

THE PROGRAMMATIC, FINANCIAL, AND CULTURAL IMPACT OF
FAILED SCHOOL DISTRICT REORGANIZATION EFFORTS:
PERSPECTIVES OF SCHOOL DISTRICT LEADERSHIP TEAMS

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Abstract

School district reorganization is a phenomenon that communities and boards of education have been forced to consider many times throughout the history of public education in New York State and across the nation. The current state aid formula employed by New York State to distribute education aid to school districts disadvantages the neediest school districts in the state, leaving those communities without the necessary resources to prepare students for college and careers in the 21st century (Timbs, 2013). Coupled with the fact that many school districts across the state have tapped into their available reserves, many school districts are on the verge of financial and educational insolvency (The Council of State Superintendents, 2012).

Participants in this study were comprised of five New York State school district leadership teams consisting of a superintendent, business official, and a board member that experienced failed school district reorganization efforts during the calendar year 2012. This study addressed what the effects of choosing not to reorganize have been, and what the future holds for those districts. This qualitative research has the potential to inform the field in terms of the decisions that school districts are making as a result of failed efforts, as well as the potential to influence state policy and law makers to generate alternatives to what current law.

Findings showed that school districts facing declining enrollment, dwindling resources, and diminishing resources in New York State have little choice but to consider school district reorganization as a viable alternative under current law. As a result of the findings, it is recommended that New York State statutes and regulations regarding school district reorganization be overhauled to reflect the demographic and economic realities of the 21st century in New York State and to promote equity for all students in the state.

Keywords: school district reorganization, leadership, leadership teams, declining resources,
declining enrollment, diminishing program

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Today's youth are caught in a unique educational trap. They have state of the art technology at their disposal and teachers who have the ability to use data to inform instruction. They have demands placed on them that arguably no other generation of students has ever had thrust upon them. Combined with the demands of the Common Core Standards and the pressures of high stakes testing, via social media the youth of today are bombarded with the challenges of the global economy and the injustices that they will have to face and correct in the future. Yet, for the most part, those same public education students, who were born in and who will live and work in the 21st century, are enduring a 19th century model of schooling with instructors who are solidly rooted in the 20th century.

Throughout history, public education in America has evolved with the needs of the nation, and school district reorganization became the vehicle for that evolution. Today the needs of the entire world are causing the American educational system to go through another transformation. School district reorganization will once again play a major role in this renovation of American public education. Alsbury and Shaw (2005) stated that declining enrollment, decreased funding, and increased accountability have rekindled interest in reorganization as a means of improving effectiveness and efficiency.

Decisions about reorganization in New York State ultimately reside in the hands of local voters. This study explored how some New York State school districts reacted to defeated school district reorganization efforts, and how program, finance, and culture were affected. Additionally, the research examined models of school district reorganization in other states in an effort to discover possible options for New York State, whose process for school district reorganization has remained relatively unchanged since 1925.

Statement of Problem

School districts often consider reorganization in the face of declining enrollment and constraining finances. The current financial situation of the state has resulted in an increasing number of school districts considering and studying reorganization, although a very small number of districts actually reorganize. The programmatic, financial, and cultural effects of school district reorganization are well documented with a balance of the benefits and detriments. What is missing from the literature is research regarding what happens to school districts that choose not to reorganize. What decisions do they make regarding the program they provide their children? How does the financial situation of the district affect tax rates and employee compensation and retention? How does the culture of the community change?

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to discover the perspectives of school district leadership teams regarding the programmatic, financial, and cultural impact of failed school district reorganization efforts in New York State school districts. School district leadership teams were defined as school superintendents, board of education members, and business officials.

Research Questions

The current financial climate has not increased the number of reorganizations, although the number of districts studying the concept has increased in recent years. The research examined the effects of not choosing to reorganize and what the future holds for those districts. The literature addressing school district reorganization is extensive; however, all of it addresses the impact it has on school districts and communities. How school districts survive a failed attempt to reorganize was the topic of research.

The research questions associated with this study were:

1. What are the reasons/motivations behind entering into a school district reorganization feasibility study?
2. What are the perspectives of leadership teams regarding the programmatic, financial, and cultural impacts of the failed reorganization effort?
3. How do leadership teams proceed with defeated reorganization efforts?
4. How would leaders improve the school district reorganization process?

Definition of Terms

New York State statutes and regulations provide for the organization of various types of school districts and for specific methods for their reorganization. The method of reorganization that may be employed is determined in part by the types of school districts that are involved in the effort. It is important to have the ability to distinguish the various methods that New York State uses to organize and reorganize school districts under existing law. The following terms were used throughout this study.

Annexation – central school district: Annexation of common, union free, or central school districts to a central school district is a reorganization procedure whereby a school district is dissolved, and its territory is annexed to a contiguous central school district.

Annexation does not result in the creation of a new district, nor is a new school board elected.

Annexation – union free school district: Annexation of common, union free, or central school districts to a union free school district is a reorganization procedure whereby a school district is dissolved, and its territory is annexed to a contiguous union free school district.

Annexation does not result in the creation of a new district, nor is a new school board elected.

BOCES: A board of cooperative educational services organized under section 1950 of the New York State Educational Law to provide educational services in a geographical area known as a supervisory.

Central high school districts: There are only three central high school districts in New York State, and all are in Nassau County. A central high school district provides secondary education to children from two more common or union free school districts.

Central school district: Central school districts may be created from the combination of any number of common, union free, and other central school districts. The financial incentives that were put into place in 1925 have made the central school district the most common form of district in New York State.

Centralization: Centralization is the most common form of reorganization. A new central school district is created by the merger of two or more contiguous districts, other than city school districts, with a new school board and boundaries that encompass the area of the districts being reorganized.

City school districts: City school districts with populations over 125,000 have boundaries coterminous with the city served, and education is a part of the overall city government. Cities with populations under 125,000 are separate governmental units and may have boundaries that are larger than the city they serve.

Common school district: Common school districts are the oldest form of existing school districts and do not have the legal authority to operate a high school. Common school districts

must designate the high school of neighboring districts to ensure they provide students with a secondary education.

Consolidation of union free/common school districts: Consolidation is any combination of two or more contiguous common or union free districts into a single common or union free school district, with a new school board and boundaries that encompass the area of the districts being reorganized.

Consolidation with a city school district: The consolidation of one or more school districts with a city school district whereby a school district is dissolved, and its territory is annexed to a contiguous city school district. Annexation does not result in the creation of a new district, nor is a new school board elected.

Culture: For the purposes of this study, the term culture defined as “a pattern of shared basic assumptions learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration” (Schein, 2011, p. 42).

Failed school district reorganization effort: For the purposes of this study, a school district that has experienced a failed reorganization effort was a district that had undertaken a reorganization feasibility study and had either experienced a failed advisory or statutory referendum or had chosen not to pursue a referendum.

Fund balance: Year end balances of school districts that are a result of revenues exceeding estimated expenditures less than estimated appropriations.

Gap elimination adjustment (GEA): A formula employed in New York State that reduces the aid that schools received in an effort to close the deficit in the state budget.

Reorganizational incentive aid: Additional operating and building aid provided to reorganized school districts.

School district reorganization: School district reorganization is the term used to define the statutory processes by which two or more school districts are merged into a single district. Throughout this study, the terms reorganization, consolidation, and merger are used synonymously.

Tax certiorari proceeding: A legal proceeding through which a corporation or property owner seeks to lower an assessment.

Tax on true: The tax rate of an entire school district based on the true market value of real property.

Union free school district: Union free schools were originally created for the combination of two or more common school for the provision of high school.

Delimitations/ Limitations

The scope of this study includes select school districts in New York State that participated in failed school district reorganization efforts in the calendar year 2012. It is narrowed to the perspectives of superintendents, business officials, and school board members from five districts in New York State that experienced a failed school district reorganization effort during 2012. The perspectives of the participants in this study are not necessarily generalizable to other school district leadership teams that have had the same experience.

Significance of the Study

School district reorganization remains the only legal alternative these districts can take advantage of to provide long term financial relief. However, the current process for reorganization in New York has gone relatively unchanged since 1925. The process is outdated, cumbersome, and rarely results in an actual reorganization. This study has the potential to inform the field in terms of the decisions that school districts are making as a result of failed

efforts to reorganize. The findings can be used to inform state policy and lawmakers as they strive to provide school districts with alternatives to the current process of school district reorganization.

In New York State, many school districts are experiencing declining enrollment, decreasing revenues as a result of the tax levy cap and the great recession, and diminishing opportunities for students. The current statutes and regulations in place do not provide school districts and communities the flexibility that is necessary to meet the needs of 21st century children and communities. Models of reorganization that exist in other states provide New York with examples of how it might alter its current law regarding reorganization. New York has an opportunity to revisit reorganization in the state entirely and to use school district reorganization to not only address the programmatic, financial, and cultural issues of individual districts, but also to advance equity and social justice across the entire state.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Across the nation public school systems find themselves facing greater accountability measures from every level of government. Since the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 the federal government has played an increasingly larger role in the operation of school districts. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2002, the most recent reauthorization of ESEA, and the Race to the Top (RTTT) initiative have created an unprecedented level of federal involvement in school districts. In New York State, the Board of Regents has imposed accountability measures on schools throughout history. Most recently the Regents Reform Agenda, an attempt to bring transformational change to education in New York State, has exponentially increased accountability measures in an already highly regulated state school system. Despite the increase in accountability measures that have been imposed on school districts, resources continue to dwindle.

As a result, school districts find themselves revisiting an issue that was before them in the middle of the last century. School district reorganization is a phenomenon that communities and boards of education have been forced to consider many times throughout the history of public education in New York State and across the nation. The current state aid formula employed by New York State to distribute education aid to school districts disadvantages the neediest school districts in the state, leaving those communities without the necessary resources to prepare students for college and careers in the 21st century. Coupled with the fact that many school districts across the state have tapped into their available reserves, many school districts are on the verge of financial and educational insolvency.

History of School District Reorganization

New York State enacted a statewide system of support for public schools in 1795 (New York State Education Department [NYSED], 2013). Since 1812, when New York first was divided into school districts, school district reorganization has been a work in progress (NYSED, 1958). From a historical perspective, New York State has embraced the concept of school district reorganization. In 1845, New York was comprised of approximately 11,000 school districts (NYSED, 1958). By July 1, 2011, that number had been reduced to 697 school districts (NYSED, 2013). Although little reorganization has occurred in recent years, the current economic climate in New York has resulted in an increased number of districts studying the possibility.

School district reorganization has not been specific to New York State. Brimley, Versteegen, and Garfield (2012) reported that school district reorganization has brought the number of schools districts in the nation from 127,649 in 1932 to 15,244 in 2009. Duncombe and Yinger (2010) cite that the nation experienced an 88% reduction in the number of school districts in the United States (US) between 1939-1940 and 2006-2007. As the number of schools and school districts across the nation decline, there has been a concomitant increase in the size of school districts and schools. Between 1930 and 1970, average US school size increased from 87 to 440 students, while district size increased from 170 to 2300 students. Over the same period, the country experienced a reduction of over 120,000 schools and 100,000 districts (Berry, 2010).

As communities around the country evolved, so did their schools. The influx of immigrants throughout the better part of the 1800s had a tremendous impact on the nation's schools. The result was an end of the 19th century initiative to urbanize education and rescue rural districts from substandard schooling in reaction to the economic needs of the time (Sell,

Leistritz, &Thompson, 1996). Between 1929 and 1969, the public school attendance rate nearly doubled while the nation experienced its greatest period of reorganization (Berry, 2004). School district reorganization was a nationwide trend and the arguments of proponents have not changed since that time (Alsbury & Shaw, 2005).

The process of school district reorganization in New York State. According to the New York State Education Department's (NYSED) (2013) *Guide to the reorganization of districts in New York State*, New York is organized into five types of school districts: common, union free, central, city, and central high school. Each was created by separate acts of legislation and has varying responsibilities and governance rules. In 1947, the state adopted a statewide *Master plan for school district reorganization*, which was updated in 1958. Over the years the plan has been amended, but the 1958 document continues to be the guide for reorganization (NYSED, 2013).

Under existing laws and regulations, school district reorganization in New York State can take place by means of five different methods: centralization, annexation to a central school district, annexation to a union free school district, consolidation of union free/common school districts, and consolidation with a city school district (NYSED, 2013). The form of reorganization that is chosen is dependent of the type of districts that are involved in the effort and the type of district that will be created through reorganization. Although each form of reorganization has a separate procedure, effect on property taxes and debt, effect on employees, and form of governance, there is a single process for initiating any form of reorganization.

The Commissioner of Education requires a reorganization feasibility study, a public information period, and approval from the majority of voters in the districts affected before a reorganization order can be implemented (NYSED, 2013). A feasibility study is normally

conducted only after a considerable amount of preliminary work has been completed by the districts involved. This work includes many joint meetings of the boards of education and assistance from NYSED Educational Management Services personnel. Once districts have collected sufficient data that indicates a formal study is warranted, consultants are often hired to assist with the process. Although there are no defined prerequisites to be a consultant, they tend to be retired superintendents who have experience with reorganization or representatives from higher education with similar experience. A request for proposals process is initiated to select a consultant and grants to assist with the cost of conducting a feasibility study are available (NYSED, 2013).

NYSED's (2013) *Guide to the reorganization of districts in New York State* states that:

A well-conducted feasibility study will cover several areas, including:

- Current and projected enrollments;
- Current and projected professional staffing plans;
- Current and projected housing plan;
- A plan for education programs and curricula in the proposed district;
- Fiscal implications of the reorganization, including change in state aid, expenditures, and local tax effort. (p. 14)

The report serves to inform district officials, the citizens of the involved districts, and the Commissioner of Education. Although each study process is unique to the specific needs of the affected communities, successful studies typically include a cross-section of all stakeholders in the community (NYSED, 2013).

Once the study is completed, it is sent to the Commissioner of Education for approval. The Commissioner may require revisions to the study before granting final approval. Once

approved all boards involved must adopt the study in order to proceed to the public information phase of the process. If one board does not adopt the report, the study is suspended. If a study is adopted by all boards of education, a public information period then takes place.

The education law provides the opportunity for a referendum in the communities involved before a reorganization becomes effective. This commitment to local control requires that accurate and comprehensive information be provided to the public throughout the process of studying and implementing a reorganization. Boards of education involved in a potential reorganization should reach early agreement on the scope and nature of participation, and a plan to effectively carry out the information process. (NYSED, 2013, pp. 14-15)

The *Guide to the reorganization of districts in New York State* goes on to state:

Regardless of the methods used by boards to involve the public, it is essential that there be a joint plan and calendar developed so that the community information program can begin as soon as adequate information from a study becomes available. (NYSED, 2013, p. 15)

At the conclusion of the public information period, a public referendum can take place to determine if the reorganization will proceed to a statutory referendum. Although not required by law, the Commissioner of Education will not call for a public referendum until some form of public support is demonstrated by the communities involved. This demonstration of public support is typically accomplished through an advisory referendum, but can also be accomplished through a petition process (NYSED, 2013). If there is no demonstration of public support for reorganization, the Commissioner will not call for a statutory referendum, and the process is suspended. New York State law dictates separate processes for each of its various forms of

reorganization, in terms of the steps that can be taken in the future after a demonstration of public support is defeated. Similarly, there are different processes that the various forms of reorganization must follow if there is a demonstration of public support.

Regardless of the path that is followed, each form of reorganization that receives public support will engage in a statutory referendum to determine whether or not reorganization will take place. The process of initiating reorganization, from initial consideration to a public referendum, can take years to accomplish. Although each process is unique, the following table provides an example of a reorganization process that proceeds to a statutory referendum.

Table 1.

Stages of the Reorganization Process in New York State

Stage	Timeframe
Preliminary work	6 months to 1 year
Acquiring a consultant	60 to 90 days
Study period	12 to 18 months
Commissioner approval	2 to 6 weeks
Board adoption	Approximately 30 days from approval
Public information period	60 to 90 days
Demonstration of public support	3 weeks subsequent to public information period
Statutory referendum	30 days subsequent to positive demonstration
Election of new board of education	45 days subsequent to successful referendum
New district begins operating	Subsequent July 1

Other state models of school district reorganization. According to the Pennsylvania School Boards Association (2009) there are 12 states that have initiatives or legislative mandates concerning reorganization. New York and Kansas provide financial incentives to districts that merge with other districts (The Rural School and Community Trust, 2006). Arkansas created a minimum size district of 350 students regardless of their academic effectiveness or financial efficiency (The Rural School and Community Trust, 2006). Other states, such as Florida, Idaho, Illinois, Iowa, Michigan, and New Mexico, are mandating more rigorous curricula that can stress low wealth districts and force reorganization (The Rural School and Community Trust, 2006). The state of California has been incentivizing reorganization since 1920 and has reduced the number of districts from nearly 3,500 in the 1930s to approximately 1,000 in 2011 (Watson, 2012). However, California also provides additional funding to small districts with geography that make them inaccessible to other communities (The Rural School and Community Trust, 2006). Between 1984 and 2010, Illinois reduced the number of school districts in the state from 1,008 to 870. They offer financial incentives to compensate for state aid, deficit fund balances, and salary differences that exist as a result of reorganization (Illinois State Board of Education, 2010).

In 2007, Maine enacted a statewide restructuring program requiring all school districts to reorganize into larger and more efficient units (New York State [NYS] Commission on Local Government Efficiency & Competitiveness, 2008). As of July 1, 2011, 108 out of 164 units were in compliance with the law (State of Maine, Department of Education, 2012). Initially, the law penalized districts that did not approve reorganization via public referendum; however, with many districts out compliance, the state has since backed away from those penalties (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2011). Arkansas passed legislation that requires districts with

fewer than 350 students to reorganize in 2004 (NYS Commission on Local Government Efficiency & Competitiveness, 2008). Since then 57 districts have been consolidated (The Rural School and Community Trust, 2006). The state can also force mergers of districts that are found to be in academic or financial distress (The Rural School and Community Trust, 2006). Indiana's Commission of Local Government Reform has called for a minimum enrollment of 2,000 students (NYS Commission on Local Government Efficiency & Competitiveness, 2008).

Regardless of the state or the incentives that are offered, school district reorganization continues to have both critics and supporters. The financial and political conditions that exist across the nation also continue to push the educational agenda. Those conditions influence the mindset of state lawmakers and, in turn, the focus on reorganization.

Programmatic Implications

A number of studies indicate that reorganization provides enhanced academic opportunities for students and communities (Alsbury & Shaw, 2006; Brigman, 2009; Nitta, Holley, & Wrobel, 2010; Sell et al., 1996; Timbs, 1997). School leaders perceived the positive impact of school district reorganization to include enriched programs, expanded diversity, greater support for at-risk and gifted and talented children, greater flexibility, and over all higher quality of education (Alsbury & Shaw, 2005). In his study of reorganized school districts in New York State, Timbs (1997) found that "past and present superintendents and board members felt that school district reorganization increased educational opportunities for students" (pp. 333-334). At least one of the school districts in each of the mergers studied was providing a substandard education prior to reorganization (Timbs, 1997). Ballin (2007) studied the dynamics of a particular school district reorganization and reported that participant reactions to declining

enrollment and loss of program strongly influenced their opinions regarding consolidation. The superintendent of the combined district stated:

I think being able to more efficiently teach the children was the greatest success. If they had continued as separate school districts, there may have been fewer numbers at different grades levels. It's just a more efficient way of delivering education to students (Ballin, 2007, p. 91).

