (Dolph, 2008; Nitta et al., 2010; Rushing, 1967). Haller et al. (1990) argued for program comprehensiveness that included a breadth of multi-level courses within subject areas. States and stakeholders expected academic paths that prepared students for college and the workforce (Dougherty, 2016). AP and IB programming prepared students for post-secondary, and students could get a head start going into college by participating in dual enrollment and DC courses (Holian et al., 2014; Piontek et al., 2016). Robust fine arts programs were critical in expanding student curriculum opportunities (Thomas et al., 2013). Proponents of consolidation argued combining the enrollment and resources of schools may equip the larger school with what was needed to offer the breadth and variety of courses students need (Nitta et al., 2010; Young & Green, 2005). Academic completion, however, did not singularly provide a sufficient understanding of student opportunity in relation to school consolidation (Rushing, 1967).

Extracurricular Activities

The extant literature revealed supportive findings for how extracurricular activities benefit student growth and development. Mahoney et al. (2003) claimed extracurricular involvement provided students with opportunities to develop positive peer relationships through interpersonal interactions with adults and other students and argued extracurricular activities promote educational success and help students work toward achieving challenging life goals. According to Caldarella et al. (2019), sports promoted resiliency, responsibility, and empathy in students. The recommendation was schools offer a broad variety of sports to meet the interests and needs of students (Caldarella et al., 2019). The Afterschool Alliance (2018) argued for the prioritizing of developing and maintaining effective extracurricular programs as educators surveyed believed these programs benefitted students' social and emotional learning. In agreement, Ackell (2013) argued extracurricular sports and clubs promote the development of students' social skills, and Poteat et al. (2019) suggested social clubs like Gay-Straight Alliance could reduce depressive and anxiety symptoms in students. Furthermore, extracurriculars may be a way for schools to increase the involvement of special education students, even utilizing extracurricular clubs and activities as ways to work toward the goals of the students' Individualized Education Plan to comply with the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990 (Pence & Dymond, 2019). A potential advantage for students of a larger school was more and varied extracurricular activities compared to smaller schools (Ackell, 2013).

According to St-Amand et al. (2017), a key consideration in providing effective extracurricular opportunities was to listen to the interests of the students

and offer a broad variety of options that the students want to be involved in and enjoy. The researchers proposed options such as sports, dance, arts, music, and theater as examples (St-Amand et al., 2017). As small, rural high schools experienced financial and academic pressures, Snellman et al. (2017) claimed school strategies to reduce costs led to some schools cutting programs, like sports and extracurriculars. Pence and Dymond (2019) also noted special education student involvement in extracurricular activities may be lower than what is ideal due to schools' insufficient resources in supporting the special needs student in an extracurricular activity. Proponents of school consolidation suggested a larger, consolidated school could offer more, varied extracurricular opportunities for students while effectively managing the financial implications.

Rushing (1967) described improvement in extracurricular activities in terms of raw quantity of options provided. Prior to a school consolidation, the students had nine total extracurricular activities from which to select; however, the number of activities offered post consolidation were in excess of 20, many of which appeared to be more competitive (Rushing, 1967). Larger schools could benefit students through variety and improvement of academic competition, fine arts, comprehensive athletic programs, and a more diversified student population (Dolph, 2008). Indeed, extracurricular sports, clubs, and activities provided benefits to students' development of soft skills, interpersonal relationships, and social-emotional learning (Pence & Dymond, 2019; St-Amand et al., 2017). While smaller, rural school may have faced financial concerns that led to a reduction in the quantity and variety of extracurriculars offered, early research showed larger, consolidated schools may have been able to withstand financial

pressures and offer more robust extracurricular options to meet varied student interests (Guthrie, 1979; Rushing, 1967).

Professional Development for Teachers

The correlation between teacher preparation and student opportunity received little attention in early debates concerning school consolidation (Rushing, 1967). Further exploration of the topic of teacher professional development was merited as it was considered to be a factor within the definition of student opportunity. Educators must be further developed professionally to best utilize new technology and implement innovative instructional strategies to improve student opportunity (Margolin et al., 2019). According to researchers, engaging students and providing them with new learning opportunities through innovative instructional strategies, sharing of best practices, and the development of instructional materials for an expanded curriculum were additional benefits of teacher professional development (Margolin et al., 2019). Showell and Brown (2019) stated, "A strong professional development plan is critical to ensuring the systemic growth and productivity of effective school instructional practices" (p. 141). When professional development was a key aspect of a strong learning climate of a school embedded into the organization, the result was the benefit of teacher and student learning (Hallinger, 2005; Self, 2001; Thurman, 2012).

Ackell (2013) identified larger, consolidated schools would make additional teacher training more feasible. Thurman (2012) recognized a larger school employed more teachers within specific fields of study, therefore, offering teachers more peers who teach similar courses within PLCs in which to

collaborate. Margolin et al. (2019) identified specific groups of teachers who most benefitted from teacher professional development.

> Math teachers, in particular, may need additional professional development in how to use technology to address specific learning objectives. Teachers with 3 or fewer years of teaching experience and those with 20 or more years also appear to need additional training on using technology for instruction. (Margolin et al., 2019, p. ii)

Teacher professional development was added to the concept of student opportunity due to the essential need for teachers to learn new instructional strategies and collaborate with peers to develop innovative classroom activities and materials (Thurman, 2012). As a school expanded the curriculum options for students, instructional leaders needed to ensure the quality of the instruction in these courses also met the demands and expectations of stakeholders (Ackell, 2013; Hallinger, 2005; Self, 2001). Teachers were equipped with the knowledge and skills to practice effective instructional strategies when deliberate professional development was in place (Margolin et al., 2019; Showell & Brown, 2019).

Instructional Technology

Since Rushing's (1967) speech, the influence and impact of technology on the world increased exponentially. Further research was needed to include technology into the modernized definition of student opportunity. Boser (2013) stated technology must be used effectively to develop new instructional strategies. Hamilton and Mackinnon (2013) argued innovative schools should be designed to maximize technology and human capital. Redesigning schools required

"fundamentally reshaping the use of human capacity, technology, time, and money to provide both recuperative and accelerative opportunities for all students" (Hamilton & Mackinnon, 2013, p. 4). Educators may be able to better personalize the learning experience through the appropriate incorporation of technology into the curriculum and culture of a secondary school (Hamilton & Mackinnon, 2013). Margolin et al. (2019) offered activities that could effectively activate development in critical academic and social skills such as collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical thinking, as well as online collaborating with students at other schools, researching and analyzing online information, engaging in online writing and reviews, and creating multimedia for online publication.

Enhanced use of instructional technology positively impacted the attitudes of students about their classes (Clements et al., 2015; Valenti et al., 2019). Research focused upon post-secondary education has illustrated students perceive audio-visual content, when implemented appropriately, to improve the courses (Valenti et al., 2019). Valenti et al. noted the student's positive perception of the course was an element for his success in the course. Further investigation of the research suggested this notion may be translated to the secondary level. According to Clements et al. (2015), over 60% of their respondent schools reported students benefitted from online courses. Effective implementation of the instructional technology was critical to students' perception of school and their success. "Although students frequently use[d] technology in the classroom, it was not being used in ways that are believed to support 21st century skills" (Margolin et al., 2019, p. 18). This notion reiterated the need for teacher professional

development to be included in the operational definition of student opportunity within a school or district consolidation.

Appropriate use of instructional technology may also be used to further enhance the curriculum and programming options for students. As discussed above, Holian et al. (2014) suggested online courses can increase opportunity for students to take DE, DC, and AP courses. Holian et al. (2014) noted some smaller, rural schools offered distance learning as a means to increase student opportunity, but technology and supervision limitations continued to create challenges in implementation for these smaller schools.

The concept of student opportunity was completed by including enhancing instructional technology. Students benefited from instructional technology by developing communication, collaboration, and critical analysis skills (Margolin et al., 2019). Effective adoption of instructional technology yielded more engaging and personalized learning environments (Hamilton & Mackinnon, 2013). The literature showed personalized learning environments led to increased student positive perception of the course and, thus, student success (Clements et al., 2015; Valenti et al., 2019). Lastly, instructional technology offered opportunities for schools to expand programming to online and dual enrollment courses that would not have been possible otherwise (Holian et al., 2014).

Operational Synthesis of Student Opportunity

The conceptual understanding of student opportunity has evolved within the literature. For this study, student opportunity was driven by the views of comprehensive programming with increased variety of extracurricular activities, while considering improved instructional technology and innovative teacher

professional development. Comprehensive programming included a breadth and depth of course offerings within subject areas, including AP, IB, and CTE classes (Dougherty, 2016; Haller et al., 1990; Holian et al., 2014; Iatarola et al., 2011; Packard et al., 2012; Piontek et al., 2016; Rushing, 1967; Warne, 2017). Schools benefitted from offering robust fine arts programs and additional resources for supporting special education programming needs (Dolph, 2008; Thomas et al., 2013). Extracurricular activities provided students with opportunities to develop social skills, resilience, and responsibility, and schools that offered a variety of sports and clubs provided students with a sense of belonging and connectedness (Ackell, 2013; Afterschool Alliance, 2018; Caldarella et al., 2019; Mahoney et al., 2003; Pence & Dymond, 2019; Poteat et al., 2019; Snellman et al., 2017; St-Amand et al., 2017).

Teacher professional development and PLCs were critical in ensuring the quality of courses and instruction met expectations. Instructional technology was found to improve students' perceptions of their education, leading to greater student success (Ackell, 2013; Hallenger, 2005; Margolin et al., 2019; Self, 2001; Showell & Brown, 2019; Thurman, 2012). Instructional technology was also utilized to overcome financial and resource barriers in offering online and DE classes, further enhancing programming comprehensiveness (Boser, 2013; Hamilton & Mackinnon, 2013; Holian et al., 2014; 2013; Margolin et al., 2019).

Summary of Review of Literature

There was a long and substantial history of school consolidation in the United States (Duncombe & Yinger, 2010; Snyder, 1993). Often, the past examples of consolidation were met with considerable criticism (Bradley, 1995;

Cooley & Floyd, 2013, Cox & Cox, 2010; Galway, 2012; Siegal-Hawley et al., 2018). Consistently, the debate for and against consolidation presented contestable arguments that should be closely examined for validity and impact. Public schools were increasingly pressured to meet stakeholder demands, while financial concerns challenged the ability of educational leaders and policymakers to do so (Berry, 2007; Boser, 2013; Dolph, 2008; Henderson & Gomez, 1975; Lawrence et al., 2002; Ornstein, 1992; Surface, 2011; Warner et al., 2010; Young & Green, 2005). Small, rural high schools were in the heart of this struggle, forced into choices of reducing and cutting support for the factors of student opportunity—comprehensive programming, extracurricular activities, teacher training, and instructional technology (Snellman et al., 2017). Inevitably, school consolidation remains an option for small, rural systems to consider when deciding how to reconcile these woes (Blauwkamp et al., 2011).

The purpose of this study was to examine stakeholders' perceptions of the impact of rural high school consolidation on opportunities for students. In the following chapters, I discussed the methodology, analysis and results, and conclusions and recommendations of the research. In Chapter III, I describe the population and participants and the methods of data collection and analysis of this study. Chapter IV includes the analysis of the data and descriptions of the results. In Chapter V, I make conclusions and recommendations based off of the data and analysis as they relate to the literature.

Chapter III: Methodology

Educational leaders and policymakers looked to consolidation as a way for rural schools and school systems to overcome financial challenges and improve the educational experiences for students (Berry, 2007; Surface, 2011). Stakeholders were met with conflicting claims about the effects of school and system consolidation (Ackell, 2013). Proponents of consolidation claimed consolidation would provide students with more curricular and extracurricular options by way of financial savings experienced from economies of scale (Guthrie, 1979; Ismail, 2020; Lindsay, 1982; Palattella, 2017; Pignolet, 2018; Rubin, 2005; Self, 2001; Shakrani, 2010; Slate & Jones, 2005; WVMetroNews Staff, 2017). Opponents of consolidation claimed the consolidation would not relieve financial stress but would risk more behavioral problems and a loss of community identity (Cooley & Floyd, 2013; Cox & Cox, 2010; Galway, 2012; Haller, 1992; Lawrence et al., 2002; Nelson, 1985; Peshkin, 1982; Rubin, 2005; Streifel et al., 1991; Superville, 2017; Warner et al., 2010). Educational leaders faced with, or experiencing, a consolidation situation benefitted from understanding the perceptions of stakeholders amid varying viewpoints and claims (Ackell, 2013). Stakeholder perceptions can shed light on the unique community and context-sensitive characteristics of school improvement planning, including consolidation (Ackell, 2013; Thompson, 2018). The purpose of this study was to examine stakeholders' perceptions of the impact of rural high school consolidation on opportunities for students.

Research Design

According to Leedy and Ormrod (2005), qualitative researchers studied a

phenomenon in detail, considered all facets of the phenomena, and described the phenomena as it existed within its natural settings. While quantitative research focused on a specific question or problem, qualitative research sought to find meaning within a phenomenon by examining the situation *holistically* (Creswell, 2009; Fraenkel et al., 2002; Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). In qualitative studies, researchers collected and analyzed data in the form of words and images to describe the meanings and attitudes regarding a phenomenon (Creswell, 2009; Fraenkel et al., 2012; Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). For this study, qualitative research was selected based on the nature of the problem, the purpose of the study, the research questions, and the form of data collected (Robert & Hyatt, 2019).

According to researchers, qualitative case studies consisted of collecting data from multiple sources to gather as much information as possible about a single case (Fraenkel et al., 2012). Specifically, the researchers claimed an instrumental case study is one where the detailed examination of a single case was a means for the qualitative researcher to gain valuable insights about a larger, more global issue. Based on the literature, I recognized a need for triangulation within this case study, that is using multiple instruments to collect data, thereby improving the credibility of the study findings (Fraenkel et al., 2012). In this study, I achieved triangulation by gathering interview data from four separate sub-groups of the population (i.e., teachers, administrators, parents, and non-parent community members).

Fraenkel et al. (2012) defined interviews as “the careful asking of relevant questions” (p. 450). For this study, I used personal interviews as the primary source of data collection since my purpose was to examine the perceptions of

stakeholders regarding school consolidation and student opportunity. According to Leedy and Ormrod (2005), interviews can yield data about "people's beliefs and perspectives about the facts, feelings, motives, . . . standards for behavior (what people think should be done in a certain situation), and conscious reasons for feelings" (p. 146). I recognized interviews could provide data about people's attitudes (Fraenkel et al., 2012) about the impact school consolidation has on study opportunity. Specifically, I chose a semi-structured interview design for this study. According to researchers, semi-structured interviews consisted of a few central questions, rather formal, but with flexibility for the interviewer to adapt, rephrase, clarify, or follow-up to the scripted questions (Fraenkel et al., 2012; Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). I developed the questions in the semi-structured interviews to target what stakeholders believed the impact of school consolidation would be on student opportunity, and the responses from the semi-structured interviews were later compared and contrasted (Fraenkel et al., 2012).

Role of the Researcher

In qualitative research, the researcher was the most integral instrument of the study, collecting the data, conducting the interviews, analyzing the documents, and analyzing the information (Creswell, 2009; Fraenkel et al., 2012). Roberts and Hyatt (2019) noted qualitative researchers bring the culmination of their knowledge, history, and personal experiences with them into the research study and, as the integral instrument, must be careful to identify and minimize any biases that could affect the study and findings. Creswell (2009) recommended qualitative researchers identified themselves relating to their "values, and personal background, such as gender, history, culture, and socioeconomic status, that may

shape their interpretations formed during a study" (p. 177). While I was a resident of Hollis County, I was not employed by Hollis County School System (HCSS), nor was I a part of any official discussions or meetings regarding school consolidations. I conducted the interviews using the same questions, interviewed people from different stakeholder groups, and utilized snowball sampling to minimize my impact on the study.

In research, it was necessary to gain clearance to conduct a research study from appropriate parties prior to beginning (Creswell, 2009). In February of 2020, I emailed the Assistant Director of Secondary Education for HCSS, and we had a phone conversation during which I described the purpose and design of my research study. Following this phone call, the Assistant Director of Secondary Education emailed me to report he had a conversation with the HCSS Superintendent, who had agreed to allow me to conduct my research in Hollis County. With the help of my dissertation committee, I completed the research proposal form for Lincoln Memorial University's Internal Review Board and was subsequently cleared to conduct research on September 2, 2020.

Participants of the Study

To better accommodate this study to the generalization of other similar situations, I provided information and context about the subjects of this case study (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). Creswell (2009) recommended "masking" (p. 178) the names of people and places in qualitative research to protect confidentiality. For that reason, I used Hollis County and the HCSS as pseudonyms in this study.

Setting

Hollis County, located in a southeastern U.S. state, consisted of 361 square miles of land plus an additional 34 square miles of rivers and lakes. The U.S. Census Bureau estimated the county population for 2019 to be over 50,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). Hollis County's median household income was estimated by the U.S. Census Bureau to be around $50,000 for 2019 (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). Of the eight surrounding counties, Hollis County ranks third in median household income and sixth for population (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). There were five distinct communities in Hollis County, each with its own high school. Two of the communities were spread into adjacent counties. Hollis County was home to a local community college, which enrolled almost 6,000 students in 2016.

