

How We Did It: Academic, Financial, and Community Aspects of Rural School District Consolidation

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This study explored the impact of rural school district consolidation in eastern North Carolina. Wilkins County is a low-income, low-performing county with an average daily membership (ADM) of 1,501 students. This case study reviews the process of consolidation one year after the 2017-2018 consolidation in terms of academic, financial, and community. It was determined that academics increased, the need for financial support increased, and the community perceived the event as positive overall. It was also concluded that additional years of data would be needed to determine the long-term effects.

Keywords: school consolidation, rural schools, academic impacts, fiscal impacts, perception impacts

Small school systems have historically struggled to educate children and maintain their attendance levels and campuses (Reynolds, 2013). Ultimately, the result, especially in rural areas, is the closing of small rural schools (Imazeki & Reschovsky, 2003). According to the United States Census Bureau (2019), in 1940, 43.5% of the United States (US) population lived in rural areas; now, only 21% do. Despite the decline in the population of the rural areas, there is a need to provide an equitable education for all students who remain (Buzzard, 2016). Equity becomes an issue in areas with small populations because funding is driven based on the number of students present at the school site.

School consolidation is a way to manage school populations by providing increased resources to the consolidated school (Adams & Foster, 2002; Imazeki & Reschovsky, 2003; Reynolds, 2013). To understand the importance of supporting rural schools in light of the trend towards consolidation, it is necessary to review the impact of consolidation on the school communities. To that end, this case study explored the impact of the 2017-2018 consolidation of the Tiger High School (THS) Grade 6-12 site in Wilkins County, North Carolina. Figure 1 shows the changes to the Wilkins County school sites through consolidation from 2016-2017 through 2018-2019. Consolidation was completed with the intention of addressing academic, fiscal, and perception concerns. The findings from this case study provide a framework for district consolidation to future researchers and practitioners considering the consolidation of several schools into one site.

Statement of the Problem

The push to increase efficiency in spending for educational expenses has dominated consolidation debates for years (Grier, 2012; Nitta et al., 2008). Although the debates do not point to results that show financial gain (Silvernail et al., 2007), they do focus on the ability to increase resources for all students (Marchbank, 2015). This case study is needed to determine the fiscal, academic, and social aspects of school consolidation in the rural eastern NC school district that occurred in 2017-2018 to prepare for any consolidations in the future. While this is a case study, similar circumstances apply to many rural school districts considering school consolidation.

Purpose of the Study

When rural areas are faced with the practicality of consolidation, it is often around the premise of financial or academic concerns. This study explored the fiscal, academic, and perception impacts at the end of the 2018-2019 school year after the school closed for one full year. Data were collected from informational materials promoting the consolidations, educational facts and figures, surveys, interviews, and financial records available from the residents and staff members in Wilkins County.

The push to consolidate the schools in the system is not a new idea. In 1996, the former Wilkins County Schools superintendent noted the imperative for consolidation (WCS Board Meeting Minutes, 1996). In 2017, there were six school sites: Cub Elementary School (CES), Tiger High School (THS), Squirrel Elementary School (SES), Beaver Union School (BUS), Viking High School (VHS), and Wilkins County Early College High School (WCECHS). The Average Daily Membership (ADM) in one school site, THS, proved to be declining. With some grade levels at THS having only 10 students enrolled, there was a notion of exploring the possibility of consolidation of the site by the board of education. Figure 2 shows the ADM of each school site

and the new ADM after consolidation for the 2018-2019 school year. The figure also shows the gain or loss by school site. Overall, the district lost 1% of the students (21 students) from the 2017-2018 to 2018-2019 school year in which the consolidation occurred.

Figure 1
Wilkins County Schools' School Sites



Note. In 2018-2019 Grades 6-12 at THS were consolidated into the site of BUS and VHS. BUS was rebranded as BPMS. VHS was rebranded as WCHS.

Figure 2
School Capacity

Wilkins County Schools					
School Name in 2017	ADM in 2017	Change to ADM from 2017 to 2018	ADM 2018	School Name in 2018	
Cub Elementary School (CES)	191	-35	156	Cub Elementary School (CES)	
Tiger High School (THS)	153	-	-	consolidated	
Squirrel Elementary School (SES)	651	-24	627	Squirrel Elementary School (SES)	
Beaver Union School (BUS)	258	+40	292	Wilkins County Middle School School (WCMS)	
Viking High School (VHS)	346	+23	369	Wilkins County High School (WCHS)	
Wilkins County Early College High School (WCECHS)	38	+13	51	Wilkins County Early College High School (WCECHS)	
Total	1,480	-21	1,501		

Note. Figure 2 displays the change in ADM for each school site from the 2017-2018 school year in January 2018 to the 2018-2019 school year in September 2018.

As shown in Table 1, the Grade 6-12 school, THS, was projected to spend \$12,691.10 per student. State funding per pupil is \$7,225.87. This means the state committed to spending this amount per child. Any amount above this would have required the district to use other funding sources to meet their school's individual needs. When compared to other district sites, more funds were being spent at the THS site. This also means that larger schools would have fewer staff or funding to ensure the smaller sites were appropriately supplied with staff and school needs. The major differences in expenses were partially due to the cost of staff salaries. The only other school exceeding \$10,000 per student was a Grade 9-13 specialty school, WCECHS.

Table 1
School Cost Analysis: 2017-2018 Fiscal Year Budget Projections (Based on an ADM of 1498)

Categories	Cub Elementary School (CES)	Tiger High School (THS)	Squirrel Elementary School (SES)	Viking High School (VHS)	Beaver Union School (BUS)	Wilkins County Early College High School (WCECHS)
Salaries	\$1,196,657.46	\$1,471,350.29	\$3,436,124.55	\$2,394,625.11	\$1,956,094.35	\$435,385.84
Water	\$6,500.00	\$6,000.00	\$53,000.00	\$11,000.00	\$8,000.00	\$0.00
Fuel	\$17,500.00	\$17,500.00	\$25,000.00	\$50,000.00	\$25,000.00	\$0.00
Electricity	\$39,000.00	\$74,000.00	\$81,000.00	\$104,000.00	\$64,000.00	\$0.00
Maintenance	\$49,276.77	\$28,893.00	\$40,746.00	\$144,381.04	\$49,796.20	\$217.00
Instructional Supplies	\$27,533.40	\$32,096.17	\$200,959.33	\$81,308.02	\$58,791.13	\$46,146.32
Cafeteria – Non-Salary	*All Cafeteria is included with THS	\$159,650.00	\$282,800.00	\$108,050.00	\$93,550.00	\$0.00
Total Cost	\$1,336,467.63	\$1,789,445.46	\$4,119,629.88	\$2,893,364.17	\$2,255,204.16	\$481,749.16
Estimate of Total Students	179	141	590	316	240	32
Cost Per Student	\$7,466.30 \$240.43	\$12,691.10 <u>\$5,465.23</u>	\$6,982.42 <u>-\$243.45</u>	\$9,156.22 \$1,930.35	\$9,396.68 \$2,170.81	\$15,054.66 <u>\$7,828.79</u>