Respondents in Ballin's (2007) study reported that reorganization to maintain academic and extra-curricular offerings was a logical solution. One particular respondent stated:

The biggest thing was the benefit to the kids. There were programs you could offer together that you couldn't offer by yourself. And I don't mean just sports. It was everything. The taxes were a factor, but the main thing was the education. (Ballin, 2007, p. 101)

The mergers not only remedied loss of opportunity, but also provided for expanded educational programming (Timbs, 1997).

Steele (2010) reported that the superintendents in the study he conducted perceived reorganization as the only means to provide students with greater academic opportunities. Similarly, through his research in determining the most effective approaches for leading rural school districts toward consolidation, Brigman (2009) found that reorganization provided more advantages than disadvantages and led to improved access to academic programs, greater efficiency, and healthier facilities. Nitta et al. (2010) conducted a phenomenological study of rural school consolidation and found that both students and teachers experienced benefits from consolidation including more opportunities for students and fewer preparations and greater professional development for teachers.

The literature regarding the impact of school district reorganization on student achievement is varied. Sleezer (1995) studied the effects of school district reorganization on 12 school districts in New York State and found no evidence of an overwhelming gain in student achievement. In one particular case, the data suggested that the increases in cost exceeded any increase in student performance. Through her study of the possibilities and limitations of school consolidations, Schmidt (2011) found inconclusive evidence that reorganizations resulted in improved effectiveness.

The argument over school and district size plays a dominant role in the discussions regarding student achievement and school district reorganization. One argument for reorganization is that larger schools have the ability to provide broader curricula, a wider variety of options and the opportunity to take classes that better prepare students for college (Duncombe & Yinger, 2007; Nitta et al., 2010). A 2009 conference report of the Achievement Gap Initiative at Harvard University included an analysis of 15 exemplary high schools in five states. Only five of the exemplary high schools studied had enrollments of fewer than 1,000, while six had enrollments that exceeded 1,700 (Ferguson, Hackman, Hanna, & Ballantine, 2009).

Sher, Schaller, and Rural Education & Development (1986) compared the district sizes within the five states receiving the best and worst SAT and ACT scores, as well as graduation, dropout, and retention rates, and found that the higher performing states had smaller average sized districts. In their study of every consolidated school in Arkansas, Johnson, Howley, and Howley (2001) concluded that smaller districts with smaller schools better supported students living in poverty by counteracting poverty's influence on poor student achievement. Furthermore, Howley, Johnson, and Petrie (2011) raise serious doubts regarding the educational benefits from making a given school or district larger, especially for poor and minority students.

Financial Implications

Achieving economies of scale is possibly the most frequent reason for policy makers to consider school district reorganization (Rooney & Augenblick, 2009). Duncombe and Yinger (2007) reported that, due to economies of size, consolidation cuts costs for small rural schools, but even two 1,500 pupil districts can cut costs by consolidating. They also found that doubling district size cuts capital spending by 24 percent. Duncombe and Yinger (2010) also note that the annual operating spending per pupil declines by 61.7% when two 300 pupil districts merge and 49.6% when two 1,500 pupil districts merge. The savings occur for instruction and administration. Transportation is usually more expensive. Participants in the Ballin (2007) study stated that economies of scale were gained through “combining personnel, programs, facilities, and assets” (p. 92).

In each of the cases studied by Steele (2010), scarcity of resources was a contributing factor to the decision to consider reorganization. Abshier (2010) found that small school districts in the state of Texas are suffering financially despite the efforts of superintendents to cut costs, maximize revenues, and improve efficiencies.

Ballin (2007) cited the need to control taxes as the reason why the participants in her study believed the reorganization was approved by voters. She discovered that 11 years after consolidation districts were facing the same resource and enrollment issues that they faced prior to consolidation. Timbs’ (1997) study of the implications of reorganization aid in New York State found that districts had lower tax on true rates during the year the incentive aid ran out than they had prior to the reorganization; however, each district used the bulk of reorganization aid to reduce taxes. Some interviewees suggested that taxes should have been raised higher and more frequently throughout the period that the newly merged district was receiving reorganization

incentive aid, but the fund balance limits prevented them from practically doing so. In each district studied, a need to increase taxes and reduce program occurred within years of the expiration of the reorganization incentive aid.

Ballin (2007) reported a similar experience when one participant stated, “we’ve had to cut since, but when we first started out, we offered the kids a lot” (p.101). Superintendents noted that educational opportunities increased from pre-merger to post merger, but declined with the reductions in the reorganization incentive aid (Timbs, 1997). Brigman (2009) reported that the perceived advantages included increased safety, improved efficiency, and better utilization of resources, but many feared uncertain revenue sources and the risk of increased taxes. A 2007 study of the perceptions of New Jersey school superintendents regarding regional consolidation indicated that any financial savings would be offset by increased transportation costs as well as the price of leveling up collective bargaining agreements (Malik, 2007). Berry (2004) noted that between the 1920s and 1970s the focus was on resources rather than results. School district leaders consider reorganization when financial conditions impact program negatively. When districts are unable to remain effective and efficient, they must look for pathways to achieve those values for their students and taxpayers.

Cultural Implications

Just as school district reorganization has programmatic and financial implications, it also has cultural implications. School district reorganization not only affects the communities, districts, and schools that are being consolidated, it creates a brand new community that must be brought together and cultivated. The term culture has different meanings to different people. Schein (2010) defines the culture of a group as:

A pattern of shared basic assumptions learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, which has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems. (p. 42)

According to Schein (2011), there are three levels of culture: artifacts, espoused values, and basic underlying assumptions. Artifacts are at the surface level and include all you would see, hear, and feel when encountering a new group (Schein, 2010). Artifacts are tangible. They are easy to see, touch, and observe, but they are very difficult to interpret until one has an opportunity to experience a group over a period of time.

Espoused beliefs and values are ideals, ideologies, and rationalizations that may or may not be congruent with the artifacts of a group (Schein, 2011). Espoused beliefs and values can be abstract and mutually contradictory, “leaving us with a feeling that we understand a piece of the culture but still do not have the culture as such in hand” (Schein, 2011, p. 53).

Schein (2011) tells us that basic underlying assumptions are beliefs and values that a group takes for granted. They determine the thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and perceptions of a group. One can neither interpret artifacts nor know how much credence to give espoused values unless the basic assumptions are deciphered. “The essence of a culture lies in the pattern of basic underlying assumptions, and after you understand those, you can easily understand the other more surface levels and deal appropriately with them” (Schein, 2011, p. 58).

Schein (2011) notes that the human mind needs cognitive stability and that any challenge or questioning of a basic assumption will release anxiety and defensiveness. School district reorganization threatens the culture of communities, schools, and districts, and therefore, many people have very negative reactions to the concept. This notion is supported through the work of

Kamerzell (1994), who discovered that in an effort to preserve the perceived unique identifiers of community, some would be in opposition to consolidation even in the face of any rational argument. Brigman (2009) cited loss of identity, political opposition, lack of teacher buy-in, and bussing concerns as common perceived disadvantages, and Schmidt (2011) ponders whether or not consolidation for the benefit of effectiveness, efficiency, and equity should trump the concepts of local control and community as further evidence of the cultural ramifications of school district reorganization.

A common objection to reorganization often made by adults relates to the negative effect it will have on students. That is not necessarily the case. Nitta et al. (2010) found that students adapted better than teachers to the social disruption caused by school district reorganization. Although receiving students and teachers dealt with the disruption better than those who had to relocate as result of a merger, it was moving teachers that presented the most difficulty. This makes sense when viewed through the lens of Schein (2011) who says that “culture implies some level of structural stability in the group” (p. 40). He goes on to state:

After we achieve a sense of group identity, which is a key component of culture, it is our major stabilizing force and will not be given up easily. Culture is something that survives even when some members of the organization depart. Culture is hard to change because group members value stability in that it provides meaning and predictability. (Schein, 2011, pp. 41-42)

Howley, Howley, Hendrickson, Belcher, and Howley (2012) report that students admitted to worrying about going to a reorganized district, but they came together almost seamlessly due to the fact that kids are basically all the same. Sell et al. (1996) noted that students that attend reorganized districts become part of a more diverse student body and have wider network of

friends. Cannon (2011) notes the major role principals play in cultivating positive cultures in newly consolidated schools by establishing relationships, becoming involved in the community, and providing support for teachers, parents, and students to reach the new expectations.

Although Alsbury and Shaw (2005) found that superintendents perceived the negative effects of reorganization to be a lack of school board representation, loss of administrative positions, and superintendent turnover, in each case study, within two to three years, the key stake-holders involved, regardless of their previous feelings prior to the merger, felt that it was beneficial. Timbs (1997) states that the pre-merger turmoil that each district experienced was replaced by an almost irresponsible quiet from the public for the first decade of reorganization. Superintendents and boards did little to remind their communities that the aid would not last forever in an effort to keep them informed and prevent political upheaval when the aid runs out. Open and continuous communication between the school district and the community after reorganization will work to foster a culture of trust and keep stakeholder informed.

School district reorganization for equity. Alsbury and Shaw (2005) suggest that reorganization in today's world of declining enrollments and diminishing resources is a possible process for achieving social justice, strengthening democracy, and supporting the purpose of public education. They also offer the following dichotomy:

On the one hand, school consolidation may provide students in small communities a more diverse "acquaintance group" offering a possible increase in social justice.

Conversely, the closer of a community's school and subsequent demise of the community and its unique values may diminish a national values pool, thus diminishing diverse cultures and lessening the goals of social justice. (Alsbury & Shaw, pp. 108-109)

Alsbury and Shaw's assertion is echoed in the remarks of New York State Commissioner of Education Dr. King at the 2012 mid-winter conference of the New York State Council of School Superintendents and again at the 2012 convention of the New York State School Boards Association. On both occasions, he stated that wealthy districts cannot build walls high enough to keep the ramifications of poverty out, and that a redistribution of wealth through reorganization of districts in the most densely populated areas of the state would address the issues of many children receiving an education in a low wealth district (King, 2012a, 2012b). In the same vein, Duncombe and Yinger (2010) state that a small poor district would experience a decline in cost per pupil if it merged with a richer neighbor, and the increase in the average property tax base would lower that district's taxes. This would improve the equity in the current system.

Alternatives to New York State School District Reorganization

Formally or informally, school district reorganization has taken place across the United States for over two centuries, but the literature demonstrates that it has not always been successful and alternatives do exist. Howley et al. (2012) performed a case study that focused on a 15 year four- district collaborative as a part of larger investigation of seven districts across the US. Although the collaborative was able to preserve local identity and control over a number of years, it appears that reorganization is inevitable. Sleezer (1995) suggested that alternatives to reorganization (i.e. inter-district sharing, partial reorganization, extra-district cooperation, and intermediary units) will only work for districts within close proximity to one another and that remote districts will need greater support from the state. Kamerzell (1994) suggests that as community members age and the number of households with school age children decline, the question of consolidation may be answered for communities.

Malik (2007) reported that every superintendent in his study supported sharing services over consolidation. According to Howley et al. (2011) in many places, especially in districts with 15,000 or more students, deconsolidation is likely to achieve substantial efficiencies and improved outcomes. Duncombe and Yinger (2010) demonstrated that some states use operating aid formulas that compensate school districts for scarcity and discourage reorganization. Ballin (2007) proffers that reorganization may be an answer for some districts, but it is not a one size fits all solution. Howley et al. (2011) found that context is important – efficiency, cost, student achievement, and culture must be addressed. State wide mandates always prove arbitrary and unworkable (Howley et al., 2011). Research on the effects of contemporary consolidation suggests that new consolidation is likely to result in neither greater efficiency nor better instructional outcomes – especially when it results from state policy that implements large-scale forced consolidation (Howley et al., 2011). Ballin (2007) suggests looking at reorganization through the lens of transportation cost implications as well. Steele (2010) suggests providing alternative incentives instead of reorganization aid, as well as alternatives to annexation and centralization, may enable smaller districts to be creative. He further submits that it would be instructive to study failed efforts and the long term outcomes (Steele, 2010).

Summary

The literature that exists demonstrates how school district reorganization has played a major role in the evolution of public education. School districts often consider reorganization in the face of declining enrollment and constraining finances. Despite the fact that New York State is one of the few in the nation that incentivizes reorganization, very little reorganization has taken place in the past few decades. The current financial situation of the state has resulted in an increasing number of school districts considering and studying reorganization, although a very

small number of districts actually reorganize. The programmatic, financial, and cultural effects of school district reorganization are well documented with a balance of the benefits and detriments. What is missing from the literature is research regarding what happens to school districts that choose not to reorganize. This gap in the literature, coupled with Steele's (2010) recommendation to study failed school district reorganization efforts, is the basis for this research.

Chapter 3: Methodology

As a result of an increase in accountability measures and dwindling resources, public schools find themselves in a somewhat familiar place from a historical perspective. School district reorganization is a phenomenon that communities and boards of education have been forced to consider at various times throughout the history of public education in New York State. Despite the financial incentives that are available to reorganized school districts, very few school districts facing declining revenues and deteriorating program take advantage of reorganization. The current financial climate has not increased the number of reorganizations, although the number of districts studying the concept has increased in recent years.

This study addressed the effects of not choosing to reorganize, and the future for those districts. The study has the potential to inform the field in terms of the decisions that school districts make as a result of failed efforts, as well as the potential to influence state policy and lawmakers to generate alternatives to what current law allows.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to discover the perspectives of school district leadership teams regarding the programmatic, financial, and cultural impact of failed school district reorganization efforts in New York State school districts. School district leadership teams were defined as school superintendents, board of education members, and business officials. The study sought to address the following research questions:

1. What are the reasons/motivations behind entering into a school district reorganization feasibility study?
2. What are the perspectives of leadership teams regarding the programmatic, financial, and cultural impacts of the failed reorganization effort?

3. How do leadership teams proceed with defeated reorganization efforts?
4. How would leaders improve the school district reorganization process?

Research Design

This was a qualitative study. Creswell (2009) states that “qualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 4). Furthermore, “phenomenological research is a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants” (Creswell, 2009, p. 13).

The study investigated the perspectives of school district leaders regarding the programmatic, financial, and cultural impact of failed school district reorganization efforts. The specific nature of the inquiry, as well as the unique context in which the participants found themselves, required that the study delve deeply into the thoughts and feelings that the participants experienced throughout and after the reorganization process. Qualitative research allowed for the discovery of the perspectives that school district leaders had by employing an interview method that extracted rich and meaningful responses.

Population and Sample

Participants in the study were purposefully comprised of school district leadership teams defined as school superintendents, board of education members, and business officials in New York State who had experienced failed school district reorganization referenda. According to Creswell (2012) “the research term used for qualitative sampling is purposeful sampling” (p. 206). He goes on to state that, when employing purposeful sampling, “researchers intentionally select individuals and sites to learn or understand the central phenomenon” (Creswell, 2012, p. 206).

In an effort to use the most recent data available, the study identified five school districts that experienced failed school district reorganization efforts in 2012. Through the assistance of the New York State Education Department and the New York State Department of State, 18 school districts were identified that experienced failed school district reorganization efforts in the past five years. Eight of those districts experienced failed district reorganization efforts within the calendar year 2012. Using reverse chronological order, the first five districts that agreed to participate in the study with three willing leader participants were selected.

For the purposes of this study, a school district that has experienced a failed reorganization effort was a district that had undertaken a reorganization feasibility study and had either experienced a failed advisory or statutory referendum or had chosen not to pursue a referendum. The research involved school district leadership teams consisting of the superintendent, the business official, and a member of the board of education. Those specific positions were chosen due to the nature of the work they perform in school districts as leaders, and the focus of the study was on the perspectives of leaders.

Following Sage Colleges' Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, letters were sent to participants requesting their involvement in the study regardless of whether or not they were currently employed by that district. The design sought the perspectives of the leadership team that was in place at the time of the defeat of a reorganization effort; therefore, the participants' current employment status was not germane to the study. Prior to the interview, all participants received informed consent forms and a copy of the interview questions (see Appendices A, B, and C). Additionally, participants were given the opportunity to discuss the purpose of the research with the researcher prior to any interview. Given that minimal risk existed,

confidentiality of all districts and participants was maintained. The researcher employed the use of pseudonyms for both the districts and the participants to ensure that neither was identifiable.

Instrumentation

Methods of inquiry included interviews of superintendents, business officials, and board of education members. Creswell (2012), states that “the one-on-one interview is a data collection process in which the researcher asks questions to and records answers from only one participant in the study at a time” (p. 218).

The interview questions were developed to support the research questions of the study and reviewed by a panel of superintendents that experienced a reorganizational effort to determine the appropriateness and effectiveness of the questions. The interview format allowed the researcher to ask 11 semi-structured questions and elicit rich responses regarding the perspectives of school leadership teams. This design allowed the participants to answer open-ended questions and to provide elicit rich responses regarding the perspectives of school leadership teams.

Reliability and Validity

According to Creswell (2009), researchers ensure qualitative validity by checking for the accuracy of their findings, and determine qualitative reliability by ensuring their approach is consistent across different researchers and studies (p. 190). “Validating findings means that the researcher determines the accuracy or credibility of the findings through strategies such as member checking or triangulation” (Creswell, 2012, p. 259). Vogt, Gardner, and Haeffele (2012) recommend having interviewees review the transcriptions prior to their use in analysis.

In an effort to ensure that the interview process was reliable and valid, the questions were reviewed by a panel of superintendents that experienced a reorganizational effort to determine

the appropriateness and effectiveness of the questions. Modifications of the questions were based on the feedback received from those leaders. Each interview was audio taped and the audio tapes were transcribed by a transcriptionist experienced with research studies who signed a confidentiality agreement (see Appendix D). The researcher shared the transcriptions with the participants to ensure accuracy and agreement. Once verified, the transcriptions were analyzed. The final versions of the transcribed notes were then compared to any public document available from each district. These documents included board minutes, minutes from community meetings, and the documents produced by the reorganization consultants.

Data Collection

Interviews were conducted to collect information on the perspectives of the impact of failed reorganization efforts and to discover the steps that were taken as a result. Interviews were arranged via telephone after initial letters of introduction were mailed to each participant (see Appendix A). Each interview was conducted in either the home or office of the participants between February and April 2013. The duration of the interviews ranged from 30 to 60 minutes.

All interviews were electronically recorded, transcribed by an experienced transcriptionist, and returned to the participants for verification. Relevant public documents pertinent to each specific school district reorganization effort was also collected. These documents included board minutes, minutes from community meetings, and the public documents produced by the reorganization consultants. Demographic data was collected through a document review of the feasibility study.

Data Analysis

Once the interviews were completed and the transcriptions were verified by the participants, the researcher organized the data through the processing of coding. Rossman and

Rallis (1998) define coding as “the process of organizing the material into chunks or segments of text before bringing meaning to information” (p. 171).

Through the use of Creswell’s (2012) process, text segments were identified and assigned a code. Creswell (2012) defines codes as “labels used to describe a segment of text or an image” and text segments as “sentences or paragraphs that all relate to a single code” (p. 244). Similar codes were categorized into themes that were then analyzed, interpreted, and applied to the research questions associated with the study. The transcripts were read and re-read through the lens of each position associated with the study to determine if there were common themes between superintendents, business officials, and board members.

The data were next analyzed by leadership team in an effort to collect emerging themes by team. “Themes are similar codes aggregated together to form a major idea in the database” (Creswell, 2012, p. 245). The identified themes that emerged were then organized by research question and analyzed in conjunction with pertinent public documents.

Researcher Bias

The researcher has been a school superintendent for twelve years and has led two districts through reorganization efforts. In both districts, declining enrollment and revenue created situations in which taxpayers were paying more every year while opportunities for students diminished. The researcher was interested in knowing if the perspectives of the programmatic, financial, and cultural impact of a defeated reorganization effort reflect the actual impact. The study discovered why these districts endeavored to engage in a reorganization effort in the face of the knowledge that they rarely result in reorganization.