Hollis County had a history with consolidation, specifically a multi-district consolidation. In 2003, HCSS absorbed Lee City School System (pseudonym) to improve the financial situation of Lee City Schools. In April of 2017, the Hollis County School Board considered an initial consolidation proposal, which included merging all five of the high schools in the system into one. Less than a month after rejecting that proposal, the Hollis County School Board met to consider the consolidation of three of the county's high schools, Hollis County High School, Lee High School, and Elizabeth High School. The new consolidated high school was planned to be on the property of the local community college, with hope to further encourage dual enrollment partnerships and promote higher education to students. The Hollis County School Board voted 8 to 1 to approve the plan in May 2017. At the final step of the approval process for the new consolidated high

school, the Hollis County Commission rejected the proposal with a vote of 11 to 4 in February of 2019 due to perceived community opposition to longer bus rides for students and an increase in local taxes. In November of 2019, the Hollis County School Board approved a new plan to combine the five high schools into two, with one of the high schools combining with its feeder middle school; however, the board withdrew this plan in early 2020. As of 2020, HCSS consisted of 17 total schools, including the 5 high schools (see Table 5).

Table 5

Hollis County High Schools Student Enrollment and Diversity

School Name	Student Enrollment	% Black, Hispanic, & Native American	% Economically Disadvantaged	% Students with Disabilities
Hollis County High School	698	6.2%	17.9%	13.3%
Lee High School	377	17.8%	40.3%	16.2%
Elizabeth High School	382	7.3%	36.9%	17.8%
Grant High School	307	3.3%	31.3%	13.7%
Morgan High School	244	4.5%	22.1%	19.7%
Hollis County School System	*6,337*[a]	*9.3%*	*35.8%*	*17.8%*
Southeastern State	*973,659*[a]	*35.2%*	*34.9%*	*13.5%*

District and Schools Enrollment from Tennessee Department of Education (n.d.b).

[a] Enrollment numbers represent Pre-K through 12th grades

Sampling

For this research study, I began with purposeful sampling to select interview participants. In purposeful sampling, participants were chosen based on their ability to provide researchers with the most relevant and helpful information for the specific purpose and research question of the study (Creswell, 2009; Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). I chose four distinct stakeholder groups for my study: teachers, administrators, parents, and non-parent community members. I considered teacher participants as certified teachers of 9th through 12th grades in HCSS. For the administrator stakeholder group, I considered administrators and supervisors of 9th through 12th grades in HCSS. I gained access to these groups through a district-level supervisor at HCSS, who introduced me to the building level administrators of three of the five high schools.

For the teacher, parent, and non-parent community member stakeholder groups, I used snowball sampling to get in contact with and select participants, where participants in the interviews were asked to recommend other potential participants who would know about the topic and meet categorization requirements of one of the four stakeholder groups (Fraenkel et al., 2012). Interview participants responded favorably to providing me with names and contact information for other prospective participants. I stored contact information in a secured Microsoft Excel spreadsheet that allowed me to keep track of my contacts with prospective participants. In the parent stakeholder group, I considered any non-educator who was a parent of a student who was currently enrolled in one of the HCSS 9th through 12th grade high schools. I considered

non-parent community members as non-educators who did not have children enrolled in one of HCSS 9th through 12th grade high schools.

In 2019, HCSS employed a total 439 teachers, 138 within 9th through 12th grades, and 35 administrators, 11 within 9th through 12th grades. I interviewed 20 total participants in this study, including five representing each stakeholder group. Where possible, individually identifiable information about participants—including the specific occupations, gender-identifying pronouns, and specific pseudonyms (Admin01, Teacher01) assigned to each participant—have been omitted to help protect the identity of the participants.

Administrator participants included head principals and assistant principals of varying years of experience and backgrounds. Teacher participants were employed at one of the high schools in HCSS and had varying years of experience (5 to 30+ years), taught various subjects, and may have coached a sport for their school. Parent participants also had various occupations and included some whose first child was in high school in HCSS and others whose child was in high school at the time of the interview and may have had older siblings who already completed high school. Non-parent community member participants had various occupations and included some individuals who had graduated from HCSS, others who had completed high school elsewhere, some who had students already graduated from HCSS, and some who did not have children who graduated from HCSS. I interviewed participants of the stakeholder groups until I experienced *saturation* within that stakeholder group, which is when new data generated from the qualitative study produced no new knowledge (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Data Collection

This qualitative, instrumental case study consisted of interviews and document analysis, which yielded extensive data on which the study was focused (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). In this qualitative study, the data were collected in the form of words and images (Creswell, 2009; Fraenkel et al., 2012; Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). I described the process by which I collected and stored interview and document data in the following section.

Interview Protocol

For the personal interviews of this study, I developed an *interview protocol*, a set of instructions and a list of interview questions to support me in maintaining some standardization across my semi-structured interviews (see Appendix A) (Creswell, 2009). Then I conducted pilot interviews using the interview protocol. According to Roberts and Hyatt (2019), pilot testing was "important to establish whether the instrument will provide the data that will inform your research questions" (p. 151). The researchers encouraged use of people who are not directly involved in the research study that can provide feedback. For the pilot interview participants, I used fellow cohort members in my doctoral program, teachers and administrators from a school in an adjacent county, and family members and friends who were not residents of Hollis County. The purpose of these pilot interviews was to test the effectiveness in the questions not for gathering actual response data from these test participants, so it was not necessary these test participants were associated in any way with Hollis County.

After careful consideration and interview piloting, I adjusted the exact verbiage of some questions for the specific stakeholder groups. For the parents

and non-parent community members, I removed the third question pertaining to teacher professional development because my piloting showed non-educators did not seem to have enough knowledge of teacher professional development to elicit meaningful responses. I adjusted the verbiage of question four by substituting *classroom technology* for *instructional technology* and gave some examples and non-examples of classroom technology.

A district-level administrator in HCSS provided me with the names and contact information for the head administrators of three of the five high schools in the county. These three were chosen by the this district administrator because he believed their schools were the most likely to be impacted by a potential consolidation. The district administrator also introduced me to the school administrators via email, encouraging them to support my research. All three administrators agreed to participate in the interviews. At the end of each administrator interview, I asked each participant for the names and contact information for three other educators who might be willing to participate in the study.

I contacted the interview participants via phone and email to seek agreement to participate. Although some prospective participants did not respond to my emails introducing myself and requesting they participate in the study, all who were contacted by phone were willing to participate. If there was no response after attempting contact with prospective participants twice, I would remove that prospective participant from my potential participant pool.

Interviewing Participants

When introducing myself to prospective participants, I identified myself as a student of Lincoln Memorial University, thereby not creating a false perception that I was affiliated with Hollis County or HCSS. I asked prospective participants if they would be willing to participate. Those who agreed were provided with a consent form for adults (see Appendix B), developed from an approved template provided by Lincoln Memorial University. Participants were asked to complete the form and return it to me via email. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, meeting the participant face-to-face was not appropriate. Instead, I used video conferencing technology or phone conferencing to facilitate the interviews. Upon receipt of the consent form, I arranged with the participant a date and time to conduct the video or phone interview. There were a few instances where participants agreed to participate but would either not return the consent form, or we were not able to coordinate an agreed-upon date and time for the interview that fit both our calendars.

Once the interviewee and I had established a reliable connection for the video or phone interview, I kept the greeting brief so not to display any biases or precognitive responses intentionally or unintentionally to the participants. I asked the interviewee if I could record the conversation. Recording devices allowed me to capture participant responses exactly, without any subjective misinterpretation (Fraenkel et al., 2012; Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). I made use of a Sony ICD-PX370 digital audio recorder. I advised participants that I may also take handwritten notes, that I would safeguard their confidentiality, and that they may stop the interview at any time. I then made note of the time and proceeded with asking the

questions per the interview protocol. During the interviews, I took notes sparingly, only of notable, non-audible observations. Once the participant finished their response to the final question, I turned off the audio recorder, thus completing the interview.

For the teacher, parent, and non-parent community member interviews, I made use of snowball sampling to recruit new participants for those three stakeholder categories. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) described benefits of snowball sampling to be a randomization effect because the researcher is not selecting the participants. Instead, existing participants select the potential participants and the potential participants then self-select if they want to be a part of the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I asked interviewees for potential participants based on which stakeholder groups needed more interviews to reach saturation. As I approached saturation for a particular stakeholder group, I adjusted the type of prospective participant (i.e., administrator, non-parent, parent, teacher) for which I asked the interviewee to provide contact information. As I approached total saturation for the overall study, I stopped asking for referrals completely.

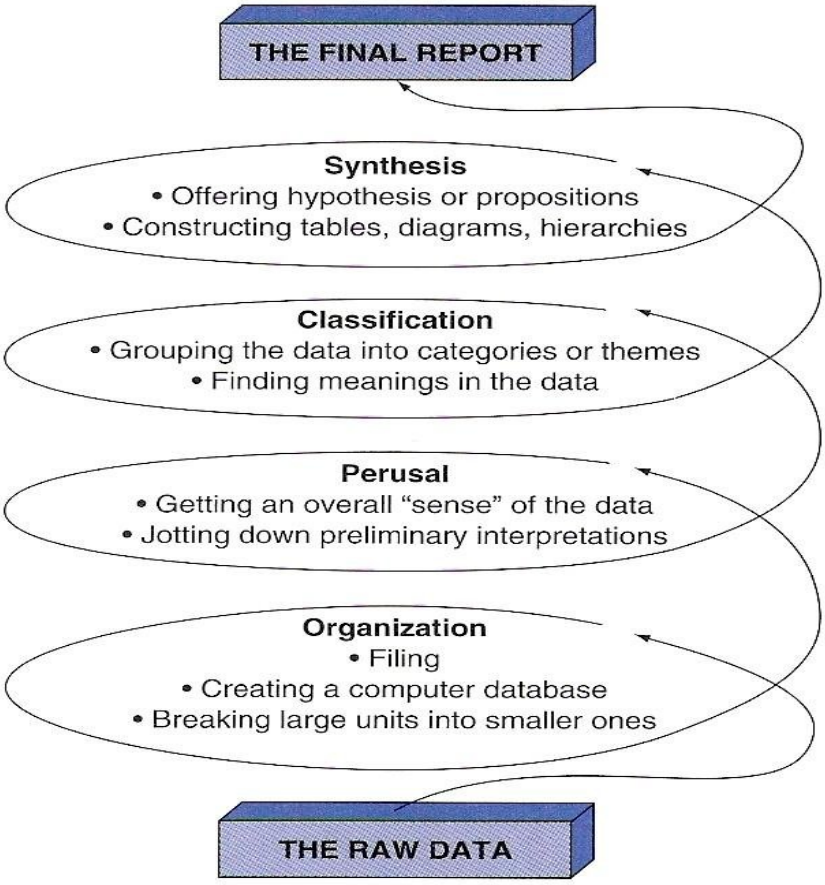
The audio data from the interviews were transferred from recorder via a USB cable to a password-protected folder on an external hard drive connected to a personal computer. I was the only individual who had access to view, copy, edit, or remove these audio files. Using Microsoft Word and a USB transcription pedal, I transcribed the interviews verbatim. The transcribed interviews were also stored in the password-protected folder on the external hard drive.

Methods of Analysis

Collection and analysis in qualitative research happened concurrently and were ongoing (Fraenkel et al., 2012). As I conducted interviews, I began and perpetually continued analysis to better inform the progress of my study. The purpose in qualitative data analysis was to take a large amount of data and information and pare it down using commonalities into themes that can help provide answers to the research questions (Fraenkel et al., 2012; Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). Case study analyses involved "a detailed description of the setting of individuals followed by analysis of the data for themes or issues" (Creswell, 2009, p. 184). Leedy and Ormrod (2005) described qualitative data analysis in the conceptual form of a spiral (see Figure 2), where the overall analysis process is broken down into four main steps: Organization, Perusal, Classification, and Synthesis.

Figure 2

Data Analysis Spiral



(Leedy and Ormrod, 2005)

For this study, I analyzed the raw data which existed in the forms of text from personal interviews following Leedy and Ormrod's data analysis spiral and through the use of coding.

According to Leedy and Ormrod (2005), coding is the organization of details, the categorization of data into meaningful groups, and the identification of patterns or themes that characterize the case more broadly (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). Creswell (2009) recommended looking for codes through a variety of

lenses: codes expected, codes based on past literature and common sense, codes unexpected or unusual, codes of interest to readers, and codes that address the conceptual framework of the study. Like data analysis, Creswell (2009) claimed coding is an ongoing process with continual reflection.

As I reviewed the transcribed interviews and documents, I used a secure Microsoft Excel file to develop a table including the participant's stakeholder group (i.e., administrator, non-parent, parent, teacher), the participant's pseudonym (e.g., Admin01), the line number from the interview transcript where the raw data was located, the quote of the raw data from the transcript, and a column of initial *open coding* from the raw data based on Creswell's (2009) recommendations above. In another column, I grouped similar open codes into broader themes, called *axial coding*. Finally, I considered the broader axial codes as they compared with the conceptual framework for this study through *selective coding.* The organization of the participant roles, raw data, and codes within the Microsoft Excel spreadsheet table allowed me to filter and sort the columns as needed. I also color-coded rows as I analyzed based on the participant's explicit or implicit favorable or unfavorable perception of consolidation's impact on the research question topics. I used the selective codes from the spreadsheet table to organize the data analysis and synthesize the findings, conclusions, and recommendations of this study.

Trustworthiness

Researchers must convey the steps taken to best ensure the validity and reliability of the study (Creswell, 2009). Validity in qualitative research involved ensuring the accuracy of the methods; reliability involved developing consistent

approaches in the methods (Creswell, 2009). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated trustworthiness may be substituted for reliability and validity in qualitative studies. In qualitative research, the biggest threat to the trustworthiness of the study was the key instrument of the research—the researcher themselves (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Creswell (2009) and Merriam and Tisdell (2016) agreed strategies can be made to minimize the researcher's threat to the trustworthiness of the study.

Within the data collection aspects of this study, I utilized four tools to minimize risks to trustworthiness: an audio recorder, a protocol for interviewing and data analysis, snowball sampling, and member checking. The Sony ICD-PX370 digital audio recorder allowed for verbatim recording of the participants responses, at speed, with no risk of misinterpretation (Fraenkel et al., 2012; Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). Per Creswell's (2009) recommendation, I employed a protocol for interviews that allowed me to maintain consistency in the format and language I used during the interviews. Additionally, I utilized a form of purposeful sampling called snowball sampling (e.g., recruiting potential interview participants from previous interviewees), which removed the researcher from the sampling selection decision (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Lastly, I invited participants of the study to check the accuracy of the transcripts in what Creswell (2009) called *member checking.*

Within the analysis aspects of this study, I employed two strategies to minimize risks to trustworthiness: computer software and triangulation. I used Microsoft Excel computer software to assist with the organization and coding of the interview transcripts. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), computer

software was beneficial to the trustworthiness of a study because it has no intrinsic biases nor motivations for the coding to convey any particular themes. Lastly, I employed triangulation of multiple stakeholder perspectives to verify the codes, themes, and ultimate findings from my data collection and analysis process (Creswell, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations in a research study were characteristics over which researchers "have little or no control" (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019, p. 154). These were features or situations that created a vulnerability in the study as noted here. Critical to this study, interview participants' memories and beliefs may not be accurately grounded in shared reality (Creswell, 2009; Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). The interview participants in this study were recalling a consolidation situation that was at its peak over a year prior to these interviews. Their perceptions of the *facts* from that time may have been skewed through time and dialogue with others since and due to the emotionality of the topic. Another key limitation to this study was only 20 people being interviewed to represent a population of over 53,000. By considering a point of saturation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), I felt confident no additional interviews would yield new information.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, the periodic school shutdowns and Center for Disease Control guidelines prevented in-person interviews. I used video conferencing technology or phone conferencing when video conferencing was not an option. I also discovered, in some cases, a participant's overall favorability of school consolidation might affect the tone and nature of their responses to individual interview questions, which was also determined to be a

limitation of the study. For this limitation, I only considered data from a stakeholder group to have reached saturation once new knowledge was no longer being discovered, despite the participant's perceived explicit or implicit favorability or unfavorability toward consolidation.

Delimitations were the boundaries of a study, stated here to clarify the scope of the research project (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). For this study, I did not interview student stakeholders due to perceived difficulty in gaining parent permissions for minors. The timeframe for the data collection of this study was in the Fall of 2020, specifically September through October. At the conclusion of this research, the five schools in HCSS remained unconsolidated. The location for this study was one county in a rural area of a southeastern state, and one school (i.e., Grant High School, pseudonym) was not included for teacher and administrator interviews as it was no longer being considered for consolidation by the school system. Additionally, I did not attempt to examine the specific financial details of the consolidation since it had not yet occurred.

Assumptions of the Study

Roberts and Hyatt (2019) stated, "Assumptions are what you take for granted relative to your study" (p. 111). According to Johnson and Christensen (2012), researchers must make some assumptions to conduct research, but it was important to reflect and clarify assumptions. By stating the assumptions of a study clearly for readers, researchers provided context that may have increased the generalizability of the study to future situations (Johnson & Christensen, 2012; Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). The following represents key assumptions I established so this research study could exist:

- Samples were representative of their respective stakeholder groups.
- Interview participants and document authors did not intentionally attempt to mislead their audience.
- Local school consolidation was an important topic of discussion for stakeholders, in that they would speak openly about their perceptions.
- Interview participants were knowledgeable about the consolidation proposals within Hollis County.
- Participants in the study wanted better opportunities for students.

