

AN ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION OF Byron David Prugh for the degree of Doctor of Education in Learning, Leadership, and Community presented on March 19, 2018.

Title: Why Do Some Vermonters Support or Oppose School Consolidation Initiatives: Case Studies of Community Members in Two Supervisory Unions.

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Student enrollment in Vermont declined over the past two decades, but the number of schools and teachers employed across the state did not decrease at a similar rate. Vermont schools are typically smaller than average schools across the United States, and state legislators passed Act 46 in 2015 to encourage the consolidation of school districts. The purpose of these two case studies is to determine what educational leaders in two supervisory unions in Vermont were doing prior to the enactment of Act 46 to provide opportunities for students in their rural schools amidst changes in enrollment, and examine the responses of community members in the White River Valley Supervisory Union and the Franklin Northeast Supervisory Union to consolidation initiatives proposed in the two years after the passage of Act 46. These two case studies also determined reasons why voters in these two supervisory unions supported or opposed consolidation. This research can provide education policy makers with insights regarding future merger initiatives.

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Why Do Some Vermonters Support or Oppose School Consolidation Initiatives: Case
Studies of Community Members in Two Supervisory Unions

By

Byron David Prugh

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to

Plymouth State University

In partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education

Defended March 19, 2018

Degree Conferred May 17, 2018

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to gratefully acknowledge the patience and guidance of my committee members: Dr. Cheryl Baker, chair; Dr. Kathleen McCabe, member; Dr. Shirley Ferguson, member. They provided me with support, ideas, and encouragement throughout the process, and I shall forever be in their debt.

Drs. Baker and McCabe were the first instructors of the first class for my cohort at Plymouth State University, and within a week, they helped bond a group of 20 strangers into a powerful group of friends and colleagues. I spent four summers (2012 – 2015) learning more about my 20/20 cohort members; Cheryl and Kathleen became mentors to many of us. The EdD program at Plymouth State University is strong because of teachers like Drs. Baker and McCabe, and I am saddened to think that future students entering the program will not have the pleasure of starting with this amazing pair of teachers. If I could just summarize this pair with one word, it would be Vygotsky! I would also like to thank Dr. Ferguson, my colleague in the White River Valley Supervisory Union. It has been a pleasure working with her as well, and I hope she enjoys her retirement. It has been a joy to work with her professionally over the past two years, and I will miss stopping by her office for a piece of chocolate and a chat at the supervisory union.

I would like to thank the Vermonters who were gracious enough to give a flatlander an opportunity to learn more about their communities. Thank you to my current and former students and colleagues for their patience, understanding, and support. And finally, I would like to thank my parents for instilling a love for learning and education in me.

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Abstract

Student enrollment in Vermont declined over the past two decades, but the number of schools and teachers employed across the state did not decrease at a similar rate. Vermont schools are typically smaller than average schools across the United States, and state legislators passed Act 46 in 2015 to encourage the consolidation of school districts. The purpose of these two case studies is to determine what educational leaders in two supervisory unions in Vermont were doing prior to the enactment of Act 46 to provide opportunities for students in their rural schools amidst changes in enrollment, and examine the responses of community members in the White River Valley Supervisory Union and the Franklin Northeast Supervisory Union to consolidation initiatives proposed in the two years after the passage of Act 46. These two case studies also determined reasons why voters in these two supervisory unions supported or opposed consolidation. This research can provide education policy makers with insights regarding future merger initiatives

Chapter 1 - Introduction

In 2015, the General Assembly in Vermont passed Act 46 (Act 46, 2015). This 64-page bill outlined the crisis facing schools across the state. Legislators wrote into the law their concerns. One concern involved the decline in overall student population. In 18 years, between 1997 and 2015, the kindergarten through 12th grade pupil population in Vermont dropped by 25,000 students; however, another concern was that despite a 24% drop in student enrollment, school-personnel did not decrease by the same rate. In addition to declines in student numbers, in under 20 years, there was also a 53% increase in the number of students with “severe emotional needs” (Act 46, 2015, p. 1) being educated in Vermont’s schools. Legislators were also aware of the fact that in less than two decades, the number of “families receiving nutrition benefits increased by 47 percent” (Act 46, 2015, p. 1). Any one of these concerns could tax the resources of a school system (Books & Polakow, 2001), and legislators acknowledged Vermont schools faced challenges from several sources.

The intent of the legislation (Act 46, 2015) was to “encourage and support local decisions and actions” (Act 46, 2015, p. 3) that would boost students’ educational outcomes, improve efficiencies, increase equity in opportunities for students, foster openness and accountability, and produce these outcomes at an affordable value. Writing in the third person, legislators even penned that “It is not the State’s intent to close small schools” (Act 46, 2015, p. 3).

The researcher summarized the ways community members in two rural Vermont supervisory unions responded to changes in student enrollment both before and after the enactment of Act 46. The researcher analyzed the responses of

community members in two rural Vermont supervisory unions to Act 46. He also determined why some community members rejected school consolidation options while others approved of school mergers.

Background

The student population in schools across the United States is not constant, but rather, in flux (Snyder, deBray, & Dillow, 2016). The number of students in some districts continues to grow, whereas, in other communities, even though the overall population of the country increases, some locales experience a decline in their school-aged student population (Fuguitt, 1995). The student population in Vermont is trending decidedly downward (Wertlieb & Bodette, 2015). In many Vermont communities, schools are smaller than typical schools across the United States. According to Snyder, deBray, & Dillow (2016), children in Vermont schools are educated in elementary schools with 52% fewer students than the average elementary school in the United States and in secondary schools with 36% fewer students than a typical U.S. middle or high school.

As the number of students in schools declines, in some regions, legislators (Weldon, 2012) attempt to address these demographic changes (Karaxha, Agosto, Black, & Effiom, 2013). In Vermont, in response to the loss and the projected loss of students, state legislators passed a bill known as Act 46 and Vermont Governor Shumlin signed it into law on June 2, 2015. Written into the law (Act 46, 2015) was an explanation that “many school districts are not well-suited to achieve economies of scale [and] lack the flexibility to manage, share, and transfer resources [and] to provide students with a variety of high-quality educational opportunities” (p. 2).

Although the Vermont Agency of Education clarified that Act 46 was not designed to “encourage or require closure of schools” (Governance Fact Sheet, 2016), the consolidation initiatives in some communities varied and did involve school closures. Some Vermont towns brought together different communities to support a single community school (Doyle-Burr, 2016). Other school consolidations involved the closing of secondary schools to create a new union or regional secondary school while retaining elementary school districts (Delcore, 2017). School consolidations resulted in the merging of school districts within a supervisory union, the closing of smaller schools within that supervisory union, and the transfer of students into other schools (Hongoltz-Hetling, 2017).

One purpose of this research was to determine in what ways residents within two rural Vermont supervisory unions responded to changes in enrollment prior to and as the result of the enactment of Act 46 in 2015. The researcher also analyzed the responses of community members to Act 46 as school board members proposed changes in school districts. The final research question asked why some community members in two Vermont supervisory unions rejected consolidation options while others approved of mergers in the two years after the passage of Act 46.

Conceptual Underpinnings for the Study

Student enrollment changes and school consolidations are not unique to Vermont or phenomena of the 21st century. Cook (2008) writes that consolidation has “presented challenges for school board members, administrators, and local control proponents for more than 100 years” (p. 49). His choice of words is apt; population changes and school consolidations have indeed presented challenges in communities

across the United States. In early twentieth-century Iowa, as consolidation of schools was encouraged, a backlash from some citizens occurred (Reynolds, 1999). Almost a century ago, in upstate New York, Updegraff (1922) analyzed the financial repercussions of rural school consolidation in communities across the isolated, northern part of New York. Tyack (1974) wrote about citizens in towns across Ohio, Wisconsin, and Idaho, amongst others, opposing unification. Forty years ago, Sher and Dunne (1977) urged readers and policymakers to reconsider the conventional wisdom around rural schools at the time. At the turn of the century, Zars (1998) described the social and financial impacts of longer bus rides on rural students and communities. Kannapel and DeYoung (1999) sought answers to pressing problems in rural education and challenged the notion that school mergers were a panacea. The citizens of isolated Ione, Oregon sued the state government to assert their rights to educate their children closer to home (Buchanan, 2004); the citizens won. For over 100 years, researchers (Buchanan, 2004; Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999; Sher & Dunne, 1977; Tyack, 1974; Updegraff, 1922; Zars, 1998) studied the people within rural communities across the United States and how they tried to come to terms with changes in student populations and the consolidation of their schools.

People living in rural communities interact and communicate with one another, and their knowledge about their community is co-created with their peers. From a social constructivist viewpoint, language and culture create the frameworks for people to communicate, understand reality, and experience the world (Vygotsky, 1978). As Vermont communities and their schools experience changes, local citizens can learn more about these transformations in a variety of ways: talking to their neighbors,

reading local media, or listening at public community events like school board meetings (Delcore, 2017; Hongoltz-Hetling, 2017). Their understanding of events emerges from their synthesis of the information communicated to them (Vygotsky, 1978), and so responses to changes might vary from town to town.

Since cultures vary across communities, the researcher conducted two case studies of residents within two separate supervisory unions within Vermont. This method of research is the best way to explain how local people responded to changes in enrollment prior to and as the result of the enactment of Act 46 in 2015. These case studies also explain the actions of community members as they explored the choices available to them under Act 46. The researcher also concluded why some community members rejected consolidation options while others approved of mergers after the passage of Act 46. Yin (2009) suggests that the most important reason for a researcher to conduct a case study is to “explain the presumed causal links in real-life interventions that are too complex for survey or experimental stages” (p. 19). By analyzing various forms of communication from within these communities, the researcher sought an understanding of the phenomena to explain them.

Statement of the Problem

Student populations in Vermont continue to decline. As the July 1, 2019 (Act 46, 2015) deadline approaches for districts to comply with Act 46, school boards, community members, and legislators consider changes to school governance (Bielawski, 2016). According to Act 46, after June 30, 2019, if officials determine school districts have not complied with requirements to change governing structures,

then the law permits the Agency of Education to merge, or partner school districts (Act 46, 2015).

Act 46 “gives a state agency more agency over the consolidation process than local citizens accustomed to voting on school budgets at town meetings” (Bryan, 2004, p. 3). If community members approve plans that do not comply with Act 46, or if community members reject consolidation plans, then it is still possible the outcomes of their votes will be invalidated by the Vermont Agency of Education after June 30, 2019.

The results of research regarding school consolidation initiatives in other parts of the United States provide contradictory explanations for support or opposition to these mergers. As evidenced by the research (Anderson, 2009; Blauwkamp, Longo, & Anderson, 2011; Donis-Keller, 2015; Meta, 1999), the success or failure of school consolidation initiatives varies, and at times, contradicts the responses from other communities around the U.S. Attitudes and student-centered improvements created a culture that consolidated schools in some Iowa towns (Anderson, 2009). In Nebraska, though, money was the primary focus of community members in response to school consolidation, followed by the issue of educational quality (Blauwkamp, Longo, & Anderson, 2011). In Maine, Donis-Keller (2015) concluded that local control was the primary issue for townspeople, along with concerns about larger class sizes and criticism of the social and financial costs associated with transporting students. In Pennsylvania, money influenced the process of some consolidations (Meta, 1999). The different research conducted by Anderson (2009), Blauwkamp, Longo, and Anderson (2011), Donis-Keller (2015), and Meta (1999) highlights a problem for policy makers,

educational leaders, and community members: there is not a single, definitive response to changes in school demographic changes nor is there a single reason for members of a community to support or reject school consolidation initiatives.

On a state level, Vermont Agency of Education employees Burfoot-Rochford and Hall (2015) wrote to politicians in the State House about Vermont schools consolidation efforts, and told lawmakers that “there isn’t really any research that specifically examines Vermont’s unique ‘small’ conditions” (p. 6). An additional problem, then, is that there is not adequate scholarly research specific to Vermont schools on this topic.

Purpose of the Study

The researcher identified specific reasons why community members supported or rejected consolidation initiatives, as well as determined what different communities did in response to changes in student enrollment in their schools in the two years prior to the enactment of Act 46. The researcher wanted to know what impacts their responses to demographic changes and consolidation efforts had, if any, on the schools within these communities. Answers to these questions might help to better inform policy makers in other communities with similar demographic changes. According to representatives from the Vermont Agency of Education (Burfoot-Rochford and Hall, 2015), answers to these questions could also fill in the gaps of knowledge which they acknowledge exist.

Research Questions

1 In what ways did two rural Vermont communities respond to declining student enrollment?

2 How did community members respond to Act 46 consolidation proposals?

3 Why did some community members reject consolidation options while others approved of mergers?

Design Controls, Limitations, and Assumptions

Design Controls

The researcher collected information from registered voters within the two supervisory unions; these individuals demonstrated a willingness to participate in the political decision-making process through the ballot box. Registered voters, even if they did not vote on the most recent ballot within their community, were surveyed because their status as voters within these Vermont towns allows them an opportunity to participate in the political process. A case study methodology provided in-depth understanding (Creswell, 2013) of the events that transpired between July 1, 2013 and June 30, 2017; these are the two years prior to the enactment of Act 46 and the two subsequent years following the passage of the law. Supervisory unions' business and budgets within the state of Vermont are based upon a July 1st to June 30th calendar year (Handbook for Vermont Municipal Treasurers, 2002). The researcher triangulated the data gathered from surveys, community member feedback, newspaper articles, school board meeting minutes, and interviews with educational leaders. Survey responses were coded to determine key reasons community members cited both for and against school mergers. Community member responses were analyzed to determine if there were any factors such as whether they formerly attended a school in the district or if the enrollment status of relatives correlated to their responses for or against school consolidations. Survey respondents were asked to consider the

anonymous responses from other community members, and these volunteers provided feedback on the questions the researcher asked individual community and education leaders. A thorough analysis and coding of newspaper articles and public meeting minutes helped the researcher verify the statements and sentiments provided by community members and establish an historical account of the responses of the communities to changes in enrollment and the enactment of Act 46.

Limitations

The researcher acknowledges that his survey to community members is based on a sample of convenience. To provide the researcher with survey data to better inform him before he interviewed community and educational leaders as part of these case studies, there was a three-month time window to gather survey responses. The researcher did not speak to every registered voter within the two supervisory unions. In the Franklin Northeast Supervisory Union, at the time of the research, there were 6558 registered voters. Since thirty-nine community members responded to the survey, this response rate provided a 95% confidence level in the reliability of the responses with a confidence interval of 15 (Creative Research Systems, 2012). In the White River Valley Supervisory Union, with 9418 registered voters, fifty-four community members responded to surveys; the confidence interval for these surveys was 13 with a confidence level of 95% (Creative Research Systems, 2012). The responses to the surveys by members of these communities, then, could have a reliability as low as 80% to 82% in the FNESU and WRVSU respectively; however, these surveys only represent one portion of the data gathered for these case studies, and by triangulating survey responses with interviews and document analysis, the

researcher confirmed that the sentiments expressed by respondents are reliable and valid.

Since the research is bounded between July 1, 2013 and June 30, 2017, events which transpired in these communities prior to the start of the research or after July 1, 2017 were not analyzed. The responses from community members within these two supervisory unions might not reflect the responses of other community members in supervisory unions throughout Vermont during this same time period, and this research did not analyze the events within these other communities.

Definitions of Key Terms

To understand some of the terms the researcher uses in this paper, it is necessary to define the following key terms for the reader:

Average Daily Membership (ADM). According to the Vermont Agency of Education, “ADM means the number of students who live in a district for whom the district is providing education” (Vermont Agency of Education, 2016, p. 1). ADM is not equivalent to enrollment (see definition below).

Consolidation. The Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary defines consolidation as “becoming united into one whole” (p. 155); for the purposes of this study, community members in the two Vermont supervisory unions considered consolidations that could result in the merging of school districts within a supervisory union, the closing of smaller schools within that supervisory union, and the transfer of students into other schools (Hongoltz-Hetling, 2017). For the purposes of this study and to simplify the reading level of surveys or discussions, this term is synonymous with *merger*. Ex. What is your opinion of school mergers (consolidations) in your town (community)?

Enrollment. According to the Vermont Agency of Education, enrollment is “a headcount of the students enrolled in a school on October 1, regardless of their district of residence” (Vermont Agency of Education, 2016, p. 1).

Rural, Fringe. The National Center for Education Statistics redefined its definition of rural school in 2006 through collaboration with the US Census Bureau. For the purposes of this research, a rural school, fringe, is located in a “rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster” (School Locale Definitions, 2006, p. 1).

Rural, Distant. The National Center for Education Statistics redefined its definition of rural school in 2006 through collaboration with the US Census Bureau. For the purposes of this research, a rural school, distant, is located in a “territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster” (School Locale Definitions, 2006, p. 1).

Rural, Remote. The National Center for Education Statistics redefined its definition of rural school in 2006 through collaboration with the US Census Bureau. For the purposes of this research, a rural school, distant, is located in a “territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster” (School Locale Definitions, 2006, p. 1).

School District. In the state of Vermont, school districts are organized within supervisory unions (see definition below). The Vermont Agency of Education provides a definition for school districts as “responsible for providing for the

education of its resident students, either by operating a school or schools, paying tuition on behalf of its resident students, or both” (Russo-Savage, 2015, p. 2). District boundaries can encompass portions of towns or encompass one or more towns and they can educate residents in some grades or all grades. (Russo-Savage, 2015).

Supervisory Union. The Vermont state legislature established statutes in order to provide a legal definition for supervisory unions. According to the Vermont Agency of Education, a supervisory union (SU) is an “administrative, planning, and educational service unit consisting of two or more school districts” and that the State Board of Education “has the authority to adjust the boundaries of an SU on its own initiative or at the request of a school district” (Russo-Savage, 2015, p. 1).

Summary

In conclusion, the researcher sought to answer questions the Vermont Agency of Education acknowledged were unanswered. The researcher studied the recent history of two Vermont supervisory unions to draw conclusions about what some communities did in response to changes in student enrollment in their schools. The researcher conducted two case studies focusing on the responses of citizens and educational leaders within the Franklin Northeast Supervisory Union and the White River Valley Supervisory Union to Act 46 and merger initiatives presented to voters.

A case study is the best way to research the answers to the research questions because Creswell (2013) reinforces the notion that a meaningful case study provides in-depth understanding, and to achieve this level of understanding, the researcher gathered together many types of data. The researcher coded key concepts from community member surveys, interviewed leaders within the local supervisory unions,

analyzed community member feedback regarding the survey responses, and examined local newspapers and public documents in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the cases using multiple sources of information. The researcher identified specific reasons why some Vermont community members supported or rejected consolidation initiatives. The researcher summarized community member responses to demographic changes and consolidation efforts within these Vermont communities. Answers to the research questions might help to better inform policy makers in other communities with similar demographic changes or merger plans.

Chapter 2 explains demographic changes in schools across the United States and provides information on Vermont's shifts in population. The chapter defines rural and small schools across the United States, and then elaborates on Vermont's unique small-school characteristics. Next, the governing structures of school systems in the United States are explained, followed by information about the administration of Vermont schools. Chapter 2 continues with an overview of school consolidation, and then focuses specifically on rural, rather than urban, consolidation. Chapter 2 concludes with an historical overview of school consolidation responses in other states, introduces Act 46, and provides some examples of community responses to Act 46 from within Vermont.

Chapter 3 provides an overview of the problem, explains the purpose of the research, and then outlines various qualitative methodologies the researcher rejected. Chapter 3 continues by defining case study research and provides an overview of the towns within the two supervisory unions under study. After a discussion of the population of these communities, the chapter continues with an explanation of the

types and methods of data collection: community member surveys, document analysis of newspapers and school board meeting minutes, and interviews with educational leaders. Methods to verify the reliability and validity of the research are covered, and the chapter concludes with an overview of the triangulation of the data for analysis.

Chapter 4 begins with an overview of the data collected by the researcher. The community survey is explained, and the descriptive characteristics of the survey respondents is detailed; the researcher then discusses the validation of the community member responses. The next section in Chapter 4 provides information about the documents analyzed by the researcher as part of these case studies. School board meeting minutes and local newspapers were reviewed and coded by the researcher. The next part of the chapter discusses interviews with community and educational leaders. After these sources of information are discussed, the researcher then presents an analysis of data. Data related to Research Question 1, the response to changes in enrollment prior to Act 46, is covered in four parts: competing priorities in the Franklin Northeast Supervisory Union and the White River Valley Supervisory Union, respectively, and followed with sharing of resources in the WRVSU and FNESU. After this section, the researcher then presents data related to Question 2 which outlines the responses of community members in both the FNESU and WRVSU to Act 46. Finally, Chapter 4 concludes with a presentation of data about Question 3, the reasons for community member support or opposition to consolidation initiatives. This topic is covered by three themes in the following order: financial considerations, local control, and student opportunities.

Chapter 5 begins with a summary of the case studies of the FNESU and WRVSU communities. The researcher then outlines his findings based on the data collected from surveys, documents, and interviews. After the findings, the researcher outlines his conclusions about Questions 1, 2, and 3. These conclusions are followed by the implications of this research, suggestions for future research, the limitations of these case studies, and a final summary of the case studies.

Chapter 2 - Review of Literature

As student populations increase and decrease in various parts of the United States (Snyder, deBray, & Dillow, 2016), citizens in local communities and state governments seek ways to provide quality education for school-aged children (Richardson, 2016). A particular challenge is one of decreasing population in some rural areas (Schafft & Jackson, 2016). Population decline in some regions has led to legislative initiatives (Weldon, 2012) to address the drop in total student enrollment in schools (Karaxha, Agosto, Black, & Effiom, 2013).

The scope of this study is to focus on changes in school enrollments and the reactions of citizens within two supervisory unions in Vermont to Act 46 consolidation initiatives. Vermont's rural communities are facing a new reality in their rural schools, and school district consolidation is one solution established by state legislators to cope with changing student populations.

Population and Demographics

Colby and Ortman (2014) project the population of the United States to increase from 319 million to 417 million by 2060, but some communities across America are confronted with a different reality; despite a growing population across the country, there are some areas of the United States losing population, especially in parts of New England (Snyder, deBray, & Dillow, 2016). As Johnson (2003) states, "smaller than average population gains and widespread out-migration from farming-dependent counties" (p. 24) represent a continuation of trends from the past thirty years, with only about half of these counties experiencing net in-migration. The trends in population change in rural areas (especially those rural communities associated with

farming) indicate that some areas show growth while others show decline, and these differences in migration patterns reflect in public school enrollment data.

According to the U.S. Department of Education, between 2014 and 2024, “public elementary (student) enrollment is projected to increase 7 percent and public secondary (student) enrollment is projected to increase 3 percent” (Snyder, deBray, & Dillow, 2016, p. 1). These gains in student populations, though, will not be evenly distributed throughout school systems in the United States. Data analysis from researchers in the US Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics projected how school-age populations might change in the upcoming decade in states across the Union. In a majority of states (60%), there will be increased student enrollment, and the focus of the citizens in these states might be regarding the impact of *larger* student populations (Snyder, deBray, & Dillow, 2016). 30 states and the District of Columbia are expected to have enrollment increases in preK [pre-Kindergarten] through grade 8, and 32 states and the District of Columbia are expected to have enrollment increases in grades 9 through 12. In preK through grade 8, enrollment is projected to increase by 15 percent or more in the District of Columbia, North Dakota, and Utah. (Snyder, deBray, & Dillow, 2016).

For a minority of states (40%), there will be declining student enrollment numbers. Of the states expected to experience the largest declines in student population, only Michigan in the Midwest is outside of the Northeast region of the United States (Snyder, deBray, & Dillow, 2016). [Total enrollment] is projected to decrease by 10 percent or more in Connecticut, New Hampshire, Maine, and Vermont. Enrollment in grades 9 through 12 is projected to decrease by 10 percent or more in

Connecticut, Maine, Michigan, New Hampshire, and Vermont (Snyder, deBray, & Dillow, 2016).

Geographically, most of the largest declines in school-aged populations will continue to occur in the Northeastern United States. Population change is not limited to one age group. As the overall population of the country increases, Fuguitt (1995) explains, some locales experience growth in their elderly population, a decline in their school-aged student population, or a combination of the two trends.

Across recent decades, there continues to be an effect caused by the loss of able young people seeking better opportunities ... the growing importance of the elderly population is an issue that transcends residence, but nonmetro areas stand out as having a higher proportion of the elderly (Fuguitt, 1995, p. 72).

Fuguitt's prescient conclusions from the 1990s are applicable to today's demographic shifts: in rural areas, there is a larger elderly population in comparison to the overall population, and the loss of young people limits the growth of families. With fewer families, fewer children enter these rural school systems. These on-going changes in population demographics potentially impact the number of students enrolled in rural schools.

