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## SCHOOL CONSOLIDATION AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

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**ABSTRACT**—The linkages between schools and community are seldom discussed in the research on school consolidation. Most of the focus of this body of literature is on the effects of school consolidation on efficiency and equity. In this essay I discuss the importance of school-community relationships and the critical role schools can play in community development. School consolidation can have several negative impacts on the local economy, social capital, and community identity. Assessments of the benefits and costs of consolidation need to consider more carefully the impacts on communities and the potential of building a stronger relationship between schools and communities.

**Key Words:** community development, school consolidation, asset-based development, social capital

### INTRODUCTION

School consolidation continues to spark controversy across the Great Plains and other rural regions of the United States (Blauwkamp et al. 2011). Population loss, especially of young adults, is a major factor in the school consolidation movement in many rural areas. Although we frequently think of school consolidation in the context of smaller rural communities, it is rapidly becoming an issue facing urban areas as well. Population decline in many inner cities has forced school districts to close schools in some neighborhoods, while building new facilities in rapidly growing suburbs. There is often a groundswell of opposition to school closings and consolidation. In our search to find political solutions to these issues we need to better understand why school consolidation is so controversial and ignites such intense opposition from community residents. Unfortunately the literature on school consolidation does not provide many insights into the emotional reaction to these issues.

The voluminous literature on school consolidation has focused on two key issues: efficiency and equity. Supporters of school consolidation contend that it will lead to greater efficiency—large schools and districts will provide education to students at a lower cost due to economies of scale. Large schools, and districts, have lower costs per student because the fixed costs are spread across more students. Of course transportation costs can

offset many of the fiscal benefits of consolidation in rural areas with low population density.

Supporters of school consolidation argue that small schools are unable to provide the breadth and depth of educational programs that are offered in large schools. Thus students in small schools may not have access to the same quality of education that is available in large schools. For example, it may not be possible to offer as many foreign languages or advanced courses in smaller schools. In the end consolidated school districts should provide improved test scores and other outcomes indicators for students. Technological advancements, such as online courses, may help overcome some of these disadvantages. These arguments for school consolidation, however, have been effective in many state legislatures, especially when faced with the severe fiscal stress of recent years.

I approach the issue of the impacts of school consolidation, however, from a community development perspective. I am primarily interested in how school consolidation affects the capacity of communities to collectively improve their quality of life. The loss of a school leaves a void in communities. School consolidation makes it more difficult for students to be engaged in their community and for the school to serve the broader population. Community capacity can in turn affect the quality of education in school districts as well. As communities in a school district decline, the educational system suffers.

Although the research on the impacts of school consolidation on efficiency and equity continues to be de-

bated, there is much more of a consensus in the research on the impacts on community (Miller 1993). Consolidation tends to undermine the capacity of communities to enhance their well-being. Along with other broader social and economic forces it undermines community autonomy, community identity, and collective action. Schools can, however, play a critical role in promoting community development. Yet this promise is often unrealized and is threatened even more by school consolidation.

One of the difficulties in this debate over school consolidation is how to weigh the costs and benefits of the efficiency, equity, and community impacts of consolidation. Some of the impacts are more quantifiable than others, which leaves legislators and administrators with only the quantifiable results. In the next section I briefly review some of the empirical research that has examined the impacts of school consolidation on communities.

### **COMMUNITY IMPACTS OF SCHOOL CONSOLIDATION**

Research on the impacts of school consolidation on communities consistently reveals that consolidation undermines the social and economic capacity of localities. As key social institutions in most communities, schools provide an anchor for other institutions and organizations. Research on the community impacts of school consolidation has concentrated on several key areas: property values, business activity, social capital, and community identity.

#### **Property Values**

School quality has a major impact on local property values. Districts that are perceived to have higher-quality schools experience more demand for housing. This relationship is ultimately reflected in the community's property values. Property values in turn shape the fiscal capacity of school districts and influence school consolidation. Thus, as property values decline, the resources available to schools decrease. Similarly, as the property tax base declines, school administrators look for strategies to cut costs, such as consolidation.

School consolidation can have a direct impact on property values as well. Lyson (2002) found that small communities in New York State that do not have schools tended to have lower property values than those that did have schools. Brasington (2004) also found that after controlling for student performance and property tax rates, school consolidation lowered property values about \$3,000 per household on average.

Property values reflect the demand for housing in an area and the evidence suggests that families prefer to live in a community where there is a school in proximity. Similarly, the perceived quality of the school will influence the demand for housing. In most states public schools are funded largely through property taxes, so these dynamics create a downward cycle for school districts that attempt to consolidate schools in response to fiscal problems.