Summary of Methodology

In this chapter, I described the qualitative instrumental case study design of this research. I discussed my role as a researcher within a qualitative study and the context, demographics, and characteristics of the sample for this study, Hollis County. Then, I detailed the data collection and analysis methods of this study. Also, I described strategies I employed to foster trustworthiness of the research design. Lastly, I noted limitations, delimitations, and assumptions of the study. With this careful planning, I was able to complete the research project and will share my analysis and results in the next chapter.

Chapter IV: Analyses and Results

During a potential or actual school or system consolidation, stakeholders passionately considered the complex and contentious topics provided by proponents and opponents to consolidation (Ackell, 2013). Proponents of consolidation produced arguments that consolidation would yield more opportunity in curriculum and extracurricular options, benefit the local economy by attracting industry and residents, and provide more financial stability for the school system (Guthrie, 1979; Ismail, 2020; Lindsay, 1982; Palattella, 2017; Pignolet, 2018; Rubin, 2005; Self, 2001; Shakrani, 2010; Slate & Jones, 2005; WVMetroNews Staff, 2017). Opponents claimed consolidating schools would produce a higher frequency of student indiscipline, create a loss of community identity, and would not improve the financial stability of the school system (Cooley & Floyd, 2013; Cox & Cox, 2010; Galway, 2012; Haller, 1992; Lawrence et al., 2002; Nelson, 1985; Peshkin, 1982; Rubin, 2005; Streifel et al., 1991; Superville, 2017; Warner et al., 2010). The claims from proponents and opponents inherently were in conflict with each other. For this study, stakeholders were distinguished from proponents and opponents of school consolidation in that proponents and opponents were politicians, public officials, members of the press, and those who attempted to influence the opinions of the stakeholders. Considering the impact that local education has on stakeholders, educational leaders and policymakers may benefit from knowledge of stakeholders' perception of what a school consolidation means for them.

The purpose of this study was to examine stakeholders' perceptions of the impact of rural high school consolidation on opportunities for students.

Researchers of existing literature examined facets of school and system consolidation, including financial and economic impacts, student achievement, student and teacher social disruption, and school leadership. In this study, I examined what stakeholders perceived a school consolidation would do to the opportunities provided to students regarding four topics: expanding curriculum options, expanding extracurricular options, supplying innovative instructional technology, and providing teachers with effective training and development. Information obtained from this study may help educational leaders and policymakers navigate the contentious possibility of consolidating rural high schools.

Data Analysis

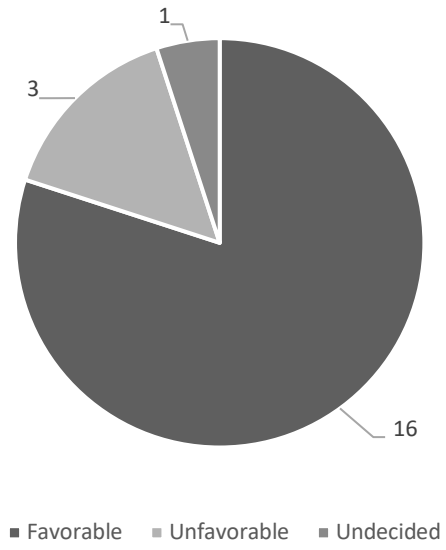
The purpose in qualitative data analysis was to pare down large amounts of data using categories and themes, relating to the research questions (Fraenkel et al., 2012; Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). For this study, I used semi-structured interviews within a case study, which were designed to illicit stakeholders' perceptions of rural high school consolidation related to student opportunity. The literature guided me to differentiate student opportunity into four categories: curriculum, extracurriculars, teacher professional development, and instructional technology.

The case for this study was a rural community of five high schools, which had formal proposals of consolidating some or all of the five high schools into one. Further, I categorized the stakeholders into four stakeholder groups: administrators, parents, non-parents, and teachers. After recording and transcribing 20 interviews, I codified and categorized the participants' responses

into themes in accordance with the research questions and Leedy and Ormrod's (2005) Data Analysis Spiral. Notably, participants' overall perspective (see Figure 3) of school consolidation was reflected in their responses and thereby the analysis codes.

Figure 3

Overall Perception of Consolidation

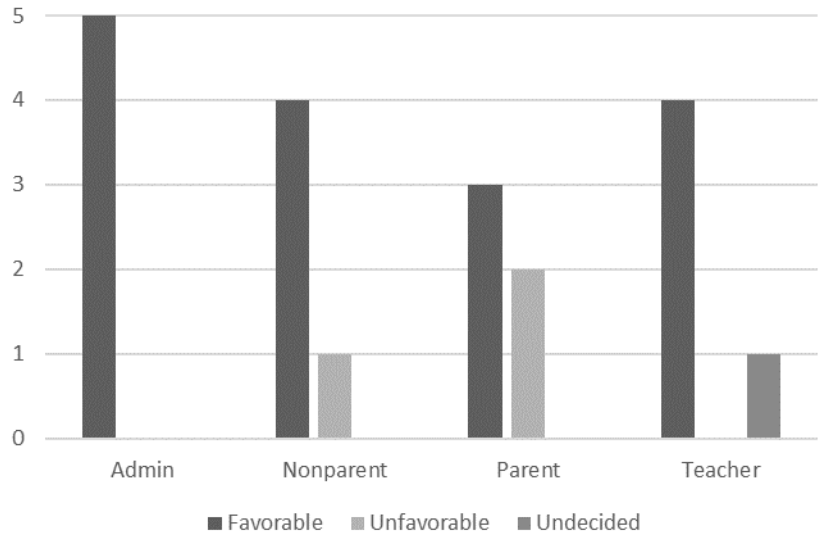


Those who were against consolidation tended to respond unfavorably to most interview questions, whereas those who were favorable toward consolidation tended to respond favorably to most interview questions. In general, the participants were largely in favor of school consolidation overall with 16 reflecting favorable responses toward consolidation, three responding unfavorably toward consolidation, and one teacher being uncertain (see Figure 3). Educators were largely favorable toward a consolidation, with five administrators and four teachers being favorable toward consolidation overall. Non-educators were more

divided; four non-parents and three parents were favorable toward school consolidation (see Figure 4).

Figure 4

Overall Perception of Consolidation by Participant Role



Research Questions

Using Microsoft Excel, I designed a table with the following columns: participant stakeholder group, participant pseudonym, transcript line number, raw data, open coding, and axial coding. As I reviewed the interview transcripts, I copied and pasted noteworthy raw data quotes and completed the corresponding fields for that item of raw data. I also color-coded rows as I analyzed to signify various things, such as a participant's overall favorability toward consolidation or to mark an item of raw data for paraphrasing or quoting in this chapter. Use of the Microsoft Excel table allowed me to sort and filter the data for whatever column of information I wanted to view. I duplicated this table into five total tabs, one for each of this study's research questions and another titled *Uncategorized.* At first, I

counted the number of times a particular open or axial code was mentioned. I thought the frequency of a code being discussed would determine its relevance to the study. I noticed, although some participants may be more descriptive or talkative than others, that did not necessarily mean their comments were more relevant; therefore, I abandoned this strategy of analysis. Instead I chose to count the number of participants who discussed particular codes. Commonalities from those axial codes became the selective codes that formed the themes in my study's results. Interestingly, the themes formed from my second analysis strategy of counting the number of participants that discussed particular codes were nearly identical to the themes derived from my first analysis strategy of counting the frequency of a code appearing within the raw data.

Research Question 1

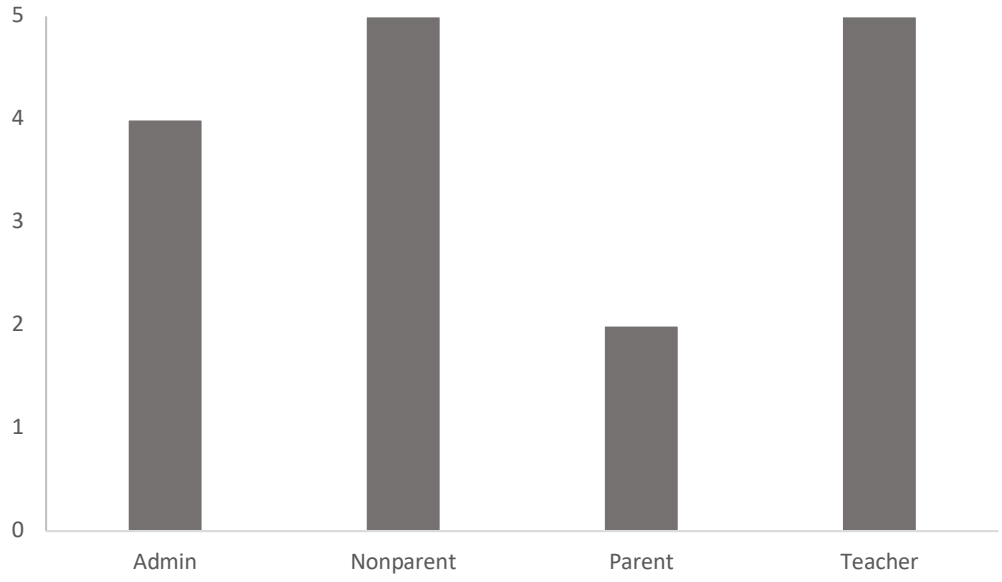
What are stakeholders' perceptions of the impact of rural high school consolidation on curriculum programming for students?

Of the 20 participants, 18 responded favorably toward expanded curriculum options within a school consolidation, one parent was not in favor, and another parent was uncertain. Three themes emerged from the data for Research Question 1: upper-level courses, CTE, and a larger student base.

Upper-level courses. Sixteen participants discussed upper-level courses in their responses (see Figure 5).

Figure 5

Upper-level Courses Discussed by Participants



All of the participants responded favorably with the idea that a school consolidation could bring more opportunities for students to take upper-level courses. Participants noted needs for more upper-level courses in math and science, and Teacher04 specifically discussed the opportunity a consolidated school could provide for enhanced Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics programs. Six participants expressed desire for more AP courses from a consolidated school. Teacher03 stated, “Since our five high schools are spread throughout the county, our course offerings are just spread really thin, especially in AP courses.”

Non-parent01 noted the inequality of curriculum options across the five schools, specifically describing the opportunity a larger student base may provide: We [Elizabeth High School] don't offer some of the same things that you can get at [Hollis County High School] . . . [Hollis] has a lot of the AP courses that [students] can't take, simply because we don't have the student body.

One non-parent and one administrator noted the difficulty that a smaller school had in recruiting teachers for upper-level math and science teachers, a difficulty they perceived a larger, consolidated school might overcome. Non-parent02 commented the following:

> I think, curriculum-wise, it might would be a good thing. On that, just because, I know some of the high schools are having trouble trying to get teachers to be able to come in and teach certain things due to budget constraints.

Admin05 stated the following:

> In a county where you have five high schools, it's very hard to find upper level math teachers and science teachers. So if you have five high schools, it's very hard to have five physics teachers, and if you did have a physics teacher for that class, in a small high school, [the class] may only have 13 students in it.

Admin01 echoed this concern, noting the number of students willing to take a course forced administration to make staff allocation decisions about what courses to keep and what courses to forego:

> A good example might be, we have a teacher that is capable of teaching calculus, and even dual-calculus if we needed to, but we have eight

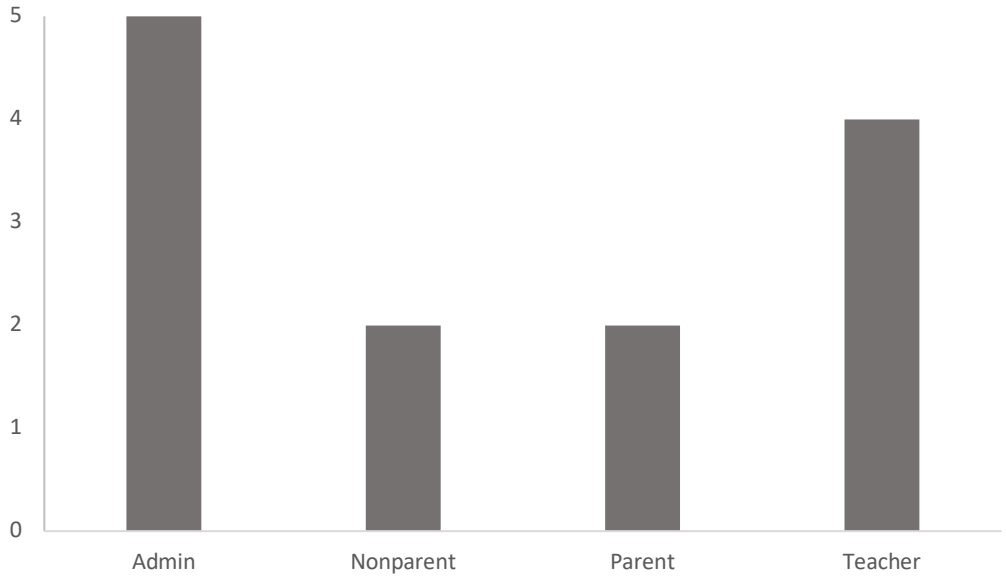
students that might be ready to take dual-calculus . . . So, due to the other numbers and other classes that class may not be able to make.

According to Teacher05, HCSS offered a dual enrollment program called Middle College that allowed students to travel from their base school to the local community college to take college credit-bearing courses. Students who were successful in this program may earn their associate's degree upon graduating high school. Teacher05's concern with this program was that it was limited in the number of students accepted into this program, and students provided their own transportation, something that lower socio-economic students might not have been able to do. Teacher05 called for more dual enrollment options within the base schools, noting some students sought to transfer out of county to surrounding schools or systems that did offer more dual enrollment options at the base school.

Career and Technical Education. Thirteen participants discussed CTE in their responses (see Figure 6).

Figure 6

Career and Technical Education as Discussed by Participants



Participants called for an increase in the assortment of CTE classes being offered to students across the county. A concern noted by several participants was while the courses offered by the county were varied, all courses were not offered at every individual location. Admin02 commented, “We do miss out on, like we have welding but only one [school] has welding for a CTE class. Some other schools have auto body or auto mechanics that we don't offer.” Admin03 confirmed this:

> For example here at [Elizabeth High School], we have Automotive in our CTE program. We are the only school in [Hollis County] that has automotive. I would think that there's probably one or two [students at the other schools] that might have an interest in that rather than their [base school’s] offerings.

Admin03's notion worked both ways; students at the school with auto mechanics might be interested in programs only offered at the other schools. Teacher03 noted the concern as well; an individual high school in the county only offered one or two CTE courses. Teacher03 mentioned parents could request a transfer to another school on the basis of student interest in a program of study, but Teacher03 did not believe that was communicated very well to the parents.

Some educator participants noted the importance of developing career and technical skills in the rural high school student population. Teacher01 responded, "Everybody at [Elizabeth High School] doesn't need to go to college. We need to teach them some skills." Admin01 remarked rural students should be able to work toward a certification within a CTE elective path "where they can transition into a job, immediate job placement after school or continue that vocational learning that after school, maybe not going into a college path or college pathway to your four year institution." Admin01, like the others, noted their school was limited in the specific CTE offerings it could provide.

Non-educators were concerned with the decentralized CTE courses as well, noting a consolidated school would put all of these programs in one place. Non-parent05 noted their concern with limited CTE offerings and discussed the potential that a school consolidation might serve to return them: "We've also lost our technical programs in our school system. And the hopes to bringing that back would be a huge benefit to our area as well." Non-parent01 responded similarly:

> Right now, if you want to take auto mechanics, you got to go to [Elizabeth High School]. If you want to take welding, you got to go [Morgan High

> School]. Where if we consolidated, you know, we're gonna have it all in one spot.

Parent03 described his experience attending a larger, consolidated school in a nearby county:

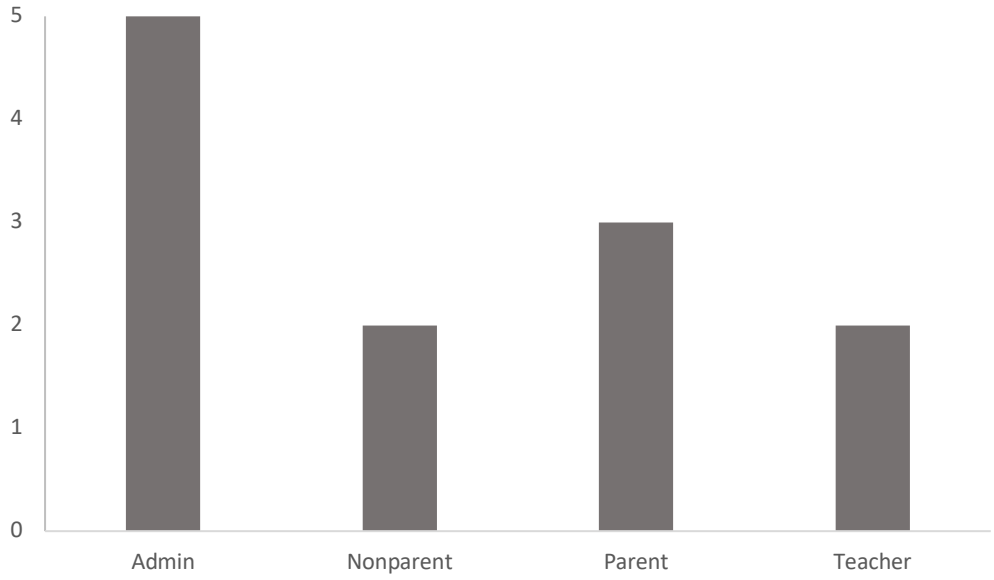
> Not only did we have that stuff, we had it to complete for folks that didn't want to do college bound stuff. We had everything attached to our building just right down the hall in a different . . . you go down the hall into this whole other building that had woodworking and mechanics, and the whole cosmetology studio. We had all these things at their fingertips.

