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School Consolidation Efforts in Mississippi

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Background

In early 2005, Mississippi lawmakers struggled with budgetary matters as turf wars intensified between political parties. The somber mood of legislators in Jackson permeated the state. Hostile environments in both chambers had driven legislators to uncompromising positions, which created deadlock in the state capital. The search to find additional funding sources led to a “no stone unturned” mentality. Legislators were forced to make difficult and sometimes very unpopular funding decisions. School consolidation, which not long ago was considered a politically risky subject by most politicians in the state, was now being viewed as a very real possibility if not probability. Hayden (2005) expressed the sentiments of pro-consolidation forces,

Many taxpayers want to know why the Mississippi Senate doesn't cut back on the 152 superintendents and their huge salaries, especially when a county such as Hinds has three superintendents, each making more than \$100,000 a year. Why isn't consolidation being considered? There were bills in the Legislature considering school district consolidation. None passed. There is a lot of disagreement (p. 4).

Administrative consolidation was seen as more economical and efficient according to economy of scale. Borrowed from business, economy of scale has become synonymous with school consolidation efforts (Orr, 1992). When applied to education the term suggests that increasing the size of a school, school district, or central office, can reduce overall costs. However, research indicates consolidation is difficult for families whose children leave familiar neighborhoods. Peshkin (1978) observed, “Viable villages generally contain schools; dying and dead ones either lack them or do not have them for long. The capacity to maintain a school is a continuing indicator of a community’s well-being” (p.161). In certain situations additional taxes have been levied to support newly enacted school consolidation initiatives (Krietlow, 1966; Sher,

1992; DeYoung & Howley, 1992). Duncombe, Miner, & Ruggiero (1994) noted, “Despite a substantial literature on economies of scale in education, there is little consistent evidence on whether school district consolidation saves money, while maintaining educational quality” (p.16). William F. Shughart II, Barnard Distinguished Professor of Economics and holder of the Robert M. Hearin Chair at The University of Mississippi, specifically addressed administrative consolidation efforts in Mississippi. Shughart (2005) stated,

By centralizing administration, consolidation distances superintendents from individual schools and from the parents of the children who attend them. Policymaking becomes more bureaucratic and administrators become less responsive to parents' wishes. Having fewer district administrations with which to negotiate contracts, consolidation also strengthens the bargaining positions of the unions. Consolidation is not the Holy Grail of better schools; competition is.

A Gulfport state senator was successful in getting a floor vote to consolidate the school administration of Harrison County's five school districts. The proposed consolidation was administrative and would leave one superintendent whereas previously there had been five. Administrative consolidation is a restructuring that includes the sharing, exchanging, or contracting of administrative functions to increase the administrative efficiency of one or more of the school districts involved. Such functions include accounting, human resources, information systems, marketing, and purchasing, among others. The bill would eventually require voters to decide a possible merger of Harrison County, Long Beach, Gulfport, Biloxi and Pass Christian districts that are all located near the Mississippi gulf coast. Later, an amendment that would give Mississippi voters in all 82 counties the opportunity to consolidate schools was defeated. Some superintendents were convinced that school consolidation was always a statewide issue, not restricted to just the gulf coast region. Therefore, if the proposed administrative consolidation happened in Harrison County it could open the door to similar

efforts throughout the state. School district size is the most important factor in determining school size, with consolidation/reorganization plans generally resulting in larger schools (Williams, 1990).

By spring, Mississippi residents began realizing the state's financial crisis could significantly affect the future structure of their local schools. The defeated legislation was quite detailed as it provided timelines and procedures for school boards to implement consolidation efforts. Although the proposed legislation was defeated there were indications the initiative would be revisited at a later date. Superintendents responded quickly, stating the consolidation of administrative offices would not have the desired affect nor would it save money. Increasingly, the superintendents felt the motivating force behind consolidation was monetary not pedagogical. Sher and Schaller (1986) stated, "there is no solid foundation for the belief that elimination of school districts will improve education, enhance cost-effectiveness, or promote great equality...issues like mergers usually are a diversion from the greater tasks of finding new ways to positively influence children's lives and increase teacher effectiveness."