Despite the overall national trend for an increase in the numbers of students attending public schools, several states, including Vermont, will experience student enrollment decreases. Snyder, deBray, and Dillow (2016) write that

Between 2013–14 and 2025–26, changes in public school enrollment are also

projected to differ by state in preK through grade 8 as well as in grades 9 through 12, reflecting the expected national enrollment increase during this period. (p. 97)

Within New Hampshire and Maine, the majority of the student population loss is outside of the coastal, urban areas; in these areas along the Atlantic coast, “urbanization is altering the population distribution in the state” (Palmer, 2009, p. 72). Vermont, unlike other New England communities, is both landlocked and mostly rural; its longest *coastline* is along the shores of Lake Champlain, a body of water it shares with the state of New York. Vermont Senator Patrick Leahy (D-VT) once tried, with strong backlash from Midwestern states, to designate this inland lake as a Great Lake (Seelye, 1998). The largest city, Burlington, has a population of approximately 42,000 persons as of the last census (City of Burlington, retrieved 2017). In tandem with its smaller population, based on the research of Johnson, Showalter, Klein, and Lester (2014), many of Vermont’s schools could be classified as both small and rural; with 57.5% of its students classified as rural, Vermont is ranked #1 when compared to other states’ rural student percentages (Johnson, Showalter, Klein, & Lester, 2014). Vermont is also ranked at #3 in regards to its percent of rural schools (72.5%) and percent of small rural districts (91.8%) (Johnson, Showalter, Klein, & Lester, 2014).

Compared to other U.S. States, Vermont has a smaller population than most; its population is smaller than its neighboring New England states as well. Miller (2014) cites updated population estimates which indicate that Vermont had 626,630 residents, Rhode Island had a population of 1,050,511, New Hampshire’s population numbered 1,323,459, Maine had 1,328,302 people living in the state, and

Massachusetts easily dwarfed its New England neighbors with a population of 3,596,080 (Miller, 2014). Vermont did not follow the larger national trend of population growth. Since the start of the 21st Century, its population has declined; demographic data from the U.S. Census Bureau (2017) indicates that for sixteen years, from April 1, 2000 to July 1, 2016, there was a loss of 0.2% of total population, and the percentage of persons under 18 dropped from 20.7% to 19.2 %. While the change in total population was almost 0%, a 1.5% drop in the number of persons under 18 (the current and future school population) is a demographic shift that reflects declining school enrollment. Wertlieb and Bodette (2015) report that:

The student population in Vermont is trending decidedly downward. Since peaking at 107,000 students in 1997, the number of students in the Green Mountain State has fallen to around 88,000 today. (p. 1)

Snyder, deBray, and Dillow (2016) compiled data for the National Center for Education Statistics regarding changes in school enrollment across the United States. In 1990, there were 70,860 students enrolled in PreK through Grade 8 in Vermont public schools. By 2025, projections suggest there will be 55,200 students enrolled in Vermont's PreK through Grade 8 classrooms (Snyder, deBray, & Dillow, 2016). Despite an increase in students in the early 1990s, the long-term trend in enrollment represents a 22% decline in a student population over a 35-year time span. Unless there is a large migration of young people into the state or a massive increase in the birth rate of Vermonters, and not just a temporary surge in students, the trends indicate a decline in student numbers in the Green Mountain State. Many of these students will be educated in a small school in a rural community.

Rural and Small Schools Defined

The minority of students in the United States are educated in small, rural schools. Snyder, deBray, and Dillow (2016) conclude that a majority of the nation's roughly 49 million school-aged students are enrolled in schools in cities, towns, or suburbs; about 9 million students attend schools in rural areas - about 18% of the student population. Bauch (2009) provides a comprehensive characteristic of rural schools beyond the numbers of enrolled students with a caveat: "Although it is difficult to define a set of universal characteristics shared by these areas, many writers have identified some common features of rural communities and their schools" (Bauch, 2009, p. 208). People living in rural areas are less educated, strongly identify with their community, highly value relationships, and their schools are a reflection of these attributes; rural schools are the center of the community, promote stronger teacher-student relationships, but usually lack the resources for specialized programs (Bauch, 2009).

In general, people in rural communities have lower levels of education than people living in urban areas, and people in rural areas have a larger proportion of low-wage jobs than their urban counterparts (Herzog & Pittman, 1995). Although rural residents might have lower-wage jobs, both DeYoung (1991) and Theobald (1991) suggest that rural communities value common schools for their ability to create equity.

In the great early 19th century intellectual debate between Jeffersonian and Jacksonian democrats, rural populations appear to have concurred with Jackson's views that common schools might be good because they leveled the social playing field. But they typically opposed the idea of using schools

to develop and train political leaders, agreeing instead that physical labor and hard work could teach better lessons to would-be leaders than years of book study. In addition, cash-poor rural families often resisted statehouse pressures to raise local taxes for compulsory schooling. (Theobald, 1991, p. 82)

Another characteristic, then, of rural peoples is the awareness of economic inequalities with larger urban areas and recognize their ability to support a more egalitarian common school to equalize opportunities for the children in their community.

Nachtigal (1982) states that, “in general, the layers of bureaucracy found in large urban/suburban communities are lacking in small communities (and so) communication can be more direct.” Tyack (1974) writes that “school and community were organically related in a tightly knit group in which people met face-to-face and knew each others’ affairs” (Tyack, 1974, p.22). For the people in rural communities, the importance of face-to-face interactions and direct ties to one another (Bauch, 2009) represent a defining characteristic which might distinguish this group from people living in urban regions. Of the nation’s 15,133 school districts, 47% are located in rural places, encompassing 28% of the nation’s schools (Hobbs, 1994).

On average, rural schools have smaller enrollments than do urban schools (Sher, 1977), and so the loss of a few students in rural schools is more noticeable than the loss of a few students in urban or suburban schools with larger enrollments. These smaller schools, representing just over one-fourth of the schools in the United States, provide both advantages and disadvantages to communities. As a benefit, small schools tend to cultivate a positive school climate, an orderly environment, a high

level of student–faculty engagement, and better school–community relationships (Kearney, 1994; Tompkins & Deloney, 1994). These rural schools function as the social and cultural heart of a community (DeYoung & Lawrence, 1995; Herzog & Pittman, 1995; Nachtigal, 1982). In contrast, a potential negative aspect of rural schools originates from a smaller tax base and lower property values; when compared to large, suburban or urban schools, rural schools are more often underfunded (Herzog & Pittman, 1995; Reeves, 2003), and because of fewer students, teachers, and resources, they might provide fewer course offerings and special programs (Ballou & Podgursky, 1995; Hall & Barker, 1995).

In summary, while there is not a single qualitative or quantitative definition of rural communities and their schools which captures the complexity of the peoples, a composite definition can incorporate some common characteristics of a people with fewer advanced levels of education than urbanites, who possess a strong sense of identify with their community, and greatly value relationships; their schools mirror these qualities; rural schools are the nucleus of the community, and teacher-student relationships are fostered, but there are fewer specialized courses available for students. Bauch (2009) emphasizes that

Certainly, the type of rural community in which a school is located will determine the school’s poverty level and its sense of isolation. However, such communities are often tightly knit, take pride in their sense of place and its history, and provide social capital for their children. Familiarity, community spirit, the influence of elders, and social activities in which the whole town participate provide opportunities that support a parent–teacher–

community model of school renewal. (Bauch, 2009, p. 118)

These characteristics of small, rural schools might be apparent in the analysis of the data by the researcher.

Rural Communities by Population

The qualities and characteristics of rural communities can also be defined by their population. While rural schools could be defined based on qualitative characteristics or through quantitative comparisons with urban areas, many communities and the schools that serve the inhabitants in Vermont can be classified as rural through criteria established by the US Census Bureau, “which designates as rural: towns of 2,500 or fewer and unincorporated areas located in nonmetropolitan counties” (Bauch 2009); other researchers (Greenough & Nelson, 2015) further differentiated rural subtypes through an examination of the US Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics. Greenough and Nelson (2015) suggest that:

Researchers in rural education should consider whether or not to use the standard NCES definition of rural schools and districts or some alternative, (but) whatever definition is used, researchers probably should consider how the demographics of their selected group of schools or districts compare in race/ethnicity, family income (poverty), enrollment trends, and other characteristics. (p. 332)

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) provides definitions for three types of rural school areas. *Rural, Fringe* is a “rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or

equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster” (School Locale Definitions, 2006, p. 1). *Rural, Distant* is a “territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster” (School Locale Definitions, 2006, p. 1). *Rural, Remote* is a “territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster” (School Locale Definitions, 2006, p. 1). While some students attend schools in an urban cluster like Burlington, Vermont, other schools within the state of Vermont are located outside of areas with less than 50,000 people, and therefore, using NCES criteria and based on the population size of communities, could be classified as rural: fringe, distant, or remote. Johnson, Showalter, Klein, and Lester (2014) define rural “using the 12-item urban-centric NCES locale code system released in 2006. Rural districts used in the report, *Why Rural Matters*, are those designated with locale codes 41 (rural fringe), 42 (rural distant), or 43 (rural remote)” (Johnson, Showalter, Klein, & Lester, 2014, p. 4). For the purpose of this research, the criteria established by the National Center for Educational Statistics will define the parameters of rural schools.

McLaughlin, Huberman, and Hawkins (1997), through their work for the National Center for Education Statistics (referenced by Greenough and Nelson), define small rural districts on other criteria. They considered the number of schools operating in a district, the number of high school students attending these schools, types of schools, and the number of teachers per grade level as indicators to define small rural schools.

Most small rural elementary districts operated a single school, while small

rural secondary and unified districts usually had 2 or 3 schools. Rural schools are generally small. High schools in four-fifths of all rural districts had fewer than 100 students per grade. Some of the schools in small rural districts were very small; a fifth of the schools in small rural districts had fewer than one teacher per grade, including 64 percent of the elementary schools. There were relatively few intermediate schools and many combined (K-12) schools in these districts. (McLaughlin, Huberman, & Hawkins, 1997, p. xiii)

Although there is not a universal consensus about the meaning of the term small, rural school, these aforementioned researchers provide a composite definition.

Small, rural schools:

- exist within communities designated by the U.S. Census Bureau with less than 2,500 people;
- operate within districts with just a few schools;
- have fewer students on average than most U.S. schools;
- provide opportunities for closer interpersonal relationships between parents, teachers, students, and others within a community;
- cannot always provide all of the educational opportunities available to students in larger schools; and
- serve as a key cultural institution within a community.

Vermont Schools: Small and Rural

The research of Snyder, deBray, and Dillow (2016) about schools in the United States determined that the average public elementary school enrollment in all U.S. schools in 2013-14 was 488 students per school; in Vermont, on average, 235 students

were enrolled in elementary schools (Snyder, deBray, & Dillow, 2016). Vermont elementary schools have 52% fewer students than the typical elementary school in the United States. Secondary schools across the United States enrolled an average of 788 students; whereas, in Vermont, about 502 students were enrolled in its various secondary public schools. (Snyder, deBray, & Dillow, 2016). In secondary schools in Vermont, there are 36% fewer students than a typical U.S. school (Snyder, deBray, & Dillow, 2016). These figures indicate that the number of students in smaller public schools in Vermont is below average when compared to U.S. schools as a whole. Since Vermont is a rural state, these small Vermont schools share some similar characteristics: almost six in ten Vermont students attend school in a rural district; rural districts are well-funded, small, and mostly white (Johnson, Showalter, Klein, & Lester, 2014). Regardless of whether a school is classified as small and rural or not, Vermont schools, like schools throughout the United States, are organized within administrative units. These types of administrative units are as varied as the schools and students they oversee.

Governing Schools: Various Models

Snyder, Hoffman, and Geddes, (1998) summarized the governance of school administrative units. They state that:

The administrative structure of public education in the United States varies widely among local jurisdictions, who share with states the primary responsibility for public education. In general, state education agencies provide coordination of large scale activities and funding to local school districts. Local school districts make significant funding decisions and set

many school policies. Local school boards are responsible for making and reviewing school policies. (Snyder, Hoffman, & Geddes, 1998, p. 22)

Across the United States, different states use different models to oversee schools. Depending on the location, the terms school districts, supervisory unions, or school administrative units could have similar meanings or appear to be completely different. For example, Hawaii only has one school district serving the entire state (Snyder, deBray, & Dillow, 2016); this one school district in Hawaii served 184,760 students in 2012 (Snyder, deBray, & Dillow, 2016). In contrast to this state-wide district model, in California, the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) enrolls more than

640,000 students in kindergarten through 12th grade, at over 900 schools, and 187 public charter schools. The boundaries spread over 720 square miles and include the mega-city of Los Angeles as well as all or parts of 31 smaller municipalities plus several unincorporated sections of Southern California. (Los Angeles Unified School District, 2015, p. 1)

In a sharp contrast to the massive geographical scale of Hawaii's school district spread across several islands or the large number of students in the Los Angeles, California school district, in Colorado, "the Agate School District encompasses a vast area on the eastern plains; it's 458 square miles of rural Elbert County" and it enrolls 10 students (Jones, 2012). Therefore, the term *school district* depends more on governing bodies designating such entities as districts rather than defining such administrative units based on their geographic size or student population.

In some states, school districts operate within another governing structure, a regional education service agency and/or supervisory union administrative centers.

Table 2.1 below displays some of the variety of school governance structure based on 2013-14 school year data (Snyder, deBray, & Dillow, 2016) from four states:

Alabama, Florida, New Hampshire, and Vermont.

Table 2. 1 Four States’ Student Populations, School Districts, Regional/ Supervisory Unions

<u>State</u>	<u>Student population</u>	<u>School Districts</u>	<u>Supervisory Unions</u>
Alabama	746,204	137	0
Florida	2,720,744	67	0
New Hampshire	186,310	179	95
Vermont	88,690	294	59

Note. Data from Snyder, T. D., deBray, C. and Dillow, S. A. (2016). *Digest of education statistics 2015* (NCES 2016-014). National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC.

Table 2.1 illustrates that there is variety, rather than one universal construct for states in regards to school governance. In 2014, there were 137 school districts in the state of Alabama, but no regional or supervisory unions; in the same year, though, in New Hampshire, there were 179 school districts and 95 supervisory administrative units (Snyder, deBray, & Dillow, 2016). Alabama has roughly three times the population of New Hampshire, but fewer school districts; Florida has only 67 school districts organized in its 67 counties, but a population nearly 13 times greater than New Hampshire and just one-third the number of school districts and no regional educational agencies. Student population size does not determine whether or not a

state expands beyond district control of schools. While all 50 states and the District of Columbia have at least one school district, thirty-three states have some kind of regional education service agency and/or supervisory union administrative centers; therefore, governing structures of schools are not consistent throughout the United States.

Vermont School Districts and Supervisory Unions

Vermont is organized with both school districts and supervisory unions. For state income tax purposes, community members identify school districts in which they reside (Vermont Tax Code 2017). As explained on the Vermont Agency of Administration's public website (2017),

The Homestead Education Tax Rate is based primarily on the education spending per equalized pupil of all the pupils residing in your town. Many town districts are also members of union school districts. Each town and union school district will have a tax rate based on its spending per pupil. For towns with multiple school districts, the tax rate is a combination of those rates.

(Department of Taxes, 2017, p. 1)

These school districts are organized within 59 Supervisory Unions or Supervisory Districts throughout the state (Snyder, deBray, & Dillow, 2016). A supervisory union (SU) serves as a means of administering schools from the various districts that come together to form a SU. Most of the school districts in Vermont belong to a Supervisory Union, although some participate in a similarly organized Supervisory District structure instead. A supervisory union (SU) is

an 'administrative, planning, and educational service unit' for two or

more school districts; not a municipality; governed by board representatives appointed from among the members of each school district's board; constitutional requirements for proportional representation do not apply; the SU board adopts a budget and allocates it among the member school districts; the electorate does not vote directly on the SU budget; it is included in each school district's budget; the State Board of Education has the authority to adjust the boundaries of an SU on its own initiative or at the request of a school district (16 V.S.A. §261 – law has been in place for over 60 years). (Vermont Agency of Education, 2015, p. 2-3)

For the citizens within Vermont's cities and towns, a supervisory union does not have direct oversight from members of the communities; rather, the SU is connected to townspeople through their local school board. The State Board of Education, a government agency outside the direct control of citizens, can authorize supervisory union changes without the consent of townspeople or school board. Townspeople, though, do exercise control over their local school district budget. For example, in 2014, "35 school budgets failed (on Town Meeting day), which is about twice as many as usual" (Bidgood, 2014, p. 14). Local townspeople, while not directly represented on a SU board, can, through their vote on the school district budget, approve or disapprove of the SU's proposed budget. In Vermont communities, citizens usually gather in early March for Town Meeting. Bryan (2004) describes Town Meeting as

Real democracy. In America, town meeting predates representative government. It is stitched into the fabric of New England and dominates

the patchwork of its public past. It occurs in each New England state at a set time and in a set place. It is accessible to every citizen, coded in law, and conducted regularly in over 1,000 towns. In my state of Vermont, citizens in more than 230 towns meet at least once a year to pass laws governing the town. (Bryan, 2004, p. 3)

When a school district budget does not pass during Town Meeting, then a supervisory union board of representatives must reconcile the needs of the SU with the needs of the community members within a school district in order to fund operations for the SU; “under Vermont law, property owners in a district without a voter-approved budget still pay the base statewide education tax rate and, in return, their district still receives some money to continue educating its students” (Fountain, 2013, p. 1). The power of the people, with whom the financial decisions reside, gives local control over entities which, by other measures, are outside the direct governance of citizens (Bryan, 2004); however, there is still an expectation that members of communities continue to fund schools through payment of their property taxes.

While school districts throughout the United States are administered through different organizational structures with various levels of direct citizen input (Turner, Khrais, Lloyd, Olgin, Isenee, Vevea, & Carsen 2016), the citizens of Vermont (Fountain, 2013) can and do make decisions about their schools at a local level. Rather than just making decisions about budgeting, though, another decision some community members are sometimes asked to consider is whether or not to consolidate with another educational institution.

Consolidation

The Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary defines consolidation as “becoming united into one whole” (p. 155). The process of whether or not to consolidate educational institutions in the United States (whether they are schools, districts, or administrative units) is not a recent phenomenon of the 21st century (Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999; Reynolds, 1999; Sher & Dunne, 1977; Tyack, 1974; Updegraff, 1922; Zars, 1998). Educational institutions consolidated schools in the 20th century. In the 21st century, Russo (2006) writes that legislatures in Arkansas, Arizona, California, Montana, Nebraska, South Dakota, and Virginia enacted policies related to district consolidations. Just as these states are diverse in their populations and sizes, and their consolidations are not the same, no *one size fits all* definition accurately conveys the meaning of consolidation in Vermont.

Consolidation in some Vermont areas might involve bringing together different communities to support a single community school (Doyle-Burr, 2016). Other school consolidations might involve the closing of secondary schools to create a new union or regional secondary school while retaining elementary school districts (Delcore, 2017). Other school consolidations could result in the merging of school districts within a supervisory union, the closing of smaller schools within that supervisory union, and the transfer of students into other schools (Hongoltz-Hetling, 2017).

Just as school consolidation varies from community to community, so too are the reasons cited for or against school consolidation. Some advocates for school consolidation agree that such mergers will create economic savings (Delcore, 2016). Larger institutions might find savings using an economy of scale not available to

smaller institutions (Gronberg, Jansen, Karakaplan, & Taylor, 2015). Other advocates for mergers imply that consolidation can enhance the learning outcomes and opportunities for students (Faher, 2016). Opposition to consolidation efforts come from some citizens concerned about whether or not a consolidation will provide more or less school choice (Weiss-Tisman, 2017).

Rural School Consolidation

Rural school consolidation is not an unknown concept or process (Brown & Swanson, 2003; Castle, 1995; Luloff & Swanson, 1990; Nachtingal, 1982; Sher, 1977; Theobald, 1995; Tyack, 1974). Within the specter of consolidation, there is a dichotomy that sometimes manifests itself as a clash of two cultures and peoples: the bureaucrats and the rural residents. From the bureaucrats point of view:

State-level policymakers and educational professionals typically spearhead efforts to consolidate rural schools as moves toward improving cost effectiveness or accountability. State Education Agencies (SEAs) influence the fate of rural schools, both directly and indirectly. They define and redefine not only appropriate school sizes, but desirable grade combinations as well; for example, most SEAs have adopted ‘the middle-school concept’ in recent years. When SEAs impose on small local districts new standards that regulate size or grade combinations, closures and consolidations are a predictable result. (DeYoung & Howley, 1990, p. 1)

Bureaucrats who might want to make changes to rural schools can view the people within rural communities as an opposition.

Parents and educators in rural communities who were interested in preparing

students for life rather than educating them as ‘human capital’ to contribute more to the nation’s well being, were considered backward and not knowledgeable enough to know what was best for education. (Bard, Gardener, & Wieland, 2006, p.41)

From the viewpoint of parents and educators in rural communities, Bard, Gardener, and Wieland, (2006) state that these citizens “argue that the loss of the school means the loss of the community” (p.42), and “the discussion continues to be cast into a win-lose framework” (p. 42). This conflict exists when some rural communities confront consolidation. Cook (2008) writes

Consolidation increasingly is becoming an attractive alternative to states faced with growing pressure to fund public education, with small, rural school districts being affected the most. The question, according to the Rural School and Community Trust, is whether policymakers take the best interest of students into account. (Cook, 2008, p. 9)

The non-profit Rural School and Community Trust formed to “address the crucial relationship between good schools and thriving communities” (Rural Trust, 2016, p .1) and when discussing rural school consolidation, Strange, director of the Rural Trust, states that

‘It’s a case-by-case situation,’ ... Over the past 70 years, the number of school districts has declined from 117,000 to around 14,200 even though the student population has almost doubled ... States often look to consolidation when they face long-term declining enrollment and rising per-pupil costs. Legislators are likely to consider the process as a way to address funding inequalities ...

Ultimately, Strange believes that as many as 25 states will take consolidation plans into consideration. And rural districts, he says, are in the most danger of losing their autonomy and identity. (Cook, 2008, p. 9)

Various rural communities around the United States responded differently to legislated or locally-led initiatives regarding school district consolidation. Many of these consolidation efforts highlight the opposing viewpoints of various constituents including the rural locals and state bureaucrats.

Responses to Consolidation in Other States

Various studies on rural schools and school consolidation, including research from both the 20th century (Guthrie, 1979; Sher & Dunne, 1977; Strang, 1987; Zars, 1998) and the 21st century (McCabe & Baker, 2011; Nitta, Holey & Wrobel, 2008; Waters, 2005), express the opinions of rural peoples in regards to school consolidation. As Tyack (1974) stated

[Rural] people may have been dissatisfied with their school buildings and with an archaic curriculum, but they wanted to control their own schools. In a major study of rural schools in New York State in 1921, for example, 65% of rural patrons polled wanted to elect their county superintendent; 69% opposed consolidation of schools. Subsequent studies showed that rural people in Ohio, Wisconsin, and Idaho also opposed unification. The impetus to consolidate rural schools almost always came from outside the rural community. It was rare to find a local group that had sponsored or spearheaded the drive for reorganization. (Updegraff, 1922,

cited in Tyack, 1974, p.25)

Researchers in other states studied educational consolidations within their communities in order to determine why members of communities consolidated their schools or districts.

When Donis-Keller (2015) studied three different cases of school mergers in Maine, she concluded that

[F]actors important to consolidation decisions from the agenda setting stage were the institutional context including parity of districts in terms of size, structure, economics, history, and history of previous collaboration, and the unity of civic leadership. Within the campaign stage, both the specific elements of the plan and the message of the campaign were important to the referendum results. Among the three cases, those campaigns that focused heavily on finances, efficiency, and compliance were less successful than the merger campaign in Tall Pines that focused attention on potential education benefits and sustainability of current programs. (Donis-Keller, 2015, p. 159-160)

Donis-Keller's (2015) findings indicate that a focus on monetary benefits (like economy of scale) creates an environment which opposes consolidation, but community members are more likely to support a merger if educational benefits (a high quality of education) are touted. Donis-Keller (2015) concludes that, for the districts she studied in Maine, the loss of local control was the most important reason to oppose consolidation; other reasons included larger class sizes and criticism of extended time to travel to and from school or transportation costs. Because of similar

demographics and regional characteristics, the outcomes of consolidation efforts in Maine might resemble outcomes in Vermont communities.

Like Vermont, Nebraska is also experiencing a demographic change. The Center for Public Affairs Research at the University of Nebraska at Omaha notes that “under all scenarios, [population] will decline” (Linares & Drozd, 2013) in the state’s rural areas. When confronted with this population change, Nebraska lawmakers initiated school consolidation. Although research by Blauwkamp, Longo, and Anderson (2011) focused on school consolidation rather than supervisory union mergers, the researchers examined sentiments espoused in local media both for and against consolidation in Nebraska towns. They determined that discussing financial and social costs are key talking points for supporters and opponents of consolidation. According to Blauwkamp, Longo, and Anderson (2011), money received the greatest attention, followed by educational quality. Issues that were not as prevalent (both for or against consolidation) were lower populations, facilities, and athletics (Blauwkamp, Longo, & Anderson, 2011).