Non-parent03's comments were largely about how the neighboring consolidated school he attended offered more curriculum opportunity than the Hollis County high school where his child attended at the time of these interviews.

Larger Student Base. Twelve participants discussed how a larger student population yields more variety of curriculum (see Figure 7).

Figure 7

Larger Student Base as Discussed by Participants



Participants had a variety of remarks about the potential that a larger school might have in offering a broader curriculum with more depth. Participants noted the challenges the five schools had with decentralized resources and staffing, new concerns that a larger school might bring, and the importance of exposing students to a variety of subjects.

Parent05 discussed how the spread of resources across five schools prevented the schools from offering everything students needed. Parent05 saw consolidation as a positive opportunity to reform the curriculum: “I think almost a combining, and even a starting over approach to curriculum, would be beneficial to the students.” Non-parent01 noted his discontent of the inequality of curriculum options among the five high schools in HCSS stating, “You know, if you want to get the best bang for your buck, you got to go [Hollis County High School] and that's not right.” Teacher04 discussed similar misgivings, specifically

mentioning the challenge the smaller school faced with limited staffing: “I know that at the small school that I teach at, we can’t offer some of the things that are at the larger high school in the county. We just don't have the personnel. And we can't offer those.” Admin01 provided a more-detailed outlook on staffing challenges at smaller schools:

> You got five schools in this county looking for or having a Spanish teacher in their school . . . you might need three or four Spanish teachers for a consolidated school rather than five individual schools bringing in five individual teachers to have that program. And then, you're not able to offer those other foreign language programs as well.

Admin01 continued by describing the strategy used to manage staffing so the small school could maintain the Spanish program while starting a Fine Arts program. The school did not have the staffing allocation to offer both. Admin01 stated, "My art teacher is also my Spanish teacher.”

While educators responded mostly favorably to the potential curriculum opportunities a larger school, with a larger student base and faculty, could provide to students, non-educators were not unified in their responses. Parent03 described the high school from which he graduated: “I came from a consolidated high school, and I graduated 40 years ago. Forty years ago, I had more opportunities than my [child] has today in 2020 at [Elizabeth High School]. Far, and not just more, far more.” Parent01, while hopeful of what curriculum options a larger school might be able to provide, was concerned with how curriculum has not already been expanded, considering the quantity of students and staff in the five

separate schools was at least, or greater, than what would be at the consolidated school:

> I don't understand why while we're separated into smaller sections, that it's not been done in years. So, I don't know for sure that consolidating it would make it any better. You still got the same amount of students . . . even if they have the same amount of teachers that they have across the board right now, they're still not offering more subjects . . . the number of teachers and numbers of students aren't changing; we're just putting them in a different location—that's not necessarily going to affect what classes are or aren't being offered.

Continuing, Parent01 discussed his preference to having a smaller school, even if the larger school were to offer more curriculum opportunities, noting concerns that "with having so many kids in one [school] . . . I'd be concerned more with drugs, violence, and extracurricular." Parent04 noted concerns that a larger school would be too populated, and students would lose individualized learning:

> I think the classrooms would be too full . . . And [smaller schools are] geared more toward individual help if needed, versus throwing 40 kids in the class and rolling with it. I mean, my [child] is in some of the IEP classes because they are just a very slow learner. And without those they wouldn't be a senior today. I just feel like if they consolidate the schools, then that's going to take away from individuality of learning.

Educators also noted concerns that a larger school might take away from individualized education, but each continued by describing ways that could mitigate that concern. Admin01 discussed the importance of following

recommendations from existing research about what an optimum number for a student population in a single school should be. Admin01 described how smaller communities within a large school would foster positive student-teacher relationships without removing the curriculum opportunities that a larger school might provide. “You can create small communities within a large school, but you can never make a small school have the large community, the large school options.” Admin01 called for leadership to focus on providing structure and focus so larger schools can have the smaller communities built into them. Admin04 echoed this call, drawing from his awareness of how larger schools in surrounding systems created smaller student communities:

> It all depends on how you structure the school. You know, some really, really large high schools have a freshman wing, a sophomore wing, and those kinds of things. Or are you going to have 1,800 and 2,000 kids just jumbled up together?

This concept of creating smaller communities to foster positive student-teacher relationships was not exclusive to educators. Parent02 responded, “If you do it right, and you arrange your classes with counselors, and deans, and assistant principals, I mean you can do a good program, and take care of kids, and know your kids, all the way through.”

Another topic within the theme of larger schools providing more variety of curriculum had to do with the potential of reducing some faculty jobs. Admin04 commented he did not know how many administrators and teachers would be needed at the consolidated school and there could be a reduction in staff. Teacher05 responded contrary to the concern of some teachers losing their jobs:

> I think they were going to have to add like 10 new spots. So, you know if they consolidated then, [some would say] well, teachers will lose their jobs. And they're like, well actually, we'll have to add jobs because we wouldn't have enough.

Participants noted concerns of obstacles that lower socio-economic students might have to equal curriculum opportunities. Admin05 mentioned how low-income students did not always have the same access to education that could expose them to new possibilities and prepare them for post-secondary life, a challenge that he believed went beyond Hollis County:

> I serve a lot of low-income students who do not see beyond where they live now. Who have no idea what is out there, and with the limited curriculum that you're offering to the kids, then they never know that they could be something else . . . not having the exposure to things that can prepare you . . . that is not providing as an equitable education. Equality does not exist in that line, I don't think, in our state.

Research Question 2

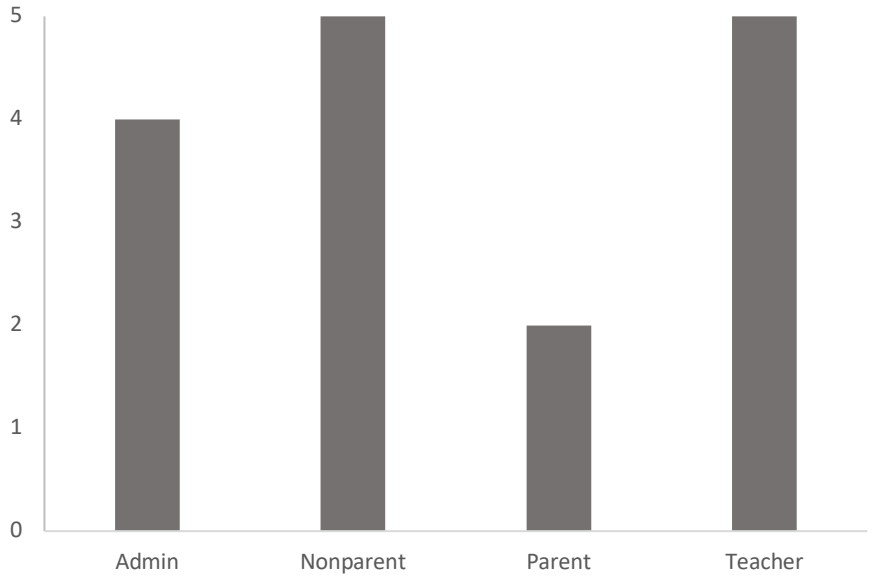
What are stakeholders' perceptions of the impact of rural high school consolidation on extracurricular activities for students?

Twelve participants responded favorably toward consolidation's impact on extracurriculars, seven responded negatively, and one teacher was undecided. From the data, four themes emerged for Research Question 2: sports, participation rates, non-athletic clubs, and more extracurricular options.

Sports. Sixteen participants discussed sports in their responses to how consolidation impacts extracurriculars (see Figure 8).

Figure 8

Sports as Discussed by Participants



Non-parent05 was concerned with the level of competition at which the consolidated high school would be expected to compete. With a larger student body, the consolidated school would move up to a higher competitive classification within the state's administrative athletic association, thereby competing athletically with other larger schools in the state. "I think it would be a nightmare if they did the one school . . . we would not be able to compete with the [larger] schools of our area." Non-parent05 continued, stating Hollis County just did not have "those kind of athletes . . . there's just not enough of them. My [child] had to be on a travel team that was statewide in order to get to where they were." In contrast, Teacher03, who also coached an athletic team, noted that Hollis County had a hard time keeping really good athletes in the county. Teacher03 remarked how surrounding counties and private schools could offer those athletes tuition, different course offerings, and more individualized athletic

attention at a different level. The teacher noted two regionally-popular athletes who played football at the time for a nearby major university grew up in Hollis County but went to a private school because of the options the other school provided over any of the Hollis County schools.

Non-parent01 discussed his frustration that the topic of consolidating revolved too much around sports, noting concerns other people had about students' playing time. "It's all about sports. And, to me, it has nothing to do with sports at all. Everybody's worried little Johnny's not gonna get to play." Non-parent01 continued by describing the developmental opportunities a consolidated school could provide to the sports teams. "[Opponents to consolidation] don't realize that little Johnny's gonna have an opportunity to play on a freshman team. There's gonna be a [Junior Varsity] team. There's gonna be a varsity team."

Admin01 described the safety concerns regarding not having developmental depth within sports teams. Admin01 discussed an example of a small freshman student trying to do drills and practices with physically more-matured 11th and 12th graders, thereby increasing risk of injury:

> A consolidated school might give you the opportunity to have a freshman team. And then you may have a [Junior Varsity] team. So, within that program, itself, you're providing more opportunities to develop a student athlete as they progress, rather than when you're just not where you need to be physically; you just have to stand on the sidelines.

Growing pains relating to sports were mentioned by two administrators and one non-parent. *Growing pains* were referred to by participants as the

changes in students' and parents' mindsets about the extent to which students would be able to participate in certain athletic programs as the consolidated school would put more students together to compete for a spot on the sports' rosters and for time to actively play in games. Some sports allowed a certain number of students on the roster, while nearly all sports have restrictions on how many students can actively play at one time during the athletic competition. There would be growing pains in the main sports as tryouts and restrictive roster sizes would possibly eliminate some students from playing on the consolidated sports teams. Admin02 stated those growing pains would have to shift as a consolidation would provide for the possibility for smaller sports to be more successful. Admin05 commented while consolidating "would limit the number of students who get to start, to get the opportunity to maybe feel like a star," a larger school could offer more sports options, such as volleyball and lacrosse. Admin03 noted a sport like softball had five individual teams across the five high schools, and combining those teams into one program, even with freshman and Junior Varsity teams, may require some students to be eliminated from the team. While eliminations may be necessary, Admin03 continued by describing the challenges smaller schools had in recruiting enough players to have a large enough team to compete:

> Then you start talking about Title IX issues within the female sports, we wanna make sure they have ample opportunity. We've got girls playing girl soccer right now that they can barely identify a soccer ball, and they know where the field is after practice and for games, but they've never played, but to make the team, to keep the team intact, we've had to pull

some out of the hallways, basically, just make sure we were giving those girls that opportunity to continue playing a sport.

Two administrators and one parent described cooperative programs within the county, where students from different schools had already combined teams so there would be enough players for the team to compete. Parent03 commented, "[Elizabeth High School] didn't have enough players to play soccer, so we play with [Morgan High School]. And they also do that with cross country and probably several other things that I don't know about."

While these cooperative sports programs existed, nine participants noted existing sports rivalries within Hollis County, but the concerns were not about combining the students from different schools. The concern was with adults' perspectives and *hanging onto* those rivalries. Teacher01 stated, "[Lee High School] is our biggest rivalry, but we're friends with them. Back in my days when I was, you know, we wouldn't urinate on [Lee High School] if they were on fire and, you know, we're friends with them now." A common code within this discussion was social media has played a considerable part in allowing students from across the communities to get to know one another. Parent03 commented: They're figuring out how to combine now. And that's why I was also so confused when this didn't go through, because everybody was like, they couldn't possibly play together. They're rivals. And I'm like, really? Because they've been going to dance classes together. They work at [local fast-food restaurant] together, for God's sakes. They're playing soccer together. They're running together. They're doing cross country. They're already doing it. They have friends in all of the

schools. Well [my child] has been playing [American Youth Soccer Organization] soccer with everybody in the county since they were four years old.

Non-parent03, a recent HCSS graduate, stated the following:

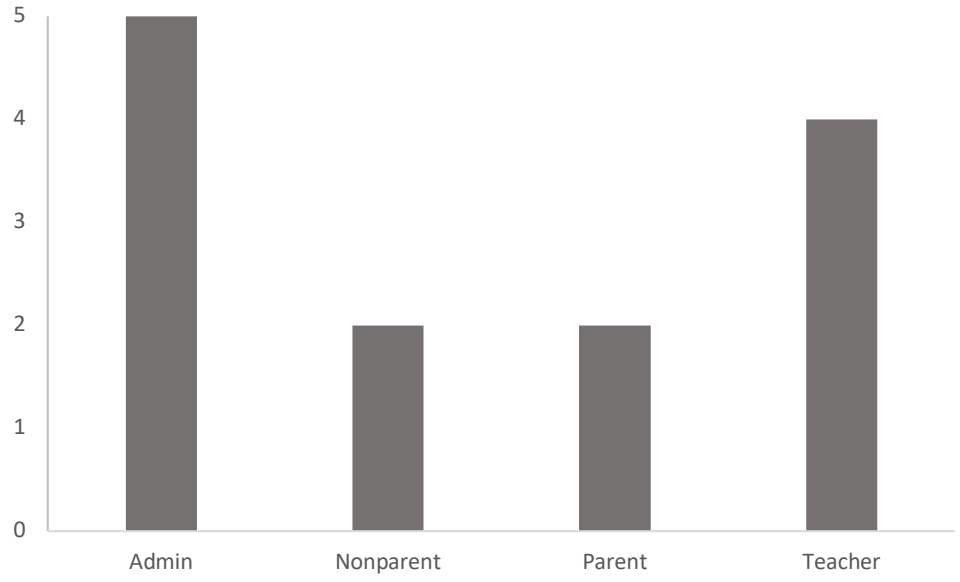
> I think, it would become normal. But the first couple of years, taking away tradition of having where [Hollis County High School, Elizabeth High School], or something like that . . . but I think it would be something students would get used to after a while.

Teacher05 remarked how he felt students would adapt and echoed the notion that the adults were the ones hanging onto old rivalries. "A lot of the people that's against it are not even really kids. Kids are resilient. They'll just adjust. I mean, a lot of people that are against it is a lot of adults."

Participation Rates. In response to how consolidation affects extracurriculars, 13 participants discussed participation rates (see Figure 9).

Figure 9

Participation Rates as Discussed by Participants



Educators and non-educators were hesitant about how consolidation would impact extracurricular participation rates. Two teachers noted concerns about students being able to participate in a given sport. Teacher02 described the limitations that a restricted roster in a sport like basketball would create. “If you eliminate five varsity teams, that’s 25 students starting. And, and where just one school that’d be five starting.” Admin04 echoed this concern, “Right now, you could have like 12 or 13 people on the team. So, you know, times that by five. And if we had one school, a lot of our kids would not get to play basketball.” Teacher04 discussed how tryouts and eliminations would prevent some student athletes from participating and growing within a team environment. Parent04 discussed how combining schools would increase the number of students who want to sign up for a sport, but the students who are not as good at the sport as another student would be eliminated. While some participants understood

developmental opportunities of having freshman and Junior Varsity teams in a sports program, other participants neglected to mention that possibility. “You can only have one girl team, one boy team, and most all sports-related and extracurricular things. And they can only have a certain amount of students,” Parent01 suggested.

Other participants noted the positives that a consolidated school would provide regarding additional extracurricular options. Teacher05 commented, “I think you’d have the opportunity to have more extracurricular in sports, or that could be areas of academia, all kinds of variety of things.” Non-parent04 also considered the additional extracurricular opportunities a consolidated school might provide. “I think interest that some of our students who are not involved in clubs right now could enhance their participation in the full experience of school.”

There was also a concern of how lower socio-economic students would be able to get transportation to and from after school activities. Non-parent02 described how his children were fortunate to have their own cars to drive themselves to and from activities, but underprivileged students might not have similar access to individual transportation. Non-parent02 noted how important it was that students be able to engage with their school by means of extracurriculars:

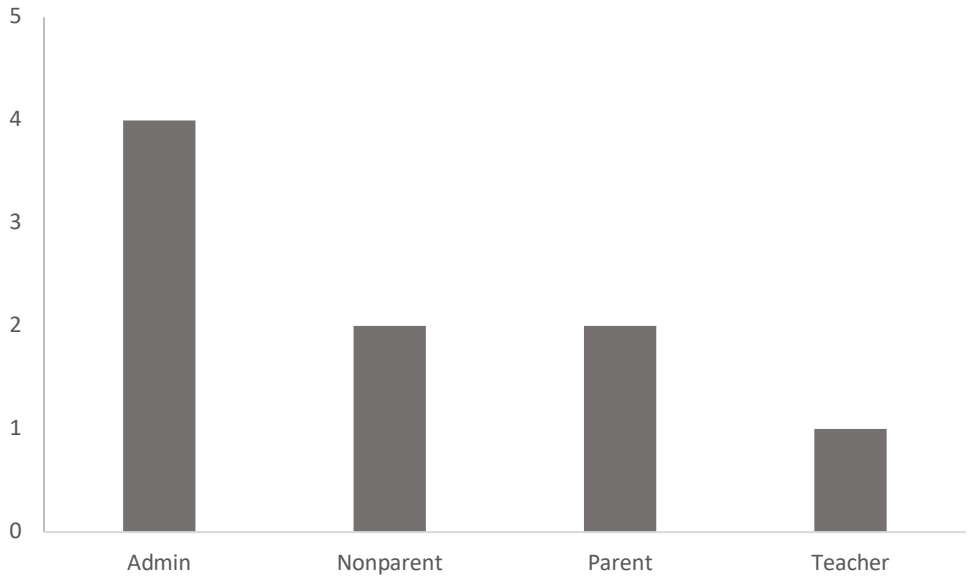
> A lot of these kids, sports in general, is what keeps them in school and their grades are . . . you know, maybe, just barely passing, because they know they have to make the grades to play sports . . . I think with a consolidated school, that is going to knock a lot of kids out of extracurricular activities, clubs, sports, all of it.