#### **Business Activity**

The local economy also may be affected by school consolidation. Sell and Leistritz (1997) found that communities that have lost schools experience a greater loss in retail sales and number of businesses. Similarly, Lyson (2002) found that business activity was much higher in rural communities that have schools than those that do not. Business activity is affected by the loss of student and faculty expenditures, as well as that of the school's expenditures on supplies and services in the local economy. Schools also stimulate local economies by paying faculty and staff salaries.

#### **Social Capital**

Schools remain one of the few local institutions that provide residents with an opportunity to interact on issues of common concern. Consolidation reduces the opportunity for social interaction within localities (Elliott 2012; Hanifan 1916). Proximity does influence the amount and type of social interaction that occurs at the local level.

Social interaction at the local level is important for several reasons. First, residents develop trust with others in the community in the course of local interaction. Trust is important because it helps improve flows of information and ties with others and ultimately facilitates collective action. Second, local interaction is essential for developing the capacity to work through differences and provide an understanding of opposing interests and concerns. In this sense it is critical to the development of democracy. Finally, social interaction at the local level is crucial for identifying areas of common concern, which ultimately improves the capacity of residents to improve their community's quality of life. Thus the loss of local schools decreases the level of social capital.

Empirical studies have consistently shown a loss of civic participation as a result of school consolidation. In their study of North Dakota communities Post and Stambach (1999) found lower levels of participation in local organizations after consolidation. Similarly, parental in-

volvement in school activities declines when schools are consolidated (Duncombe and Yinger 2001). This decline in involvement is at least partially due to the greater distance that parents have to travel in consolidated districts.

### Community Identity

School consolidation is typically viewed as a threat to community identity (Warner et al. 2010). Where one goes to high school, for example, provides a signal or information to others outside the community. The loss of a school threatens this sense of place or community. Many rural communities today lack theaters and shopping malls, so athletic events and school-sponsored activities have become the key element of their community. Parents often experience that loss of identity when their children can no longer attend the same school they had attended. They do not have the same type of attachment with a consolidated school.

### SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITY

Schools and communities have mutual interests, but several forces work against realizing those common interests (Chung 2002). Professionalization and bureaucratization have especially contributed to the loss of school engagement in communities. These processes push administrators and teachers to focus their attention on the internal dynamics of schools while downplaying the linkages to the broader community. Professionalization limits community participation in education decisions as well. School officials, it is argued, have the training and experience necessary to make good decisions about education.

Bureaucratization also tends to make it more difficult for local residents to access school facilities or other resources. It could be reasoned that this narrowing of the mission of schools is a positive development given the limited resources devoted to education. But this criticism misses the point about the educational value of engaging students in real-world issues and applying the concepts they learn in the classroom. In other words, greater engagement in the community rather than less may be a more appropriate response to the fiscal stress facing many school districts.

Professionalization and bureaucratization also have shaped the community development field in recent decades. Emphasis on finance and housing, the bread and butter of many community development programs, has largely ignored the potential of working with schools to help address community issues. Professionalization has

contributed to a narrowing of the field of community development. There is much less emphasis on community organizing and more on accessing external resources as a means of promoting development (Stoecker 1997). Professionalization of the community development field has even restricted the role of residents in shaping development efforts because they may have limited information and knowledge about the technical issues related to housing and finance. These processes have also moved community development professionals away from working through local organizations and institutions.

There are numerous reasons, however, why schools logically should be the focus of community development practitioners. In many communities schools are one of the few local institutions that remain. Local businesses have been replaced with regional, national, and international chains. Independent hospitals and healthcare organizations have been acquired by outside organizations. Many small-town banks have become branches of national, and even international, holding companies. As these organizations and institutions have become more integrated into the larger society, communities have lost much of their autonomy. Decisions affecting the community are increasingly made by outside agencies and organizations. The disappearance of these local institutions often results in a net economic loss to the community as purchases of goods and services become more centralized (usually outside the community). Support for other local organizations also declines as these institutions restructure their relationship to the community. Schools can potentially play an important community function because they have this localized relationship that other social institutions lack today.

Schools provide the potential for regular interaction among community residents. The decline in levels of participation in local institutions and organizations has been well documented (Putnam 2000). Although much of this decline can be attributed to broader social forces, I believe the lack of meaningful opportunities to address issues of common concern in communities is also a major contributor to this decline. Public education is frequently a common concern among residents (and businesses). It cuts across class, race, ethnicity, and sex. Some of the most successful community development cases in recent years that have worked across racial and ethnic lines have focused on schools (Warren 2001). The lesson is that among various local institutions, schools have the greatest potential of uniting citizens in ways that improve their quality of life. Thus it provides opportunities for collective action.

Schools also offer the potential of learning citizenship through community engagement (Peshkin 1978).