Demographic changes in communities create new challenges for schools to provide a quality education for students. In Iowa, school districts face continuing and increased pressures from declining enrollments and declining revenues while struggling to meet the increasing demands placed upon them by government, stakeholders and institutions of higher learning.

(Anderson, 2009, p. 72)

Krob (2011) reports that while 41 counties in Iowa are projected to grow in population by 2040, there are 47 counties projected to lose population, and a projected

60 counties will have more people over the age of 65 than under age 18 (Krob, 2011). Although NCES demographic data (2017) indicates that Iowa will experience an increase in overall student population, this increase will not be evenly shared throughout the state. Some communities in Iowa are losing school-aged children and growing in their senior citizen population; the members of these Iowa counties also faced school consolidations because of this population trend in their areas. After state legislative initiatives in Iowa were implemented Anderson (2009) determined that

The success of a merger was enhanced by a history of sharing and cooperation between the districts, strong leadership, the free sharing of information regarding the process and by leaders seeking input from their constituents. On the negative side, a lack of trust between the districts and dissension among stakeholders due to issues surrounding activities contributed to dissatisfaction among participants regarding the consolidation process. (Anderson, 2009, pp. 72-73)

Anderson's (2009) research, while determining factors that either made the consolidation process positive or negative, concluded that openness, collaboration, and cooperation contributed to the success of consolidation. For members of communities with successful consolidations, their attitudes and focus on improvement created an environment that was more accepting of merging (Anderson, 2009). Demographic challenges also exist in rural Pennsylvania, as more of the population in these regions ages, and the number of young children declines.

From 2000 to 2030, the number of senior citizens in rural Pennsylvania is projected to increase 58 percent. In 2030, an estimated 25 percent of the total

rural population will be 65 years old and older. At that time, there will be more senior citizens than children and youth in rural Pennsylvania. (Center for Rural Pennsylvania, 2014, p. 1)

School consolidation is not just a 21st century issue. Meta (1999) researched the failed consolidation of two school districts within the state of Pennsylvania. Some community members recognized that a shift in populations required changes in the status quo, and they attempted to cope with the decrease in school-aged children through consolidation (Meta, 1999). Meta's (1999) opinion is that

state policy makers must develop legislation which provides a framework for voluntary mergers with fiscal incentives. Without meaningful financial gains, it is unrealistic to expect elected school board members to be able to establish support for a merger from the community. (Meta, 1999, p. 161-162)

Meta (1999) suggests that money influenced the process of some consolidations in Pennsylvania and his argument is that financial incentives are key to mergers. His findings contradict Donis-Keller (2015); she indicates that a focus on monetary benefits (like economy of scale) creates an environment which opposes consolidation. These different outcomes occurred in Pennsylvania and Maine respectively, and so communities from two different states responded differently to monetary incentives rather than similarly.

An analysis of the work of various researchers across the country (Anderson, 2009; Blauwkamp, Longo, & Anderson, 2011; Donis-Keller, 2015; Meta, 1999) does not provide a single explanation for why some communities support school district mergers and other communities reject these consolidations; instead, successful and

unsuccessful consolidations are complex. In some cases, entirely different outcomes from consolidation efforts occur. Buchanan (2004) wrote in the American School Board Journal that

Perhaps the most extreme example of parents fighting school consolidation took place in tiny Ione, Ore[gon]. [In 2003], Ione was part of the Morrow County School District, a system of fewer than 2,200 students spread out over more than 2,000 square miles. When district officials threatened to close Ione High School due to budget constraints, residents of the 350-person town seceded from the Morrow County district. Ione, with approval of the state Legislature, formed its own school district ... the fledgling district has two schools, which share a common campus, and 152 students. Had the high school closed, students would have been bused 17 miles to the nearest school. Perhaps more important, the small farming community would have lost its center. (Buchanan, 2004, p.18)

In this scenario, the citizens within a school district with a small student population spread out across a large geographic region sought legislative support to break away from their assigned district. These Oregonians created their own desired outcome - their own small, rural district - despite the historical trend across the United States for small, rural districts to merge into larger entities.

Vermont Legislative Response

The decline in the school-aged population in Vermont impacts local schools. Vermont has many small, rural schools organized under 262 school districts with 59 Supervisory Unions or Supervisory Districts throughout the state (Snyder, deBray, &

Dillow, 2016) The large number of administrative units combined with fewer students creates a scenario:

The last time there was a major overhaul in school governance was the late 1800s. But now there is an urgent fiscal reality: Vermont's public schools have lost more than 20,000 students since the second half of the '90s, making these districts even smaller, while education costs -- and taxes to pay for them -- have risen. (Bidgood, 2014, p. 14)

Vermont public schools have already lost tens of thousands of students, and demographic projections indicate that the schools in the state will continue to experience declining enrollments over the next decade despite a national trend of population increases. In response to these trends, the Vermont State Legislature passed Act 46.

Act 46

Lawmakers responded to the loss and the projected loss of students through a legislative bill known as Act 46. This law was passed by the Vermont Legislature and signed by Vermont Governor Shumlin on June 2, 2015. In Section 1 of Act 46, under Findings, the rationale for the legislation is stated:

(a) Vermont's kindergarten through grade 12 student population has declined from 103,000 in fiscal year 1997 to 78,300 in fiscal year 2015.(b) The number of school related personnel has not decreased in proportion to the decline in student population. The proportion of Vermont students with severe emotional needs has increased from 1.5 percent of the population in fiscal year 1997 to 2.3 percent in fiscal year 2015. In addition, the proportion of

students from families in crisis due to loss of employment, addiction, and other factors has also increased during this time period, requiring the State's public schools to fulfill an array of human services functions. (d) From July 1997 through July 2014, the number of Vermont children ages 6 through 17 residing with families receiving nutrition benefits has increased by 47 percent, from 13,000 to 19,200. While other factors affect student academic performance, studies demonstrate that when the percentage of students in a school who are living in poverty increases, student performance and achievement have a tendency to decrease. (e) With 13 different types of school district governance structures, elementary and secondary education in Vermont lacks cohesive *governance* and delivery systems. As a result, many school districts: (1) are not well-suited to achieve economies of scale; and (2) lack the flexibility to manage, share, and transfer resources, including personnel, with other school districts and to provide students with a variety of high-quality educational opportunities. (Act 46, 2015, p. 1-2)

The wording of Act 46 articulates the challenges in Vermont's schools. The social, financial, educational, and demographic realities serve as a basis for passing the bill into law. The Vermont Agency of Education (AOE) provided a fact-sheet to clarify the intentions of Act 46 to explain the essence of the law. The AOE document explicitly outlines for readers both the things that Act 46 does and does not do.

According to this document, Act 46 attempts to:

better align shared resources ... protects small districts from [student attendance] fluctuations ... gives systems opportunities to partner with other

small districts to achieve some [economy of] scale ... determine what works, what doesn't work, and where savings and program improvements can be found ... provides enough time for districts to consider their course of action ... gives the State Board of Education the tools to help very small districts that are not viable on their own ... and puts pressure on systems to control their growth in per pupil spending. (Governance Fact Sheet, 2016, p. 2)

This document states that Act 46 pressures systems to control their per-pupil spending growth, but it also implies that Act 46 can provide support for systems to find savings through partnerships. It is clear that, according to the AOE, the law empowers the State Board of Education to initiate changes if school districts do not. The Fact Sheet also states what Act 46 is not supposed to do:

Encourage or require closure of schools – including small schools; restrict or repeal the authority of school districts to continue to pay tuition; change the amount or manner in which a district pays tuition for its students, or the manner in which voters decide whether their district will pay tuition.

(Governance Fact Sheet, 2016, p. 2)

The AOE clearly articulates in this document that Act 46 does not encourage or require closure of schools. Whether or not community members interpret the intention of Act 46 in a similar manner to the AOE might be answered by the researcher.

In summary, the intent of Act 46, according to the Vermont Agency of Education, is to facilitate school district mergers. The intent of Act 46 is to encourage monetary savings from these consolidations rather than close small, rural schools.

Regardless of the intent of the law, just as rural communities around the United States responded loudly to school consolidation measures in the past, so too did Vermonters.

Community Responses

In the neighboring state of New Hampshire, schools are governed under School Administrative Units (SAUs), similar in structure to the Supervisory Unions in Vermont. Research conducted by McCabe and Baker (2011), with the cooperation of two SAUs, uncovered themes from community members in smaller, rural towns with declining populations. Community members expressed their opinions through themes such as: “our children’s education is important, we want to do something, and governance is a concern” (McCabe & Baker, 2011, p.28). These same concerns are echoed by the Vermont Legislature in the wording and intent of Act 46; there is a need to do something about the education of children in the state, and the governance structure is a concern (Bidgood, 2014). It is the intent of the law, in order to improve economies of scale and provide students with high-quality educational opportunities, to legislate district consolidations. However, not all community members within the state of Vermont are voting to consolidate school districts in the early stages of Act 46’s implementation, and there are mixed outcomes when community members are asked to vote to accept changes in their school district governance. Some communities are merging their school districts into new, larger districts, while other community members are rejecting these consolidations (Merger Activity, 2017). Votes on the outcomes of these ballot measures are front page news in publications around the state (Delcore, 2016; Faher, 2016; Hongoltz-Hetling, 2016). According to Bielawski (2016), in the first year after Act 46 passed, only “50 towns voted to merge 57 school

districts into 12 unified districts” (p. 1); over 200 communities were still in the process of deciding how to comply with Act 46.

While the intention of Act 46 is to eventually create new, larger supervisory unions and school districts within Vermont, some community members are rejecting merger plans. In early June 2016, “of the four supervisory unions holding unification votes, two approved merging and two did not” (Bielawski, 2016, p. 1); voters in these communities were aware of the financial consequences of a no vote since there was a “top tax break incentive — a 10-cent reduction in residents’ equalized homestead property tax rate that declines 2 cents each subsequent year” (Bielawski, 2016, p. 1).

The community members within the Franklin Northeast Supervisory Union are not the only group grappling with consolidation. According to an article in the *Valley News*, a local newspaper for the New Hampshire and Vermont residents within the Upper Valley region, the people within the Windsor Southeast Supervisory Union already shared resources and aligned the curriculum of their classrooms; however, the cash incentives offered by the state for an accelerated merger did not result in a speedy acceptance of consolidation. Instead, when community members were informed by the Vermont Agency of Education that closing a high school or relinquishing school choice were components of the merger, their “optimistic goal has died amid anguish” (Hongoltz-Hetling, 2016, p.8). As a result, the community stopped implementing Act 46 consolidation initiatives. Additional research might offer reasons that some communities around Vermont support school district consolidations and other voters reject these merger plans.

Summary

The purpose of this study is to determine why community members in Vermont choose or reject consolidation for their school districts and/or supervisory unions and not to analyze if consolidated schools provide the benefits touted by their advocates or the harms espoused by opponents. Research from across the United States offers conflicting explanations for responses to changes in student enrollment and community reactions to school consolidation initiatives. Researchers such as Anderson, (2009), Blauwkamp, Longo, and Anderson (2011), Donis-Keller (2015), and Meta (1999) provide a variety of reasons for support or opposition to consolidation initiatives in other communities across the United States: a history of past cooperation, financial motivations, social considerations, educational quality, and local control. Whether these or other factors influenced community members in their response to changes in enrollment and merger initiatives will be answered by this research.

Chapter 3 - Research Design and Methodology

Introduction

For the past two decades, the number of students in Vermont schools has dropped. Since peaking at approximately 107,000 students in 1997, the population of students fell to about 88,000 students by 2015 (Wertlieb and Bodette, 2015). This trend from the past twenty years is not projected to reverse course in the next decade. According to Snyder, deBray, and Dillow (2016), student populations in Vermont between 2014 and 2024 are projected to decrease by 10 percent or more. This data indicates that by the mid-2010s, the citizens of Vermont were confronted with two truths: overall public school student populations in the state decreased by about 18% in twenty years, and future projections indicate student populations will continue to decline another 10% or more. As one response to the loss and the projected loss of students, state legislators passed a bill known as Act 46 and Vermont Governor Shumlin signed it into law on June 2, 2015. Written into the law was an explanation that

With 13 different types of school district governance structures, elementary and secondary education in Vermont lacks cohesive governance and delivery systems. As a result, many school districts: (1) are not well-suited to achieve economies of scale; and (2) lack the flexibility to manage, share, and transfer resources, including personnel, with other school districts and to provide students with a variety of high-quality educational opportunities. (Act 46, 2015, p. 2)

To clarify the intentions of this law, the Vermont Agency of Education stated that Act 46 was designed to help school systems make changes, including partnering with other districts; gives the State Board of Education the means to help partner small, non-viable districts with others; and pressures school districts to control per pupil expenses without risking students' learning (Governance Fact Sheet, 2016). Furthermore, while it is the intent of the law to expedite partnerships with school districts, the Vermont Agency of Education (2016) states that it is not the intention of the law to close schools (p. 2). Regardless of the stated intent, some voters within Vermont communities are interpreting the law to mean that some schools will be closed through the consolidation process (Hongoltz-Hetling, 2016).

In many Vermont communities, schools are smaller than typical schools across the United States. Students in Vermont are educated in elementary schools with 52% fewer students than the average elementary school in the United States and in secondary schools with 36% fewer students than a typical U.S. school (Snyder, deBray, & Dillow, 2016). Vermont schools are organized within larger administrative units (Vermont Schools, 2017), and although schools throughout the United States are governed through various structures with differing levels of direct citizen input (Turner, Khrais, Lloyd, Olgin, Isenee, Vevea, & Carsen 2016), the citizens of Vermont (Fountain, 2013) can and do make decisions about their schools at a local level.

The purpose of this research is to determine the ways residents within two rural Vermont supervisory unions responded to changes in enrollment prior to and as the result of the enactment of Act 46 in 2015. The research will analyze the consequences of the actions of community members as student enrollment numbers changed within

their regions. The final research question will answer why some communities rejected consolidation options while others approved of mergers for two years after the passage of Act 46.

Problem and Purposes Overview

Problem

Student populations in Vermont continue to decline. As the July 1, 2019 (Act 46, 2015) deadline approaches for districts to comply with Act 46, school boards, community members, and legislators consider changes to school governance (Bielawski, 2016). Without a massive influx of children, Vermont school populations will continue to decline; state legislators identified this as a problem. Their solution, to encourage changes within school districts across the state, creates an additional problem by creating potential conflicts between the state's authority and local control over schools. According to Act 46, after June 30, 2019, if officials determine school districts have not complied with requirements to change governing structures; then the law permits the Agency of Education to merge, or "partner," school districts (Act 46, 2015). As a result, Act 46 usurps the long-standing tradition of local control over local schools that citizens have exerted through town meetings, and the law transfers some new authority to a state entity (Bryan, 2004). If community members approve plans that do not comply with Act 46, or if community members reject consolidation plans, then it is still possible the outcomes of their votes will be invalidated by the Vermont Agency of Education after June 30, 2019.

Purpose

This research sought to identify specific reasons why some communities supported or rejected consolidation as well as to determine what some communities did in response to changes in student enrollment in their schools. What impacts did their responses to demographic changes and consolidation efforts have, if any, on the schools within these communities? Answers to these questions might help to better inform policy makers in other communities with similar demographic changes.

On a state level, Vermont Agency of Education employees Burfoot-Rochford and Hall (2015) wrote to politicians in the State House about Vermont schools consolidation efforts, and they stated to lawmakers that “there isn’t really any research that specifically examines Vermont’s unique ‘small’ conditions” (p. 6). This research could add more to the limited scholarship with its focus on small, rural communities in the state. This research could be applicable beyond Vermont. Several states will experience student enrollment decreases (Snyder, deBray, & Dillow, 2016). Therefore, on a national level, if this research can identify underlying reasons how communities with declining enrollment respond, other communities could learn from the experiences of these Vermont towns.

Research Questions

The researcher intends to seek answers to three questions: In what ways did two rural Vermont communities respond to declining enrollment? How did community members respond to the enactment of Act 46? Why did some communities reject consolidation options while others approved of mergers?

Methodologies

Creswell (2013) suggests that qualitative research is an appropriate approach for scholars to explore a problem or issue because some variables cannot be measured in a simple, straight-forward manner; qualitative research can answer questions with complex answers, empower individuals, and illustrate trends. Quantitative research (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002) relies on statistical analysis, and this approach does not always fit the problem. To best answer the research questions, the researcher will primarily engage in qualitative research. Qualitative research is possible through a variety of methodologies; several types of qualitative research methods were considered, but the researcher eliminated methods based on their limitations.

One research methodology the researcher considered was a narrative approach. Narratives are generally gathered from one or two people (Creswell, 2013). However, if only one or two individuals from within two communities tell their stories, then the voices of other members of the communities might be omitted. A narrative approach could share the recollections of a small number of people, but for a broader answer to community responses to changing school enrollment, community responses to Act 46, and decisions about supporting or rejecting school consolidation efforts, such a small sample size might not accurately answer the research questions; therefore, the researcher did not conduct a narrative qualitative study. Another facet of narratives is that they tend to focus on a specific event. Czarniawska (2004) defines a narrative as a chronologically connected oral or scribed account of an action or event. A limitation of a narrative for this research is its reach; over the course of four years, more than one

action or event transpired within these supervisory unions in response to changes in student enrollment and in response to Act 46. A narrative does not encompass the larger, complex responses from community members.

The responses to changes in school enrollment and responses to school consolidation efforts can represent a phenomenon which occurred in Vermont both before and after the passage of Act 46 in June 2015. As Moustakas (1994) explains, a researcher can gather information from the people who experienced a phenomenon, and then provide a description to answer what they experienced and how they experienced it. The researcher, though, is attempting to answer how the members of the community responded to changes in school enrollment, why members of a community voted for or against school consolidation efforts. The researcher is answering why and how questions. How did community members respond to changes in school enrollment? Why did they respond to the changes in these ways? How did community members respond as a result of the passage of Act 46? Why did community members support or oppose consolidation efforts? If the essence of the experience (Moustakas, 1994, van Manen, 1990) is the culmination of a phenomenological study, then the researcher will not answer his questions adequately. A phenomenological approach is not the best qualitative method.

The researcher also considered a grounded theory approach. Creswell (2013) explains that grounded theory is designed to uncover a theory. Corbin and Strauss (2007) state how this methodology is designed to create a “unified theoretical explanation” (p. 70). It is not the intention of the researcher to uncover theories or to create theoretical explanations for the research questions. While the researcher might

learn why community members opposed or supported school consolidation efforts, a grounded theory approach will not answer the first research question about what communities did in response to changes in school enrollment prior to the passage of Act 46. As Creswell (2013) explains, “the researcher needs to recognize that the primary outcome of this study is a theory with specific components: a central phenomenon, causal conditions, strategies, conditions and context, and consequences” (p.90). While this research might be applicable to other scenarios, it will not generate a theory with all the components Creswell cites. This research focuses on the responses of community members of two supervisory unions within Vermont rather than all the people in all of the supervisory unions within the state. The research is not intended to serve as a basis for a new theory, but rather, to describe the responses to changes in student enrollment within school districts, and describe the sentiments of community members regarding school mergers. A grounded theory approach is not approach for this type of research.

An ethnographic study (Creswell, 2013) “discerns pervasive patterns such as life cycles, events, or cultural themes” (p. 95) as a researcher observes people in their environment. The researcher is not focused on the culture of the community members within the supervisory union to explain the responses to changes in school enrollment, why members support or oppose consolidation, or their responses to the enactment of Act 46 in 2015. Further analysis of these labels might identify cultural components of these communities, but the researcher is not seeking to analyze how the cultural groups within these communities interact to create an “overall picture of how a system

works” (Fetterman, 2010, p. 10). An ethnographic approach would not answer the research questions adequately.

The researcher concluded that the qualitative approach would not be a narrative, phenomenological, grounded theory, or ethnographic study because of their limitations; rather, the researcher conducted two case studies of the communities within two Vermont supervisory unions. Merriam (1998) provides the explanation for why case studies are the best methodology for this type of research because they can provide the researcher with a thorough understanding of the situation and his conclusions could impact future research and policies. The researcher had multiple variables to consider when he studied the responses to changes in enrollment, reactions to Act 46, or why members of these communities accepted or rejected school consolidation initiatives. The researcher desires to provide information to policy makers as they consider how they might respond to declines in student populations or address the challenges of school consolidation in rural communities. A case study approach provided the researcher with an in-depth understanding of the research questions.

Overview of the Two Case Studies

According to Merriam (1998), a “case study design is employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation” (p. 19). The in-depth situation the researcher intends to study relates to the research questions: What ways did two rural Vermont communities respond to declining enrollment; how did community members respond to Act 46 consolidation initiatives proposed by educational leaders; why did some communities reject consolidation options while others approved of mergers? To most

effectively answer these questions, the researcher conducted these case studies as a mixed methods approach combining both qualitative (QUAL) and quantitative (QUAN) data. Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003) defined mixed method as “a type of research design in which QUAL and QUAN approaches are used in types of questions, research methods, data collection and analysis procedures and inferences” (p. 711). The researcher conducted case studies of both the Franklin Northeast Supervisory Union (FNESU) communities and the White River Valley Supervisory Union (WRV SU) communities. The researcher selected the community members within two supervisory unions to study because their town populations and the number and types of schools, while not identical, are similar. These two supervisory unions both serve rural populations according to their own public descriptions (FNESU 2017, Act 46 Study Committee, 2017). One significant difference between these two communities, though, was the initial response to consolidating their school districts after Act 46 was enacted in 2015. In the FNESU, voters within all five towns rejected merging (Bielawski 2016); on the other hand, the Orange Windsor Supervisory Union (OWSU) and the Windsor Northwest Supervisory Union (WNWSU) communities came together and conducted a process to merge into the White River Valley Supervisory Union (Shaw, 2017) effective as of July 1, 2016.

The difference between the communities was the responses of people within these supervisory unions to consolidation and the differences in community responses to consolidation provided the researcher with more compelling information. The community members in all of the towns within the FNESU rejected merging schools, whereas WRV SU members accepted the merging of two supervisory unions into one

supervisory union; however, when the community members within the WRVSU were given the options to merge some of their school districts into new administrative bodies, Hillier and Vondrasek (2017) reported that some of the town members rejected this option, others voted to consolidate their school districts, and other communities opted for a wait-and-see approach. Community members within these two supervisory unions responded differently, and therefore, case studies for both supervisory unions provided the researcher with compelling details about responses to changing enrollment, responses to school consolidation initiatives, and community member reactions to Act 46.

The case studies are bounded to effectively answer the research questions. The researcher studied community responses for two years prior to the passage of Act 46 on June 2, 2015. Then the researcher examined community responses during the two years after the passage of the law. The researcher focused on relevant events within these communities between June 2013 and June 2017 because supervisory unions' business and budgets within the state of Vermont are based upon a July 1st to June 30th calendar year (Handbook for Vermont Municipal Treasurers, 2002).

Creswell (2013) reinforces the notion that a meaningful case study provides in-depth understanding, and to achieve this level of understanding, a researcher gathers together many types of qualitative data including documents, interviews, and observations. These many types of data come together as part of a mixed methods case study. Yin (2009) writes that mixed methods research can “collect a richer and stronger array of evidence than can be accomplished by any single method alone” (p. 63). The researcher wants a richer array of evidence, and therefore, for the purposes of

these case studies, the researcher combined a mix of community member surveys, interviews with leaders within the local supervisory unions, analysis of community member feedback regarding the survey responses, and thoroughly scoured local newspapers and public documents to gain an in-depth understanding using multiple sources of information.

The researcher conducted case studies which combined both quantitative and qualitative data in an embedded, mixed methods approach; however, these case studies are primarily qualitative in their nature with a smaller quantitative component. These case studies were conducted as “concurrent design” (Creswell, Plano Clark, et al., 2003). The concurrent, but separate, collection and analysis of quantitative data from community member surveys and qualitative data from open-ended responses, school board meeting minutes, newspaper articles, and letters to the editors.

The researcher concurrently gathered data from newspaper articles and school board meeting minutes to determine in what ways two rural Vermont communities responded to changes in student enrollment. While the number of students in these communities can be quantified, the responses to these changes are qualifiable variables and were coded as such. These public documents, in the forms of media accounts and meeting minutes, provided the researcher with additional qualitative data to help explain community member opinions about school consolidations and community responses to the enactment of Act 46. The researcher concluded his data collection by asking community and educational leaders qualitative questions about changes in student enrollment in their supervisory unions and the responses of community members after the enactment of Act 46. A concurrent mixed methods case

studies of these two supervisory unions was the best methodological approach for the researcher to conduct his investigation.

