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ABSTRACT

Thrasher School is a K-12 unit school in Prentiss County, Mississippi, that has survived and flourished in an economically disadvantaged area because of its close community connections. The K-12 school enrolls 482 students, of which 144 attend grades 9-12. The community has vigorously resisted high school consolidation, financing reconstruction of the school building after a 1990 fire. This working-class community includes few college graduates, and both school and community strongly encourage vocational programs, which prepare students for work in the local economy. Interviews with the principal, assistant principal, high school teachers, high school students, and a countywide school board member point out the intimate involvement of the community in the school and the importance of interpersonal relationships between community members and school staff, among teachers, and between teachers and students. The operation of the school represents to the community the succession of generations of citizens; the school arguably thrives because of this legacy of community support. The school exists to serve and sustain the community and local ways of living, and loss of the school is seemingly understood by the community as a serious threat to these ways of living. (SV)

CHAPTER 6

Flourishing in the Face of Adverse Rural Conditions: A Case Study of Thrasher School, Booneville, Mississippi[1]

CALVIN W. JACKSON[2]

Although the community of Thrasher, Mississippi, might continue to exist in some form without its school, Thrasher School could hardly exist in its present form without its community. Its apparent success today seems to depend on this close connection. The Thrasher community is extremely supportive of the school in both formal and informal ways. For example, the community displays a tremendous level of support for the high school athletic programs, which, in turn, are a major catalyst for drawing the community together. This is especially remarkable in the case of the basketball program. A consistent winner of state championships, the basketball team plays *every one* of its games on the road because the school has lacked a gymnasium for the past four years.

The community offers the school financial support, as well. As an example, the original Thrasher School building was destroyed by fire in May 1990. The community rallied to face this disaster and to finance reconstruction. In 1993, the new building opened. The quick reconstruction would not have been possible without the rapid communal response. Indeed, such disasters have sometimes served to remove schools permanently from rural communities. The community's action demonstrates its opposition to consolidation. (The issue of consolidation will be considered later in the chapter.)

At first glance, Thrasher and the other communities in Prentiss County might seem impoverished to visitors. Closer examination and conversations with school faculty, staff, students, and other community members provide a more vigorous picture. The adult members of this small community are mostly factory workers who earn minimum wage or slightly above. Very few adults are college educated and a large number of youth don't complete high school. Approximately eight percent of the high school graduates complete college. The school and the county strongly support and encourage enrollment in vocational programs. They recognize that for many students, this is the best way to prepare them for work in the local economy. There are no private schools in the county, and this community reportedly values public education for all of its children.

The School (Principal, Assistant Principal, Teachers, Students)

Thrasher School enrolls 482 students in grades K-12; 155 attend grades 9-12. The student-teacher ratio is reported locally as 13.7 to 1 (but see table 1 for cross-site comparable data). The student population is 76 percent white, 22 percent black, and 2 percent Asian.[3] Approximately 30 percent of each graduating class of 30-40 students attends a postsecondary program; 75 percent remain in the Booneville environs. Free and reduced-price meals are provided to 44 percent of all students.

Thrasher is a small school fighting to survive the threat of consolidation from its neighboring high school (just five miles distant). Many educators and policymakers might, in general, regard the preservation of a high school enrolling just 155 students but located so close to another small high school (nearby New Site High School enrolls about 300 students) as sentimentally misguided; most rural schools that used to exist in such close proximity to one another have been closed. But to the residents of Thrasher, the school—especially the high school—represents the heart of the people and the hamlet of Thrasher. Their defense is passionate and persistent, and thus far it has been effective.

The principal. Bill Buse is the principal at Thrasher. His dedication to the school and its students is striking. He lives in a house located on the campus and provided by the school, which gives him immediate access to the school seven days a week. Buse says he sees his school as one facility but two different "worlds." The K-6 environment is a different

world from the 7-12 environment. There are clearly two separate schools on the campus, with little interaction between them.

As one might expect in a school this size, Buse wears many hats. He sees such versatility and resourcefulness as an advantage for a school leader. He knows almost all the children by their first and last names. He knows their families and has helped to educate their siblings and, in many cases, their parents, as well. He exhibits affection and careful regard for the students at Thrasher School.

Bill Buse struck me as a creative man with strong leadership skills. He sees instruction as his first administrative priority. However, he views himself as "more than an instructional leader." He provides an ear for teacher concerns and is a mediator between teachers and parents. He unabashedly reports that the school is "run by the teachers," and his approach is to let them do their jobs without "unnecessary intrusions." But he also insists that teachers solve most classroom problems, including discipline.

Any member of the teaching staff may call a staff meeting, but meetings must be "worthwhile," Buse explains. Based on expressed need, staff development activities occur about once a month. Buse claims that he sees teachers as role models for the kids, and he works with them to help them cultivate good teaching habits. He believes teachers who also live and participate in this community can set good examples and cultivate pride in their students.

