Hidden resistance in rural education: a study of two school district consolidation attempts in New York State 2008-2014

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Hidden resistance in rural education:
A study of two school district consolidation attempts in New York State 2008-2014

by

Casey Thomas Jakubowski

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ABSTRACT

This study explores two rural school consolidation attempts in upstate New York during the “Great Recession” between 2008 and 2014. One consolidation received voter approval, the other was defeated. Case study research (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018) formed the structure examine how the two attempts were alike and different. Official school documents, reports in local newspapers, and online discussion boards formed the source material used in this dissertation. Gee’s (2014) Discourse Analysis became the methodological framework used in analyzing source materials. As part of the analysis process, a hole in policy implementation literature became apparent, namely the lack of local voter agency. In order to begin to address this perceived hole, I describe a five phase framework to capture community and stakeholder sense-making of the school district consolidation process and give voice to local resident agency in the process. I examined how communities moved from Phase 1: Situational development into Phase 2: Local government board action, followed by Phase 3: Community sense making, and Phase 4 Community Agency. The fifth phase of this framework, Post Referendum, concludes the study. In my dissertation, I pay particularly close attention to the online discussions, which often serve as a counter point to the official narrative which arose in the documents and media. In many past studies on school district consolidation, the online or “hidden transcript,” which Scott (1990) defines as the narrative non-empowered members of society tell each other is missing from the analysis of why a consolidation was successfully undertaken or averted.

This study supports research conducted by Cramer (2016) that found misalignments between the perceptions of rural residents and public employees about their work and levels of compensations. This dissonance, as well as distrust of public administrators by rural residents, resulted in counter narratives that dismissed the information presented supporting school
consolidation as untrustworthy. In both the successful and unsuccessful attempt at consolidation, the issue of compensation, perceived work load and number of employees was discussed online. Additional research will be needed to determine if new social-media platforms will replace traditional routes of information dissemination by schools.
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CHAPTER 1:
ESTABLISHING THE PROBLEM

Introduction

Governmental reform is no easy task. In the United States, and specifically New York State, educational governance has historically been a locally controlled feature of day-to-day life. Since the 1980s, increasing calls for educational reform have taken on heightened interests. New York State is not immune to these calls for reforms, and rather interestingly, has been actively engaging in reforming local schooling since the late 1800s.

With the 2016 election of President Donald J. Trump, scholars, journalists, and citizens have swung their collective attention to rural America in order to discover why the agitation and anger towards government exists. In rural New York State, case studies (Chabe, 2011; Tangorra, 2013) have emerged from local school district consolidation attempts that hint at long-standing and deep-seated distrust of central government bureaucrats and their attempts to change existing local control structures for “efficiency” and “reform” purposes. School district consolidation is the legal combination of two previously independent local education agencies into a new one. In the following two case studies of local school district consolidation, I reveal a “Hidden Transcript” of non-elite dialogue, which Scott (1990) describes as the voices of the powerless when they are not around the powerful. As narratives in the three sources emerged, a dissonance between three sources of dialogue became apparent in the two consolidation attempts. The source materials for the narratives included the official narrative from the school district described in documents released to the public, the media narrative found in local newspaper reports, and a narrative captured online, from residents who used the TOPIX website to discuss school district consolidation efforts. By comparing these three narratives, I show how the
officials and the news media are in favor of school district consolidation as a way to achieve two overall policy goals: reduce expenditures and increase opportunity in their communities. What emerges online are alternatives to the official pro consolidation narrative. One such alternative questions the given that a problem exists with the way education is undertaken in the community. Another alternative narrative suggests that consolidation is not the only route to saving money. As Cramer (2016) pointed out in her groundbreaking research, rural residents do not believe that public officials have their best interests in mind, and further, view solutions from distant capitols as unworkable in local conditions.

During economic turmoil, different levels of government explore ways to reduce expenses. With education accounting for a significant portion (almost 50%) of state government expenditures (Sipple & Yao, 2015), school funding levels create yearly conflict in state budget negotiations. One frequently proposed solutions to reduce educational expenses is school district consolidation. (Rey, 2018). The word consolidation is highly controversial, and triggers debates between neighbors over the “correct path” for the community and its school. This debate can occur in public space, as well as private spaces. These “subaltern” discussions in private space are frequently lost (Scott, 1990), and the narrative told by people outside the official or formal power structure “…have been given little attention or that certain voices have not been heard.” (Bowen, 2009, p. 33). With increasing use of the internet, conflict emerges online in the form of virtual debates over the choices made by the local school district leadership. This development allows researchers to capture these previously lost or ignored discussions (Bowen, 2009; Scott, 1990). These online discussions may help reveal why, at the local level, the policy implementation of rural school consolidation frequently fails.
Choices under debate, both publicly and privately, include the options of running a school district alone or collaborating with neighboring districts. In New York State, on which this study focuses, there have been a number of dramatic changes in the fiscal, educational, and social expectations local districts must meet (Zuckerman, et al., 2018). New York State government and local communities may differ on what quality education should be for students in a school district. There is dissonance between what the state policy makers want and what citizens’ desire for their local schools.

**Background of New York State Education**

New York’s Governor, Commissioner of Education, and policy makers have frequently called on small rural districts to reorganize into larger systems (DeWitt, 2011; Folts, 1996; Gormley, 2013; Hupfl, 2015; King, 2012; NYSED, 1958; Parkerson & Parkerson, 2015; Pugh, 1994; Rey, 2018; Stern, 2014; Waldman, 2012). In order to incentivize local schools to consolidate, New York State offers a boost in basic operating aid. This incentive included a 40% increase of the base operating aid above what the individual districts received alone. This aid lasts for 15 years from the date of the successful merger. Additionally, the state increased school reconstruction aid to almost 95% reimbursement for the communities (Nolan, 2012; NYSASBO 2014; Roby, 2016). Between the political pressures exerted by the governor and declining economy, a potential solution to the problem of how a local, rural, and often poor, community can provide its students with educational opportunities is the added state aid. Yet even with this increased political pressure and economic incentive, especially during the recent economic downturn (Sipple & Yao, 2015), small, rural school communities actively choose to forgo the state aid and keep their smaller schools in operation. In New York State alone, between 2008 and 2014, only two consolidations out of multiple attempts were successful (NYSASBO, 2014).
Rural schools help to define a community (Corbett, 2015; Flora, Flora, & Gasteyer, 2016; Howely, Howley, & Johnson, 2014; Pugh, 1994; Theobald, 1997; Tieken, 2014). People who live in rural communities often exhibit great pride and attachment to their local school, with many families’ proud multi-generational alumni of the institution. With this smallness comes a cost. According to the New York State Education Department, the smallest operating school district in upstate New York, Long Lake, spent around three million dollars for 30 students in 2016-2017 (NYSED, 2017). The rural schools in New York State are resource intensive (Sipple & Brent, 2008; Willbourn, 2013; Zimmer, et al., 2009).

The question is why, in times of economic stress would residents vote to keep their local schools and forego additional revenues designed to enhance their educational programs through consolidation? Why has the implementation of consolidation policy failed in most of the districts who have sought to consolidate in the past? The questions of “why” are difficult to answer. The question of why do citizens or voters do something emerges from motivation (McRea, 2018). As Cramer (2016) found during interviewing rural individuals, motivation is complex, and tied into many different identities, actions, backgrounds, and experiences. Examining how rural communities see the issue of school district consolidation is a starting point within this dissertation. Community framing of an issue emerges from how different constituents within the local community view the debates. I examined what issues were raised online by participants. I wanted to see if there was alignment between what officials in the community, the media, and online identified as problems facing the local school district and proposed solution. In telling the story of four communities engaged in school consolidation debates, I wanted to understand how different groups came to see their schools in times of stress.
Problem identification

Background:

For local Boards of Education in New York State, there exists a twofold problem with providing residents a level of service expected from the local school district. First, increased educational standards mandated by federal and state agencies have pressured local schools to do more. Second, decreasing resources have resulted in fiscal pressure on local communities to fund school districts at the level necessary to enact these new standards. Rural school district boards have been grappling with this balancing act for decades. One frequent policy solution suggested to local boards of education continues to promote consolidating rural districts in order to provide effective and efficient educational services.

The definition for an effective school has changed over time. Currently, an effective school, as defined by state and federal law, offers an educational program where all students who attend the school achieve “proficient” on state tests in ELA, math and science in grades K-8. For high schools, the requirements are similar, with student demonstrating proficiency on Regents (or exit) exams in ELA and math, as well as a graduation rate for all students above 80% (NYSED, 2016). The definition for an efficient school has changed as well. Currently, an efficient school uses all available resources to offer programming which limits spending to less than a 2% increase from the prior year. The budgeting and spending process must conform to all state and federal laws. The district needs to be transparent with its taxpayers and the governments that provide aid. The local governing body (school board), by its nature, needs to satisfy the local voters and the state education department (NYSED, 2012). With two different masters to serve, local districts are exploring ways to meet the additional requirements for
enhanced educational expectations while containing rising costs. One such option for local districts is to consolidate the local educational authority with a neighboring district in order to reduce costs and enhance revenues through a consolidation incentive grant from the state.

In New York State, most school district consolidation attempts fail. A report from the New York State School Association of Business Officials (NYSASBO, 2014) found that out of multiple attempts at consolidation only two were successful between 2008 and 2014. New York State policy allows any of the school districts that are not a large urban center (Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, Yonkers or New York City) to seek consolidation. Of the 694 school districts in the state eligible to consolidate, only 30 pairs have studied consolidation during the 2000-2014 time period. Only two were successful. The State’s efforts have failed its own goals.

The rationale for the judgement that the policy has failed originates in the 1958 Master Plan for School District Reorganization, which called upon small, mostly rural Centralized school districts within the state to consolidate. The Master Plan of 1958 identified well over 200 districts which should continue to consolidate. To date (2019) very few have actually consolidated.

With the political pressure and the economic incentive to consolidate, a question emerges as to why a local community would not choose to consolidate their school. By consolidating the school, the community will receive extra operating aid from the state, which may result in the ability for an increased curriculum for their children and community members. Why would a community choose to forego potential fiscal and programmatic benefits offered by successfully consolidating two smaller, struggling school districts? While the “why” questions are difficult to examine, what questions are easier to explore- What are some of the objections to consolidation raised by community members? What are potential alternatives to consolidation residents would
like to explore? By first establishing the perceived realities that rural residents experience during school district consolidation processes, my dissertation can establish base line data for the two case studies. Then, with the “what” in the open, and the “hidden transcript” revealed, the process of understanding motivations for supporting or rejecting consolidations has greater visibility to researchers.

My dissertation describes the differing opinions that community members’ state publicly in media and school generated materials on school consolidations. This study begins to describe reasons community members give unofficially and anonymously online for supporting or opposing the implementation of state policy at the local level. By comparing the three types of sources (public documents, media reports was well as anonymous online contributions), the similarities and differences of opinions between the types of sources were described. What my study found was an alignment between the official school documents and media narratives to support consolidation. The narrative from “official” sources clashed with the narrative emerging from online sources. When the official, media, and online narratives supported consolidation, such as the successful case examined in my dissertation, fiscal and programmatic reasons were cited as potential benefits to consolidation. This alignment then lead to support for consolidation, and overcame objections to consolidation as the only viable policy option left to local residents. In the unsuccessful case examined, online contributors believed that consolidation was not the only available solution. District leaders needed to explore other options before offering consolidation as the only option available to voters. Some online residents felt that their community would not benefit in a consolidation, and could not trust officials at the school to follow through on promises offered in reports and meetings.
Official, media, and online narratives often portrayed the inability of the local communities and school districts to maintain past practices, and consolidation was the only option left to keep a local school district functioning. The opposition narratives, online, asked why district officials had no pursued other alternatives to consolidation before proposing a “nuclear option” of consolidating. Some online alternatives included lowering the number of staff, or negotiating employee compensation levels lower than currently existed. Additionally, opposition arguments questioned the trustworthiness of local and state leaders and the voracity of promises concerning increasing aid when the State itself faced insolvency. A final argument opposing consolidation included an argument that the proposed partner district was a wrong fit, and the communities did not mesh.

There also arises problems with some of the theories which discuss policy implementation on the local level. Many of the theories, to this point (Downs, 1972; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973; and others explored in Chapter 2) give greater precedent to governmental actions, and tend to not recognize local resident agency during implementation. While Lipsky (1980) examined the local or street level bureaucrat and their ability to change policy in the implementation stage, this theory still focuses on governmental agent’s actions. I argue that local, non-governmental affiliated residents’ agency during policy implementations needs greater recognition in research. This is especially true when decisions, such as a school district merger, are subject to a voter referendum. Therefore, I propose a new framework that describes local agency, or ability to approve or disapprove of a state level policy implementation. My new framework can help explore one area I found neglected in implementation literature: the agency people at the local level exert.
Theoretical Background

Policy implementation theory formed the basis for my dissertation. States adopt policy at the capitol. The decision makers, in this case the legislature, or governor, or Board of Regents, expects the policy will be implemented at the local level. Pressman & Wildavsky (1973) first identified and used policy implementation as a theoretical framework for studying governmental actions. This “top-down approach” explores the central government’s viewpoint in policy implementation. When the state adopts a policy, scholars want to identify what actually happens between the adoption and implementation stage.

In some implementation theories local community members understanding of the situation leading to the policy implementation is missing. Quite often, community members encounter technical and detailed situations and rely on professionals trained to recommend a course of action. The public, confronted with technical information, utilize their own experiences to try and make sense of their reality. Zuckerman (2016) argues that sense making is an important part of change during a policy implementation. Sense making is defined as the ability of members within a local community to understand the situation and come to consensus on how to implement change. Seeing data presented by the local schools and media, in addition to their own lived experiences, led some online participants to a different policy solution than the proposed school consolidation.

New York State has chosen to adopt a top down approach to school reform efforts, including school consolidation. With the policy to consolidate schools passed in the capitol (Albany), why then, do so many rural areas choose to forgo consolidation? The “top down approach posits that there is a difference between policy adoption and implementation. One researcher, Brodkin (1990) suggests that “distinguishing analytically between the state’s policy
promises and the state’s policy products” (p. 108) is key to understanding the failure of policy implementation at the local level. A second school, the “bottom up approach” argues that local public officials do more than the state level policy deciders to thwart implementation. The term “street-level bureaucrats” identifies officials who have day to day responsibility for administration (Lipsky, 1980) carry out policy implementation. In much of the research, there has been less attention paid to local community influence over actual policy implementation. Saetern (2005), suggests that the area of local implementation is an area ripe for further exploration. My dissertation specifically examines the cases of two attempts to carry out the New York State policy of school district consolidations at the local level.

In order to examine the local implementation of rural school consolidation, I chose Fowler’s (2002) model of the multi-step policy process. The key stage of the policy process in this dissertation is the process’ fifth stage, implementation (Fowler, 2002). Implementation occurs after defining an issue, setting the agenda, formulating a policy, and adopting a policy by a governing body. Within a policy issue, there are two parts: controversial elements and a public element (Fowler, 2002). Rural school consolidation contains both parts of the policy issue. It is controversial, or “Wicked,” as Corbett & Tickham (2015) describe. A “Wicked” problem in policy implementation research presents no correct answer, thereby leading to frequent debate and disagreements how to improve existing conditions. School District consolidation often emerges with little agreement between different parties about how to proceed. It is also public, due to the very nature of schooling. Residents within a community, businesses, and state officials are all interested in the implementation and governance of education (Zuckerman, et al., 2018).

The study of rural school consolidation is relevant due to the fractured nature of the educational governance structure in the United States (Fowler, 2002). The federal government
has identified improving schools as a major policy goal under No Child Left Behind (Goyette, 2017). New York State has chosen, through the State Education Department, the policy of consolidating small, rural districts as one way to address this policy goal. The State Education Department has left the actual process of consolidating up to local school boards and superintendents. The Boards of Education and superintendents have wide latitude in how they choose to implement this policy of school improvement via consolidation. These two groups meet the definition of “Street Level Bureaucrat” which Maynard-Moody & Musheno (2000) have identified as “…discretionary state agents who act in response to rules, procedures and law…in response to individuals and circumstances” (p. 329). The Board of Education and the superintendent often find themselves in conflict between the need to implement federal and state regulations in their local districts when it conflicts with local sentiment. In chapter two, the literature review, my dissertation will trace the three generations of policy implementation literature which Fowler (2002) describes. The literature review chapter (2) describes research about policy implementation difficulties. The conflict between State and the local expectations is often a source of tension within the community as are the tensions between the school and local community (Rey, 2014). These dialogues are intensive and emotional, as Tangorra (2013) found when examining a failed school district consolidation. To people locally, the school is a constant, everyday influence. It is tangible to people locally. It is “our school.” To the State, a school is a statistic, part of the system, and is a cog in the wheel of the machinery for educating citizens (Tieken, 2014) This emotional us versus the whole conflict, between local understanding, and state level policy implementation, forms a critical element of my dissertation.

Part of the conflict between local residents and the state resides in perceived power. By examining the political process in local communities in depth, publicly discussed issues by the
media and school officials provide comparisons to online discussions by residents. Scott (1990) refers to these expressions by residents as “hidden transcripts.” Hidden transcripts are stories told by members of a community away from the eyes and ears of the ruling group. When worried that expressing opinions to community elite will hurt their children, people use hidden transcripts to convey disapproval. Duncan (1999) found that rural areas have a number of conflicts between elites and residents in the areas of public goods and services, especially in schools. My dissertation begins to capture, as Cramer (2004) has in Wisconsin, informal discussions centering on public policy implementation in a rural area of New York State. Because many studies on school consolidation (Chabe, 2011; Steele, 2010; Tangorra 2013) privilege the official narrative, I explore the unofficial narrative from people online. I compare the official narrative with the “hidden transcript” in order to see if there is alignment or dissonance when a “wicked problem” emerges at the local level.

**Consolidation process in New York State**

In order to enter into the consolidation process for schools in New York, districts must follow a lengthy process that the New York State Education Department outlined (NYSED 2015). First, both school districts undergo an in-depth analysis of their educational programs. The process starts with a letter seeking participation sent to neighboring districts. After receiving an affirmative response, the two districts notify the State Education Department and alert the local Board of Cooperative Education Services (BOCES) District Superintendent (DS). A BOCES DS is the Commissioner of Education’s representative to a locality in New York State. The DS holds responsibilities for setting local school district boundary lines (NYSED, 2009.) After the notification process occurs, the Boards will formally vote to enter into the process (Chabe, 2011).
Once the Boards have agreed to explore a consolidation, the next step is to seek a grant from the New York State Department of State to cover the cost of hiring consultants to run the process. After receiving a grant, the schools issue a request for proposals for a consultant to run the process. In New York, there are some common consultants who usually respond: Western New York School Study Council, Rural Schools Association, Castellano & Silky, and The SES Group. Once the schools and consultants enact a contract, the study begins in earnest. The consultants will work with the schools to review documents including enrollment projections, teacher contracts, tax and aid revenue, curriculum and course offerings, building conditions and utilization, and extracurricular activities.

Next, each community will provide volunteers to serve on a study team examining data and proposing recommendations. The process involves dividing committees into subcommittees that examine specific areas of the school communities in detail. Stakeholder opinions and ideas emerge during public hearings. Delegates from both schools districts undertake tours and shadowing experiences to learn about each other’s schools. After holding formal hearings, the two school boards will vote to authorize a “straw poll” or sense of community vote. If the straw poll passes, the Commissioner of Education will issue an order for a binding vote to take place. If the binding vote passes in both school districts, the consolidation is official, and a merger will take place. Elections result in a newly created school board. The old school districts dissolve into a newly combined district (Chabe, 2011).

After a failed vote, the community must wait for one year and one day to re-vote. The consolidation process is often over a year in length and can lead to multi-generational bitterness over events that occurred during the process (Bennett-Garaway, et al., 2016). In studies concerning teacher strikes, McHenry-Sorber & Schafft (2015) found significant bitterness
between community members and the teaching staff. It is not uncommon for opposition groups to emerge and picket meetings and school events (Tangorra, 2013). Often “vote no” signs emerge. In the era of electronic media, Facebook pages and websites become common for groups in their efforts to sway voter opinion. The State’s process appears well organized, but its impact and events appear disorganized.

**Proposed framework:**

Before understanding why consolidations fail, especially when the state offers financial benefits in times of economic stress, researchers and policy makers need to understand how local communities perceive these attempts. It is important to understand how local actors within local communities understand reform attempts. Using implementation theory, my dissertation reflected upon two case studies of school consolidation in New York State. Trying to balance a “top down” and “bottom-up approach” this study discovered different groups (official school district officials, media, and online discussion participants) and their opinions, position statements, and reactions to different stages of the consolidation process. The first group examined will include the policy or decision making bodies of the government, such as the school board. The second group, the media, exists outside of the decision making process, but as Dearing & Rogers (1996) explain, have significant influence on the outcome of a policy implementation process by their ability to report on an issue to a mass audience. The third group, online participants in an anonymous online discussion board, Topix were examined to see if there are common themes which emerged during the process.

As Vidich & Bensmann (2000) found, in small, rural communities, the school board members are frequently influential. These interests may be in conflict with the community’s interest, or the interest of other community members. Part of the narrative discussed in this study
is how a counter narrative or “hidden transcript” (Scott, 1990) develops away from the officials within the district and the media reporting on the process. In the past, the “hidden transcript” is lost unless someone actually interviews people engaged in this dialogue (Cramer, 2016). With the flourishing of the internet, as discussed below, it is possible to capture some of this dialogue when time has passed and no one outside of the group was present for the discussion.