Disputes about the number of students affected, the enactment process, financial projections, and even the motives behind this type of legislation were brought into question. For example, the realization that local control could be lost and domination of an entire district by a more populous or politically powerful entity could be a possibility. While consolidation may be appropriate for some areas of the state, the concern for many educators was the quick fix mentality of politicians who failed to consider the long-term effects of such legislation. Some educators and legislators argued whether large schools are truly more cost-effective. Researchers have found the relationship between size and costs will vary depending on the individual factors

of each school setting (Howley 1996; McKenzie 1983; Melnick, et al. 1986; Nachtigal 1992; Robertson 1995; Rogers 1987; Walberg 1992).

The original bill, which was written for Mississippi's Harrison County, was soon amended to allow elections in all state counties with less than 900 students. This became a critical point of contention. Critics argued that administrative consolidation, as discussed in this venue, would lead to the consolidation of schools as a next step process in saving money. In other words, there would be a domino effect from administrative consolidation to full school consolidation. Regardless of the terminology used, most politicians and educators continue to use the term consolidation when referring to any type of school unification, reorganization, or merger. While administrative school consolidation seemed plausible to some; the idea of actually combining schools could face a more formidable opposition. The question of fairness to small school districts led to contentious debates in other states considering school consolidation. Cultural issues of community identity, traditions, and symbols have long been powerful resources to counter school consolidation efforts. As cited by Pierson in Kelly (2002), "The hardest animal to kill in Illinois is a school mascot" (p.1). School culture is a powerful force whose wrath has been unleashed on many an unknowing suspect. Schein (1992) believes the "bottom line for leaders is that if they do not become conscious of the cultures in which they are embedded, those cultures will manage them" (p. 15). Peterson and Deal (1998) state the value of school culture is a "shared sense of what is important, a shared ethos of caring and concern, and a shared commitment to helping students learn (p. 29)."

Statement of the Problem

In 2005, funding for public schools reached a critical impasse during state budget talks. Engaged in a political blame game both state houses clearly had defined agendas. The state's

contentious budget wrangling permitted the school consolidation issue to be framed solely from a financial perspective rather than the broader context of community. Deciding the fate of a school superintendent as is the case with administrative consolidation, or the move to full school consolidation itself; had become a process mired in controversy that lacked a meaningful collaboration, examination of cultural context, and pedagogical expertise. At this point, school consolidation in Mississippi was singularly framed as a financial consideration. The dialogue surrounding school consolidation in Mississippi continues to be polarizing. State legislators cite budgetary concerns while many educators question the effects of consolidation on both students and communities. The Louisiana Department of Education's Strategic Planning Study Group Report (2003) states, "School district consolidation and reorganization should not be founded only on opportunities to reduce costs, and the financial savings should never be the sole reason to consolidate school districts" (p.19).

With the narrow defeat of school consolidation efforts in February 2005, Mississippi legislators focused their attention on other budgetary concerns. However, the school consolidation issue had received a lot of attention.

Research Design

The researchers sought to understand the perspective of school superintendents regarding the issue of school consolidation. Survey research provided a method for gathering data from respondents thought to be representative of the desired population. As a follow-up to the structured item survey used in this study, an open-ended narrative brought to light unanticipated interpretations and variations in the meaning of responses. In addition to the survey instrument and open-ended narrative, field notes and observations from meetings were used. This study used

triangulated data, investigators, and methods (Denzin, 1970, 1997; Flick, 1992). Member checks were used to establish trustworthiness (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Thick description was included to provide a detailed description of the school consolidation phenomenon that included the researchers' interpretation in addition to the observed context and processes.