The concern was students without their own transportation relied on buses or walking to get to and from school, which may not be available to and from extracurricular activities.

Non-athletic Clubs. In response to how consolidation affects extracurriculars, nine participants discussed non-athletic clubs (see Figure 10).

Figure 10

Non-athletic Clubs as Discussed by Participants



One administrator explicitly stated, “It would be a good opportunity for kids to have more offerings, even in their extracurricular programs.” Administrators and teachers at the largest school in the county, Hollis County High School, claimed to have more extracurricular club opportunities than the smaller schools due to the larger student body. Admin02 commented, “We have a lot of clubs here at our school, and the more kids you have, and the more, the varied interests they have, there's a space for everybody.” Admin05, who worked

at one of the smaller schools, concurred a larger school would be able to offer more club options to students. “I think there will be other extracurricular activities, athletic-wise and academic programs and clubs that could be offered that, you know, kids have no idea about.” Parent03 recalled the extracurricular options that the consolidated school from which he graduated offered:

> It would increase art. We did, we had a theater. We did drama . . . We had, we did musical theater. We did dramas. We did all this stuff. We had a drama club, speech stuff, creative writing, we had everything. And we were able to do it all there.

With a similar sentiment to Non-parent02’s comments above about underprivileged students not having transportation to and from afterschool extracurriculars, Non-parent04 noted a concern regarding the access to extracurricular club activities that lower socio-economic students might face:

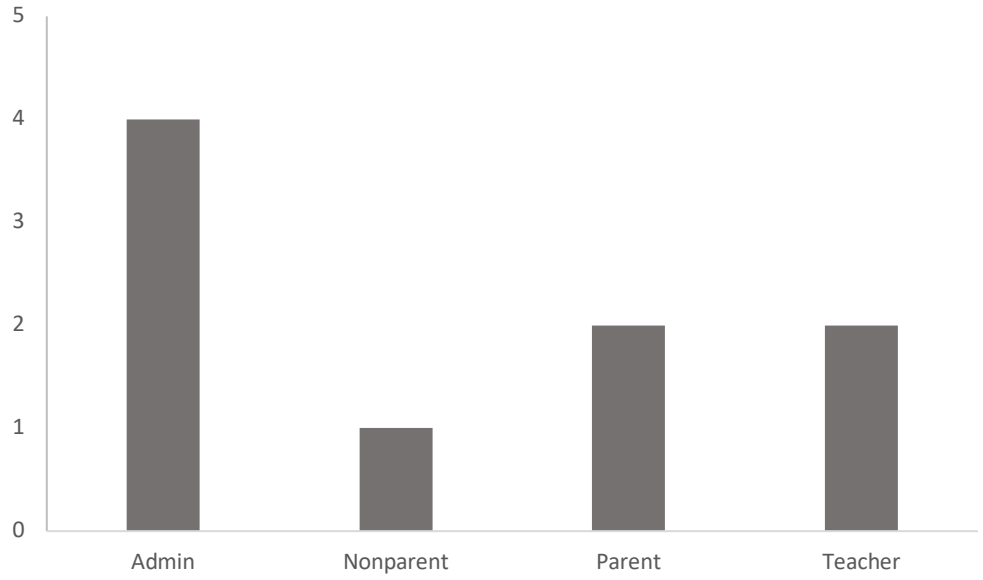
> A lot of those kids depend on either walking to school, or a bus, a short bus ride to school. And to be able to walk to school if a club meets before school starts, they can’t get there if they have interest in it.

Again, the concern was a consolidated school would create transportation issues to and from school considering the expansive geographic area of Hollis County.

More Extracurricular Options. In response to how consolidation affects extracurriculars, nine participants discussed how a larger school may provide more extracurricular options (see Figure 11).

Figure 11

More Extracurricular Options as Discussed by Participants



Participants who discussed the extracurricular options a larger school could provide described faculty availability, facilities, restricted rosters of sports, and how offering more options does not mean students would take advantage of those opportunities.

According to Teacher05, staffing was an issue at smaller schools regarding extracurricular options. Teacher05 commented, “Obviously, bigger schools have more to do, more things that they can offer, some more people that can help do that.” Admin01 clarified the need of having faculty involved in extracurriculars and the challenges smaller schools faced in providing more extracurricular options:

> You have to have a faculty representative that's able to either coach, or instruct, or monitor and supplement the needs of the club. And with limited faculty, just in the number of students that you have, you have

> limited opportunities . . . What students need an art club, the number of students needing an art club may be overwritten by the number of students who want to participate in [something else].

Non-parent04 understood a larger student body and more staff gave opportunities for more clubs, more sports activities, and different sports activities than were being offered at the time. Teacher03 noted the largest high school in the county "means that we have the opportunity to offer more things than any other high school in the county."

Consolidating the students and faculties would create a larger school. Admin01 discussed how a consolidated school would provide "more robust programs, more opportunities, and more offerings." Parent05 concurred, stating more-accommodating facilities, along with the wider variety of extracurricular options, would improve student opportunity. Parent03 noted his past experience in a consolidated school, stating there was "just so much available . . . that would have been available for our kids, too" had the schools consolidated. Admin04 commented, while there may have been more and different types of clubs, a consolidation would have forced tryouts and eliminations for activities and sports that may have restricted roster sizes. Akin to the participation rates theme above, Admin04 stated, "With consolidation, you will not have as many people on the football team, or basketball team—sports wise, than you would if you had five high schools."

In a noteworthy response, Teacher02 discussed the idea that just because a school might be able to offer a wide variety of activities did not mean students would take advantage of those activities. Teacher02 called for people to "take a

hard look at how to reach those kids that aren't choosing to take advantage of it [now], over a building or something."

Research Question 3

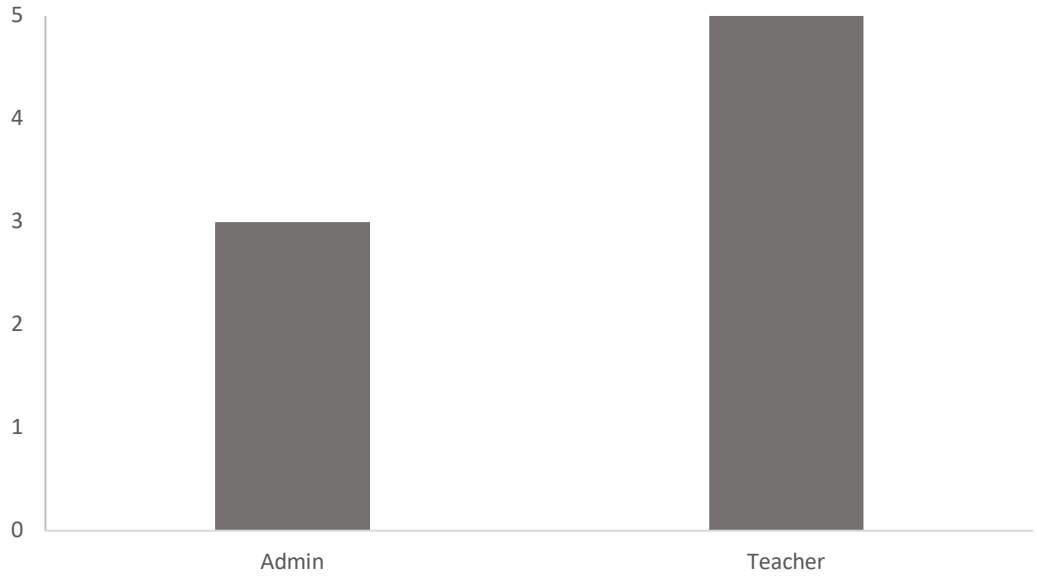
What are stakeholders' perceptions of the impact of rural high school consolidation on teacher professional development?

Six of the 10 educators asked about this research question responded favorably toward consolidation's impact on teacher professional development, while four were undecided. Three themes emerged from the data for Research Question 3: department-specific professional development and PLCs, sufficient existing professional development, and unaffected professional development .

Department-specific Professional Development and Professional Learning Communities. Eight of the 10 educators interviewed discussed department-specific professional development and PLCs in their responses about how a consolidation would impact teacher professional development (see Figure 12).

Figure 12

Department-specific Professional Development and Professional Learning Communities as Discussed by Participants



The majority of the comments made by educators about teacher professional development were not about formal professional development but about informal collaboration among peers. Across the five high schools, educators noted how department-specific collaboration with peers was lacking, due to there not being many, or any, peers with which to collaborate. In some subject areas, there might have been only one teacher in the school, or in the entire county, that taught that subject or course. Admin05 noted, "Many times, you know, smaller schools, you might have one teacher that's teaching all the science classes." Participants believed combining staff into a larger faculty would provide additional peers with which teachers could collaborate. Admin05 commented:

> Teacher training would be better, just because you have more collaboration among peers within a department. I think that collaboration

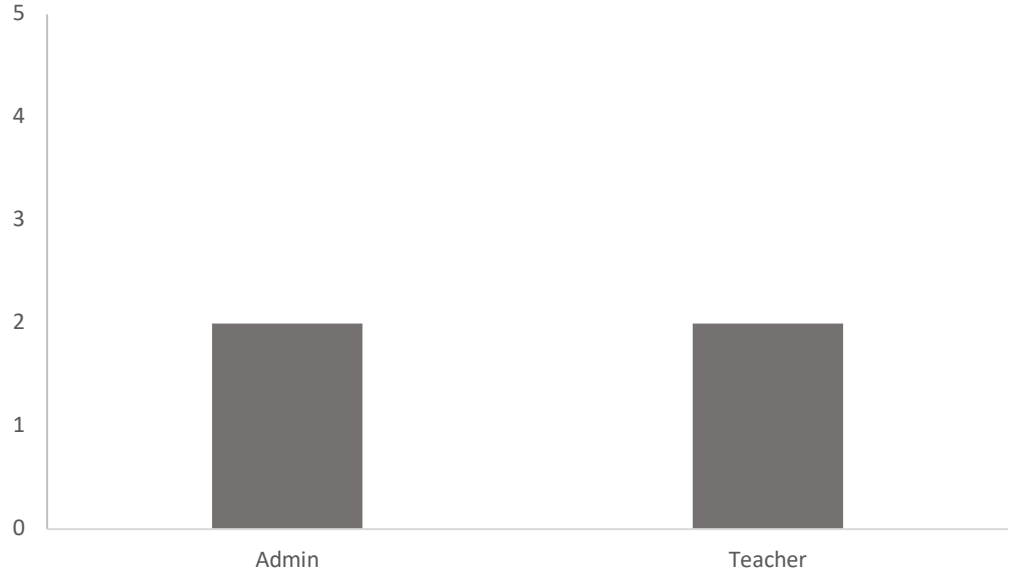
> builds good teacher training, teacher camaraderie, and sharing ideas, and also provides some competition among the teachers to challenge each other to be better. If you're alone on an island, then you think your ideas are the best and nobody really ever challenges your ideas.

Admin02 commented how he would have liked to develop common planning time across disciplines, where teachers who taught the same classes or grade levels would have had time within the school day to meet and collaborate. Admin02 continued, “Unfortunately, we're not able to do that based on the number of teachers I have.” Admin01, who had a Spanish teacher who also taught the school’s only Fine Arts classes remarked, "They're a department of one.” Teacher02 noted how combining their staff of 14 teachers with additional teachers would have benefitted Teacher02’s practice: “Say I'm in a school with maybe 50 teachers. There's 50 more ideas that I can bounce off of people.”

Sufficient Existing Professional Development. Four of the 10 educators discussed how the existing professional development is sufficient when asked how consolidation would impact teacher professional development (see Figure 13).

Figure 13

Sufficient Existing Professional Development as Discussed by Participants



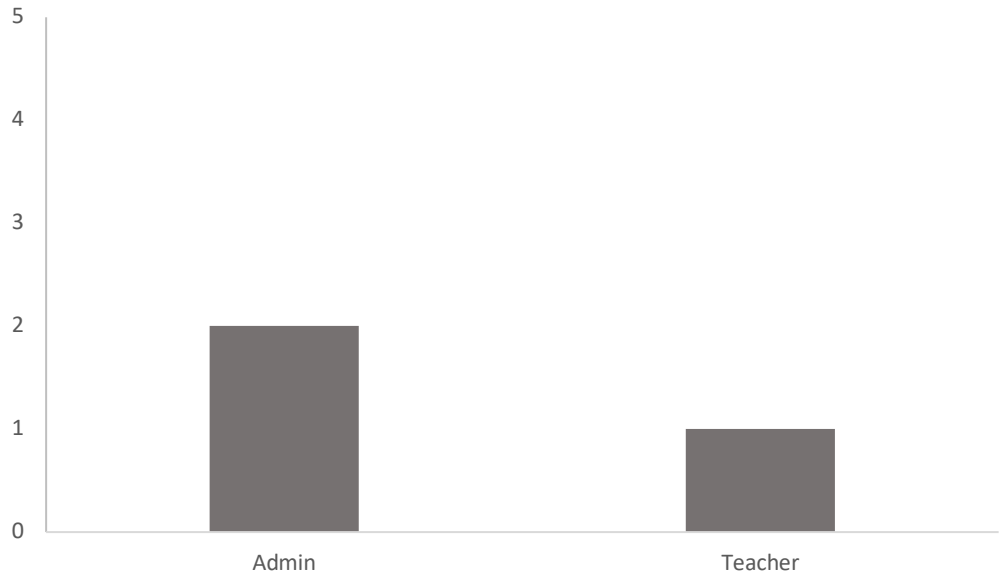
Those educators who discussed formal teacher professional development were mostly satisfied with the level and quality of the professional development they had received. Teacher04 noted sufficient professional development that was content-specific: “We get the training we need for . . . What, like, I teach, I do math. And so the training I have during the summer would be, is always math-related.” Teacher04 continued to describe professional development for other core disciplines, like English, was also content-specific. Admin03 described how HCSS provided sufficient professional development during the summer. This administrator discussed technology-specific training that was offered locally, where HCSS teachers did not have to go to neighboring counties or cities to receive quality professional development. Admin03 commented he was not sure a consolidation of the schools would have a tremendous impact on professional development.

The sentiment that existing professional development in HCSS was sufficient was not universal. Teacher03 stated, “We don’t as a county do a great job with professional development.” Teacher03 noted he took his own steps in developing himself professionally by advancing his educational degrees through local universities. Teacher03 continued, “I just don't think as a county as a whole, we do a good job giving teachers the resources that they need and the training they need to be prepared for the year.”

Unaffected Professional Development. Three of the 10 educators discussed professional development would not be affected by a school consolidation (see Figure 14).

Figure 14

Unaffected Professional Development as Discussed by Participants



Educators who discussed how professional development would not be affected by a consolidation had varying perceptions: teachers already received the

training they need, the existing training and collaboration was bad and would not improve, and the size of the school would not impact the quality of teacher training. Teacher04 noted the training he received was sufficient and department-specific, so he did not see professional development changing with a consolidation. Teacher01 commented, while a larger school might improve collaboration to a small degree, it was hard for teachers to ask for help. Regarding new teacher training, Teacher01 commented, "We just throw them to the wolves right now," referring to the lack of training and support that his school provides to new teachers. Admin04 described how they had worked for large and small school systems, noting consolidating the schools would not "make a difference, one way or the other" to teacher professional development.

Research Question 4

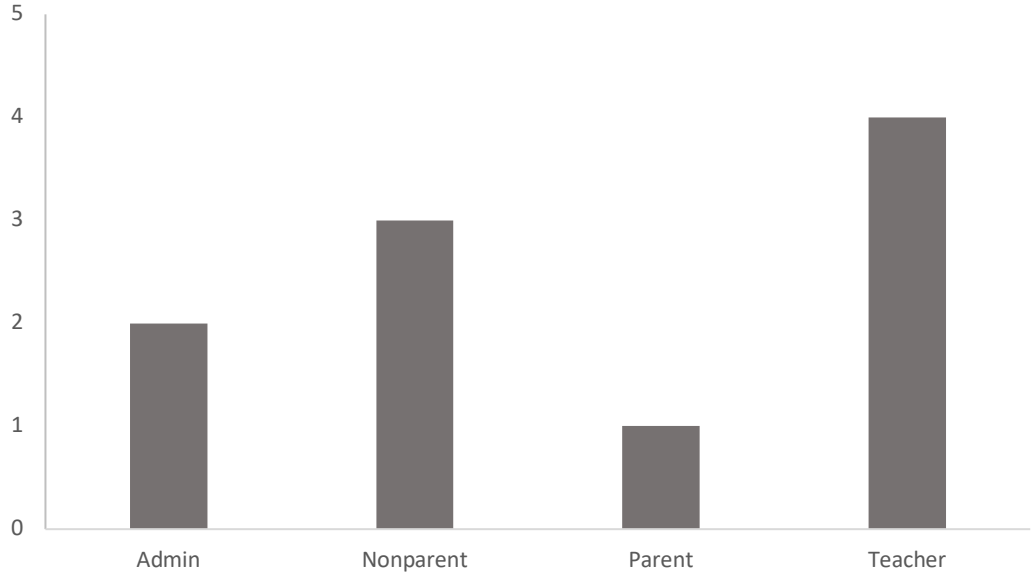
What are stakeholders' perceptions of the impact of rural high school consolidation on instructional technology?