New Information Source:

The new source of information is online discussion forums for local school consolidation processes (Armentor, 2005). These forums contain unfiltered community member reaction to the consolidation process. The forums allow individuals to express opinions about a policy debate within their community that may not happen in a more formal setting, such as traditional media or school-based forums or documents. Online forums capture the informal debates in a community that have not appeared elsewhere to this point in time (Bode & Dalymple, 2015).

Walsh (2012) studied rural groups during decision-making processes. In her research, she found that political scientists do not “seriously listen to the public” (p. 517). Walsh identifies over reliance on research with the local elites and preconceived notions some researchers use when examining rural areas as the cause of a distorted perspective on rural citizen’s views on policy discussions. While this dissertation study does not involve “listening” to the public during the actual consolidation attempt, I want to “listen” to the public by using their self-generated comments from the time period. Utilizing documents is a well-accepted technique used by historians to capture an individual and group’s ideas from the past (Hannawalt, 1995). Altheide & Schneider (2013) have argued that this strategy is part of ethnographic content analysis. The idea is that a “researcher interacts with documentary materials so that specific statements can be placed in proper context for analysis” (p. 5). The documents produced by the schools, the media,
and online are all part of a context, and by examining the documents through content analysis and then placing the materials within context, a richer story of the events and participants emerges. This strategy will help overcome a perceived problem that “certain matters have been given little attention or that certain voices have not been heard” (Bowen, 2009, p.33). Further, this strategy will help illuminate in research space the “hidden transcripts” that Scott (1990) describes are the stories, discussions, views, beliefs or statements that people outside of the formal power structure are too afraid to say in front of the elite for fear of retribution. Carr & Kefalas (2009) and Duncan (1999) mention that in rural educational settings, parents will refrain from countering official narratives for fear of educational retributions aimed at their children. The internet, and its anonymity, may offer a potential safe space which will allow the surfacing of this “hidden transcript.”

These two case studies examined below show that the school officials engaged with the public through a series of Board of Education meetings, hearings, public forums, press releases, and information placed on websites in traditional media, and in public spaces (See chapters 4 and 5 below for specific examples). The engagement strategies used by school officials lead in both cases, (Brocton-Westfield in chapter 4, Oppenheim-St Johnsville in chapter 5) to overall support for consolidation during the initial or “straw votes.” I found a consistent thread among the official and media narratives that no other options were available to the school districts except consolidation. It was quite clear from the school and from the newspapers, a failed merger would be a disaster for the school.

Countering that narrative was the online discussion boards. With the increased use of the internet and social media as a form of communication, policy makers, policy implementers, and researchers will need to use these sources as part of the process of understanding this
phenomenon. Social media is a powerful driver of opinions. Online posts, in some instances, did not support this narrative, and proposed counter solutions, which included, as examples, suggestions of decreased compensation for paid school district staff, increased state aid, or regional school districts, as alternative viable options to consolidation.

Boyd & Ellison (2007) describe three characteristics of internet social media sites that allow for user interface. They are “web-based services that allow individuals to 1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, 2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, 3) view and traverse the list of connections” (p. 211). They further describe the development of niche websites, such as TOPIX, which “support niche demographics” (p 218). A small number of people share a characteristic, thereby becoming a “niche demographic.” The TOPIX website meets the definition proposed by Boyd & Ellison (2007) of an interactive site which supports a niche demographic interested in the events and affairs of a local community. While a question about the voracity of TOPIX representing the entire community’s sense making may emerge, I argue, that without having directly engaging with the members of the community at that particular moment there is no way to really capture the sentiment of the entire community. TOPIX resources, combined with letters to the editors and interviews in the press, represent a triangulation of evidence.

The triangulation of evidence from multiple sources represents best practices in most research fields (Creswell, 2014). This triangulation leads researchers to make the best possible analysis, using the data and materials available to them at the time of the research study. Most consolidation studies to this point have focused on the central decision-maker’s view of events during the process (Peshkin, 1978; Schmuck & Schmuck, 1992; Steele, 2010; Tangorra, 2013). Rarely have these studies examined what other, community non-elite or outside the “core
members”, of the process have thought or discussed (Nitta, et al, 2010). This study uses the TOPIX website to allow those neglected voices to emerge, and speak out on their own terms (Bowen, 2009; Scott, 1990).

A second research study, conducted by Kurtz, et al (2017) found that “…online environments is a method of increasing interest to social science researchers, largely because of the increasing importance such spaces play in everyday life worldwide.” (p.1). Citing a number of examples from health-care related blogs, the authors found that “the translation of research methods between standard and online texts is not a simple one. Where online texts solves some problems faced in traditional qualitative research (like easy access to the text), it also creates other, different challenges…like search engine bias…” (p. 9). My dissertation captured these online sources, and begins the process of analyzing this to this point neglected swath of materials.

In using discourse analysis of the official documents, media reports and the TOPIX entries, my dissertation found the school district narrative and the traditional media narratives matched. According to the district officials, the raising standards and decreasing revenues made the status quo unsupportable, and merger was the only option. The news media agreed, with editors and reporters in both cases calling for the schools to consolidate. The opposition to these narratives was found online. In both cases examined, some residents blamed the state for withholding much needed resources to rural areas. My study also found that people felt that their local districts needed to do more before considering consolidation. Some steps included renegotiating contracts for staff members, finding other, better fitting consolidation partners, or finding alternative expense reductions through staff attrition or program elimination.
A clear dissonance between the public voices (officials and media) and the “hidden transcript” was apparent throughout my dissertation research. As the economic downturn of 2008-2012 played out in local communities, school officials were increasingly concerned about their abilities to meet new rising state standards while maintaining an acceptable budget as resources decreased. Consolidation seemed to offer a way to meet the demands of increased programming with additional revenue. For the media, the consolidation process allowed the editors and reporters to share information with the public which encouraged consolidation, and the opportunity to offer more programming in a less expensive model. But the underlying assumptions made by both officials and the media, consolidation is the only option, were questioned by members of the public online. It was these unaddressed assumptions that lead to dissonance and the defeat of one consolidation attempt.

**Approach to study:**

In order to understand the source material, the narratives presented by the three groups was examined using discourse analysis (Gee, 2014). Discourse analysis is defined as “the study of language in use” (Gee, 2014, p. 8). Further descriptions describe the technique as:

a methodology for analyzing social phenomena that is qualitative, interpretive, and constructionist. It explores how the socially produced ideas and objects that populate the world were created and are held in place. It not only embodies a set of techniques for conducting structured, qualitative investigations of texts, but also a set of assumptions concerning the constructive effects of language (Burman & Parker, 1993). Discourse analysis differs from other qualitative methodologies that try to understand the meaning of social reality for actors (e.g. Geertz, 1977) in that it endeavors to uncover the way in which that reality was produced.” (Hardy 2004).
Discourse Analysis will allow the words of the three sources of information to tell their story. The official school documents were produced to tell the “official narrative” of why consolidation is necessary. The media, through articles, letters to the editor, and editorials written, construct a narrative for the community about the policy under discussion for implementation. The online discussions were produced in reaction to what was the “official” or “media” narrative emerging within the community during this intensively self-reflective moment during the consolidation process.

My dissertation benefits from a case study approach which Yin (2018) describes as “an empirical method that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real world context…the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident.” (p. 15). Yin (2018) describes an exploratory and descriptive case study, of which this dissertation is, as “focusing on “what questions” (p. 10). In order to help explain why, in times of declining economic resources and increased requirements, would voters choose to forgo the benefits of school district consolidation my dissertation first need to examine some “what questions.” While I may never completely answer why voters in rural areas would choose not to consolidate their schools, by looking at the what, I can start to explain the context of the consolidation both locally and state wide. I can also begin to understand if locally raised issues emerge in the national rural education dialogue. Finally, I can attempt share the “hidden transcript” from these often overlooked communities with a wider audience.

Research questions

As the study of two rural school district consolidation processes evolved, I realized trying to find the answer to “why would, in times of economic crisis would rural communities vote to
keep their individual schools and turn down increased state aid?” would be difficult. Examining how the consolidation attempts evolved would provide some basic data that could help hint at the why question. To gain insight into why, my dissertation focus on gathering and analyzing the evolving narrative created during the consolidation process. I focus in on three questions for this study:

- What are the issues raised in online discussions concerning rural school district consolidation? Do the issues raised in these selected case studies align with national research?

This first question begins by describing information in the four selected cases in order to understand what the given state of “hidden transcript” (Scott, 1990) concerning consolidation was in these communities. By understanding the given of these communities’ understandings, research can begin to find the “why” behind the failure of consolidation policy in the state.

- Does alignment between public school officials, the media, and online contributors differ in successfully consolidated rural school districts than in unsuccessfully consolidated rural school districts?

This second question begins to examine a level of understanding concerning public officials’ statements and actions which Cramer (2016) discussed in her research into rural residents. The alignment between three groups engaged in the consolidation process begins to explore why residents, when faced with a problem and a potential solution may choose to withhold consent to implement.

- What new model should researchers use when examining local policy implementation issues in loosely coupled systems such as education?
The third question begins to fill in a gap that I perceive in the literature, which does not describe local community’s agency during implementing policy originating from high levels of government. Voters, especially in a referendum situation, have the ability to stop the implementation of a policy.

These three questions guided my investigation into the two case studies presented within the dissertation. As I examined policy implementation process in local political agencies, I found some trends which may be valuable to researchers and others during the current discussions over rural communities. First, most studies conducted in rural school consolidation have not used the internet as a source of information (Bennett-Garaway, et al., 2016; Chabe, 2011; Foster, 2015; Steele, 2010; Tangorra, 2013). The exclusion of the internet as a source in those studies was primarily due to two factors. First, the internet has only come into its own as a media for communications in the last two decades (2000-2016) (Curran, et al., 2016). Many rural areas have not had adequate internet service until recently for the medium to become wide spread as a form of communication (Karsten & West, 2016; LaRose, et al., 2007). The rise of social media and the internet will continue to have a profound impact on policy and political discussions.

Second, researchers have chosen to interview key participants in order to gauge their understanding of the events that occurred during their time as a leader within their community (Tieken, 2014; McHenry-Sorber & Schafft, 2015). Some of the selection criteria for identifying these informants included ease of identifying and contacting individuals formally involved in the events of a consolidation process. Other research methods focus on materials left behind by key actors in the process (Brundage, 1997). As Scott (1990) points out, these formal, power-based individuals and groups in communities control access to creating the official narrative. These voices, powerful and influential, often drown out the dispossessed from the historical record.
“In the context of rural consolidation, the non-elites have a formal and quite powerful role – the ballot box. Hence, understanding the success or failure of a consolidation requires avenues into discussions voters might be having. On-line venues is one source of these conversations.” (Schiller, 2018).

Cramer (2016) points out the influence informal leaders often play in local community decisions. The advent of the internet as a form of communication has opened another group to study: informal participants in the process. Informal participants are not in leadership positions. They are not active members of the committees involved in the process that I know of. Some of the research overlooks informal participants because they do not leave documentation that researchers can study. The internet now captures some thoughts and expressions which may have been lost in a verbal, face to face exchange in the past. I believe that by analyzing online materials, I can begin to uncover some of the power dynamics at play in rural areas in New York State. As Tracy (2011) demonstrated in her research of Denver Colorado, schools districts are ripe sources for exploring power dynamics between the elected, and the voiceless.

**Using political science**

Political science is one disciplinary field used to examining school consolidation. New York State has chosen, as state policy, to leave decisions concerning the organizational structure of the school district in local voters’ control (Benjamin & Nathan, 2001). Political science is the study of the outward manifestation of power by those who wield it (Kingdon, 2011). In rural communities and school districts, the power of a community can be rooted in who controls the educational establishment of the village. Rural schools are often one of the largest employers in an area. By determining staffing in a local rural school, the school board exercises power over the economic opportunities of some residents. Further, the school spends a significant amount of
money into the local economy. Controlling large amounts of tax payer funded expenditures can have significant impact on the local business community. Additionally, the physical location of a school can determine how well or poorly a village does economically. Two studies, focusing on upstate rural New York, found correlation between a village’s economic vitality and the presence of a school (Lyson, 2002; Sipple, Francis & Fiduccia, 2019).

By exploring the power dynamics revealed during a school consolidation process, my study explains how community members react to the political realities of who exercised control over administrative processes and its implication for rural education policy setting. As described in chapters 4 and 5 below, a number of online contributors question the motivation of school board members, the media, and administration in proposing the consolidations. The online postings pose questions about the “real motivation” and the relationship between elected board members and paid administration. The perceived power dynamics in the school districts influence how voters may make sense of a proposed consolidation. These perceptions may then influence how the residents choose to vote on the proposed consolidation during referendums. Local community voters ultimately decide to approve or reject a proposed implementation near the conclusion of the school district consolidation process.

According to Carr & Kefelas (2009); Corbett, (2007); and Vidich & Bensman (2000) the local school boards, student body offices, and athletic captaincies are a reflection of a village’s power dynamic played out in the school. In a smaller, unconsolidated school, local elites can use their control of the local school board as a way to ensure their children gain access to additional resources which withheld from other children (Carr & Kefalas, 2009). A consolidated school would provide those additional resources to more children. My study examines the views
expressed by the non-elite in the “hidden transcripts” which often point out the potential loss of power a consolidation may hold for the local elite (Scott, 1990).

**Findings**

As my dissertation explored two rural school consolidation attempts in New York State, I hoped to answer the question of why would citizens in times of increased expectations and decreasing resources choose to forgo the opportunities and resources presented by a successful school district consolidation?

My study found in the “hidden transcripts” (Scott, 1990) online, some of the contributors questioned elected and professional administration’s competencies. These discussions questioned how elected board members did not check the growth in school spending levels. The online discussion board contributors asked why past decisions lead the district to the brink of consolidation. There were frequent references to the state forcibly closing their school, and take away the ability of local residents to exercise decision making ability. Finally, a repeated mantra that upstate New York, especially rural areas are starved of resources given, unfairly, to downstate metro areas.

In both cases, all parties involved realized that status quo was not the correct solution, and something had to change. Different proposals emerged within the consolidation discussions, with advocates for internal school district based solutions often arguing with consolidation supporters. In the first case, introduced in Chapter four, the unsuccessful consolidation attempt of Brocton-Westfield, residents felt that there was more work the school could undertake internally before a consolidation could happen. The length of time before residents in Westfield saw “real tax savings” became a significant fault in the consolidation attempt. An earlier proposed regional school system provided a viable alternative to single school district
consolidations for local residents. The online community further pointed out rural areas, especially in the western part of the state, continued to receive less than a fair share of resources from the state government. Residents also believed that losing the high school within the Westfield community would begin a potential downward spiral of perceived existing stability in the village. Finally, there was a real lack of trust between community members and school officials in the failed case study that a consolidation was essential to the continued district’s operation. Online participants questioned how, if the districts were in real trouble financially, administrators and teachers continued to receive their salaries and benefits, and a budget surplus existed.

In the second case, introduced in Chapter five, the successful consolidation attempt of Oppenheim- Ephrata and St. Johnsville, people within Oppenheim-Ephrata were initially reluctant to support a consolidation, until their Board of Education chose not to permit the straw vote. This action by the board created significant backlash, and residents pressured members to change their minds and permit the vote to proceed. After the straw vote successfully passed, the binding vote failed, resulting in a significant budget reduction and layoffs convinced reluctant voters to agree to a consolidation. Community members who supported consolidation worked across communities to demonstrate a combined school district was the “right thing to do.” Additionally, other defeated consolidations around the Mohawk and Adirondack regions provided further evidence to convince people in Oppenheim-Ephrata to support consolidation.

Turning back to the three questions guiding my dissertation:

- What are the issues raised in online discussions concerning rural school district consolidation? Do the issues raised in these selected case studies align with national research?
Rural residents participating in online discussions raised multiple issues. Across both case studies, the people in support of consolidation described the continued state demand for higher standards. The increased demands in coursework and expectations were cited as one reason a consolidation should be undertaken. A second pro consolidation point raised was the increased resources to the districts in a time of scarcity. The two major themes in both case studies supported the pro consolidation narrative.

In opposition to consolidation, some online points included the amount of salaries paid to professional staff. This point appeared in both case studies. Participants also raised trust as an issue. For some, they felt the officials in the schools were not promoting consolidation for positive reasons, rather as a way to maintain power. As described in greater detail in chapters four and five, these issues raised online questioned official narrative points and suggested an alternative path.

The two case studies provided examples of discussion points which have appeared in national research into school consolidation, addressed in more detail in Chapter 2. What was lacking in these case studies was an emphasis on identity. National research studies often cite local identity as a leading reason for school consolidation attempts to fail. While finding identity issues in both case studies, such as clearly identifying with the local school district, my perception based upon analysis was that identity was not the deciding, overriding factor driving participants to a consolidation decision. Identifying as a resident of a particular town may have played a part in the defeat of one school consolidation process, in chapter 4, Brocton- Westfield. It was not, however, an overriding, and critical reason. Rather, for the defeated consolidation, the major factor for defeat was economic in nature.
Identity in the successful consolidation case study appeared, but quickly set aside, as online participants indicated that only the current option for a consolidation partner was before the community, not another district.

As I will address in chapter 6, conclusions and implications, identity as a rural resident played a greater role in conversations in both consolidation attempts. As Cramer (2016) and Wurthnow (2018) have described in research studies into rural areas, identification with a particular area has become less important to rural residents. Rather, identifying as rural as opposed to suburban or urban has appeared as a greater identity, and for many residents, the rurality of a community needs protection against outsider influences.

The table below (Table 1: Districts and Narrative Alignment) graphically represents the two case studies presented in my dissertation. As can be seen from the table below, alignment appears between all three groups only in the successful consolidation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District Pairs</th>
<th>Alignment between groups?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brocton- Westfield</td>
<td>Officials and media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western New York</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vote failed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oppenheimer- St. Johnsville</td>
<td>Officials, Media and online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adirondack foothills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vote succeeded</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Does alignment between public school officials, the media, and online contributors differ in successfully consolidated rural school districts than in unsuccessfully consolidated rural school districts?

In my dissertation study of two consolidation attempts, I discovered clear alignment in the narratives told by the public school officials and the media (newspapers). The narratives told of
increasing expectations federal and state officials placed on schools. These increased expectations included more rigorous demands for graduation expectations and curriculum. These demands happened while the economy suffered one of the largest recessions in many decades. This lead to school officials and the media describing consolidation as the only policy option left for the districts to pursue. In the successful case study, the official and media based narrative also aligned with the online narrative. Community members described the schools as facing a crisis, and that consolidation was the only option left. In the unsuccessful case study, the official and media narrative aligned, but the online narrative described other options that the schools could do before consolidation.

- What new model should researchers use when examining local policy implementation issues in loosely coupled systems such as education?

With most policy implementation frameworks failing to address local voter agency, and an increase in the attention paid to rural areas, a new model may help explain why policies introduced in the capitol fail in balloting on village Main Street. I propose the following five phases to explain how the consolidation process succeeds or fails to implement:

- Phase 1: Situational development: What events, from the recent past, have impacted the local school districts ability to provide an educational program that meets state mandated requirements?

- Phase 2: Local governing board action: What has the Board of Education undertaken in order to address the new situation of the local school district?

- Phase 3: Community sense making: How have members of the community engaged with information presented by different sources, and how have community members crafted their own narrative?
- Phase 4: Community member agency: What actions have community members taken, in this instance during the straw and binding vote to approve or disapprove the consolidation proposal by the school district board?

- Phase 5: Post referendum: How has the leadership (i.e. Board of Education and Administration) the media, local population all reacted to the success or failure of the binding referendum, and what actions were proposed or enacted?

The five phases emerged in the two case studies in my dissertation. While the State attempts to define the consolidation process of two or more local school districts as an objective study process, it is subjective. At the local level, people examine facts through lenses of lived experiences. People in each community engaged in a consolidation are trying to make sense of information presented by school officials, the local media, and by their neighbors, formally and informally. When narratives clash, and information does not make sense on a visceral level, then residents begin to question why, and doubt the need to surrender their local school for additional state aid, even in times of economic crisis.

**Dissertation outline**

Chapter two will serve as a literature review and presentation of the theoretical framework for my dissertation. First, a brief exploration of the rural school context is undertaken. A large body of literature defining rural and the interaction between rural communities and their schools has developed in recent years (for example, see Casto, et al, 2012; Flora, Flora & Gasteyer, 2016; Howley & Howley, 2015; Zuckerman, 2016). The literature review will examine the issues faced by rural communities in meeting the state mandates for educational programs as well as local needs expressed through community-school collaboration literature.
Within the literature review section (chapter 2), I explored research concerning policy implementation by examining how “street level bureaucrats” modify the “top down” development of this policy. These implementation policy discussions will attempt to integrate the idea that many school reforms fail because they do not take the “culture” of the community into account (Fowler, 2002).