Difference
Between
District Cost
per Student
and State
Allotment
per Student

Percentage of
Budget Spent
on Students
at this Site

10% 14% 32% 22% 18% 4%

Note. 1,498 Total Students; \$12,875,860.46 Total Cost; \$7,225.87 WCS Per Child Allotment. This table displays the cost of each site in the 2017-2018 school year with the WCECHS and THS noted with an underline to show the increased cost at each of these school sites.

Review of Related Research and Literature

Consolidation of schools has been and is a topic that attracts researchers and practitioners alike. According to Flowers (2010), it is one of the most difficult challenges to face in a community. In this regard, school consolidation is unsurpassed compared to other modern reform efforts in the drastic impact it has had on public schools (Berry, 2006; Duncombe & Yinger, 2010; Hayes, 2018). After the consolidation of a 1,501 ADM Grade 6-12-school in the 2017-2018 school year, this case study assisted the Wilkins County Schools in determining if their anticipated benefits materialized. The purpose of this mixed-methods case study was to determine the degree of community, financial, and academic impacts resulting from the local school board's decision about consolidating a Grade 6-12 school site. This review of literature will cover

- The history of school consolidation
- Perceptions about school consolidation
- Academic performance, financial impacts, and community
- Sustainable impact
- Building community consensus processes
- How academics are assessed in NC

History of School Consolidation

School consolidation is a term that is not new to the educational sector. School consolidations have been used to reduce the number of schools starting as early as 1939 (Ackell, 2013). There were over 117,108 school districts in the United States in the 1940s (Cotton, 1999).

This number has decreased to 13,225 in 2017 (United States Census Bureau, 2018). Evolutions within this timeframe have required school districts to change over time (Johnson, 2015). During the history and evolution, schools have transformed from one-room schoolhouses to modernized, multiple buildings and technology-enhanced buildings (Johnson, 2015; Marchbank, 2015). Likewise, teachers had to shift from teaching multiple grades in one classroom to multiple teachers teaching individual grades of students, all with a variety of low to high technology resources as supports (Houston, 2001). Cox and Cox (2010) asserted that, as communities continue to face

reduced budgets, school consolidation would continue to be a recommendation of governance to facilitate fiscally responsible decisions related to educational costs.

Perceptions on School Consolidation

Several scholars have referred to school consolidation as school redistricting, school mapping restructure, school merger, school deactivation, and school district reorganization (Alberghini, 2017; Bard et al., 2006; Durant, 2016; Johnson, 2015). Nonetheless, each term defines the process of combining school sites due to a variety of reasons. With reasons varying from student choice to financial reasons, the perception of this topic differs based on the stakeholders involved. These stakeholders include parents/guardians, former attendees, students, superintendents, school leaders, staff, and local school boards.

Criticism, Size, Academics, Poverty, and Financial Impacts

Research about school consolidation is positive and negative regarding its impact on academic and financial issues. Overall, there appears to be a chorus of critics who view consolidation at the very least with skepticism. Skeptics argue that “under the rubric of school improvement, many places that once provided school no longer do; for they have been improved out of existence” (DeYoung & Howley, 1990, p. 3). In some successful consolidations, efforts are made to involve community meetings, share plans, and have all student bodies interact prior to consolidation. Despite those glimmers of successful consolidations, agreement for maintaining smaller schools seemed to thrive from the association of smaller class sizes, more extracurricular involvement, stronger community connections, and the lack of research that showed increased school quality after consolidation (Bard et al., 2006; Cutshall, 2003). When looking at impacts, researchers have varied points depending upon perceived impact, school size, poverty and race, and resources (Alberghini, 2017; Baldwin, 2015; Bard et al., 2006; Irvin et al., 2011). While some researchers in this area also looked at the per-pupil cost to analyze the data, other researchers looked at the grade spans served and whole child focus areas such as poverty and social-emotional aspects (Lowen et al., 2010; Lyson, 2005; Woods et al., 2005).

Equity in North Carolina Districts

In North Carolina, the State Constitution mandates the funding of adequate resources for all schools in the state. While the outcome unanimously stated that “neither school district nor counties have any constitutional right to equal funding, ...all children...have a fundamental state constitutional right to the opportunity to receive a sound basic education” (Leandro v. State of North Carolina; Leandro v. State: Duke University School of Law, n.d.). A sound education was defined as providing opportunities for children to become adults that are literate, make informed choices, and have sufficient academic and vocational skills to engage in additional education or gainful employment. With the pressure from Leandro for schools to improve academically and survive financially, school leaders and school boards consider consolidation to increase fiscal and academic resources.

Building Sustainable Impact

Supporters of consolidation point to the benefits of improving financial issues, manageable enrollment, cost savings for maintenance of facilities, balancing equity among schools, and centralizing administrative responsibilities (Britt, 2013). Britt (2013) indicates that benefits can be seen in sharing of staff for efficiency, increasing PK-12 student-to-student interaction, and increasing Teacher Cadet Programs. Each of these brings greater benefits to a small rural area where it is typically hard to attract highly qualified staff.

Community Consensus Building

Consolidation will always be a pivotal issue in education, especially in rural areas (Gordon & Knight, 2008). When consolidating, the impact extends beyond the physical building (Hyndman et al., 2010). To build consensus, leaders must invest time learning about the needs and wants of the community and the characteristics present in the neighborhood of the school (Lyson, 2002). With the school sometimes being a major employer in a small rural area, the staff will populate the area near the school. As a result of shared values and a blend of professional to managerial staff in the area, both social and economic vitality can co-exist (Baldwin, 2015; Bard et al., 2006; Lyson, 2002).

The push to consolidate the schools in the system is not a new idea for this case study. Since 1996, the former Wilkins County Schools Superintendent has noted this need. In 2017, the current ADM in one school site proved to be declining; and with grade levels with only 10 students, there was a notion of exploring the possibility of consolidation of the site by the board of education. In this small, low-performing district that lacked resources, it was assumed that it would not be best practice to have one teacher preparing to teach six courses. Another consideration was the use of substitutes for classroom teachers on one site while the same position at a different site was not maximized.