Fourteen participants responded favorably toward consolidation's impact on instructional technology. Three non-educators responded unfavorably toward the impact on technology, and three others were undecided. Three themes emerged from the data for Research Question 4: infrastructure, sufficient existing technology, and centralized resources.

Infrastructure. When asked about how a consolidation of the high schools would impact instructional technology, 10 participants discussed the infrastructure of the technology needed (see Figure 15).

Figure 15

Infrastructure as Discussed by Participants



While the interview question asked specifically about potential impacts a school consolidation would make on instructional technology, half of the participants wanted to discuss the infrastructure of the buildings, as these participants felt without supportive infrastructure, the implementation of instructional technology would not improve from where it was at the time of these interviews. Parent05 noted the existing school buildings "were built in such an age where technology wasn't available, so they're not laid down the way toward networking helps, WiFi, things like that." Admin02 described one of their school buildings as being built in 1950, so there were limits to improving technology drastically due to the infrastructure of the facility.

Two participants discussed specific concerns with the existing power infrastructure at Hollis County High School. Teacher03 commented:

> I don't know if you've ever stepped in [Hollis County High School], but it is a dilapidated building in all senses of the word, and that includes our, um, the power . . . I only have two outlets in my room, and all of our rooms on my side of the hallway are connected on the same electrical box. And so, when they become overworked with devices, I just randomly lose power in the middle of class. And then I have to wait for somebody in the office to flip the breaker, and it's worse in the winter. And so I have this conversation with my students every year about, you know, it's not a personal choice that I'm not letting you plug in a device here. It's that this building physically can't withstand pulling that much power all the time.

Non-parent05 discussed the same concern with power. He knew another teacher at Hollis County High School who had told Non-parent05 there were only two power outlets in the classroom, and the teacher had to choose what technology to plug in at the same time and switch technology out as needed for instruction.

Beyond the power issues, Parent05 noted the wiring of the school buildings all had to be retrofitted. Regarding the plans for a potential new, consolidated school, Parent05 commented, “It was just nice to be able to go into a program in mind you're going to do the technology this way for the future so you won't be trying to fit modern technology into 1960-something buildings.” Teacher02 discussed building a new, consolidated school would mean the school system would not have to continually work to improve the existing infrastructure in the old buildings, and power and internet outages would no longer affect

student learning. Non-parent03 described how a nice, new school would influence the system to ensure the quality and implementation of new instructional technology would match the new school atmosphere.

Non-parent04 considered the existing county-wide internet infrastructure, not just the school buildings. Referencing remote learning during the times of the COVID-19 pandemic, Non-parent04 noted some students were experiencing poor internet service or lack of service in some areas of the county. “I think [Hollis County] would have to step up to have access, better access for the students in order for it to make a big difference in the school.” Again, Non-parent04 noted the need for improvement in infrastructure for there to be drastic improvements in instructional technology.

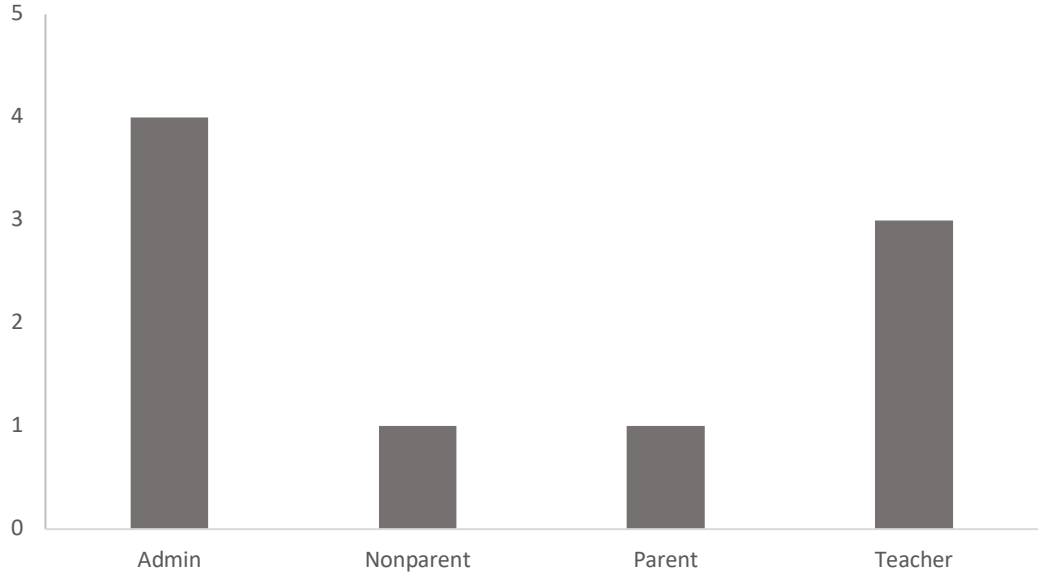
Parent01 was unfavorable toward consolidating the technology into one school because he did not believe the infrastructure would be able to support the larger, consolidated demand:

> It’ll be too much. It’ll be too much in one area. I don’t know how they would, I don’t know how they would manage, to be honest, to have that much power and things went on at one time . . . the kids have it now, but they're, you know separated from areas. I think if you put them all in one school, that's liable to be internet overload.

Sufficient Existing Technology. When asked about how a consolidation would impact technology, nine participants noted the existing instructional technology in the county is sufficient (see Figure 16).

Figure 16

Sufficient Existing Technology as Discussed by Participants



HCSS implemented a 1:1 Initiative in the Fall of 2017. In the first year of this program, the 6th and 9th grade students were provided Chromebooks for use in their classes. In subsequent years, the 1:1 Initiative would provide new devices to the next years' 6th and 9th graders in a graduated rollout of the Chromebooks. At the time of these interviews, the 9th graders from the Fall of 2017 were Seniors, thus completing the first cycle of HCSS's 1:1 Initiative. According to Teacher03, the students kept their Chromebooks until the 6th graders became 9th graders, where they would receive a new device, or until they graduated high school. This program was one of the first in the region and was lauded as a great success by local news outlets. Admin03 remarked, "We're ahead of the game right now. When we had to shut down because of COVID last year, we did not have to sprint to find a way to get these devices to them; they already had them." Referencing this program, many of the participants felt satisfied with HCSS's

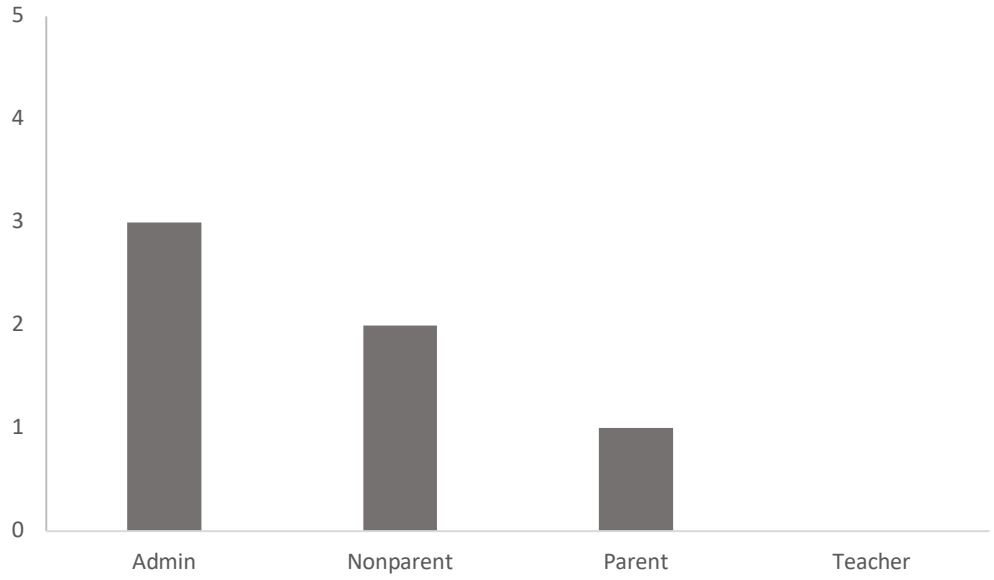
existing instructional technology and did not believe a school consolidation would have a large impact.

Teacher03 commented, “We've worked really hard in the last five years to make the technology upgrades that we need. All of our teachers have smart boards . . . all of our students have individual devices.” Teacher01 noted, “We're doing the best we can right now. I feel like we're pretty much up to date.” Non-parent02 commented, “I think in that aspect, they're doing fairly well as is.” Teacher04 noted [teachers] have what they need from a program standpoint and the county buys the technology for [the teachers], “So I don't really think that's going to impact, one way or the other, whether we stay like we are or if we consolidate. It's going to be the same.” Admin05 commented teachers and students have access to the technology but assumed technology access would be as good or better if the schools consolidated.

Centralized Resources. Six participants discussed centralizing resources when asked about how a consolidation of the high schools would impact instructional technology (see Figure 17).

Figure 17

Centralized Resources as Discussed by Participants



Two parents were unfavorable toward consolidation and its potential impact on technology. Instead of spending money on a major capital project like building a new school, Parent04 suggested using that money to provide each school the tools and technology the school needed. Parent01 noted by spending money on a building, the school system was not spending money on classroom technology that would directly impact the students.

Other participants believed centralizing the technological resources would create benefits, reflecting a level of understanding of economies of scale. Admin01 noted having five small rural schools, each with similar technology and infrastructure needs, would stretch the county's resources "pretty thin." Admin04 commented, "Consolidating [technology] would probably help with the cost of technology, having it all in one school or maybe in two schools instead of five." Admin01 agreed, "[Consolidation] provides a more effective, efficient use of

resources to be able to implement the greatest level of technology for each student in each individual classroom."

Non-educators also noted potential economies of scale from centralizing technology. Non-parent05 commented, "I'm sure that it would greatly impact the ability to offer more resources because you can combine our resources. Right now, we have them divided up amongst five schools." Non-parent03 noted with five schools, there are five different budgets to consider. Non-parent03 continued in stating providing technology "to one school or to two different schools, you're probably looking at, at better technology." Parent03 recognized potential economies of scale by taking existing resources that were spread out and putting them together for better access. Although unfavorable toward consolidation, Parent04 noted potential cost benefits of combining utilities into a centralized location, conceding, "In my life, I've learned that money is a driver of a lot of things."

Teacher05 described specific improvements that could result from centralizing resources. Teacher05 noted most of the schools in HCSS have only one or two computer labs, but this participant had friends who worked at larger schools in adjacent counties that had at least four or five computer labs. Admin01 called for continued improvement of classroom technology and infrastructure to continue being academically competitive and providing students with enhanced technological opportunities. Admin01 stated, "In terms of facilities and focus and support, you spread your resources so thin in the community that it becomes problematic. We're doing a really good job of just being mediocre right now."

Summary of Results

The purpose of this study was to examine stakeholders' perceptions of the impact of rural high school consolidation on opportunities for students. Using semi-structured interviews, I collected stakeholders' perceptions regarding student opportunity. Through analysis of the data, three to four themes emerged for each of the four research questions of this study. Through data analysis, I discovered themes around Research Question 1: *What are stakeholders' perceptions of the impact of rural high school consolidation on curriculum programming for students?* which included upper-level courses, CTE, and a larger student base. The themes formed around Research Question 2: *What are stakeholders' perceptions of the impact of rural high school consolidation on extracurricular activities for students?* were sports, participation rates, non-athletic clubs, and more extracurricular options. Data analysis of Research Question 3: *What are stakeholders' perceptions of the impact of rural high school consolidation on teacher professional development?* produced the following themes: department-specific professional development and PLCs, sufficient existing professional development, and unaffected professional development. Finally, the themes formed for Research Question 4: *What are stakeholders' perceptions of the impact of rural high school consolidation on instructional technology?* included infrastructure, sufficient existing technology, and centralized resources. While specific comments from participants may have not always aligned within these themes, the importance the participants placed on these themes as points of dialogue in their interview responses informed the discussion of implications and recommendations in the next chapter, Chapter V: Discussion of the Study.

Chapter V: Discussion of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine stakeholders' perceptions of the impact of rural high school consolidation on opportunities for students. I developed four research questions, which helped focus the study to stakeholders' perceptions of student opportunity in terms of expanded curriculum and extracurricular options, innovative instructional technology, and effective professional development for teachers. Using a qualitative case study, specifically semi-structured interviews with stakeholders, I was able to generalize key themes that informed this chapter, Discussion of the Study.

Regarding consolidation's impact on curriculum opportunity for students, three themes developed that aligned with the conceptual framework of the study, *economies of scale*. According to researchers, economies of scale referred to the advantages produced by an organization as its level of production increased (Boser, 2013; Slate & Jones, 2005; Stigler, 1958; Zimmer et al., 2009). In education, economies of scale lent to a reduction of redundant services, staff, facilities, and equipment (Zimmer et al., 2009). Proponents of consolidation claimed these reductions could lead to cost savings that could be put toward new resources that would enhance the student learning experience (Guthrie, 1979; Shakrani, 2010; Young & Green, 2005).

The most prominent theme for consolidation's impact on curriculum was the expansion of upper-level courses. By combining the student base from multiple smaller schools, consolidation would put more students interested in a specific upper-level or alternative course together in the same building. Moreover, the combination of qualified staff would allow for a reduction in teaching

redundant courses, thus freeing some teachers to be available to teach upper-level and alternate courses. This aligns with Haller et al.'s (1990) definitions of program comprehensiveness where base, advanced, and alternate course offerings within a subject area provided a more robust curriculum of which students could take advantage.

Unexpectedly, the second theme for consolidation's impact on curriculum was the perceived importance that stakeholders of a rural high school felt regarding the need for expanded CTE courses. Again, and in alignment with perceived benefits of economies of scale, the results pointed toward consolidation creating a positive impact on CTE programs if they were all to be housed within one school. Students would not be limited to only the one or two CTE programs available at the smaller school but could access multiple CTE courses within the larger, consolidated school.

The third theme for consolidation's impact on curriculum opportunities nearly explicitly stated the summation of economies of scale in education: a larger student body yields more variety in the curriculum. While stakeholders recognized more students with diverse interests led to a more expanded curriculum, including upper-level, CTE, fine arts, and foreign language, some stakeholders noted concerns that coincide with the concept of *diseconomies of scale*, that is the disadvantages that are associated with an organization as it becomes larger (Streifel et al., 1991). Specifically, stakeholders were concerned a larger school would not have a community school feel, and it would be more difficult for students to develop positive, meaningful relationships with educators. Interestingly, some stakeholders who acknowledged this potential diseconomy

also noted strategies to mitigate the concern. By developing the new, consolidated school with smaller communities in mind, such as separating students by grade level or elective path, the benefits of larger school opportunities could exist while the smaller communities within could foster more meaningful, positive student-teacher relationships.

The second research question dealt with consolidation's impact on extracurricular opportunities. As expected, sports was an overwhelming theme. Similar to how economies of scale would allow for more varied curriculum options due to a larger student body with more diverse interests, stakeholders perceived that having more students in the same school who are interested in participating in the *smaller sports* (e.g., volleyball, soccer, lacrosse, track, cross-country) would enable the school to more easily recruit enough players for those teams.

Concerns about participation rates in sports was a prominent theme that reflected diseconomies of scale. Stakeholders were concerned some activities, specifically the *bigger sports* like football and basketball, that had restrictive rosters would mean some students would not get to participate or would not get sufficient playing time. Again, some stakeholders who acknowledged this concern also acknowledged the sports with higher student demand could improve the depth of athletic development by adding Junior Varsity and freshman teams to the program.

The third and fourth theme for consolidation's impact on extracurricular opportunity also conveyed a base understanding of economies of scale. A larger school may be better able to provide more extracurricular options, and many of

those options may be non-athletic clubs. For an extracurricular club to be in alignment with school guidelines and to be able to get sufficient support to operate effectively, there must be a faculty member involved as the club coach or sponsor. A smaller school with limited staff may find a new, proposed club cannot find an available faculty sponsor. A larger school with more staff will have more faculty members available who may be willing to sponsor a club. Furthermore, a larger school with more students could find there were more students with a similar interest that would have been considered too niche to merit a club in a smaller school. Extracurricular activities provided students with opportunities to develop resiliency, responsibility, and positive peer-to-peer and student-to-adult relationships, benefitting their social and emotional development (Ackell, 2013; Afterschool Alliance, 2018; Caldarella et al., 2019; Mahoney et al., 2003).