Because each field (education and community development) has narrowed its focus, we tend to lack holistic approaches to address interrelated issues such as local economic development, racial and income segregation, suburban sprawl, and the achievement gap in schools. Paul Grogan and Tony Proscio (2000, 220–21) make this connection between schools and community development in their book on neighborhood revival:

From the perspective of community development groups, education is the next frontier. For decades, they had found themselves hamstrung by the impenetrable wall around their neighborhood public schools. They could fix housing, revive shopping areas, raise the level of public services, even reduce crime. But the schools—probably the biggest factor in families' decision about whether to remain or flee—were simply beyond the realm of the organized community. Many critics of community development correctly pointed out that, even when community development corporations visibly transformed their communities into livable, attractive places, the middle class sometimes kept moving out.

The definition of community has been one of the most widely debated concepts in social scientific literature. For my purposes in this essay, there are three important elements (Wilkinson 1991). First, I am referring to communities of place (not interest). Communities of place are based in a specific territory, whereas communities of interest tie individuals to each other through religion, values, politics, or similar concerns. One of the key issues in defining communities of place is the boundary of a community. For some it may be a small neighborhood, and for others it can be as large as a county. School attendance areas form the community boundaries in many places. Schools generate issues of common concern across an area. Research suggests that some of the strongest factors influencing social interaction at the local level are having school-age children and homeownership (Kasarda and Janowitz 1974).

Second, community requires local social organizations and institutions that can provide routinized social interaction. Local cafes, coffee shops, taverns, bookstores, and hair salons also can provide these opportunities (Oldenburg 1999). The loss of these places can be devastating to community life. In many localities schools fulfill this function. This does not mean that communities require

a full set of institutions that enable them to become self-sufficient. In the past residents in small towns could meet most of their needs through local organizations and institutions. Today, however, small communities are likely to rely on many institutions outside their borders.

Finally, the concept of community involves social interaction on matters of common interest. This definition implies that community does not exist simply when you have local institutions; residents must interact on something that they have in common. This issue is somewhat controversial because critics charge that social class and race/ethnic differences divide communities so deeply that it is difficult to mobilize residents around issues that they have in common. The concept of community does not deny that there may be deep social divisions and different interests and values in a community. It does suggest, however, that many of the residents in a specific area may be faced with some of the same issues and concerns. Environmental pollution, for example, may affect most residents in a place and spark collective action in response to this threat. The quality of public education may be another factor that can influence community quality of life, even if residents do not have school-age children. Although there may be racial and class differences in how these issues affect households due to unequal resources, they do still have an impact on most residents in the locality.

There is considerable debate as to whether the concept of community is still relevant in today's global society. In the past people lived, worked, and consumed in the same places. These functions, however, do not overlap as much as they once did. Urbanization and bureaucratization of our institutions contribute to the loss of a sense of community. Social scientists have argued that these processes change the nature of social relationships by contributing to increased individualism and social isolation. This is especially the case in many urban neighborhoods that have experienced deindustrialization and racial segregation (Wilson 1987), but also in suburban areas that are characterized by low-density development. Technology also may affect these relationships because it loosens the bonds at the local level and enables individuals to develop less place-bound communities. Similarly, mass communication and global culture may reduce some of the place-specific attributes that contribute to a sense of community. The central concern with the loss of community is that residents lose the capacity to address issues of common concern.

Although these social processes are real and have undeniably weakened community bonds at the local level, there is substantial evidence that residents continue to

interact on community matters, and that this interaction is an important component of their quality of life. Social networks may have become denser over time, but community residents continue to interact with neighbors helping each other and by participating in social events (McPherson et al. 2006). Community may not have been lost, but instead has been transformed and liberated.

School consolidation can be considered an element of urbanization and bureaucratization (Sher 1977). The loss of local institutions and the growing linkages to the larger society and economy have been part of the process of modernization and urbanization of communities over the past century and a half. This has been referred to as the “Great Change” by some sociologists (Warren 1978). With these changes individuals have tended to be more isolated and less connected to one another.

In response to the growing divide between schools and communities, there has been discussion around the promotion of community schools over the past few decades. The basic definition of a community school is one that seeks to integrate children into the community through selected activities other than academics and at the same time serves as a community center for recreation and adult education. Community schools promote student engagement through activities such as community service-learning and school enterprises. School facilities can be used to help provide social services. Businesses are actively involved in providing apprenticeship programs as well. Community schools build on the assets that are available in these institutions.

### SCHOOLS AS COMMUNITY ASSETS

The community development field has shifted its orientation from needs assessment to asset-based development over the past two decades (Green and Goetting 2010; Green and Haines 2011). This asset-based approach attempts to maximize and leverage the use of available community resources rather than focus on the problems the community faces. This approach to community development views schools as assets that can contribute to the well-being of the larger community and not as problems that need to be addressed.