Buse works constantly to engage the community in school functions and bring adults onto the campus. He is engaged in curriculum development and the instructional program and uses a participatory approach to school management. The high school was implementing block scheduling during the year I visited (1997-1998), going from eight periods to four periods a day. With the new schedule, the school would offer five upper-level math and seven science classes.

One of the principal's goals was to have the school fully wired and on-line within a year. Computer hookups were in place for the library, and the English Department was already on-line. The library was slated to go on-line next. One computer lab was used primarily for K-4 students. Funds for further computer enhancements were available through a state technology initiative, but there were seven other schools in line ahead of Thrasher, and thus, it faced a long wait.

Assistant principal. Phil Worley is the assistant principal at Thrasher, but he also teaches science classes part-time. He has developed excellent computer skills and uses them in his administrative role.

A lifelong resident of the area, he voices the highest regard for the school's community and its people. He is a graduate of Thrasher, like his father and his brother. His wife teaches home economics at a neighboring high school.[4]

Like his colleague Bill Buse, Worley, too, views teachers as the central figures in managing student behavior. Unlike most assistant principals, he says he "will *not* administer discipline for the school." The school and the community enlarge one another, according to Worley, and events in the community are felt strongly in the school. For instance, the school closed recently in observance of a death in the community. Some years ago, when a tornado damaged his house, approximately 50 people gathered at dawn to help repair it.

Worley believes in the students at Thrasher and describes them as "real good kids." They resemble students anywhere, he says, exhibiting all kinds of interests and the gamut of academic talents. Like his principal, Worley maintains close relationships with students and knows them all by name. Yet, his special focus is in the elementary area. Worley doesn't believe there is "a bad teacher at Thrasher." Teachers love teaching here, he says, and the very low teacher turnover rate supports his claim. He describes his colleague Bill Buse as "a dedicated, good principal who is too good to us." The Thrasher School's reputation recently inspired two families to move into the area expressly so that their children could enroll there.

Worley describes the community surrounding Thrasher as an extended family of caring individuals who regard school officials as worthy of confidence. Although many outsiders might perceive the community as uninvolved in academic matters, they are very supportive of this aspect of the school. In the past, the Thrasher School did not maintain a parent teacher organization (PTO). Today, however, the PTO is an active, vibrant organization at the school.

Teachers. One of the teachers I interviewed was Ellen Shelton, who teaches high school English. Shelton moved to the area from Dallas, Texas. The school system in which she previously taught enrolled approximately 2,000 students. Shelton exhibited what I would call

genuine excitement for teaching and affection for the kids at Thrasher. She mentioned during the interview (as did Principal Buse) that the basketball team had an "away game" that night. She noted that she rarely misses a game. It was important for her, she said, to attend games to demonstrate her support for the school and the community. Though an urban outsider, she recognized and appreciated the influence athletics had on the relationship between community and school.

One of the surprising benefits of teaching in a very small high school like Thrasher, according to Shelton, is the opportunity to teach the same students every year from grade 9 through graduation. "You really get to know your students after teaching them for four years," she said.

In addition to all of the reasons mentioned by the principal and assistant principal, Thrasher flourishes, in Shelton's view, because teachers are a cohesive group, working with common purpose. Teacher interaction is common and the teachers experience interdisciplinary learning *themselves* as a result of the intense collaboration "necessary to make the school work." Teachers freely share successful teaching strategies and best practices with each other, and team teaching across subject areas is common.

Ellen Shelton would like to see an increase in the number of graduates who go on to some form of higher education. Unfortunately, the prevailing economic conditions make even high school graduation a hard sell for teachers. While practically all students want to remain in the area following graduation, the sorts of jobs available locally do not reward graduation. (Typically, the smallest poverty gap between rural and urban America is for high school dropouts, and the largest for college graduates; well-paid, skilled jobs are difficult to come by in rural areas, a major theme throughout rural history worldwide.[5]) The typical response from those who leave school before receiving a diploma is that they simply "lost interest." Nonetheless, as reported to me by those interviewed, graduation rates are high in comparison to state averages.

Students. Among the students I interviewed, "Samuel" (not his real name), a senior at the time, made a strong impression on me. An African American, Samuel had two brothers and two sisters who all graduated from Thrasher. He told me that he planned to attend the community college serving the Booneville-Prentiss County area.

Very active in student organizations at Thrasher, Samuel was the editor of the school yearbook and a member of five school clubs and service organizations. The students voted him "Mr. Thrasher," the male senior who best represented the spirit of the school. Ironically, Samuel was a transfer student from a nearby high school.