While two of the themes for consolidation's impact on teacher professional development indicated the existing professional development was sufficient and consolidation would not impact professional development, stakeholders recognized a consolidation of faculty would foster more department-specific professional development and teacher collaboration. While in smaller schools where there were only one or two teachers within a given subject area, a consolidation would produce economies of scale where more teachers of the same subject would be together at the same school, thus allowing more on-site collaboration and PLCs.

One unexpected theme for consolidation's impact on instructional technology was stakeholders felt the existing technology was sufficient. While

this sounded positive for the school system, to what extent were the stakeholders considering future innovations in technology and the costs of perpetually updating technology to meet evolving instructional needs? A second theme for consolidation's impact on instructional technology somewhat addressed this: centralizing the resources could produce cost savings the school could use to further enhance technology. Lastly, it was unexpected that the most prominent theme when stakeholders were asked about instructional technology was that of infrastructure concerns, not classroom technology. Stakeholders believed the existing school facilities were failing to keep up with the new technology demands; a new school building could remedy network and power deficiencies, and instructional technology would not dramatically improve until the infrastructure issues were remedied. The stakeholders believed consolidating schools would be the most efficient means to getting new, technologically equipped school facilities.

Implications for Practice

From the results of this study, I formed implications for practice within the four categories of student opportunity as they relate to the literature: curriculum, extracurriculars, teacher professional development, and instructional technology. According to Dougherty (2016), students' access to upper-level, AP, Fine Arts, and foreign language curriculum helped prepare them for post-secondary options. Non-educators should be made aware of the existing curricula offerings and the specific potential outcomes of curriculum expansion in a consolidated school. CTE students who completed a specific elective path were found to be more successful in their post-secondary pursuits (Packard et al., 202). There should be a

clearly communicated outline for what CTE offerings will be available and what those would look like for students in a consolidation proposal. Concerns about the size of the consolidated student population should be addressed with specific strategies to create smaller grade level or academic communities within the larger, consolidated school. As Admin01 noted, following the research to help determine an optimum school size should be considered. According to Slate and Jones (2005), an optimum level of student enrollment was between 800 and 1,000 students. Haller et al. (1990) concurred for a high school to offer a robust curriculum of base, advanced, and alternate courses within a program, a graduating class size of 200 is required. As the administrator participant mentioned, when the student population exceeds that number, smaller communities should be built into the plans for the new, consolidated school.

Researchers argued extracurricular involvement promoted student educational success and helped students work toward achieving life goals (Mahoney et al., 2003). Stakeholders should be made aware of the specific plans to expand sports and extracurricular opportunities for students within a consolidation plan. Within such a proposal, the specific plans to expand the developmental depth of the athletic programs by adding Junior Varsity and freshman teams and the safety and developmental benefits for students should be clearly communicated to stakeholders. Additionally, educational leaders and policymakers should consider ideas to provide transportation to and from extracurricular activities for those students who cannot provide, nor have access to, their own transportation.

Margolin et al. (2019) argued innovative instructional strategies, sharing of best practices, and the development of instructional materials helped educators to engage students and provide them with new learning opportunities. Stakeholders should be made aware of the existing state of teacher collaboration within the smaller schools. Often only one or two teachers teach the same subject within a school; whereas with a consolidated staff, there may be multiple teachers with whom to collaborate. Also, while some educators felt existing professional development was sufficient, educational leaders should provide examples of what more innovative and effective professional development could look like with combined faculty and resources.

Lastly, educators may be better able to personalize a student's learning experience by using technology incorporated into the curriculum and culture of the school (Hamilton & McKinnon, 2013). The specific plans for future-proofed facilities should be made visible to stakeholders, allowing them to see what potential improvements to infrastructure and updated technology could bring to instruction and student learning.

Recommendations for Further Research

The stakeholders' willingness to participate in this study was evident in the impassioned manner in which they opened up about their perceptions. The final two questions in the interview protocol simply asked participants to share their thoughts on potential advantages and drawbacks of consolidation. While the intent of these questions was to give participants an additional response to discuss student opportunity, many participants shared other ideas and concerns, which were not a focus of this particular research study. In many instances, their

discussion was rich and the data from their responses pointed to the need for further research.

Future research could focus on stakeholders' perceptions of a rural school consolidation's impact on community identity. Stakeholders wanted to discuss old community sports rivalries and the risk of the loss of individual communities' identities if the schools were to combine. Existing literature described the emotional connection stakeholders, specifically parents, had to their community schools (Peshkin, 1982; Superville, 2017). Interestingly, some stakeholders noted the adults in the community would be more affected by consolidation than the students, which is similar to Nitta et al.'s (2010) findings that students adapted better to the social disruption of a consolidated school than the teachers. Existing knowledge about school consolidation could be expanded upon or brought up to date by examining the nature of stakeholders' connection with their community schools in the face of a potential or actual school consolidation or by comparing the perspectives of adolescents to adults within a school consolidation situation.

Another noteworthy topic of discussion from this study's stakeholders was that of student indiscipline. Stakeholders in this study noted concerns of increased drug use, increased gang activity, and increased student feelings of isolation leading to safety and violence concerns. Contradictorily, Haller (1992) argued student behavior problems barely increased after a school consolidation. Future research could examine more recent studies of student misbehavior and more closely analyze the nature of stakeholders' perceptions of student indiscipline in a consolidated school.

Warne et al. (2010) discussed the local community politics that influenced an Appalachian school district consolidation, such as this. Additionally, Thurman (2012) noted the challenges that local politics placed on a school leader during the first year of a school consolidation. Stakeholders in this study described how politics, specifically perceived financial and control issues between the local school board and the county commission played a major factor in the rejection of the school board's 2019 consolidation proposal. Future examination into the political facets of a school consolidation would fill another gap in the existing literature.

Additionally, this research could be expanded upon by studying a larger population of stakeholders, including students. Also, it would be interesting to discover what similarities or differences in stakeholder perceptions there might be if this study was conducted in a different county or region. Lastly, the results of this case study could be compared to that of a different population case study, such as an urban or a suburban school consolidation.

Conclusions of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine stakeholders' perceptions of the impact of rural high school consolidation on opportunities for students. For this study, I synthesized an operational definition of student opportunity to include four facets: comprehensive programming, increased variety of extracurricular activities, innovative staff professional development, and enhanced instructional technology. Using instrumental, semi-structured interviews within a case study and qualitative data analysis of the interview data, I formed key themes for each

of the four facets of student opportunity based on the research questions. From the extant literature and the key themes, the following conclusions can be made.

On some level, stakeholders perceived the economies of scale that a consolidated school could produce: expanded curriculum, increased sports and extracurricular options, expanded collaborative support for teachers, and improved infrastructure to support instructional technology. Stakeholders also perceived diseconomies of scale in terms of lower participation rates in major sports and the loss of meaningful student-teacher relationships within a larger school.

Public officials and leaders in public schools are obligated to their communities and stakeholders, by their positions as public servants, to provide their students with educational experiences that prepare them for future academic achievement and to be productive members of society. Educational leaders and policymakers should listen to stakeholders and address their concerns. If a school or system consolidation is believed to be in the best interest of the students and communities, then policymakers and educational leaders should develop and communicate clear and specific plans to all stakeholders. Cementing the necessity and benefits of economies of scale as pertaining to educational improvement and strategies to mitigate potential diseconomies of scale should be central in communicated proposals for school consolidation.

In a school consolidation, if economies of scale are to be achieved, and a school consolidation is to be successful, policymakers and educational leaders will require the support of stakeholders before, during, and after a consolidation. To lose stakeholder support at any point would risk the improved educational

opportunities for students and increase the school's and community's challenge of keeping up in an increasingly competitive world.

References

Ackell, R. J. (2013). *Examining perceptions of administrators, teachers, parents, and community residents about advantages and disadvantages of consolidating two high schools in a school district in central Pennsylvania* (Publication No. 3596384) [Doctoral dissertation, Drexel University]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.

Adams, M. (2020, January 8). Rural school districts face tough discussions on consolidation. *Virginia Mercury.* https://www.virginiamercury.com/2020/01/08/rural-school-districts-face-tough-discussions-on-consolidation/

Afterschool Alliance. (2018). An ideal opportunity: The role of afterschool in social and emotional learning more opportunities to develop social and emotional learning. *Afterschool Alliance*, *71*, 1–8.

Alberghini, J. R. (2017). *Vermont school district consolidation case study* (Publication No. 10688479) [Doctoral dissertation, Northeastern University]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.

Alvesson, M., & Sandberg J. (2013). *Constructing research questions: Doing interesting research*. Sage.

Anfara V. Jr., & Mertz, N. (2015). *Theoretical frameworks in qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Sage.

Appalachia Educational Laboratory, Inc., & Tennessee Education Association. (1988). *Maintaining positive educator morale during consolidation.* Office of Educational Research and Improvement.

Bailey, G., Block, J., Brewington, C. Hebnes, J., Myers, E., & Vielleux, R. (1994, June 22-24). *A consolidation model for K-12 consolidation within Missoula County* [Paper presentation]. Sixteenth Annual Rural Education Conference, Dillon, MT, United States.

Bard, J., Gardener, C., & Wieland, R. (2006). Rural school consolidation: History, research summary, conclusions, and recommendations. *The Rural Educator, 27*(2), 40–48.

Bastress, R.M. (2003). The impact of litigation on rural students: From free textbooks to school consolidation. *University of Nebraska Law Review, 82*, 9-49.

Berry, C. (2007). School consolidation and inequality. *Brookings Papers on Education Policy*, 49–75.

Billger, S. M., & Beck, F. D. (2012). The determinants of high school closures: Lessons from longitudinal data throughout Illinois. *Journal of Education Finance, 38*(2), 83–101.

Blauwkamp, J. M., Longo, P. J., & Anderson, J. (2011). School consolidation in Nebraska: Economic efficiency vs. rural community life. *Online Journal of Rural Research & Policy, 6*(1), 0–20.

Booth, W. C., Colomb, G. G., & Williams, J. M. (2016). *The craft of research* (4th ed). University of Chicago Press.

Boser, U. (2013). *Size matters: A look at school-district consolidation.* Center for American Progress.

Bradley, A. (1995). Beyond city limits. *Education Week, 14*(41), 32.

Brummett, A., Dixon, S., Black, R., Rigell, C., Ailshie, L., Twyman, G., Miller, W., Mathis, M., & Shelby, J. (2004). *School consolidation in Tennessee.* Association

of Independent and Municipal Schools. http://www.aimsschools.net/documents/aims_consolidation_report.pdf

Caldarella, P., Johnson, J. E., Larsen, R. A. A., Heath, M. A., & Warren, J. S. (2019). Adolescent sports participation and parent perceptions of resilience: A comparative study. *Physical Educator, 76*(4), 1026–1045.

Camera, L. (2017, June 21). White, wealthy communities want their own schools. *U.S. News & World Report.* https://www.usnews.com/news/education-news/articles/2017-06-21/white-wealthy-communities-line-up-to-create-their-own-school-districts

Campbell, C., & Binder, L. (2014). *In-depth portfolio assessment: Shelby County Schools, Memphis, Tennessee.* Center on Reinventing Public Education.

Clements, M., Pazzaglia, A. M., & Zweig, J. (2015). *Online course use in New York high schools: Results from a survey in the greater capital region* (REL 2015-075). Regional Educational Laboratory Northeast & Islands.

Cooley, D., & Floyd, K. (2013). Small rural school district consolidation in Texas: An analysis of its impact on cost and student achievement. *Administrative Issues Journal Education Practice and Research, 3*(1), 45-63.

Cox, B., & Cox, B. (2010). A decade of results: A case for school district consolidation. *Education, 131*(1), 83–92.

Croft, M., & Moore, R. (2019, February). *Rural students: Technology, coursework, and extracurricular activities.* ACT Research & Center for Equity in Learning.

Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed). Sage Publications, Inc.

DeLuca, T. A. (2013). K-12 non-instructional service consolidation: Spending changes and scale economies. *Journal of Education Finance, 39*(2), 150-173.

Dolph, D. A. (2008). *Coming together: The pros and cons of school consolidation.* University of Dayton, Educational Leadership Faculty Publications. https://ecommons.udayton.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1217&context=eda_fac_pub

Dougherty, S. M. (2016). *High school career and technical education participation and initial college enrollment: Evidence from Arkansas.* Society for Research on Educational Effectiveness.

Duncombe, W. D., & Yinger, J. M. (2010). School consolidation: The benefits and costs. *School Administrator, 67*(5), 10-17.

Durflinger, N., & Haeffele, L. (2011). *Illinois public school district consolidation: A tiered approach.* Illinois State University Center for the Study of Education Policy.

Edwards, S. (2019, July 23). *Hamilton Co. parents concerned after survey suggests consolidation, closing of schools*. News Channel 9 ABC. https://newschannel9.com/news/local/hamilton-co-parents-speak-out-after-survey-suggests-consolidation-closing-of-schools

Egerton, J., & Leeson, J. (1967). *Nashville, experiment in urban school consolidation.* U.S. Department of Health, Education & Welfare. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED020267.pdf

Fitzgerald, K., Gordon, T., Canty, A., Stitt, R., Onwuegbuzie, A., & Frels, R. (2013). Ethnic differences in completion rates as a function of school size in Texas high schools. *Journal of At-Risk Issues, 17*(2), 1–10.

FOX56 Newsroom. (2020, May 21). *Auditor General completes review of Wilkes-Barre Area High School consolidation plan*. https://fox56.com/news/local/auditor-general-completes-review-of-wilkes-barre-area-high-school-consolidation-plan

Frankenberg, E., Siegel Hawley, G., & Diem, S. (2017). Segregation by district boundary line: The fragmentation of Memphis area schools. *Educational Researcher, 46*(8), 449-463.

Galway, G. (2012). Lessons in leadership: Perspectives on corporate managerialism and educational reform. *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy, 130.* https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ971060.pdf

Grider, A., & Verstegen, D. (2000). Legislation, litigation, and rural and small schools: A survey of the states. *Journal of Education Finance, 26*(1), 103-119.

Guthrie, J. W. (1979). Organizational scale and school success. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 1*(1), 17–27.

Haller, E. J. (1992). High school size and student indiscipline: Another aspect of the school consolidation issue*? Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 14*(2), 145–156.

Haller, E. J., Monk, D. H., Bear, A. S., Griffith, J., & Moss, P. (1990). School size and program comprehensiveness: Evidence from "high school and beyond." *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 12*(2), 109–120.

Hallinger, P. (2005). Instructional leadership and the school principal: A passing fancy that refuses to fade away. *Leadership and Policy in Schools, 4*(3), 221–239.

Hamilton, L., & Mackinnon, A. (2013). *Opportunity by design: New high school models for student success. Carnegie Challenge.* Carnegie Corporation of New York.

Hawkins, S. (2018). *What does education opportunity for all students really mean?* Diverse Issues in Higher Education.

Henderson, R. D., & Gomez, J. J. (1975). *The consolidation of rural schools: Reasons, results, and implications—A preliminary investigation* [Paper presentation]. Annual Meeting of the Rural Sociological Society, San Francisco, CA, United States.

Holian, L., Alberg, M., Strahl, J. D., Burgette, J., & Cramer, E. (2014). *Online and distance learning in Southwest Tennessee: Implementation and challenges* (REL 2015-045). Regional Educational Laboratory Appalachia.

Howley, C., Johnson, J., & Petrie, J. (2011). *Consolidation of schools and districts: What the research says and what it means.* University of Colorado at Boulder, National Education Policy Center.

Hu, Y., & Yinger, J. (2008). The impact of school district consolidation on housing prices. *National Tax Journal, 61*(4), 609–634.

Iatarola, P., Conger, D., & Long, M. C. (2011). Determinants of high schools' advanced course offerings. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 33*(3), 340–359.

Ismail, L. (2020, May 19). *Metro school board votes to close three schools in North Nashville*. News Channel 5 Nashville. https://www.newschannel5.com/news/metro-school-board-to-vote-on-possible-school-closures

Jackson, A., & Gaudet, L. (2010). Factories: Getting rid of learning. *American Journal of Business Education*, *3*(1), 61–64.

Jakubowski, C., & Kulka, L. (2016). Overcoming state support for school consolidation: How schools in the empire state react. *Journal of Inquiry and Action in Education, 8*(1), 66–80.

Johnson, B., & Christensen, L. (2012). *Educational research: Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed approaches* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.

Knox County Board of Education. (1987, March 26). *Knox County Board of Education Special Session* [Meeting minutes]. Knox County Archives, Knoxville, TN, United States.

Knox County Board of Education. (1988, February 18). *Knox County Board of Education Meeting* [Meeting minutes]. Knox County Archives, Knoxville, TN, United States

Kohler, E. A., Onwuegbuzie, A. J., Combs, J. P., Bustamante, R. M., & Edmonson, S. L. (2015). School size and incidents of violence among Texas middle schools. *Journal of Educational Issues, 1*(1), 151–163.

Lawrence, B. K. (1993). *Consolidation of rural schools: Mount Desert Island, Maine: A case study.* Supervisory Union Administrative Center.

Lawrence, B. K., Bingler, S., Diamond, B. M., Hill, B., Hoffman, J. L., Howley, C. B., Mitchell, S., Rudolph, D., & Washor, E. (2002). *Dollars & sense: The cost effectiveness of small schools.* Knowledge Works Foundation.

Leedy, P. D., & Ormrod, J. E. (2005). *Practical research: planning and design* (8th ed). Pearson Education.