Yin (2009) states that a researcher conducts a case study to “*explain the presumed causal links in real-life interventions that are too complex for survey or experimental stages*” (p. 19). The researcher explains how residents responded to changes in enrollment prior to and as the result of the enactment of Act 46 in 2015. Their actions were coded to qualify their responses. Responses to Act 46 were qualitatively categorized by the researcher. Since the researcher explains why some communities rejected consolidation options while others approved of mergers after the passage of Act 46, the responses of community members and educational leaders provided a rich resource of qualitative data for the researcher to analyze. Demographic information provided by community members and student enrollment numbers in the supervisory union schools are sources of quantitative information. A mix of quantitative and qualitative data were compiled to provide the researcher with comprehensive data and provided him with information he can use to explain how and why the communities responded to changes in student enrollment and how they responded after the enactment of Act 46.

Population and Sample

The study population included registered voters from within the White River Valley Supervisory Union (WRVSU) and the Franklin Northeast Supervisory Union (FNESU) because voters determined the outcomes of various consolidation initiatives within these communities. The towns in the WRVSU include Bethel, Chelsea, Granville, Hancock, Rochester, Sharon, South Royalton/Royalton, Stockbridge,

Strafford, and Tunbridge. (WRVSU, 2017). The towns within the FNESU include Bakersfield, Berkshire, Enosburg Falls, Montgomery, and Richford (FNESU, 2017). These two supervisory unions have similar numbers of residents. Based on the 2010 U.S. Census and from data organized by Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community (2013), the population of these communities is displayed in Table 3.1 below.

Table 3. 1 2010 U.S. Census Population in Various Vermont Towns

<u>Town</u>	<u>Population</u>	<u>Supervisory Union</u>
Bakersfield	1,347	FNESU
Berkshire	1,708	FNESU
Bethel	2,002	WRVSU
Chelsea	1,242	WRVSU
Enosburg	2,703	FNESU
Enosburg Falls	1,305	FNESU
Granville	302	WRVSU
Hancock	326	WRVSU
Montgomery	1,195	FNESU
Rochester	1,113	WRVSU
Richford	2,305	FNESU
Sharon	1,486	WRVSU
(South) Royalton	2,748	WRVSU
Stockbridge	729	WRVSU
Strafford	1,106	WRVSU
Tunbridge	1,232	WRVSU

Note. Data sources include 2010 Census Summary File 1 prepared by the U.S. Census Bureau, 2011 and State of Vermont, Agency of Commerce and Community Development, Vermont Population Projections – 2010 - 2030. August, 2013.

The total number of townspeople residing within the borders of the WRVSU is 11,504 people, and the total community population in the FNESU is 10,506.

FNESU consists of

- two elementary schools (K-5),
- three elementary and middle schools (K-8),
- one junior/senior high school (6-12),
- one high school (9-12) and
- one primary designated technical career center (FNESU 2017).

WRVSU consists of

- three elementary schools (K-6),
- two elementary and middle (K-8),
- three elementary, middle, and high (K-12) and
- one primary designated technical career center (WRVSU 2016).

According to the Vermont Agency of Education, each Supervisory Union enrolled approximately the same number of students in 2016: WRVSU enrolled 1600 students while FNESU enrolled 1597 students (Vermont Agency of Education, 2016). With a similar number of students, similar (although not identical) types of schools, and similar numbers of residents, the communities within FNESU and WRVSU are comparable to one another with the exception of their initial merger responses to Act 46 (Bielawski, 2016, Shaw, 2017). Participants in the case studies were registered voters within these communities; one exception will be made for educational leaders who work in administrative roles within the supervisory unions but reside outside of the communities. According to the Vermont Secretary of State's data (Vermont Election Division, 2016, p. 1), the number of registered voters within these communities is displayed in Table 3.2.

Table 3. 2 Number of Registered Voters in Selected Vermont Communities

<u>Community</u>	<u>Registered voters</u>
Bakersfield	975
Berkshire	996
Bethel	1,364
Chelsea	980
Enosburg (Falls)	2,137
Granville	223
Hancock	273
Montgomery	923
Richford	1,527
Rochester	855
Sharon	1,069
(South) Royalton	2,201
Stockbridge	543
Strafford	939
Tunbridge	971

Note. Data from Vermont Secretary of State (November 17, 2016). Voter turnout, elections division. Retrieved from <https://www.sec.state.vt.us/media/800294/2016gevoterturnout.pdf>

Sources of Error

The researcher was mindful of possible sources of error. There are four primary sources of errors in surveys (Dillman, 1998, Groves, 1989): coverage error, sampling error, measurement error, and nonresponse error. Since the coverage area is bounded to include the community members within the FNESU and WRVSU, individuals from outside of this area do not need to be surveyed, but the registered voters residing within these communities had opportunities to respond to these surveys.

Measurement error is created through several factors including poor wording of questions, conducting bad interviews, and participant behaviors (Dillman, 1998). While the researcher cannot control poor behaviors in participants, he mitigated measurement error with feedback from cognitive interview techniques. To confirm the validity of these questions, cognitive interviewing with individuals not participating in the research was conducted. The researcher asked the survey questions to non-registered voters who resided within the communities in order to practice cognitive interviewing techniques. To better understand the community members' thoughts, the researcher asked the persons completing the survey to think aloud as they read the questions. Geiselman and Fisher (2014) recommend that the interviewer encourage the person being interviewed to actively volunteer information. As the interview continues, the researcher/interviewer needs to convey his "need for extensive, detailed information, [and] that a thorough search of memory will require concentration" (p. 3). After completing practice surveys through the cognitive interview process, the researcher used feedback from the subjects to modify questions and interview techniques as needed. A modification suggested through this process included asking interviewees if they had anything else they wanted to add at the conclusion of their interviews. Additionally, the researcher learned that the microphone used during interviews was sensitive enough to pick up some background noise; therefore, when possible, the researcher sought quiet locations to conduct his interviews.

The researcher took steps to ameliorate some of the potential sources of errors in his surveys by mindfully generating survey questions and thoughtfully gathering data from members of these communities. Since not every member of the community

was interviewed or surveyed, nonresponse error was managed through a careful review of public comments, newspaper quotes, feedback from community members, interview responses, and school board meeting records. These additional sources of information provided a voice to the community members who did not respond to the survey.

Community Member Feedback

The researcher asked an optional question on the consent form which was on a separate paper from the community member survey. Survey respondents were asked if they were willing to volunteer their time to participate in a focus group. Three individuals from within the WRVSVU and two individuals from the FNESU indicated a willingness to take part in a focus group; however, because so few individuals from the survey respondents volunteered to participate, the researcher contacted them on an individual basis. He asked these volunteer, registered voters from these communities to share their opinions about community member responses to Question 9 (see Appendix A). Question 9 is an open-ended question regarding school mergers. These volunteers were recruited by the research through the Consent Form (Appendix B). The researcher reviewed the interview questions (see Appendix C) with these community members to elicit their feedback regarding whether or not these questions will adequately answer the research questions. After speaking to these five individuals, the researcher had some additional material to validate his data. Furthermore, to validate the community member responses regarding their support or opposition to school district mergers, the researcher confirmed the sentiments of community members. Statements made by interviewees regarding community member responses

to Act 46 consolidation initiatives as well as sentiments expressed by community members in local media and school board minutes were analyzed to confirm that the survey responses reflected the opinions of community members.

Interviews

Before interviewing influential policy makers within the supervisory union, the researcher conducted a survey of community members, heard feedback from community members, and reviewed public documents and newspaper articles. Reviewing these sources of information prior to the interviews provided the researcher with the most flexibility to follow leads gleaned from an analysis of the responses and data.

After document reviews, surveys of community members, and focus group sessions were complete, the researcher conducted interviews. The population for interviews for this project included the supervisory union superintendents and school district board members within FNESU and WRVSU who served two years before, during, or in the two years after the passage of Act 46; therefore, two purposefully selected superintendents of schools and three educational leaders from each of the supervisory unions provided a mixed sample of individuals. A mixed sample of interviewees can provide “triangulation, flexibility, and meet multiple interests and needs” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 28). The researcher needed to have interviewees offer their opinions of responses to changes in enrollment and school consolidation initiatives along with their perceptions of community member responses to Act 46 to triangulate their answers with survey answers and public meeting/media documents.

In conclusion, initially, a sample of registered voters of the FNESU and WRVSU was surveyed, while the researcher also reviewed public documents such as school board meeting minutes and newspaper articles. The researcher then received feedback from registered voters from each supervisory union willing to offer their opinions in order to validate responses from fellow community members. The researcher modified an interview question and interview technique for the two supervisory union superintendents and six educational leaders. These surveys, public documents, community members' responses and interviews were analyzed to answer the research questions.

Data Collection and Instrumentation

Community Member Surveys

Czaja (2005) suggests that “there is no requirement that a survey must use only one method. Sometimes, the best approach is a combination of methods” (p. 55). Appendix A provides the complete list of survey questions; the answers to questions provided the researcher with data. Question 1 asks participants to identify their dedicated school district for Vermont taxes to verify that the researcher had a variety of responses from people representing all the towns within these supervisory unions. Questions 2, 3, and 4 asked respondents to indicate how long they lived in this community, did they attend school in the community, and do they have any relatives currently attending schools in the communities. The researcher wanted to know if the respondents were connected to schools in the communities through their own experiences of through family members. For Questions 5 and 6, the researcher wanted to learn the age or gender identity of respondents to match with local demographics.

Question 7 asked respondents to identify the sources of information about schools, and this offered the researcher insights regarding whether community members support or oppose school consolidations in their communities because of the sources of their information about topics related to schools. Question 8 asked whether respondents support school mergers as a lead-in to the open-ended response to Question 9.

Question 9 asked participants to explain their reasons for supporting or opposing consolidation; responses to this question helped the researcher to answer one of his primary research questions.

The researcher surveyed community members through surveys mailed to randomly selected registered voters. The researcher requested a list of registered voters in the state of Vermont from the Vermont Secretary of State and then separated voters into their respective communities in spreadsheets. The registered voters for each community were then randomly sorted on the spreadsheets, and the researcher selected community members from these lists. There are some advantages and disadvantages to different methods of surveys (Czaja, 2005). The public information provided by the state of Vermont (Condos, 2015) for voters includes names and addresses, but not phone numbers, and so the mail survey was conducted because of its lower cost and the limited time available to the researcher.

While Czaja (2005) believes that a face-to-face survey method is beneficial because it can be a more relaxed way to engage with participants, the disadvantages, are that face-to-face interviews are (Czaja, 2005) costly, time-consuming, could cluster people of similar demographics together, and respondents might be hesitant to provide personal behavior or answer in a way they think the researcher wants. Mailed

surveys provided anonymity and a means to distribute the survey to members of the communities spread across two supervisory unions. The researcher emphasized the anonymity of the surveys to encourage participation, and he provided two separate envelopes for respondents so that they could send a copy of their consent form in one envelope and the copy of their survey responses in the other. Kennedy (2008) writes that some people are reluctant to discuss sensitive political topics unless they believe their replies will be anonymous; however, if a survey is anonymous, then people are also more likely to answer honestly instead of providing socially desirable answers. Since the open-ended question on the survey asked a political question regarding support or opposition to school consolidations, and despite the lack of empirical evidence regarding anonymity and its impact on cooperation and quality, the researcher values the potential for honest responses even if they might not be socially desirable replies.

A limitation of the mailed surveys is that they are “subject to response bias because they don’t receive a good response rate from people with low education, [individuals] who do not like to write, [and] those who have difficulty reading” (Czaja, 2005, p. 38). While a mail survey can provide a “reasonably high response rate when the topic is highly salient to the respondent” (Czaja, 2005, p. 38), and both the survey and consent form are written at an eighth-grade reading level, the researcher acknowledges that some individuals might opt to not respond because of lower education and/or lower literacy abilities. The written surveys, though, are only one means of gathering data from community members, and since interviews and

document analysis of meeting minutes and media comments provided the researcher with additional evidence of community sentiments.

Telephone surveys were not considered for this survey because of the large number of disadvantages for this survey method. Czaja (2005) warns that “rural areas are likely to have a lower percentage of telephone households” (p. 46) and that “telephone respondents can and do respond to open-ended questions; however, they usually answer in a sentence or a few short sentences” (p. 49). Despite advances in the past decade to increase access through cell phones, rural areas continue to experience a coverage gap when compared to non-urban areas (Perrin, 2017). Since the open-ended response to the question regarding support or opposition to school consolidation measures is particularly important to the researcher, and research (Czaja, 2005; Groves & Kahn, 1989) shows that telephone surveys do not generate as long or detailed responses as often, then the drawbacks to this methodology are clear. Too many people could be excluded from the population because of a more limited access to reliable communication in rural areas, and responses might not be as thorough.

In summary, the researcher conducted anonymous mailed surveys to provide an opportunity for registered voters within the FNESU and WRVSU to respond to the questions. A limitation of these surveys is that community members with less education or low literacy skills might not want to participate, and the surveys were only sent to community members who are registered to vote in these towns.

Community Member Feedback

The researcher intended, once the surveys were completed, to invite a randomly selected group of registered voters who responded to the mailed surveys to

participate in a focus group within the two respective supervisory unions. Survey respondents, on separate consent forms, had the opportunity to contact the researcher by phone, email, or by providing their contact information. Anonymous surveys did not ask individuals to provide this information on the survey itself; rather, if a community member wanted to express an interest in participating in a focus group, she or he needed to communicate her or his desire either through a phone call, an email, or providing her or his contact information separately from the survey. Three individuals in the WRVSU and two survey respondents from the FNESU provided their contact information so that the researcher could speak to them; no one emailed, wrote, or phoned the researcher regarding participation in a focus group.

Since the researcher wanted to verify if the sentiments of the survey respondents resonated with other community members, he spoke with these individuals separately. (Czaja 2005) states that participants might provide new insights as community insiders since “the researcher, not being a member of the survey population, might not be aware of [opinions], [and] such opinions can be uncovered quickly [in focus groups]” (p. 109). These individuals, although not seated as a focus group, served as the community insiders to verify that the sentiments expressed by community members in their surveys resonated with sentiments of others in their communities and across their supervisory unions.

Documents

One source of data for the researcher was newspapers with coverage area for FNESU and WRVSU. *The County Courier* covers news for Bakersfield, Berkshire, Enosburg, Montgomery, and Richford as well as other towns outside of the Franklin

Northeast Supervisory Union. *The Randolph Herald*, meanwhile, reports on news from towns inside and outside of the White River Valley Supervisory Union. Stake (1995) suggests that many researchers will use newspapers, meeting minutes, and other types of written records in case studies (p. 68). There are some advantages and disadvantages for researchers using documents like newspapers. In this case, newspaper articles and letters to the editor were not created specifically for the purpose of this research; the researcher was flexible (Merriam 1998) as he built an understanding of the situation. Since the newspaper articles and school board meeting minutes were created to record historical information rather than as research documents, the researcher developed categories over time; Dey (1993) indicates that the researcher uses qualitative analysis to create concepts rather than adhere to pre-conceived categories, and so the researcher did not establish pre-existing codes prior to his initial review of these documents.

Issues of the *Randolph Herald* and *County Courier* from June 2013 to June 2017 were combed for articles and editorials relating to changes in school enrollment, responses to these changes, and responses to Act 46 within these Vermont communities.

In addition to these media sources providing documentary evidence, four years worth of public minutes of school board and supervisory union meetings were coded for relevant data in regards to school enrollment and community responses both before and after the passage of Act 46. Under Vermont statute 32 V.S.A. Sec. 1671(a)(6) and Vermont's public record law, town clerks are required, as the custodian of public records, to produce a record upon request (Condos, 2015).

Interviews

Targeted interviews with superintendents and educational leaders who were willing to volunteer their time took place after community member surveys, community member feedback, and document analysis occurred in order to provide the researcher with the broadest understanding of the community responses. There are some strengths and weaknesses with interviews. Yin (2009) states that the strengths of interviews include that they are “targeted - focuses directly on case study topics, (and) insightful - provides perceived causal inferences and explanations” (p. 102); however, interviews also have weaknesses, including bias from poorly worded questions, errors of omission or improper memory of events, and bias from responding to questions to please the interviewer.

In order to overcome the weaknesses of the interview process, the researcher corroborated claims using other sources of evidence (Yin, 2009). These sources of evidence to confirm the veracity of the responses of the interviewees include answers from the community member surveys, community member feedback, school board meeting minutes, and newspaper articles. Discrepancies in the interviewee responses and other sources did not occur, and so the researcher used all his sources to form his conclusions.

Data Analysis

As evidence was gathered from document reviews, surveys, community member feedback, and interviews, the data was analyzed. Creswell (2013) and

Merriam (1998) suggests that for a case study, a researcher should bring together and analyze multiple sources of data. The researcher analyzed the data based on the recommendations of Stake (1995) who suggests that during the process of categorical aggregation, the investigator will “mine the data for various instances to determine if issue-relevant meanings manifest themselves and patterns are revealed” (p. 78).

Creating a table could help organize these categories (Creswell, 2013), and since the researcher is studying community responses within two separate supervisory unions, Yin’s (2009) cross-case synthesis approach is desirable. This cross-case approach “starts with the creation of word tables that display data” (p. 156) and then “the analysis can start to probe whether different groups of cases appear to share some similarity” (p. 160). In the final stage of analysis, the research considered naturalistic generalizations that were formed. Naturalistic generalizations are based on the “associating generalizations that various actors have reached together” (Stake, 1995, p. 85), whether those actors are community members responding to survey questions, individuals quoted in newspapers or meeting minutes, or persons interviewed by the researcher.

Forming these naturalistic generalizations helped the researcher analyze the various problems outlined for the case studies and provided validity for his conclusions through the process of triangulation. Mathison (1988) concludes that triangulation, using multiple sources of data to confirm the findings, can provide a “holistic understanding [and] plausible explanations about the phenomena being studied” (p. 17). These multiple sources, documents, surveys, and interviews converged the evidence to arrive at valid conclusions. Patton (2002) suggests that

there are four types of triangulation: data, investigator, theory, and methodological. In this study, the *data* was triangulated. As Yin (2009) attests, because multiple sources of data about the same phenomenon are analyzed, constructs can be validated through data triangulation.

Summary

The researcher determined: the ways two rural Vermont communities responded to declining enrollment; community member responses to Act 46; and why some communities rejected consolidation options while others approved of mergers. Case studies of the citizens of the White River Valley Supervisory Union and the Franklin Northeast Supervisory Union were conducted to answer the research questions. The number of students and residents within these two supervisory unions are similar, but geographically, they are isolated from each other. A combination of registered voter surveys, community member feedback, documents including local media and school board meeting minutes, and interviews with educational leaders from these two supervisory unions provided the researcher with data for analysis. When the data was coded and categorized, patterns emerged as the data was analyzed so that the researcher answered his research questions.

Chapter 4 – Analysis of Data

As student populations in Vermont declined, a 2015 law known in Vermont as Act 46 was passed by legislators to address the financial consequences of declining school enrollment. This law provided a framework for community members and school board members to explore options for school district consolidations (Act 46, 2015). Research on school consolidation initiatives in other parts of the United States (Anderson, 2009; Blauwkamp, Longo, & Anderson, 2011; Donis-Keller, 2015; Meta, 1999) provide contradictory explanations for support or opposition to educational mergers. In Vermont, Burfoot-Rochford and Hall (2015) stated to lawmakers that “there isn’t really any research that specifically examines Vermont’s unique ‘small’ conditions” (p. 6). The researcher of this study sought to determine what some community members did in response to changes in student enrollment in their schools prior to the enactment of Act 46 as well as to identify specific reasons why some community members response to, and their support or rejection of, consolidation initiatives after the enactment of Act 46 in 2015. The following questions were considered during this research: (a) In what ways did community members in two rural Vermont supervisory unions respond to declining enrollment; (b) How did community members in these two supervisory unions respond to Act 46 consolidation proposals; (c) Why did some community members reject consolidation options while others approved of mergers?

Overview of Data

Data was collected for two supervisory unions in Vermont, the Franklin Northeast Supervisory Union (FNESU) and the White River Valley Supervisory Union (WRVSU). Both supervisory unions serve rural populations, have small towns, and contain small schools within their districts (FNESU 2017, Act 46 Study Committee, 2017). Geographically, they are located in different regions of the state. FNESU is close to the Canadian border in the north, while WRVSU is near the New Hampshire border in the center and east part of Vermont. The initial response to consolidation after Act 46 was enacted in 2015 was another difference in the communities. In the FNESU, voters within all five towns rejected merging (Bielawski 2016, p. 1); on the other hand, the Orange-Windsor Supervisory Union and the Windsor Northwest Supervisory Union communities came together and conducted a process to merge into the White River Valley Supervisory Union (Shaw, 2017 p.7), effective as of July 1, 2016.

The researcher relied on several different sources of information for data and data collection to answer the research questions. Data sources included:

- community surveys
- school board meeting minutes
- local newspaper articles
- opinion letters to the editors
- interviews with community and educational leaders within towns located in the White River Valley and Franklin Northeast Supervisory Unions.

To distinguish among individuals, the researcher cited the people who responded to his survey as respondents, he cited people who were interviewed by reporters or who wrote letters to the editors as community members, and he cited educational and community leaders as interviewees. In this chapter, the quantitative data gathered from the community surveys is presented first, followed by information from the documents the researcher reviewed. Then, the researcher provides disaggregated information about the characteristics of community and educational leaders interviewed in order to provide these persons with anonymity. The final section of this chapter presents the data gathered by the researcher during the course of his investigation.

Community Survey

The researcher designed a community survey that provided both quantitative information about the people participating in the research as well as qualitative information about their support or opposition to school consolidations. Cognitive interviews with five non-registered voters residing within the communities provided the researcher with feedback regarding the validity of the survey questions before they were mailed to randomly selected registered voters in the supervisory unions. The feedback from the cognitive interview participants indicated that they could comprehend the questions and they understood that the survey asked an open-ended response regarding school consolidation. Since mail surveys are subject to response bias (Czaja, 2005), in order to determine if the responses were a reliable reflection of the sentiments of community members, the researcher corroborated claims using other sources of evidence (Yin, 2009). These sources included school board meeting

minutes, interview responses, feedback from community members who responded to the survey, newspaper articles, and opinions expressed in letters to the editors in local papers.

The survey (Appendix A) and consent form (Appendix B) were written at an 8th grade reading level (Stockmeyer, 2009) and mailed to randomly selected (n=415) registered voters residing in the towns within the Franklin Northeast and White River Valley Supervisory Unions. Survey respondents were asked to indicate the school district of their residence within the supervisory union to ensure there were responses from registered voters residing in all of the towns of these supervisory unions. Respondents were asked how long they had lived within the community, if they attended schools within the community, and if they had any relatives currently attending schools in the community. As part of the survey, respondents were asked to provide information about their age and gender so that the researcher could determine if they were representative of the town populations age and gender demographics. The researcher also asked respondents to consider all the ways they received information about the schools in their district; the researcher sought to determine how information about schools is disseminated to community members. The final questions asked whether respondents supported school mergers within their community and for the respondents to explain their answer to this question. An optional question was provided at the end of the survey for participants to identify their political ideology on a spectrum from very conservative to very liberal; this question was designed for the researcher to consider an additional project related to political ideology and attitudes

about school mergers. The results of this question are not part of the scope of these case studies.

The researcher was not able to sample every member of the population within a reasonable amount of time; he sent surveys to 185 registered voters with the FNESU towns and 230 registered voters within the WRVSU towns. With a response rate of 39 out of 6558 registered voters residing in the towns of the FNESU and 54 from 9418 voters within the WRVSU, the surveys had a 95% confidence level and a confidence interval of 15 and 13, respectively (Creative Research Systems, 2012). Most quantitative researchers use a confidence level of 95% (Creative Research Systems, 2012) to determine how accurately a question would be answered by other members of the population. With a confidence interval of 15, if 50% of the responses to a question were “NO,” then adding or subtracting 15 from 50 indicates that in 95% of surveys, between 35% and 65% of the responses would also be “NO” (Creative Research Systems, 2012). These parameters provided the researcher with some reliability for the responses; however, it should be noted that Dillman (1998) warns that in surveys, “the precision of results is closely related to the number of respondents” with the caveat that this is “assuming no other sources of error” (p. 55); the researcher acknowledges this limitation in his results.

Descriptive Characteristics of Respondents

The researcher requested a current list of registered voters from a list provided by the Vermont Secretary of State. To randomly select survey recipients, the researcher organized the list of registered voters from the towns onto separate spreadsheets, and then randomly sorted the names. 2.8% of registered voters within

the FNESU and 2.4% of WRVSU registered voters were sent surveys. The researcher mailed a total of 415 surveys to registered voters and 93 of those surveys were returned completed; 27 were returned by the US Postal Service as undeliverable, 22% of the surveys were returned to the researcher with answers to the questions. Table 4.1 indicates the population of the towns, provides the number of registered voters, indicates the number of surveys mailed to randomly selected voters from the FNESU communities, and provides information about the number of surveys returned to the researcher including the response rate.