The researcher has strong opinions regarding reorganization and believes that New York State has a neither a strong nor a sustainable policy regarding school district reorganization.

Although school district reorganization should be pursued by many school districts in New York State, under current law it is not a viable statewide solution to the equity issues that exist. Throughout the study, the researcher strived to put his beliefs and feelings aside and to allow only those of the participants to emerge.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis

The purpose of this research was to discover the perspectives of school district leadership teams regarding the programmatic, financial, and cultural impact of failed school district reorganization efforts in New York State school districts. The participants in the study included school superintendents, board of education members, and business officials from school districts in New York that experienced a failed school district reorganization effort in 2012. The study was rooted in the following research questions regarding school district reorganization:

1. What are the reasons/motivations behind entering into a school district reorganization feasibility study?
2. What are the perspectives of leadership teams regarding the programmatic, financial, and cultural impacts of the failed reorganization effort?
3. How do leadership teams proceed with defeated reorganization efforts?
4. How would leaders improve the school district reorganization process?

Data regarding five school districts that experienced failed school district reorganization efforts were collected in an effort to address each of the research questions.

Demographic Information

This research included 15 members of leadership teams from New York State school districts where reorganization efforts had failed. Participants included five leadership teams, each consisting of a superintendent, business official, and a board member. Pseudonyms were employed for the each of the districts, as well as for each participant. Among the 15 were six females and nine males. Three of the leadership teams were from districts that supported the reorganization, and two were from districts that did not. Table 2 displays the participants from

the study by position, gender, and whether or not they came from a district that supported reorganization.

Table 2

Participant Composition by Position, Gender, and District Support of Reorganization

Position	Gender	Level of Support
Superintendent	Male	Favored
Superintendent	Male	Favored
Superintendent	Male	Opposed
Superintendent	Female	Opposed
Superintendent	Female	Favored
Business official	Male	Favored
Business official	Female	Favored
Business official	Female	Opposed
Business official	Male	Opposed
Business official	Female	Favored
Board member	Female	Favored
Board member	Male	Favored
Board member	Male	Opposed
Board member	Male	Opposed
Board member	Male	Favored

This chapter is structured to answer each research question through the responses of the participants by district.

The Pleasant Central School District was involved in a failed effort to annex one of its neighboring districts, the Culpepper Central School District. Pleasant is small, rural, average needs school district located in western New York that has experienced an enrollment decline over the past 25 five years from approximately 1100 students to 750 students. An effort to centralize the two districts failed several years earlier, and as a result, Culpepper closed its high school and has since tuitioned many of its high school students to Pleasant. In 2012, the residents of Pleasant and Culpepper conducted a school district reorganization study to determine if an annexation of Culpepper by Pleasant would be beneficial. A subsequent advisory referendum was held to decide whether or not the concept of the reorganization had support from both communities. The residents of Pleasant overwhelmingly supported the measure, while the Culpepper community voted it down by an extremely narrow margin. Superintendent Rich, Business Official Bonacci, and Trustee Slentz from the Pleasant Central School District participated in the study.

Located in the Adirondack Park, the Fiddletown Central School District, a rural, average needs district with an enrollment of 950 students, experienced a failed centralization effort with the contiguous Rose Valley Central School District. After a detailed study of reorganization, the effort was brought to an advisory referendum, where it was overwhelmingly approved by the residents of Fiddletown and equally overwhelmingly defeated by Rose Valley. Participating in the study from the Fiddletown Central School District were Superintendent LaPaglia, Business Official Landry, and Trustee Knapp.

The Smithton Central School District is a small, average needs school district with an approximate enrollment of 1000 students is located in New York State's Capital District. It experienced a failed centralization effort as well. In this instance, a school district reorganization

study of the two districts was conducted, but the boards of education of both Smithton and Irondale determined that it would not be feasible and an advisory referendum was never conducted. Study participants from Smithton included Superintendent Rudd, Business Official Humphrey, and Trustee Keeler.

A similar situation occurred between the Rockwood Central School District and the Bull Hill Central School District. Both districts, located in the southwestern region of central New York, are small, high need school districts that have experienced significant enrollment reductions over the past three decades. Rockwood has an enrollment of about 400, while the Bull Hill Central School District has an enrollment of approximately 740. This effort did not advance to an advisory referendum when the Rockwood Board of Education determined that centralization was not feasible, despite the fact that the Bull Hill Board of Education resolved to move forward. Participants from the Rockwood Central School District included Superintendent Long, Business Official Van Winkler, and Trustee Egland, while Superintendent Stocker, Business Official Hoffman, and Trustee Hoskey were the participants from Bull Hill.

Data from the five districts study represent four school district reorganization efforts; two of the efforts failed at referendum, and two failed by resolution of the board of education.

Motivations for Entering into a School District Reorganization Feasibility Study

School districts choose to study the feasibility of reorganization for many reasons. As stated in chapter 2, those reasons change with the conditions that exist at the time. Districts chose to reorganize in response to growth, decline, immigration, state wide initiatives, or financial conditions. This study sought to discover the reasons and/or motivations for the leadership teams' decisions to consider reorganization.

Reasons for considering reorganization in Pleasant. As a result of declining enrollment and the inability to generate revenue, partially due to the GEA, the Pleasant Central School District looked to their neighboring school district, Culpepper, as an ideal partner for school district reorganization. Years ago, Culpepper closed its high school and began tuitioning students to neighboring districts. Most of the students chose to attend Pleasant High School. The fact that so many students from Culpepper already attended Pleasant, the relatively close proximity of the districts to one another, and their similar tax rates made the two districts ripe for school district reorganization. The incentive aid that would be generated would help fill the revenue gap that existed and would also prevent Pleasant from having to continue to cut program from the budget. In recent years, the decline in enrollment and loss of revenue created a situation where Pleasant was providing fewer and fewer opportunities for their students. Taken together, the conditions in Pleasant called for drastic measures.

Superintendent Rich claimed that the GEA was the major financial driver that caused him to consider school district reorganization. He stated:

We had some of the highest losses per pupil in aid in the entire state due to the GEA and how it worked. That was particularly painful because we are also coincidentally probably one of the most efficient districts in terms of our per pupil costs. So the GEA was a fiscal driver. (J. Rich, personal communication, March 22, 2013)

In addition to the loss in state aid that was caused by the GEA, enrollment decline was equally influential on his decision to consider a merger. Pleasant had experienced a decline in enrollment from approximately 1,100 students in 1987 to 740 in 2012. Rich went on to state:

The reason why Culpepper was such an ideal partner is they are a K-8 district. They gave up their high school through a public referendum back in 1991 and they tuition kids to

four surrounding districts and we are the district that receives the lion's share of the kids; something like 60 percent of the kids come here. (J. Rich, personal communication, March 22, 2013)

Given the enrollment decline that had occurred in both districts, a merger would have resulted in a very small school district with a total student population of approximately 900 students – smaller than the enrollment of Pleasant a quarter of a decade ago.

Business Official Bonacci agreed that loss of aid and declining enrollment were the driving factors behind the decision to consider reorganization. He shared the opinion that the relationship with Culpepper made them an ideal partner:

We had a very high level of comfort in our relationship and it actually was just a normal, natural progression at the time. It just made a lot of sense. It would have made sense under normal conditions and it made even more sense under the financial stress we were in. (J. Bonacci, personal communication, March 22, 2013)

The conditions that existed in Pleasant were apparent to each member of their leadership team. The enrollment decline that Pleasant experienced over the years created a situation where it simply was not feasible to offer the program that it once did. The district's inability to generate revenue was making it impossible to maintain even the lower level of program they had been forced to offer. Not only was it apparent to the leadership team in Pleasant, it was equally obvious to members of neighboring boards of education. Trustee Slentz echoed the remarks of Rich and Bonacci and explained the transparency of the situation when she stated:

...cuts had begun. The recession was in full swing. It was pretty obvious there was not going to be any restoration of aid any time soon. We're both very small; declining

enrollments...some other school board member from around here said if your two districts can't merge, nobody can. (J. Slentz, personal communication, March 22, 2013)

The decline in enrollment, coupled with the loss of state aid caused by the GEA, resulted in a significant decline in program for students. As the growth of the district budget outpaced the revenue they were able to generate, Pleasant was forced to make reductions to program and staff. Rich's primary goal was to sustain program:

The number one goal on my list was to maintain program... for a school of our size we had some staggering reductions in staff to stay ahead of that loss of aid. So my main goal ...driving goal was to stop the bleeding that was being caused by the inequity in aid and what was happening on the ground with our budget. (J. Rich, personal communication, March 22, 2013)

Business Official Bonacci agreed that making more resources available was his primary goal. He went on to add that the GEA was exacerbated by the tax levy cap that was enacted into law by New York State and added to the district's inability to generate revenue and provide those needed resources. Bonacci also explained how the cap complicated the actual merger process:

It ended up being actually a serious complication in the middle of the merger study because we did all of our financials and projections without a tax cap. Part way through there was a tax cap so we had to go back out and change all of the financial projections using a tax cap and that prevented us from showing this merger of taxes really... And it made the presentation to the community and the sell for the community much more difficult. (J. Bonacci, personal communication, March 22, 2013)

The reorganization of Pleasant and Culpepper would have resulted in a new tax rate for the Pleasant-Culpepper Central School District. After the study, consultants spent a considerable

amount of time working with the district leadership and the communities to establish the new tax rate, and then New York State codified a tax levy limit. The consultants then had to go back and formulate a new tax rate that took the tax levy limit into account. As a result, there were two sets of tax rates floating around that caused people to mistrust the accuracy of the study.

Trustee Slentz was also concerned about the academic program that Pleasant was offering its students. She was very concerned about the erosion of the academic program that took place over the years due to enrollment decline. The fiscal calamity that ensued further eroded the offerings Pleasant was able to provide for its students. Her main goal was preserve and expand academic program. Slentz stated, “At the time we had no AP courses... really bright students unable to get into good colleges because their transcripts are so thin” (J. Slentz, personal communications, March 22, 2013).

Declining enrollment and the loss of revenue resulted in an erosion of program that led the leadership team to believe that they had no other choice but to consider school district reorganization.

Reasons for considering reorganization in Fiddletown. The entire Fiddletown leadership team attributed the GEA as the central factor that contributed to the conditions that caused them to consider reorganization. Fiddletown experienced a decline in enrollment over the past several years and made the modifications that were required. It was the perspective of the entire leadership team that the changes that they made as a result of their enrollment decline made them one the best managed districts in their region. Fiddletown Superintendent LaPaglia characterized Fiddletown as “a district that did...and does very well with managing the money” (F. LaPaglia, personal communication, March 8, 2013). He went on to state that a lack of revenue, attributed in large part to the GEA, was the primary condition that caused him to first

consider school district reorganization. Business Official Landry and Trustee Knapp also characterized the GEA as the catalyst for considering reorganization. According to Knapp:

The biggest condition without doubt is the gap elimination. I mean, I think our school has been well managed financially. I think that we've been careful with the funds we have. But gap elimination, I mean that costs us over one million dollars a year in funding from the state; so I think that's what, without doubt, turned us to look at reorganization.

(G. Knapp, personal communication, March 8, 2013)

The loss of revenue that Fiddletown experienced, in conjunction with a declining enrollment, resulted in a concomitant reduction in program. LaPaglia's primary objective was to use school district reorganization as a vehicle to save program, which was different from reorganizations he was associated with in the past. At that time, he viewed reorganization as a means to add program and provide additional opportunities for students. He described the difference between his current reorganization experience and one from 30 years earlier:

It was to save as many programs as we could and then to reorganize what would we do to enrich our programs. Because I knew, based on past experience... a lot of the positives as far as monies coming into the district, to work with programs that we would never have had the opportunity to do; so I knew that there was opportunity for the two districts in merging; although that was different, if you will... this was just survivability and keeping what we had. Back then it was well, how can we enrich? We don't talk about enriching anymore; we talk about just sustaining and maintaining. (F. LaPaglia, personal communication, March 8, 2013)

Trustee Knapp believed that the board of education as a whole had the same goal as Superintendent LaPaglia. He felt that the Fiddletown board favored a merger because of what

they could do to save program and to prevent them from having to take more opportunities away from children. In his estimation, the effort to reorganize had little to do with saving money or controlling tax rates, it was to protect program:

Our five board members...were tremendously supportive of programming and kids and doing good things for our schools. So it wasn't a taxpayer driven type of mentality at all, it was a program driven mentality... that was without question the driving force, because we wanted programming again for our kids. (G. Knapp, personal communication, March 8, 2013)

The Fiddletown Central School District experienced the same declining enrollment issues that small rural districts are facing across the state. The leadership team believed that those issues, in conjunction with the GEA and their inability to generate revenue, forced them to consider reorganization.

Reasons for considering reorganization in Smithton. There are many factors that can lead to a school district's decision to consider reorganization. Smithton had lost state aid as a result of the GEA and had experienced enrollment decline that resulted in a reduction of program. Three years prior to considering reorganization, Smithton had experienced consecutive years of budget reductions that took a toll on what they offered their students. They also had a positive experience sharing staff with other districts. All of these factors led the Smithton Central School District to an indirect route to a centralization study with the Irondale Central School District. The effort began as an attempt to study shared services. Superintendent Rudd explained:

They were going to look at the two districts - where we could share services. Keep your own identity, but where we could do shared transportation, shared administration,

students the whole thing... how can we do some consolidation... let's do what we can do with the neighboring district. (R. Rudd, personal communication, March 1, 2013)

According to Rudd and Business Official Humphrey, a number of events took place in a relatively short period of time that eventually led to a school district reorganization study. The first event was the departure of both superintendents. Then the districts were notified that the state would not fund a shared services study but would fund a reorganization study. During that same time period, Smithton suffered a negative tax certiorari decision that cost the nearly ten million dollars in assessment. Those events, coupled with the fact that the Smithton budget had been reduced for four consecutive years, made the decision to transition to a merger study a natural progression. Trustee Keeler, a longtime member of the Smithton Board of Education, agreed with Rudd and Keeler but had a bit of a longer view:

As enrollment began to decline, and we looked at it as a board, you could begin to see a threat. Not only just of the kids but also for the community at large. And as a consequence, the real name of the game was survival. How do we preserve and protect what it is that we've established over the course of the last thirty years and basically achieve a high performing school district in an era of diminished resources. And one of those opportunities was the issue of reorganization. Everybody was looking at maintaining, if not enhancing, the quality of what we had...shifting our direction to something new and different with a clear cut focus on the future of the job market and the economy. All of that played out in terms of the search for some way to achieve those goals. And one of those opportunities was the issue of reorganization (personal communication. (R. Keeler, personal communication, April 18, 2013)

The financial conditions that existed in Smithton had resulted in a situation where their taxpayers were paying more for less each year. Despite the fact that their budgets were decreasing, taxes were increasing while opportunities for students were diminishing. Rudd saw reorganization as a means to provide more options for his students, and his primary goal for the reorganization effort was to maintain and enhance program:

It was to combine the two districts to be able to maintain...if not enhance, educational opportunities for kids. What do we have? What do they have? And that would be an enhancement. Bring what Irondale has – bring what Smithton has and what can enhance the programs for kids; that was the number one...and also try to reduce the tax rate to the taxpayer. (R. Rudd, personal communication, March 1, 2013)

Business Official Humphrey concurred with Rudd that the primary goal was program. She wanted to “stop the bleeding” and bring a sense of stability to the district. However, she had to admit that she saw reorganization as a way to control the tax rate as well:

We’re a school...that would be our number one goal. But again, the community was loud and clear in that Smithton has a very high tax rate... it’s not sustainable, and so the idea being that if we can maintain and enhance, in addition to bringing down the tax rate, it’s a win/win. (J. Humphrey, personal communication, March 1, 2013)

Although program certainly was a concern of Trustee Keeler, his role as a long standing member of the board of education caused him to have a bit of a different perspective. Although clearly concerned about the diminishing program and rising tax rate, he was also afraid the culture of Smithton was being threatened. In his estimation, the Smithton Central School District had a culture of success that provided the community with a great sense of pride. For Keeler, preserving the culture of Smithton was as important as any other factor:

I think initially as a school board member it was about the money. And then as time went on it was really about... the program and also what the culture was. I think it was a very strong issue on the Smithton side especially around culture. So while the initial goal was to look for the money in order to be able to achieve our goals, there also became a very strong issue to make sure that no matter what happened, for our community and for our kids, the culture behind the school...the Smithton Central School District...was going to be preserved. (R. Keeler, personal communication, April 18, 2013)

In the end, the inverse relationship that Smithton was experiencing between their tax rate and program, coupled with their experience of sharing staff with other districts, led them to the conclusion that they were obligated to enter into a reorganization study.

Reasons for considering reorganization in Rockwood. Superintendent Long was the interim superintendent of the Rockwood Central School District when the effort to reorganize came to a halt. However, she came to Rockwood very late in the game and was not involved with the initial phases of the effort, nor was she a part of the study phase, “I came in August; they were still finishing up the study... they finished, let’s say September” (K. Long, personal communication, February 28, 2013). From her point of view, the catalyst for effort to reorganize Rockwood with Bull Hill stemmed from a previous study that included Rockwood, Bull Hill, and two other districts:

Several years ago a county study...was done to look at the basic issues of finances amongst all of the school districts. However, when the financials came in... the best gain for the district was with Bull Hill. At that point, people had started to dip into reserves to supplement the budget, to balance the budget and Bull Hill asked Rockwood if they

would be interested in merging. So I believe it was started initially by financial concerns.

(K. Long, personal communication, February 28, 2013)

Successful reorganizations require that the two districts are a good match for each other. Common cultures, common tax rates, and topography all come into play. However, even if all those factors are present, both districts then have to believe that they are a good match for each other. Although Rockwood was open to the concept of reorganization, Long believed that Bull Hill was not the match they were looking for:

I'm not so sure that Bull Hill would have been Rockwood's first choice. I think they identify with Highland, more so than Bull Hill, and there are a couple of reasons for that. Bull Hill is in a different BOCES, so they have a southern orientation. Rockwood is the most southern school in our BOCES, but we have a northern orientation. Our athletic leagues are north and so it was more of a natural fit, I think for Rockwood to consider Highland as a partner versus Bull Hill; even though Bull Hill's building is five miles away from here. (K. Long, personal communication, February 28, 2013)

Business Official Van Winkler agreed with Long's assertion that financial concerns were Rockwood's basic reason to consider reorganization, "Well the conditions mainly relate to reductions in state aid and reductions in student population; the enrollment continuing to decline" (L. Van Winkler, personal communication, February 28, 2013). He also perceived the previous study of four districts as the catalyst for the reorganization effort:

Well, the way it initiated was actually a county-wide look, and they brought in consultants to look at the four school districts in the county. There are four in this county; and they said, "Let's look and see what might work." And I think when they looked at what might work; I think they were looking financially. So they looked at the

combination of all four school districts work. How would that work out? Any combination of three of the four, and then any combination of two of the four...and Rockwood and Bull Hill seemed to make the most sense, in terms of location of the districts and being able to reduce the tax rates enough in both districts to make it viable. (L. Van Winkler, personal communication, February 28, 2013)

Trustee Egland was a fifth year board member, alumnus, and longtime resident of Rockwood. He also credited a previous study as the initiating factor for the effort to reorganize Rockwood with Bull Hill, "Well, it first started with a four district and county study, looking at all four districts with our BOCES at shared services and every other option that was out there" (D. Egland, personal communication, February 28, 2013). He went on to state that his reasons for choosing to examine reorganization had to do with declining enrollment and its impact on program:

Well, obviously declining enrollment is a big issue for us and everywhere else, and the bottom line with what we're looking at is to offer our kids more programs and more classes. This school used to have a lot of AP classes. Kids graduating, almost as sophomores, juniors in colleges, and that's pretty much gone now. (D. Egland, personal communication, February 28, 2013)

The original county wide study, along with the issues that accompany declining enrollment, loss of revenue, and eroding program, all provided the background that inevitably led the Rockwood Central School District to consider a reorganization effort.