Leisey, R. M., Murphy, P. K., & Temple, D. W. (1990). *The consolidation of a rural school district: A case study*. (ED 336216). Georgia State University.

Lindsay, P. (1982). The effect of high school size on student participation, satisfaction, and attendance. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 4*(1), 57–65.

Loughlin, S., & Modesitt, A. (2017, April 5). School board votes to combine Rockville, Turkey Run. *Tribune-Star.* https://www.tribstar.com/news/school-board-votes-to-combine-rockville-turkey-run/article_9a4c3e8c-1a6e-11e7-b079-97ee88e4f109.html

Mahoney, J. L., Cairns, B. D., & Farmer, T. W. (2003). Promoting interpersonal competence and educational success through extracurricular activity participation. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 95*(2), 409–418.

Margolin, J., Pan, J., & Yang, R. (2019). *Technology use in instruction and teacher perceptions of school support for technology use in Iowa high schools* (REL 2019-004). Regional Educational Laboratory Midwest.

McGuffey, C. W., & Brown, C. L. (1978). The relationship of school size and rate of school plant utilization to cost variations of maintenance and operation. *American Educational Research Journal, 15*(3), 373–378.

McInerny, C. (2019, May 17). Here's where we are in Austin ISD's school consolidation process. *KUT 90.5*. https://www.kut.org/post/heres-where-we-are-austin-isds-school-consolidation-process

Mehta, J. (2015). Escaping the shadow: "A nation at risk" and its far-reaching influence. *American Educator, 39*(2), 20–26.

Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (4th ed). Jossey-Bass.

National Center for Educational Statistics. (n.d.a). *Digest of education statistics.* https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d19/tables/dt19_105.50.asp

National Center for Educational Statistics. (n.d.b). *The condition of education: Annual earnings.* https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cba.asp

National Center for Educational Statistics. (n.d.c). *Number of public school districts and public and private elementary and secondary schools: Selected years, 1869-70 through 2017-18*. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d19/tables/dt19_214.10.asp?current=yes

Nelson, E. (1985). *School consolidation* (Report No. 1985-00-00). ERIC Clearing House of Educational Management.

Nitta, K. A., Holley, M. J., & Wrobel, S. L. (2010). A phenomenological study of rural school consolidation. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 25*(2), 1–19.

Oates, W. E. (1969). The effects of property taxes and local public spending on property values: An empirical study of tax capitalization and the Tiebout Hypothesis. *Journal of Political Economy, 77*(6), 957.

Oates, W. E. (1973). The effects of property taxes and local public spending on property values: A reply and yet further results. *Journal of Political Economy, 81*(4), 1004.

Ornstein, A. C. (1992). Trends in consolidation and decentralization. *Clearing House, 65*(5), 322.

Packard, B. W., Leach, M., Ruiz, Y., Nelson, C., & DiCocco, H. (2012). School-to-work transition of career and technical education graduates. *Career Development Quarterly, 60*(2), 134–144.

Palattella, E. (2017, April 20). Erie School District to move ahead with full consolidation plan. *GoErie.com*. https://www.goerie.com/news/20170420/erie-school-district-to-move-ahead-with-full-consolidation-plan

Pang, N. S. (2014). Globalization in the one world: Impacts on education in different nations. *Education in One World: Perspective from Different Nations, 11*, 17-27.

Pence, A. R., & Dymond, S. K. (2019). Extracurricular school clubs: A time for fun and learning. *TEACHING Exceptional Children, 47*(5), 281-288.

Penuel, W., Meyer, E., & Valladares, M. R. (2016). *Making the most of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA): Helping states focus on school equity, quality and climate.* University of Colorado at Boulder, National Education Policy Center.

Peshkin, A. (1982). *The imperfect union: School consolidation and community conflict.* University of Chicago Press.

Picchi, A. (2019, September 5). The new face of racial segregation: School "secession." *CBS News*. https://www.cbsnews.com/news/the-new-face-of-racial-segregation-school-secession/

Pignolet, J. (2018, December 11). Shelby County Schools: Consolidation plan could close 28 schools, build 10 new ones. *Commercial Appeal*. https://www.commercialappeal.com/story/news/education/2018/12/11/dorsey-hopsons-plan-would-close-28-shelby-county-schools-investments-new-construction-facilities/2279084002/

Piontek, M. E., Kannapel, P. J., Flory, M., & Stewart, M. S. (2016). *The implementation of dual credit programs in six nonurban Kentucky school districts* (REL 2016-136). Regional Educational Laboratory Appalachia.

Poteat, V. P., Calzo, J. P., Yoshikawa, H., Lipkin, A., Ceccolini, C. J., Rosenbach, S. B., O'Brien, M. D., Marx, R. A., Murchison, G. R., & Burson, E. (2019). *Greater engagement in gender-sexuality alliances (GSAs) and GSA characteristics predict youth empowerment and reduced mental health concerns.* Child Development.

Ratcliffe, M., Burd, C., Holder, K., & Field, A. (2016). Defining rural at the U.S. Census Bureau: American community survey and geography brief-1. *U.S. Census Bureau, December*, 1-8.

Reinstadler, K. (2010, August 18). Raleigh, N.C.'s secret to great schools: Consolidation, busing and putting poor children in middle-class schools. *MLive*. https://www.mlive.com/news/2010/08/raleigh_nc_a_picture_of_equal.html

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. (2012, December). *Why does education matter so much to health? Issue brief. Health policy snapshot.* Author.

Roberts, C., & Hyatt, L. (2019). *The dissertation journey: A practical and comprehensive guide to planning, writing, and defending your dissertation.* Corwin.

Rubin, S. (2005). Country roads. *Ford Foundation Report, 36*(1), 14–19.

Rushing, D. (1967). *How a consolidated high school provides better educational opportunities* [Conference session]. National Outlook Conference on Rural Youth, Washington, DC, United States.

Self, T. L. (2001). Evaluation of a single school district consolidation in Ohio. *American Secondary Education, 30*(1), 71–82.

Shakrani, S. M. (2010). *School district consolidation study in 10 Michigan counties: Is district consolidation cost effective? What is the alternative to consolidation?* Education Policy Center, Michigan State University.

Showell, J., & Brown, C. G. (2019). Teacher perceptions of school culture after the change from a semester schedule to a trimester schedule. *International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation, 14*(1), 128–146.

Siegel-Hawley, G., Diem, S., & Frankenberg, E. (2018). The disintegration of Memphis-Shelby County, Tennessee: School district secession and local control in the 21st Century. *American Educational Researcher Journal, 55*(4), 651-692.

Slate, J. R., & Jones, C. H. (2005). Effects of school size: A review of the literature with recommendations. *Essays in Education, 13*.

Snellman, K., Silva, J. M., Frederick, C. B., & Putnam, R. D. (2017). The engagement gap: Social mobility and extracurricular participation among American youth. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 657*, 194-207.

Snyder, T. D. (1993). *120 years of American education: A statistical portrait.* National Center for Education Statistics.

St-Amand, J., Girard, S., Hiroux, M.-H., & Smith, J. (2017). Participation in sports-related extracurricular activities: A strategy that enhances school engagement. *McGill Journal of Education, 52*(1), 197–206.

Stigler, G. J. (1958). The economies of scale. *Journal of Law & Economics, 1*, 54-71.

Strauss, V. (2018, May 2). Back to the future: A new school district secession movement is gaining steam. *The Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2018/05/02/back-to-the-future-a-new-school-district-secession-movement-is-gaining-steam/

Streifel, J. S., Foldesy, G., & Holman, D. M. (1991). The financial effects of consolidation. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 7*(2), 13–20.

Superville, D. R. (2017, June 7). When a community loses its schools: The disparate impact of school closings. *Education Week.*

Surface, J. (2011). Assessing the impact of twenty-first century rural school consolidation. *International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation, 6*(2), 1–13.

Tarbutton, T. (2018). Leveraging 21st century learning & technology to create caring diverse classroom cultures. *Multicultural Education*, *25*(2), 4-6.

Tennessee Department of Education. (n.d.a). *Career clusters.* https://www.tn.gov/education/career-and-technical-education/career-clusters.html

Tennessee Department of Education. (n.d.b). *TN state report card.* https://www.tn.gov/education/data/report-card.html

Tennessee Department of Education. (2018). *School accountability: ESSA updates for 2017-18.* https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/education/cpm/essa/ESSA_schl_accountability_fact_sheet.pdf

Thomas, K. M., Singh, P., Klopfenstein, K., & Henry, T. (2013). Access to high school arts education: Why student participation matters as much as course availability. *Education Policy Analysis Archives, 21*(83), 1–25.

Thompson, C. (2018). School administrators' and stakeholders' attitudes toward, and perspectives on, school improvement planning. *Education Planning, 25*(4), 7-26.

Thompson, D. (2020, May 29). Cherokee County votes to consolidate three high schools. *Citizen Times.* https://www.citizen-times.com/story/sports/high-school/hshuddle/2020/05/29/cherokee-county-votes-consolidate-three-high-schools/5282102002/

Thurman, L. E. (2012). *A principal interest: Leading for learning in high school consolidation* (Publication No. 3570698) [Doctoral dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.

Thurman, L. E., & Hackmann, D. G. (2015). Leading the newly consolidated high school: Exciting opportunity or overwhelming challenge? *Educational Considerations, 42*(2), 1–12.

United States. National Commission on Excellence in Education. (1983). *A nation at risk: The imperative for educational reform.* National Commission on Excellence in Education.

U.S. Census Bureau. (n.d.). *U.S. Department of Commerce.* https://data.census.gov/cedsci

Valenti, E., Feld bush, T., & Mandernach, J. (2019). Comparison of faculty and student perceptions of videos in the online classroom. *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice, 16*(3), 1-21.

Warne, R. T. (2017). Research on the academic benefits of the advanced placement program: Taking stock and looking forward. *SAGE Open, 7*(1), 1-16.

Warner, W. M., Brown, M. W., & Lindle, J. C. (2010). Micropolitics, community identity, and school consolidation. *Journal of School Public Relations, 31*(4), 303–318.

Werblow, J., & Duesbery, L. (2009). The impact of high school size on math achievement and dropout rate. *The High School Journal, 92*(3), 14–23.

Wolf, A. (2002). *Does education matter? Myths about education and economic growth*. Penguin.

WVMetroNews Staff. (2017, May 18). Fayette County school board approves closure, consolidation plan. *WV MetroNews.* http://wvmetronews.com/2017/05/17/fayette-county-school-board-approves-closure-consolidation-plan/

Young, A. (2020, February 28). Parents address concern about Roane County Schools enrollment decrease. *10News*. https://www.wbir.com/article/life/parenting/parents-address-concern-about-roane-county-schools-enrollment-decrease/51-94109a7e-ffdd-4a8e-9f00-5b46769b07c3

Young, E., & Green, H. A. (2005). *School system consolidation* (Staff Education Brief 8). Tennessee Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations.

Zimmer, T., DeBoer, L., & Hirth, M. (2009). Examining economies of scale in school consolidation: Assessment of Indiana school districts. *Journal of Education Finance, 35*(2), 103-127.

Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol
Candidate Name: Brad Smith
Date of Interview:
Time Interview Began:
Time Interview Concluded:
Participant Pseudonym:
Participant Information:

- ☐ Teacher
- ☐ Administrator
- ☐ Parent
- ☐ Community Member (non-parent)

Interviewer (I):
This interview should take about 20 minutes.

Do you mind if I record our conversation? I can pause or stop the recording any time you ask me.

Increasingly, academic and financial expectations add pressure to rural public schools. In many areas of rural United States, systems and schools have consolidated in efforts to improve their situations. Since at least 2017, the XXXXXX County School Board has considered options of combining all or a few of the five high schools. One key argument in these proposals was that a consolidation might improve opportunities for XXXXXX County students. The purpose of this interview is to understand stakeholders' perceptions of the impact a school consolidation would make on student opportunity.

Your identity and responses will remain confidential.

You may request a printed copy of the transcript of this interview to provide you with the opportunity to check for accuracy and correct any information.

You may end the interview at any time. Just tell me you want to stop.

Do you understand everything so far?

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Participant (P): Participant Affirmation(s)

The next few questions will ask for your perspective of student opportunity in terms of curriculum, extracurriculars, technology, and teacher training.

1. How do you feel a consolidation of the high schools would impact curriculum and programming options for students?

2. How do you feel a consolidation of the high schools would impact extracurricular activities?

3. How do you feel a consolidation of the high schools would impact classroom technology (i.e. computers, tablets, interactive devices, servers & network support?

4. *[Omit for parents and non-parent community members]* How do you feel a consolidation of the high schools would impact teacher training?

5. What, if any, other advantages do you feel a consolidation of the high schools would create?

6. What, if any, other drawbacks do you feel a consolidation of the high schools would create?

7. Do you have any additional thoughts you would like to share?

Appendix B

Consent Form for Adults

Social and Behavioral Sciences
Sample Adult Consent

INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Stakeholder Perceptions of Student Opportunity in Consolidated Rural High Schools

You are being asked to participate in a research study about stakeholder perceptions of student opportunity in consolidated rural high schools. You are selected as a possible participant because of your connection with Roane County Schools, as either a teacher, administrator, parent, or community member. Please read this form and ask any question before agreeing to be in the research.

This study is being conducted by researchers at Lincoln Memorial University.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION
Educational leaders and policy makers looked to consolidation as a way for rural schools and school systems to overcome financial challenges and improve the educational experiences for students. Stakeholders were met with conflicting claims about the effects of school and system consolidation. Educational leaders facing or within a consolidation situation will benefit from understanding the perceptions of stakeholders amid varying viewpoints and claims. The purpose of this study is to examine stakeholders' perceptions of the impact of rural high school consolidation on opportunities for students.

DURATION
This interview should last between 15 and 20 minutes. The location of this interview may be at your school, work, or virtually via a secure video conference platform.

ELIGIBILITY
You must be 18 years of age or older to participate.
You must be one of the following:
A resident of Roane County
A teacher in a Roane County high school
An administrator in a Roane County high school
A parent of a Roane County high school student

PROCEDURES
If you agree to be a participant in this research, we would ask you to do the following things.

- *Respond to prepared questions about your perceptions of student opportunity in consolidated rural high schools.*
- *Allow audio recording of the interview for later transcription.*
- *Allow 15-20 minutes for participation in the interview at a location, either school, work, or virtually on a secure video conferencing platform.*
- *You must be 18 years of age or older to participate.*
- *You must be one of the following:*
    - *A resident of Roane County*
    - *A teacher in a Roane County high school*
    - *An administrator in a Roane County high school*
    - *A parent of a Roane County high school student*

RISKS AND BENEFITS

- There are no known risks associated with this research.
- Educational leaders and policymakers may gain knowledge from this study that may improve their decision-making, thus improving the public schools within the participants' communities, filling a gap in existing literature.

COMPENSATION

- There is no compensation for participation in this study.

PRIVACY/CONFIDINTIALITY

- *Anonymity of the data and privacy of the subject will be maintained.*
- *Only the principal researcher will have access to the data, audio files, and transcripts.*
- *Data may be published within a dissertation or presented at a conference. Once published, all individually identifying information will be redacted or altered to maintain participant privacy.*
- *Consent forms will be collected and stored, with access only by the principal researcher.*
- *Audio recordings and transcripts will be collected and stored, with access only by the principal researcher. These files and documents will be destroyed after three years.*

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Your participation is voluntary. There is no penalty if you choose not to participate and you are free to withdraw at any time.

- *Participants may skip any questions they do not feel comfortable answering.*
- *Participants may request the audio or video tape to be turned off at any time.*

CONTACTS and QUESTIONS

The researcher conducting this study is Brad S. Smith, a doctoral candidate at Lincoln Memorial University. If you have questions you may contact them at bradley.smith@lmunet.edu or 865.558.7770.

If you have questions about the rights and welfare of research participants please contact the Chair of the Lincoln Memorial University Institutional Review Board, Dr. Kay Paris at (423) 869-6323 or kay.paris@lmunet.edu.

RETURN INSTRUCTIONS

Upon signing of this consent form, please return the form to the principal investigator.
If the interview is being conducted virtually, via a secure video conference platform, the principal investigator will email participants a copy of this consent form. At which point, participants will be asked to respond to the email with either of the following:

> *"I have read and understand the information in the consent form and I willingly give my consent to participate in this research study. I am 18 years of age or older."*
>
> *OR*
>
> *"I do not give my consent to participate in this research study."*

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION STATEMENT*
You should not sign this form unless you have read it and have been given a copy of it to keep. Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to answer any question or discontinue your involvement at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you might otherwise be entitled. Your decision will not affect your future relationship with LMU or your quality of education provided to you by LMU. Your signature below indicates that you have read the information in this consent form and have had a chance to ask questions that you have about the study.

IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS*
If you have any comments, concerns, or questions regarding the conduct of this research please contact the researcher at bradley.smith@lmunet.edu or 865.558.7770.

If you are unable to reach a member of the research team listed at the top of this form and have general questions, or you have concerns or complaints about the research study, research team, or questions about your rights as a research subject, please contact the Chair of the LMU IRB, Dr. Kay Paris at (423) 869-6323, or by email kay.paris@lmunet.edu.

I have read and understand the information above and I willingly give my consent to participate in this research study. I am 18 years of age or older.

Subject Signature Date

Printed Name of Subject

Researcher Signature Date

Printed Name of Researcher

A COPY OF THIS CONSENT IS BEING PROVIDED FOR YOUR RECORDS