Table 4. 1 *FNESU Voters and Survey Response Rates*

<u>Community</u>	<u>Population</u>	<u>Voters</u>	<u>Sent</u>	<u>Returned</u>	<u>Response Rate</u>
Bakersfield	1,347	975	35	8	.23
Berkshire	1,708	996	35	7	.20
Enosburg	4,008	2,137	40	11	.28
Montgomery	1,195	923	35	6	.17
Richford	2,305	1,527	40	7	.18
FNESU	10,563	6558	185	39	.21

Note. 100% response rate would equal 1.0. US Census data. Registered voter data from Vermont Secretary of State (November 17, 2016). Voter turnout, elections division. Retrieved from <https://www.sec.state.vt.us/media/800294/2016gevoterturnout.pdf>

Table 4.2 indicates the population of the towns, provides the number of registered voters, indicates the number of surveys mailed to randomly selected voters from the WRVSU communities, and provides information about the number of surveys returned to the researcher including the response rate.

Table 4. 2 *WRVSU Voters and Survey Response Rates*

<u>Community</u>	<u>Population</u>	<u>Voters</u>	<u>Sent</u>	<u>Returned</u>	<u>Response Rate</u>
Bethel	2,002	1,364	30	9	.30
Chelsea	1,242	980	25	7	.28
Granville	302	223	10	3	.30
Hancock	326	273	10	4	.40
Rochester	1,113	855	30	6	.20
Sharon	1,486	1,069	25	6	.24
(South) Royalton	2,748	2,201	40	9	.23
Stockbridge	729	543	20	4	.20
Strafford	1,106	939	30	6	.30
Tunbridge	1,285	971	30	9	.30
WRVSU	12,339	9418	230	54	.23

Note. 100% response rate would equal 1.0 U.S. Census data. Registered voter data from Vermont Secretary of State (November 17, 2016). Voter turnout, elections division. Retrieved from <https://www.sec.state.vt.us/media/800294/2016gevoterturnout.pdf>

As indicated by Tables 4.1 and 4.2, response rates varied between 17% and 28% in FNESU communities and 20% to 40% in WRVSU towns. Franklin Northeast Supervisory Union communities include the towns of Bakersfield, Berkshire, Enosburg, Montgomery, and Richford. The White River Valley Supervisory Union includes Bethel, Chelsea, Granville, Hancock, Rochester, Sharon, South

Royalton/Royalton, Stockbridge, Strafford, and Tunbridge. There were survey responses for all fifteen of these towns.

In the survey, community members were asked how long they had lived within the supervisory union; there was a range of responses from as little as one and a half years to seventy years. For residents the White River Valley Supervisory Union (WRVSU) that replied to the survey, 28% attended schools within the supervisory unions and 72% of respondents did not attend school within the supervisory unions. For the residents of the Franklin Northeast Supervisory Union (FNESU) that responded to the survey, 31% attended schools within the supervisory unions and 69% of respondents did not attend school within the supervisory unions. When respondents replied if they had any relatives currently attending schools in a WRVSU community, 50% (n=54) indicated they did have at least one relative currently attending a school in the supervisory unions the researcher studied, while 50% did not have a relative currently enrolled in a WRVSU school. When respondents replied if they had any relatives currently attending schools in a FNESU community, 46% (n=39) indicated they did have at least one relative currently attending a school in the supervisory unions the researcher studied, while 56% did not have a relative currently enrolled in a WRVSU school. The survey stated that relatives might include (but are not limited to the following terms): daughter, son, grandson, granddaughter, niece, nephew, cousin, brother, or sister.

Tables 4.3 and 4.4 display information about whether a respondent attended a local school in either the FNESU or WRVSU and how they answered Question 8: Do you support school mergers within your community?

Table 4. 3 *FNESU Responses: Attendance and Opinion of Mergers* (n=39)

<u>Support</u>	<u>Attended school locally</u>	<u>Did not attend school in the district</u>
YES	2	7
NO	4	9
MAYBE	6	11

Table 4. 4 *WRVSU Responses: Attendance and Opinion of Mergers* (n=54)

<u>Support</u>	<u>Attended school locally</u>	<u>Did not attend school in the district</u>
YES	8	20
NO	3	8
MAYBE	4	11

Tables 4.5 and 4.6 display information about whether a respondent, at the time of the survey, had a relative enrolled in a school in either FNESU or WRVSU and how they answered Question 8: Do you support school mergers within your community?

Table 4. 5 *FNESU Survey Responses: Relatives, Opinion of Mergers* (n=39)

<u>Support</u>	<u>Relative(s) currently enrolled</u>	<u>Relative(s) not enrolled</u>
YES	5	4
NO	8	5
MAYBE	4	13

Table 4. 6 *WRVSU Survey Responses: Relatives, Opinion of Mergers* (n=54)

<u>Support</u>	<u>Relative(s) currently enrolled</u>	<u>Relative(s) not enrolled</u>
YES	16	12
NO	4	7

MAYBE

7

8

Survey respondents were also asked to provide information about their age and gender. In Table 4.7, the percentages of respondents in the categories of age and gender are rounded to the nearest whole number.

Table 4. 7 *Survey Age and Gender Response*

<u>Response Category</u>	<u>FNESU</u> (n=39)	<u>WRVSU</u>
(n=54)		
18 to 25 years old	.03	N/A
26 to 35 years old	.08	.11
36 to 45 years old	.18	.15
46 to 55 years old	.31	.22
56 to 65 years old	.38	.30
66 to 75 years old	.05	.19
76 years or older	N/A	.04
Female	.63	.57
Male	.37	.41
No answer	N/A	.02

As the data in Table 4.7 indicates, only one respondent from the FNESU was aged 18 to 25, while most of the randomly selected registered voters who replied, 69%, were aged 46 to 65. Within the WRVSU, 23% of the respondents were at least 66 years old, and 52% of responses came from persons aged 46 to 55; no one aged 18

to 25 responded to the survey from the WRVSU. Registered voters who responded from the FNESU were 63% female, 37% male; respondents from towns in the WRVSU were 57% female to 41% male. Respondents were also provided an opportunity to not respond to the question about gender or to identify themselves on a non-binary scale; one person indicated a preference not to answer the question.

Respondents in both the FNESU and WRVSU received information about local schools from a variety of sources, with all respondents indicating two or more sources in their surveys. In the survey, respondents were asked if they learned about local schools from attending school board meetings, through conversations with others, from family members, through the Internet/emails, from neighbors, newspapers, radio, school board minutes, or television. In addition, respondents could indicate other sources. Some other sources mentioned by respondents were “quarterly newsletter, community bulletin boards, colleagues at work, and the morning coffee club at Bernie’s.” The percentages in Table 4.8 do not add to 100% because respondents selected as many different sources that were applicable to themselves.

Table 4. 8 *Sources of Information About Schools*

<u>Source</u>	<u>FNESU</u> (n=39)	<u>WRVSU</u> (n=54)
Attending board meetings	.07	.09
Conversations with others	.84	.72
Family members	.54	.30
Internet/emails	.62	.19
Neighbors	.38	.26
Newspapers	.71	.67
Other sources	.23	.22
School board minutes	.07	.11
Radio	.07	.17
Television	.23	.11

Note. Respondents could select as many sources of information from a checklist on the survey as they needed, including providing other sources.

Seventy-one percent of respondents living within the boundaries of the FNESU primarily receive news about schools through newspapers and 84% indicated that conversations with their friends and family served as sources for information. Seventy-two percent of respondents from WRVSU learn about schools from conversations with their friends and family, and 67% receive information about schools from newspapers. For community members from both supervisory unions, reading school board meeting minutes and attending school board meetings were the least common methods as a means of learning about local schools; three respondents from the FNESU and four respondents from the WRVSU indicated they attended informational meetings/community forums hosted by school boards which were designed to provide community members with additional information about Act 46 and initiatives on local ballots.

Validation of Community Responses

People who responded to the anonymous survey were given an opportunity to participate in a feedback forum; participants had the option to include their contact information on the consent form indicating a desire to take part in a community forum. Only two individuals from the FNESU and three from the WRVSU expressed an interest in taking part in a community forum. Rather than host forums, the researcher contacted these respondents and individually asked them if the sentiments expressed by community members in the surveys reflected their understanding of community opinions regarding consolidations. The researcher also went to school board meetings

to speak with school board members from these towns to validate the statements made by people from these communities about school consolidations. The feedback from the participants and board members indicated that the respondents expressed sentiments espoused by members of their communities; the voices of the respondents were the voices of the communities.

Document Analysis

School Board Minutes

Administrative assistants from both the White River Valley Supervisory Union (WRVSU) and the Franklin Northeast Supervisory Union (FNESU) provided the researcher with digital copies of the school board meeting minutes from the time frame under review: July 2013 to June 2017. Both supervisory union websites have direct links to school board meeting minutes for the past two years which can be accessed digitally without a password.

Local Newspapers

The Vermont State Archives serves as a repository for newspapers throughout the state. The *Randolph Herald*, serving the WRVSU community, and *County Courier*, covering the FNESU towns, as local media sources for community members, have similarities and differences important for the researcher. Both publications are weekly, and both newspapers report on events in all the communities within their respective supervisory unions; however, because these newspapers are part of different media markets, the community members in their respective supervisory unions were reading news articles and letters to the editors that related to their towns. Letters to the editors of local newspapers provided the researcher with quotations from community

members; the sentiments expressed in these public letters provided the researcher with additional opinions regarding school consolidations within each supervisory union. The researcher also verified information by reviewing issues of the *Valley News*, covering WRVSU news, and the *St. Albans Messenger*, reporting on FNESU events. Letters to the editors, editorial commentaries, and local school coverage in these two larger daily publications were also reviewed to confirm details provided to him by interviewees or through his review of school board minutes.

Interviews

Community and Educational Leaders

After the researcher completed a review of local media and school board meeting minutes and analyzed the results of respondent surveys, he reached out to six community and educational members who served in educational leadership or advocacy roles before, during, and after the passage of Act 46 in 2015. Some of the interviewees currently serve in leadership roles in FNESU or WRVSU towns. To maintain the confidentiality of these sources, the researcher confirms that the community and educational leaders currently or previously served as superintendents or school board members in towns within each of the supervisory unions. These interviewees included three men and three women who were all between 45 and 65 years old; three interviewees represented the FNESU, while three interviewees spoke about the WRVSU. The researcher also interviewed the current superintendents of both supervisory unions. Since one interviewee requested anonymity, all individuals including the current superintendents of the FNESU and WRVSU are referred to using

pseudonyms. These unisex pseudonyms include: Casey, Courtney, Jamie, Kelly, Logan, Sam, Taylor, and Tracy.

The researcher asked the interviewees the same ten questions (Appendix C).

Interviewees were first asked to

- describe enrollment trends in their respective supervisory unions,
- consider ways that school boards within the supervisory union addressed these trends,
- reflect on the best qualities of the supervisory unions schools prior to the passage of Act 46, and
- reflect on the most pressing problems facing schools and the supervisory unions before June 2015.

These first four questions were designed to answer ways that community members responded to changes in school enrollment. Interviewees were then asked to consider

- their response,
- the supervisory union member school board responses, and
- community responses following the passage of Act 46.

Their answers provided the researcher with an understanding of why community members might oppose or support school consolidation initiatives. After these seven initial questions were asked, community and educational leaders were also queried to consider

- how these responses differed within various communities, and

- whether their initial responses to changes in school enrollment changed because of Act 46.

These questions were asked to determine community member responses to Act 46 and/or changes in enrollment. The researcher concluded the ten questions by asking interviewees to consider what changed within the supervisory unions after the passage of Act 46. This open-ended response was intended to clarify the consequences of the actions of community members prior to the enactment of Act 46, and to determine additional reasons why citizens within these supervisory unions might have supported or opposed merger initiatives. At the close of the interviews, the research asked the interviewees if they had any additional information they wanted to share. A few interviewees provided additional information or queried the researcher about other topics not related to the case studies. The researcher conducted these interviews in person and reviewed transcripts of these interviews to verify the themes which emerged from community survey responses and his review of local newspapers and school board meeting minutes.

Research Questions

The researcher was guided by three questions:

- In what ways did two rural Vermont communities respond to declining student enrollment?
- What were community member responses to Act 46 consolidation initiatives?
- Why did some community members reject consolidation options while others approved of mergers?

Analysis of Data

Research Question 1

The first question considered by the researcher, in what ways did communities respond to declining student enrollment, was answered through a review of local media articles, school board meeting minutes, and from analysis of interviews conducted with community and educational leaders. Two themes emerged related to this question: (a) competing priorities in lieu of enrollment, and (b) opportunities for sharing.

Table 4.9 indicates the percentage for two themes the researcher noted during his examination of school board meeting minutes for the communities within the FNESU between July 2013 and June 2015.

Table 4. 9 *FNESU Frequency of Items Shared (July 2013 – June 2015)*

<u>Community</u>	<u>Sharing Resources</u>	<u>Enrollment Discussions</u>
Bakersfield	.22	.09
Berkshire	.11	.06
Enosburg	.22	.17
Montgomery	.20	.13
Richford	.09	.14

In the case of Bakersfield, 22% of board meeting minutes contained a reference to an opportunity to share students, resources, or ideas with another school district. One example of sharing resources was noted in a meeting was about the Leveraging Educational Assistance Program (LEAPS) summer program; Bakersfield and Enosburg school groups shared students because of, as recorded in the minutes, “a

decline in LEAP attendance at Bakersfield” (Bakersfield School Board Minutes, April 15, 2015, p. 1). Sharing and enrollment discussions were not unique to FNESU school boards. Table 4.10 indicates the percentage for two themes the researcher noted during his examination of school board meeting minutes for the communities within the WRVSVU between July 2013 and June 2015.

Table 4. 10 *OVSU/WNWSU Frequency, Items Shared (July 2013 – June 2015)*

<u>Community</u>	<u>Sharing Resources</u>	<u>Enrollment Discussions</u>
Bethel	.36	.11
Chelsea	.20	.15
Granville	.30	.20
Hancock	.14	.23
Rochester	.22	.24
Sharon	.14	.09
(South) Royalton	.19	.10
Stockbridge	.15	.17
Strafford	.24	.18
Tunbridge	.25	.17

Additional examples of sharing within the FNESU and WRVSVU communities are provided in a separate section later in this chapter. This theme was observed the least in Richford school board meetings, at 9%, to a high of 36% in the Bethel school board meetings in the two years preceding the passage of Act 46.

100% of school board minutes reviewed between July 2013 and June 2015 dealt with the business of overseeing a school district; teachers were hired and fired, budgets were developed and deliberated, funds were appropriated, and various minutia were a part of school board meetings. The researcher, though, noted that the business of overseeing a school district served as competing priorities to enrollment discussions. The fewest discussions regarding enrollment numbers occurred in the

Berkshire school board meetings; only 6% of the school board meeting minutes from July 2013 to June 2015 in this community referenced student enrollment. The highest number of references to enrollment figures occurred in Rochester, with 24% of school board meeting minutes including notes about enrollment discussions. Within the fifteen school boards of the WRVSU and FNESU, minutes indicate the percentage of conversations about enrollment were within the range of 6% to 24%, with a median of 15% of school board meeting minutes containing references to enrollment. School board members, in the two years preceding Act 46's enactment, engaged in conversations about student enrollment, as noted in Tables 4.4 and 4.5, but enrollment was not a primary item of business for any of the school boards studied by the researcher. School board members' oversight of school districts also required them to discuss a plethora of items unrelated to student enrollment; these agenda items served as competing priorities.

Competing Priorities within FNESU before Act 46

Student enrollment was not a significant concern for the five school boards within the Franklin Northeast Supervisory Union in the two years prior to Act 46's passage in June 2015. As the data in Table 4.4 displayed, only 6% of school board meeting minutes in Berkshire alluded to enrollment conversations, the lowest percentage for the communities in the FNESU; the highest percentage of conversations about student enrollment occurred in Enosburg, with 17% of the meeting minutes citing a conversation about student enrollments.

At a school board meeting in Montgomery, Superintendent Jay Nichols "reviewed information regarding the 10-year student population changes in several

supervisory unions” and “he noted a general decline in enrollment numbers [across the state], with FNESU having the least percentage of student loss for Franklin County, at 5%” (Montgomery School Board Minutes, February 10, 2014, p.1). A week later, Bakersfield school board meeting minutes indicate that a discussion occurred as members “reviewed loss/gain of students in Supervisory Unions and schools around the area” and noted that “Bakersfield has had a loss of 24 students over the last 10 years” (Bakersfield School Board Minutes, February 17, 2014, p.2). These student enrollment trends did not seem to alarm school board members at any of the school board meetings in February 2014, nor did they create a sense of concern. Instead, programs, policies, budgets, and unexpected problems were the primary focus of school board members.

In Bakersfield, rather than focus on the loss of 24 students over a decade, board members considered projects that would benefit student learning, like the construction of a sugar house (Bakersfield School Board Minutes, May 19, 2014). School board members also worked to create policies “about the use of social media” (Bakersfield School Board Minutes, September 15, 2014, p.2). Since student enrollment appeared in only 9% of Bakersfield board meeting minutes, this theme was not prevalent as a topic of conversation. In Berkshire, the school board focused on items such as the construction of a new roof (Berkshire School Board Minutes, September 17, 2013) or the high percentage of students living in poverty (Berkshire School Board Minutes, August 5, 2014). These items required the members to consider costs and programs, not changes in student enrollment.

In Enosburg, school board members discussed student enrollment more than their colleagues in neighboring school districts. Members considered “allowing sophomores to enroll in career center classes in order to keep class sizes up” (Enosburg School Board Minutes, October 21, 2014, p.2). Two months later, members had a “discussion regarding getting more students from sending schools (especially Sheldon and Fairfield)” (Enosburg School Board Minutes, December 16, 2014, p.1). Nevertheless, business items other than student enrollment figures, including developing policies for staff and student handbooks (Enosburg School Board Minutes, August 20, 2013; Berkshire School Board Minutes, May 21, 2015), were a focus of the school board members. School board members developed budgets for town voters to approve (Enosburg School Board Minutes, March 12, 2015) or considered personnel changes (Enosburg School Board Minutes, November 11, 2014); these operational items competed with and overshadowed the topic of student enrollment numbers.

In Montgomery, school board members discussed enrollment changes in three of the twenty-two board meetings between July 2013 and June 2015; mentioning enrollment changes, though, was not considered cause for concern. “[Principal] Beth [O’Brien] was happy to report that enrollment was up this year and expected to be at 141, play (sic) school through 8th grade, at the end of the month. (Montgomery School Board Minutes, September 8, 2014, p.1). Program considerations were more prominent in the conversations of school board members. Members learned, as per state mandate, “centralization” of special education services will take place (Montgomery School Board Minutes, February 10, 2014). Unexpected expenses, like

a paving project for the school driveway (Montgomery School Board Minutes, April 13, 2015), also appeared as school business. Student enrollment was not a significant topic of discussion for Montgomery school board members.

In Richford, enrollment changes were overshadowed by other projects and budgetary matters. One project that spanned the two years prior to Act 46, were solar panels (Richford School Board Minutes, August 26, 2013) for the Richford School. While board members did learn that “there are five fewer tuitioned students than budgeted for in FY15 which equates to an approximate drop of \$60,000+ in revenue” (Richford School Board Minutes, September 22, 2014, p.1); this item did not generate further discussion about enrollment concerns. Board members focused on other fiscal matters when they considered some non-traditional means of student fundraising (February 23, 2015) and revenue building, including a “discussion in regards to investing the current scholarship funds into the stock market” (Richford School Board Minutes, April 27, 2015, p.2). Two years after the initial conversation started regarding solar panels, the school board members learned that the “panels should be put up next week and the electricians will do their work during the first full week in July” (Richford School Board Minutes, June 22, 2015, p.1).

For the five communities within FNESU, other priorities overshadowed school board conversations about student enrollment figures. This changed, though, in June 2015, when Superintendent Jay Nichols gave a presentation about “changes to the law H.361 known as Act 46,” and a motion was made to “go forward with [the] Unification Study Committee” (Bakersfield School Board Minutes, June 15, 2015 p.1). Superintendent Nichols presented information about Act 46 at the separate school

board meetings of the FNESU communities. This was a turning point for school boards; updates from the unification study committee were added to the monthly agendas of the five school boards across the FNESU in the year following the enactment of Act 46; Act 46 updates were monthly business items on the agenda for the regularly scheduled school board meetings in Bakersfield, Berkshire, Enosburg, Montgomery, and Richford between August 2015 and June 2016. Research Question 2 focuses on the responses to Act 46 in these communities.

Competing Priorities within WRVSU before Act 46

A review of school board minutes and local media two years prior to the enactment of Act 46 indicates that board members in the White River Valley Supervisory Union communities discussed school enrollment numbers at some of their board meetings, but enrollment discussions were just one of the many items of business. Programs, policies, budgets, and unexpected problems competed with enrollment priorities.

Prior to the enactment of Act 46, the WRVSU school boards were either members of the Windsor Northwest (WNWSU) or Orange Windsor Supervisory Unions (OWSU) communities. These two supervisory unions started the process of merging prior to passage of Act 46 under the guidance of the Agency of Education (Strafford School Board Minutes, September 26, 2013). This was the second merger of two supervisory unions facilitated by the State Board of Education using powers granted under Act 156 which “encouraged unions to consolidate - the first being the merger of the Windsor Southwest and Rutland-Windsor SUs” (Levasseur, January 22, 2015, p. A1). Although the community members within the newly formed White

River Valley Supervisory Union (WRVSU) merged two separate supervisory unions, the Orange River Supervisory Union (OWSU) and the Windsor Northwest Supervisory Union (WNWSU) on July 1, 2016, the towns' school district configurations did not change because of this consolidation.

By the end of 2013, prior to the enactment of Act 46, community members within the Orange Windsor Supervisory Union and the Windsor Northwest Supervisory Union, which would eventually merge to form the White River Valley Supervisory Union, were already focused on the results of the State Board of Education's actions regarding the breakup of WNWSU and how it would impact their communities, if at all (Marx, December 19, 2013). Unlike the FNESU, supervisory union merger conversations between WNWSU and other supervisory unions, including the OWSU, occurred three years before the passage of Act 46. In December 2012, Vermont State Board of Education members voted to place WNWSU under "a comprehensive supervisory union study (a.k.a. 'Boundary Change Study')" (Vermont School Board Association, January 6, 2015, p. 9). The State Board of Education sponsored a study to consider boundary changes for the towns served by the Windsor Northwest Supervisory Union. The decline in student enrollment in towns like Rochester impacted the overall student enrollment in the WNWSU, and a majority of the State Board of Education members recommended dissolving the WNWSU because of its size (Marx, November 28, 2013). The Windsor Northwest Supervisory Union school board members in Bethel, Hancock, Granville, Rochester, and Stockbridge spent time at their meetings, addressing "a lot of moving parts, including changing contracts for teachers and staff" (Marx, December 19, 2013, p.A8). Discussions of

student enrollment in WNWSU board meetings related to supervisory union consolidation.

Student enrollment numbers were not the only topic of conversation for school board members. In the Fall of 2013, an unexpected problem emerged for the school boards of both Bethel (WNWSU) and South Royalton (OWSU); members were concerned the news that appeared in the *Randolph Herald* about “a school bus driver for Butler’s Bus Service in Hartford had a blood-alcohol level of more than 1.9 while he drove students Sept. 20 from Hartford to Whitcomb High (in Bethel), then to South Royalton High School, and then to Randolph” (Slater, November 7, 2013, p.1). This incident was also discussed separately by the Bethel and South Royalton school boards as items of business. At the time, the actions of this bus driver were a priority for school boards in three different supervisory unions – OWSU, WNWSU, and the Orange Southwest Supervisory Union covering Randolph, Vermont; the behavior of the bus driver compelled different school boards to address an unexpected event and to respond to community member concerns about student safety.

Another example of an unexpected problem school board members addressed was personnel changes. The school board in Rochester learned that “after just on (sic) year on the job, Rochester School Principal Linda Kelley has resigned” (Vondrosek, July 18, 2013, p.1). The resignation of an administrator created a new challenge for a school board already aware of enrollment challenges. At Rochester’s Kindergarten through Grade 12 school “student enrollment decreased from 250 students in 2004 to 143 students today [enrollment in Grades K-5 remained steady]” (Schenkman & Wissner, November 28, 2013, p. A8). The Rochester school board members, like their

colleagues in other school boards, focused on multiple items. In the second half of 2013, they discussed declines in enrollment, Boundary Change Study recommendations, and the unexpected resignation of the school principal; their business items were a mix of competing priorities.