Testing and Accountability in North Carolina School Districts

Early in the research, the perceived academic gains for students were considered a strong rationale for why board members shared some consensus with the community. According to North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) (2018), Wilkins County Schools had been on the state's low-performing school districts list since 2011. Data from NCDPI End-of-Grade (EOG) and End-of-Course (EOC) assessments provide a history of low-performing schools in Wilkins County Schools. In the context of this case study, the local school board hypothesized positive gains for students impacted by school consolidation.

Methodology

According to Buzzard (2016), "the school is the center of the community, and all of its components interact with one another and the rural community to form the ever-evolving open-social system of people, things, and ideas" (p. 3). This center was, however, disappearing in rural areas as school mergers and consolidations have taken a priority to save resources and funding.

The goal of this research was to assist small rural school districts with a practical plan for the consolidation of multiple school sites. In the research context, the school district was in dire

need of several new facilities at one time. School construction cost can be extremely expensive, with new schools ranging from \$7 million to \$60 million per site depending upon the size and grade range (NCDPI, 2021). This dilemma has helped the district to change its focus from developing five individual new sites over the next 50 years to building one site to hold all student PK-13. This brought us to the current case study. Through a mixed-methods approach, we explored the consolidation of the Grade 6-12 site through the lens of academic, financial, and community impacts. This study also provided significant insight about the impact of site consolidation for small districts.

The mixed-methods approach was the most suitable based on the allowance for a variety of data to be analyzed. This approach allowed us to combine qualitative and quantitative data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Qualitative designs impacted the descriptive, open-ended, narrative capabilities of this data collection process (Creswell et al., 2007). Qualitative methods also encouraged the use of emerging methods of data collection as well as seeking themes and patterns for interpretation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Qualitative data provided rich, detailed accounts of stakeholders' perspectives regarding the processes and impacts of school closure and site creation. We conducted community meeting focus groups to gain group feedback on the consolidation process. Surveys were also used to gauge the community perspective. These surveys included areas that required a written response for feedback. Coding of these data was completed when collected to support analysis of each participant and categorization into common themes.

Quantitative methods required an instrument to be used for data collection, statistical analysis, and statistical interpretation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Quantitative data in this research were explored in outcomes that have pre- and post-data structures. Data on the construction of buildings, school report card data, academic performance of local and state benchmarks/assessments, enrollment data, staffing data, and coded data from community forms helped to provide a quantitative view of the changes.

The overarching goal of the research was to use a variety of data to paint a whole picture of how school consolidation impacts a small rural district. Qualitative and quantitative data set a stronger foundation for analysis when used complementarily. By combining qualitative and quantitative methods, we identified the weakness of each collection type (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Triangulation of the data collected helped to mitigate these weaknesses to provide a thorough, rich data set.

The positionality of the researchers is noteworthy, as one of the researchers is a lifelong resident of the Wilkins County community and, at the time the consolidation was conducted, superintendent of the Wilkins County school system. While this positionality provided tremendous insight and access, it also lends itself to bias and a lack of objectivity. To help mitigate such bias, two additional researchers were included, both of whom are university faculty in educational leadership and possess no affiliation with Wilkins County.

Population and Sampling Procedures

This research studied the population of a small, rural school district in Wilkins County, NC. According to North Carolina Commerce (2018), 2016 data indicate Wilkins County had approximately 12,503 residents. Its racial makeup was 48.7% Black, 42.11% White, 5.6% Hispanic or Latino, 1.8% two or more races, 1.66% other races, 0.09% Native American, and 0.04% Asian (United States Census Bureau, 2018). It is located in the northeast region of the state.

There were approximately 1,501 students attending school in this area. These students came from the three towns in the 424 square mile county.

From this population, a small group of stakeholders was identified to share data about consolidation impacts. A single-stage sampling design according to Creswell and Creswell (2018), allowed for direct sampling of individuals in the community. Wilkins County School represented three communities: Tiger, Citytown, and Farmtown. All community members were invited to the community meetings, which allowed for a selection of participants in the focus group.

Convenience sampling targeted feedback from the community, staff, students, and parent stakeholders that were available to participate in the focus group. Ideally, the eight focus groups were composed of two 6-8-member groups of students, two 6-8-member groups of parents, two 6-8-member groups of staff members, and two 6-8-member groups of community members.

For the survey, all parents and staff members received an invitation to participate in this research. The invitation was shared on the local radio, on the phone auto calling system, and with a letter sent home to parents and given to staff. In research, it was ideal to test the full population, but historically participation in feedback opportunities yields small numbers of stakeholder input. We were hopeful that using convenience sampling of the full staff and parent population would yield greater results.

Instrumentation

For data collection, the researchers used a variety of questions for focus groups and community member surveying. Focus groups conducted at three community meetings with parent stakeholders and staff stakeholders focused on four questions. Question 1: What impacts have you noticed after year one of consolidation? Question 2: What things could we have done differently? Question 3: What things did we do well? Question 4: Are there any other items you want to share?

For community member surveying, the researchers requested permission to modify a developed survey used by Buzzard (2016) to collect data on consolidated schools' systems in New York. This survey was utilized previously by a third-party research company in a telephone survey (Buzzard, 2016). Eight of these questions created by Buzzard began with an informational focus on the participant. The participant disclosed the amount of time they had been in the community, why they moved here (if they were not native to the area), allowed them to think through the changes they have seen in the community, asked them to determine the impact on their "quality of life," and asked how that change had been compensated for by the community. The final three questions asked about changes in the children, tax savings, and additional information the interviewee wanted to share.

Procedures

Provided in this section are the procedures that demonstrated the processes used to gather data. This section first outlined the initial setup of focus groups in community meetings. Next, this section detailed the surveying protocol used for individual input of parents and staff members.

Focus Groups

Based on the research of Krueger and Casey (2000), focus groups followed a four-step design for implementation. These steps were (1) Decide if focus groups are appropriate, (2) Decide who to

involve, (3) Listen to your target audience, and (4) Put your thoughts in writing. Focus groups were specifically included in this research to encourage participation among the participants.

While the facilitation occurred, the role of the researchers was to listen to the group while being observant of body language and group interactions. According to Kruger and Casey (2000), the researchers needed to remain unbiased to the information presented and encourage the reluctant and shy participants to engage more in the conversation. When conversations began to end, the shared information was used to probe deeper into the thoughts of the interviewees.