The third chapter encompasses a description of the methods used during my study. Discourse analysis (Gee, 2014) formed the basis for analyzing source materials collected from the two consolidation attempts. Also identified was the process I used to narrow down the potential consolidations for selection into my study. How the collection, sorting and coding data happened is explained next. The next section describes Saldania’s (2013) coding structures along with an example of the coding plan used in the dissertation. The first level of coding will be descriptive coding (Saldania, 2013, p. 4). The second phase of coding will be pattern codes (Saldania, 2013, p. 209). As the stories began to emerge, and narratives became apparent to me, I began to organize the findings, which then formed the basis of chapters four and five. Chapter six contains the conclusion to my dissertation.

Building on previous research studies conducted during graduate school (Jakubowski, 2013; Jakubowski, 2014; Jakubowski, 2017; Jakubowski, 2018; Jakubowski, 2019) examining school consolidations in New York State, a few patterns emerged and discussed in depth in the dissertation:

- There are concerns about the tax rates rising in one community and falling in the other community.
- Residents are concerned with the debt load communities are carrying from previous building upgrades.
• Residents are concerned that there are ulterior motives for consolidation, not programmatic improvement or cost reduction.

• Some residents do not believe the state will provide the promised resources to the communities due to the economic stress placed on state government (Jakubowski & Kulka, 2016).

My dissertation reports on national research topics and relationships to these two case studies. The comparisons revealed some similarities between nationally based issues and locally discuss concerns. Some of the initial findings indicated local participants were concerned about the process speed. Other issues found mistrust in the state’s intentions.

**Limitations**

All research has limitations. My study seeks a novel approach to studying rural school consolidation, but recognizes the reality of research. First, not every member of a community undergoing a consolidation process contributes online or in person, or via the media. Some members of the community will choose to not engage in the process until the statutory implementation vote. The research process will never be able to capture their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, or rational for their voting choice. The self-selecting nature of participation in the process limits what data is available for the study. However, historical researchers have faced this issue and have utilized research techniques in order to tell people’s stories when little documentary evidence exists (Hannawalt, 1995, Scott 1990).

The second limitation of this study is the unique nature of New York State’s local processes. While other states are actively implementing school consolidations, New York does not mandate the process. Some of the research findings may not have wide spread replicability.
into other states. It is important to remain cognizant to differences in voluntary and involuntary consolidations.

Finally my own involvement in two consolidation studies inspired this dissertation. As Biddle, Southerland & McHenry-Sorber (2019) and White & Corbett, eds. (2014) work on research in rural educational settings has found, many rural researchers have a personal, vested involvement in the process. From the first professional teaching position to family influenced events and graduate research my dissertation has derived from personal and professional experiences of working in rural communities. As a researcher, it is necessary to state one’s potential bias and remains aware of the potential influence of those biases throughout the research process (Creswell, 2014; Schulte & Walker-Gibbs, 2016; White & Corbett, 2014). I wrote entries into a journal as I examined and classified the data collected and interpretation. This helped with what Yin (2018) described as triangulation.

Significance of this study

There are three levels of significance to this study. First, there is a continued call to research rural education (Howley, Howley & Johnson, 2014; Roberts & Cuervo (2015); Walden, 2016; White & Corbett, eds. 2014). In Scribner’s (2016) work on school reform, a specific concentration on rural education emerges: “…the significance of school district boundaries and local governance extended the legacy of the one-room schoolhouse far beyond rural communities…” (p.4). Further, Scribner (2016) identifies a gap in the history of school consolidation research: “…historians reduce…the subsequent decades as a sort of denouement or epilogue” (p. 35). In Scribner’s opinion, rural school consolidation past 1985 needs to be studied in greater detail, as the debates over rural school consolidation set the stage for “home rule” and the ability of suburbs, especially in the north, to develop exclusivity in terms of socioeconomic
status and race. The research also needs to move away from what Biddle & Azano (2016) call the deficit model of rural education. For almost 100 years, rural education was seen as deficient when compared to urban education. This viewpoint has tainted the political dialogue state and educational reformers use today in discussing rural education and all educational reforms (Zuckerman, et al., 2018).

Second, most of the studies into New York State’s policy of school consolidation have not gone beyond “people don’t want to lose their identity” (Stewart, 2018). Liu, et al., (2010) has indicated local policy implementation research requires more study. I find that the introduction of a new, five phase theory will help to remedy some of this misalignment. The theory will provide a scaffold to examine New York State’s policies at a local level while ensuring state policy contexts are considered as well.

Third, educational policy research has not extensively used the discussion sites on the internet as extensively as other disciplines. When combining these three factors, this study will attempt to make a contribution to the research literature concerning rural school consolidation in New York State. The internet has become one of the leading providers of information in local settings. It is a powerful tool used by many people to communicate with each other their opinions, knowledge, and to interact (Armentor, 2005; Bode & Dalrymple, 2015; Curran, et al, 2016). Administrators, researchers and others who study education and policy will need to begin using online platforms as sources of information for research and practitioner work. The discovery of the “hidden transcripts” which Scott (1990) described emerge online. These “hidden transcripts” help explain to some extent the thinking behind opposition to the stated policy goal enacted by New York State and pursued at the local level by the Boards of Education and superintendents.
Existing educational research focuses on urban settings (Arnold, et al, 2005; Brown & Schafft, 2011; Howley, Howley & Johnson, 2014; Roberts & Cuervo, 2015; Schafft & Jackson, 2010; Theobald, 1997). State Education policy discussions often neglect rural areas (Howley, Howley, & Johnson, 2014). The rural regions within New York have suffered disproportionately in losses of state aid, population, and educational opportunities during the Great Recession and before (Sipple & Yao, 2015). According to the NCES, almost 50 percent of school districts in New York are rural. There has been an uptick nationally in pushes towards consolidating smaller rural schools into larger administrative units (Biddle & Azano, 2016). With the recent media and political focus on rural areas (Catte, 2019; Cramer, 2016; Wurthnow, 2018), this dissertation is timely in its discussion of issues facing school. This study examined the story of four sets of communities affected by declines in population, the economy, and educational programming. The school district leadership chose to examine school district consolidation as a potential solution to their educational problems. The decision by the school district leadership to pursue this option of consolidation lead to a series of events during which the ideas self-governance, public and personal interest, and community engagement of the democratic process emerged. Based upon the documents from the consolidation process, the school leaders in these communities genuinely believed that they were acting in the best interests of their school communities. The participants in online discussions question the leader’s intent.

Questioning a leader’s intent is similar to the work of McHenry-Sorber & Schafft (2015), when examining the conflicts which emerged between the teacher unions and the local community over a labor strike. In that narrative, the community and the teachers both believed the others were disrespecting their positions and ascribed the actions of the other group as selfish. The communities within my study that considered school consolidation experienced
conflict as the membership and the school district leadership differed over the definition of their problems, and the potential policy solution to their problem. Rural New York is not the only area experiencing this level of conflict. Maine, Vermont, Pennsylvania are three other states who have faced economic declines and are in the midst of school consolidation processes. Those three states have mandated the consolidation process, while in New York, consolidation is still voluntary.

Further, I strive to discuss and broaden application of state policy towards rural schools. With the implementation of state policies for school improvement focusing on school efficiency and effectiveness, most of the education policy discussion in New York has focused on decentralizing large urban high schools into smaller learning communities while simultaneously pressing smaller rural districts to reorganize into larger administrative units. The policy disagrees with recommendations reviewed in the literature review in Chapter 2. Rural school research has not found significant improvement in efficiency or instructional effectiveness as measured by student test results after districts are larger than 1000 student administrative units (Duncombe & Yinger, 2007).

**Definitions**

Some common terms used during this dissertation which will need definitions:

1) Rural: A community which has less than 2500 inhabitants, or is more than 40 miles distant from a metropolis (USDA, 2012)

2) School district: an autonomous entity responsible for educational program to students aged 6-18 as proscribed by law or regulation.
3) Consolidation: the legal process of dissolving an established school district and combining with a neighboring school district to form a new school district. Synonyms include district reorganization or merging (NYSED, 2015).

4) Decision making body: a group lawfully charged with fiduciary and regulatory governance of an area demarcated by state law and statute. A school board of education is a decision making body (Kingdon, 2011).

5) Traditional media: Defined as newspapers, television, and radio reports of an event. The three types of media have established (50+ years) of existence and formed the basis of how most Americans obtained news prior to the development of the internet (Tracy, 2010).

6) Successfully Consolidated Districts: Districts which completed the school consolidation process and voted to consolidate.

7) Unsuccessfully consolidated districts: Districts which completed the school consolidated process but did not vote to consolidate. The districts are still independent.
CHAPTER 2:  
LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the 2016 presidential election, news organizations such as the New York Times, The Atlantic, The Huffington Post and others have paid increasing attention to rural area’s issues (Cervone, 2018; Theobald, 2017; Wuthnow, 2018; Zuckerman, et al, 2018,). With decreasing resources and increasing pressure to meet new standards, rural communities engage in rural school district consolidation as one route to solve this dilemma, and for my dissertation, I have chosen to focus on New York State schools.

In scholarly research, reports by Beadie (2008); DeYoung (1987); Theobald (1997); and others have examined the foundation of the American education system emerging from rural schools. Scribner (2016) described the role local school district governance played in political developments across the United States. Scribner’s (2016) research explains how governance and control of the local school district formed a central point of contention between conservatives in rural areas and urban reformers. “Local control” became, as Scribner’s (2016) book found, a code word for conservatives to use as a way to thwart reformers attempts at integration, social reform and economic reform via local school systems. To this day, contrary to popular belief, almost 50% of local school districts in New York are rural (NCES, 2014). Understanding the “fight for local control” as Scribner (2016) describes the actions by federal government, state government, and local school leaders over the aims and methods of rural school governance can help scholars understand some of the reform efforts of the past 50 years in the United States.

A summary of the research literature reveals a prescient theme: “There is a paucity of rigorous research that examines the impact of education policy on the conditions of rural schools” (Williams & Grooms, 2015, vii). By examining the rural school consolidation
discussion in New York, my dissertation will add to the research on rural schools, and partially address Williams and Grooms (2015) call for additional research.

I also hope to address a concern expressed by many rural education proponents. There is often a complaint in essays and research identifying state and federal education policy does not take into account rural needs (Jimmerson, 2005). The reality that policy reforms do not often explicitly address rural needs, or take into account rural realities is in dissonance with calls of educational reformers who want all students in all schools to have access to high quality education (Goyette, 2017).

First, this chapter will start with an examination of the public policy process in research based literature. Then, I describe the 5 phase framework I am proposing. Third, major trends from rural education will be organized into the policy implementation models discussed by Roll, et al., (2017). Reminding readers of the guiding question I hope to gain insight into is “why, in times of increasing expectations and decreasing resources, would residents in rural areas vote to forgo additional resources by defeating school consolidation. Because why questions are difficult to answer, I explore three specific areas in my dissertation research as I explained in Chapter 1:

- What are the issues raised in online discussions concerning rural school district consolidation? Do the issues raised in these three case studies align with national research?

- Does alignment between public school officials, the media, and online contributors differ in successfully consolidated rural school districts differ than in unsuccessfully consolidated rural school districts?

- What is a potential theoretical framework that researchers can use to study local policy implementation of state identified policy choices in a loosely coupled system?
Turning now to the public policy process, I examine three theoretical traditions in the public policy process literature.

**Public Policy Process Literature**

At the local level, the policy implementation process becomes subjected to a number of forces and conflicts wrapped up in the ways in which residents make sense of what the state or federal government is asking. As Tracy (2011) points out, there is a heightened level of interest in local school decisions by residents within a community. Educational policy researchers tend to use the five stages theory to help organize and explain the process of the policy process (Fowler, 2002). Fowler (2002) identifies the five stages of the policy process as follows. The policy issues are first defined. Second, the agenda for policy decision making is set. The third stage is the formulation of the policy, followed by an adoption, or fourth, action by a decision making body. The implementation stage, fifth, is the focus of this dissertation. A final step often included in the literature, policy evaluation, creates a circular flow in the policy process. The Evaluation stage examines policy implantation through analysis used by a wide variety of practitioners, policy makers, and researchers to qualitatively or quantitatively measure some aspect of the new policy. For my dissertation, the policy evaluation stage defined is the extent to which small, rural central school districts consolidated into centralized school districts described in the New York State Master Plan for School District Reorganization (1958).

Other policy evaluations (not used in this dissertation) could examine the extent to which consolidated districts offer increased educational program opportunities for students (Self, 2001). A second evaluation (also not used in this dissertation) could ask to what extent consolidations create a more efficient use of resources by the new district (Duncombe & Yinger, 2007). The literature reviewed below focuses on implementation, primarily due to rural school consolidation
manifesting as the local implementation of a state policy proscribed by New York State since 1958: consolidate small, rural districts.

**Overview of Policy Implementation literature**

Roll, et al (2017) divides policy implementation research into three “waves” describing where policy originates and is implemented. The first wave, “top-down” model that started the field with a focus on central structures that led policy implementation via adoption and promulgation of the decision. The second wave is the “bottom up” wave examined how local, “street-level” bureaucrats, closest to the people altered the policy’s intended implementation in a response to a wide variety of reasons, which will be explored in depth. The “third wave” is a compromise model of policy implementation research establishes a “multi-actor, multi-level nature of the system in which policy and management takes place” (Roll, et al. p. 6). My dissertation finds its theoretical home in the “third wave” by addressing the interplay between the state and local implementation process of rural school consolidation.

Within my dissertation, I wanted to look at why New York State Education Department policy promoting school consolidation fails on the local level. Part of the solution to this investigation lies in how the centralized bureaucracy of NYSED and the legislature has passed much of the “heavy lifting” of policy implementation onto the local level. In keeping with local control and action, the State has allowed Boards of Education and voters to maintain control of the reform agenda by not explicitly mandating school consolidation at the local level. This approach of local control stands in stark opposition to recent state and federal reform efforts, mandating local adoption of federal and state standards, testing, teacher and principal evaluation systems, budgeting, and fiscal reserve policies. In these instances, state and federal mandates were legislated onto local processes without room for disagreement.
Additionally, Brodkin (1990) indicated that the “implementation research should focus on the gap between legislative intent and bureaucratic action” (p.109). The gap between the State of New York’s policy that small rural schools should be merged, and the reality that many small rural districts still exist leads us to this thought by Brodkin (1990) “Not only are the issues raised by social politics contentious ones, but the capacity of political institutions to resolve them is weak” (p.111). Social politics are the “capacity of the state to act in pursuit of its social objectives” (p.109). In New York State, the stated goal of educational policy is to “raise the knowledge, skills and abilities of all citizens in the state of New York” (NYSED, n.d.). The Education Department has, with legislative support, passively promoted consolidation through additional aid for successfully consolidated districts.

The passive approach models what Brodkin (1990) further argues that “The American approach of channeling policy deliverables through multiple public and private intermediaries …is passive intervention” (p. 113). While New York State’s Constitution requires that all residents receive a “sound basic education” (Rebell, 2011) and the federal efforts to improve education have emphasized an increase in students’ abilities to be competitive academically and economically, there are a number of actors in the implementation realm. The multiple number of states (50) and the number of independent school districts in New York State (600+) “creates difficulties in achieving coordination, efficiency, and accountability” (Brodkin, 1990, p.113). While the federal and state governments wish to see improvements in student learning, Brodkin (1990) argues, the ability of the multilayers of governmental structures (federal, state and local) create an incoherent system which slows the implementation of the overall goal of providing a sound basic education to all students in the state.
There is also dissonance between what the state level and the local level perceive as a “sound, basic education.” The state may define the system by one set of metrics, while the local population may have their own criteria for what constitutes a sound basic education (Haller, Nusser & Monk, 1999; Rey, 2014). Brodkin (1990) also addresses a significant issue of “The efforts of public executives to press their own agendas on organizations are frequently exercises in frustration” (p.114). The use of reform commissions and the public talking points used by the last three governors of New York are examples of policy tools which the state has used to encourage rural schools to consolidate and implement goals of increased educational improvement. The press coverage, and pressure exerted on rural schools to seek a consolidation attempt increased with the enactment and use of the policy tools. In the end, however, the majority of attempted school consolidations failed to implement.

How to improve the educational attainment of rural school students in the state has become a “Wicked Problem” or one which has no clear or easily implementable policy solution (Corbett & Tinkham, 2015). “Wicked Problem” literature established in the 1970s finds policy solution and implementation efforts by governments in a state of flux, as disagreements of the “correct path” to solve a policy dilemma are unclear. There are no easy solutions available to policy makers expecting rural school reform. The available solutions to the achievement issue are currently under debate in local, state, and federal level policy and decision making bodies. While the State Education Department would like to assume that reforms passed in Albany will be implemented in Alden, the truth is not so smooth. Our first model, Top-Down, assigns power to centralized bureaucracies for the development and implementation of policy.
The Top-down Model

One example of policy theory created by two political scientists hoping to explain why policies developed in the capital fail to implement at the local level, Pressman & Wildavsky (1973) proposed that the successful policy implementation was the result of four parts of a process: identifying 1) who has to act, 2) who has to consent, 3) who has to participate, and 4) for how long does the process take? Once these four questions are addressed, then the policy generators could begin to address the issues concerning how the policy would be implemented by studying “decision points” or the hurdles and interactions between the policy generators and who would be affected by the policy. To Pressman and Wildavsky (1973), scholars examining implementation must understand that “the apparent simple sequence of events is dependent on complex chains of reciprocal interactions…” Along the way from policy adoption to implementation, the top level policy generators, such as Congress, the state legislature, or the local Board of Education, are dependent on bureaucrats, or professional experts to implement the policy. At the federal level, the US Department of Education serves to create the standards, procedures, and administrative regulations which govern educational policy adopted by Congress. At the state level, the New York State Education Department staff serves two masters: the State Legislature and the Board of Regents. Both the legislature and the Board of Education have the ability to adopt and promulgate policy solutions to problems which became apparent.

The staff at the New York State Education Department (SED) develop the policies, regulations, and procedures that local school districts must follow. Often SED needs to intersect these state requirements with federal law and regulation. At the local level, the school district Board of Education sets policy guidance for the superintendent and principal to establish procedures and processes in order to carry out requirements imposed from above. The critical
questions that Pressman and Wildavsky (1973) raise include: What are the goals of the policy? What are the structural positions of the decision makers? What means to an end do policy implementers hold in order to ensure implementation?

In De Leon & De Leon’s (2002) review of policy implementation research, the two authors describe the first wave or generation of research as “case study analysis that considered the immense vale of troubles that lay between definition of a policy and its execution…policy implementation was seen as two (and often more) parties acting in opposition to one another, not so much because one was correct, but because both thought they were doing the right thing…” (p. 469). De Leon & De Leon (2002) also mention the first wave of scholarship was about “command and control” research. For instance, this research examines how policy implementation actions by governing agencies resulted in a series of requirements that were attached to federal directions on school improvement. These directions on school improvement would include the requirements set forth to spend money originating in the Title I section of the Elementary and Secondary Achievement act of 1973. The work of Sabatier (1986) indicated that many times policy implementation was designed to change behaviors. In policy analysis, three parts of a problem could make or break implementation. First, the tractability of a problem needed to be surmountable. Second, the movement of statute to structure should be smooth and without major obstacles. Finally, the political variables should be manageable for the implementation bureaucracy. Policy implementation could happen most effectively when structures were not changed too much in pursuit of a goal (Sabatier, 1986).

**Bottom up Approach**

The Bottom-up approach to policy implementation shifts the researchers view to the individuals who enact the policy at the local level. De Leon & De Leon (2002) describe the
second wave of literature in policy implementation moving beyond policy-failure studies. They identify research focus on the agents who actually implement policy. The idea that “street level bureaucrats were the key to successful implementation and that the top downers ignored them at their peril…(p. 470) emerged from the scholarship of Lipsky (1980) and Cohen (1990). Lipsky (1980) identified Street Level Bureaucrats as policy makers for reasons of discretion and autonomy. “Professionals are expected to exercise considerable discretionary judgment in their field. They are regularly deferred to in their specialized area of work…” (Lipsky, 1980, p. 14). In many school districts, the teachers are the “street level bureaucrats” who must implement reforms in curriculum and instruction defined at bureaucratic levels above their station. During Lipsky’s (1980) research, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was the major federal policy towards local schools (Goyette, 2017). Education policy in the 1980s were less proscriptive than they have become since the creation of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Now education policy making is more prescriptive, and requires schools adopt and implement federal policies with less latitude than Lipsky’s (1980) research would indicate (Ravitch, 2016). These district level leaders need to take into account local needs and priorities before following state mandates. Lipsky’s (1980) second point refers to autonomy. Compliance with stated goals and objectives can create friction between the state and local school districts.

As Lipsky’s (1980) theory of “Street level bureaucrats” discusses public school superintendents, principals, and teachers and support staff are officials who serve as members of the state bureaucracy. In New York, the sheer magnitude of the public workforce is not in the centralized bureaucracy, but the local school districts, many of whom are the largest employers in the respective communities. Up to 50% of New York’s budget expenditures fund education. The salaries, benefits, and retirement plans for many local districts are supported by state funds
(Sipple & Yao, 2015). Attached to these funds are requirements mandating policy implementation at the local level. Yettick, et al., (2014) demonstrated that schools, especially rural ones, faced issues with implementing mandates due to size and lack of resources. The failure to implement policies in local schools triggers threats of withholding resources by the state or federal monitoring agency. In the rural areas Yettick, et al., (2014) describes, the state and federal funding awards are often critical to basic programmatic implementation. As one former rural superintendent expressed in confidence “We know how to spend both sides of a dollar and get change back.”