Community members throughout the towns in the Orange Windsor Supervisory Union focused on programs, policies, and budgets. In Strafford, for eight months, board members considered the implications of a new, full-day Kindergarten program (Strafford School Board Minutes, January 14, 2014). In Tunbridge, school board members considered policy changes for the benefit of the Tunbridge Fair Association (Tunbridge School Board Minutes, November 4, 2013). In Chelsea, school board members considered policies on purchasing items from other states (Chelsea School Board Minutes, August 7, 2013). In Granville, board members discussed proof of residency requirements (Granville School Board Minutes, May 14, 2014) since the policy impacted the school district's operating budget. In Sharon, school board members considered how tuition increases in Hartford and a new boiler would impact the budget (Sharon School Board Minutes, February 11, 2014). A primary function of school boards involves monitoring the costs associated with programs and policies, and developing yearly budgets for voter approval. Operating budgets for schools, though, were not always well-received by community members. When changes in school enrollment necessitated program changes, voters in Bethel challenged the budget school board members presented to the community.

Determined voters at Bethel's School Board meeting defeated a proposed \$5.4-million budget that favored online learning as opposed to traditional

methods. The vote was a lopsided 120 to 22. Voter turnout was strong with about 150 people in attendance ... School Board Chair Kristen LaFromboise spoke briefly about the budget process, stressing the board's attempt to achieve a balance between quality and expense while doing what's best for Bethel's schools. However, the inclusion of significant cuts to the foreign language and health and family consumer sciences curricula, in order to increase technology offerings, proved too much for voters, who were adamant in their dissent. (Warhol, March 5, 2015, A1)

The Bethel school board spent several months developing a budget designed to compensate for reduced student enrollment; online programs would provide the remaining high school students with additional class choices (Bethel School Board Minutes, March 12, 2015); however, the townspeople rejected this approach as a response to declining student numbers.

In Bethel, Chelsea, Granville, Hancock, Rochester, Sharon, South Royalton, Stockbridge, Strafford, and Tunbridge, school board members and community members discussed budgets, unexpected, policies, and programs between July 2013 and June 2015. These meeting items, at times, overlapped with conversations about enrollment; however, school board members sought other methods to address changes in student enrollment or the challenges associated with educating students in rural communities. Sharing resources was one such strategy in all the school districts prior to Act 46's enactment.

Sharing within FNESU before Act 46

Another theme related to changes in enrollment involved opportunities for sharing. Teachers or students were shared across school districts within the two supervisory unions to compensate for a lack of human capital. Kelly, one of the community and educational leaders interviewed by the researcher, commented that prior to the enactment of Act 46, “one of the best qualities of the FNESU was cross-training of teachers through SU-wide in-services and alignment of the curriculum across school districts.” To share access to professional development opportunities, teachers from communities throughout the supervisory union could collaborate together in spite the limited number of faculty within their own school districts. School board members in FNESU communities learned of several sharing opportunities.

The Richford school board explored a Community Center partnership with the high school (May 28, 2014). When “Jay Farnham resigned his position as health teacher to take a new job at RHS, and because that position was also shared with the Berkshire School, [the Montgomery] and the Berkshire principal actively (sought) his replacement” (Montgomery School Board Minutes, May 12, 2014, p.2). An “ELL teacher needed to serve one student in Enosburg ES, one in Berkshire, and three at the high school” (Enosburg School Board Minutes, September 17, 2013, p.1). Across the supervisory union, school boards learned of plans for “Special Education Consolidation at the Supervisory Union level, as mandated by state law” (Berkshire School Board Minutes, October 14, 2014, p.1). Special education and ELL resources were shared.

Students were also shared across supervisory unions. At an Enosburg school board meeting in January 2015, when Franklin Northwest Supervisory Union guests informed Enosburg school board members “that Sheldon will not provide bus transportation to EFHS (Enosburg Falls High School) beginning next year, [there was a] discussion of Enosburg providing busses for those 52 students” (Enosburg School Board Minutes, January 6, 2015, p.1). Berkshire and Richford students collaborated with each other on several occasions. Students partnered with the Richford NOTCH program; they “attend NOTCH program in Richford in the morning and (returned) to Berkshire for afternoon programs” (Berkshire School Board Minutes, May 11, 2015, p. 2). At the same meeting, Berkshire school board members learned about a “Humanities Camp Collaborative between Richford High School and Berkshire Middle School (and) both schools collaborated and received one of the ten grants awarded in Vermont” (Berkshire School Board Minutes, May 11, 2015, p.2). To provide additional opportunities for sports teams, students were shared. “Bakersfield will have a softball team this year (will include students from another school)” (Bakersfield School Board Minutes, March 30, 2015, p.1). Sharing students between these school districts within the FNESU provided opportunities for children to attend programs that would have otherwise been denied to them because of changes in student enrollment.

Sharing within the WRVSU before Act 46

Students were also shared for programs to provide enough pupils to make enrichment activities viable. As early as July 2013, the South Royalton School Board members were seeking partnerships with the Tunbridge and Chelsea School Boards to

share middle school students for sports teams. Although Tunbridge and Chelsea middle school students combined to form sports teams, after meeting with Athletic Directors from these school districts, South Royalton members did not pursue a merger of students for sports teams (South Royalton School Board Minutes, November 5, 2013); in the same business item, though, one school board member expressed that he “would like to see that all kids are given the opportunity to play sports” (p.1). Logan, an interviewee, indicated that one of the strengths of the supervisory union prior to Act 46 was the centralization of bus services, technology, special education, and business staff which increased efficiencies. In August 2013, an article in the *Randolph Herald* highlighted how the Bethel and Rochester schools shared students to form sports teams. Bethel Schools Athletic Director Willy Walker stated, “Our varsity girls’ team had serious number problems, and Rochester realized they were short in numbers for the boys’ teams” (Hill, August 28, 2013, B8). Jeff Mills, the athletic director at Rochester High School, added that “in order for Rochester and Bethel to be able to offer soccer, something needed to be done ... and that something turned out to be an alliance” (Hill, August 28, 2013, B8). One article in the *Randolph Herald* noted that there were “new opportunities as a result of the supervisory union merger, such as sharing teachers across multiple schools” (Warhol, February 12, 2015, B9). School students and staff members were not the only human capital shared by school districts. In Hancock and Granville, attorney fees were shared between the two communities’ school boards (Hancock School Board Minutes, June 11, 2014). This arrangement provided both school boards with legal counsel, but the communities did not need to bear the cost burden alone.

People in various school districts within both supervisory unions found ways to share capital or human resources; they facilitated cooperation between schools for professional development, and they provided opportunities to share resources. Since some school student populations could not support programs alone, school boards also considered or endorsed the merging of sports teams or enrichment programs to provide students access to these programs. Sharing students between schools gave them opportunities to provide these programs. School board members in both supervisory unions' school districts also engaged in a few discussions on enrollment changes and potential consolidations in the two years prior to Act 46 becoming a law; however, student enrollment and consolidation concerns became more important and prevalent items of business in school board minutes with the enactment of Act 46 in June 2015.

Research Question 2

What were community member responses to Act 46? In the FNESU and WRVSU, responses by community members varied. These reactions to consolidation initiatives proposed by educational leaders included a “wait and see” approach, exploring consolidation with nearby school districts, supporting school district mergers on local ballots, or opposing school district consolidation.

FNESU Community Member Responses to Act 46

A Unification Study Committee was formed in the summer of 2015, with two representatives from Bakersfield, Berkshire, and Montgomery respectively, three members from Richford, and four members from Enosburg (Bakersfield School Board Minutes, June 15, 2015). School board meeting minutes in each of the five school

districts included items of discussion relating to the Unification Committee throughout the Fall of 2015 and Spring 2016. Articles began to appear in the local newspaper, the *County Courier*, and “members of the Franklin Northeast Supervisory Union committee exploring the idea of school unification in the district ... (stated that) one thing is sure: change will happen, one way or another” (FNESU Committee, January 7, 2016, p.5). Local community members began voicing their concerns through letters to the editor. One community member wrote

The details of Act 46 make this act difficult to understand and to implement; and the time given by the Act for towns to decide the details of the expected unification of town school districts is woefully inadequate for meaningful citizen participation. One of Enosburgh’s members on the Unification Committee has quit the Committee because of the lack of broader citizen involvement. For me, the failure to aggressively share information with citizens in my community and to involve us from the beginning in designing these changes is the most disappointing aspect of Act 46’s implementation. The lack of details in the *County Courier*’s article reinforces my opinion that at least in the FNESU those leading this process have not conscientiously invited meaningful citizen involvement in deciding on the detailed changes that are coming. (Henaveld, January 14, 2016, p.5)

Letters to the editor regarding Act 46 appeared in ten issues of the weekly *County Courier* between January 21st and June 2nd; community members expressed both their support and opposition to the consolidation proposals. Finally, when the registered voters in the FNESU went to the ballot boxes on Tuesday, June 7th, all

communities rejected the first school district merger proposals (Bakersfield School Board Minutes, June 13, 2016)

Table 4. 11 *FNESU Consolidation Vote Outcome (June 2016)*

<u>Community</u>	<u>Voter Turnout</u>	<u>Votes</u> (NO – YES)	<u>Decision</u>
Bakersfield	.19	99 – 89	NO
Berkshire	.19	113 – 78	NO
Enosburg	.11	158 – 82	NO
Montgomery	.29	219 – 52	NO
Richford	.17	207 – 60	NO

Note. Source of voting outcomes. Monroe, M. (June 8, 2016). FNESU school merger unanimously defeated. *St. Albans Messenger*.

According to the data in Table 4.11, the vote against consolidation was closest in Bakersfield; 52% of voters reject the proposal, while 48% were in favor of school district merger. 59% of Berkshire voters, 66 % of Enosburg voters, 81% of Montgomery voters, and 78% of Richford voters rejected the proposal to form a unified school district within the FNESU. The outcome of the vote did not stop further efforts to make changes to the school districts within the Franklin Northeast Supervisory Union. Within a month of the vote, Superintendent Jay Nichols requested that all board members should attend the supervisory union board meeting on September 29, 2016. The goal of the meeting: “to find out how to get the word out to more people about unification and the truths of what will happen if it does or does not pass” (Bakersfield School Board Minutes, July 18, 2016, p.1). The same meeting minutes noted that the “most commonly heard concern [from community members] was losing school choice and control” (Bakersfield School Board Minutes, July 18, 2016, p.1). In Berkshire, school board members were tasked to “poll their

communities in the aftermath of the vote” (Berkshire School Board Minutes, October 11, 2016 p.1). By November, “the [Montgomery school] board held a brief discussion about Act 46 and decided to ‘sit tight’” (Montgomery School Board Minutes, November 14, 2016).

In February 2017, an article in the *County Courier* stated that the “Vermont Principals’ Association Executive Council ... proudly announces the hiring of its new Executive Director, [FNESU Superintendent] Jay Nichols” (Henaveld, February 9, 2017, p.8). Interviewee Kelly opined that Superintendent “Nichols left [FNESU] because he was a strong supporter of mergers, and he lost too much support in the community after the divisiveness of the campaign.” On May 11, 2017, it was reported in the *County Courier* reported that “Lynn Cota, who is currently Principal of Berkshire Elementary School, was unanimously selected to take this lead role at FNESU” (p.2). By the end of that month, “Lynn discussed Act 46 with the [Richford] board in regards to the November 30th deadline and also seeked (sic) their willingness to come together to submit a proposal” (Richford School Board Minutes, May 22, 2017, p.2).

In the Franklin Northeast Supervisory Union, as a response to Act 46, a Unification Committee was formed, community members and educational leaders split into opposing camps; in June 2016, registered voters in all five school district communities voted against the proposal to form a consolidated school district within the supervisory union. In the aftermath of this vote, the FNESU school superintendent resigned, but members of the community and board members continued to debate the merits of Act 46 into the summer of 2017.

WRVSU Community Member Responses to Act 46

Within a week of Governor Shumlin signing H.361/Act 46 into law, state legislators attending the Strafford school board meeting heard criticism from community members; “reaction from the board and community members was swift - and overwhelmingly negative (with) Board member Hilary Lineham (stating) ‘creating a [merged district] would mean we have no Strafford School Board’” (Brown, June 18, 2015, p. A1). By the end of the summer, as the White River Valley Supervisory Union began to coalesce, the chair of the transition board’s communication committee “emphasized that school choice will not be affected by the SU integration process underway. Nor, she said, is there any plan to close any of the existing schools” (Vondrasek, August 27, 2015, p. A2). By January 2016, after several community forums regarding Act 46 and with the work of the transition board, the WRVSU retained “the typical SU structure, with a separate school board and budget for each town in the SU; (however), the creation of the WRVSU d(id) not meet the requirements of Act 46” (Vondrasek, January 9, 2016, A1). Although no other towns within the new WRVSU symbolically protested Act 46 at their yearly town meetings, during the Strafford town meeting on March 6, 2016, townspeople “unanimously and loudly” passed a non-binding resolution calling for the repeal of Act 46 (Brown, March 8, 2016, p. A7).

By April 2016, school boards from five of the ten towns in the supervisory union formed study committees while the other five school boards conducted surveys of residents, hosted community forums, and held meetings with districts outside of their current supervisory unions (Vondrasek, April 7, 2016). While this was taking

place, though, at the April Chelsea school board meeting, Stan Brinkman presented the board with a petition; “each voter’s signature was in support of not only repealing Act 46, but a promise not to re-elect any legislator that voted for Act 46” (Thomas, April 21, 2016, p.A6). Each of the school board members that were present, and the Chelsea school principal, signed Brinkman’s petition (Thomas, April 21, 2016). Despite the petitions and the non-binding resolution, Act 46 was not repealed, and study committees continued to explore options for district mergers within the supervisory union (Floyd, November 17, 2016). The chair of the Pre-K-12 Operating Study Committee, Lisa Floyd, acknowledged that “transportation remains a serious concern, particularly for residents of Rochester and Chelsea, since these communities are more isolated from Bethel and Royalton” (Floyd, November 17, 2016, A3). In December 2016, 50 middle and high school teenagers from a Student Congress met with members of the Study Committee to provide feedback to the members (Campbell, December 8, 2016). In the same month, a South Royalton group publicly stated that it was “pushing hard to slow down the process” (Vondrasek, December 22, 2016, A1). At the end of the year, the Study Committee opted for a model that “calls for all three towns [Bethel, Rochester, and Royalton] to maintain their PreK-5 programs, and to operate one middle school in Bethel, and one high school in South Royalton. In order to go forward, the plan would need voter approval (in April 2017)” (Vondrasek, December 29, 2016, A1). Tunbridge and Chelsea voters considered forming a single, combined school district during the April 2017 vote, while the Sharon, Strafford, and Stockbridge school boards wanted the Agency of Education to consider their districts for Alternative Structure classification (Vondrasek, December 29, 2016, A7).

According to the Vermont Agency of Education, an Alternative Structure can be a sustainable supervisory union with “multiple member districts each of which has its own independent school board” (Unmerged Districts, August 1, 2016, p.1). By April of 2017, it was up to the voters to decide if they would merge school districts or not. The data in Table 4.12 shows the outcomes of the votes across the White River Valley Supervisory Union in April 2017.

Table 4. 12 *WRVSU Consolidation Vote Outcome (April 2017)*

<u>Community</u>	<u>Voter Turnout</u>	<u>Votes</u> (NO – YES)	<u>Decision</u>
Bethel	.28	67 – 320	YES
Chelsea	.26	78 – 173	YES
Granville	.11	3 – 23	YES
Hancock	.14	4 – 35	YES
Rochester	.46	178 – 213	YES
Sharon	N/A		
(South) Royalton	.30	462 – 206	NO
Stockbridge	N/A		
Strafford	N/A		
Tunbridge	.28	109 – 151	YES

Note. Source of voting results: Camerato, T. (April 12, 2017). Royalton voters defeat towns’ proposed school mergers. *Valley News*.

The townspeople in each of the voting communities except for South Royalton approved the consolidation of their school districts. Logan, one of the interviewees, claimed that “a campaign of fake news and misinformation caused voters in South Royalton to reject the proposal.” This interviewee cited the false rumor which spread alleging that all high schools in the new White River Valley Supervisory Union would be closed if school districts merged, and a new centralized union school would be constructed instead. Casey, when interviewed separately from Logan, also claimed

that opponents to consolidation in the FNESU “did not tell voters the truth, and (they) claimed that Richford High School was going to be shut down” if a district merger was successful.

The outcome of the vote galvanized both supporters and opponents; after gathering enough signatures for revotes in three communities: Rochester, Tunbridge, and Royalton (Vondrasek, May 3, 2017, A1), voters returned to the polls in June 2017.

Table 4. 13 *WRVSU Consolidation Vote Outcome (June 2017)*

<u>Community</u>	<u>Voter Turnout</u>	<u>Votes</u> (NO – YES)	<u>Decision</u>
Rochester	.44	236 - 144	NO
(South) Royalton	.30	248 - 377	YES
Tunbridge	.35	164 - 160	NO

Note. Source of voting results. Slater, M. (June 22, 2017). Rochester says ‘no’ to merger plan. *Randolph Herald* and Kelly, D. (July 06, 2017). Tunbridge says ‘no.’ *Randolph Herald*.

In a reversal of votes, community members in South Royalton approved district consolidation, and voters in Tunbridge and Rochester rejected consolidation (Vondrasek, June 25, 2017, A1). The reasons for the changes in voting outcomes are reflected in the answer to Research Question 3.

Research Question 3

The final research question focused on why some community members rejected consolidation options while others approved of school mergers. The researcher relied on school board minutes, local media articles, interviews with community and educational leaders, and community surveys to answer this question. Three themes emerged: financial considerations; control of local schools; and student

opportunities. Thirty-eight percent of respondents explained their support or opposition to school mergers was based on financial considerations, 35% of respondents cited local control as reason for their opinion, and 45% of respondents cited student opportunities as a reason to justify their position on consolidation initiatives regardless of whether or not their stance was in support or opposition to mergers; respondents included more than one of these three dominate themes in their explanations, and therefore, these three themes together add to more than 100% of the results.

Financial Considerations Within FNESU and WRVSU

Costs were a concern for both supporters and opponents of school consolidations for community members in both the Franklin Northeast and White River Valley Supervisory Unions. According to thirty-eight percent of survey respondents, cost was a reason to support or oppose mergers. Supporters of consolidation initiatives perceived monetary benefits. On one side of the argument, a community member indicated his support of mergers in his survey because they “will increase efficiency of oversights and therefore save some taxpayers money in the long run.” Another survey respondent expressed support for mergers because they would “trim some fat, [since there are] too many high salaries for so few students to oversee.” Interviewee Casey commented that “we have too many teachers and staff for the number of kids [and] that’s why Vermont has the most expensive education system in the US.” Potential savings motivated Casey to support Act 46. Since Strafford district did not merge with another district, this could prove to be a costly miscalculation. When interviewed, Logan remarked that since “Strafford [community

members] did nothing, they [taxpayers] can expect to see a significant property tax increase;” the townspeople did not merge their school district with another district, and this was a costly miscalculation in Logan’s opinion.

On the other hand, an opponent of school consolidations responded in her survey that she was opposed to mergers because, in her opinion, “taxes will go up because students need to be bussed further, [and the] cost of education will go up for some towns.” In a published letter to the *County Courier* editor, one local wrote that “if one of the end goals of Act 46 is tax relief, there is no guarantee to it or any long-term savings” and that she opposed this legislation by stating that “Act 46 is a bribe, that if not taken mandates punishment” (Suarez, January 2016, p.7). Another commentator wrote that “if we want more efficiency and quality, we should reward actual demonstrated improvements in efficiency and quality rather than compliance with simply eliminating local school boards” (Kelley, November 2016, p.5). He complained that ‘Maine attempted an Act 46 type consolidation of more centralized school districts 10 years ago. There were no savings for taxpayers. The primary result was bigger administrative offices’ (Kelley, November 2016, p.15). Financial concerns were voiced by community members in both supervisory unions. Supporters of school mergers viewed consolidation as a means of saving money while opponents perceived that costs would remain the same or increase as a result of mergers.

Local Control of Schools Within FNESU and WRVSU

In the case of community members within both the FNESU and WRVSU, another theme emerged from the data: local control. In the replies of thirty-five percent of survey respondents, local control of schools was cited as an important

reason to oppose mergers. No one acknowledged that school district mergers would lead to an increase in local control by community members over their community school. Survey respondents opposed to school consolidations stated opinions like: “I hate to loose (sic) control over schools; taxpayers will lose their voice; I support mergers with separate schools sharing resources, (but) do not support taking identity of existing schools or taking school decisions out of immediate community.”

Interviewee Kelly perceived Act 46 to be “a threat to local voice that is being constantly attacked or eroded at various levels by the state.” Another interviewee, Logan, stated that “local control undermines the ability for school districts to implement effective change if every (school board) operates in a silo.” Opinions varied widely on the matter, though, and were not one-sided. A resident of Enosburg, Vermont, thought that local control was a moot point when he was quoted in the *County Courier* saying that “I think the unification of Vermont’s town school districts is an appropriate reform (because) local control ended long ago as learning needs became less local and more national” (Henaveld, January 2016, p.5). Within the same community, though, another resident offered a contrarian position and lamented that “it [Act 46] disenfranchises Vermont towns, our most precious thread of direct democracy in the Vermont tradition” (Suarez, January 2016, p.7). She concludes her thoughts by “hop(ing) that other townspeople within the Supervisory Union recognize how this act threatens direct democracy and vote against it” (Suarez, January 2016, p.7). Within a month, a writer countered her arguments in the *County Courier* by stating that the “merger means a small shift in control [and] if we do not do so - if we let Fear (sic) stop our opportunity for progress - if we fumble, we lose this great

chance” (Kimel, February 2016, p.5). In one commentary, a concerned Vermonter stated that “The fix is in. Montpelier is taking over Vermont’s schools and turning them into a state-run monopoly so that it can amass power for itself” (Bucknam, August 2016, p. 17). Jamie, when interviewed by the researcher, believed that Act 46 hindered the ability of school districts to implement decisions that would work on a local level. Jamie thought “[Act] 46 is not perfect because there is a school just minutes from here that we cannot work with.” There were a variety of opinions about control of schools; it was a theme expressed in interviews, in survey responses, and in local media. Both supporters and opponents to school consolidations used their understanding of local control to bolster their side of their arguments.

Student Opportunities Within the FNESU and WRVSU

Student opportunities emerged as a phrase both supporters and opponents of consolidation cited as a justification for their viewpoints. According to forty-five percent of survey respondents, student opportunities influenced their opinion about mergers. Some community members responded that mergers would offer fewer opportunities because teachers would offer “less time on individual pupils” and that “small school(s) [give] individual attention.” A local community member regarded Act 46 as a threat to student opportunities offered by school choice in her commentary when she writes that “the diversity of educational offerings characteristic of Vermont schools for over 150 years will die, and with it venerable independent schools that have served our children well for decades” (Buckman, August 2016, p. 17). Their opposition to school mergers was grounded in the need for opportunities for the personalized attention available to students in smaller schools or based on concerns

that lack of school choice would inhibit opportunities Vermont students were traditionally offered. During an interview, Tracy commented that students could have “fewer chances to join in afterschool activities like plays and sports due to of a lack of transportation. If a student goes to a school far from home, that student then might not have the option to stay after school.” Transportation and bussing were cited by seven percent of survey respondents as a reason to oppose consolidation. Opponents of consolidation saw limited transportation options, larger classrooms, and loss of school choice as factors which hindered educational opportunities for students within these two supervisory unions.

Supporters of school mergers, though, also argued that theme of student opportunities was a reason to support consolidation. Taylor, an interviewee, said that “one huge benefit, if all the towns merge into one school district, that would be good for students with families that move during the year.” Taylor stated that “many kids relocate between towns [within the SU] and merger means that students could stay in the school where they started the year.” The opportunity to remain at a current school instead of transferring to a new school was touted as a benefit of consolidation. “Students who move, regardless of socioeconomic status, are more likely to be behind their peers academically, to have behavioral problems, and to drop out (Monroe, November 25, 2015, p.1). The opportunity to remain at a school was not the only consideration for supporters. As one respondent stated, with school “population shrinking, schools under resourced, [consolidation provides] equal access to high quality education including sports, social clubs, athletic facilities, social services, art and recreation.” There would be “more choice of classes” according to another

respondent in a survey. A community member reiterated this sentiment by responding that merged schools “could offer more choices to students, more students for more personal interactions, [and that a] larger school attracts more qualified teachers.” Another respondent explained that “small student populations limit student opportunities for growth in academics, social, extra-curricular (sic), small schools aren't able to meet individual students' needs.” This pro-merger citizen's reasoning directly contradicts an opponent's reasoning regarding individual students' needs; one person perceived small schools as a place to support individual needs while another viewed small schools as an impediment to supporting individual student needs. Sam stated, when interviewed by the researcher, that some high school seniors were in classes as small as two students, and that “larger classes would bring more educational opportunities so that students can get education they deserve.” The Executive Director of the Vermont Superintendents Association, wrote that “Act 46 may not be perfect ... but students have expressed a desire for the greater equity in opportunity that unified systems will provide” (Francis, June 2016, p.5). Student opportunity, while interpreted as different types of opportunities by various people, was cited as a reason to support or oppose consolidation initiatives.