Survey of Parents and Staff

For the second data collection aspect of this study, the researchers focused on a survey sent to parents and staff. The survey was available in hard copy, and any surveys collected within the three-week window were used to inform this research. Data collection procedures also involved the review of financial statements, audits, state release academic data, and attendance data. Each of these sources was reviewed to look for trends within a three-year time frame (2016-2017, 2017-2018, and 2018-2019). Course audit data were also compiled to show the change in course offerings for students.

Data Processing and Analysis

In the literature review, there was a strong focus on the criticism, size, academic, and financial impacts of consolidation. This case study focused on how school consolidation in a small rural community impacts:

- the academic performance of the school district
- the financial state of the school district
- the community perception of the school district

For question one, state and local data were analyzed to show trends in data present from the previous three years and the current school year in terms of ADM and academic performance. This included the courses that were offered each year. For question two, financial information on the cost to run each school site and the current cost after consolidation were compared. This included a variety of variables such as water, electricity, gas, site maintenance, transportation, staffing cost, and annual budget increases and decreases. For question three, data were collected from focus groups and the survey to determine the community perception of school consolidation.

When coding the focus groups for common themes, we reviewed charted details, researcher notes, and the transcription of the focus group. When coding the surveys for common themes, we reviewed responses from participants. This allowed me to develop a theory based on the reoccurring themes present in the responses. There were also data from community participation about the number of participants in each focus group, the number of sent surveys, and the number of completed surveys. The data matrix aligned each of the surveys and focus group questions with the three research questions.

Results

School consolidation is a consideration for many rural districts struggling to provide a quality education for all school sites. To ensure the questions posed for the focus group and survey were easy to understand and not biased in how they were written, a pilot study was conducted with ten

central office staff from Wilkins County Schools who agreed to participate. Data from the pilot survey revealed responses that were logical responses based on the question asked. At the conclusion of this pilot, there were no recommendations from participants for changing the focus group questions or the survey.

Data Collection

Data were collected from October 2019 to May 2020. Only 8% of the surveys were returned (121 respondents from the 1,501 surveys delivered home by every student in Wilkins County Schools). The first community meeting was held on October 22, 2019, the second community meeting was cancelled due to a lack of stakeholder interest in the community meeting of that area, and the third focus group occurred with four students after the community meeting. Opportunities for adding additional feedback were provided. The fourth focus group occurred on August 18, 2020. After COVID-19 plans were completed, the researchers were able to get this additional group of students to give feedback on the focus questions.

Data Analysis

As stated previously, there were a variety of data sources to be analyzed in this research. The data were analyzed to determine if the perceived benefits of increased academic gains, decreased financial cost, and increased positivity from community perception were achieved in this district's school consolidation.

Analysis of Research Question #1

For research question one, state and local data have been analyzed to show trends in the previous three years. When reviewing these data, it is important to remember the information shared was gleaned from North Carolina's System of Assessment retrieved data from End of Grade assessments (EOGs) for elementary schools and End of Course assessments (EOCs) for high schools. In Grades 3-8, there are growth scores present due to the ability to track annual progressive data from assessments that occur annually. Growth refers to the academic progress of a group of students from the beginning of the year to the end of the year (SAS Institute Inc, 2021). At the high school level, Grades 9-12, only performance data are present, not growth, because there is not an annual source for data collection from sequenced assessment in the previous grades. Overall, performance grades for reading, math, and science assessments are also not considered a data point for Grades 9-12 for this same reason.

A review of the reading, math, and science data in Table 2 showed greater academic performance gains by the school site after consolidation. Based on Year 3 data, more students were performing at a higher proficiency rate after the schools were consolidated. This collective proficiency is based on the total of each student who has a proficiency level of level three, four, or five. The fluctuation in growth with only one school not growing for both reading and math also shows that most schools were able to individually grow each student even though the students may not have made it to proficiency by the end of the school year.

Table 2
School Performance Grades in Reading, Math, and Science

School	Subject	2018-2019			2016-2017			2017-2018		
		Growth	Performance	Grade	Growth	Performance	Grade	Growth	Performance	Grade
CES	Read	77.6	51	D	84.5	49	D	79	50	D
	Mat	79.2	51	D	84.3	50	D	87.3	59	C
	Sci	n/a	57	n/a	n/a	64	n/a	n/a	56.6	n/a
SES	Read	70.7	48	D	77.2	46	D	80.3	48	D
	Mat	58.6	41	D	74.3	48	D	58.2	40	D
	Sci	n/a	51	n/a	n/a	46.3	n/a	n/a	46.7	n/a
BUS	Read	89	51	D	75.5	49	D	n/a	n/a	n/a
	Mat	87.4	42	D	75.4	35	F	n/a	n/a	n/a
	Sci	n/a	67	n/a	n/a	58.4	n/a	n/a	69.3	n/a
WCMS	Read	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	87.2	55	C
	Mat	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	82.5	40	D
	Sci	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
THS	Read	72.3	51	D	74.1	45	D	n/a	n/a	n/a
	Mat	67.5	31	F	86.3	41	D	n/a	n/a	n/a
	Sci	n/a	55	n/a	n/a	29.6	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
VHS	Read	n/a	33	n/a	n/a	23	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
	Mat	n/a	29	n/a	n/a	26.3	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
	Sci	n/a	25	n/a	n/a	5.8	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
WCHS	Read	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	36.4	n/a
	Mat	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	11.8	n/a
	Sci	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	38.5	n/a
WCEC HS	Read	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	56	n/a	n/a	71.4	n/a
	Mat	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	53.3	n/a	n/a	81.8	n/a
	Sci	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	52	n/a	n/a	>95	n/a

Note. *There were no letter grades for individual subjects in the 2016-2019 school year for high schools. **There are no high school growth scores because there is not an annual source for data collection from sequenced assessments in the previous grade.

Beyond the individual subject data, schools in North Carolina are also recognized as having not met, met, or exceeded growth based on the combination of performance and growth factors. The NCDPI School Accountability Model/ Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) Plan requires the

use of a formula to determine overall school performance grades. This is the combination of 80% of the school's achievement score (performance) and 20% of the school's growth of the students served within the school. Based on these data, the consolidation of schools led to an increase in schools meeting growth. In Year 1, CES, SES, BUS, THS, VHS, and WCECHS were all open. WCECHS was not open this year, and only CES and BUS met growth. This means that 40% of the schools (two of the five sites) met or exceeded growth. In Year 2, CES, SES, BUS, THS, VHS, and WCECHS were open and SES was the only school not meeting growth.