Qualitative research has an emergent design as opposed to predetermined design. Researchers focus on this emerging process, which is a unique to the phenomenon being studied. Because the researchers sought to observe and interpret meanings in context, it was neither possible nor appropriate to finalize research strategies before data collection had begun (Patton 1990). Ultimately, in this type of study judgments about usefulness and credibility are left to the researchers and reader.

Purposeful sampling was chosen for this study to gain information-rich cases, which can be studied in depth (Patton, 1990). An educational organization consisting of 23 members was selected for this study. Only those individuals who were serving at the time as superintendents of public school systems in Mississippi were invited to participate in the survey. This means members of the organization who either worked for private school systems on the Mississippi Gulf Coast or for systems just across the state line in Louisiana were not extended invitations. The invitations arrived via e-mail, asking the superintendent to click on a link to a URL that contained the survey. Of the 16 valid recipients, 8 completed the survey within the 10-day window. One recipient opted out.

The survey consisted primarily of questions, which asked respondents to designate their opinions using a 5-point Likert scale. At the end of each section of the questionnaire (politics, level of understanding, consolidation of administrative offices, and outcomes of consolidation) the participants were asked to provide short narratives regarding the topics.

Researchers examined school consolidation in Mississippi from the perspective of state school superintendents without predetermined constraints. Qualitative research methods were developed to explore and assess the phenomenon.

Findings

In the survey, 85% of the superintendents indicated people in school district were passionate about their schools. While passion is not specifically defined in this study; within the context of school settings it is generally recognized as an appreciation of school climate and culture. Passion can be short-lived or easily misdirected by the culture within an institution. The superintendents were asked whether people in their school districts had a thorough understanding of school consolidation issues to which, 57% of the superintendents responded “no” to the question. “If people in the communities understand the real issues about school consolidation they will not want to be involved in the end,” stated one superintendent. Another noted, “This issue is far more complex than a budget analysis.” However, 58% percent of the superintendents felt they had a thorough understanding of school consolidation issues themselves. One respondent cited his many years of experience in education as an excellent preparation for fully comprehending school consolidation issues. Respondents to the survey affirmed parents’ passion for their schools; however, this passion did not necessarily translate into the depth of understanding they thought the critical issue of school consolidation requires. Superintendents express tremendous respect for the constituents of their school district but had concerns about how the school consolidation issue is being framed in Mississippi. Therefore, information and interpretation are influential factors. The researcher identified finances, culture, politics, and pedagogy as information-laden topics, which help define school consolidation for Mississippians.

Fueling speculation that consolidation efforts in the state were suspect is the fact several superintendents questioned motives. Fifty-seven percent of the respondents indicated there were ulterior motives for school consolidation. Months of newspaper headlines and electronic media coverage documented the deep divide. “On the state level, the consolidation issue is being developed because of superintendents’ salaries,” noted one respondent, who also wondered if lobbying efforts had impacted the legislature. Another responded, “The political climate is uncertain at this time, and I think that many motives are behind the consolidation issue. I believe that consolidation of municipalities and other governmental agencies should also be considered if school districts are.” Furthermore, 71% of the participants either disagreed or strongly disagreed that the Mississippi legislature is seeking to do what is best for public education in the state. Essential to this point is the mindset among superintendents that legislators offered school consolidation as an option not because of academic research but solely due to financial necessity. Seventy-two percent agreed or strongly agreed the consolidation of school district superintendents and administrative offices will eventually lead to larger school consolidation efforts in Mississippi. “I think the decision [school consolidation] should be based on research and data that indicates educational quality rather than financial concerns alone,” stated one respondent.

Superintendents in this study were asked to respond to the following statement, “There are some Mississippi School districts that ought to be consolidated.” The response to this question was decisive. Fourteen per cent indicated they strongly agree with 86% saying they agree with the statement. One hundred percent of the superintendents surveyed either strongly agreed or agreed to school consolidation in certain circumstances. There is a realization with the respondents that consolidation may be inevitable, as in situations where the population has

declined to the point that a quality education cannot be provided to all students. This perspective was palatable due to the body of existing research, which identifies case scenarios where school consolidation is the best decision based on the student concerns.