Long's primary goal was to use reorganization as vehicle to responsibly hang on to as much program as possible. Due to years of declining enrollment, without a successful

reorganization Rockwood would not be have been able to afford the staff necessary to provide its students with the current level of programming. Long stated:

Our classes are extremely small. We have...two sections in every grade level, but they are 11 and 11. And they recognize that our population is declining while we have yet to let go of certain programs, etc... I have two reading recovery teachers for 21 first graders. (K. Long, personal communication, February 28, 2013)

The financial conditions in Rockwood could be described as having a shrinking tax base, diminishing program, and constant fiscal pressure. Van Winkler was in a position where he could compare the program in Rockwood to the program that his children received in his home district. On a daily basis, he was in a position where he was forced to make decisions that took opportunities away from the children of Rockwood, while living in another district that provided children with a real opportunity to become college and career ready. With the inequities staring him in the face, Van Winkler's goal was to be able to provide a quality education for the students of Rockwood without having constant financial hardship.

I'm strictly a business person...but I also have three kids...and I know what they received in their high school careers; they went to a larger school district...What they were afforded was opportunities that made them more viable for getting into the colleges of their choice that you couldn't offer here. There just wasn't the possibility with the small class sizes, with the number of teachers... you just weren't able to offer some of those students...you know, the ones who wanted to go to maybe an RIT, Fordham, whatever-the type of class load that would allow them to get into those schools. It made it more and more difficult. (L. Van Winkler, personal communication, February 28, 2013)

Trustee Egland's goals were very similar to Van Winkler's, "it was dual; it was the programming and educational quality for the kids. And it was also looking for the best interests of our tax payers" (D. Egland, personal communication, February 28, 2013). He knew that Rockwood was not providing its students with the same opportunities that were available to other districts and was looking for any mechanism to correct the situation. Although open to the concept, Egland confirmed Long's assertion that Rockwood was looking to reorganize with Highland rather than Bull Hill:

We were looking to do something different. To add in any way we could. I think really the onus was on more shared services, because we've already got a good working relationship with Highland. We had a lot of shared services with Highland already, and then when the four district study came back with the financials for possible merged districts, Highland and Rockwood were the farthest apart. We would have had to use 130% of the aid to balance out the tax levy... it was a shock to everybody that Highland was so far away from Rockwood. It was the only combination that was completely impossible to do... and I think that everybody thought that that was going to be the given. And I think that if we had...if that had been a doable thing, I think that we probably would be merged by now. I really do. (D. Egland, personal communication, February 28, 2013)

The initial study of all of the schools in the county, along with the conditions that caused Rockwood to cut program while tapping their reserves, led the board of education and the community to the conclusion that they had no choice but to consider school district reorganization.

Reasons for considering reorganization in Bull Hill. The Bull Hill Central School District was part of a failed attempt to reorganize with the Rockwood Central School District when the Rockwood Board of Education decided not to move forward. Superintendent Stocker explained why Bull Hill considered reorganization:

I think the main thing is that we have been doing three year projections for a number of years now. It was very clear that we were not going to be able to survive more than maybe four or five more years without just decimating our program. Furthermore, we've lost enrollment and as a result, it was becoming difficult to maintain all of the programs that we want our kids to have; electives, AP courses. So we saw this as a way to enrich our high school curriculum and to maintain our programs for as long as possible... We just saw this as a chance to thrive and thrive. (C. Stocker, personal communication, March 12, 2013)

The Bull Hill Central School District was created in the late 1960s as a result of the centralization of two neighboring school districts. The fact that Bull Hill is a reorganized district has left the community comfortable with the concept. After years of dealing with enrollment decline, diminishing revenues, and reductions in program for students, the board of education did not shy away from considering reorganization once again. Trustee Hoskey agreed with Stocker's perspective regarding the conditions that existed in Bull Hill that led to the reorganization effort:

I think I'd have to say that we have tried for the ten years or more that I've been on the board to be fiscally responsible and we saw this as a fact that due to the financial situation, due to the lack of enrollment that's happening or the reduction of enrollment, it was the most fiscally responsible thing to do for our community as board members is to pursue it. (M. Hoskey, personal communication, March 12, 2013)

Business Official Hoffman described the GEA and the district's inability to generate tax revenue as the primary conditions that led to the reorganization effort. Like the other districts in the study, Bull Hill's low wealth prevented them from generating revenue through the tax levy. The GEA placed additional pressure on the revenue that Bull Hill could now generate through state aid creating a situation that left them with few options:

We've always kept our tax rate low in this district. We knew that we were going to have difficulty generating additional income or revenue through the tax levy. We got cut substantially as many districts did with the gap elimination...in our case its three million over the last three years. Rockwood...generally has a very similar circumstance to Bull Hill. (L. Hoffman, personal communication, March 12, 2013)

Superintendent Stocker felt that the conditions that existed in Bull Hill made the option of reorganization very attractive to her. When asked what her primary goal was, she replied, "I think that improving our curriculum offerings was the selling point that I tried to use in the community; the top one priority" (C. Stocker, personal communication, March 12, 2013). Hoffman was also concerned about the damage that was being done to the program at Bull Hill and saw reorganization as means to stop cutting:

So we started cutting really the first year I got here because they could see where the numbers were going. We weren't just cutting small things. We were cutting significant positions, significant programs. We're much more of a shell than we were. Not only do I do budgets, but I'm I have family. I have children in education. To see the amount of things that we had cut and the people that we had to lay off was really concerning. So I wanted to see that stop. I wanted to see these substantial cuts stop. Either possibly build

or improve our programming as well as position us so that we had a longer term outlook.

(L Hoffman, personal communication, March 12, 2013)

Trustee Hoskey's goals were somewhat different than Stocker's and Hoffman's.

Although he had concerns about program and rising taxes, he wanted to ensure that the community would be able to keep their schools. In his estimation, Bull Hill was heading for financial and educational insolvency and would soon be in a position where they would not be able to remain operational. When asked what his primary goal was, he stated:

I think from the board perspective, I felt that the top priority was to sustain the school district in the community... I think that was the key thing in the thought process that I had. Because we could see where we were going financially, where we could become insolvent and then I've seen schools...or communities...where they've closed schools down... and I hated to see that happen in this community. (M. Hoskey, personal communication, March 12, 2013)

Summary. Bull Hill, Rockwood, Smithton, Fiddletown, and Pleasant were all experiencing enrollment decline, program reductions, and difficulty generating revenue through their tax levy. The GEA further impacted their ability to generate revenue, causing them to make cuts to their budgets that resulted in fewer opportunities for their students. Although each took different paths to a school district reorganization study, in the end each district felt that they were put into a position that forced them to consider reorganization just to maintain the diminished program they were offering.

Perspectives of the Programmatic, Financial, and Cultural Impact of the Failed Reorganization Effort

How leaders perceive conditions may vary from role to role and may not necessarily reflect the actual state of affairs. Do the conditions that actually exist as a result of a failed attempt to reorganize reflect the perspectives of the leadership team members? If not are there any similarities between the perspectives of leaders within and between districts? This study looked to uncover how school district leaders perceived the effects of a fail reorganization effort.

Leadership team perspectives in Pleasant. The failure of the reorganization effort had not been fully actualized in Pleasant when the leadership team was interviewed. They were putting together the spending plan for the year subsequent to failure of the effort; however, that plan had yet to go before the voters in the Pleasant Central School District. Each member of the leadership team viewed the defeat of the effort as unfortunate, but could only surmise what the ramifications would be.

Despite the fact that years of work force reductions and cuts to program had been made building up to the merger effort, the perspective of Superintendent Rich was that they had thus far survived, but the worst was yet to come. He saw the merger as a way to prevent further damage to program in the future. The loss of program that took place in Pleasant created a district that offered fewer opportunities for students than it had in the past, but going forward the cuts that were going to necessary would lead to true program devastation. According to Rich:

We were really a very fiscally strong district at the beginning of the storm. So we've been able to mitigate...things, between the cutting and all of the stuff we've done, we were able to avoid huge programmatic losses. We've lost quite a few electives...but what scares me is the next three to four years. I think we've weathered this pretty well, all things considered. So I think that's a long winded way to say I think the failure of the

merger we're about to pay for. We haven't yet, but that's what's looming. (J. Rich, personal communication, March 22, 2013)

Had the reorganization been successful, the newly formed school district would have had an enrollment of fewer than 1,000 students. In Trustee Slentz's estimation, the new district would have still been too small to create a competitive program for their students, "I'm not sure it would have made a difference one way or another" (J. Slentz, personal communication, March 22, 2013). It was her belief that the size of the new district would have helped a little to provide for an economy of scale, but it will still have been too small to allow for a critical mass of students to support a broad curriculum. For her, the defeat of the reorganization was simply going to result in some form of insolvency sooner rather than later. Bonacci believed that form of insolvency would be educational rather than financial:

Let's stop talking about fiscal insolvency. Let's look at our rhetoric. The terminology that we should consistently use is educational insolvency. Because when you start on the descriptors that center around money that has a negative connotation for all of the people that are against educators and the pension system and all the things that they attack us for... we need to put it in terms of education insolvency. We're not going to be bankrupt to the point that we're giving the keys to Albany which I heard people say. We're going to be at a place where we may not be able to offer a mandated program the State requires us to provide... your kid is not going to compete on any plane because of that disparity. The angle we need to push on is the equity piece. (personal communication, March 22, 2013)

How the defeat of the reorganization effort would impact future budget votes is something that was still in question. Would the defeat of the measure bring the community

closer together in their support of the budget, or would they reject the tax increases that will be necessary to sustain the current level of programming? Superintendent Rich was confident that the defeat of the reorganization effort would not have an adverse effect on school district budget votes, “this district has been very supportive over the years. I can only think of maybe one budget in 26 years, maybe two, that have gone down in this district” (J. Rich, personal communication, March 22, 2013). However, he did not have the same confidence regarding the district’s reserves:

We’re just going to begin the slow decline of drawing them down, and I mean we’re not alone in that. Schools in our region are all doing that at various degrees...but that’s a natural progression that the tax cap and the GEA and the general apathy towards rural schools are going to create. I don’t see anything positive unless there is some significant change in the attitude in Albany. (J. Rich, personal communication, March 22, 2013)

Trustee Slentz concurred with Rich in that her perspective was that the community would continue to be as supportive as they have been in the past, but that the district was drawing down their reserves so quickly that they would be depleted within three to five years.

Business Official Bonacci was concerned that the defeat of the merger would result in having to make a decision between either outrageous cuts or outrageous tax increases. His fear was that the community may revolt by defeating future budgets, “the thing about the cuts that we’ve done, they haven’t pinched the community-we’re at that point right now where when we delve into that and there’s going to be a lot of community outrage” (J. Bonacci, personal communication, March 22, 2013).

The opinion of the superintendent was that the defeat of the merger did not seem to have had an adverse effect on the culture of the Pleasant Central School District. The community

seems to have accepted the fact that they would not be merging with Culpepper, but feared that they did not grasp the severity of the situation. He based his perspective on the fact that too few people were talking about the defeat of the effort, Superintendent Rich reported:

It hasn't been an organized response. It's more informal. I'll have people come up to me at a game or concert and say, is this thing with Culpepper really over or are we going to revisit it in the future? I've had questions like that. So I know people are still thinking about it. (J. Rich, personal communication, March 22, 2013)

Business Official Bonacci's perspective was that community did not understand the financial constraints that Pleasant was under. In his opinion, the residents of Pleasant did not realize how much they would have benefitted from the merger, at least in terms of preventing further cuts to programming and rising taxes:

I think our community had this misconception that we were rescuing them in the merger. And that we were this much stronger district. They were desperate. They needed us. They didn't recognize that there is this impending financial crisis, and we needed each other. So I think there's a little bit of disappointment and maybe even for some a little bit of relief. But I almost think it's like business as normal to the community for the most part. (J. Bonacci, personal communication, March 22, 2013)

Trustee Slentz had yet a different perspective of how the community reacted to the defeat of the effort. Her perspective was that Pleasant really saw the benefits from the reorganization and the results of the vote prove it. However, the community appears to have quickly gotten over it and was not sure that they should revisit reorganization with Culpepper in the future:

It's pretty much returned back to normal. There are some people that are still mad at the folks from Culpepper. That's also part of it. It was so close and we voted for it so

overwhelmingly. And this is the second time that they've done this. We're like really, do we even want to try? (J. Slentz, personal communication, March 22, 2013)

A common impediment to school district reorganization is a fear of the loss of local control and identity. In this case, annexation was the form of reorganization that was being pursued. If successful, the Culpepper Central School District would have been annexed by Pleasant. However, an agreement was made that the name of the district would be changed to the Pleasant-Culpepper Central School District to prevent the residents of Culpepper from feeling a sense of complete loss of identity. Given that Pleasant was to be the annexing district, and that the residents of Pleasant were not going to experience a sense of loss, Superintendent Rich felt the Culpepper community was fearful of losing their identity and local control; he did not feel that was necessarily the case in Pleasant:

Because we knew from the onset that it was an annexation. Our board was never really fearful because they knew this would not result in them all being unseated. So that wasn't a real issue here. I know there were members in Culpepper on their board that struggled with that. They have some long serving board members; one that goes back to the 1980s. So I know there was some concern over that. There was concern about the identity of their district. A few people have articulated that it's like in the corporate world like a takeover type of situation. We tried to do everything we could to mitigate that for them. We agreed early on that the name was going to be Pleasant-Culpepper Central School. We were going to have the assurances built in...from our district perception, we felt we had to go out of our way so Culpepper wouldn't feel the loss of control and identity because it was not an issue on this side. (J. Rich, personal communication, March 22, 2013)

The sense of loss of identity by Culpepper was perceived to be an issue for Trustee Slentz as well. Regardless of the fact that the new district would recognize the identity of Culpepper, Slentz felt that many of Culpepper's residents had a great fear of losing their identity. From her perspective, this simply was not an issue in Pleasant.

Because we had the high school there wasn't, from our point of view, so much of a question of local identity... we've got so many of their high school students anyway. So I think a lot of the Pleasant district felt we're cousins, were siblings. We're in the same family, we just had different houses. I think for some people in Culpepper that was an issue because they felt they were going to be losing their identity even though we were going to be Pleasant-Culpepper. (J. Slentz, personal communication, March 22, 2013)

Rich was under the impression that the instructional staff was far less concerned about control and identity issue than the non-instructional staff. The annexation would have resulted in the loss of the Culpepper collective bargaining units and their negotiated agreements. All of the employees from Culpepper that came to the new district would have fallen under the terms and conditions of the Pleasant collective bargaining agreement. The trepidation that surrounded this fact caused a great deal of concern for the Culpepper employees and added to the sense of loss that Culpepper was experiencing. Business Official Bonacci went on to state that the fear was not limited to the Culpepper employees:

Control wasn't an issue in our district. We bent over backwards to make them feel like they weren't losing control. And that it seemed like all of our decisions were driven by how they would feel. So we tried really hard to make them feel like really more of an equal partner in the process and stuff. And I think I was little bit surprised by how much

angst there was by our staff considering that this was an annexation and we were the annexing district. (J. Bonacci, personal communication, March 22, 2013)

The terms and conditions that existed in the Pleasant collective bargaining agreements would have become the terms and conditions of all of the new district's employees. Despite the fact that the Pleasant collective bargaining agreement would have been the controlling agreement had the annexation been successful, Bonacci felt that the disparity between the two pay scales played a significant role in the fear that the Pleasant staff was experiencing:

Some of our teachers who are higher up on the pay scale here were fearful that because their counterparts were so much lower paid in Culpepper that the leveling process would divert district funds away from their potential raises in the future. So leveling was a very controversial subject. (J. Bonacci, personal communication, March 22, 2013)

In the past when reorganization occurred, quite often a new collective bargaining agreement would be negotiated to include the most favorable labor terms from the previous agreements. The new agreement would give all employees the higher of the two salaries, the richest benefit package, and greatest association rights. This practice is referred to as leveling up. The current state of the economy may not make this practice feasible.

Leadership team perspectives in Fiddletown. For three consecutive years prior to the effort to reorganize, Fiddletown had to make significant reductions in program to make up for its loss of revenue. As a result, the leadership team believed that they would be able to hold the line for 2013-2014 at 2012-2013 levels despite the failure of the effort to merge with Rose Valley. Superintendent LaPaglia explained, "We are able to sustain every program that we have today for the 2013-2014 school year...but for the 2014-2015 school year...we're looking at a deficit of \$450,000, and we will start again" (F. LaPaglia, personal communication, March 8, 2013).

Knapp agreed that although the defeat would not have an immediate impact on the academic program, it certainly would in subsequent years. His belief was that the reorganization would have prevented Fiddletown from having to make devastating cuts in the future. The reductions in program that have been made have been harmful, but he felt that they were on trajectory that would lead to educational insolvency. Although the defeat of the effort may not have much of an impact on program in the immediate future, it certainly would ensure cutting in the future. Trustee Knapp considered the reorganization as a necessary preventive measure:

I think that 2013-2014, it's not going to impact it tremendously because our business official and our superintendent have done a tremendous job... so we're looking right now at a 2013-2014 budget which pretty much replicates where we are in 2012-2013... I can't say the same right now for 2014-2015. We're still looking long range there for that shortfall. (G. Knapp, personal communication, March 8, 2013)

Despite the fact that Fiddletown had to suffer significant cuts to programming, with little relief on the horizon, Business Official Landry seemed to be surprisingly optimistic about having the ability to reinstate positions in the future. Although both Rich and Knapp were gravely concerned about the ability of Fiddletown to provide even the most basic program, Landry was hopeful about the prospects the future held without reorganization:

We've had three years of horrendous budget sessions... by my second year here we ended up cutting 30 positions. So there is no more for us to cut. So I guess this year for a change we don't have to cut anything; because we can't cut anything else. But it's nice to know that at this point...we're on an even keel and can hopefully move forward to reinstate something. I'm not saying that it's going to happen, but that's the goal...is to

hopefully in the future reinstate some of those things that we had to cut two and three years ago. (L. Landry, personal communication, March 8, 2013)

This optimism is remarkable, given the fact that Fiddletown's reserves are diminishing. As Fiddletown's ability to generate revenue became more difficult, the district began to tap into their reserves in an attempt to hang on to as much program as possible. Superintendent LaPaglia described the state of Fiddletown's reserves:

We had a bus reserve...because we need to purchase another bus we have exhausted that reserve account. We had a capital reserve account; we've pretty much exhausted that... So, yes, we've just been whittling away at our reserves. And as far as our fund balance, we are at the four percent, and that's it. (F. LaPaglia, personal communication, March 8, 2013)

The Fiddletown residents supported the effort by a large margin and clearly saw the benefits that reorganization had to offer. When the effort was defeated by Rose Valley, the general sentiment in Fiddletown was that of disappointment. However, LaPaglia did not feel that disappointment would lead to a lack of support for the budget:

I think for this year, we'll be good. My max I can go is 4.19. Do I think 4.19 would pass? Yes, I do. I think if I can tell them we're going to bring back kindergarten, first grade and second grade art and music; that would be a plus. People would say that's good. I'll pay a couple of extra dollars for that. I think that the 4.19 for this community is sustainable; that they can do that. (F. LaPaglia, personal communication, March 8, 2013)

Landry had a different perspective of what the board would eventually put before the voters. The residents of Fiddletown understood that reorganization would bring tax rates under

control, while preventing additional cuts to program. Although the residents clearly want to prevent further cuts, Landry believed that there is a limit to what they can afford in terms of tax increase:

We can actually put out an increase of 4.19%. We're not going to do that... I don't see our board doing that, but we will go more than the two percent... I don't think our taxpayers will have a problem with that. And I say that because the last three years we've been telling them we are \$1.6 million short in a \$16 million dollar budget. So they've been very aware of the severe issues. So I think that if we were to go to them and say we're going to do three and a half, I think that would go for it. (L. Landry, personal communication, March 8, 2013)

Given the high percentage of Fiddletown residents that supported the effort to reorganize it is not surprising that a feeling of sadness fell over the community. Superintendent LaPaglia noted, "They were...saddened. I think they were disappointed; they felt that this was a good marriage. When they first learned of it, then it was like, now what?" (F. LaPaglia, personal communication, March 8, 2013). Landry reported that the community had a mixed reaction to the defeated effort:

As far as Fiddletown goes, I think that some people are saying let's give them a shot, let's try it again. Which I think they can do...and then some people are saying you know what, they flat out told us they don't want to do it, let's look elsewhere. So, this community is open to a merger with another district; whether it's Rose Valley or somewhere else. They are open to looking at what can we do, because they know that if you merge that incentive aid is going to carry you for however many years...15 years or

something like that...so it would just make the programs in this school so much better.