Attendance

The majority of the schools showed an increase in their average daily attendance percent each year except for two sites. The sites showing increases from year to year include CES, THS, VHS, and WCECHS. The sites that showed a decrease within Year 1 to Year 3 are SES and BUS. Overall, after comparing the initial and the final year, each site did show an increase of 1% to 5% in average daily attendance.

Courses Offered

Another point of reference for academics is the number of courses offered at the school sites. There were 11 additional courses offered in the 2019 school year after consolidation. The decrease in the number of English and Math courses offered was seen in remediation courses (English Essentials, Foundations of Math I, Foundations of Math II) that were removed. The one Elective lost was Physical Education (PE): Lifetime Sports. There was also a significant increase in Career and Technical Education (CTE) Courses, which increased from 15 to 26 courses offered (an increase of 11 courses). The data suggest that access to additional courses were available after the consolidation of the initial sites.

In summary, there was an overall positive impact on academics for school consolidation in a small rural community. The actual EOC assessment data for reading, math, and science, as well as the overall school data, showed an increase. In addition to this, attendance improved, and more courses were offered.

Analysis of Research Question #2

For research question two, the researchers collected data to determine how does school consolidation in a small rural community impact the financial state of the school district? The researchers began with the operational budgets for each school site and the current cost after consolidation for each site. This includes a variety of variables such as water, electricity, gas, site maintenance, transportation, staffing cost, and annual budget increases and decreases.

In analyzing the budget, each funding source is coded as Instructional Services (IS), System Wide Support Services (SWSS), and Ancillary Services (AS). According to the State Public School Fund (SPSF), the subtotal expenses of all-purpose codes decreased by \$52,393.23, as seen in Table 3. These funds are utilized to purchase items like computers and software, instructional supplies, copier costs, electrical services, heating/fuel, and telephones. Local Current Expenses Fund (LCEF) include the same items, but these funds come from the county. There was an increased need of \$208,596.32 in this area. Federal Grant Funds (FGF) increased by \$29,095.05. The federal funds cover instructional supplies, computer software, and supplies. Federal funding

is also an area that has increased funding available due to the district actively seeking grants to fund school purchases. Capital Outlay Funds (COF), which stem from the county, pay for items like rebranding costs for the BPMS and VHS site, new athletic uniforms, and roof repairs at the CES site. This fund saw an increase of \$499,604.35. The Multiple Enterprise Fund (MEF) had the least change with the amount spent per year remaining relatively the same range. In a wealthy school district, this enterprise fund generates revenue from students who pay for lunch each day. However, it is important to understand high-poverty districts like Wilkins County Schools. All of the schools in this district provide free lunch to all students due to the high poverty level in this area. Therefore, the system pays for the operational cost with local funds and then requests reimbursement funding to maintain the cost of the student meals and staffing of the school nutrition department. This fund had an increase of \$347.32. Finally, Local Funds showed a decrease of \$131,203.57. The Local Fund covers purchases for instructional supplies, office and file supplies, participant materials, and school district communications.

Table 3
District Funding Expenses 2016-2019 and Projection for 2019-2020

Funding Source	Purpose Codes (Fund Use)	2017	Change from Year 1 to 2	2018	Change from Year 2 to 3	2019	Change from Year 1 to 3	Projected 2020
SPSF	IS	\$362,167.67	-\$58,442.33	\$303,725.34	-\$1,334.98	\$302,390.36	-\$59,777.31	\$302,390.36
	SWSS	\$416,003.83	\$33,630.70	\$449,634.53	-\$26,409.86	\$423,224.67	\$7,220.84	\$423,224.67
	AS	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$163.24	\$163.24	\$163.24	\$163.24
	Subtotal	\$778,171.50	-\$24,811.63	\$753,359.87	-\$27,581.60	\$725,778.27	-\$52,393.23	\$725,778.27
LCEF	IS	\$4,697.70	-\$2,655.88	\$2,041.82	\$13,067.71	\$15,109.53	\$10,411.83	\$5,000.00
	SWSS	\$551,670.98	\$50,045.74	\$601,716.72	\$149,856.48	\$751,573.20	\$199,902.22	\$751,573.20
	AS	\$2,317.73	\$700.93	\$3,018.66	-\$2,418.66	\$600.00	-\$1,717.73	\$600.00
	Subtotal	\$558,686.41	\$48,090.79	\$606,777.20	\$160,505.53	\$767,282.73	\$208,596.32	\$757,173.20
FGF	IS	\$151,976.64	\$52,939.12	\$204,915.76	-\$11,565.09	\$193,350.67	\$41,374.03	\$193,350.67
	SWSS	\$38,984.08	-\$4,697.98	\$34,286.10	-\$7,581.00	\$26,705.10	-\$12,278.98	\$26,705.10
	Subtotal	\$190,960.72	\$48,241.14	\$239,201.86	-\$19,146.09	\$220,055.77	\$29,095.05	\$220,055.77
COF	IS	\$11,940.05	-\$7,473.73	\$4,466.32	\$73,914.97	\$78,381.29	\$66,441.24	\$15,000.00
	SWSS	\$21,604.07	\$176,558.28	\$198,162.35	\$256,604.83	\$454,767.18	\$433,163.11	\$15,000.00
	Subtotal	\$33,544.12	\$169,084.55	\$202,628.67	\$330,519.80	\$533,148.47	\$499,604.35	\$30,000.00
MEF	AS	\$6,447.69	\$316.57	\$6,764.26	\$30.75	\$6,795.01	\$347.32	\$6,795.01
	Subtotal	\$6,447.69	\$316.57	\$6,764.26	\$30.75	\$6,795.01	\$347.32	\$6,795.01
Local Funds	IS	\$13,501.57	\$17,704.27	\$31,205.84	-\$14,238.42	\$16,967.42	\$3,465.85	\$16,967.42
	SWSS	\$134,669.42	-\$55,429.26	\$79,240.16	-\$79,240.16	\$0.00	\$134,669.42	\$0.00
	Subtotal	\$148,170.99	-\$37,724.99	\$110,446.00	-\$93,478.58	\$16,967.42	\$131,203.57	\$16,967.42

Total
for All

Funds \$1,715,981.43 \$203,196.43 \$1,919,177.86 \$350,849.81 \$2,270,027.67 \$554,046.24 \$1,756,769.67

Note: Bold means there was decreased cost.