Relationships and resources: The conflict between local views of educational policy implementation and the pressure professional administrators feel emerges in implementation research on “street level bureaucrats.” Maynard-Moody & Musheno (2000) describe the conflict between private citizens’ personal feelings and their obligations when employed in government positions. They found street level bureaucrats behave “[r]ather than discretionary agents who act in response to rules, procedures, and law, street-level workers describe themselves as citizen agents who act in response to individuals and circumstances” (p. 329). This concept, of acting in response to individuals and circumstances, describes the customer-centric approach that many school districts want their citizens to feel as they interact with the Boards of Education, superintendents, principals, teachers, and staff. Maynard-Moody & Musheno (2000) further describe the acts of street level bureaucrats as “define their work and to a large extent themselves in terms of relationships, not rules” (p. 352).

In rural districts, the relationship between schools and their communities is important (Tieken, 2014). The leadership in many districts, especially if not local raised or informed, rely on informants to help navigate the politics of running the school system. Hill (2003) describes
implementation resources are defined as individuals or organizations that can help implementing units learn about policy, best practices for doing policy or professional reforms meant to change the character of services delivered to the client (p. 269).

Hill & Jochiam (2018) identify the superintendent’s relationship with community members as key to continued tenure in a community. Anytime a local leader challenges the status quo, calls for the superintendent’s resignation grow. When implementing controversial policy or programs, the superintendent’s relationship with the community faces stressors. When approached by neighboring districts to examine a potential consolidation, leaders may be wary, or publically declare that any study into shared services will not lead to a school consolidation attempt for fear of angering their local voters and the Board of Education members.

In rural school consolidation, there are a number of resources available to districts seeking to consolidate. First, the State itself has a division within its school district Operations and Management bureau that serves as contact points between districts and the state of New York Education Department while undergoing a district reorganization feasibility study. Second, a number of outside groups will serve as outside consultants who will run the feasibility process from beginning to end. The third resource available to districts during this process is the local Boards of Cooperative Education Services. The BOCES is led by a District Superintendent (DS) who acts as the field representative of the Commissioner of Education in the region to which they are assigned. The BOCES DS will often times meet with school boards of education, will supervise voting, and provide technical assistance on the laws, policies and procedures which a school district should follow during a consolidation vote. The DS may ask members of previous consolidations in other parts of the state to share their personal experiences from consolidation studies with citizen participants undergoing their own process. The final resource available to
schools is the New York State Center for Rural Schools. This group provides districts with a wide variety of data and research on school reorganization practices, and resource sharing practices. The Center’s website provides interactive maps which Boards may use to preview results, and to have data at hand during discussions concerning reorganizations.

Other less formal resources include the New York State Council for School Superintendents, the School Administrators Association, the New York State United Teachers, and the New York state School Boards Association. These professional organizations provide information to their members on the pros and cons of consolidation, as well as best practices and research on the processes from a member’s perspective. At yearly conferences by the above groups, there is some discussion on consolidation and issues relating to schools and districts in the midst of consolidation.

Third wave of research

With the top-down and bottom up models still not addressing completely the issue of describing policy implementation, a “Third Wave” emerged. DeLeon & De Leon (2002) identify the publication of Goggin, et al., (1990) as the birth of a middling ground. Goggin, et al., (1990) tried to describe ways that policy implementation could be more “scientific” and structured with hypothesis as to why so much variation still existed.

As the third wave of research on implementation evolved, researchers began to realize that “policy makers can be of one mind when it comes to operationalizing a policy for, at base, when multiple players are involved, implementation becomes a battle to determine a correct reading of the mandate and its accurate execution” (De Leon & De Leone 2002, p. 474-475). One study from a western state stood out as a well-defined and compelling case study for implementation issues with local school governance. Tracy (2011) examined the inner workings
of the Colorado Springs School District and its many decisions on how to improve student achievement. In this research there existed a real tension between what professionals, board leadership, and constituent groups want out of reform policies. The tension was portrayed in Tracy’s (2011) own observations, media reports, and the public comment period at Board of education meetings. Rey (2014) in a study of New York State Rural Superintendents found this conflict as well, and described the frustration rural professionals felt when dealing with community members who were not aware, or valued the pressure state sources placed on local leaders.

There is a dissonance between what the state level reformers want and what local people want from their rural schools. This dissonance emerges from the 1958 mandate to consolidate small rural schools into larger, more efficient units offering increased educational programing. State officials view the mandate as a policy which should be implemented. At the local level, residents question the “correct fit” of the policy for their community. Pressman & Wildavsky (1973) and De Leon & De Leon (2002) further indicate that researchers began to ask how to broaden the scope of policy implementation research from just the policy makers and policy implementers to the populace affected by the policy being implemented. Researchers began to “recognize that there is somebody whose behavior needs to be modified in order that implementation will be considered successful, and that those somebodies might be more willing to conform to the new mandates if they were informed, and even more so if they consented, before the decision” (De Leon & De Leon, 2002, p. 478).

This last point is especially critical due to the referendum nature of rural school consolidation in New York State. As Benjamin & Nathan (2001) point out that New York is a referendum state at the local government level. In order to finally implement a school district
consolidation, both communities must consent twice to the process via referendums. The school communities considering consolidation first participate in a nonbinding “straw vote” to see if there is support. Then, if the straw vote passes, a binding referendum will formally approve or disapprove the consolidation. New York State wants to change the behavior of local residents who are keeping smaller rural schools which the state has deemed fiscally inefficient and unable to implement a strong academic program to improve the state’s economic and social capital (Vogt, 1997). Pashall (2019) examined in New York State attempts to dissolve local villages, and discovered that fiscal incentives are often not influentially enough to convince residents to dissolve their village. Even with political, social, and economic rhetoric from political leaders, newspapers, and scholars supporting consolidation as a way to reduce taxes and create more competitive environments in the state, local rural residents are resisting these pressures to change attitudes, beliefs and behaviors.

**Analysis Tools.** The analysis tools for third generation implementation help scholars to make sense of what policies were successfully implement and which ones failed. These analysis tools, as described below, provide a structure for understanding how a policy implementation was created, implemented, and can be evaluated.

Matland (1995) proposed that scholars look closer at policy conflict and policy ambiguity in order to assess implementation. In this model, policy conflict is defined as “the degree of goal congruence…and finding the one best way to attain the agreed upon goal… (p. 156). Matland (1995) further describes ambiguity as “ambiguity of goals and ambiguity of means…goal ambiguity is seen as leading to misunderstandings and uncertainty…Ambiguity of means appears in many ways, perhaps most obviously in cases where the technology needed to reach a policy’s goals does not exist…” (p. 157-158). Loosely explained, policy conflict asks if
implementers and populations agree with the goals of the policy. Ambiguity asks if the goals and means to implement the policy are clear. Does the policy create conflict? Does the policy have clear goals and a clear means to implement? The model asks if the conflict and ambiguity levels are high or low, and then describes a “central principle most likely to have an influence on implementation” (Matland, 1995, p. 160) is the extent, or level to which resources are made available to undertake the policy implementation. In the case studies presented below, the resources to carry out school district consolidation include the information channels available to the local district leaders, the space the local media provides, and the consultants for the districts engaged in managing the consolidation process.

The analysis tools for implementation provide scaffolding for the researcher to examine rural school consolidation policy. First, improving educational efficiency and achievement are clearly and universally recognized as solid goals for the state (Goyette, 2017). Stakeholders, policy makers, and policy implementers want a reduction in the cost of providing an education. How to go about achieving those goals is the source of real conflict. In 1958, the State established the policy of having small, rural schools consolidate into larger units. Past educational reformers asserted that a larger district could provide more efficient and effective education for rural children (Parkerson & Parkerson, 2015). The State Education Department and local school districts were expected to comply with this policy. But New York’s legislature has never mandated school district consolidation. Instead, the legislature and State Education Department have indicated to local districts a need to initiate studies, hold referendums and approve the adoption of the policy at the local level. The legislature continues to assert public pressure, with the governor, through rhetoric which identifies local government spending as expensive, wasteful, and detrimental to growth. The legislature has further signaled its desire to
see schools consolidated by funding grant applications from local districts to the Department of State designed to underwrite the cost of consultants. Last, the legislature has funded consolidation aid lines which are awarded to schools after successful consolidation. McDonnell & Elmore’s (1987) model classifies this as transferring decision making to other agencies.

The Education Department in New York supported the legislative goal of consolidation implementation through a series of regulations that required districts to “show cause” for any deviation from the Master Plan for School District Reorganization. These deviations from the Master Plan included building renovations and construction associated with non-consolidation related efforts to improve and upgrade the school facility in a district targeted for consolidation. The Education Department no longer requires these “show cause” steps. The practice ended as a number of political leaders began to realize school district consolidation was a local “third rail” and any public support of a merger could end a political career. According to McDonnell & Elmore (1987), the State’s actions were examples of policy mandate on local school districts: consolidate or show why the changes are necessary because the district has not consolidated. Since mandates were no longer sufficient, New York’s legislature switched tactics and adopted what McDonnell & Elmore (1987) would describe this as inducement.

The first inducement to consolidation is the increased state aid rate of 40% additional to what districts were receiving before a consolidation. A second inducement by the state includes the promise of grant money to help defray the costs of hiring implementation resources to study the consolidation proposals. A third inducement includes additional building aid supplied to districts at no additional local costs to retrofit a newly consolidated district facility. These three policy inducement examples all promote school consolidation.
Across multiple points, New York has, via the official pronunciations from different leadership, indicated that consolidation is the official policy. The publication of the Master Plan for School District Reorganization in 1958 was a public statement of the importance of this policy. In 1980s then Commissioner of Education Sobel called for a review of all school districts in New York State, and an identification of which ones could be consolidated by region (Wiles, 1994). Since 2000, New York’s governors have empaneled three commissions to address economic competition in the state. All three have identified decreasing the number of school districts as a way to achieve the goal creating a better educated state at lower costs. The election of Governor Andrew Cuomo, and public addresses by then Commissioner of Education John B. King, Jr. revealed support for consolidating smaller schools in New York State (Mickley, 2014). According to McDonnell and Elmore (1987) these statements amount to hortatory policy instruments used by government officials to act on consolidation.

Yet with all of these policy implementation tools at disposal, the public policy of rural school consolidation in New York continues to fail in the majority of instances since 2000. Researchers have pointed out, “reforms fail because reformers do not take school culture into account” (Fowler, 2002). For this dissertation, the overarching goal of consolidating small, rural school districts is in direct opposition to what rural residents often find is a benefit to these schools: their smallness. Parents in rural communities, taxpayers in rural districts, local business leaders want a small, local school that is integrated into the fabric of the community. These key stakeholders have invested, in some instances over multiple generations, personally and financially into these local schools. As Tieken (2014); Thomas (2003); Steele (2010) and other researchers have found, the local school district is not a business to the local community, rather it is the heart and soul of the area. The school gives the community its identity. A consolidation
process, to a state bureaucracy, is a matter of efficiency and increased educational opportunity in order to meet federal and state mandates. Local residents may see a school district consolidation akin to surrendering a core piece of their world. Implementing the policy of consolidating rural schools becomes a “Wicked Issue” (Corbett & Tinkham (2016) due to its emotion and visceral nature for residents of that district. By examining current literature on rural education reforms and school consolidation in particular, a picture emerges of some significant implementation issues which have failed to produce the desired results by the state.

**Implementation literature critique: Neglecting local agency.**

While implementation literature is concerned with how a policy was successfully or unsuccessfully implemented, it focuses almost exclusively on the policy or political actors engaged in the process of implementation. The research field also looks at who is impacted by policy implementation, but it does not really describe the agency which regular citizens have in policy implementation. Rather it focuses on the “street-level bureaucrats.” There is a lack of discussion concerning local population’s agency, is in my opinion, a flaw in the research which is critical and requires redress. Pomper (1996) and others in the historical field define agency as the intentional actions of actors in their own lives in order to effect change. A profound quote demonstrates why agency is critically important to research on local policy implementation decisions:

Unless people believe that they can produce desired effects and forestall undesired ones by their actions, they have little incentive to act. The growing interdependence of human functioning is placing a premium on the exercise of collective agency through shared beliefs in the power to produce effects by collective action (Banduria, 2000, p. 75).
In the two case studies I examine in my dissertation, the issue of agency emerges, and brings opponents together in a shared belief that no matter what happens, the exercise of local decision-making power by the right to vote is a critical and important action step residents must exercise at the polls.

A second area of neglect in the literature is the role of local media. A more detailed and nuanced explanation would allow greater understanding of the critical nature local journalism plays in policy discussions. Most studies examine national, traditional (i.e. newspapers) media engagement in issues. Dearing & Rodgers (1996) describe the role of media in agenda setting. But the media become actors in the process of shaping the debates around policy implementation through their actions. The media can also affect how residents in the local community learn about the “official story” of a policy implementation. Callaghan & Schnell (2001) found that research commonly argues that the media transmits other’s messages. Their research concluded that:

the media have the power to actively shape public discourse by selecting from many available frames offered by interest groups and politicians…media professionals are free to create and emphasize their own thematic spins on issues and thus can alter the prevailing definition of a conflict. (p. 203).

While policy implementation research has recognized that government policy makers have goals for a policy, it has not recognized that the media and citizens have goals for a policy as well. Policy developers, implementers, journalists, citizens and others all have viewpoints on what the rationale for a policy is, and what it should be. Relationships between these stakeholders is fraught with power dynamics, and missing stories of subalterns. This gap in the literature needs further explanation, especially in light of Scott’s (1990) theory concerning the hidden transcript.
The Hidden Transcript and the voiceless residents

Scott (1990) identifies members of communities without the ability to speak their minds in front of powerful individuals as engaging in a “hidden transcript.” The examples in research include the ways in which servants will intentionally “mishear” a directive from the master. Subaltern members of society will also have their own discussions about the powerful and the real reason for elite actions. One problem I believe that most research cited in this literature review overlooks is agency and reasoning by non-elite members of society. Carr & Kefalas (2009); DeYoung (1987); and Peshkin (1978) and others interviewed and examined materials created by the elite. As Cramer (2016); Duncan (1999); and Tracy (2011) found in their work, it is difficult to capture the voices behind the “hidden transcript” simply because those not in power are afraid of being “heard” by the powerful. In rural communities, these transgressions by the powerless against the powerful can have serious repercussions to the children of the non-elite, as Carr & Kefalas (2009); Duncan (1999); Vidich & Bensmann (2000); Weis (2005); and Willis (1977) found in their research into lower classes. These repercussions can include hostility at school, loss of access to community resources, and shunning. For families in precarious economic positions, active opposition to the wishes of the elite can result in further economic catastrophe.

With the invention of the internet, and the anonymity of some features of the internet, a semi-permanent record can be discovered by examining what people willingly post on discussion boards about a situation. These posts can start to help historians, social scientists, and researchers begin to reconstruct what voices not part of the official narrative may have said, or thought, or believed about the official narrative, when in the past it was ephemeral as a conversation over coffee at work, or over a back yard fence.
Local public policy analysis framework

After examining the theories above, I felt there is a need for a framework to explain how local policy implementation related to, and is affected by, local resident’s agency. The framework I am proposing does not privilege the elite, or those in formal power positions. Rather, this proposed framework gives attention to the agency expressed by individuals and groups who are not often part of the formal story. The discussions, usually lost to time, form the basis for the “hidden transcript.” This hidden transcript (Scott, 1990) is usually only captured when a researcher is present, or discovers sources which were hidden or saved. Cramer (2016) and Wurthnow (2018) deliberately interviewed people who are usually not interviewed to tell stories. I have broken my framework into five phases, and I present each of those phases below:

Phase 1: Situational development: describes the process of how a local community or region reached the need to entertain consolidation discussions. Three areas emerged which districts discussed in the consolidation faced:

1) Ongoing economic difficulties upstate: The upstate economy has been in a state of economic decline for well over 20 years (Sipple & Yao, 2015).

2) Increased state and federal requirements: With the addition of NCLB, Race to the Top and other New York State Board of Regent requirements, rural school districts are struggling with providing required educational programming to their students (Steele, 2010).

3) Media’s narrative: Media outlets in New York State have been pro consolidation. Newspapers (as researched in this dissertation) were 100% in support of consolidation, and had been for quite some time.
**Phase 2: Local governing board reaction:** In the two cases studied in my dissertation, school district officials would first cut programming as much as possible, while still meeting mandates. In many instances, budget cuts included eliminating co-curricular activities, including lower level sports (junior varsity and modified levels). Other options for action included utilizing reserve funds, which up until the Comptroller’s audits of the 2000s had provided a “smoothing effect” on year to year state aid variations. Many districts proposed raising levies, but low wealth districts (such as those included in the study) faced continued inability to increase the rate beyond the state imposed 2% tax levy (NYSSBA, 2014). For most, if not all of the school districts across New York State who attempted a consolidation process, the Boards of Education, and the superintendent believed that the district had done all it could internally to control expenses.

**Phase 3: Community sense making:** This phase of the theory forms the heart of each of the chapters presented below. During this phase, the official narrative of why consolidation is necessary usually aligns with the media narrative which, as seen in the next two chapters, supports the need to consolidate schools. Sense making emerged from studies of people within an organization. Defined as the process by which people give meaning to their collective experiences. The formal definition of sense making is "the ongoing retrospective development of plausible images that rationalize what people are doing" (Weick, et al. 2005, p. 409). Weick, et al, (2005) points out that identity is a key feature in sense making, and the lived, shared experiences of members within a school district community form a very strong bond, especially when the ability of the local school district to fulfill its mission is called into question during a consolidation process. The sources of information for this phase are the online discussions.
examined from TOPIX. After the consolidation attempt and community dialogue has finished, the community members have an opportunity to express their agency in a series of votes in Phase 4.

**Phase 4: Community member agency:** This phase involved voting. The implementation of school consolidation is unique, in that many educational policies do not ask the public to vote on implementation (Schiller, 2018). Both communities in Brocton and Westfield (Chapter 4) had experienced a failed consolidation attempt in the previous five years of the attempt chronicled in this dissertation. In Oppenheim-Ephrata and St. Johnsville (Chapter 5), residents in one community utilized their agency to force their Board of Education to schedule a straw vote, and to elect a new, pro-merger board following the defeat of the first binding vote.

As part of the consolidation process, community members could express agency through the ballot measures proposed as the advisory referendum or “Straw vote” and later in the binding referendum. Additional agency was shown in the retention or election of new Board of Education members after the initial proposal to consolidate, or later, as the process continued and intervening elections appeared in between votes on school consolidation. The chapters below report on exit polls, which often captured why community members chose to support or defeat consolidations. These exit polls provide an additional window into the “hidden transcript.” The exit polls allowed the school officials and media to report on information supplied by voters to the exit poll takers about why they supported or opposed consolidation, and their reasons for or against the proposition.

**Phase 5: Post referendum:** After the votes, the community begins, through the officials, the media, and online contributors, two potential pathways: implementing the results of the vote, or moving on, in light of a defeat. If the vote was successful, and a new school district was created,
the community begins to put in motion a number of activities, which include the election of new school board members, the re-negotiation of contracts, and the creation of transition committees to enact the changes proposed in the consolidation report. The students are asked to vote on new colors, mascots, and nicknames. Orientation days to the new campuses are conducted. Staff are brought together for team building and alignment meetings. New budgets are proposed and enacted. Examples from New York State include the Central Valley Central School District (formerly Mohawk and Ilion Central School Districts).

If the vote was unsuccessful in both communities, the idea of a consolidation is often dropped, which was the case in Canton-Potsdam. One or the other district may seek a new partner among other neighbors which had been the situation which led to the start of Brocton-Westfield process examined in my dissertation. If a vote was unsuccessful in only one community, the Board of Education for that area may decided to wait, and offer a revote one year and one day from the defeated poll. This was the situation in Oppenheim-St. Johnsville. For some areas, the school officials, political representatives, and the media may decide to not let the idea of consolidations die. In Downs (1972) work on issue attention cycle, the research indicates that following the cost realization stage of the policy debate, there is a decline in people’s willingness to engage in the issue, and a post-problem time evolves where attention is moved to a new issue. The media in areas across the state reviewed during these consolidation case studies continued to keep school consolidation on their pages, and in the public eye. State Educational and political leadership also chose to keep the issue of consolidation in the public’s eye. The Western New York regional paper covering Chautauqua County, (Dunkirk Observer) the Binghamton (Press and Sun Bulletin), Syracuse (Post Standard) NY area, and Glens Falls (Post Star) regional papers have all published articles concerning school consolidation as a policy
which may reduce costs for local tax payers and increase educational opportunity. In his state of the county address in 2018, the Erie County executive suggested school consolidation as a viable way to improve efficiency. The most recent New York State Education Commissioner, MaryEllen Elia supported school consolidation as a potential policy solution. The leadership of the state, educationally and politically, continuously sees consolidation as a viable policy to improve efficiency.

Other educational policy issues see phase five as time period to celebrate and move to the next policy issue, or re-group and continue to advocate for the change that should be seen, in their opinion in the policy. The final stage can be viewed as a launch point for other policy issues or a retreat and reorganize phase. For my dissertation, I do not spend much time on this phase, and instead, will focus on the first four stages of my proposed framework.