(L. Landry, personal communication, March 8, 2013)

Knapp had a similar perspective of how the community responded to Rose Valley's defeat of the measure:

We have what I'm going to call small groups... I don't know the extent of it, but I know that it's a very small active group that is campaigning for us to consider a study with our neighbor to the southeast of us. They're again, within five miles of us. We as a board have said, we did all of the homework with Rose Valley. We believe that is a good marriage. We really think that is the way to go. We want to make sure Rose Valley is completely done with this process. We want to see if there is any reconsideration now that they've been given six or eight months. They've kind of had a chance to think it over. Now they're in the budget process, looking at other cutbacks. Do they really want to give up on this merger or do they want to reconsider it? And we think it's only honorable to do that because we made a commitment to them. And we feel that we've got to make sure that they're definitely done. (G. Knapp, personal communication, March 8, 2013)

Reorganization is a topic that causes concern for all stakeholder groups in every community that faces the issue: the fear of loss of identity and local control, trepidation surrounding the collective bargaining process that has to take place and the countless other unknowns that accompany reorganization. The Fiddletown leadership team believed that the community was so concerned about saving program that the fear of losing their identity and local control was not an issue for Fiddletown residents. All felt that Fiddletown residents embraced the concept of reorganization early in the process. This was supported by the fact that 73% of

Fiddletown voters supported the reorganization effort, “I think at first there was a little trepidation...think at first a little nervousness, but my impression... I think that the vote speaks for itself. Fiddletown overwhelming passed it” (L. Landry, personal communication, March 8, 2013). Landry was under the impression that the Fiddletown community had grown weary from years of watching their school district continuously scale back student offerings and accepted the concept of reorganization, almost without question, “the Fiddletown community pretty much embraced this idea. I think that they saw the writing on the wall” (L. Landry, personal communication, March 8, 2013).

The same could not be said about Rose Valley. According to Knapp the Rose Valley community was more concerned about identity and control than Fiddletown was. In his estimation, that was the reason why the measure was defeated there:

In Rose Valley, I think local identity was a huge factor. I mean that community has always been very proud of their village, very proud of their school, very proud of their identity and very protective of it. And I think there were some very emotional issues that played into this, in their defeat of it. I think very much. That was a question that was uppermost in Rose Valley’s mind was... Fiddletown is bigger, are they going to elect all of their board members and all the people in Fiddletown on the new board? We aren’t going to get representation. What is going to happen to us? That was a question I know that was asked both at a public meeting...and I believe it was in a letter to the editor about Rose Valley getting swallowed up by Fiddletown. So there was a lot of that emotion going on...without question. (G. Knapp, personal communication, March 8, 2013)

Leadership team perspectives in Smithton. The effort to reorganize the Smithton and Irondale Central School Districts failed when the boards of education of both districts did not resolve to move to an advisory referendum. The failure of that effort will have an impact on the program that Smithton is able to offer, and will force the district to make cuts. Superintendent Rudd explained:

We've done everything from non-instruction... impact all of our clerical, our custodians, transportation. There's so...there's nothing left. I can't pull a custodian...our clerical are down from twelve months to ten months... our grounds guy is from twelve months to nine months. So, there's nothing left there. Last year was probably the first big hit where we started to get into instruction and that was with TAs. This year was the big one...6.0 teachers... we won't have a lot of teachers for next year...we eliminated Family Consumer Science in the high school. We had reduced sections of business and tech, art, band, music. We hit all of them, there's nothing even left today. We went after ...Math, Science, English, Social Studies, Reading Specialists, Special Education Teacher, Librarian and then the two big ones, Social Workers and Psychologists. So by not merging, yes, we're losing programs. (R. Rudd, personal communication, March 1, 2013)

Despite the fact that Smithton was forced to make significant reductions to its instructional and non-instructional work force and that Superintendent Rudd felt that the failed effort would have a further negative impact on program; Keeler did not feel that program would suffer. Rather he had an optimistic perspective regarding how the district will maintain program:

I don't think it's going to affect us all that much and I'll tell you why. There are two forces working. One is that we are making a substantial adjustment to a new economic

reality. Unlike other school districts, in the absence of a merger, the absence of new money, what we know is that we're never going to get more money. We do not believe that all you have to do is weather the storm. If we don't set a new baseline upon which we continue this district, it will not succeed. We have to change in one way, shape, or form. I will tell you that the board clearly understands that we are in effect bringing ourselves to a new baseline of program and costs upon which the future will be built, on the assumption that there is never going to be more money. So it's in essence a time of adjustment. We're teasing out things like the number of teacher assistants we have. Programmatically, we have a faculty that is not willing to let go of good stuff... there is always a pursuit of alternatives. How do we maintain program and enrich program despite the fact that we have less people? We also have current enrollment decline and we have adjusted to that. So if you look at that trend, it's...we're in an adjustment phase. The other thing that's going on is the hopeful phase. There is a future...so you have this adjustment to a new bottom and the hope and aspiration of a new future. We are now adjusting to a different reality which is declining population, declining resources, setting a new bar at the ...setting a new foundation and then building towards a new future. (R. Keeler, personal communication, April 18, 2013)

Keeler and Rudd both experienced the same effort to reorganize their district and had access to the same report that the study generated, yet from their separate roles, they viewed the immediate impact of the district's program from different perspectives.

The Smithton residents have always been very supportive of the district's budget in the past. Business Official Humphrey stated, "The interesting thing is that the community is very pro-Smithton. They support this district. They support the leadership of the district...and last

year we made cuts... and we had over 60% approval,” (J. Humphrey, personal communication, March 1, 2013). Both Rudd and Humphrey agreed that remaining within the tax levy limit would result in a positive vote, however they both were concerned about the amount of fund balance they were using, more than a third of what they had available or \$825,000. Humphrey went on to illustrate the ramification of using that much fund balance:

\$825,000 is way more than this district has ever taken out of the fund balance which leaves us with...around \$1.2 million...left over to get through one more year. We’re either going to become insolvent or they’re going to change the way in which they’re funding schools and we go from there. But, we’re not in it alone. (J. Humphrey, personal communication, March 1, 2013)

Keeler did not have an opinion regarding how the taxpayers of Smithton would react to the failed effort to reorganize, but had the same concerns that Rudd and Humphrey had regarding the district’s fund balance:

We, like all school districts, are spending down our reserves. We have two and a half years left; that’s kind of scary. And I don’t know how that’s going to pan itself out. We’ve been spending probably a third more than what it is we accrue, if not a half more than what it is we accrue... So it’s dwindling. And there’s nothing we can do about that because we do have to figure out how to hit the tax cap and preserve as much as we can of the good things that we have; recognizing that we have cut forty-four positions. (R. Keeler, personal communication, April 18, 2013)

All three of Smithton’s participants feared that the strain that the past few years had put on their fund balance would result in the district becoming insolvent within the next couple of years unless something dramatic regarding how New York State funds its schools.

From Keeler's perspective maintaining the culture that had been nurtured over the years resulted in an atmosphere that promoted high standards and student achievement. It was his belief that the culture could be, had to be, maintained regardless of identity or who was on the board of education:

I don't think identity was so much an issue as culture. I think...as I listen to people in the community, especially those quite frankly who have been students in the Irondale school system, and had moved here on purpose, to them the movement back to a merged district and hooking up with Irondale was a walking away from what they believed was a very, very positive environment for their kids. So the preservation of the culture was really important. The secondary issue I think, of local control...I don't think it was much of a concern... From a control perception, I don't think the board feared loss of control... there was a concern about loss of control if it resulted in the loss of the quality of education. (R. Keeler, personal communication, April 18, 2013)

Rudd's perspective was that identity was never a very big issue throughout the process of the study. In many reorganization efforts, maintaining local control and identity are often the contributing factors that cause the defeat of a reorganization effort. It is important to underscore the fact that the leadership team did not feel that loss of control or identity played a role in the merger effort:

As far as identity...this is probably going to sound weird...it wasn't a big deal. The identity as far as what were the colors going to be, what is the name going to...that was like, even parents and kids were like no big deal. (R. Rudd, personal communication, March 1, 2013)

Rudd, Humphrey, and Keeler all reported that the community had completely moved on since the defeat of the effort to reorganize and the virtually no one was talking about it. Rudd stated “I can hear crickets. No one. And you know that’s a good point because in other districts, they say you never brought it to the community to vote. Not a word; not a word” (R. Rudd, personal communication). Keeler echoed those sentiments when he said, “No, life went on... it was like, whew, we got past that one. Let’s go” (R. Keeler, personal communication, April 18, 2013).

Leadership team perspectives in Rockwood. When the Rockwood Board of Education decided not to move forward to an advisory referendum at the completion of the feasibility study, the process to reorganize with Bull Hill came to an end. According to Superintendent Long, that decision would not immediately have a negative impact on program at Rockwood:

I don’t believe it will in the very near future... We haven’t lost the program, but we won’t be servicing as many students. And that’s what’s happening as a result of the reduction of force; which was necessary to address the fiscal distress of the district. (K. Long, personal communication, February 28, 2013)

Long reported that she had targeted 11 positions that would be cut during the budget process as a result of the declining enrollment, and she did not believe that the elimination of those positions would drastically impact program for the upcoming year; “it’s also more rightsizing...it’s done for economics and efficiencies” (K. Long, personal communication, February 28, 2013).

However Long described a negative impact on programming when she went on to explain:

Class sizes will definitely increase in the junior/senior high. We are changing from the middle school concept to a 7-12 because I can gain more efficiencies in staffing. Teachers will have more preparations. It will be a very basic schedule for the

junior/senior high kids... our junior class is 35 kids this year. Thirty-five kids and 17 want to go to BOCES. That's a lot, and they're not taking course work that will end up in any kind of certificated program. And I struggle with that at \$8,900... We have to start to look at how we can be more efficient here and not just send everybody out. I mean we have three students in Alternative Ed. Those are luxuries that are hard to support at \$36,000 dollars a student. (K. Long, personal communication, February 28, 2013)

Despite Long's contention that she did not believe that program would be impacted by the failed effort, she described a situation that would provide students with fewer opportunities as a result of the defeated effort.

From the perspective of a business official, Van Winkler disagreed with Long's perspective of how the failure of the effort to reorganize would impact program. In his estimation the district had been taking away options from students for quite some time and the defeat of the merger would only compound the issue:

Obviously it's going to impact it, because there's just no two ways it can't. And then we're going through the budget process now. We're eliminating positions as we speak. What I was doing before you came in to me was actually putting together the reductions in staffing on the budget...roughly eight or nine FTEs out of a hundred. (L. Van Winkler, personal communication, February 28, 2013)

Trustee Egland's perspective was aligned with Long's when it came to his perspective about the impact that the failed effort would have on programming, "We don't feel we're going to lose... we're not going to lose any programming. We're going to downsize, which...we're actually rightsizing, it's a better word for it (personal communication, February 28, 2013).

However, Egland then stated, “we’re going to eliminate the middle school, that was another thing we were doing as part of our rightsizing” (personal communication, February 28, 2013).

One of the reasons that the effort to reorganize failed had to do with how much of the incentive aid would be used to replenish reserves. The defeat of the effort will have ramifications for Rockwood’s reserves. Long and Van Winkler agreed that the reductions that were being made to staff would prevent Rockwood from depleting their reserves, at least in the short term. Long reported, “If we did not meet these...decreases in staffing, if we did not, I think we would have been insolvent in five years” (K. Long, personal communication, February 28, 2013). Van Winkler concurred when he stated:

Well, first of all, with reserves, it will affect it, but now it’s a little bit further... it’s at least a year down the road because we’re taking that out of the equation with the reductions. The reductions in staff are going to mean minimal use of reserves. But that just takes you a year down the road, and then you’re dealing with issues again because state aid doesn’t look like in the near future it’s going to get much better. So we’ll be dealing with that again. (L. Van Winkler, personal communication, February 28, 2013)

When the Rockwood Board of Education decided to pull the plug on the effort to reorganize, many in the community were upset. Those who were in favor of the merger, and even some who were not, believed that they should have been able to cast their vote one way or the other. They believed that the board should have allowed the process to move to an advisory referendum. Some members of the Rockwood community feared that those who were angry with the process would not support future budgets; however Egland was not concerned that the defeat of the effort to reorganize would result in future defeated budget votes:

I've heard a few people say that they're going to vote no for the budget just because the board voted no for the merger. And I don't think...and I've said this in public...I don't think the Rockwood voters are that ignorant. (D. Eglund, personal communication, February 28, 2013)

Long agrees with Eglund. When asked if she felt that the community would continue to support budget referenda in light of the defeated measure, she responded, "Yes, I think they will... one went down in the last eight years (K. Long, personal communication, February 28, 2013). Van Winkler, on the other hand, believed that the defeat of the measure could make it more difficult to get a budget passed in Rockwood:

I think it's going to create a lot of negative feelings in the public, and it has created some. That it's going to be more difficult to get a vote through. Or, at least a vote without anything more than a minimal increase in taxes. (L. Van Winkler, personal communication, February 28, 2013)

As is the case in many school district reorganization efforts, the Rockwood community was divided over the issue. Those who were vehemently opposed to the merger were very pleased with the action that the board of education took, while those who were in favor or on the fence had a much different reaction. A budget vote is one way to measure the effects of the defeated measure, but the community has other ways of expressing their thoughts regarding the defeat of the reorganization effort. According to Long there have been:

A lot of negative letters to the editor...some of it was just mean spirited. My board president will tell you he's gotten a lot of e-mails and a lot of handshakes for the chutzpah and the courage that they showed in being a standalone district. Several people... were just horrified. Just horrified. And now you don't see anybody anymore at

the board meetings... right now, it like no one's talking. (K. Long, personal communication, February 28, 2013)

Van Winkler also felt that the community seemed split over the decision as well:

The teachers are really upset and now with these reductions in staff... there's a lot of angst, anger, etc. with the teachers... the board members ended up five to two not to go forward with the study... Teachers were just upset; you could see it in their faces. They just walked out of the meeting and all that. And some other people who were against the merger were all happy and gleeful. (L. Van Winkler, personal communication, February 28, 2013)

Egland's perspective was similar to Van Winkler's. When asked whether or not he felt that the teachers in Rockwood were supportive of the merger, he said the community was split "right down the middle" (D. Egland, personal communication, February 28, 2013).

The effort to reorganize Rockwood with Bull Hill ended when the Rockwood Board of Education resolved to end the study before going to an advisory referendum. Long believed that one of the reasons that the board decided not to move forward had to do with the fear of losing identity and local control. When asked if identity and local control was a concern of the community, Long replied:

Huge; and I think that's why it didn't go past the board level... the biggest concern, I believe, that many of the board members had was we were going to lose this building; and this building is the heart of the community. (K. Long, personal communication, February 28, 2013)

Often school district reorganization results in the closing of a school. In a small rural town, where the school is the center of the community, the fear of losing that school is very

intense. Losing the school would cause the community to feel as if they were losing their identity as well. The fear of having the Rockwood School closed was a major concern of the residents and certainly played a part in the eventual defeat of the effort to consolidate the two districts. Long stated, “The Rockwood people...were very afraid that they would be swallowed up, close this building and go to Bull Hill. That’s probably one of the biggest fears that surfaced throughout the course of the study” (K. Long, personal communication, February 28, 2013). Although the plan was put into place by outside consultants without any affiliation to either district, the Rockwood residents never trusted that their building would remain open.

Trustee Egland felt that local control and identity played a significant role in the failed effort. In fact it was hard for him to separate his emotions from the issue:

I said all along in a public meeting that having been a graduate from Rockwood, and I coach junior...basketball and whatever else, that I want my daughter, who’s a freshman, to graduate from Rockwood. But I realize the reality of it is that I also want my daughter to graduate with college credits, if possible. So, local identity was a big thing, and it was a big thing that I heard from a lot of people too. It’s hard to separate that emotional part of it and just go with the business aspect of it. And then that even gets convoluted because the business aspect of it tends to go to the financials as opposed to the educational. (D. Egland, personal communication, February 28, 2013)

The fear of losing local control and identity is one of the reasons why school district reorganization is such an emotional issue. It often becomes very difficult for people to separate their emotions from rational thought, even when they have all of the information in front of them.

Leadership team perspectives in Bull Hill. The decision not to reorganize will have an impact on the program that Superintendent Stocker was trying to protect through a merger. From her perspective, the failed attempt to reorganize with Rockwood could impact the program in a few different ways. When asked how, she went on to state:

We've been creating about three scenarios. One is let's stay at the property tax cap and not make any more than efficiency cuts... Another scenario is we'll make a million dollars in cuts, which will cut everything that we have. And then that would buy us maybe another six months of longevity. And then the third option is to increase our tax levy well beyond the tax cap over the next three years and that would buy us quite a bit... We've broken it down to the monthly cost to the average taxpayer to fund a kindergarten program and that kind of thing. (C. Stocker, personal communication, March 12, 2013)

Similar to the perspective of the other participants in the study, Hoffman's opinion was that the defeat of the effort to reorganize would have an impact on Bull Hill's offerings in the future, but not immediately:

Well, short term it doesn't change anything because when we made these substantial cuts we presented it as a two-year budget because it was so substantial. We consolidated cafeterias. We eliminated cleaners... we have two half-time people now in the business office. I mean we just really scaled back significantly...used the CBO much more than we did... what we're calling efficiency cuts, but were not doing anything substantial... Next year we're going to probably be cutting. (L. Hoffman, personal communication, March 12, 2013)

Trustee Hoskey's perspective was that the district needed to reorganize if it was going to sustain the program for children and the community in the future, but did not believe that the defeat

of the effort to merge with Rockwood was going to have an impact on program for the subsequent year:

We decided not to look at one year and what could we do just to survive next year. And we as a board had decided to push out to the future and what the community would rather see... what do you want to see...for the Bull Hill Central School District community in the future? And so that's the approach that we have taken. We did numerous cuts last year... even if we went out with our tax cap this year, we don't have to make many cuts, only efficiencies and so on and so forth. (M Hoskey, personal communication, March 12, 2013)

Similar to many school districts that consider reorganization, the Bull Hill leadership team was concerned about their financial situation as well as their program. The defeat of the merger will have implications for the Bull District. Stocker explained:

So if we stay at the tax cap, we'll be done in about three years probably. We'll close our doors unless something else happens... we're not going to make a million dollars in cuts. Nobody wants to do that, so that's off the table. If the community agrees to significant tax increases, then we could continue our program for I would say at least five years and maybe beyond. Now had we merged with Rockwood, then of course our longevity would have been increased significantly beyond that; not forever, but significantly. (C. Stocker, personal communication, March 12, 2013)

Trustee Hoskey agreed with Stocker, "we won't be able to sustain ourselves" (personal communication, March 12, 2013).