The emphasis on needs and problems tends to render communities powerless. Schools are frequently identified as problems that need to be fixed. This labeling of schools as problems pushes communities to seek external resources (especially financial assets and technical expertise) to address these challenges. This dependence on external resources undermines community capacity

building. In addition solutions are proposed before the sources of the so-called problem are really understood. For example, the achievement gap is addressed by curriculum reform, while many of the sources of the gap are based outside the school.

The asset-based development approach empowers communities to build on their resources and identify the strategies that can enhance their assets. Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) identify three different types of assets: individual gifts, associations, and local institutions. Individuals have gifts, experiences, and skills that contribute to the well-being of communities. These gifts often are overlooked or ignored in the community. Informal organizations can provide social networks and contacts that are essential to the mobilization of communities. Finally, formal institutions can provide a wide variety of resources, as well as establish regular contact and trust among community members.

Asset-based development begins with the mapping of the gifts, associations, and institutions in the community. This stage of the organizational effort enables developers to identify the kinds of resources that are available to them. It does not mean that communities rely entirely on local resources. Instead local assets can be leveraged to be more effective. The key, however, is that local actors need to maintain control over the community development process. Mapping these individual assets provides communities with an opportunity to develop a vision based on the resources that are available to them.

After mapping the assets community organizers build consensus by forging identifying goals that can be achieved by leveraging community resources (Green and Goetting 2010). Asset-based development approaches tend to be less conflict oriented than other community development strategies. Organizers build on consensus and mobilize residents around common goals. Consensus organizing can build stronger support, with less resistance, for efforts to promote community well-being (Eichler 2007).

How can schools serve as a community resource or an asset? First, school facilities are underutilized because they are typically used for only a part of the day. School facilities can provide a meeting place for community organizations, business groups, and informal organizations (e.g., book clubs). Community organizations, especially those serving youth, can use recreational facilities. Most communities struggle to find facilities for artists and musicians, and schools can cooperate with local organizations to provide these key resources. School grounds are increasingly used for community gardens. These gardens

not only improve food security in the community, but they also provide an educational opportunity for students.

Second, schools often have equipment that could benefit the broader community. For example, there is growing interest in the concept of community kitchens that provide equipment and facilities to entrepreneurs that are too small to procure their own. Access to this equipment and facilities can help entrepreneurs overcome some of the barriers they face in the startup phase. Thus, schools can serve as incubators for promoting certain types of entrepreneurship in the community.

Third, schools can stimulate the local economy through their purchasing power. Rather than purchasing goods and services outside the community, schools can support local businesses with their purchases. The growing number of farm-to-school programs is an excellent example of going local. In an effort to introduce more fresh fruits and vegetables into school lunch programs, many schools are purchasing products from local farmers and ranchers rather than from wholesalers. These programs benefit the schools because they not only provide nutritious food, but they also are frequently used to educate children about food and nutrition. At the same time these purchases help support local farmers, who benefit from these direct purchases.

Fourth, schools can offer courses to the broader community. Many schools offer courses in English as a second language. Local schools are best prepared to reach out to local residents that may not have the resources to obtain this training elsewhere. The potential ties to students can be an effective way of reaching this audience.

Schools have the potential of making a broad set of contributions to community development. These benefits are seldom discussed in the debates over school consolidation. Closing a school typically has devastating impacts on the community and ignores the potential contribution schools make to the broader community. The loss of a local school has a multiplier effect in the community because it means a loss of many of these key resources for community development.

## CONCLUSIONS

Education can be enhanced by a strong relationship between schools and community. Consolidation however, presents obstacles to building these relationships. Many of the educational innovations, such as community service-learning, that are being promoted within the educational field today run counter to the movement to consolidate schools and districts. At a minimum it is more

difficult to get students in consolidated schools engaged in their communities.

We need to look more carefully at institutional innovations that provide school districts with the financial and programmatic benefits of economies of scale, while rebuilding the relationship between schools and the local community. Here it is important to distinguish between administrative and educational consolidation. Administrative consolidation can be achieved without affecting the size of schools or communities. Shared services across school districts can be an effective strategy for providing economies of scale without consolidating attendance areas (Howley et al. 2012).

The field of community development also needs to recognize the importance of school-community relationships. Schools are often the major employers in most communities. Through their purchases of goods and services, they have an impact on the local economy. Schools also have many underutilized resources that can facilitate the community development process. Community organizers need to consider school administrators, faculty, and students as important stakeholders in the community development process. School administrators can serve on committees and boards in the community. They provide access to a wide variety of networks in the community and can offer an important perspective on development issues.

The arguments for school consolidation lend themselves to a standard cost-benefit analysis. When the fiscal benefits of school consolidation exceed the costs, it appears to be a rational decision to find ways of consolidating schools and districts. Including the element of community into this analysis, however, is problematic and tends to draw on emotions rather than rationality. I have argued that in the long run the element of community may ultimately play a major role in the quality of education. By integrating the importance of community into these decisions, it is possible to build on the mutual relationships between schools and community.

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