Rural Research

This section of my literature review will describe some trending issues in rural education research. The section examines how the rural research issues fit into the policy process. The section is organized using my proposed framework in order to begin to make sense of rural school consolidation policy implementation in New York State.

Phase 1: Situational development

Two major issues continue to evolve in research on rural education reform: Rural schools are inefficient and do not provide adequate education for their students. Starting with Cubberly (1914) and up to the present day, reformers and government leaders continuously use these two statements as the foundation for rural education reform (Biddle & Azano, 2016; Jakubowski, 2019a). As Biddle & Azano (2016) discovered in their 100-year evaluation of rural research, small rural schools have been problematized and efforts have been continuously made to reform the districts into a different appearance- usually larger. The authors found that commentary
included concerns with the cost of running rural schools as taxpayers usually became resistant to paying the levies. The tax issue was further exacerbated by the condition of the structure of many rural schools; they lacked basic sanitary amenities, were frequently cold in the winter and too hot in the summer. The third issue emerged around paying the teacher. Some local members complained that the teacher was paid too much, or was not qualified to receive such pay. Other people became angry at the prospect of nepotism, as school board members would hire their children to teach school.

Beadie (2008); Justice (2012); and Steffes (2012) found in research of early New York States rural schools, significant conflict over religion and state financial aid in the examined rural communities. To reformers in urban environment, the religious friction was intolerable. As Tyack and Cuban (1995) discussed in their research, the urban-based reformers of the progressive time period believed that the rural school system was the great downfall of American Democracy and needed significant reform. Loveland (1993) reviewed the transition point of education governance in New York State. The study focused on the early 1900s, and discovered that both Commissioner Andrew Draper and Victor Rice identified the small, rural schools in the state as a major source of problems and mandated that surveys be conducted to investigate the conditions of the physical schools, their curriculum, and the credentialing of the local teacher force.

Balducci (2003) and DeAntoni (1971) both examined early implementation of the consolidation policy by examining resistance to consolidation and the process that the state implemented. Both authors found in their studies that the rural population felt state policy of consolidation did not benefit the local schools. Essert & Howard (1952) studied the status of local New York State rural school consolidation. In their research, the authors discovered many
local residents felt that their wishes were ignored, and consolidation was inevitable. Essert & Howard (1952) further recommended school leadership deal with opposition to consolidation by appealing to local influential residents directly. The authors of the study called these efforts to convince influential local residents to join the consolidation cause kitchen table conversations.

As the centralization movement after World War I, and consolidation movement following World War II increased speed, some rural areas moved from begrudgingly accepting a school that met state standards to one which could be a central point of community pride. From the 1940s to the 1960s, increasingly centralized schools created new locations for rural youth to meet. Ostrude (2012) found the local school became new places for southern tier New Yorkers to gather for sporting events, theatrical presentations, and community gatherings at the newly centralized and constructed school building. Ostrude (2012) shows that people in newly centralized schools in the 1940s thru the 1960s began to leave behind their village based identities, and instead adopt a school district based identity. Residents would move away from saying they lived in Triangle New York, and instead cite Whitney Point as their home community.

Renyolds (1999) on the national level indicated that many states were looking to improve the physical structure of rural schools, the teacher qualifications, and curriculum. These efforts are seen in New York’s own efforts to ensure that students in rural areas were exposed to a safe building, with a qualified teacher (Monk, 2007), and a through regents-based curriculum. Smith (1999) indicated that the rural school problem coverage in the press and in governmental discussions was a rehash of previous research and did not add to different viewpoints or literature or the understanding of rural schools. Smith (1999) found repetitiveness in the description of rural issues in the popular media and in government discussions.
In 1958, during the middle of a push to centralize and consolidate rural schools, the State Education Department created the Master Plan for School District Reorganization, which identified many rural school districts in New York State as being too small to adequately provide a solid education for students. The Master Plan commented that “most parents desire a high school education for their children…” (Jakubowski, in press). Within this high school education, students would have a variety of courses that would meet the stated diploma requirements and the needs of a changing economy. As the Master Plan went into place, it further described the lack of curricular offerings as a problem which needed addressing. The Master Plan identified the lack of vocational offerings as an issue with rural schools. These are all issues that Cubberly (1914) identified as some of the root causes for the poor conditions of rural education.

Parkerson & Parkerson’s (2015) research into rural schools in New York State found urban reformers continuously criticized rural schools for their faults. Their findings indicated that urban reformers identified issues with rural schools emerging from untrained leaders. The lack of professional educators in managerial positions did not support the specialization and bureaucratization that was emerging in urban districts as “good educational practice.” Parkerson & Parkerson (1998, 2015) further indicate that rural education programs became problematic to reformers because they did not allow teacher specialization. In urban schools, teachers taught one subject at the secondary level, or one grade level at the elementary level. Reformers believed the rural education system would improve if the practice of multi-aged classrooms ended. The reformers wanted children placed in a birth year grade level, or taught by teachers who were knowledgeable in their subject. Parkerson & Parkerson (2015) further remind readers the local school districts employed the children of local community members in teaching roles. The authors also remind us that the public projects of supplying wood for the local school, fixing the
physical structure, or acquiring resources for local schools were contracted out in the local community. These contracts were often ways school board members awarded patronage to supporters. At the time period under discussion, the urban reformers, such as Cubberly (1914) and Draper (Loveland, 1993), and others (Justice, 2004) questioned the motivations, credentials, and actions of rural school board trustees and teachers. The reformers wanted to increase the training teachers received in preparation for assuming a teaching position in a rural district (Fraizer, 2007).

Feldmann (2003) found that many times the state sent officials to rural schools to roll out implementation measures and they failed to understand the needs of the community, and how important the rural school is to its community. As stated earlier, Parkerson & Parkerson (2015) as well as Theobald (1999), and Tieken (2014) have found rural schools to be the center of village life in rural areas. They provided jobs for local families, the served as gathering places for political and civic opportunities, and would host congregations when churches were under construction or repair (Parkerson & Parkerson, 2015).

Lyson (2002) found that rural schools are extremely important to their communities by increasing values, amenities and additional services. Sipple, et al., (2019), reaffirms this finding. Thomas (2003) found that in the Utica region of New York a village that had lost its school had essentially disappeared. Thomas & Smith (2009) defined the major issue that many rural residents have with the reforms provided by the state education department were to New York City and urban centric. Their research indicated that the central region of the state felt ignored and overlooked.

In recent governmental discussions at both the state and local level, these issues of efficiency and effectiveness have emerged in the commissions called by three successive
governors. The Lundine (2008), Suozzi, (2008) and New New York Commission (2015) all call for a decrease in the cost of public education in New York State. The three state efficiency commissions identified high public expenditures and tax rates contributed to the perception that New York was losing its place as economically competitive. The commissions all indicated that small rural districts especially were extremely costly, and were not producing the desired education outputs. Duncombe & Yinger (2007); Howley, et al (2012); Kanapel & De Young (1997); Schaft & Jonson (2014); and Sipple & Yao (2015) have indicated that state-level governments, especially in times of economic difficulty, identify inefficiency in rural schools as an issue that needs to be addressed.

Not only New York’s state-level politicians identify public education expenses as an issue, so do local residents. Noting that public school teachers and administrators are public employees, some research into local opinions on salaries and benefits examines how people react to those expenditures. Cramer (2012, 2013) examined the viewpoints of rural communities about their feelings towards government, and state employees in particular. For people in a rural area, the wages, the unions, benefits, and the employees themselves are seen as impediments to reform in rural areas. University at Buffalo (UB) Regional Institute (2009) found that Western New York State could benefit from a reduction in the number of schools, and identified a dozen pairs of schools which would make strong consolidation partners. It was the high level of public spending on education which triggered the UB report.

At the national level, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act from the Johnson administration attempted to address the identified problems of poverty in rural areas via their schools. The legislation identified poor educational achievement in rural schools as a cause of rural poverty, and in later iterations (No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, and Every Student

In interesting observation reveals a coincidence of demand for district consolidation with changes in the national economic cycles such as the Great Depression, the Post World War II suburban expansion and population drain from rural areas, the economic collapse of the 1970s and 1980s, and the economic downturn of the Great Recession (2008-2012). Sipple & Yao (2015) examined the impact the Great Recession had on public expenditures, specifically school budgets. In their research, they found that districts in New York State that relied heavily on state aid to their budgets saw a greater impact from the recession than districts who did not rely heavily on state aid (New York State Rural School Center, 2017).

**Supporting Place Based Education**

Researchers seeking to change the negative narrative that surrounds rural schools have recently found venues for their work. These researchers are changing the narrative from rural schools as deficit models to ones which support student learning outcomes. Challenges to the deficit narrative have been especially relevant since the 2016 presidential election. Theobald (2017), in reviewing J.D. Vance’s work *Hillbilly Elegy* found

The end result is a book that will feed already-prevalent stereotypes about the shortcomings of rural dwellers—their backward ways, their uneducated politics, their willingness to live in poverty because they lack the wherewithal to do anything about it. For rural people everywhere, not just those in Appalachia, the success of Hillbilly Elegy is a most unfortunate development. The fact that a significant number of colleges and universities are giving legitimacy to the work may be even more unfortunate. (p.2)
One area of recent research gaining traction is the uniqueness of rural districts to resist the imposition of outside expectations not aligned with local needs. Zuckerman, et al., (2018) found during research into “odds beating” rural schools in New York State that these districts preformed above expected outcomes for their demographics.

The findings of this study suggest that when rural district and school leaders engage in adaptive strategies and create strong mechanisms for alignment...allows schools to resist external parties dictating to them. (p. 15).

Rural schools, as recent research indicates, are preforming better than their suburban counterparts, and offering a world class education in order to prepare students for citizenship and economic requirements in adulthood.

Another work examining the status rural schools asks readers and researchers to “Reimagine Rural” (Fulkerson & Thomas, 2016). Captured within this volume are the perceived status of rural America that range from popular culture to reforms imposed on schools and districts. Within this work, the authors indicate that “urban public grows to accept stereotypes of rural areas…” (p. 1). In calling for a re-imagination, the authors and editors are reminding researchers based in urban areas, where most school reform emanates from, to pause, and understand the local context of rural education. The second volume of the series also calls into question the urban reformers lack of knowledge about rural areas. Especially poignant is the idea presented that the “standardization of knowledge by urban reformers has disadvantaged rural knowledge” (p. 161).

It would be disingenuous to ignore the wealth of research which is available that describes how the deficit model of rural schools is incorrect and damaging. Cervone (2018) has found that urban based education reformers have deliberately devalued rural knowledge and rural
education experience as a way of keeping rural areas “marginalized.” (p. 1). The work further explores how identity, especially as described in reform efforts by neoliberal reformers have changed the purpose and mission of rural education away from educating students for citizenship to a purely market and consumer driven identity.

This recent literature on policy contains a commonality that stands out: policies formulated and implemented at the national and state level are biased against rural areas and are intentionally marginalizing rural areas. The chapter will now examine policy formulation and implementation research in order to provide a scaffold to the ongoing debate between local communities and state policy makers over schools.

**Phase 2: Local governing board reaction**

New York State, after a series of scandals in school finance began to audit every single school in the state. Many rural communities were found in “fiscal stress” based on those audits, or failed to comply with state and national auditing standards (DiNapoli, 2015). Schools are mandated to abide by two different caps: surplus budget funds and tax rate caps. School districts used to keep funding in general surplus to ensure that there were sufficient funds for economic troubles. The State mandated that these funds no longer exceed four percent of a school’s budget. For small budget rural districts, this mandate was a event that caused stress. For these rural districts, the state removed a tool to counter future economic downturns. In positive economic climates, extra revenue from strong years could counter lost revenue during weak years. The districts lost one safety value in their budgeting tools to prevent wild budget swings due to economic changes.

The second cap, the tax cap limited tax rate increases to two percent a year. For districts that had difficulties raising revenue each year, their local funding stream, which under their
control, was now limited. School districts are allowed to negotiate contracts with bargaining units that are often multiple years in duration. The tax cap limited district’s abilities to enact those promised raises if the contract rate of increase exceeded the tax levy increase.

Simultaneously, the State moved into implementing federally mandated testing, accountability, and standards reforms which were part of an overall federal policy formulation and implementation in order to improve student achievement (Richards, 2014). At the state level, the formulation and adoption moved quickly into implementation. School districts were now publically held accountable for measures of academic achievement that were distributed to community members, parents, and press. As Dearing & Rodgers (1996) have indicated, the press will often set agendas through their use of selective coverage, editorial decisions, and their ability to create a public pressure group. Rural school parents were suddenly told by the state that their children were not doing well academically, and that accountability measures such as graduation were not as high as they thought. To add to matters, the state then increased accountability standards twice, with the result that grades three through eight test results continued to fail, and that all students must earn higher grades than a 65 on state graduation assessments. Haller, Nusser & Monk (1999) and Rey (2014) have found that there is quite often a disconnect between how local residents feel about their school and how the state, or superintendents feel about the school’s performance.

Districts, as many consolidation studies have indicated, were faced with “decreasing resources, increasing expectations for student achievement, and decreasing student populations...” (Lundine, 2008; Parsons, 2014; Suozzi, 2008). For many superintendents, the only option that they could see was to begin the process of consolidation. One superintendent, after a failed consolidation, said “Will we survive?” (Steele, 2010). In many rural areas, the
changes that occurred after school centralization affected entire areas (Rasmussen, 2009). Many rural educational leaders are concerned with an expanding educational opportunity gap between their students and larger school (Reardon, 2011) but hesitate to discuss consolidation due to its political volatility. Some residents within a community believe that the state policy is wrong, and enjoy the small school setting (Rollefson, 2015).

**Federal and state versus local in school improvement**

There are conflicts between the stated goals of efficient schooling and the underlying local control desires of many rural residents. Brasington, (2003); Brown & Schafft (2011); Burton, et al., (2013); Davidson (1996); DeYoung (1987); DeYoung (1991); Duncombe & Yinger, (2007); and Elliott (2012) have all examined the issues facing rural schools when consolidation is proposed. In their research, a theme emerges: the school is the center of the community. Each researcher has found that local residents, when confronted with consolidation, find something about the other community that they do not like, or do not feel is right for their children (Semke & Sheridan, 2012). Nitta, et al (2010) and Oncescu & Giles (2014) found significant disruptions to small communities when schools merged. Consolidation stressed these communities and divided the residents into different camps (Foster, 2015). It is then often difficult to attract or retain teachers, administrators and superintendents when the community is divided against itself (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015; Greco, 2007; Grisson & Mitani, 2016; Howley et al., 2005; Jakubowski, 2019; Papa, 2004; and Morford, 2001).

At both the state and national level, there have been a number of studies that have examined the implementation of school consolidation. These studies address the actual implementation process, as well as beginning to evaluate the success or failure of the process. The studies on consolidation have examined student reaction, community reaction, the process of
consolidation, and the value of a school to its community before and after consolidation (Tieken, 2014). Two themes appear in national research on rural school consolidation. One is identity. (DeYoung, 1987; Peshkin, 1978; Renyolds, 1999; Schmuck & Schmuck 1982). Local residents value their school and its symbolism as a central hub for the community. Second, researchers identify state “heavy-handedness” in dealing with rural school consolidation (Parkerson & Parkerson, 2015; Tieken, 2014). In some districts, the superintendent and Board of Education face dissonance and resistance when the idea of a consolidation is broached with community members (Walden, 2016; Waldmann, 2012; Warner, et al, 2010). Due to the muddled nature of educational governance in the state, there are frequent points for conflict and ambiguity. As Werts & Brewer (2015) commented “the human element confounds a given policy from inhabiting the school environment…” (p.1). Brodkin (1999) further reminds us that a state’s policy implementation struggles are a “continuation of multilayer contents to define social policy…” (p.108). In New York State, we have according to Matland (1995) a situation where there is low conflict on the goals of improving the educational achievement of the children in the State. We do experience a significant amount (or high) ambiguity of how we should reach this goal. In each of the three case studies, the conflicts between the street bureaucrats and the target populations explored in depth.

Other researchers, including Arnold, et al (2005; Bard, et al.; (2006); Coladarci (2007); Jimmerson (2005); and Reeves (2003), found research in rural schools on policy implementation lacked an understanding of why state level policy reforms failed in rural settings. Jimmerson (2005) indicated that the federal No Child Left Behind policy was riddled with areas that were not supportive, or aware of realities faced by rural schools. This research indicated that the policy unfairly punished rural schools with small enrollments due to the ways in which
achievement scores were calculated. The minimum requirement of 30 students per cohort, and the impact one student plays on the adequate yearly progress scores had a larger impact in these rural schools. Further, the “highly qualified” teacher mandate created undue strains on rural schools who have difficulty attracting teachers with a variety of teaching credentials to their schools. Third, the mandatory school choice or supplemental education services requirement also does not work in rural settings due to the paucity of schools to choose from and the lack of providers for outside tutoring.

**New York specific research**

A number of studies specific to New York State have examined policy implementations from state and federal reforms. Davis (2015) has specifically examined how superintendents are prepared to implement the Regents Reform Agenda of improved accountability and increasing student achievement. The Regents Reform Agenda is the plan by the state education decision board to increase student achievement in New York State. This included tougher tests, tougher standards, and increased accountability for schools in academic difficulty. This study found that most superintendents were “heavily involved in professional development opportunities provided by BOCES” (p. 75). In this research, the role of the state’s field arm (BOCES) was seen as critical to implementing research. The BOCES provided a translation of state mandates emerging from federal and state reforms. Further, the BOCES acted as a convener of regional leadership and provided support as the school superintendents were preparing to implement reforms locally.

Within rural areas, implementation often falls to the principal or superintendent. In studying the school improvement implementation attempts in the last 10 years, when a significant number of changes occurred, two researchers found rural areas struggling to keep up with the massive number of initiatives emerging from state government. Franchani (2014) found
that districts implementing the Regents Reform Agenda have changed how the district works with teachers on content and pedagogical approaches. The district leadership worked very hard to “coordinate committees” (p. 40) and to ensure “conferences were aligned to implementing the CCLS” (p. 41). Further research found that districts across the state were using BOCES professional developers due to “the budget crunch limiting our access to outside consultants (p. 38).

Kearns (1992) examined how superintendents in New York State perceived the mandates relating to curricular reforms. Examining a series of mandates, this research discovered that the number of changes they were asked to implement overwhelmed many superintendents. Further, The conclusions of this investigation encourage differential rather than uniform policy action granting local school districts greater curricular and procedural freedom. Offered for consideration is a holistic paradigm that would provide operational understandings of individual school districts based on the premise that every district has unique features hidden within expanded cohorts such as region, district size, combined wealth ratios, or academic performance measures (p. xxi).

Namely, many of the reform mandates were a “one size fits all approach” and needed to be varied in response to local needs.

Specifically in the area of implementing rural school consolidation, a few studies have examined the New York State specific issues with regards to implementing the policy of combining smaller schools. These research studies have examined the political culture of a community (Pugh, 1995); the process of consolidation (Chabe, 2011); leadership required to implement consolidation (Steele, 2010); and the after effects of a failure to implement the policy (Tangorra, 2013), the after effects to a community when consolidation happens (Lyson, 2002).
and alternatives to consolidation (Casto, et al., 2012; Jakubowski & Kulka, 2016). NYSASBO (2014) described in a policy brief some major issues which will prevent a school consolidation from happening. The study found that most consolidations fail for one of six reasons:

- A fear of losing local identity
- Perception that the communities are incompatible and that one may benefit more than the other
- Higher costs and increase in property tax
- More time required for transportation
- Job security for school district employees
- Natural tendency to resist change (p. 5).

These six causes NYSASBO (2014) identified helped frame coding themes and topics, which I address further in Chapter 3. Especially with the political pressure New York schools were facing from the governor, the trade association felt its members needed to understand the political and economic conditions of consolidation. This includes decreased populations, decreased revenue, increased curricular reforms and mandates, school infrastructure, and increasing costs associated with salaries, benefits, and overhead (Dewitt, 2011; Gormley, 2013; Kaplan, 2011; King, 2012; Mickley, 2014; Nolan, 2012; Roby, 2016; Schwartzbeck (2003); Snyder, 1998; Stern, 2014; Thomas, 2003; Thomas & Smith , 2009).

Deloff (2015) examined power and trust relationships in schools implementing policies. The research found a wide variation in trust, power relationships and intergovernmental relationships. One of the superintendent interviewed in the study said: “that the state could have reached its goals—to improve the educational system in New York State, differently...” (p. 101). O’Rourke & Yilmaki (2014) found rural administrators must go beyond just their local
community expectations for schooling, and be able to bridge the divide between the state and the local communities. Rey (2014) found that many rural communities come into conflict with the state’s goals for education, and the superintendent must mediate this conflict in order to meet the goals of local and state educational policy implementation. It is this balancing act that many superintendents find themselves in when a small rural district has exhausted its financial resources and is mandated by the state to increase student achievement.

In a study specifically about New York State rural school consolidation process, Stewart (2018) found that

Additionally, rural voters have many reasons that they vote down mergers once a study has gone forward including beliefs: that the mergers are a first step to consolidate municipalities by the Governor; financial inducements are not advantageous in the long run; academic programs can be offered through BOCES, distance learning, or the creation of regional high schools; and fear of what the loss of schools does to the larger community. In this way, our work is similar to other studies that recognize the ways that school and community are interconnected in small town America (p. 10).