Overall, there was an increased fiscal need of \$554,046.24. The funds impacted during the school consolidation process in order from least impact to most impact are as follows: Local Funds, State Public School Fund, Multiple Enterprise Funds, Federal Grant Fund, Local Current Expense Fund, and Capital Outlay Funds. Analysis of these sources reflects the high need for physical equipment and rebranding when consolidation occurs. The overall increased need reveals that there was an increased fiscal need when consolidation occurred in this case study.

Focus Group Responses for Financial Data

The next source of data for fiscal review was the focus group responses. In the focus group questions, perceptions about fiscal impacts from the parent groups. One parent group noted the lack of physical traffic to the local stores in the area of the school that closed. One of the parent group participants stated, “Now I don’t see many kids going to the local grocery store or the pizza place, so I know it has impacted their business.” The student focus groups did not note any fiscal impacts.

Survey Responses for Financial Data

The final source of data for the fiscal review was the answer to the survey questions. Fiscal impacts were apparent in questions 5, 6, and 10 from the survey. In the survey, 81% of the respondents felt that the community has not tried to compensate for the loss of the school building and students. When asked if they felt the closing of the school building had a financial impact on the community, 75% stated there was no impact, 11% were unsure, and 14% noticed an impact. The final question related to seeing any school tax savings since the school building closed. Respondents noted that 58% saw no impact, and 41% were unsure if there was any impact. Overall, the majority of the respondents saw no impact or little impact fiscally after the consolidation of the school.

Analysis of Research Question #3

According to Kramer (1994), effective citizens have common values, motivations, and shared commitment of energy. They also recognize potential concerns in their environment. This is the power of the perception of community members. As stated in the Survey Demographics section of this research, the largest number of participants who have lived in the Wilkins County area for 31+ years was 36%. The second-largest number of participants who have lived in Wilkins County for 0-5 years was 30%. The remaining participants who lived in Wilkins County for 6-30 years was 30%. A final group who lived in Wilkins County but did not participate at 4%. The participants also shared their reason for selecting this rural community. From these data, the reasons were as follows: 52% not applicable, 16% family-related reasons, 9% reporting less crime, 7% bought a home, 7% were raised in the area, 6% relocated closer to their church, and 3% were relocated due to family.

Focus Group Analysis

Making decisions about school consolidation can be complex. To analyze the data, the researchers developed common themes from the participants' responses. In Table 4, the responses from the three focus groups have been combined. In this case study, the researchers specifically reviewed the academic, fiscal, and community perception impacts that materialized after school consolidation occurred at the end of Year 2.

Table 4
Emergent Themes Based on Focus Group Responses

Question Focus	Focus Group Themes
Impacts after year 1 of consolidation	<p>Longer bus routes (students return home after dark)</p> <p>Increased opportunities (classes, better schools, progressing in academics)</p> <p>Bullying (minimal and handled early)</p> <p>Loss of people in the town of the consolidation (empty buildings, less traffic)</p> <p>Increased student relationships (students have more interactions, happier, more communication, new people, diversity, family-oriented, more attention)</p>
Things to be done differently	<p>Nothing</p> <p>Timing (extra year, allow 9th-grade cohort to finish)</p> <p>Opportunities to accept each other and traditions (diversity, acceptance, take advantage of opportunities)</p> <p>Increase student and parent interaction prior to consolidation (increased comfort level with new families, small county)</p>
Things done well	<p>Informing the public (communication, town meetings)</p> <p>Stakeholder Input (share views, collaborations, planning, opportunity to have a voice, long-awaited and needed step, sharing pros and cons)</p> <p>Combine community's culture (collaboration, different learning styles, more teammates for sports, no inferiority within schools)</p> <p>Rebranding (uniforms, gym, technology, new items)</p> <p>Opportunities (cooking classes, more help with academics)</p>
Other items to share	<p>No</p> <p>Suggestions (students should be home before dark)</p> <p>Appreciations (bring schools together, better than when separated, good process, bringing the county together, desire to reclaim more students)</p>

Summary of Research Questions

Research question 1 required a review of quantitative data about the academic performance of each school and the district. Ultimately, academic performance improved, with data showing an overall positive impact on academics. The assessments given during this period showed an increase in growth and proficiency, attendance improved, and more courses were offered. However, this study was not intended as a comparison of direct cohorts of students, nor does it consider other possible variables impacting student outcomes like teacher quality. Based solely on the data, there was an increase, but the scope of this study utilized a limited time frame for academic performance to demonstrate improvement. Nonetheless, improvement in academic measures emerged after the consolidation.

For research question 2, the researchers reviewed the operational cost prior to and after school consolidation. The consolidation of the school did have an impact on the district finances and local expenses, showing increased funding needed. Although the stakeholders did not perceive any fiscal impact, the financial analysis shows that school consolidation in a small rural community does impact the financial state of the district's funding.

Lastly, in research question 3, the researchers focused on the perception of the school community about school consolidation. Data from focus groups and surveys helped to determine this impact. The results of this collection yielded evidence to support the fact that when a school is consolidated, there is little to no impact on the community's perception of the district.

Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

School consolidation is a process used to combine schools with perceived benefits for the local education agency closing the school. This case study focused on the materialization of benefits in academic, fiscal, and community perception when school consolidation occurs in a small rural school district. For Wilkins County Schools, the consolidation of a 6-12 site in 2017-2018 (Year 2) was studied. With future consolidations being considered, the results of this study provide valuable information for future consolidation decisions.

Summary of the Findings

For research question 1, a review of the academic performance of each school and the district was conducted. After a review of the end-of-the-year performance data, attendance, and courses, the researchers found an overall positive impact on academics for school consolidation in a small rural community. The end-of-course assessment and overall school data increased, attendance improved, and more courses were offered.

For research question 2, a review of the operational costs prior to and after school consolidation was conducted. After a review of data from daily operational bills, transportation costs, salaries, survey data, and focus group data, the researchers found that there was an increased impact on the district finances and local expenses. School consolidation requires an increased financial need, especially during the year of consolidation (Year 2) in preparation for the consolidated year (Year 3). Although the surveyed participants did not notice a fiscal increase, reported finances showed an increase in monetary need. Without a longitudinal study, it is hard to

determine if there would be projected savings in time to offset the initial increased fiscal expenditures.

With the last research question 3, the perception of the school community was examined. Data from focus groups and surveys were utilized to help to determine the impact of consolidation on the school community. These data revealed little to no negative impact on the community when school consolidation occurs.