When asked why he chose to attend Thrasher, Samuel said that he "loved the environment and the people." He reported that he had "a great relationship" with his teachers. He confessed, however, that he was "a little nervous" on arriving at Thrasher. The change eventually proved easy, he indicated. Samuel reported that he commuted (that is, drove himself) approximately seven miles to get to Thrasher. His involvement in extracurricular activities, he said, helped him become a more assertive student. He had "learned a lot" at Thrasher and his teachers had "made sure" he had taken "the right courses" to be prepared for college. Samuel was convinced he made the right decision to enroll at Thrasher.

School Governance (Superintendent, School Board)

Mr. Ed McCoy is the superintendent of schools for this county district. One of his dreams for Thrasher is to build a gymnasium with a big stage; one large enough to handle all the performances the school wants to produce. He describes the imagined structure as a multipurpose facility, to serve as auditorium, gym, assembly hall, and fine arts center. If McCoy's vision prevails, Thrasher will have this facility sooner rather than later. Ed McCoy has a background in construction and taught electrical trade at the vocational technical center for 11 years. In most school building projects in the county, the superintendent serves as general contractor.[6]

Mr. McCoy quickly acknowledges the support of the community and its role in the life of the schools in the county. This strong community support was evident when the community borrowed money from the bank to build a band hall at the school and repaid the loan themselves. (According to McCoy, another nearby community erected and paid for an *entire building* of six classrooms. In fact, all six school communities in Prentiss County have borrowed money and erected buildings on their own at one time or another.)

McCoy views himself as "a strong disciplinarian." He stated emphatically that he does not "put up with problems of any kind." Test scores in his county district, he says, reflect an overall performance rating of 4.5 on the 5.0 scale established by the state accreditation entity.[7]

Gary Johnson, a member of the countywide school board, was in the last year of his sixth term. He indicated that he planned to seek reelection to a seventh term. Johnson works as an engineer at a factory within commuting distance, where he has been employed for the past 24 years. He is a 1971 graduate of Thrasher School, and reported that 36 students began the ninth grade with him, and 36 graduated four years later. He indicated that "the key was students helping students."

Johnson lives just two houses away from the school and remains very active in the school. At the time, he had a son in the eighth grade and a daughter in the sixth grade. His wife graduated from Thrasher, as did all six of his brothers. Like Johnson, they all still live in the community.

Johnson stated that "not much has changed" about Thrasher over the years, except for the new building. He feels good about the school today and believes in the teachers. He cited several examples of strong community support for the school. Though he drives 28 miles to work every day, he does not view a lengthy commute as a reason to leave his community.

His initial involvement with school governance came as a result of concern for his son, who experienced a hearing loss. Johnson became involved because he was convinced that special education was not the place for his child, and he was determined to ensure that his son "didn't end up there." Recognizing that his son would face challenges due to his disability, he eventually ran for a seat on the school board, to ensure that his son's needs would be addressed in a way that he viewed as best. He found that the teachers at Thrasher already had his son's best interest in their hearts.

He has nonetheless been successful in his role on the board and has served as board chairman for two years. He sees the role of the school board as a district governing body with a heavy emphasis on providing advice and addressing the broad issues of education. He is, he says, not at all interested in "running the school" on a day-to-day basis. He gives the principal and assistant principal "extremely high marks" on their per-

formance. Even though he represents the entire county district and has grown to love and appreciate all the schools, it appeared clear that his strongest allegiance continued to be to the school and community at Thrasher.

The Prevailing Perspective on Consolidation

On the issue of consolidating the local high schools, the position of this community, its teachers and administrators, and all their allied parties is quite clear: they *adamantly* oppose it. They report fighting long and hard to retain and maintain the community's identity in the school. I was told that one county superintendent lost his bid for reelection because he favored consolidation. The principal clearly recognizes the hypothetical advantages of consolidation, but stated that the potential loss to the community far outweighed, in his mind, the possible advantages.

One advantage of consolidation would be the ability to offer more varied classes. Operating efficiencies contingent on consolidation might also improve funding for instructional purposes.[8] But a major disadvantage would be the loss of closeness between faculty and students, according to principal Buse. Class size would increase and less time would be provided to individual student needs, he said. Superintendent McCoy saw consolidation as a way of destroying not only the Thrasher school, but its community as well. He felt that maintaining four high schools in one county gave four times as many kids a chance to get involved in activities, sports, and school life in general. He felt that large schools "lose control" and that disorder (including increased drug use and violence) would surely follow.

Summary Observations

Thrasher School is the center of the community of Thrasher. The operation of the school represents to the community the succession of generations of citizens; the school arguably thrives because of this legacy of community support. The Thrasher community is intimately involved in the school and takes personal pride in the grounds, building, sports, teams, and other aspects of the institution. Community members have a high degree of respect for the administration of the school.