Several questions received a mixed response from the superintendents. When asked if budgetary concerns were fueling the school consolidation issue, 57% indicated they agreed or strongly agreed. Forty-three percent said they disagreed to some extent.

There were questions from the survey that received an overwhelming response in either agreement or disagreement. For example, 100% either agreed or strongly agreed that local control of school is one of the bedrock American values affected by school consolidation. “The local control issue is vital to those successful school districts in our state...it seems to me that we do not ‘large’ very well,” noted one participant. Also, 100% of the participants felt educational quality is often an issue not addressed in school consolidation efforts. Emphasizing this point, one respondent noted, “If consolidation is workable – it should be workable from the standpoint of improving student achievement and access to activities.” A question regarding the popularity of school consolidation among Mississippians revealed 86% of the respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed that school consolidation was a popular concept in the state. Eighty-six percent indicated they either agree or strongly agree that school size does not guarantee success as good schools come in all sizes. When asked if the consolidation of school district superintendents and administrative offices will have an adverse impact on their careers, 71% disagreed or strongly disagreed. Seventy-two percent felt school consolidations in Mississippi would simply exchange one set of problems for a new set of problems. This comment from the survey illustrates the point:

The public can be made to believe that money could be saved by consolidation. They talk only about the superintendents’ salary.

Someone will have to talk about the difference in cost of teachers' salaries from one district to another. This includes standardization of textbooks, classroom sizes, transportation issues, and energy problems. There might be a few less superintendents but we'll end up with more assistant superintendents, etc., just to name a few problems.

Summary

Superintendents in this survey frame the school consolidation debate solely as an educational issue. Believing they are uniquely qualified by virtue of their experience and educational expertise, the superintendents' position regarding school consolidation was consistent. Specifically, school consolidation may be considered but only when it is framed from an educational perspective, which first and foremost considers the students welfare. The school consolidation issue was not rejected in totality by the superintendents, but only when financial or political considerations usurp what they believe to be best for the students.

Other areas of concern among superintendents were school culture, community, and control. The strong ties between culture, community, and the public schools of Mississippi were recognized by superintendents who frequently are the guardians of these relationships. The sense of pride that many communities have in their schools is nurtured by superintendents who grow increasingly skeptical of others vying for control. Local community control of schools was identified as a bedrock American value. Ever mindful of their role in the community, their accountability to and identity with school culture, and their compliance with state and federal mandates, the superintendents sought to extend their influence in a calculated but effective manner. The superintendents prided themselves in their ability to properly assess school culture while serving in a leadership role.

Furthermore, superintendents in this survey believe many members of the Mississippi legislature view school consolidation as a purely financial decision. Whereas superintendents question whether consolidation is best from a pure teaching perspective, legislators are compelled by the potential monetary savings. Superintendents felt the motives of those advocating school consolidations should be closely examined. Superintendents differentiated between the “real issues” and superficial ones that in their estimation were driven more by politics than principle.

There is concern about eroding support from the business community. Superintendents decried misinformation about the school consolidation issue. Research is viewed with great enthusiasm as it reinforces a thorough and analytical perspective, not driven by the changing dynamics of political expediency, finances, or control.

Superintendents categorized Mississippi’s school consolidation debate as being complex, ultimately to be decided by voters of the state, in need of researched-based best practices.

Epilog

The people of south Mississippi, including thousands of students and faculty suffered the loss of homes, belongings, and jobs, after Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast region on August 29, 2005. Challenges related to housing, food, finances, education, health care and basic survival were immediate.

Legislators, educators, and parents now wonder if the public school system that emerges from the wake of Katrina will be vastly different from what existed before the storm.

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