In summary, school consolidation does have an impact on the school district. This case study explicitly focused on what materialized in Wilkins County Schools after the consolidation of a 6-12 site in the 2017-2018 (Year 2) school year. This impact can be seen in increased academic gains, increased financial costs, and increased positivity from community perception.

Interpretation of the Findings

Perceptions on School Consolidation

In this case study, survey participants from the school area where the consolidation occurred noted the feeling of loss and a desire to have students attend the same school where they are now alumni. The notion that parents had issues with longer bus rides due to the consolidation was also noted in studies by Boddington (2010), Delph (2015), Durant (2016), and Tieken (2016). In the focus group, parents specifically pointed out issues with longer bus routes for their children. Each of these items about the potential perception of stakeholders (stability and longer bus routes) emerged in this case study, confirming what was shared in the literature review.

Criticism, Size, Academic, and Financial Impacts

The onset of literature reviewed in this area focused on the complexity of research that supports or opposes school consolidation in terms of the size of the school closing, academic gains, and financial impacts. This is a large part of why this case study occurred, to see if the perceived benefits materialized. As identified in the research of DeYoung and Howley (1990) and Bard et al. (2006), the perception of loss by the participants in terms of traditions (for example, mascots, ceremonies, reunions, etc.) was apparent in the school that was closed due to the schools consolidating.

Consolidation offers some benefits to a community, which can be an opportunity for criticism or support. However, this can also be seen as a loss of opportunity for minorities to lead and control their schools (Collins, 2019; Diem et al., 2015; Jimerson, 2005). In this study, there was an elevated perceived increase in social benefits by the students, which somewhat refuted the claim that consolidation in larger schools yields low achievement and decreased student satisfaction (Bakioglu & Geyin, 2009; Bard et al., 2006; Chavez, 2002; Grier, 2012; Lenear, 2013; Machesky, 2006; Raywid, 1999; Riha, 2011).

There is also an understanding based on school size that both schools, when consolidated, did not create a significantly large school. The consolidated school site added fewer than 100 students to the site when combined due to its prior small size and ADM of only 153 of the students displaced from Tiger High School. In addition to this, poverty did impact the offerings in the smaller school (Irmsher, 1997) and the ability of the school to provide 21st-century resources, more courses, and improved instruction. This can be seen in the data collected showing an increased

number of courses offered after schools were consolidated. Finally, the financial need did increase during the process of school consolidation for the district.

In summary, future disparagement of school consolidation will continue in school size. This is seen in this case study as well as literature collected to examine school consolidation. Despite this, there are clear, direct positive impacts present for the areas of academics, poverty, and finances that correspond with the research collected in this study.

Implications of the Findings for Practice

After careful review and analysis of the summary, interpretations, and limitations, there are several implications of the findings for practice. Where school consolidations are becoming more prominent, it is important to understand the potential outcomes and prepare for them accordingly. The findings of this case study about school consolidation revealed several implications for school districts seeking to consolidate schools.

Academics

In research question 1 about the academic impact of school consolidation, there are advantages that may have a positive academic impact in this case study. For school districts looking for options to combine the course with low enrollment, this solution offers a means to fill what could be potentially several vacancies. If the school to be closed during the consolidation and the currently open school are to combine, common scheduling issues are decreased while an opportunity for more courses being offered emerges. More courses offered to students often helps those schools looking to diversify course options without having the staff to maintain current sections. Once combined, a class of five to seven students at one site can be combined with another low enrollment course at the remaining school. With a free period, the teacher can now entertain remediation or enrichment courses new to the school site.

With courses being combined and the engagement of remediation and enrichment, it may also follow, based on this case study, that increased academic outcomes developed. With greater flexibility in scheduling, supports are included in the traditional day that allows students to be grouped based on mastery of instruction and intervention. This may have positive impacts on end of grade testing results.

Fiscal

In research question 2 which focused on the financial impact of school consolidation, there were highlights and shortfalls based on fiscal reports and perception data. Parallel to the ability of the district to offer new courses comes the addition of students to the physical school site. The size of the school, as noted in Chapter 2, can have major ramifications on a system's consolidation process. In this case study, the consolidating schools were small schools (fewer than 500 ADM). The school to be utilized also had the capacity to add additional students with no major changes. This was due to the ADM decline that impacted the entire district. Therefore, the schools were not greatly impacted by adding an additional small school (fewer than 500 ADM) for the overall growth of ADM <100 students. If school systems are considering consolidating medium-sized or schools that are larger, strategic planning needs to occur to ensure you have space to fit all students when the sites are combined.

Another critical part of any planned activity is having a budget to support the full operation. It has been identified by researchers (Andrews et al., 2002; Gordon & Knight, 2008; Hayes, 2018) that increasing school size is not the best solution to increasing student achievement and decreasing the fiscal demands of running a school system. For school districts seeking to consolidate schools, it is counterproductive for a school board to assume school closure is a simple process. Financially, this can be a very complex process that is not the direct reduction of school funds for a closed school and additional funds added to the maintained schools. Traditional fiscal needs for maintenance as well as increased funding for rebranding are major financial investments that occurred during this case study. Financial expenses were impacted by several things like changing the physical structure of the district, the cost of emergency heating issues due to older buildings, money spent on creating new mascots and buying new uniforms. It is imperative for rural school districts, especially those in financial need or distress, to have strategic conversations with county commissioners and other stakeholders who can support increases in the overall cost to run the school site and any remnants of the old site when it is closed.

Community Perception

In research question 3 about the perception of the community when it is impacted by school consolidation, there was little to no evidence of any major impacts. Regardless of any noted impacts, communication is critical during any time of change in an organization (Burrack, 2019). The theoretical framework's focus on organizational change intentionally focuses on the structures, operations, technologies, culture, and strategies that need to be addressed to ensure viability (Spector, 2010). The community and its stakeholders in this case study appreciated being informed. At the same time, there were a few surveys that noted they wanted to be more informed. As a district, the key is to create open, honest, two-way communication lines with stakeholders to ensure greater trust and continuing collective effort during the process of consolidation.

Of those respondents with negative reviews around the process, it was clear that there was a sense of loss in the community and a loss of tradition. It may benefit a district planning to consolidate school to make conscientious efforts in the school closing to keep them informed, honor their heritage and traditions from the closed site, and provide sessions for former graduates to maintain some way of connecting to their alma mater. Although the physical building may no longer be in use, the new site can host class reunions and traditional events.