Given the loss of the incentive aid that would have been generated through the reorganization, Business Official Hoffman feared that the defeat of the merger would result in an

insolvency of sorts within the next few years. Hoffman did not believe that Bull Hill had the ability to generate enough tax revenue to cover the loss, she explained:

...thinking about the amount of money we have lost...puts us to about 2016-2017 using existing reserves and fund balance. So we're strong to 2016-2017 or at least if we followed through as I projected...and the idea is to do twelve percent through three years. That's probably not going to fly in the community but it is worthy of a conversation and hoping we at least get people out to discuss it to say, yes we'll do it or no, we won't... it would only take us out maybe another year under the current conditions. (L. Hoffman, personal communication, March 12, 2013)

The effort to reorganize Bull Hill and Rockwood ended when the Rockwood Board of Education decided not to move forward with a 5-2 vote. However the Bull Hill Board of Education resolved to move forward with a 7-0 vote. From Superintendent Stocker's perspective, the rejection seems to have brought the Bull Hill community closer:

Everybody's just so angry... I haven't talked to anyone...retired person, teacher... I'm thinking the people who own little businesses in the community... I haven't heard anyone who is negative about Bull Hill; who has said that we did anything wrong. In fact, they have been very, very positive about the way the board conducted itself... So it really increased the sense of pride in Bull Hill. (C. Stocker, personal communication, March 12, 2013)

Trustee Hoskey had the same perspective that Stocker had. The defeat of the effort by Rockwood's board created a common enemy for the Bull Hill community to unite against. The defeat of the effort was perceived as a slight, and the community was sensitive about the issue:

I agree with that 100%... the reaction our community had was to express themselves on the disappointment on the Rockwood Board of Education because the Rockwood Board of Education really didn't specifically define the reasons why they voted 5-2; only other than they didn't feel that the study gave them enough information to move forward. (M. Hoskey, personal communication, March 12, 2013)

Rounding out the leadership team's perspective of how the community reacted to the defeat of the merger, Business Official Hoffman stated:

I think that the short answer is that they blame Rockwood. We didn't get a lot of people at our board meetings. We went out to every community within our district so people had an opportunity to come and hear about it. We put lots of things in the papers. We sent out newsletter again. So our community felt that they were informed. At least we didn't get any feedback to the contrary. So I think they felt we gave it our best shot. (L. Hoffman, personal communication, March 12, 2013)

The fear of losing local control and community identity is one of the largest obstacles for a successful reorganization effort. From Stocker's perspective, local control and identity maintenance played a limited role in the defeat of the effort, at least for Bull Hill:

Well, Bull Hill was merged...about forty years ago. So we've been through this process before and...our collective memory is part of our identity; our collective history. And so that was not an issue ever for us...because people have experienced it before, they saw it as a positive thing... I did not hear from more than maybe two people who complained about a loss of identity or local control. And we're also the bigger district. And so the loss of local control was I think less an issue for us than it was for Rockwood. (C. Stocker, personal communication, March 12, 2013)

Hoffman agreed with Stocker that the issue of identity and local control was more of an issue for Rockwood than it was for Bull Hill:

I think the identity aspect of it is more with Rockwood. That seems to be a stronger issue with that district... Here I think it certainly came up and there were some community members that were concerned about that... More than that identity I think there were some concerns because we have two different locations. What does that mean to one of our other locations because of where our elementary is located? So what would that mean to that town's identity more than the district itself? (L. Hoffman, personal communication, March 12, 2013)

Trustee Hoskey concurred with Stocker and Hoffman that local control and identity were not major issues in the Bull Hill community:

I don't think there was an issue with local control... it was more of an adult concern than a student concern when the two districts merged forty years ago...and so I believe that that was the only thing that I could see; was that we would have that little bit of adult issues. But I know the kids... we've been doing merged sports or combined sports with Rockwood for years and the kids have always gotten along with each other. So I would have to say that the identity would probably be able to be meshed pretty good once we merged. (M. Hoskey, personal communication, March 12, 2013)

Summary. From the perspective of each of the leadership team there would be little change in program in the year subsequent to the defeated effort to reorganize. Given that each district has made substantial cuts to program in the years leading up to the decision to study reorganization, each had made the decision to build a budget that maintained current levels of programming hoping that reorganization would be successful. Although each team

acknowledged that they would have to continually make cuts to program in the future, little change would take place in the first year after the defeat of the effort.

From a financial perspective, the leadership teams believe that the defeated effort will force them to chip away at their dwindling reserves and raise taxes. In an effort to maintain program while controlling their tax rates, the districts were forced to use significant amounts of their reserves. It was their shared belief that the future will bring tax rates that will increase every year to make up for losses in state aid and reserve funds, resulting in tax payers getting less of a return on their tax investment.

Although the loss of local control and identity have historically been major obstacles to successful reorganization efforts, the participant leadership teams did not believe those issues caused their defeats. They also agreed that despite their best efforts to educate their communities, the stakeholder groups in their districts do not fully understand the gravity of the conditions in their districts.

Steps Teams Taken as a Result of the Defeated Effort

A growing number of school districts in New York State have considered reorganization in the years subsequent to the recession of 2008. Despite the fact that more districts are considering and studying reorganization, few have actualized. This study sought to uncover the steps that districts whose leadership teams chose to consider reorganization have taken as a result of a defeated effort.

Changes in Pleasant as a result of the failed reorganization attempt. The reorganization was viewed by the Pleasant leadership team as a means to end the cycle of raising taxes while taking opportunities away from children at the same time. When Culpepper residents defeated the effort at the advisory referendum, the Pleasant Central School District was

put in a position of having to deal with the reality of their situation. One of the major changes that has taken place has been more of a concentration on sharing services with other districts and the BOCES:

We definitely have become more aggressive in terms of shared services. Pretty much all of the sharing that we've done since it went down, the positions, it's all been post-merger defeat. To try to generate BOCES aid to try to save the positions. (J. Rich, personal communication, March 22, 2013)

Trustee Slentz felt that personnel issues and an increase in sharing positions would be the major change that occurred as a result of the failed reorganization efforts as well. According to Slentz, educating employees was one of the biggest challenges associated with sharing services that they would have to face:

There are issues with contracts and there are people that think it means they're going to lose their jobs... so we have to educate the teachers to understand that no, it means that you keep your job because we'll be able to have classes for you to teach. And it's not as if any of our districts have people who are only doing AP classes. We don't have that luxury. So it isn't that there are four AP teachers and now there is only going to be one. (J. Slentz, personal communication, March 22, 2013)

Bonacci, whose position had been affected by the merger defeat, felt that sharing instructional services would be the biggest change in the future. In his estimation the sharing that had taken place had not affected many instructional positions and had not really been noticed by the general public. The shares that will take place in the future will have a greater impact on the district:

We've continued to look for efficiencies in cuts. My position is one that's most dramatically changed. So personally there was a big impact for me. But I think that we've been pretty fortunate... we're in a strong position and we've been fortunate really not to have done a lot of the dramatic stuff yet. (J. Bonacci, personal communication, March 22, 2013)

Rich, Bonacci, and Slentz all agreed that they already shared quite a bit with neighboring districts and capitalized on their BOCES. Although there had been discussions regarding how to engage in more sharing, very little had been accomplished. "We can't even agree on a common school schedule, day schedule or bell schedule... how serious are we really about cooperating and sharing when we aren't even willing to address our schedules so we all hold school on the same day" (J. Rich, personal communication, March 22, 2013).

The leadership team had hoped that the reorganization was going to actualize, and they would be able to avert further layoffs and cuts to programming. They reported that if nothing changed, the future would consist of chipping away at program until they reached the point of educational insolvency. However, in the year subsequent to the defeat of the merger little change would take place.

Changes in Fiddletown as a result of the failed reorganization attempt. The defeat of the annexation effort by the Rose Valley community left the Fiddletown Central School District with very few choices as it prepared for the future. Fiddletown had high hopes for the ability to restore many of the programs and positions that it had cut over the past few years. Although the 2012-2013 budget did not include further cuts, it certainly did not make restorations. In fact, a predicted shortfall for the 2014-2015 school year would be a source of consternation for the board and the community, Trustee Knapp explained it this way:

The superintendent came back to us with a statement which the board all agreed with, which is, I'm done cutting. I've cut to the bare bones right now, and I'm done. I just can't do any more. And the board agrees with that. I mean, none of us were happy with the cuts we made anyway. And so we've cut back to a point where we can't cut any further. The superintendent agrees; the board agrees. We're all on the same page. We can't make any more cuts. But to maintain, we might have to go to six or seven percent for a year to keep these programs where we believe they should be and leave it up to the community. I think that's where the board is going to head. I don't think we're going to cut any further. I don't think we can. I think it's the wrong move. Our responsibility as a board is to provide a sound education for our kids. (G. Knapp, personal communication, March 8, 2013)

The failure of the reorganization will force the Fiddletown Board of Education to adopt future budgets that call for higher tax increases than usual in an effort to keep the limited program that they offer in the wake of the cuts they had made in recent years. Business Official Landry reported several other changes that would occur as a result of the defeated effort:

Well, our administration is reduced. ... our elementary assistant principal went to another district and she will not be replaced. Superintendent LaPaglia has submitted his letter of resignation for the purposes of retirement... the question is, maybe we should get a shared superintendent. That would be a change and the reason for that is of course cost savings... so as a result of this merger not going through, we still do not have JV sports teams and will not be able to fund them. We had cut music and art programs, specifically in the elementary school where they are not mandated... we're not going to be able to

reinstate any of those things at this time that we would have been able to had we merged.

(L. Landry, personal communication, March 8, 2013)

Superintendent LaPaglia believed that the relationship that he had with the BOCES and neighboring districts would change as a result of the defeat of the merger effort:

We will scrutinize our BOCES budget. You know, for years it's been... we trust what's going on... We go line by line now with our BOCES budget, which we've never done. We're very careful with our Special Ed needs program... And so everything is scrutinized. Which is fine, you know. That's good for an efficient program, but it was never like that... Now we have conversation on almost every line as far as what we're spending. I think that we try to share more, if we can, with other districts. We are, I think, looking more to what our neighbors can do for each other. (F. LaPaglia, personal communication, March 8, 2013)

Trustee Knapp also saw the defeat of the merger changing Fiddletown's relationship with the BOCES:

The board now has a question for BOCES which is, we have to stay within the tax cap and all of our expenses are there and yet the BOCES budget continues to grow. So we had a meeting with our representative on the BOCES board... We're concerned that we have to stay within the tax cap, how about you guys staying within the tax cap? Maybe our relationship is... I don't want to say it's straining... in a way we're asking them to really be careful with their budget because it's affecting our budget and our budget is really tough. (G. Knapp, personal communication, March 8, 2013)

Changes in Smithton as a result of the failed reorganization attempt. Superintendent Rudd reported that after one takes the reductions of program as a result of cuts in staff into

account, very little would change in Smithton next year as a result of the defeated measure. He had plans for future sharing with other districts, but claimed that issues in the collective bargaining units would prevent any real sharing in the near future (R. Rudd, personal communication, March 1, 2013). Humphrey agreed that the collective bargaining units were preventing sharing opportunities:

Really, that's the biggest thing that ties our hands, is the contract. That's the hardest part about even sharing versus merging is we have two completely different contracts. So even having one business office, you would still need to have two payroll people because you've got two different contracts. You basically would have to pay them two different ways because depending on what their contract says versus what our contract says. So it's... people don't realize how much the contracts tie our hands. (J. Humphrey, personal communication, March 1, 2013)

Rudd also planned to engage the business community in forming partnerships, but was in the planning phase at that point. Trustee Keeler also was focused on partnerships, "I think on our part we constantly look for partnerships. For us, the spirit of collaboration is tied in to the future," (R. Keeler, personal communication, April 18, 2013). Just as with Rudd, Keeler's ideas for partnerships were in the planning phase.

Rudd, Humphrey, and Keeler also reported that the relationships that they have with the BOCES and surrounding districts would not change in the upcoming year. Although the failed effort to reorganize was going to impact program, there were no concrete plans to increase collaboration with the neighboring districts of the BOCES.

Changes in Rockwood as a result of the failed reorganization attempt. When asked if Long felt that the Rockwood community would notice any changes as a result of the defeat of

the merger measure she simply responded “They will not see any difference in program” (K. Long, personal communication, February 28, 2013). When asked the same question, Van Winkler responded:

Right off the bat, the reductions in staff. That’s one of the major changes... So there’s going to be an effect there. There’s going to be an effect on the kids and what’s offered to them. Again, elementary level, you’re pretty well covered, but once you get to secondary, you’ve got a problem. And the problem isn’t going to go away. It’s going to get tougher as years go on until maybe you’re only able to offer what you’re absolutely required by law...period. (L. Van Winkler, personal communication, February 28, 2013)

Long reported that the defeat of the effort to reorganize had not changed Rockwood’s relationship with the BOCES or neighboring districts. They planned to share what they always had shared with other districts. However, the fact that an actualized reorganization would have moved Bull Hill from its current BOCES to Rockwood’s BOCES was something that made the effort attractive to Rockwood:

The Commissioner made a ruling on the BOCES designation and put Bull Hill, which is a component district of another BOCES, in our BOCES which is the way we want it... this worked for both communities, that determination. And I thought that was going to be the clincher to go through the boards and out to the community. (K. Long, personal communication, February 28, 2013)

One interesting change that will result as a result of the defeat of the merger is that Rockwood will no longer share their business official. They decided that they needed their own full time business manager and would no longer contract with the BOCES. Business Official Van Winkler’s position was a shared position through the BOCES. The decision to move from a

half time BOCES business official to a full time business official of their own would remove him from Rockwood. From his perspective, the relationship that Rockwood had with its BOCES was already changing:

You know, no longer is the business administrator going to be a shared position, but you still have the central business office, you still have the other shared positions. So it's not a major change. The problem with all districts in the BOCES is they're putting a lot of pressure on. Superintendents...can put a lot of pressure on the BOCES, because superintendents are under pressure in their own individual districts. So I don't think that's anything different from Rockwood than any other district. (L. Van Winkler, personal communication, February 28, 2013)

Changes in Bull Hill as a result of the failed reorganization attempt. From Superintendent Stocker's point of view the proposed reorganization of Bull Hill and Rockwood would have allowed Bull Hill to bolster its program for a while longer and prevent the removal of more opportunities for children. She also stated that the defeat of the effort would result in an eventual form of insolvency. However, in terms of the year subsequent to the defeat of the measure, everything was dependent on the level of support they could get for their budget from the taxpayers. Stocker indicated that nothing was for certain. She explained:

I know that teachers keep wanting to know, so what's our plan. Are we going to be a merged district? Are we not going to be a merged district?... they like certainty and...this just isn't a time that we can give you any certainty. (C. Stocker, personal communication, March 12, 2013)

The ambiguity that existed in Bull Hill not only left the teachers and staff wanting for answers, it also left the business official wondering what the next steps would be as well. When

asked what changes she felt would take place as a result of the defeat of the reorganization effort she simply stated, “well, there are still discussions” (L. Van Winkler, personal communications, March 12, 2013).

The defeat of the merger has left the community of Bull Hill with more questions than answers. Although Rockwood defeated the measure, they are intimating that they may still be open to the process. As put off as they were by the rejection they received from Rockwood, the residents of Bull Hill were very interested in the concept of reorganization, but may not have been ready to let cooler heads prevail. Hoskey was also concerned about the ambiguity that the defeat of the merger had resulted in:

there is that concern out there of where we’re going and what’s happening. So there is a lot of uncertainty... What is that all going to mean? What is it going to mean for my future? And then it all stopped. And then so now we’re talking about we’re going to be a standalone district. We’re going to pull up our bootstraps and we’re going to move forward. Now they’re saying so what does that mean to my future? So there’s a lot of that right now going on. (M. Hoskey, personal communication, March 12, 2013)

All three members of the Bull Hill leadership team reported that they did not believe that there would be any change in their relationship with the BOCES or their neighboring districts as a result of not moving forward with reorganization. They were under the impression that they shared all they could with the BOCES and their neighboring districts and felt they could do no more.

Business Official Hoffman indicated that Bull Hill had always bought BOCES services and established intermunicipal agreements with other districts and did not feel there was anything else to share.

Summary. Despite the claims by virtually every participant that the future without some form of reorganization would lead to eventual insolvency in one form or another, very little will change in the districts during the year subsequent to the defeat of the reorganization effort. The participants all viewed their effort as an opportunity to head off further reductions to staff and program and to maintain their current levels of programming. They reached into their reserves to preserve positions in hopes that the reorganization would come to fruition.

How Would You Improve the Process of School District Reorganization?

The participants in this study were all members of district leadership teams where reorganization efforts failed. Given that reorganization did not occur, the research sought to discover how the participant leadership teams would change the process and what they believed was an ideal vision for reorganization.

An ideal vision for Pleasant. Rich's ideal vision for school district reorganization would result in districts with fewer than 2,000 students. Under this system, communities would be able to retain the perceived benefits of a rural education and be able to be more cost effective:

What I would like to see is a solution that still affords kids and families in rural areas the types of schools that they value and appreciate... I think in our area of upstate New York and even in the southern tier, the districts by and large could pair up and be still somewhere between 1,200, 1,300, up to 2,000 students geographically...and at the end of the day, once people adjusted to it, they would still have what they've always valued in rural education, which is a small intimate type setting where they know all the teachers and everybody knows the kids. And when parents come in there's a good chance you had them as a student. (J. Rich, personal communication, March 22, 2013)

Rich would also like to see the procedures for reorganization in New York State revised. In his opinion, the process is cumbersome and favors opponents of reorganization:

I would like to see an easier system where two schools could get together and agree even if it was at just the board level... this nonsense of all these votes and you know, it's crazy... in every corner there's a chance for people to back out. It's rigged to fail but it's so flawed that people, who are anti-merger for a pet peeve reason, can be very strategic in taking it down. And I think that's what happens in a lot of places. (J. Rich, personal communication, March 22, 2013)

Rich would create a system that makes it easier for school districts to reorganize through the implementation of a much simpler system. Although he would like a simpler system for merging school districts, he also felt strongly that creating very large school district would not serve the needs of children.

Bonacci pondered whether or not reorganization in New York State would be necessary if school were properly funded, "will we even need to reorganize the way we're thinking about if state aid was fair" (J. Bonacci, personal communication, March 22, 2013). Slentz's vision was aligned with Bonacci's "actually if I could really reorganize, I would reorganize the way schools are funded; property taxes are not an equitable way to fund something that is a statewide guarantee" (J. Slentz, personal communication, March 22, 2013).

An ideal vision for Fiddletown. Given the ability to design an ideal reorganization for the Fiddletown Central School District, all three members of the leadership team would choose to remain within the confines of current law in New York State, although each expressed that the current process is cumbersome. While both LaPaglia and Landry chose to centralize with another neighboring district, Trustee Knapp believed that the annexation of Rose Valley is the

ideal reorganization. Similar to Rich's vision, each member of the Fiddletown team indicated that they were too small to be able to offer a competitive program, but did not want to get too big. The size of the districts that would result from either reorganization would not exceed 2400 students.