Survey Data Analysis

The researcher also analyzed the survey data to determine if support or opposition to school consolidations correlated to demographic characteristics provided by survey respondents. The researcher conducted a Pearson R analysis of the community member surveys. According to the survey data, there is no correlation between a how long a respondent has lived in the community and their support for

school mergers. There is no strong correlation related to whether or not a respondent attended a school in the supervisory union or had a relative currently enrolled in the supervisory union and their support or opposition to school consolidation initiatives. There was no strong correlation related to a respondent's age or gender identity and their support of school consolidation in their community.

Summary

The researcher conducted surveys with a random sample of registered Vermont voters residing within two Vermont supervisory unions, examined local media articles from July 2013 to June 2017, reviewed school board meeting minutes from July 2013 to June 2017, and conducted interviews with community and educational leaders. The researcher relied on school board meeting minutes, interviews, and newspaper articles to answer the first research question, in what ways did community members in two rural Vermont supervisory unions respond to declining student enrollment. Two themes emerged from a review of the data. School board members discussed how their districts were sharing resources. School board members also coped with competing priorities, rather than focus on student enrollment, and conducted business relating to programs, policies, budgets, and unexpected problems. Data regarding the second research question, the historical response of community member responses to Act 46, showed great variety in the responses of community members from towns across the two supervisory unions. Responses by community members included a "wait and see" approach, considering multiple options with nearby school districts, supporting school district mergers on local ballots, or opposing school district consolidation. Data related to the third research question, why did some community members reject

consolidation options while others approved of mergers, revealed three primary themes: financial considerations, control over schools, and student opportunities.

Within the FNESU and WRVSU, an analysis of survey response data did not find any strong correlation between the amount of years a respondent lived in the community past attendance at a local school, current enrollment status of relatives, age, or gender and support or opposition to school mergers. Based on this data, the conclusions of the researcher and implications for public policy and future research are discussed in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5 – Findings, Conclusions, and Implications

This chapter is organized into five sections. The first section summarizes the case studies conducted by the researcher. The second section provides the findings of the researcher. The conclusions of the researcher are in the third section of this chapter. The fourth section summarizes the implications for this research. Finally, in

the fifth section, the researcher indicates the limitations of these case studies and offers suggestions for future research.

Summary of the Study

In 2015, the General Assembly in Vermont passed Act 46 (Act 46, 2015). This legislation was a response by lawmakers to the state-wide “24% drop in student enrollment in public schools” (Act 46, 2015, p. 1) from 1997 to 2015. Act 46 was written to “encourage and support local decisions and actions” (Act 46, 2015, p. 3) that would improve efficiencies and educational outcomes, increase equity and opportunities for students, provide better value for expenses, and nurture openness and accountability; legislators even penned that “It is not the State’s intent to close small schools” (Act 46, 2015, p. 3). The purpose of this research is to determine how communities within two rural Vermont supervisory unions responded to changes in enrollment prior to the enactment of Act 46 in 2015. The researcher also analyzed the responses of community members to Act 46 in the towns of the Franklin Northeast Supervisory Union (FNESU) and the White River Valley Supervisory Union (WRVSU). The final question the researcher answered was why some community members rejected merger initiatives while others approved of consolidations during the two years after the passage of Act 46.

To answer the three research questions, the researcher conducted case studies in Franklin Northeast Supervisory Union and White River Valley Supervisory Union. Creswell (2013) explains that a meaningful case study provides in-depth understanding; therefore, to support this level of understanding, the researcher gathered together many types of qualitative data which came together as part of a

mixed methods case study. Yin (2009) writes that mixed methods research can “collect a richer and stronger array of evidence than can be accomplished by any single method alone” (p. 63). The researcher, using multiple sources of information to answer the research questions, combined community member survey responses, interviews with educational and community leaders within the local supervisory unions, and an analysis of local newspaper articles, letters to the editors, and school board meeting minutes to gain an in-depth understanding of the problem. The case studies were bounded to answer the research questions. Since supervisory unions’ business and budgets within the state of Vermont are based upon a July 1st to June 30th calendar year (Handbook for Vermont Municipal Treasurers, 2002) the researcher focused on relevant events within these communities between June 2013 and June 2017. These dates correspond to the two years preceding the passage of Act 46 and the two years after the legislation was enacted.

An analysis of the work of various researchers across the country (Anderson, 2009; Blauwkamp, Longo, & Anderson, 2011; Donis-Keller, 2015; Meta, 1999) does not provide a single explanation for why some communities support school district mergers and other communities reject these consolidations. Anderson's (2009) research concluded that openness, collaboration, and cooperation contributed to the success of consolidation. Blauwkamp, Longo, & Anderson (2011) concluded that money was the primary focus of supporters and opponents, followed by educational quality. Donis-Keller’s (2015) findings indicate that a focus on monetary benefits (like economy of scale) create an environment which opposes consolidation, but community members are more likely to support a merger if educational benefits [a

high quality of education] are touted. Donis-Keller (2015) concludes that the loss of local control was the most important reason to oppose consolidation; other reasons included larger class sizes and criticism of extended time to travel to and from school or transportation costs. Meta (1999) suggests that money influenced the process of some consolidations in Pennsylvania and his argument is that financial incentives are key to mergers. Successful and unsuccessful consolidation initiatives are complex, and therefore, the researcher intentionally surveyed the community members with an open-ended survey question about why they supported or opposed school mergers. Instead of providing a checklist of items such as local control, quality of education, fiscal considerations, collaboration, or any of the other explanations provided by other researchers, community members responded to the survey in their own words.

Surveys were mailed to community members based on a randomly generated list of registered voters from towns within the FNESU and WRVSU. As Tables 5.1 and 5.2 show, 39 registered voters in the FNESU and 54 registered voters from towns in the WRVSU responded to the surveys. The response rate was 21% of survey recipients in the FNESU and 23% of the survey recipients from the WRVSU.

Table 5. 1 *FNESU Survey Response Rates*

<u>Community</u>	<u>Surveys Sent</u>	<u>Surveys Returned</u>	<u>Response Rate</u>
Bakersfield	35	8	.23
Berkshire	35	7	.20
Enosburg	40	11	.28
Montgomery	35	6	.17
Richford	40	7	.18

FNESU	185	39	.21
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Note. 100% response rate would equal 1.0.

Table 5. 2 *WRVSU Survey Response Rates*

<u>Community</u>	<u>Surveys Sent</u>	<u>Surveys Returned</u>	<u>Response Rate</u>
Bethel	30	9	.30
Chelsea	25	7	.28
Granville	10	3	.30
Hancock	10	4	.40
Rochester	30	6	.20
Sharon	25	6	.24
(South) Royalton	40	9	.23
Stockbridge	20	4	.20
Strafford	30	6	.30
Tunbridge	30	9	.30
WRVSU	230	54	.23

In addition to the community surveys, the researcher relied on several different sources of information for data to answer the research questions including: school board meeting minutes, local newspaper articles, and opinion letters to the editors; and interviews with community and educational leaders within towns located in the White River Valley and Franklin Northeast Supervisory Unions.

Findings

The researcher examined the ways community members in two rural Vermont supervisory unions responded to changes in student enrollment. The researcher analyzed school board meeting minutes, read local newspapers for articles and editorial page opinions, and interviewed community and educational leaders to answer

the first question. Two themes emerged related to this question: (a) competing priorities in lieu of enrollment, and (b) opportunities for sharing.

The research revealed that the business of overseeing a school district served as a competing priority to enrollment discussions; however, increases and decreases in student enrollment were not completely ignored. Within the fifteen school boards of the WRVSU and FNESU from July 2013 to June 2015, between 6% to 24% of meeting minutes mentioned student enrollment, with a median of 15% of school board meeting minutes containing references to the topic. One hundred percent of non-executive/special meeting school board minutes between July 2013 and June 2015, though, from the towns within both the FNESU and WRVSU, dealt with the business of overseeing a school district: budgetary items were discussed, funds were allocated or denied, and school staff were hired and fired. Board members dealt with school-related business items from the demanding task of revising a budget rejected by the townspeople (Bethel School Board Minutes, March 12, 2015), to the more basic matter of selling a used lawn mower (Berkshire School Board Minutes, October 14, 2013). Programs, policies, budgets, and unexpected problems competed with enrollment priorities in the communities within the Franklin Northeast Supervisory Union and White River Valley Supervisory Union.

People in various school districts within both supervisory unions found ways to share capital or human resources. School board members facilitated cooperation between schools for professional development and staffing (Berkshire School Board Minutes, May 2014). Board members endorsed opportunities to share resources (Berkshire School Board Minutes, October 2014; Richford School Board Minutes,

June 2014; Enosburg School Board Minutes, September 2013). Since some school student populations could not support programs alone, school boards also considered or endorsed the merging of sports teams (South Royalton School Board Minutes, March 2015; Tunbridge School Board Minutes, August 2013) or enrichment programs (Bakersfield School Board Minutes, April 2015) to provide students access to these extracurricular opportunities. Sharing students gave schools opportunities to provide personnel or programs; this theme emerged with a median of 20% of the time in school board meeting minutes in the two years preceding the passage of Act 46.

The second research question asked about the community member responses to Act 46. The researcher reviewed school board meeting minutes from June 2015 to June 2017. The researcher perused archival records of local newspapers. *The County Courier* and *St. Albans Messenger* serve the community members in the towns of Bakersfield, Berkshire, Enosburg, Montgomery, and Richford in the FNESU; *The Randolph Herald* and *The Valley News* report on events in Bethel, Chelsea, Granville, Hancock, Rochester, Sharon, South Royalton, Strafford, Stockbridge, and Tunbridge. The researcher also interviewed eight community and educational leaders from within the two supervisory unions.

In the Franklin Northeast Supervisory Union, as a response to Act 46, members from the five different school boards formed a Unification Committee: two representatives from Bakersfield, Berkshire, and Montgomery respectively, three members from Richford, and four members from Enosburg (Bakersfield minutes, June 15, 2015). Community members and educational leaders split into opposing camps. Articles began to appear in the local papers; members of the Unification Committee

stated in a letter to the *County Courier* editor that “one thing is sure: change will happen, one way or another” (January 7, 2016, p.5). Local community members began voicing their concerns through letters to the editor through the first six months of 2016. In June 2016, registered voters in all five school district communities voted against the proposal to form a consolidated school district within the supervisory union. The members of the community and board members continued to debate the merits of Act 46 into the summer of 2017, but a second vote in FNESU towns did not take place before the end of the 2016-2017 school year.

Prior to the enactment of Act 46, the WRVSU school boards were either members of the Windsor Northwest (WNWSU) or Orange Windsor Supervisory Unions (OWSU) communities. These two supervisory unions started the process of merging prior to passage of Act 46 under the guidance of the Agency of Education (Strafford School Board Minutes, September 26, 2013). This was the second merger of two supervisory unions facilitated by the State Board of Education using powers granted under Act 156 which “encouraged unions to consolidate - the first being the merger of the Windsor Southwest and Rutland-Windsor SUs” (Levasseur, January 22, 2015, p. A1). Although the community members within the newly formed White River Valley Supervisory Union (WRVSU) merged two separate supervisory unions, the Orange Windsor Supervisory Union (OWSU) and the Windsor Northwest Supervisory Union (WNWSU) on July 1, 2016, the towns’ school district configurations did not change because of this consolidation. The second stage of consolidation conversations, as a result of Act 46, occurred within the towns of the WRVSU before the initial merger of WNWSU and OWSU was complete. In order for

communities to benefit from the financial incentives offered by Act 46, the sooner school districts consolidated, the greater the property tax decrease for residents of these towns. Since the initial consolidation of the OWSU and WNWSU into the WRVSU did not alter the school district configurations, a second phase of merger talks was started in order to combine the school districts within the newly formed supervisory union.

By April 2016, school boards from five of the ten towns in the White River Valley Supervisory Union formed study committees while the other five school boards conducted surveys of residents, hosted community forums, and held meetings with districts outside of their current supervisory unions (Vondrasek, April 7, 2016). Through the summer and fall, school board and community members from the ten towns in WRVSU continued with ongoing conversations about possible choices for the voters in their towns. Strafford studied a merger with Sharon and Thetford that would result in the Three Rivers School District; however, Strafford would have to give up grades 7 and 8 since the Sharon school board did not want to start operating those two grades (Pache, 2016).

At the end of 2016, the WRVSU Study Committee opted for a model that “calls for all three towns [Bethel, Rochester, and Royalton] to maintain their PreK-5 programs, and to operate one middle school in Bethel, and one high school in South Royalton. The towns of Granville and Hancock would continue to pay for all K-12 students’ tuitions in neighboring schools and remain in the WRVSU, but they would merge to form a unified school district. Tunbridge and Chelsea school districts would merge to form the First Branch school district. In order to go forward, the plan would

need voter approval [in April 2017]” (Vondrasek, December 29, 2016). Tunbridge and Chelsea formed a single, combined school district during the April 2017 vote, but within days of the vote, a petition for a revote was circulated and accepted. The Sharon, Strafford, and Stockbridge school boards wanted the Agency of Education to consider their districts for Alternative Structure classification (Vondrasek, December 29, 2016). According to the Vermont Agency of Education,

A unified union school district that is responsible for the education of at least 900 resident students may not be possible or the best model to achieve Vermont’s education goals in all regions of the State. As a result, Act 46 recognizes the need in some regions to create or continue sustainable “alternative structures,” which are supervisory unions with multiple member districts each of which has its own independent school board. (Unmerged Districts, August 1, 2016, p.1).

For the people in these communities, the Alternative Structure model served as an alternate choice to voting to merge with other school districts. The findings of the White River Valley Act 46 Study Committee explain why these communities did not vote to consolidate with other districts. The White River Valley Study Committee (2017) findings indicated that while Strafford operates a PK – 8 school and designates Thetford Academy as its primary high school, “merging with neighboring schools would cost substantially more to tuition the grade 7 and 8 students” (p.11). In addition, while Sharon and Stockbridge “worked hard to analyze the possibility of becoming a single, unified district” (White River Valley Study Committee, 2017, p.11), “in the final analysis, this did not make sense to any of those involved given the substantial

distances and community orientations” (p.11). In April 2017, the townspeople in Bethel, Chelsea, Granville, Hancock, Rochester, and Tunbridge, all within the WRV SU, approved the consolidation of their school districts. South Royalton voters rejected the consolidation proposal. Sharon, Stockbridge, Strafford residents did not vote on any plan to merge with another school district because school board members and community members in these towns were not satisfied with possible consolidation options prior to the ballot measures appearing in the WRV SU towns. Table 5.3 shows the outcome of the votes in these communities.

Table 5. 3 *WRV SU Consolidation Vote Outcome (April 2017)*

<u>Community</u>	<u>Votes</u> (NO – YES)	<u>Decision</u>
Bethel	67 – 320	YES
Chelsea	78 – 173	YES
Granville	3 – 23	YES
Hancock	4 – 35	YES
Rochester	178 – 213	YES
Sharon	N/A	
(South) Royalton	462 – 206	NO
Stockbridge	N/A	
Strafford	N/A	
Tunbridge	109 – 151	YES

Note. Source of voting results: Camerato, T. (April 12, 2017). Royalton voters defeat towns’ proposed school mergers. *Valley News*.

The outcome of the vote galvanized both supporters and opponents; after gathering enough signatures for revotes in three communities: Rochester, Tunbridge, and Royalton (Vondrasek, May 3, 2017), voters returned to the polls in June 2017. In a reversal of votes, community members in South Royalton approved district consolidation, and voters in Tunbridge and Rochester rejected consolidation

(Vondrasek, June 25, 2017). Table 5.4 shows the outcome of the revotes in these three towns.

Table 5. 4 *WRVSU Consolidation Re-Vote Outcome (June 2017)*

<u>Community</u>	<u>Votes</u> (NO – YES)	<u>Decision</u>
Rochester	236 - 144	NO
(South) Royalton	248 - 377	YES
Tunbridge	164 - 160	NO

Note. Source of voting results. Slater, M. (June 22, 2017). Rochester says ‘no’ to merger plan. *Randolph Herald* and Kelly, D. (July 06, 2017). Tunbridge says ‘no.’ *Randolph Herald*.

The final research question focused on why some community members rejected consolidation options while others approved of school mergers. The researcher relied on school board minutes, local media articles, interviews with community and educational leaders, and community surveys to answer this question. Three themes emerged: financial considerations; control of local schools; and student opportunities. Thirty-eight percent of respondents explained their support or opposition to school mergers was based on financial considerations, 35% of respondents cited local control as reason for their opinion, and 45% of respondents cited student opportunities as a reason both for or against consolidation initiatives; respondents included more than one of these three dominant themes in their explanations. Financial concerns were voiced by community members in both supervisory unions. Supporters of school mergers viewed consolidation as a means of saving money while opponents perceived that costs would remain the same or increase as a result of mergers. There were a variety of opinions about control of schools; it

was a theme expressed in interviews, in survey responses, and in local media. Both supporters and opponents to school consolidations used their understanding of local control to bolster their arguments. Opponents of consolidation saw limited transportation options, larger classrooms, and loss of school choice as factors which hindered educational opportunities for students within these two supervisory unions. As one respondent stated, with school “population shrinking, schools under resourced, [consolidation provides] equal access to high quality education including sports, social clubs, athletic facilities, social services, art and recreation.” There would be “more choice of classes” according to another respondent in a survey. A community member reiterated this sentiment by responding that merged schools “could offer more choices to students, more students for more personal interactions, [and that a] larger school attracts more qualified teachers.”

Conclusions

Research Question 1

The first question the researcher studied focused on how community members in two rural Vermont supervisory unions responded to changes in student enrollment. Through interviews with eight community and educational leaders and reviews of school board meeting minutes and local media, the researcher concluded that school administrators and school boards shared resources as a solution to provide opportunities for students in these small, rural schools.

While some school board meeting minutes included information stating “enrollment was up for K-12 this year” (Bethel School Board, September 2013, p.1) or that “[Principal] Beth [O’Brien] was happy to report that enrollment was up this year

and expected to be at 141, (Montgomery School Board, September 2014, p.2), these reports also highlight that the sharing theme serves as a canary in a coal mine. These school districts did not have enough new students in the two years prior to the enactment of Act 46 to maintain all of their programs without needing to share and collaborate with other school districts.

At the same meeting where enrollment figures were mentioned, the Bethel School Board sought a cooperative agreement with the Rochester School Board for girls basketball (Bethel School Board, September 2013) similar to the agreement that already existed between the school districts for their cooperative soccer program. Small increases in enrollment could not mask the larger, long-term changes; these school districts needed to share students if the school boards wanted to provide students with opportunities to compete in soccer or basketball. The Montgomery and Berkshire school principals shared a health/PE teacher, and when he resigned (Montgomery School Board Minutes, May 2014), both school districts collaborated to find a replacement for the resource they needed. Montgomery's enrollment increased to 141 students in 2014, but this total number of students was served by a shared resource, a teacher who worked in two different school districts. The Berkshire school did not share human resources with just one partner, the Montgomery school. The school district also collaborated with the Enosburg schools, as it was noted in the Enosburg school board minutes (September 2013) that an "ELL teacher needed to serve one student in Enosburg ES, one in Berkshire, and three at the high school" (p.1).

Sharing resources was not unique to school districts within the FNESU or WRVSU prior to the enactment of Act 46 regardless of whether or not enrollment was slightly higher or lower. Tunbridge Central School Board Minutes reported that there were 122 students at the school “which is more than at the beginning of the year” (Tunbridge School Board Minutes, November 2013, p.1), but this did not cause the school board to eliminate the sharing of students between Tunbridge and Chelsea schools; students still played basketball as a merged team. At one point, the South Royalton athletic director also looked into partnering with the Chelsea and Tunbridge athletic program (South Royalton School Board Minutes, November 2013), but in the end, the district opted not to join with the two other districts. In Richford, the school board members were aware that with a decline of five tuitioned students, there was a drop in revenue of about \$60, 000 (Richford School Board Minutes, September 2014); however, in the same fiscal year, Richford also shared students through a partnership with Berkshire. Students “attend the NOTCH program in Richford in the morning and [return] to Berkshire for afternoon programs” (Berkshire Board Minutes, May 11, 2015 p.1).

While school boards might have discussed small increases or decreases in student enrollment over two years, sharing students and teachers indicates the student populations in these schools was small enough that there were not enough students to form sports teams or justify a full time teacher for some positions. Sharing human and fiscal resources enabled schools to provide programs; this collaboration was a response to small student populations within these district schools.

Research Question 2

What were the community member responses to Act 46? A Unification Study Committee was formed in the summer of 2015, with two representatives from Bakersfield, Berkshire, and Montgomery respectively, three members from Richford, and four members from Enosburg (Bakersfield minutes, June 2015). School board meeting minutes in all five school districts included items of discussion relating to the Unification Committee throughout the Fall of 2015 and Spring 2016. Articles began to appear in the local newspaper, the *County Courier*, and local community members began voicing their concerns about losing their voice and control through letters to the editor. Letter writers were also concerned with a lack of citizen involvement, fear that cost savings were overstated, fear that educational costs were skyrocketing and change was needed to bring school costs down, and whether students would have more or fewer educational opportunities in newly formed school districts.

Finally, when the registered voters in the FNESU went to the ballot boxes on Tuesday, June 7, 2016, all communities rejected the first school district merger proposals (Bakersfield School Board Minutes, June 13, 2016). There were enough opponents of the merger who advocated that voters not rush into a decision about consolidation. In the year that followed the June 2016 vote, Jay Nicholas, the FNESU superintendent, resigned and accepted the role as the director of the Vermont Principals Association. The five school boards continued with the everyday business of overseeing the school districts, but until the new superintendent, Lynn Cota, started in the summer of 2017, there was limited discussion of the next phase of Act 46 consolidations.

The Windsor Northwest (WNWSU) and Orange Windsor Supervisory Unions (OWSU) communities started the process of merging supervisory unions prior to passage of Act 46 under the guidance of the Agency of Education (Strafford School Board Minutes, September 2013). This was the second merger of two supervisory unions facilitated by the State Board of Education using powers granted under Act 156 which “encouraged unions to consolidate - the first being the merger of the Windsor Southwest and Rutland-Windsor SUs” (Levasseur, January 22, 2015). Community members within the Orange Windsor Supervisory Union and the Windsor Northwest Supervisory Union merged to form the new White River Valley Supervisory Union (WRVSU) on July 1, 2016. The towns’ school districts, though, did not change as a result of this consolidation. It was not until April of 2017 that the residents in Bethel, Chelsea, Granville, Hancock, Rochester, South Royalton, and Tunbridge voted to consolidate their school districts as the result of Act 46.

By April 2016, school boards from five of the ten towns in the WRVSU “settled into natural study committees” (Vondrasek, April 7, 2016); however, in the other towns, community forums, resident surveys, and talks with districts outside of the SU occurred (Vondrasek, April 7, 2016). Community members also wrote letters to the editor like their peers in the FNESU. Articles in the *Randolph Herald* reported on the outcomes of the study committees and school board forums, and the editorial pages shared the opinions of both supporters and opponents of consolidation efforts.

Voters in WNWSU and OWSU accepted consolidation into the WRVSU in 2016; no changes were made to the configuration of school boards. But when community members were provided with an opportunity to vote to merge some school

districts and form consolidated school boards within the SU in 2017, Royalton, Rochester, and Tunbridge voters rejected these plans at least once, and Stockbridge, Sharon, and Strafford community members did not vote on the matter at all before the end of June 2017. Chelsea, Bethel, Hancock, and Granville voters did approve plans prior to the end of the 2016-2017 supervisory union fiscal year; Table 5.3 indicates that these votes passed with as few as 11% of eligible voters casting ballots in Granville to a high of 46% of registered voters in Rochester participating in the vote.

Research Question 3

The final research question answered by the case studies of community members within the FNESU and WRVSU focused on the reasons why some community members reject consolidation options while others approved of mergers. There were three main factors associated with support or opposition to the mergers of school districts and schools within these two Vermont supervisory unions: local control, financial concerns, and opportunities for students.

In some ways, this finding agrees with the conclusions other researchers made in their communities in other states; however, there is not one simple answer to explain why community members support or oppose consolidation initiatives encouraged by Act 46. The perspective of individuals impacted their support or opposition; their justification for their position could be grouped under the same theme, but their opinions could be diametrically opposite. Both supporters and opponents of consolidation cited financial considerations in their viewpoints. Donis-Keller's (2015) findings from Maine indicate that a focus on monetary benefits can create opposition to consolidation, but community members are more likely to support

a merger if high quality education benefits are promised. Donis-Keller's conclusion contradicts Meta (1999) who suggests that money influenced the process of some consolidations in Pennsylvania. Blauwkamp, Longo, & Anderson (2011) focused on school consolidation rather than supervisory union mergers in Nebraska. They determined that discussing financial and social costs are key talking points for supporters and opponents of consolidation; money received the greatest attention, followed by educational quality.