Thrasher supports the school with its resources and talents and gives of itself freely to meet the school's needs.

These conclusions, plus evidence from the interviews, suggest that the school (and perhaps the Prentiss County School District as a whole) is preserved and sustained on very "traditional" terms. One might not expect to find the "latest thinking" on "constructivist instructional methods" or deep concern with national standards (though it seems likely that state requirements would be taken seriously). But it is clear to me that the school exists to serve and to sustain the community. Young people stay in the Thrasher-Booneville-Prentiss County area and are concerned with and proud of the locality and local ways of living. Loss of the school, it seems, is understood by the community as a serious threat to these ways of living. This hypothesis would explain why this apparently impoverished community so readily rebuilt the building destroyed by fire and funded and built a band hall under its own auspices.

I infer from my visit that a tacit goal of this community is to prove that a small, relatively impoverished, rural place can sustain a high school and help it thrive at a reasonable cost. Those whom I interviewed displayed an unabashed passion for Thrasher School. This level of community appreciation and support, in my experience, is rare and precious. I suspect that few educators are willing to honor and incorporate local purposes and values in the way that is required to win this sort of appreciation and support. Some observers of education believe, for instance, that the profession values innovation and change for its own sake, or for the sake of purposes not related to sustaining local communities.[9]

Notes

1. Though the hamlet of Thrasher appears on maps of Mississippi, the postal address is "Booneville." Thrasher is located in the northeast corner of Mississippi, about 15 miles south of Corinth, and about a mile and a half to the east of U.S. Route 45.
2. This case study was conducted by the Regional Educational Laboratory at Southeast Regional Vision for Education as part of the Laboratory Network Program funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement. Calvin W. Jackson is now a senior policy analyst at the South Carolina Department of Education.
3. Its 24 percent minority enrollment gives Thrasher School the greatest proportion of minority students of any school in the district, but the extent to which racial diversity is responsible for the community of Thrasher retaining its school is not

clear. The National Center for Education Statistics [NCES]. *Common Core of Data (CCD): School Years 1993-94 through 1997-98* (CD-ROM; NCES 2000-370). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 2000, shows that *none* of the six regular schools in Prentiss County, Mississippi, is predominantly African American, while three schools (two elementary schools and a high school) enroll no African Americans. Of course, many city districts in the North cannot achieve the degree of integration evident in Thrasher because residential patterns have become so segregated in those cities.

4. Prentiss County maintains four schools that include grades 9-12: three K-12 schools and one 9-12 school (NCES, 2000).

5. See, for instance, G. Huang and C. Howley, *Recent Trends in Rural Poverty: A Summary for Educators* (ERIC Digest) (Charleston, WV: ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, 1991), ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 335 180; J. Jacobs, *Cities and the Wealth of Nations: Principles of Economic Life* (New York: Random House, 1984); and R. Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

6. The 26,000 square-foot gymnasium project was completed at an approximate cost of $1.6 million and became operational in February 1999. A new 9,000 square-foot vo-tech building will be operational for the 2000-2001 school year.

7. According to recent information for 1996 now available from the Mississippi Department of Education (http://www.mde.k12.ms.us/acad/td/d5900032.htm), eighth-grade students at Thrasher scored at the 61st percentile on the "composite" measure of the CTBS/5; 96 percent of high school students passed the state's Functional Literacy Exam (soon to be supplanted by subject-area tests); "core" students taking the ACT in that year (n=6) returned a mean composite score of 19.8, while all Thrasher students taking the test (n=17) returned a mean composite score of 17.2. (It seems that far more students take the test than would be indicated by the reported rates of postsecondary enrollment; core students are evidently college-intending students.) In view of the community's modest economic circumstances, these results are *quite impressive*. These data describe performance in the 1996 school year and were the most recent available as of October 2000.

8. Such claims are often overstated by proponents, and, sometimes, consolidated schools prove more expensive to operate than those they have replaced. See, for example, E. Haller and D. Monk, "New Reforms, Old Reforms, and the Consolidation of Small Rural Schools," *Educational Administration Quarterly* 24(4): 470-83 (1988); C. Howley and J. Eckman, eds., *Sustainable Small Schools: A Handbook for Rural Communities* (Charleston, WV: ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, 1997); and A. Peshkin, *The Imperfect Union: School Consolidation and Community Conflict* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

9. Compare, for example, S. Arons, *A Short Route to Chaos: Conscience, Community, and the Reconstitution of American Schooling* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997); J. Bruner, *The Culture of Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); D. Orr. *Earth in Mind: On Education, Environment, and the Human Prospect* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1994); and K. Seal and H. Harmon, "Realities of Rural School Reform," *Phi Delta Kappan* 77(2): 119-25 (1995).

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