This research, in line with this dissertation, has begun to move the discussion away from the “identity is the reason consolidations fail” explanation in many previously conducted research studies (NYSASBO, 2014; NYSSBA, 2013).

As the literature reviewed revealed, both policy implementation and rural education are at a crossroads in New York State. There is a need to hear the voices of these communities as part of the ongoing dialogue about policy development and implementation and its effects on rural communities. Recent research has continued the drumbeat that policies adopted at state and national levels emerge, and do not account for local rural needs (Lavalley, 2018).
Three research questions guide the dissertation and begin to answer the calls emerging from Lavalley (2018), White & Corbett (2014) and Williams & Grooms (2015):

- What are the issues raised in online discussions concerning rural school district consolidation? Do the issues raised in these three case studies align with national research?

- Does alignment between public school officials, the media, and online contributors differ in successfully consolidated rural school districts differ from unsuccessfully consolidated rural school districts?

- What is a potential theoretical framework that researchers can use to study local policy implementation of state identified policy choices in a loosely coupled system?

**Conclusion**

Rural school consolidation is a passionate and divisive process that breaks the norms of a “harmonious community” that McHenry-Sorber and Corbett (2015) describe as an outsider’s view of a rural area. Rural education research, as Biddle & Azano (2016) describe, was founded on the deficit model. Rural schools could not do right by their pupils. The deficit model describing rural schools has continued to the present, and forms the basis of many state policies which desire reform to solve a “rural school problem” of economic inefficiency and programmatic gaps (Parkerson & Parkerson, 2015).

Corbett (1997) reminds readers rural schools were designed to educate children from standards and assessments designed for urban populations. This results in a “death spiral” as schools educate children to leave the community. Carr & Kefalas (2013) take up this research theory in the United States and find that schools which attempt to implement expected curriculum and standards from state government sources encourage a “hollowing out” of the rural areas in states. Rural school consolidation policies at the state level are one way, and in New York State, the only formal way a school district can remediate so called deficits. It is this
policy, consolidate rural schools in New York State, which is the basis for the research which will inform this dissertation.

Using a theory that expands Pressman and Wildavsky’s (1973) Policy Implementation theory I hope to discover why the great expectations in Albany are dashed in rural New York state schools. Through the use of a “third generation” of policy implementation theory lens (De Leon & De Leon, 2002), this dissertation will explore how unsuccessful and successful consolidations differ. Then, in the two case study chapters (4 & 5) this dissertation will describe the policy goals three groups studied hope to achieve: local officials, the traditional media, and online participants. The two case study chapters provide greater discussion to the five phases of my proposed framework, with concentration on phases 1-4 as key to understanding why a policy was or was not successfully implemented. The final chapter (6) will present a cross case analysis and implications for future research.
CHAPTER 3: Methodology

This chapter describes the methodology my dissertation used to examine two case studies of rural school district consolidation in New York State between 2008 and 2014. The study focuses on the process of gathering and analyzing materials to answer the three research questions described in Chapter 1. This chapter also provides rational for selecting discourse analysis (Gee, 2014) as the driving research method including a description of the sample selection criteria. Then, the chapter describes the coding scheme used, along with the data and analytical procedures, and reliability and validity measures are addressed. The chapter ends by discussing potential weaknesses and limitations.

Research Design:

Two research structures for my dissertation provided the scaffolding for the data collection, analysis, and coding. First, I will describe utilizing the Stake (1995) and Yin (2018) Case Study approaches. Second, I will discourse analysis (Gee, 2014) application to the documents collected and analyzed. Finally, I will describe the coding structure used in the study that was influenced by Saldania (2013) coding scheme.

Case Study

Examining rural schools, and communities, it is easy to use a generic or popular schema of a small village in an idyllic setting. Yet, as researchers discussed in Chapter 2 remind students of rural America, no two villages are exactly the same. Rather, there are unique points to each village, each school district, and each region. In my dissertation study, I am reminded to tell a proper story (Biddle, Sutherland, & McHenry-Sorber, 2019) that honors and supports the unique voice of each community. Stake (1995) provides this opportunity by emphasizing that
researchers can create a case study from exemplar events, occurrences, or phenomena. In an exemplar case study, a particular instance is examined, and then provides the basis for extrapolation, and finding the commonalities across other events or locals as a way to start explaining the causes, events, and impacts of an event. For the two case studies selected, which I explain the process below, one consolidation attempt represents an uncommon occurrence in New York State: a passed consolidation attempt. I explain in more detail about the Oppenheim-Ephrata and St. Johnsville merger in Chapter 5. Chapter 4, Brocton-Westfield, examines a common occurrence in New York’s history, a failed consolidation attempt. While these two attempts are unique, the phenomena of a rural school consolidation attempt is so frequent, that the examples can stand in as proxies for other communities, and potentially serve as a model for examining the policy implementation process in other areas.

Yin (2018) describes case study research as an “empirical method that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real world contexts, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident” (p. 15). It further allowed me to consider events that occurred during the research but were “not always sharply distinguishable in real world situations” (p.15). During the time of the consolidation processes, real world events were influencing the processes. These events included statements by political and educational leaders, stresses from economic down turns, and increasing population declines in rural areas.

One way of meeting the standards of Stake (1995) and Yin (2018) research approaches was by utilizing the voices of the participants through the documents and discussions which were left at the end of the process via official documentation, newspaper or media reports, and the online
discussion. In order to honor the uniqueness of the voices, I selected discourse analysis as the model to use.

**Discourse Analysis**

In order to discover the answers to the research questions presented, and to identify common themes that emerge in official school documents, on-line and in traditional media sources, this study uses discourse analysis. Selecting discourse analysis allows for critical interrogations of what each source group presents as the rational for adopting or opposing consolidation.

(Gee, 2014) identifies discourse analysis as:

“a methodology for analyzing social phenomena that is qualitative, interpretive, and constructionist. It explores how the socially produced ideas and objects that populate the world were created and are held in place. It not only embodies a set of techniques for conducting structured, qualitative investigations of texts, but also a set of assumptions concerning the constructive effects of language” (Burman & Parker, 1993). Discourse analysis differs from other qualitative methodologies that try to understand the meaning of social reality for actors (e.g. Geertz, 1977) in that it endeavors to uncover the way in which that reality was produced (Hardy, 2004).

Discourse analysis “is the study of language in use” (Gee, 2014, p. 8). In this scenario, by interrogating the artifacts from the consolidation process using discourse analysis, researchers can recreate some of the events, understandings, and beliefs of the people involved during the events (Gee, 2014). Discourse analysis allows researchers a tool for examining what was said in an artifact, what meaning the author or creator meant to convey, and how the words used
expressed opinions to readers. Similar to the work historians undertake, discourse analysis attempts to find ways to make local assumptions and frames of reference visible to “outsiders” (Gee, 2014, p. 103).

One advantage of discourse analysis is its unobtrusive methodology (Creswell, 2014). Depending on the sources used in research, direct interaction between the investigator and the subjects of the study can be limited or might be avoided (Gee, 2014). The separation of the researcher from the authors of the texts reduces the chance that the researcher may influence the information subjects present. I selected and used this framework as a way to investigate two rural school district consolidation attempts from the past. Because the process is not happening currently in the communities, it would be difficult to use survey data, interviews, and field study since those investigative techniques rely on observing and describing the events in situ. While the consolidation studies are within “recent memory,” there is significant research from oral history, police investigations, and other scholarly fields that call into question people’s memories of events (Thompson, 2000).

The information emerging from discourse analysis was organized in two ways. First, source materials were classified by researcher-imposed categories developed prior to the review of source materials. This allowed the researcher to fit materials within a conceptual framework developed before the research process commenced.

Second, the source materials were classified a second way: through topics or categories that emerged from the reading of source materials. This approach allows the sources to speak for themselves, giving voice to the creators of the sources instead of imposing the researcher viewpoint. The categories that emerge from the sources may allow the inquiry arch of the project to proceed in directions that a researcher may not have considered before the study. This second
approach to data classification allows the researcher to study the documents without a previously-identified schema, which may reduce researcher bias (Gee, 2014). Cramer (2012; 2014; 2016) listened to small groups discussing politics in Wisconsin without taking an active role in the group’s discussion. The current study also “listened” to group discussion through the use of materials “left behind” from the consolidation attempts, a process similar to the investigations of professional historians who use documents and other materials from past events (Brundage, 1997) to develop a coherent narrative.

My dissertation examined the official school documents, media reports, and online discussions generated during two school district consolidation processes. As I will describe below, the two cases emerged in New York State following the 2008 “Great Recession.” Both cases are rural school district pairs examining consolidation as a policy solution to the problem of increased standards and decreasing resources.

Sample selection

Two case studies were selected from New York State. First, New York State has an official, ongoing policy that promotes rural district consolidation. Of the 697 districts in New York, roughly 50% are rural (NCES 2013-2014). Most, if not all, of the rural districts in New York reflect the national trend in rural population loss. Further, New York is geographically near to states that are currently undertaking consolidation policy implementations. Pennsylvania (McHenry-Sorber, 2009), Vermont (Rogers, et al., 2014) and Maine (Donis-Kellner, et al., 2013) are in the process of involuntarily consolidating smaller, rural schools. New York maintains a policy of voluntary district consolidations and is unique. It does not require or force consolidations, unlike other states (Tieken, 2014). New York can provide researchers with local-level debate artifacts created during school consolidation process. Plus, New York’s status as a
metro-dominated state allows researchers an opportunity to examine the effects of rural school consolidation in a state with rural areas (Thomas, 2013).

The population for the study includes all school districts in New York State that have acted on a proposed district consolidation during 2000-2014. The University at Buffalo Regional institute report (2009) found 30 districts attempted consolidation during the years 2000-2009. An additional 10 districts were identified from the NYSASBO (2014) study. There were over 25 pairs of districts that engaged in consolidation studies between 2000-2014. Districts that completed studies prior to 2010 were excluded from the study. Table 3.1 lists the districts in New York State attempting consolidations between 2010 and 2014.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District Names</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Result</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oppenheimer-Ephrata &amp; St. Johnsville</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Passed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ilion &amp; Mohawk</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Passed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scio-Wellsville</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Failed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lake Pleasant-Wells</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Failed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kinderhook-Schodack</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Failed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herkimer-Frankfort-Schulyer</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Failed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glen Falls City-Glen Falls Common</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Failed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brockton-Westfield</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Failed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seneca Falls-Waterloo</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Failed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southampton-Tuckahoe Common</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Failed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table adapted from NYSASBO, 2014
Table 3.1, above, was adapted from a New York State Association of School Business officials report in 2014, identifies the districts participating in successful and unsuccessful consolidations. Case studies considered for inclusion were identified using the University at Buffalo Regional Institute (2009), New York State Association of School Business Officials (2014), and New York State School Board Association (2013) reports on district consolidation processes. The schools identified as part of the population were confirmed via personal communication with the New York State Education Department’s Office of School Operations and Management Services (SOMS), the office with responsibility for district consolidations. Second, schools were categorized using New York State and federal classifications obtained from USDOE (2013) website. Any school that is not classified as one of the three rural categories established by the USDOE (2013) was excluded from this study. This included three attempts on Long Island and the Glens Falls-Glens Falls Common consolidation. Third, the list of remaining school consolidation partners was examined for the number of times school districts attempted consolidation A number of district pairs had undertaken the consolidation process but either did not hold an advisory vote (or straw vote), or the proposal to merge was defeated at the straw vote stage. The criteria eliminated all but two districts. Two district consolidation cases that meet the criteria for the study are:

- Oppenheimer-Ephrata-St Johnsville (successful small-school example) (Central NY)
- Brocton- Westfield (unsuccessful small-school example) (Western NY)

The two selected case studies met the requirement of undergoing consolidation studies during the time period. Further, these pairs were of similar sizes, which allows for comparisons.
Yin (2018) emphasizes that case studies should be “carefully selected so that the individual case study either (a) predicts similar results or (b) predicts contrasting results but for anticipated reasons.” (p. 55). Since these case studies happened in the recent past, this study allows in-depth study in two cases of an issue that occurred across the state in the early part of the 2010s, and has been on the national education agenda.

The time period of 2000-2014 was selected for three reasons. First, this era saw increased use of online communication in rural areas. Second, an era of economic decline had caused districts to examine the possibility of consolidating as a means to increase revenue. Third, the various political and educational leaders had increased their support for consolidation as a cost savings measure across New York State.

Table 3.2, below, lists the two successful consolidations in the state from 2010-2014. The table provides some additional characteristics of the districts engaged in consolidation studies ultimately successful. These characteristics include the relative size of the schools, the federal location classification data. Table 3.2 includes which region of the state where the district is located. The four communities are located in the Greater Utica metro.
Table 3.2: Successful Consolidations 2012-2014

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Size</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Classification</th>
<th>Straw vote</th>
<th>Binding 1</th>
<th>Binding subsequent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oppenheim-St.Johnsville</td>
<td>Small-Small</td>
<td>2010-2012</td>
<td>Rural-Central</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes (2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ilion-Mohawk</td>
<td>Medium-Medium</td>
<td>2010-2013</td>
<td>Fringe-Central</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Source for table include NYSASBO (2014); NCES (2014)

Only two consolidation attempts were successful during the time frame under study. Both consolidations occurred at approximately the same time.

Unsuccessful consolidation attempts were much more available during the time period selected for study. Table 3.3 presents the unsuccessful consolidation attempts. Additional data on the table includes the size, year, federal classification and location of the schools. The results of the straw and binding votes are included. Excluded from the table of unsuccessful consolidation attempts are districts which did not hold a straw vote.
Table 3.3 Unsuccessful District Consolidations 2010-2014

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Districts</th>
<th>Size</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Classifications</th>
<th>Straw</th>
<th>Binding vote 1</th>
<th>Binding vote 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scio-Wellsville</td>
<td>Small-Small</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Rural- Southern Tier NY</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lake Pleasant-Wells</td>
<td>Small-Small</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Rural- Adirondack</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brocton-Westfield</td>
<td>Small-Small</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Rural- Western NY</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seneca Falls-Waterloo</td>
<td>Medium-Medium</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Rural- Western NY</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candor-Van Etten</td>
<td>Small-Small</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Rural- southern Tier NY</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chenango Forks-Chenango Valley</td>
<td>Medium-medium</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Fringe- Southern Tier NY</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hamilton-Morrisville</td>
<td>Medium-Medium</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Rural- Central NY</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mayfield-Northville</td>
<td>Small-small</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Rural- Adirondack</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canton-Potsdam</td>
<td>Medium-Medium</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Rural- North Country</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Sources include NYSASBO (2014); NCES (2014)

With the sheer number of unsuccessful district consolidations since 2010 to 2014, there existed a wide potential pool of candidates for representatives of failure cases. In order to examine similar cases (Yin, 2018), districts that parallel the successful district merger sizes were necessary. Brocton and Westfield were selected due to their participation in recent failed merger attempts with a neighboring school district as a representative case study. The Oppenheim and St Johnsville districts were selected as successful small district representative case study. The two studies parallel each other in their size, and participation in multiple consolidation attempts.

The two pairs of small districts selected for the study (Brocton-Westfield and Oppenheim-Ephrata-St. Johnsville parallel each other but do have some unique characteristics. None of the four districts are close to major metros, and the demographics of the districts are
similar as well. Brocton and Westfield are both above 85% white, while in Oppenheimer and St. Johnsville, the percentage of white residents is over 95%. The median household income across all four districts is around $37,000 dollars, with Brocton and Westfield at the upper end ($39,000) and Oppenheimer-St Johnsville at $36,000 and $37,000 respectively. Of the four districts, Brocton and Westfield are larger, with 634 and 807 students respectively, while the smaller Oppenheimer and St. Johnsville enrolled 347 and 448 students. Brocton and Westfield reported for 2012-2013 graduation rates of 69 and 84% respectively while Oppenheim-Ephrata and St. Johnsville each had a graduation rate of 77%. Both pairs of districts had one community (Westfield and St. Johnsville) with more amenities, such as a hospital, fast food restaurants, and employers, while the second communities (Brocton and Oppenheimer) were smaller and more distant, with fewer amenities. The four districts share a strong agricultural heritage in their respective regions.

Table 3.4 below provides demographic data for the four school districts included in this study. The four characteristics included for comparison including ethnicity, district student population, median household income and graduation rate.

Table 3.4: District Demographic comparisons

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Ethnicity- % white residents</th>
<th>Size</th>
<th>Median Family Income</th>
<th>Graduation rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brocton</td>
<td>88% (most diverse)</td>
<td>634</td>
<td>$39,900 (wealthiest)</td>
<td>69% (lowest)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westfield</td>
<td>97%</td>
<td>807</td>
<td>$39,100</td>
<td>84% (highest)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oppenheim-Ephrata</td>
<td>99% (least diverse)</td>
<td>347 (smallest)</td>
<td>$36,503 (Poorest)</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St Johnsville</td>
<td>98%</td>
<td>448</td>
<td>$37,574</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Reorganization studies for each district, US census 2010, NYS report card 2012
Table 3.3 shows the similarities among the districts included in the study. Note the difference in ethnicity and graduation rate in Westfield and Brocton. The gaps between the two communities indicate differences which were magnified during the consolidation attempt. Oppenheim and St Johnsville are very similar in every category. There is some national level research to indicate districts engaged in consolidation studies need to be very similar if the consolidation attempt will succeed (Tieken, 2014).

**Resource materials for the study**

My dissertation examines two pairs of districts engaged in the New York State consolidation process and identified above, examined traditional media (newspapers), online discussions, and school documents for information about reasons for supporting or opposing consolidation. Data were gathered from six months before the official announcement of each consolidation process to six months after a process officially ended. This time period was selected in order to provide a window onto the community’s discussions about their school districts before, during, and after the consolidation process. Implementation research suggests the importance of the “decision points” (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973) that occur during the process, and by examining the period six months prior to the official start of the process and six months after the official vote to end the process, this study aims to capture the story of policy implementation at the local level (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973). O’Toole (2004), indicates that “the research topics that form the core of a scholarly specialty in policy implementation are …nuance(d) and complex” (p. 311), and it is this complexity and nuance that require us to examine three different sources in order to unearth and explore the nature of policy implementation.
Sources that inform this research study fall into three categories of materials: traditional media sources, information released from the school districts or official state government sources, and internet materials from the anonymous discussion site TOPIX (www.topix.com). These three categories of sources were selected as a way of triangulating data results within each selected consolidation study (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2018). Newspapers were selected as representatives of the influence media plays in public discussions (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; Tracy, 2011). School documents in a consolidation study represent the “official transcript” that Scott (1990) describes as the local elites’ version of events. The internet sources were selected as a resource for gaining insight into the “hidden transcripts” that Scott (1990) discussed as outlets of opposition to official policy.

There has been some research in the fields of political science (Rowe, 2015) and communications about the role of the internet in political decision making and opinion influence. For example, political science has explored the use of Twitter, Linkedin and Facebook as platforms for the discussion of politics and political platforms (Bode, et al. 2015). Communications studies (Chadwick, 2017) have found the internet has become a robust source for interaction between people and a significant source for discussions about opinions concerning local, regional, national and international issues. The triangulated information gathered from the three sources, was designed to produce a more robust picture of the official unofficial stories about school consolidation.

**Official School District Documents**

School-district-generated information forms the first storyline for investigation. The narrative that emerges from a school district is present in a number of sources that provide the residents, faculty, staff, and student with information pertaining to all aspects of the
consolidation process. The official story, as Scott (1990) describes these document types, explains to stakeholders how the community leadership views the goals of policy implementation. Some of the sources selected for examination under this category include board of education agendas, meeting minutes, newsletters, published school letters, materials placed on the school websites, student newspapers, and documents submitted by the consolidation consultants to the district and state. These documents reveal the “official story” that the school district’s leadership, both professional and elected, wishes to convey to their public about their reasons for moving the consolidation vote to the school board’s agenda. The official committee reports from the consolidation consultants and the state officials contain information that describes the enrollment, budget, staffing, and course offerings in comparison and combined of the districts. This data usually helps form the discussion basis for the required forums concerning the consolidation process. These documents create the record of the consolidation process from the institutional viewpoint. The records are the summation of the views of the district as an agency within the agenda setting process.

School documents were obtained from school websites as many districts archive online their Board Agendas, meeting minutes, and school newspapers. Any documents not readily available online were often located by conducting a key word search on Google search engine. These words often included the names of the school district and some combination of “consolidation” “merger” or “reorganization.”

**Traditional Media (or Newspapers)**

The second type of sources included local media sources, specifically regional and local newspapers. Researchers recognize that information gathered and distributed by media sets the agenda in local communities (Dearing & Rodgers, 1996; Tracy, 2011). The media may also
describe what the editors hope is the policy implementation goals for the actions undertaken. The media can, through the sources it uses, shape public opinion on an issue. Resources identified as part of the traditional media include: newspaper articles, editorials, columns, letters to the editor, and websites with comments that are directly related to traditional news sources such as newspapers, TV, and radio stations. The media can provide a description of the current state of the school system that editors, local elite and other opinion makers perceive. These sources tend to require people to identify themselves and take “ownership” of their opinions. Media sources select public officials within communities for interviews and guest columns, but do include interviews and letters to the editor from individuals who do not hold a formal decision making role within the community. TV and radio stations will also interview people who hold positional authority as well as members within the community who do not hold a position. These sources create a “public record” of discussions and deliberations within a community that can be attributed to individuals (Tracy, 2011). The public record is comprised of the materials and resources that are available to all members of the community and are not restricted to the membership of groups on the basis of title, affiliation or role. Any person within the community has the right to examine or use the materials that have been made available by the media (Tracy, 2011).