An ideal vision for Smithton. Rudd stated that the current process employed by New York State is overly complex and will not work for districts like Smithton and Irondale whose tax rates are too dissimilar to make reorganization feasible:

Theirs was \$14.61 and ours was \$19.40. So their property taxes on the same piece of property would have been \$2,191, and ours was \$2,900. We would have went down; they would have went up. Even though it was only a little bit. I think it was going to equal out at...\$17.80 for each district. (R. Rudd, personal communication, March 1, 2013)

He would advocate for a method that addresses the disparities that exist between many neighboring across the state. The formula would provide reorganization aid that would allow contiguous districts with disparate tax rates to reorganize without being penalized.

Similarly, Humphrey went on to say "the first thing you want to do, is do the financials... it's not going to work for you? OK, let's move on... it's not worth our time and energy" (J. Humphrey, personal communication, March 1, 2013). Keeler agreed that the difference in tax rates prevented the boards from choosing to go forward. In fact, had the study begun with a tax rate comparison rather than ended with one, the entire process would have been concluded in a single session:

I'll tell you point blank. One of the lessons that we learned...was that when you get into this merger stuff the first thing you do is look at the finances. It turned out that our

consultants wanted to put the finances off until the very end. Their attitude was you've got to look at program first. You've got to look at the structures of the facilities and that kind of thing. Then after you are objective about those things, then you look at the finances. You don't want to have the finances cloud the whole merger study. The flip side is all that they had to do...was look at the size of the budget in relationship to the number of kids in each district... Had they done that right away they would have seen...that meant a huge tax shift from Smithton to them. Dead – dead on arrival... We said...on one hand it wasn't a waste of time because we learned an awful lot; both about ourselves and them. But at the same point in time it would have been dead in the water from the beginning. But the wasted energy associated with exploring something that, at its fundamental level was never going to happen. (R. Keeler, personal communication, April 18, 2013)

Keeler, Humphrey, and Rudd all stated that the effect on the tax rate should be the very first thing that should be analyzed. If they are favorable, then proceed with the study and see what it produces; if they are not, end the reorganization study with each other and move on to another alternative.

Rudd also believed that the models of reorganization currently available in New York State need to be expanded. There are other alternatives that should be explored:

Two districts, one superintendent, one business official, one curriculum, one PPS...that type of a model... I heard they do some of these down south or whatever... you could have one superintendent... two boards and...that would be like the dating part. They could give us a waiver... give us you know, incentive money... to try this model. Give us...let's do a five year pilot. It's not going to hurt, you are going to get better programs,

that's because...mostly its high school. The elementary schools... leave alone. Even leave the middle schools alone; start with your high schools. How can you start shipping kids back and forth? Then if it worked, then you could go to a merger... transition into it easily. (R. Rudd, personal communication, March 1, 2013)

Keeler agreed with Rudd and felt that the entire system of public education organization in New York State should be examined:

I think that what you've got to...what you need to do is you need to take each level of the school system and treat it differently...at the elementary school level it's about community schools. I think that the key there is to make sure that you really, really maintain the relationship between...the elementary school and its surrounding community, because that is absolutely essential. So you've got to preserve the relationship between the school building and its surrounding community at the elementary school level... you've got to preserve the building community relationship but you've also got to have this teamwork process that ensures that there is this continuity and consistency. At the middle school level it's a transition time. You can mitigate the size of a middle school as long as you provide for kids the kind of supports they need... I would be more concerned about the culture inside a middle school to make sure that in fact the target is on preventing kids from being isolated and cast aside. The high school level, it's all to me about two things. One is we all know that size makes a difference. I get little nervous when it's four to five hundred kids all in one grade level. I think the interrelationship between the different grade levels is really important... I think is to make it small enough that it creates a level of intimacy and it creates a sharing across the grade levels. Older kids are really good role models for younger kids. The other one is

the academic offerings. I think we need to really branch out. We need to really change. There are all kinds of resources. The key is to take teachers and change them from people who aggregate knowledge and impart it to becoming brokers of knowledge ...everybody talks about 21st century kids. You don't get 21st century kids without 21st century teachers and 21st century curriculum. You don't get that. And so the only way to build that is to change the role of teachers. To bring a new relationship to take place...one that uses all of the resources. The resources of higher education, the resources of the business community, and the resources internal to the school and bear on the student, and the facilitator of that is the teacher. That's a big changed role. But at the same point in time it is a very clear and distinct role. Maybe you need to recognize it in order to force people to deal with it. But it is a very clear departure from what it is that we've had in the past and I think it's where we've got to go. (R. Keeler, personal communication, April 18, 2013)

The Smithton leadership team would revamp the entire model and create a system that is much more flexible than currently exists. The system would provide additional reorganization aid to districts with varied tax rates, but also be open to various types of creative sharing and ways for adults to reorganize themselves. The ideal vision for Smithton is one in which provides school districts with the ability to experiment without the threat of failure.

An ideal vision for Rockwood. While Superintendent Long and Business Official Van Winkler believed that a regional approach to reorganization would be ideal, Trustee Egland believed that several changes to the process need to be put into place.

When asked what her ideal vision for Rockwood would be if she could reorganize the district any way she chose, regardless of current legislation, Long replied:

Actually I think my most ideal hope for Rockwood would be a regional high school... keep your small community school, your identity, and funnel those kids into schools that offer all the opportunities that meet all kids' needs. That would be my goal. And I would stop sending kids out to BOCES Special Ed programs that are an hour away and I would be maintaining and providing for the children within a transportable distance. (K. Long, personal communication, February 28, 2013)

Van Winkler's response was similar:

It's really simple...one county school district... one high school... You have your neighborhood elementary schools and that, but you have one administration... I'd keep the rules that the state would still provide you that merger money for the 14 years. I would keep that in tact so it allows you to get things running right. Do long range planning, set up reserves, etc. But what you would be able to do, especially at the secondary levels, especially for the high school kids, in terms of offering them courses... and I know that there's distance learning and all the other stuff, and that's all nice and eventually it might be one of the solutions to some of the problems...but sure it would be nice to have the kids offered all sorts of courses that they could take and use to their advantage, either personally just to their advantage or in terms of the next step of going to college. (L. Van Winker, personal communication, February 28, 2013)

Long and Van Winkler believed that they had a sufficient number of students and a large enough tax base in their region to achieve the economies of scale necessary to provide a competitive program to their students. They believed that a regional approach would create a sustainable school system that would have the ability to produce college and career ready students.

While Egland was not opposed to a regional approach to reorganization, he believed that the current process is greatly flawed. Trustee Egland had a series of ideas for an ideal process for school district reorganization in New York State:

So I have a list and these are just ideas ...to allow binding community agreements. In other words, we're not going to fire so many...this person or that person...and that encompasses a lot of things. We're not going to close your building for five years; make that a binding community agreement. Specific to building closures. I think there should be an established budget before you even start. Allow for one year from the date of the new district, a merged board of education; four from one, three from another or whatever. I actually said four from the smaller, three from the larger, because the perception in the public... and it's not because I'm the smaller...but the perception from the public is that the big is taking over the little. So give the little a little bit more power. Voting districts for three years...so you know you're going to have representation from your old school districts to be part of the new school district...grants to study the psychological effects on the children. Curriculum management and assistance for merged Elementary and Middle School...mandated elimination of Middle School...Mandatory percentage of incentive aid into reserves. I don't think that the teachers should automatically be bumped up in salary, either. In fact...let's start from scratch. Everybody loses their job and we get to re-hire... another big issue for us, was this timeline... they were going to give us, like four months to have a brand new school district.

Given the freedom to create a system for school district reorganization, the Rockwood leadership team would allow for a flexible process that permits the regionalization of school districts.

An ideal vision for Bull Hill. When asked what their ideal vision for school district reorganization was, both Hoffman and Hoskey focused on the current process that New York State has in place. Each suggested that the board of education has too much power in the process and felt that the board should not have the ability to shut the door on reorganization before the community has the opportunity to weigh in via the advisory referendum. Trustee Hoskey stated:

The first thing is taking it out of the board's hands completely for that first vote.

Because if there wasn't a board vote, and you would go to the study and a straw vote, that would have passed over there. (M. Hoskey, personal communication, March 12, 2013)

Stocker, Hoffman, and Hoskey each reported that if the decision went to the public, via a straw vote, that reorganization would have taken place. Both leadership teams indicated the fact that the board of education stopped the process left a bad taste in the mouths of members of both communities.

Superintendent Stocker suggested that the state should broaden the possibilities for reorganization. Her ideal vision for her district would be to become a part of a county wide district, and for the state to reformulate how reorganization incentive aid is distributed to account for wide variations in tax rates. Stocker stated that "all four districts were on board with that. But the incentive aid is structured in a way that it didn't make any sense. So if I had my way, we would have a county school district" (C. Stocker, personal communication, March 12, 2013).

Summary. The leadership team members were each given the opportunity to explain their ideal vision for school district reorganization. Districts that experienced a defeated effort to reorganize due to the action of their own board of education seemed to have a broader scope of vision for reorganization than the districts that experienced a defeat at the hands of the other districts' actions.

The leadership teams in Pleasant and Fiddletown experienced defeat when their partnering district voted down the advisory referendum. Bull Hill's effort was defeated when the Rockwood Board of Education resolved not to move forward. Pleasant, Fiddletown, and Bull Hill each would choose to either simplify the current system of reorganization or move to a county wide system of reorganization. The Pleasant Central School District Business Official advocates for a more equitable funding system in New York State. In his estimation, addressing the inequities in the funding system by moving away from property taxes could prevent the need for districts like his to reorganize at all.

Smithton and Rockwood defeated their own efforts when the boards of education resolved not to move forward. The Rockwood vision for ideal reorganization was more comprehensive than that of Pleasant, Fiddletown, or Bull Hill. They favored a system that maintains incentive aid, but allows for regional and county wide districts. The leadership team would also like to see the possibility for built in agreements specific to building use and board composition, mandates from the state for issues that communities are not likely to resolve voluntarily, more time to prepare a new districts, and the ability to eliminate all positions and start from scratch.

The vision for Smithton was extensive, creative, and empirical. Scharmer (2009) refers to the Voice of Fear (VOF) as the enemy that blocks "the gate to the open will" (p. 43). The Smithton leadership team had a vision of reorganization that permits experimentation without having to fear not imperfection. They would give school districts the ability to pilot various forms of reorganization, free from any fear of failure in order to discover a system that is more effective and efficient; even if only temporarily. They supported a fluid system that frees school districts from the constraints that currently exist and opens them up to unlimited possibilities.

They would advocate for a method that addresses the disparities that exist between many coterminous school districts. In their estimation, they would have reorganized had there been away to address the tax disparity issue without using reorganization incentive aid. Table 3 demonstrates a leadership team’s current interest in pursuing school district reorganization compared to how their effort was defeated.

Table 3

Interest in School District Reorganization

District	How defeated	Interest
Pleasant	Culpepper defeated straw vote	Interested
Fiddletown	Rose Valley defeated straw vote	Pursuing
Smithton	Smithton Board of Education	Neutral
Rockwood	Rockwood Board of Education	Pursuing
Bull Hill	Rockwood Board of Education	Pursuing

Chapter 5: Summary of Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this research was to discover the perspectives of school district leadership teams regarding the programmatic, financial, and cultural impact of failed school district reorganization efforts in New York State. Specifically, the study sought to discover: 1) the conditions that existed to motivate school district leaders to consider reorganization; 2) the perspectives of school district leaders regarding the impact of a defeated merger effort; 3) the changes that were made as a result of the defeated effort to reorganize; and 4) the leadership teams' ideal vision for reorganization. The participants in the study included school superintendents, board of education members, and business officials from five school districts in New York State that experienced a failed school district reorganization effort in 2012.

This chapter consists of three sections, namely summary of findings, conclusions and recommendations.

Summary of Findings

Reasons for considering reorganization

School district leaders make the decision to consider reorganization for many reasons. In each of the cases studied, declining enrollment, waning resources, and diminishing program caused the perfect storm that led to the decision to enter into a reorganization feasibility study. All five leadership teams reported a considerable decline in enrollment over the last two decades leading to the decision to enter into a feasibility study. This report in enrollment decline is consistent with the loss of employment and population that upstate New York experienced over that same time frame. As districts lost enrollment and taxpayers, their ability to maintain program suffered. Declining enrollment resulted in a loss of economies of scale that made it feasible to offer AP courses, electives, artistic and athletic opportunities, and gifted and talented

programs. Property tax revenue was lost as businesses and residents moved away limiting the districts' ability to generate revenue via the property tax. In addition to the losses that these districts experienced over time, each team reported a significant recent decline in enrollment. Table 4 illustrates the percentage of enrollment decline for each district between 2006 and 2011.

Table 4

Percentage of Enrollment Decline 2006-2011

District	Enrollment decline
Pleasant	12.13%
Fiddletown	10.85%
Smithton	13.22%
Rockwood	22.07%
Bull Hill	16.46%

In each case studied, the leadership teams reported that tax bills were increasing while program was declining. Residents were receiving a diminished return on their tax investment each year. In particular, Smithton experienced a three year period prior in which the school district budget decreased while tax bills increased. Prior to the decision to consider reorganization, each school district was asking taxpayers to pay more for less.

The leadership teams in Pleasant, Fiddletown, Rockwood, and Bull Hill each cited maintaining program as a driving force behind the decision to consider reorganization. The goal was to prevent further cuts to program and to maintain what they were currently offering. Although some members of each team were hopeful that reorganization would enable them to restore some of the program that had been lost over the years, only the Smithtown leadership

team talked about using reorganization to enhance program. In actuality they were talking about restoration when speaking to enhancement. Combining the program of Smithton and Irondale would in effect enhance existing program, but that enhancement would actualize in the form of the restoration of programs that had been eliminated over time.

The Fiddletown superintendent noted that in past reorganizations he experienced in the 1980s, the goal was true program enhancement. Then, the goal was to reorganize in an effort to add to program and control taxes. They had not yet reached the point where program was being negatively affected. Those reorganizations addressed a concern about rising tax rates and resulted in richer program and greater opportunities for students. Those districts were simply too small to expand upon their programs. The efforts associated with this study were caused because the districts were too poor and were struggling to maintain their already greatly diminished programs.

It is also important to note that in each of the cases studied for this research, the primary goal of the reorganization was related to program and opportunities for children, and not controlling taxes. Each district self-reported to be fiscally responsible and experiencing a revenue problem, not an expenditure problem. In fact, each team reported that they were not spending enough due to their inability to generate the revenue necessary to offer programs that would create college and career ready students. The school districts in this research were motivated to study reorganization in an effort to have the ability to spend more money, not to spend less.

Leadership team perspectives.

Each of the participant district leadership teams were motivated to study reorganization because they believed that reorganization could enable them to save program, control taxes, and

become more effective and efficient. How the members of the leadership teams perceived the impact of the defeated effort to reorganize may or may not have been reflective of actual events. This study sought to discover those perspectives.

Each participant in the study agreed that the conditions that exist in their districts had put them on an unsustainable path. Their inability to generate revenue was making it impossible to them to maintain their current level of programming. Each district had already been forced to make cuts on an annual basis that had resulted in a continuous decline of opportunities for students. It was the perspective of each participant that program had already greatly suffered and would continue to do so. Although there was some disagreement regarding the immediate impact on program, all but one participant believed that, absent some type of reform, each district would become educationally insolvent in the very near future. They simply will reach a point where they will not be able to afford to offer the minimum mandated programming. A single participant was optimistic that some form of self-correction could result in an ability to rebuild in the future.

The perspectives of the participants were that the financial conditions of the districts would have been improved by reorganization. The incentive aid would have allowed districts to maintain current levels of program and prevent further cuts. Additionally, a successful reorganization would have allowed districts to rebuild the reserves they spent down in an attempt to maintain program and control taxes. With the exception of the Smithton-Irondale merger, each of the reorganization efforts would have resulted in a tax reduction. There was a shared perspective among the Smithton leadership team that had an analysis of tax rates taken place prior to entering into a feasibility study, the disparity between the tax rates of Smithton and

Irondale would have rendered a reorganization of the two districts virtually impossible under current law.

There was a common belief that the defeat of the effort to reorganize would lead to increasingly rising tax rates. Although the participants universally agreed that their residents would support the tax rate increase directly subsequent to the defeat of the effort, there was an understanding that, given the current status of state aid to districts, tax rate increases would become unsustainable. The leadership teams agreed that each community would soon reach a breaking point in terms of the tax rate.

The GEA was perceived to be the straw that broke the camel's back in terms of the final motivation for considering reorganization. Each leadership team cited the GEA as a driving force behind the decision to enter into a feasibility study. There was agreement among each of the leadership teams that the inequity in the current state aid system was at the root of the districts' financial woes. It was generally perceived that an equitable distribution of aid would address the fiscal distress that participant districts were experiencing and would negate any need for school district reorganization.

The leadership teams in Pleasant and Smithton reported that their communities appeared to have moved on in the face of their defeated effort to reorganize. Although a small number of community members were questioning what the next steps would be, the vast majority of Smithton and Pleasant residents appeared to be unconcerned. The Smithton Superintendent stated that he "could hear crickets" in the wake of the defeated effort in his district. Both leadership teams reported that they had been chipping away at program for so long that it had become accepted. Although many cuts have been made, most people from the outside looking in do not notice much of a difference. Students continue to graduate and basketball games continue

to take place. The Pleasant business official reported that most residents do not understand the dire circumstances they are facing. In his estimation, the residents of Pleasant felt that they were doing Culpepper a favor by agreeing to the annexation. They have yet to grasp the fact that the annexation would have been mutually beneficial.

The same cannot be said for Fiddletown, Rockwood, and Bull Hill. The Fiddletown and Bull Hill leadership teams reported that their communities were extremely concerned about the future of their districts. Each community supported the measure to reorganize by a large margin and appeared to view reorganization as necessary. According to the Rockwood leadership team, the community appeared to be split between those who wanted to reorganize, those who did not, and those who did not want to reorganize with Bull Hill.

It is important to note that since the time that the research for this study was conducted, the Rose Valley Central School District residents have approved an advisory referendum to reorganize with Fiddletown. Additionally, an advisory referendum was approved by Rockwood and Bull Hill. Statutory referenda have been scheduled and, if successful, two new districts will begin operating on July 1, 2014.

The Pleasant, Fiddletown, Smithton, and Bull Hill leadership teams reported that, although an issue for some of their residents, as a general rule maintaining identity and local control was not a major issue. In their opinion, it was not one of the reasons for the defeat of the effort to reorganize. To a great extent this was the case in Pleasant, Fiddletown, and Bull Hill because they were the larger districts. Although Smithton was not, it was considered the dominant district. The consensus in Rockwood was that, because they were the smaller district, local control and identity played a larger role.

Maintaining district culture was a great concern for Smithton's trustee. From his perspective, nothing was more important than maintaining the culture of excellence that he believed existed in Smithton. He actually viewed reorganization as a vehicle for maintaining that culture. In his estimation, the current trajectory of program and revenue decline was more of a threat to that culture than reorganization.

Changes made as a result of the defeated effort to reorganize.

The defeat of the effort to reorganize Pleasant and Culpepper has caused Pleasant to become more aggressive about sharing services with other districts. Although they already shared many back office and non-instructional services, the Pleasant leadership team believed that it would have to begin sharing instructional positions. The fact that they had been unsuccessful in sharing instructional positions in the past was a real concern for Pleasant. Given that they had had to cut a considerable amount of programming over the past few years, little changed for them in the year subsequent to the defeat of the annexation; however, the leadership team was quite aware that many more cuts to program were on the horizon in light of the defeated merger effort. It is that awareness that keeps them interested in reorganization, either with Culpepper or another district.