Future Planning for Wilkins County Schools

This case study was initiated to determine if the perceived results of school consolidation in the 2017-2018 school year for a Grade 6-12 site materialized. Similar to other small districts saddled with decreasing enrollment and resource issues, the more knowledge about the benefits and shortcomings, the greater prepared the school district can be in the planning for this process. The Wilkins County Schools' case study is unique because the consolidation is being done in phases.

Phase one was the consolidation of the Grade 6-12, completed in 2018. These data are meaningful to the districts' long-term plans. The second phase is to consolidate all five remaining schools into one PK-13 site. This site would hold pre-kindergarten, elementary, middle, high school, and early college students for all county residents. This new facility will eliminate the need to make major repairs in each of the antiquated buildings. It is also more cost-effective to build one new site versus awaiting the building of five individual sites to replace each of the five current

antiquated sites. With this phase planned for in the future, it is important for the school board and the community to understand the school consolidation process. Community engagement in planning, feedback on the present state of schools, and considerations for future planning all impact the community's perception.

In summary, the findings of this case study about school consolidation revealed several implications for school districts seeking to consolidate schools. These implications include planning for increasing course offerings, possible increases in academic performance, considerations of school size and increased operational cost, strategic planning with an organizational change framework, and planning for those who feel marginalized. It also reviewed the district-specific plans for future consolidations. All of these items represent the academic, fiscal, and community perceptions impacts that practitioners should be aware of when considering school consolidation.

Recommendations

In evaluating the process of uncovering the impacts of school consolidation, there are a few areas that are recommended as additional research topics for future practitioners. In my research, there was confirmation of research shared in the review of literature in Chapter 2, as well as the onset of a mass pandemic that could drastically shape the future of education. These items specifically include researching another district from an outside perspective, determining standards for school size, lengthening the collection of data periods, and gathering data on COVID-19 impacts on future education plans. We will examine each of these items below.

If we were to conduct this study again, we would begin by researching other school districts currently undergoing or considering consolidation. An analysis of data from similar rural districts as well as a variety of different types of school districts by contrast would provide much needed insight into whether there are optimal conditions for successful consolidation. In conducting this research, we would recommend using the same data items from the initial research. The data collection items can be reproduced from any state-level report for academic scores and fiscal expenditures. Replication of this exact study will ensure we are able to create comparable scenarios for research practitioners and other stakeholders wishing to learn the impact of consolidation in different districts. We have identified several case studies with similar replication of academic and fiscal gain in other states. However, currently, there are a limited number of systems on file in regard to school consolidation, specifically in North Carolina.

While this research is being conducted, it would also be a recommendation for future practitioners to determine standards for school size. When comparing data from school site sizes and school district sizes, there is a need to have comparable data. The headers of these data should entail the range of grades covered in the school and the number of students within the school. There will then need to be scales created to determine the range in ADM required to represent small, medium, and large schools and districts. My research concludes that there are benefits that come from combining two small schools, both with fewer than 500 students attending each site. As referenced in Table 1, many of the school size categories do not address schools with fewer than 500 students. This school size, fewer than 500 students, would be found more frequently in rural school settings.

The data from other researchers on perception confirmed the perceived increased social benefits for students. These benefits are in terms of interactions with additional peer groups. However, some data refuted this claim, revealing decreased student satisfaction due to the loss of

traditions present in the consolidated school (Lenear, 2013; Machesky, 2006; Raywid, 1999; Riha, 2011).

When reviewing academic impacts and their connection to school size, this case study supported data from other studies. The data from the literature review supported the notion that larger school consolidations did not yield lower academic achievements for students. With small rural schools (fewer than 500 students), the school consolidation process can add a small number of students and staff, keeping them relatively small (fewer than 500 students). In this case study specifically, THS had fewer than 100 students to be relocated to the new site after consolidations. Lenear (2013) also supported the results that minorities perform better in smaller schools, which was comparable to this case study conducted in a predominantly minority district. A suggestion to conduct additional reviews of small school sites that are consolidating is the recommendation. These schools, due to their rural location, may remain small (fewer than 500 students) and may not be able to offer greater opportunities or fill current vacancies.

For this case study, we would also recommend pulling data from the next school year to see if trends continue. By increasing the collection of data to year four, it may reveal a lesser impact in the finance category once major consolidation items have been paid for in the first three years of consolidation. The cost for items such as uniforms, re-branding, paint repairs, and roof repairs was removed from the local current expense funds and capital outlay funds. This would already generate a savings in Year 4. Exploring the fiscal collection process in the upcoming years would prove critical to seeing a true picture of the fiscal impact of consolidation.

Finally, a major area for a recommended study about school consolidation is the impact of COVID-19. When the world began to quarantine under stay-at-home orders, the use of the school buildings diminished extensively. These actions also impacted the data collection of this research. Since no students could come on-site, parents were then engaged in opportunities to have educational opportunities anytime and anywhere. It will be a strong recommendation to determine if school consolidation rates increase as students take on virtual learning opportunities.

Conclusions

The choice of local school boards in North Carolina to consolidate schools is one of the most controversial decisions a district can make. Nevertheless, rural school systems seeing declining enrollments and budget cuts, which ultimately lead to school closures (Baldwin, 2015), should know that the decision to consolidate impacts students, staff, parents, and community stakeholders.

This case study was conducted in Wilkins County Schools, NC, to determine if the perceived benefits of school consolidating materialized after closing a Grade 6-12 school in Tiger, NC. Based on the findings, there appeared to be academic gains, gains that occurred because of the smaller size of the district: fewer than 500 students. This is partially due to the strategic use of resources across the district. Another noteworthy gain attributed to the consolidation was increased access to a variety of academic courses and resources.

When reviewing fiscal gains, this study revealed increased costs during the year of closure. Items that contributed to the increased expenditures were rebranding costs and transportation costs for students who now have longer bus routes. Despite the increased cost, residents indicated that there were little to no perceived changes in the financial impacts other than less traffic in the area where the school was closed.

Lastly, community perception overall was not impacted by the close of the school site, with only 30% of the surveyed stakeholders reporting some impact. Of the participants in the focus

group and survey data, 10% of the candidates noted an impact on their quality of life, and 100% noted they did not know or did not experience any tax savings.

Overall, the research collected in this case study mirrored the research being conducted in other states around small rural school consolidation in their data collection and results. As rural districts have to make these tough decisions more often, we will be able to better identify the direct impacts by district size for academic, financial, and community perception indicators. In this current approach of face-to-face and virtual education opportunities, the results from this study might provide much-needed guidance for North Carolina and other states' school systems and similar schools.

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