This study examined local media sources in order to see how those sources influence the online discussion process. The following chapters (4-5) identify the exact media outlets and describe the local traditional media’s reporting on consolidations within their communities. Some preliminary results (Jakubowski, 2017) indicate that online discussions copy language and ideas from media sources.
Internet-based sources (Topix)

The third resource used for the study were user generated comments from the website TOPIX. The web has created opportunities for people to post anonymously online their opinions about policy implementation in their local communities. The materials from this website construct an ongoing dialogue between someone who posts an idea, question, or a snippet of a report or document online. As people post to the site, they add their opinions to the discussion. In this way the discussion boards allow people to use the anonymity of the internet to discuss the consolidation process. Here is an example:

Figure 3.1: Brocton comment on consolidation


There is some research that describes the effects of the internet and its anonymity on people’s statements (Philipps, 2015) and ideas that may be limited in scope by the context of a traditional media outlet or public forum where the individual needs to “own” their statement and its content (Reader, 2012). Scott (1990) explains how subalterns are often afraid to speak truth to power and how they shy away from direct speech or confrontation in order to ensure that there is no repercussion. By exploring the online website, the study hopes to capture some of the “coffee house” conversation about the school consolidation which is lost when not recorded. Previous
research into rural school consolidations has not used community generated sources (Nitta, et al., 2008).

The online discussions used in this study are evidence of what Scott (1990) describes as transcripts of resistance or hidden transcripts. Materials collected online are anonymous, and allow the contributors to state opinions in an environment that limits their exposure to consequences and provides an unstructured platform to link their beliefs to ideas, opinions, and rumors, which do not often surface in a semi or permanent media. As Brundage (1997) discusses, sources reflect the opinions of their authors at the time they were written. The online discussions are a source that may potentially capture verbal conversations that would usually disappear.

**Material collection**

Materials and sources were gathered using a key word search of Google (search engine), Topix, newspapers, and district websites, which included official board minutes and the mandatory consolidation review, from the two pairs of communities identified as the focus of this study. First, key word searches were conducted using identifier information for the community and school districts that are most closely associated with each other. For example, key word searches included “Brockton, Brockton Central School District, BCSD, and Chautauqua County.” A second example of key word searches were the names of the professional and political leadership of a community, including the name of the superintendent of schools, the president and members of the board of education, the local assembly and state senate member, and the governors of the state of New York. This set of search parameters helped to generate information that is attributed directly to that person or about that individual. Third, once the name or names of opposition groups or leaders emerged, a search was conducted using their
identifier information to gather their perspective on the consolidation. The final tally of documents appears in the Table 3.5 below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source: Official Reports</th>
<th>Board agendas and minutes</th>
<th>Media articles</th>
<th>Discussion Thread</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brocton-Westfield</td>
<td>1 official report</td>
<td>39 meetings</td>
<td>33 articles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oppenheimer-St. Johnsville</td>
<td>1 official report</td>
<td>12 meetings</td>
<td>78 articles</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I downloaded materials into a Microsoft Word or pdf document as a way to easily read and organize information that I had gathered during the study. This process allowed me to manipulate sources through electronic means. I organized the source materials into a chronological order to investigate the relationships between events from start to conclusion.

Classifying/Coding Materials

The process for classifying materials and sources of information gathered during this study emerged from discourse analysis developed by Gee (2014). This multistep process was designed to follow the rigors of discourse analysis and ensure materials and information contained within the document were coded throughout the study process. The coding scheme was influenced by Saldania (2013) model of coding. Coding followed the open coding methodology, with codes emerging from sources. The coding occurred in two waves: descripting and topical (Saldania, 2013). In order to gather the materials needed to code, I first identified the sources. The three sources of information for the dissertation emerged from: official school documents, media articles, and online contributions.
Analysis Process

First, the entire document was read within context. The original sources included for official school documents were the consolidation process reports posted to the district’s websites or the consultant organization’s web page. Board meeting minutes were obtained from school district websites. Newspaper articles were located on webpages hosted by the papers. The online contributors were located within the TOPIX webpages divided by community. Here is an example from Brocton-Westfield consolidation meeting minutes:

Marilyn Kurzawa led a conversation about the results from the focus group meetings held so far. Marilyn and the committee members noted the following:

- Attendance was lower than expected at all meetings except for the student meetings.
- For those who attended, awareness was at a high level and people understood what was going on.
- Both superintendents were complimented for getting students to the sessions, and for doing such a thorough job communicating information about the meetings to their school publics.
- Most of focus group comments were positive about their schools, but expressed concern about the future, with rising taxes and declines in programming for students.
- Focus groups are a catalyst for conversation that focuses on the positives of the community.

An analysis of the example document reveals one of the consultants (Kurzawa) used the consolidation meeting to refresh and update the Consolidation Advisory committee member’s understanding of the work done by the consultants in the district. The document section selected indicated that “awareness” was a key feature of the consolidation taskforce meetings. Awareness emerges as a key feature from the statement “Both superintendents were complement…through job communicating information….” Consolidation advisory board meetings and the district officials in the Brocton Westfield consolidation expressed a need to communicate information to
the public. The Consolidation Advisory group meeting minutes further highlighted the significant role the focus group information would take in developing a consolidation report through the inclusion of students, the efforts of the superintendents to have students engaged in the process, and the conversations focusing on “positive nature” of communities.

When I read the three sources, I made notations in the margins noting themes and specific points that emerged. I identified specific phrases or sentences that exemplified the major theme or specific point. Saldana’s (2013) coding framework was selected because it allows the data to speak for itself when creating a coding schema. By descriptively coding the three source types, officially generated materials, traditional media materials, and online source materials, a deeper understanding of the context may emerge and how populations in school districts undergoing consolidation react to information and opinions as they emerge.

The approach to coding, or open coding, is identified as one form of document analysis in Creswell (2014). This inductive approach, building understandings from the evidence and then organizing, created a better opportunity for the lived community experience to emerge, without significant researcher interference (Creswell, 2014c). The inductive approach allows the documents and source materials to help guide the researcher to understanding the local context which emerges in an area. The topics, themes, issues, and areas for concern from the community emerged during the process. (Scott, 1990).

Second, I identified specific quotes, overall themes, and references to other materials as I was reading the documents. The identified themes would later then coalesce into broader categories for more nuanced and detailed coding described below. The following example can provide some clarity. *The Post Journal* article specifically identified how a combined Brocton and Westfield district would begin the process of moving towards a single district campus. As I
was coding, I identified a major theme of “building locations.” From reading the selected quote from the document, one of the reasons for the consolidation failure in this particular case emerges: the location of the building:

Initially, phasing out portions of the school district leading up to a single building to house all students was a recommendation, in an effort to maximize savings. In other words, Westfield’s middle and high school would immediately be shut down and Brocton’s elementary school would be phased out over three years, leading to one facility (or both if a new building was constructed) shutting down entirely. Both education boards found this unacceptable. Source: (Jamestown Post- Journal, October 8, 2013)

Third, the data were broken down into individual codes using Saldana’s (2013) method for coding, which describes two levels of coding. The first level, descriptive coding, “summarizes in a word or short phrase …the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data…” (p.88). By breaking down data into topics, overall themes (which will be discussed in later chapters) emerged. The second level of coding is pattern coding, which “identif[ies] an emerging theme…and grouping those summaries into a smaller number of sets, themes or constructs” (Saldana, 2013, p. 210).

Fourth, as topics emerged within the source materials, a number of broad-based themes emerged. As illustrated in the quote from the Jamestown Post above, the concerns expressed about facilities location were present across multiple sources: school documents, including the official merger action plan, the media, and online:

“if there is a merger close one of the schools down. it /sic/ makes no sense to merge and keep both schools open” (Topix website, Brocton NY October 19, 2012).
The quote would fall into the topic of facilities, meaning the discussion of buildings. Further the quote reveals a theme concerning closing buildings. Some online contributors noted how nice the single campus of Chautauqua Lake, a neighboring school district, which had previously consolidated, was for the students and community members. In examining the Jamestown Post quote in conjunction with online discussion from TOPIX as referenced above, and additional online discussion threads, references to “closing the buildings” and “single campus” emerged. Contributors pointed out the inconsistency in the expense of running multiple locations when one of the stated goals of the consolidation was to save money. The Board opposition to closing campus locations is incongruent with a stated objective of the consolidation.

After coding each document, I wrote memos to myself identifying the themes, major points, and quotes that could be used in reporting the attempted consolidation process. The memos summarized the contents of the document broadly so that the major topic or topics were apparent on a quick re-read. I also made notations on each memo if there were connections to other memos, documents or sources for each specific case, and recorded questions that needed further investigation, and additional sources or references that needed further investigation.

**Material Reorganization**

I summarized my source materials by topic and reorganized the information into the proposed five-part framework: situational development, local governing board action, community sense making, community member agency and post referendum. For example, using the new framework, the following quote would be considered part of Stage 3: Community sense making:
Merging Brocton-Westfield has the potential to provide quality education for our kids and reduced (or at least stabilized) taxes. The key of course is approving a merger and selecting a new BOE who will manage Incentive Aid wisely and significantly reduce resources. (Source: October 9, 2012 Brocton Topix website)

The example quote illustrates a policy goal articulated by an online participant: improving educational opportunity and decreasing costs. This quote matches the official school merger document that describes the goal of a merger as:

Arguments for centralization revolve around two benefits supported by data. They are cost savings through economies of scale and greater equity through expanded educational opportunities for students (Consolidation Report, p. 12).

The quote from the official school documents informs phase 2: Official governing body action. Each case study forms its own unique results chapter. Chapter 4 describes the failed attempt to consolidate two rural districts (Brocton-Westfield). Chapter 5 details the successfully implemented consolidation process (Oppenheim-Ephrata-St. Johnsville). Chapter 6 presents a cross-cutting analysis of consolidations across New York State.

Maintaining reliability and validity.

Reliability and validity were maintained during this research process through the use of coding memos and research memos. The memos were compared against the raw data to ensure accuracy in capturing the coding and the classification of data. Research memos were constructed through reflections on data, classification schemes addressed above, and questions that emerge during the coding process. Case studies were selected by Yin’s (2018) process of matching cases for literal and theoretical replication, which requires the prior knowledge of the
outcomes (Yin, 2018 p. 59). Two cases (Brockton-Westfield and Oppenheimer-Ephrata-St. Johnsville) have served as the basis for previous studies conducted during graduate school (Jakubowski, 2013; 2014; 2017; 2018; 2019). I have also received peer feedback on one such case study at an international conference (Jakubowski, 2017). Further, the case study outcomes have been compared with research conducted on rural school consolidation in New York State (Casto, et al., 2012; Chabe, 2011; Rey, 2014; Sipple, 2014; Steele, 2010; Stewart, 2018; Tangorra, 2013).

**Challenges and Limitations**

While no research is exempt from flaws, it is incumbent to discuss some potential areas that may emerge during this study. Researcher bias is the first example of a challenge. Second, destroyed source material results in an incomplete picture. Third, the sources created from the timeframe represent the most strident participant’s views of the consolidation study and may not represent the “silent majority” of community members. Fourth, because the sources are anonymous, there is no way to follow up with the people participating in the online discussion.

I lived through one active consolidation as a practicing teacher, and experienced the effects of a second consolidation as a family member. As I read the source materials, I found myself reliving my experiences during the school merger process in my first teaching job. Back then, I sympathized with the students when they complained about the limited number of course offerings. As a taxpayer, I empathize with the desire to lower the property tax rate. Even with rigorous research training in education and historical research methods, it is possible that any source reviewed may be misinterpreted. As a researcher, I should be neutral, yet personal feelings and emotions emerging during the study process require a consistent recognition of bias.
and a need to read the source material multiple times in a structured fashion with a research journal to ensure a nuanced reading of the materials.

Second, sources generated during past historical events do not often survive the immediacy of the event. In the age of disposable paper and deaccession requirements, paper documents and notes from events can be lost. Under state law, different types of files classify materials generated in local school districts, and retention schedules determine when to discard different file types. After a period of time, the documents are shredded or discarded as the need for storage space in schools places pressure on older documents that are no longer required for retention. In local historical societies, physical space limits archives. Archivists need to make decisions about what to accession into their collections. Often local archives are limited in the funding that they receive. Accidents can also destroy materials. The internet and e-mail have reduced paper records for many agencies (Weiss & Mercer, 2011).

Third, the self-selecting decisions contributors make to engage in the traditional media sources and the online websites eliminate the opportunity to hear the voice of residents who do not choose to actively participate in these discussions. This biases the sources available to researchers as they struggle to give the silent members of a community their voices from an historical event. For this reason, my dissertation study utilizes three types of sources: traditional media, official school generated materials, and online participation materials in an effort to triangulate the discussions. This triangulation may provide insights into unspoken thoughts in these communities. Anthropology, sociology, and history have all embraced the idea of portraying the story of the “voiceless” through structured research and careful review of sources (Scott, 1990).
Fourth, the anonymity online does not allow this study to follow up with members of the community who have participated in the discussions. While many research studies seek to use critical actors as a focus of the consolidation process, this study specifically seeks to examine those members of society who choose deliberately not to take public ownership of their comments in public. While there may be some overlap between people who have participated in public forums, been interviewed by media, or write letters to the editor, there was some motivation for deliberately selecting anonymous online contributions to the discussion. In this study, the anonymity of the online discussions may be a way to capture discussion points made during informal situations around the community. While the inability to follow up with contributors could affect the current study, future research opportunities may address this concern by explicitly seeking to contact the anonymous users for interviews or studies. There is a deep tradition of political participation through history, and scholars use those sources in their studies (Brundage, 1997).

I believe that through triangulation of sources, adherence to case study and discourse analysis frameworks, and recognizing research bias, I have begun to meet Biddle, Southerland, & McHenry-Sorber’s (2019) call for unique research into rural areas, and allow the here to for voiceless (Scott, 1990) to have their story told.
CHAPTER 4:
BROCTON AND WESTFIELD: FAILURE TO CONSOLIDATE

Introduction

This chapter provides the results of an analysis of the school district consolidation debate in two western New York small school districts. This is the first of two case studies in this examination of rural education organizational policy in New York State. With the continued economic difficulties in upstate New York over the past 20 years, areas like Westfield and Brocton have explored consolidation as a way to lower local costs and increase educational opportunities. Both school districts were part of a failed consolidation attempt before their joint attempt chronicled in this chapter.

In the case presented here, I begin to address the three research questions proposed in Chapter 1. The first question asks what type of discussions emerged online during consolidation. This case study presents some evidence indicating that online discussions within the community mirrored the narrative emerging from the officials and the media. However, a second narrative emerged online revealing community members’ lack of trust in officials, the media, and the state. Within material reviewed, statements potentially indicate local residents’ general feeling of unease about what was best for their school and the ideas proposed in the consolidation materials.

The case study also begins to answer my second question about alignment between the officials, media and online discussion. The materials reviewed indicate an alignment in judgement that the tax rates paid by local residents were too high and that proposed tax rates were unsustainable. All three groups agreed that the status quo was unsupportable and that some action was necessary to change the community’s trajectory. Disagreements emerged over the
specific actions needed to change the situation. School officials believed fiscal realities were impacting basic educational functions. No more fluff could be cut. Online contributors suggested additional cuts in the form of salary and benefits reductions were in order before consolidation.

This chapter also begins to provide evidence for my third question, concerning a new five phase policy implementation framework introduced in chapter 1. The consolidation failed when voters of Westfield felt that Brocton residents would benefit far more than they would, and the costs of consolidation were too high for their community

**Background**

As Catte (2019), Theobald (2018), and Wurthnow (2018) point out, each rural community is unique. Researchers need to situate their studies in authentic individual communities and not in the generic “rural” broad strokes of past studies, according to Critical Rural Theory developed by Fulkerson & Thomas (2014). To that end, I chose to study two communities engaged in consolidation discussions, which I introduce in the sections that follow.

Brocton and Westfield are located along the eastern shore of Lake Erie, in the southern tier of New York State in Chautauqua County. Centered in this heavily agricultural region of western New York State, both communities undertook a consolidation study after the height of the Great Recession (2007-2011). Two years previously, both of these school districts were part of failed consolidation studies with different neighbors: Fredonia and Brocton had attempted to combine districts, while Westfield and Ripley failed to consolidate in the same time frame. Utilizing the proposed five phase framework introduced in chapter 1, I now turn to describing the situational development, or Phase 1 for the policy implementation narrative within these two communities.
Phase 1: Situational development

From their founding in the 1800s, Brocton and Westfield saw growth during the late 1800s and early 1900s with the establishment of Welch’s Grape group and the railroads. Since World War II, the two communities have seen a continued decrease in population size and, according to the 2010 census, an aging population. Of the two communities, Westfield has more of the amenities of a village as listed by Lyson (2002), including a daily newspaper, a hospital, and a larger grocery store. However, many of the residents, according to the 2010 census, travel to Dunkirk, Fredonia, Erie PA, Buffalo or Jamestown for work and extended shopping.

Both communities continue to face difficult economic conditions, as evidenced by increasing unemployment rates in the region over the last 20 years. As a result of the widespread unemployment, the region experienced decreasing population, or “outmigration”, as residents left the area to find work. An additional indicator of difficult times was stagnant property values in the area: population rates and property values are relevant because schools are dependent on attendance data for state and federal aid. As a result, school districts’ ability to raise operating revenue is tied in New York State to land values in the communities (Sipple & Yao, 2015).

Community Demographic Statistics

In the tables below, data comparing the two school district communities are presented to help paint a “thick description” (Creswell, 2014) of each reality which the residents faced on a daily basis. The charts also hint at a thread which emerged online of perceived differences between the two communities, which the data does not bare out. As Agulair, et al.,(2019) found, even when presented with hard data, many people do not change their held beliefs that the texts refute.
Table 4.1, below, introduces the two communities through basic demographic information. The two communities are similar in size, and have both experienced a decrease in population for the 10 years prior to the consolidation attempts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4.1: Community Demographics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brocton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population 2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size (sq. miles)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tax Levy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approved expenditure</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Consolidation study, 2013.

Table 4.1 shows similarities across both communities, from a size and income standpoint. Brocton did, however, see a much steeper increase in population losses. The table also shows the Brocton community pays a higher tax levy than Westfield. This difference is crucial to understand, as it would play a significant role in the defeat of the consolidation attempt. Table 4.2, below, continues to demonstrate the two communities are similar, this time in terms of ethnic diversity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4.2: Ethnic Comparisons</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brocton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Consolidation study, 2013.

Table 4.2 demonstrates that both Brocton and Westfield are very similar in ethnic composition. While Brocton is slightly more diverse than Westfield, compared to New York State’s statistics, both school districts according to the consolidation study are very similar. Some of the differences in ethnic diversity may be due to Brocton’s location near Dunkirk, one
of the region’s larger cities, and the employment opportunities in the area, which include
agriculture and corrections. Table 4.3 continues the comparisons of the two communities, but
focuses on the two school districts themselves. Included on the table include enrollment,
percentage of free and reduced lunch, a poverty indicator, and graduation rate, an achievement
indicator.

Table 4.3 School Comparisons

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Brocton</th>
<th>Westfield</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student enrollment</td>
<td>534</td>
<td>723</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Free &amp; Reduced Lunch</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduation rate</td>
<td>84.9%</td>
<td>84.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Consolidation study, 2013.

While Tables 4.1 and 4.2 indicated the two communities were very similar, Table 4.3
begins to demonstrate some of the differences between the two school districts begins to emerge.
While both districts have a similar graduation rate (84 %), which exceeds New York State
expectations for performance, the differences emerge in enrollment and % free and reduced
lunch. Westfield Central School District is almost 50% larger than Brocton. As Brasington
(2003) pointed out, school district consolidations are usually only successful when the two
communities are very similar in their composition. The second, and more impactful difference
between the two communities is the percentage of Free & Reduced Lunch, a federally supported
definition of poverty rate within a community. The Brocton School District serves almost twice
the number of students in poverty than Westfield. While the Consolidation study (2013) reported
that the two communities were remarkable similar, in the opinion of professionals and
consultants, the differences between Brocton and Westfield did emerge in the online discussion
that I report on below. The next table, 4.4, compares school based salaries with the local
population’s salaries.
Table 4.4: Community Salary Comparison

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Brocton</th>
<th>Westfield</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Superintendent</td>
<td>$115,000</td>
<td>$117,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>$35,000-76,663</td>
<td>$37,600-79,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support Staff</td>
<td>$8,000</td>
<td>$11,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>$39,941</td>
<td>$39,188</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: New York State Education Department, US Census, Consolidation Study, 2013

Table 4.4 is crucial due to the online dialogue which emerged during the consolidation process which identified salaries and benefits as areas which some online discussants felt were too high, and were a major factor in creating fiscal difficulties in the two districts. Echoing work done by Cramer (2016), residents in both communities felt the teachers and especially the superintendents were overpaid and these steep compensation packages were a major reason the districts were unsustainable. The salary ranges also hint at the benefits packages, which are usually an additional 50% of a salary (Will & Sawchuck, 2019) and often an area of conflict in communities where the majority of workers do not share the public employee benefits.