The Fiddletown Central School District faced similar challenges in the wake of their defeated effort. Although they were able to get a budget passed for the year subsequent to the defeat of the reorganization, the leadership team was concerned about their ability to do so in the future. Given the path they are on, they will have to greatly exceed the tax levy limit every year going forward simply to maintain their current level of programming.

One significant change has been Fiddletown's relationship with its BOCES. Although they found themselves having to use more BOCES services, they were putting pressure on the

BOCES board to get their budget under control. They now scrutinize the BOCES budget as closely as their own, putting a different spin on the relationship they have had over the years. This change in relationship has been an unexpected outcome of the failed effort to reorganize.

The desire of Fiddletown to reorganize with Rose Valley has not changed in light of the fact that Rose Valley failed to approve the advisory referendum. One year later, Rose Valley approved a second advisory referendum. Fiddletown and Rose Valley will proceed to a statutory referendum, which could result in a reorganization if the measure is passed by both districts.

Little has changed in Smithton as a result of their effort to reorganize. Although plans are in the works to engage in greater sharing and business partnerships, little has actualized. The Smithton Central School District continues to search for an appropriate response to the defeat of their measure.

Similar to the case in Fiddletown, Rockwood and Bull Hill are once again involved in an effort to reorganize. Rockwood narrowly approved the advisory referendum and the two districts could actually reorganize as a result of their defeated effort to do so.

Ideal visions for reorganization.

The process of school district reorganization in New York State has gone relatively unchanged since 1925 and does not necessary reflect the challenges that face school districts in the 21st century. The process is perceived as cumbersome and designed to give district residents ample opportunity to defeat an effort to reorganize. It also does not reflect the demographic and economic changes that have taken place over the last century, not to mention life in New York State post-2008.

Although there was agreement that the process needs to be addressed, the leadership teams of Pleasant, Fiddletown, and Bull Hill had a vision for reorganization not very different

from what exists under current law. Aside from allowing for regional or county wide reorganizations, each would choose to only simplify the current system of reorganization if given the ability to throw aside the restrictions of current law. It is interesting to note that the Bull trustee would support removing a board of education's authority to end the process to reorganize prior to the measure going before the voters.

Smithton and Rockwood had a more aggressive vision for an ideal process of reorganization. Similar to Pleasant, Fiddletown, and Bull Hill, Rockwood favored a system that maintains incentive aid, but allows for regional and county wide districts. They would build in requirements that there be specific agreements between districts regarding building use and board composition. The Rockwood trustee would like to have the flexibility to dissolve all employment contracts and give the board of education the power to hire all new employees.

The Smithton leadership team had a number of experimental and creative ideas for how the process of reorganization might change; including piloting various form of sharing and functional consolidation. The participants did not seem to have given much thought as to how to change the process. Given that the law has gone unchanged for so long, and that reform in New York State is a complex process, they may be under the impression that it will never change.

Reflecting the literature, the perspectives of school districts leaders regarding reorganization were mixed. Although 100% of the districts in the study had the perspective that reorganization would help them maintain their current level of programming and control taxes, they all admit that the relief would be temporary without addressing the inequity that exists in current funding formula

Overall participants favored the concept of reorganization; however, although 100% of the districts that supported reorganization are currently pursuing reorganization, only 50% of

those that did not are currently interested in doing so. In districts where disparate tax rates exist, not enough reorganization incentive aid would be generated to level tax rates. In these instances, current law renders school district reorganization prohibitive. All agreed that reorganization would be welcome if New York State developed a method for reorganization that would allow for disparities that exist.

Conclusions

The participant leadership teams in the study agreed that declining enrollment, dwindling revenue, and eroding program motivated them to consider school district reorganization. This is supported by the Alsbury and Shaw (2005) study that reported that declining enrollment and decreased funding have renewed interest in school district reorganization. The conditions that existed in the five school districts created situations in which opportunities for students have declined and exacerbated the inequities that exist between wealthy and poor districts. Each of the districts studied are unable to sustain the current level of programming for students. The same programing that disenfranchises students renders them unable to compete with students from districts that are able to provide programs that prepare college and career ready graduates. Conditions in low wealth districts in New York State are reflective of those that existed at the end of the 19th century when initiatives to reorganize were put into place to rescue districts from substandard schooling (Sell et al., 1996).

At the present time, school districts in New York State that are unable to prepare college and career ready graduates have no choice but to consider some form of reorganization. The current law only allows a narrow and complex path to reorganization. Although some relief may be achieved through the sharing of instructional services, many collective bargaining agreements restrict such sharing. As a result, neighboring districts are unable to take advantage of the unique

programs that others offer their students. The use of online and distance learning can address some of the problem, but it is only a part of the total solution. As a result, these districts are forced to reduce instructional staff and programming in an effort to balance the loss of revenue they are experiencing.

Reform to the options that are available through school district reorganization is necessary if New York State is going to produce students that are prepared to compete in the global economy. Programmatic offerings can be enhanced as a result of reorganization (Alsburry & Shaw, 2006; Brigman, 2009; Nitta et al., 2010; Sell et al., 1996; Timbs, 1997). The districts studied have been forced to cut electives that have been proven to produce students that are career and college ready. High school electives that tap into the interest of individual students and allow for deep study and understanding have been cut from their budgets. Advanced placement courses, gifted and talented programs, the arts, and foreign languages that improve the overall quality of a high school program have been stripped away. Additionally, programs that improve the achievement of at risk students have been paired down to the point where they are neither meeting state and federal mandates nor achieving the desired outcomes. Students from low wealth districts similar to those studied are disadvantaged by the programs they are offered. Most are unable to get accepted into competitive colleges, and those that are accepted find themselves unprepared for the rigors of competitive college programs. Mergers not only can work to sustain academic and athletic offerings, but also to expand and remedy loss of opportunity (Ballin 2007; Brigman, 2009; Duncombe & Yinger, 2007; Nitta et al., 2010; Steele, 2010; Timbs, 1997).

Opportunities for students are supported by available revenue. Reorganization can bring about the economies of scale that are able to provide for competitive programming (Duncombe

& Yinger, 2007). New York State's current method of financing public education and its reliance on property tax have created a situation in which low wealth districts are unable to provide the quality program that is required for 21st century learning. School district reorganization has the ability to control tax rates and to provide the additional aid necessary to provide those programs (Ballin, 2007; Timbs, 1997). The financial straits in which low wealth districts find themselves can be alleviated through reorganization. Although not a permanent solution to the problem that exists in New York State, reorganization has the ability to provide long term, albeit temporary, relief to school districts struggling to provide college and career ready programming. School district reorganization is a vehicle that can support strengthening academic programming while the problem of inequitable funding is being addressed. However, if the funding issue is not properly addressed, reorganized districts will find themselves in similar situations within 15 to 25 years (Ballin, 2007; Timbs 1997).

School district reorganization has the ability to solve the programmatic and financial issues that many low wealth school districts in New York State are facing. However, the cultural issues that are involved with reorganization can overshadow the programmatic and financial benefits. When viewed through the lens of Schein's (2011) three levels of culture: artifacts, espoused values, and basic underlying assumptions, the reorganization of school districts is extremely problematic. School districts are the heart of many communities. The traditions and history of those districts are strong and greatly valued, and for good reason. They have produced students they can be proud of. Their athletic teams have provided a sense of pride that is deeply engrained in those communities. Community members are proud of their schools and devoted to their mascots and colors. Artistic performances have given communities' members years of entertainment and pride in the accomplishments of their students. They are attached to the

artifacts that decorate the halls of their schools and the shops in their communities, and they are loyal to them. They provide a sense of security and comfort that they are unwilling to let go of (Kamerzell, 1994). They share beliefs and values that they perceive to be unique to their school and community and fear they will be lost in the process of reorganization. The underlying assumptions that are shared within a school community have been long formed and are deeply held.

Letting go of the past and moving forward with reorganization requires that a community relinquish its culture and embrace a new one that is underdeveloped and untried. In the past, the fear of losing local control and identity prevented many reorganization efforts from actualizing, and this continues to be the major reason for the failure of such efforts. The conditions that exist in the districts studied have reached a point where they can no longer afford to hold on to those individual cultures. Declining revenue has forced many districts to eliminate the very things that have given rise to the sense of pride that once existed. Although they desperately want to return to those former days of glory, the demographic and economic conditions that exist have forced them to look forward. With the exception of Smithton, each school district leadership team continues to be interested in reorganization. Each of the other teams is either actively engaged in an effort to reorganize or looking for a partner for reorganization. They have reached a point where the programmatic and financial conditions are overriding their desire to maintain their well-earned culture.

Policy Recommendations

Under current law, school district reorganization is not a statewide solution to the factors that force low wealth district to decimate program in the face of their inability to generate appropriate revenue. Only districts with similar tax rates and those that have geography and

topography that will not inhibit reorganization can truly benefit. Large sparse districts and those that have disparate tax rates from their neighbors are not able to reorganize into effective and efficient districts. Additionally, New York State does not have the ability to provide the reorganizational incentive aid to every district slated to reorganize under the current master plan.

New York State should revise the *Master plan for school district reorganization in New York State* in light of the current demographic and economic reality. The new plan will have to take a bold approach to reorganization and seek to create a system that will benefit the entire state. The new plan must be accompanied by law that allows for the disparate tax rates that exist between many contiguous districts across the state. A formula for addressing these disparities must be developed to aid districts that would benefit programmatically from reorganization. Districts that are proven to have the ability to enact higher tax rates, but have chosen to keep them lower to the detriment of program, should be required to increase rates to a predetermined level before reorganization aid can be allocated for leveling tax rates. In many cases, many communities may have to be compelled to pay higher tax rates since they are unlikely to do so voluntarily.

Many struggling school districts are slated for reorganization under the current *Master plan for school district reorganization in New York State*. Those districts should be required to study reorganization prior to the approval of any capital project. The use of taxpayer dollars to provide building aid to school districts that should consider reorganization is not an efficient use of state resources. A better use would be to employ the reorganization incentive aid these districts could receive to provide quality programs for their students. Districts that refuse to consider reorganization should not receive state aid for capital improvements or additions and should have to shoulder those cost locally. Not only would this result in a more efficient use of

state funding, it would force school districts to focus on finding ways to provide programming that will produce competitive college and career ready graduates.

School district reorganization must be expanded beyond the current methods of reorganization that exist under current law. Although centralization, annexation, and consolidation of some existing school districts may be warranted, the ability to create regional school districts that disregard other governmental boundaries must be permitted. Looking at school districts from a regional perspective across the state could result in an effective and efficient delivery system that eliminates the duplication of services and provides for an equitable education for every child in New York State. Several bills have been introduced in New York State for the provision of various forms of regional high school districts. If allowed by law, regional high schools would have the ability to prevent the duplication of services that exists across the state and allow for effective and efficient school systems. It is recommended that New York pass legislation that allows for regional high school while continuing the practice of the providing reorganization incentive aid.

New York State should allow alternatives to the current options that would lead to greater effectiveness and efficiency. Rather than the provision of incentive aid for a period of 14 years for a traditional reorganization, incentive aid could be provided for lesser periods of time for experimental forms of functional consolidation. Opportunities that allow for the experimental sharing of superintendents and district office administration could pave the way for a smooth transition to formal school district reorganization. The provision of incentive aid for merging transportation, operations and maintenance, and food service, as well as instructional sharing arrangements would promote the concepts of shared services, functional consolidations, and reorganization.

It is recommended that New York State convene a think tank comprised of school district leaders for the purposes of studying school district reorganization. This think tank would be responsible for making recommendations to New York State policy and law makers regarding improvements to the current methods of reorganization, as well as possible alternatives. In addition to examining how school districts can engage in greater sharing and improve reorganization, the group of individuals should also be charged with studying how greater sharing can occur other governmental entities, higher education and the business community. The think tank should also consider how on-line and blended learning can be incorporated into the concept of school district reorganization, bringing a 21st century approach to a process that has not changed since early in the 20th century.

Recommendations for Further Study

Steele (2010) suggested that “it would be instructive to study failed efforts and the long term outcomes.” Although this study focused on specific failed efforts to reorganize, it was limited to the perceptions of school district leaders during the year subsequent to those failed efforts. It is recommended that these same districts be re-examined five years after their failed efforts to determine a longer term outcome employing a mixed methods approach that includes all stakeholders. In addition to the five participant districts in this study, it would be instructive to include other districts that have experienced failed efforts to reorganize for a number of years to determine their outcomes as well.

Closing Statement

School district reorganization in New York State is an option that can provide some low wealth districts the financial relief necessary to enable them to provide quality programs. It, however, is overly restrictive and does not allow for innovation. If New York is going to be a

player in the global economy, it not only must have the ability to provide an education that will create competitive students for the 21st century, it must also have the flexibility and forethought to provide a quality education for centuries to come.

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Appendix A

Letter of Introduction

January 28, 2013

NAME

ADDRESS

CITY

SALUTATION

As you may know I have been very interested in the concept of school district reorganization for many years, and have spent most of my career as a superintendent involved in reorganization efforts. As a doctoral student at Sage Graduate School I am conducting research regarding the results of failed attempts to reorganize school districts. Specifically, the purpose of this qualitative study is to discover the perspectives of school district leadership teams regarding the programmatic, financial, and cultural impact of failed school district reorganization efforts in New York State school districts. School district leadership teams will be defined as school superintendents, board of education presidents, and business officials.

Given your experience as a school district leader who has been involved in a reorganization effort, I invite you to be a participant in this research. Methods of inquiry will include interviews of school district leaders, as well as reviews of the feasibility studies, board of education meeting minutes, and other pertinent documents.

Interviews will take approximately one hour and will be scheduled at your convenience. All interviews will be transcribed and returned to the participant for verification. The audio tapes will be destroyed when the research has been concluded and pseudonyms will be used for participants and districts to ensure confidentiality.

I look forward to our interview and gaining your insight regarding school district reorganization. Your contributions to this study will be greatly appreciated and will be an important contribution to school districts leadership teams. Please review the attached informed consent document and contact me with any questions, comments or concerns at (xxx) xxx-xxxx, (xxx) xxx-xxxx, or xxxxxx@sage.edu.

Sincerely,

Cosimo Tangorra, Jr.

Appendix B

Informed Consent Form

To: _____:

You are being asked to participate in a research project entitled: *The programmatic, financial, and cultural impact of failed school district reorganization efforts: a qualitative study the perspectives of school leadership teams.*

This research is being conducted by : Dr. Ann Myers and Cosimo Tangorra, Jr., Doctoral Candidate in Educational Leadership at Sage Graduate School.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to discover the perspectives of school district leadership teams regarding the programmatic, financial, and cultural impact of failed school district reorganization efforts in New York State school districts. School district leadership teams will be defined as school superintendents, board of education presidents, and business officials. Interviews of leadership team members will be conducted to determine their perspectives of the impact of failed reorganization efforts and to discover the steps that were taken as a result.

Methods of inquiry will include interviews of superintendents, business officials, and presidents of the board of education as well as a review of the relevant documents pertinent to each specific school district reorganization effort studied. The research questions associated with this study are as follows:

1. What did the leadership teams want to accomplish as a result of reorganization?
2. Why did they choose to pursue a reorganization to achieve those desired objectives?
3. What are the perspectives of the programmatic, financial, and cultural impact of the failed reorganization effort and how, if at all, do they reflect the actual results?
4. What steps have the leadership teams taken as a result of the defeated effort?

Interviews will take approximately one hour and will be scheduled at the convenience of the participant. All interviews will be transcribed and returned to the participant for verification. The audio tapes will be destroyed when the research has been concluded and pseudonyms will be used for participants and districts to ensure confidentiality

School district reorganization is one of the only avenues legally available to low wealth school districts that are experiencing declining enrollment, loss of revenue and diminishing programs. Despite the incentives to reorganize, very few districts choose the option despite the considerable resources they expend studying the concept. The data collected in this study should prove useful to school districts leaders who are faced with similar circumstances. Understanding the effects of choosing not to reorganize may help to better inform district leaders and residents, as well as shape future legislation and policy.

The potential risks involved in this study are limited to the controversial and emotional issues that may have occurred throughout the reorganizational effort that are particular to this research.

To prevent public exposure and negate that potential risk, the strictest confidentiality will be maintained.

Interviews are to be conducted in person. In the event that a participant would prefer an alternate format, the researcher will accommodate them to their satisfaction; be it mail, email, telephone, or any other form of technology.

I give permission to the researcher to audiotape my interview for the sole purpose of transcription. Put your initials here to indicate your permission. _____

In the event that I am harmed by participation in this study, I understand that compensation and/or medical treatment is not available from The Sage Colleges. However, compensation and/or medical costs might be recovered by legal action.

Participation is voluntary, I understand that I may at any time during the course of this study revoke my consent and from the study without any penalty.

I have been given an opportunity to read and keep a copy of this Agreement and to ask questions concerning the study. Any such questions have been answered to my full and complete satisfaction.

I, _____, having full capacity to consent, do hereby volunteer to participate in this research study

Signed: _____ Date: _____
Research participant

This research has received the approval of The Sage Colleges Institutional Review Board, which functions to insure the protection of the rights of human participants. If you, as a participant, have any complaints about this study, please contact:

Dr. Esther Haskvitz, Dean
Sage Graduate Schools
School of Health Sciences
65 First Street
Troy, New York 12180
518-xxx-xxxx
xxxxxx@sage.edu

Appendix C

Interview Questions

1. What conditions existed in the district that caused you to consider studying school district reorganization?
2. What was your primary goal in considering school district reorganization?
3. How did maintaining district identity and local control enter into your decision making?
4. Who was involved in the decision to conduct a feasibility study? How did the decision evolve?
5. Was your community initially opposed to or in favor of the concept?
6. How did the failed school district reorganization effort impact the program that you offer your students?
7. What has been the impact on your tax rate, reserves, and the results of your budget votes?
8. How has your community responded to the school district reorganization effort? Describe the reactions by different stakeholder groups.
9. What changes have taken place as a result of the defeated effort?
10. How have your relationships with other school districts and the BOCES been affected by the failed school district reorganization effort?
11. If you were not confined to New York State's school district reorganization statutes and regulations, how would you have chosen to reorganize your district?

Appendix D

Transcription Confidentiality Agreement

Agreement and acknowledgement between Transcriptionist and Cosimo Tangorra, Jr.

The Client has or shall furnish to the Company certain confidential information, all on the following conditions:

1. The Company/transcriber agrees to hold all confidential or proprietary information in trust and confidence and agrees that it shall be used only for the contemplated purposes, and shall not be used for any other purpose or disclosed to any third party under any circumstances, whatsoever.
2. No copies may be made or retained of any digital audio or written information supplied.
3. At the conclusion of our discussions, or upon demand by the client, all information, including digital audio or written notes shall be returned to the client.
Company/transcriber shall not retain copies or written documentation relating thereto.
4. This information shall not be disclosed to any employee, consultant or third party unless party agrees to execute and be bound by the terms of this agreement, and disclosure by client is first approved.
5. The Company/transcriber acknowledges the information disclosed herein is proprietary and in the event of any breach, the Client shall be entitled to injunction relief as a cumulative and not necessarily successive or exclusive remedy to a claim for monetary damages.
6. This constitutes the entire agreement. Signed this ____ day of _____, 2012.

Witnessed:

Witness

Transcriptionist

Witness

Cosimo Tangorra, Jr.