Costs were a concern for both supporters and opponents of school consolidations for community members in both the Franklin Northeast and White River Valley Supervisory Unions. According to thirty-eight percent of survey respondents, cost was a reason to support or oppose mergers. Supporters of consolidation initiatives perceived monetary benefits. Interviewee Casey commented that "we have too many teachers and staff for the number of kids [and] that's why Vermont has the most expensive education system in the US." On the other hand, opponents of school consolidations were concerned costs would still go up. Suarez stated in a published letter to the *County Courier* editor, "if one of the end goals of Act 46 is tax relief, there is no guarantee to it or any long-term savings" (Suarez, January 2016, p.7). Kelley complained that "Maine attempted an Act 46 type consolidation of more centralized school districts 10 years ago. There were no savings for taxpayers. The primary result was bigger administrative offices" (Kelley, November 2016, p.15). Financial concerns were voiced by community members in both supervisory unions. Supporters of school mergers viewed consolidation as a means of saving money while

opponents perceived that costs would remain the same or increase as a result of mergers.

Donis-Keller (2015) concludes that, for the districts she studied in Maine, the loss of local control was the most important reason to oppose consolidation; other reasons included larger class sizes and criticism of extended time to travel to and from school or transportation costs. In the replies of thirty-five percent of survey respondents, local control of schools was cited as an important reason to oppose mergers. No one acknowledged that school district mergers would lead to an increase in local control by community members over their community school. Henaveld (2016) thought that local control was a moot point when he wrote that “I think the unification of Vermont’s town school districts is an appropriate reform [because] local control ended long ago as learning needs became less local and more national” (p.5). Suarez lamented that Act 46 “disenfranchises Vermont towns, our most precious thread of direct democracy in the Vermont tradition” (January 2016, p.7). Kimel argued that if the “merger means a small shift in control (and) if we do not do so - if we let Fear [sic] stop our opportunity for progress - if we fumble, we lose this great chance” (February 2016, p.5). Bucknam (2016) concluded that “The fix is in. Montpelier is taking over Vermont’s schools and turning them into a state-run monopoly so that it can amass power for itself” (p.17). There were a variety of opinions about control of schools; it was a theme expressed in interviews, in survey responses, and in local media. Both supporters and opponents to school consolidations used their understanding of local control to bolster their side of their arguments.

Anderson's (2009) research, while determining factors that either made the consolidation process positive or negative, concluded that openness, collaboration, and cooperation contributed to the success of consolidation. For members of communities with successful consolidations, their attitudes and focus on improvement created an environment that was more accepting of merging (Anderson, 2009). Since sharing of resources was a theme uncovered in this research, and school districts had set precedents for sharing resources to offer student opportunities, the researcher discovered that student opportunities emerged as a phrase both supporters and opponents of consolidation cited as a justification for their viewpoints.

According to forty-five percent of survey respondents, student opportunities influenced their opinion about mergers. Opposition to school mergers was grounded in the need for opportunities for the personalized attention available to students in smaller schools or based on concerns that lack of school choice would inhibit opportunities Vermont students were traditionally offered. During an interview, Tracy commented that students could have “fewer opportunities to participate in afterschool activities like plays and sports because of a lack of transportation. If you attend a school far away from your home, you might not have the chance to stay after school.” Transportation and bussing were cited by seven percent of survey respondents as a reason to oppose consolidation. Opponents of consolidation saw limited transportation options, larger classrooms, and loss of school choice as factors which hindered educational opportunities for students within these two supervisory unions.

Supporters of school mergers, though, also argued that the theme of student opportunities was a reason to support consolidation. Taylor, an interviewee, said that

“one of the biggest benefits, if all of the towns in the SU had merged into one district, would be for students whose families move during the school year.” Taylor stated that “many kids relocate between towns [within the SU] and merger means that students could stay in the school where they started the year.” The opportunity to remain at a current school instead of transferring to a new school was touted as a benefit of consolidation. Monroe (2015) notes that “students who move, regardless of socioeconomic status, are more likely to be behind their peers academically, to have behavioral problems, and to drop out” (p.1). The opportunity to remain at a school was not the only consideration for supporters. As one respondent stated, with school “population shrinking, schools under resourced, [consolidation provides] equal access to high quality education including sports, social clubs, athletic facilities, social services, art and recreation.” There would be “more choice of classes” according to another respondent in a survey. A community member reiterated this sentiment by responding that merged schools “could offer more choices to students, more students for more personal interactions, (and that a) larger school attracts more qualified teachers.” Another respondent explained that “small student populations limit student opportunities for growth in academics, social, extra-curricular [sic], [and] small schools aren't able to meet individual students' needs.” This pro-merger citizen's reasoning directly contradicts an opponent's reasoning regarding individual students' needs; one person perceived small schools as a place to support individual needs while another viewed small schools as an impediment to supporting individual student needs. Sam stated, when interviewed by the researcher, that some seniors were in classes as small as two students, and that “bigger classes would bring more

educational opportunities and students will get an education they deserve.” The Executive Director of the Vermont Superintendents Association, wrote that “Act 46 may not be perfect . . . but students have expressed a desire for the greater equity in opportunity that unified systems will provide” (Francis, June 2016, p.5). Student opportunity, while interpreted as different types of opportunities by various people, was cited as a reason to support or oppose consolidation initiatives.

Analysis of survey respondents also provided some insights into support or opposition to school mergers in communities. Within the FNESU and WRVSU, survey respondents expressed their support, opposition, or mixed feelings about school consolidations. A statistical analysis of the respondents did not indicate a strong correlation between support or opposition to merger initiatives based on demographic characteristics that included: years of residency in the community; previous enrollment in a school in the supervisory union; the current enrollment of a relative in a school in the supervisory union; the age or gender of the respondent. Based on the survey data, fifty-two percent of WRVSU respondents favored school mergers, whereas in the FNESU, just twenty-three percent of respondents favored consolidation; however, in both communities, there was no evidence of a correlation between quantitative variables analyzed by the researcher and support for mergers.

Implications

Sharing human and capital resources between schools in Vermont provided educational leaders with a means of coping with fewer students or as a solution to saving some money. On a smaller scale, on a case by case basis, this response to changes in student enrollment might be successful for some school districts. The

Vermont legislature, though, enacted Act 46 to address a state-wide concern regarding rising costs of education and decreases in student enrollment. While Alternative School District Structures provide some school districts and communities with a pathway to maintaining a school district similar to their current structure, as more school districts merge with like districts, some community members might discover that they do not have the same partners. Previous collaborating schools might be closed or affiliated with another supervisory union, and opportunities for sharing might disappear. The implication for school board members and educational leaders is that what worked in the past might not be an option for the future.

Support or opposition to school consolidation is complicated, and when legislators enact laws to make changes to schools within communities, they should consider that there will be unintended consequences of their actions. Some community members did support Act 46 in Vermont, and at the ballot box, they demonstrated this support through their approved reorganization of their local school district. When the Vermont Agency of Education initiated the merging of the Windsor Northwest Supervisory Union with the Orange Windsor Supervisory Union, some community members complained (Marx, December 2013). In the end, though, the consolidation took place in 2016 without any changes being made to the local schools in the districts. Further school district mergers within the newly formed White River Valley Supervisory Union, and the stated or implied outcome that schools would close or consolidate, generated greater opposition from some voters. The Agency of Education and lawmakers insisted that the legislation (Act 46, 2015) “was not intended to close schools” (p. 3), but when voters in these WRVSU communities went to the polls, they

were aware of the study committee's recommendations (Reports of Act 46 Study Committee 2017). One implication of this study is that, regardless of the intention of legislators, Act 46 was interpreted by some community members in the WRVSU as a bill to close schools.

Across the state, in the Franklin Northeast Supervisory Union, other community members also reached the same conclusion: Act 46 might close their local school (Bucknam, August 2016) The voters in all five FNESU communities rejected a consolidation measure because the opposition campaigned to pause, to slow things down, rather than initiate a consolidation that might result in school closures. Act 46 provided an incentive for communities to quickly consolidate their school districts with temporary cuts in property taxes (Suarez, January 2016), but this tax savings did not motivate enough community members to approve changes to their local school districts, especially if they were concerned about schools closing.

For some community members in both the FNESU and WRVSU, though, closing schools was an acceptable outcome of the merger of school districts. Voters in Chelsea were aware that if they approved consolidating their K - 12 school district with the neighboring Tunbridge K - 8 school district, in order to comply with Act 46, the new school district would be a K - 8 structure and students in grades 9 - 12 would choose their high schools; Chelsea voters chose to close their high school. Voters in Bethel, Rochester, and South Royalton also went to the polls with the understanding that if they consolidated their K - 12 school districts into one entity, then all the students in their communities would attend middle school in Bethel and high school in South Royalton. Voters in South Royalton rejected this change in April 2017, but in

June 2017, reversed their decision. In Rochester, voters approved of this change in April 2017, but in June 2017, they too reversed their decision (Vondrasek, June 2017). One implication of this research is that the passage of Act 46 generated an unintended consequence, community members perceived some schools would close or they were told closures would occur. This generated opposition to district mergers. A second implication of this research is that the sources and accuracy of information community members receive about school consolidation is critical to the acceptance or rejection of changes to school districts.

Information, or misinformation, depending on point of view, about school district consolidation under Act 46, influenced voters. Local newspapers, social media, and word of mouth are sources of news that should be considered by either side of the issue if they want to convey their message to members of the community; this research indicates that they were the most popular sources of information about local schools for voters within the FNESU and WRVSU. The implication, though, is that if community members trust these sources of information, then the arguments made both for or against Act 46 influenced the outcome of the votes. Casey, when interviewed by the researcher, cited a Facebook campaign of misinformation about Act 46 as a significant factor in affecting the votes against consolidation in FNESU. Another interviewee, Logan, cited a rumor that spread in South Royalton: the current local school would be closed and replaced with a new union school. According to these educational leaders, *fake news* clouded the conversations regarding consolidations in their communities. In an extreme example of one citizen attempting to control the narrative, the following incident was reported in the *Valley News*.

As a raging debate over a proposed school consolidation plan heats up, one merger supporter purchased dozens of copies of *The Herald of Randolph* last week in an attempt to limit exposure of a letter to the editor from a consolidation opponent. During a meeting of an Act 46 Study Committee on Thursday, Royalton resident Shannon Morrill-Cornelius announced that she had purchased more than 100 copies of the weekly paper that day. ‘The one thing I did today is I went to South Royalton and I got every copy of the *Herald* that I could find, 120 copies. They’re in my car,’ she said. (Hongoltz-Hetling, June 5, 2017, p.1)

Both supporters and opponents tried to manipulate information whether by preventing the dissemination of ideas or by promoting erroneous information. Supporters or opponents to school consolidation efforts should focus their efforts on outreach to community members through local media, social media, and networks of friends and family. Supporters or opponents to school consolidations need to mobilize their side and conduct a political campaign if they want to achieve their desired outcomes.

The final implication of this research is that context matters to community members; their support or opposition to school consolidation depends on their perception of the issues. This implication, though, is challenging for both supporters and opponents of consolidation because the perspective of the voter matters. Class size is a good example of how the same scenario could justify support for one person and opposition in another.

Future Research

This research limited the scope of the study to examining community member responses to changing enrollments two years prior to the passage of Act 46, the response of community members to Act 46 for the two years after its passage, and the personal motivations for individuals to support or oppose school consolidations. One limitation of this research is that the case studies only focused on two supervisory unions within Vermont. Future research could examine the responses of other communities across the state. Since the FNESU and WRVSU did not overlap in their towns or local media markets, additional research might explore how the decisions of community members in one supervisory union might have impacted the responses of community members in an adjacent supervisory union.

Additional research might provide an answer to a question regarding why communities as a whole responded to Act 46 rather than just how community members responded to the legislation. The scope of this research was not to examine communities as single entities in their support or opposition to school consolidations; rather, this research focused on reasons why individuals in two Vermont supervisory unions supported or opposed consolidation initiatives, how small, rural communities responded to changes in student enrollment, and how community members responded to Act 46 consolidation initiatives.

A researcher could search for common characteristics of the communities that supported or opposed consolidation initiatives. Further research could explore the ways that sharing resources between school districts provides evidence of consolidation through mutually beneficial relationships without the need for

legislation to encourage collaboration. Additional research might also confirm why some community members changed their votes within two months. The underlying individual motivations to support or oppose consolidation did not change; voters are concerned with local control, financial considerations, and opportunities for students. Anecdotal evidence suggests that a few influential community members changed voters opinions. Further research might determine if whole communities support or oppose consolidation initiatives because of the opinions of key individuals within communities. Additional research could also examine what happened in these communities after June 2017. The case studies were bounded, but the impact of Act 46 on school consolidation initiatives did not end at the close of the school districts' fiscal year.

Another limitation of this research was that only one person under the age of twenty-five responded to the survey. The researcher concluded that the demographics of these communities contributed to this outcome. Only 6.49% of residents within FNESU towns and 7.44% of residents in WRVSU towns are between the age of 18 and 25 (Statistical Atlas, April 2015); the highest percentage of people between the ages of 18 and 25, 15.1%, occurs in South Royalton, the location of the Vermont Law School. The researcher also relied on a random sorting of the registered voters from these communities, and he did not send surveys targeting specific age groups. The community and educational leaders from these communities who were interviewed were all between the ages of forty-five and sixty-five; adults under twenty-five within these towns were not school board members or administrators with many years of leadership experiences. Targeted research directed at the youngest adults in a

community might provide insights into millennial voters views about school consolidations within their towns. These young voters might soon be the parents of students who are enrolled in these newly formed school districts; their thoughts about mergers might be valuable to educational leaders planning for the future of schools in these communities.

Finally, another limitation to consider was the limited responses from registered voters in the community. Because the researcher was not able to sample every member of the population within a reasonable amount of time, he sent surveys to 185 registered voters with the FNESU towns and 230 registered voters within the WRVSU towns. Thirty-nine people respond to these surveys in FNESU towns and 54 responded from WRVSU towns. The confidence interval was 15 for FNESU survey results and 13 for WRVSU results (Creative Research Systems, 2012). The researcher has confidence level of 95%, but there was an interval range of 15 and 13. Therefore, if 45% of respondents cited financial concerns as a reason to support or oppose school consolidation, and with a confidence interval of 15, then the researcher can state with 95% confidence that between 30% and 60% of registered voters in the two supervisory unions would cite this as a reason. In addition, these confidence intervals prevent the researcher from making strong correlations in the survey responses from FNESU community members; he cannot conclude definitely that support or opposition to school mergers in Bakersfield, Berkshire, Enosburg, Montgomery, or Richford correlates to whether a person attended school in one of these communities or if it correlates to the current enrollment status of a relative in FNESU schools. For future

research, additional surveys of community members would lower the confidence interval; however, these confidence intervals are a limitation of these case studies.

Assumptions

The researcher took for granted that he had easy access to public meeting minutes for school boards from both supervisory unions. Administrative assistants from both supervisory unions were very helpful and accommodated the researcher's request for meeting minutes. The researcher also assumed that local newspapers had archived issues for him to peruse. The researcher was treated very respectfully by members of the *Randolph Herald* and *County Courier* staff, and the archivists at the Vermont State Archives were eager to assist him. The researcher took for granted that enough registered voters within both supervisory unions are willing to participate in a focus group to provide him with feedback regarding the responses of citizens to the surveys. In this assumption, the researcher was wrong. There were a few community members who were willing to verify the sentiments of their fellow townspeople, but only five individuals indicated their desire to participate in a follow-up to the survey. The researcher assumed he would have 150 people from towns within each supervisory union respond to surveys. This was another assumption the researcher made based, in part, on hope that the topic would encourage strong response to his surveys. The researcher assumed he could interview eight community leaders within the supervisory unions, including both supervisory union superintendents. In this regard, the researcher was correct. Local educational leaders were accommodating and pleased to provide the researcher with time to interview them for these case studies. Another assumption the researcher made was that survey respondents, community

members, and interviewees were honest in their answers. The researcher acknowledges that memories can change and fade over time, and he assumed that participants remembered things as they happened rather than recalled historical events in error.

The researcher considered that the people in the Vermont communities he studied might not respond in a similar manner to consolidations as people in other rural towns across the United States reacted. Voters in neighboring communities separated by a distance of a few miles responded differently to the same consolidation initiative. The researcher assumed that some people would not respond to his queries. The researcher also considered that since the topic is complex, then the answers to his questions are complex.

Finally, the researcher adhered to the professional code of ethics advocated by Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011); the best interests of the students are the driving forces for ethical decisions by educational personnel. The researcher acknowledges his bias favors decisions which are in the best interests of the students, and in doing so, admits that his own opinions could influence his responses to survey respondent answers, community member feedback, or interviewee replies. However, the researcher considered that the responses he received from community members reflected their own understanding about what they consider to be in the best interests of the students in the community. Since the events are bounded within the case study they are now a matter of history that cannot be altered, and the researcher objectively described community member responses to changes in enrollment, community member reactions

to Act 46 related initiatives, and explained why some members supported merger initiatives while others opposed consolidation measures.

Summary

Purpose

The researcher sought to identify reasons why some community members supported or rejected school consolidation. The researcher also determined what some community members did in response to changes in student enrollment in their schools, and how community members responded to consolidation initiatives after the passage of Act 46 in 2015. One purpose of this research is to provide Vermont legislators and policy makers with a better understanding of the responses of citizens in two Vermont supervisory unions to Act 46. Another benefit of this research is that it provides educational leaders with an understanding of how small, rural schools provided opportunities for students prior to the enactment of Act 46. Finally, the purpose of this research was to identify the reasons why voters in two Vermont supervisory unions supported or opposed school consolidation initiatives in their towns.

Findings

The researcher discovered that, prior to the enactment of Act 46, community members in two Vermont supervisory unions relied on sharing and collaboration as a strategy to provide opportunities for students and teachers within their small, rural schools. For two years after the passage of Act 46 in June 2015, community members rejected consolidation initiatives in Franklin Northeast Supervisory Union. Across the state, two supervisory unions, OWSU and WNWSU merged to form the WRVSU in June 2016; however, by June 2017, the communities were unable to form consolidated

school districts within this supervisory union. The three main reasons community members supported or opposed consolidation initiatives were: (1) student opportunities, (2) local control, and (3) financial considerations.

Conclusions

Sharing human and capital resources between schools in Vermont provided educational leaders with a means of coping with fewer students or as a solution to saving some money. Support or opposition to school consolidation is complicated, and when legislators deliberate making changes to schools within communities, they should consider that there will be unintended consequences of their actions. Context matters to community members; their support or opposition to school consolidation depends on their perception of the issues. Misleading information impacts the outcome of votes in these communities. School consolidation is a politically charged topic, and opponents or supporters should not take any vote for granted.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this brief ANONYMOUS survey. There are 8 short answer questions in this survey, and then one question that requires an answer of at least one sentence. The purpose of this research is to gather information about individuals with your community, and whether or not they support or reject school mergers. This survey is confidential and you can skip any question you do not want to answer.

1. Which school district is your dedicated district for Vermont taxes (towns are listed in alphabetical order)?

- Bakersfield
- Berkshire
- Bethel
- Chelsea
- Enosburg
- Granville
- Hancock
- Montgomery
- Richford
- Rochester
- Sharon
- South Royalton/Royalton
- Stockbridge
- Strafford

- Tunbridge

2. How many years have you lived in this community?

_____ years

3. Did you attend any of the schools within these communities?

- YES

- NO

4. Do you have any relatives who currently attend schools within one of these communities? Relatives might include (but are not limited to the following terms):

daughter, son, grandson, granddaughter, niece, nephew, cousin, brother, sister.

- YES

- NO

If you answered YES to Question 4, and your relative(s) is/are enrolled in school, please indicate what grade level(s) s/he/they is/are in: (check all that apply)

___K ___1 ___2 ___3 ___4 ___5 ___6 ___7
___8 ___9 ___10 ___11 ___12

5. What is your age?

- 18 to 25 years old
- 26 to 35 years old
- 36 to 45 years old
- 46 to 55 years old
- 56 to 65 years old
- 66 to 75 years old
- 76 years or older

prefer not to answer

6. What is your gender identity?

- I identify myself as a female
- I identify myself as a male
- I prefer not to answer
- Other: _____

7. Where do you get your information about schools in your community?

(Check all that apply).

- Newspaper
- Radio
- Television
- Internet/emails
- Conversations with friends
- Neighbors
- School board meeting minutes
- Attending school board meetings
- Family members
- Other: _____

Thank you for completing some demographic information.

In regards to school mergers,

8. Do you support school mergers within your community?

- Yes
- No

· Maybe (not a firm yes or no)

The next question is an open-ended response. You can write as much or as little as you would like in order to explain your viewpoint, but please provide at least one sentence for your answer.

9. Why did you answer question 8 the way that you did?

Thank you again for your time. **If you would like to leave your contact information in order to participate in a more in-depth interview about school consolidation within your community, please provide your contact information on a separate page in order to keep your responses to this survey anonymous.**

Appendix B

CONSENT FORM

RESEARCHER NAME: Byron David Prugh

STUDY TITLE: Why Do Some People in Vermont Towns Accept or Reject School Mergers

PURPOSE The researcher wants to answer why some people support or reject school mergers. He also wants to answer how some people responded to changes in student populations over time. Answers to these questions might help other towns with similar changes.

I am being asked to join in the study because I am a voter in a town the researcher is studying.

Your name was randomly selected from voter registration roles. You are NOT required to participate in this research.

DESCRIPTION I know that I am being asked to answer questions in a survey to help the researcher. My answers might help others understand how some people in Vermont responded to changes in schools (merging with other school districts, closing schools, student enrollment concerns).

I understand that it might take me 3 - 7 minutes to answer the questions. I understand I will not be paid to fill in the survey.

RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS I will be asked to reflect about a topic, school mergers, which might make me experience some strong emotions. I am aware that I can end my participation in this study at any time.

BENEFITS There may be no direct benefits to me. What is learned may be good for Vermont citizens, other researchers, and elected officials. I also understand that I can learn more about this research when the research is finished.

OTHER OPTIONS I know that I can choose not to complete this survey.

PRIVACY All paper surveys will be kept secret based on federal, state, and local laws and regulations. I understand that data collected by the study may be reviewed by Plymouth State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB is responsible for protecting my welfare and rights as a participant. The IRB makes sure the researcher follows university rules.

The information collected will be kept for three years. My name will not be written on the survey.

STOP PARTICIPATING I can stop completing the survey at any time and for any reason.

MONEY I will not be paid to complete a survey. There is no cost for me to participate.

INJURY SUPPORT Neither Plymouth State University nor any government or other agency funding this research project will provide special services, free care, or money for any injuries resulting from this research.

I understand that treatment for such injuries will be at my expense and/or paid through my medical plan.

QUESTIONS

All of my questions have been answered, and I am willing to take part. If I have more questions about this study, I may contact Mr. Prugh at 617-697-3785 or bdprugh@plymouth.edu.

If I have questions about my rights, I may call the Chairperson of the Plymouth State University's Institutional Review Board at 603-535-3221.

CHOICE

I understand that filling in this survey is my choice. I can stop at any time without any punishment. I agree to participate in this survey. I can receive a copy of this consent form.

Signatures:

My Name (please print)

My Signature

Date

I agree, to the best of my knowledge, the subject signing this consent form can have the study fully and carefully explained by me. The subject was given an opportunity to ask any questions about the nature, risks, and benefits of participation in this research study.

The consent form will NOT be attached to the anonymous survey. Please mail it in a separate (enclosed) envelope in order to maintain your privacy. Surveys are mailed in separate envelopes.

Byron David Prugh

Researcher's Name (Printed)

Plymouth State University's IRB has approved for the researcher to ask for participants in this study until August 22, 2018.

FOCUS GROUP If you would like to participate in a 45 minute focus group (in mid October) on the topic of *Why Do Some Community Members Support or Oppose School Consolidation in Vermont*, please provide additional contact information below:

Phone number () _____ - _____ OR email: _

OR mailing address:

Appendix C

1. Can you describe the enrollment trends within your supervisory union/school district since June 2013?
2. How did your supervisory union/district address recent enrollment trends?
3. Prior to the passage of Act 46, what were the best qualities of your SU/district?
4. Prior to the passage of Act 46 in June 2015, what do you recall were the most pressing problems/challenges within the SU/district?
5. When Act 46 was passed, what was your response to Act 46?
6. When Act 46 was passed, what was your school district's/SU's response to Act 46?
7. When Act 46 was passed, what was your community's response to Act 46?
8. Was your community's response different from others?
9. Has that initial response changed? Please explain your yes or no answer.
10. What has changed with the supervisory union as a result of the community's response?