In summary, the four tables presented above indicate that the two communities of Brocton and Westfield had experienced a long term population loss, and would continue to do so for the foreseeable future. Both communities, on the aggregate, appeared to share many commonalities demographically. Differences began to emerge, however, in the school based data. Brocton was more diverse, served a higher percentage of children in poverty, and paid their staff less than the Westfield School District. Foreshadowing some of the online discussion about pay and benefits, the difference in pay rates would emerge as a contentious issue online, as some participants believed that a reason driving the consolidation were attempts by the paid school employees to use the consolidation as an excuse to “level up” their contracts. The difference
between the two communities may also have been enough to potentially cause some voters to
react to Brasningtons’s (2003) findings of incompatibility. The chapter turns now to Board of
Education’s actions prior to the consolidation attempt.

**Board action prior to this consolidation attempt**

As part of Phase 1: Situational Development, both Westfield’s and Brocton’s Boards of
Education undertook a series of actions in order to address ongoing population and resources
losses. Both districts had sought to consolidate with neighboring districts, but those attempts
failed. Both school boards had also participated in a regional high school study seeking to reduce
the number of operating high schools in the region while maintaining an elementary school in
each of the communities. This proposal failed when enabling legislation failed in the New York
State Legislature (WNYSC, 2012).

Without a regional school system or a successful consolidation, both Boards of Education
sought to partner with the local Board of Cooperative Education Services (BOCES) to contract
out for services that are not “core functions.” These services included cooperative bidding on
supplies, itinerate teachers, and other services (WNYSC, 2011). By shifting some of these
functions to BOCES, the districts were able to reduce expenditures and receive state BOCES aid.
These steps were not enough, however, and as recounted in the consolidation report, both
districts eliminated a number of extra-curricular activities, cut classroom offerings, and
eliminated positions over at least three budget cycles before the 2011 consolidation attempt. The
actions, which included cutting teachers and services, occurred while raising taxes and using
fund balances in order to try and maintain some level of programming which would satisfy
increased state demands. Finally, in 2011-2012, the two Boards of Education chose to enact what
I describe as Phase 2: Local governing board action. The Boards sought to consolidate with each
other in the hopes of addressing the issues of reduced resources and increased standards in their schools.

The Consolidation Study (2013) for both school districts indicated that the budgets for both districts, in the $13 to $15 million dollar range were experiencing growth, but Brocton especially was experiencing increasing numbers of deficit years. In the study (p. 71-73), the historical budget data (2008-2018) indicated that Brocton had or would be suffering from structural deficit spending out of a ten year data set. Brocton had essentially reallocated all of its fund balance to cover operating expenses as expenditures were increasing without additional revenue sources. Westfield, the study indicated, would only suffer structural imbalances at the very end of the ten year review of data. Westfield also continued to see a strong fund balance, and would not need to use its reserves for almost 5 years to cover deficit spending in its budget.

The consolidation report did, however enumerate a number of staff positions, curricular, co- and extracurricular areas eliminated in the past five years as the districts were attempting to meet fiscal mandates from the state. The charts in the report (pp. 56-58) clearly indicated Brocton had suffered a greater level of cuts in programming than Westfield. The cuts to classroom based programming in Brocton were much steeper than the Westfield eliminations. In the extra-curricular realm, Brocton had also experienced more cuts than Westfield, with the elimination of eight sports programs compared to one in Westfield. A picture was beginning to emerge that Brocton needed the consolidation with Westfield.

**Phase 2: Local governing board reaction**

In 2012, the Boards of Education representing Brocton and Westfield Central School agreed to seek a consolidation attempt with each other. More formally known as a Proposed Re-organization Study, the formal process for combining two districts is under the jurisdiction of the State Education Department. The process is composed of a multi-step process, described in
Chapter 3 (Chabe, 2011; NYSED, 2015). Over a series of seven meetings, which lasted until the final report was published in 2013, the two communities were engaged in a dialogue concerning the implementation of this state policy.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the consolidation process for a district involves many months of study and many events, which must be approved:

1) Board of Education must agree to the study.
2) Members of the Board of Education must approve the study results.
3) An advisory referendum must pass in both communities (straw vote).
4) A binding referendum must pass in both communities.
5) Any legal challenges to the Commissioner of Education emerging from the merger must be set aside.

In examining the narratives the three stakeholders produced during the consolidation, the following sections begin to explain some of the public and hidden transcripts of the two communities’ debates. This analysis begins to answer why, in the middle of increasing standards and declining resources, the voters of Westfield chose to reject merging with their neighbors. Publically, narratives told a story of merger as the only solution to fiscal and programmatic problems facing the school. Privately, some residents questioned the amount of expenditures the school continued incur year after year.

Both boards had sought to attempt a consolidation within three years after their communities had undertaken a defeated process with other partners. Westfield had rejected a merger with Ripley, and Fredonia had rejected a consolidation with Brocton.
The official narrative

Two major points revealing the “official narrative” emerged during the consolidation study. As discussed in Chapter 2, the official narrative is frequently privileged by researchers studying rural areas. School officials set agendas, direct research, and invite members of the community to participate in official activities. Composed of the Board of Education members, the superintendent, administration, and elected officials representing the area, the official narrative focuses on two areas:

Will creating a new school district through centralization enhance or maintain educational opportunities and at the same time increase long-term efficiencies and lower costs for the taxpayers of both Brocton Central School District and Westfield Academy and Central School District? (Study, 2013).

Goal 1: Enhance or maintain educational opportunity: The consolidation study described immediate improvements to the programming aspect of the two districts. The study suggested that a newly combined district could reinstate a number of extracurricular programs cut during previous budgetary constraints. The study further suggested that the children from Brocton would benefit from newly opened opportunities which would accompany a merger with Westfield. A newly combined school could offer additional advanced placement opportunities for all students. Most importantly, the study suggested that the two districts could stop eliminating programs in their efforts to meet budgetary constraints.

Goal 2: Efficiencies and Lowering Costs: The consolidation report concluded a combined Brocton and Westfield could access more state resources and lower local residents’ tax rates. Data contained within the study indicate that the merged district would have received almost $25
million dollars more in aid from the state for the next 14 years (WNYSC, 2012, p. 86). The additional state aid money is supplementary to funding the districts would receive if they stayed separate. The report suggested using 40% of the new aid to reduce tax rates in both communities (p. 81) (Fessenden, 2006). However the “fine print” of the study indicated Brocton would see an immediate decrease, while Westfield’s rates would fall three to five years following consolidation.

The study further indicated that the newly-merged school district would have received additional aid from the state to make structural changes to the buildings in order to accommodate moving students between the two communities. The report recommended three different uses for the existing facilities, as well as a phased draw-down of the old community schools and the construction of a new campus K-12 between the two communities. The report (WNYSC, 2012, p. 168) projected that the districts would save $2 million dollars from a new campus.

**Analysis of data**

In this section of the chapter, I analyze the source materials from the news media and online discussions. The section discuss how residents and community members began to make sense of what the consolidation process information revealed about the rationale for pursuing the policy implementation. The hidden transcript of non-elite members in the community become apparent.

**Phase 3: Community sense making: Media narrative**

After the twin goals of enhanced or maintained education programming and improved efficiency emerged in the official narrative, the third phase, community sense making, began. Local residents, during a consolidation study, have access to the official materials from the school as well as the media’s narrative as reported in local newspapers.
To discover what the media-based narrative for consolidation looked like in this case study, I examined four newspapers based in the region. As described in the methods chapter (3) of this dissertation, I focused on three local papers: the Dunkirk Observer, Westfield Republican, and the Jamestown Post Journal. The fourth source was the Buffalo News, a large regional paper serving the entire Western New York area. The four papers form the basis of daily news sources in the region, and are often cited online as sources of information for the two communities. Two themes emerged from the media’s narrative concerning consolidation: Economic efficiencies and descriptions of the consolidation process.

**Economic efficiencies**

The news media repeated frequently the narrative that consolidation would improve local school efficiencies. In establishing the need for greater efficiencies in the local schools, articles and editorials painted a bleak fiscal picture. In January 2013, the editor of The Dunkirk Observer wrote that local schools were “living on borrowed time,” describing funding inequities across the state that had resulted in resource issues for small, rural districts. A February 2013 article by The Dunkirk Observer (Observer Staff, 2013) described the following observations:

Both districts will have to use reserve funds and fund balances to make up the difference between anticipated expenditures and anticipated revenues. These reserves will be depleted by 2016-2017 in both districts. While it is possible to raise school taxes over the district’s cap in New York state, that would require a supermajority, 60 percent of those voting....At the same time that expenses are going up, enrollments are in a general decline in New York State, and especially in Northern Chautauqua County.

In March of 2013, The Dunkirk Observer released a quote from the advisory committee, which painted a bleak picture: “It is about how we can literally save the educational system in
two floundering school districts by consolidating them into one self-sufficient and productive one…” (Chodan, 2013). By specifically selecting this quote, the editors show their position on the consolidation issue: most of the points of emphasis in the consolidation report were positive, and discussed increasing opportunities for educational programmatic offerings and extracurricular activities. The same article also points out that a new district should negotiate new contracts “from scratch” and “consider a longer school day.” A number of cost savings recommendations including reducing administration and teaching faculty, contracting with the local BOCES, and reducing the number of support workers were included. Finally, the article indicates the consolidation report recommendation 40% of the additional aid goes “to reduce taxes” (Chodan, 2013).

The theme of efficiency continued in the media’s narrative. In April of 2013, the assistant news editor published a piece in The Dunkirk Observer that describes the “educational changes” in Chautauqua County (Gugino, 2013). The article sends out a call:

“schools must change as well. In the face of declining enrollment and reduced state aid, schools have found ways to share services, investigate mergers and tuition students to…keep costs down” (Gugino, 2013).

Gugino (2013) then goes on to quote Brocton Superintendent Hertlein: “it is survival at this point,” arguing that sharing services can reduce costs to taxpayers. Further along, the article examines mergers. The opening line of that section reads:

“Merger votes are nothing new to the area, but the pressure on districts to find cost savings for taxpayers and program opportunities was the driving force behind the talks between Westfield and Brocton school districts” (Gugino, 2013).
The article then quotes Hertlein again: “There’s two factors: our student population in both districts is declining...and so is our revenue.” The Westfield Superintendent, also quoted in the article, agrees that finances are a priority: “The financial position that most districts are in is leading us to look at more economical ways to deliver education to our kids” (Gugino, 2013). In summary, the *Dunkirk Observer* was stressing the economic advantage of a merger by stressing the efficiencies that a merger would bring to the two local schools.

*The Dunkirk Observer* continued to emphasize the fiscal benefit of consolidation to taxpayers. One report indicates that the centralized schools would receive monies to help lower the tax rate: “Both Districts will see a reduction in taxes, Hertlein said” (Chodan, 2013 a). In a June 2013 article, *The Dunkirk Observer* quoted Brocton Board of Ed President Thomas DeJoe who explained how a consolidation would “lead to a reduction of taxes in both districts.” (Observer Staff, 2013a).

Description of the economic enhancements a merger would realize continued as a theme in the *Dunkirk Observer*. In June 2013, an editorial appeared describing past consolidation efforts, and reminding readers those efforts failed to cut costs by defeating merger votes:

“The constant battles and half way measures...are wasteful, both in money and time...[L]ittle or nothing has changed...Cost savings would still be significant with a cut in jobs at the administrative level, and some teaching and support staff”.

Similarly, an opinion piece by Steve Cockram, a board member in Westfield, published in June of 2013 in *The Observer* identifies school revenues as flat:

“...the state balanced its budget with the Gap Elimination Adjustment...Add the tax cap law...School expenses continue to rise...About 70 percent of a school’s’ expenses are personnel related...If not addressed it [the economic challenges faced by the school] will
lead to long term financial and educational disaster. Schools must have a balanced budget....schools cannot legally declare bankruptcy...There are three financial benefits. First is a reduction in duplication of administration...[The second goal is decreasing] student-teacher ratio […] optimized more easily, giving another similar savings...[The] third benefit is state aid to fill the structural deficit.”

The Dunkirk Observer, through articles and opinion pieces, promoted economic benefits of school consolidation. These sentiments were echoed in the Westfield Republican. With an editorial appearing just before the consolidation vote, the editors of the Republican indicated that:

All four districts couldn't offer the same quality of education as the two merged districts now offer. There are more classes, more extra-curricular activities and more electives, facts that remain true even after the merger incentive aid ended. We know school facilities are much better than they were if the districts hadn't merged. We know the districts are doing better financially than they were before the merger.

That is the situation in Westfield and Brocton now. Doing nothing is not an option because both districts are struggling financially while, at the same time, struggling to provide a sound education.

Merging will be a bumpy road, but it gives students and taxpayers a fighting chance. It is the right thing to do. (Republican Editors, 2013).

The Republican editors have evaluated the fiscal situation in the Chautauqua County region, and believe that a merger is the only way education can improve in the area. In their opinion, the
situation became so dire, the merger is the only “chance” the school community members have to see effort maintained, or even an improvement with the fiscal realities as existed.

In the *Jamestown Post Journal*, the editors also supported consolidation as a way to enhance fiscal efficiency in the two school districts. Interviewing the Westfield superintendent Davidson, the paper set up readers to focus on fiscal realities of additional aid:

The process of centralization provides additional funding to both school communities. This funding is paid over a period of 14 years as operational incentive aid.

“The first five years of operational incentive aid is about $2.6 million. Then it declines by about 4 percent thereafter until year 15,” said Davison. “The study’s recommendation for the operational incentive aid is (to use) 40 percent to reduce taxes, 35 percent for educational programming and 25 percent for reserve funds.” *(Post Journal, 2013)*.

The second theme the paper had was to share and explain the consolidation process for its readers.

**Share the process of consolidation with readers**

A second narrative I identified in analyzing the media’s reports involved informing the public of the consolidation process. One article written by *The Dunkirk Observer* reporter covering the process, detailed the extensive efforts involved in the consolidation study (Chodan, January 2013). She quotes the consolidation team leader: “It's like being on a jury. You listen to all the evidence before deciding on guilt or innocence. We have to stay objective.” She further reports to the public that “the consultants had interviewed administrators and staff members, conducted focus groups, and had conducted four meetings with the district advisory committee which had 24 members, 12 from each district” and informs readers that “[the team leader] believes the members were looking out for the students. She [the team leader] also called ‘the
maturity, attitude and contributions of the students in both districts very impressive.”” Later, the article reiterates, “The report has to use hard data, not just a gut feeling.” In conveying the importance of community participation, the article quotes the expert consultants who ask that “residents may call, speak up at board of education meetings, or write letters to the editor of the newspaper.”

In February, The Dunkirk Observer then published a second article detailing the consolidation process; this second article was still part of the overall goal of the editorial board of the paper to educate their readership on how a consolidation works. In the article, the paper reiterated the role of the district advisory committee and how it “gained insights, gather data and analyze perceptions in the two school districts and communities.” (Feb. 2013). The paper pointed out that the process is “governed and guided by NYSED’s Office of Prekindergarten through 12 Education's (Pk-12) Office of Educational Management Services” and stated “the key questions are whether there can be sufficient cost savings and improved educational programming. If so, the department allows the merger process to go forward.” The article then continues to describe the composition of the committee and its process. In a March 2013 article, The Observer indicates that “the districts intend to put the report online. If the board decides to go forward there will be future public meetings before a straw vote in June.”

In May 2013, The Observer reported the approval of the merger plan by the Brocton and Westfield Boards, and let the public know where and when the voting for the “advisory referendum (or straw vote)” would be held in each district. In June of 2016, the Observer reported that information on the merger had been “mailed out to residents” and “the straw vote (advisory referendum concerning the consolidation of Brocton and Westfield Districts) is scheduled for June 18th. Voting is from noon-8pm in the foyer of the new gym.” These two
articles were the third part of the newspaper editors’ efforts to educate their readership on how the consolidation process works. The editors were relaying information to the public about the logistics of the consolidation process and the voting process.

After the straw vote, *The Observer* (June, 2013) published an article in which the superintendents and community leaders expressed being pleased with the results. All four of the interviews pointed out that the situation was “win- win,” and there was relief among the officials involved in consolidation. Holt, one of the Board of Education members for Westfield quoted in *The Dunkirk Observer* article, indicated that he “was concerned about the vote, especially since the voters in both districts have rejected previous merger attempts” (Observer, June 2013). This short-lived relief was tempered by the districts’ understanding that a second vote was necessary to complete the process. One of the ways in which the newspaper’s editorial board conveyed this next step in the process was by selecting specific quotes from the two superintendents: “This is like the semi-finals...This is just the beginning” (Observer, June 2013). The emphasis on the process is evident in the language used by the superintendents (Dearing & Rodgers, 1996).

Soon after the June straw vote, the *Observer* published a piece by Board of Education member Steve Cochram that indicated that “the merger process doesn’t make guarantees. Rather the question is if there are enough dedicated community members to be on the new board (you?) to make the tough decisions in the best interest of students.” This opinion piece stressed to the reader that the future would be decided by the new Board of Education, not the consolidation report. The opinion piece was one attempt by the consolidation officials to use the media as a purveyor of information about the process.
The Press Journal and the Westfield Republican also published similar editorials describing the consolidation vote. Each of the three regional papers reported on locations, the three questions relating to consolidation up on the ballot, and the process of counting the ballots.

In sum, the local media published a number of articles describing the process of school consolidation. The reporters and editors in these local sources constantly covered the timeline, the actions by the committee, and dates provided for meetings and voting.

The editorial boards of the region’s newspapers—The Dunkirk Observer, the Westfield Republican, and the Jamestown Post Journal—used editorials and articles to promote consolidating schools in the region. The media stance mirrors the online discussions and the official structural position that the status quo in the area’s school structure was unsustainable and no longer viable. D’agostino (2013), as editor of the Observer wrote an editorial concerning schools and their financial position, arguing that local schools are facing a “tidal wave of rising costs.” The editorial further quotes Dr. Rick Timbs, an expert on school finance in New York State, who argues that mergers “opened up opportunities for students compared to the district before it merged.” In April of 2013, Gugino, The Observer’s assistant editor, wrote that “times have changed in New York State and especially in Chautauqua County over the past several years. With it, schools must change as well.” Detailing the idea of shared services, consolidation, and paying for students to attend other public schools (referred to as tuitioning out students), the editorial asks local school superintendents to rethink how schools are doing business in the post-recession age. The media in the area, in its collective narrative of reports and editorials, clearly was in favor of consolidation because the tax-supported system was no longer sustainable.
Phase 3: Community sense making: Online discussion

In order to ascertain common threads, or themes, among the online sources, I again used the methodology described in Chapter 3. As the documents were read using the discourse analysis and the coding process, three trends emerged from the materials. First, the online discussion emphasized that community members desired substantial tax savings from a consolidation. Second, program overreach within the school districts was identified as a potential reason why the districts were fiscally in trouble. Third, it was apparent that residents felt a consolidation must do what is right for the local community—not the state.

The three goals emerging from online discussions were not the same as the official goals and the media goals reported earlier in this chapter. The three groups—online, media, and official—all agreed that cost savings was a primary goal of consolidation efforts. From there, however, the media and official goals diverged from those residents expressed online. Officials and media wanted to increase programmatic offerings, but some online posters did not feel this was necessary, and some residents actually believed programming was in part responsible for the two districts’ fiscal trouble. Further, officials and media constrained their arguments for merging within the givens of state policy. People online challenged those givens and felt that school officials should look beyond the current policy of consolidation for alternative solution.

Cost savings

In an examination of thirty-seven discussion threads from January 2012 – January 2014, a theme repeated over and over: the two districts must first seek cost savings from programmatic cuts. While the official documents and media articles highlighted program improvements and some efficiencies, the online discussions examined indicated that cutting expenditures was a priority. Some members of the online discussion threads identified overpaid teachers and
administrators as the root cause of the districts fiscal woes. New York State, under fiscal
disclosure acts, posts the pay and pensions of all public employees in the state, including
teachers. The online discussion community found an initial motivation for their statements in the
official consolidation report, which noted teacher compensation and benefits, and recommended
that a consolidated district reexamine the various union contracts and what they contained:
“They expressed the need to lower contractual commitments, including post-retirement health
care options; to increase staff contributions for health care benefits; and to create a new contract
that will be fair to all staff but allow the new district to grow” (Consolidation study, 2013, p. 90).
This report conclusion was cited by online discussants as proof that teachers were overpaid.

A blunt statement by an online contributor was “up voted” (an online tool that allows
participants to show their support for statements) by some members of the Brocton and Westfield
areas: “We have too many teachers doing not enough work.” This statement represents an
impression that some people in the public have of teachers: that they do not work hard. This
sentiment was echoed in another thread, where the comment indicated “There are WAY too
many teachers now in these two districts.” Another post indicated that the merger would fail due
to the influence exerted by teachers: “Westfield teachers want to keep their sweet status-quo
positions. These teachers know it would mean real work and a real shake up if the merger passes.
Don’t let the teacher unions bring down the merger.” The language used in this post indicates the
teaching positions are “sweet”–code for easy and well-paid, and the phrase “a real shakeup”
suggests these discussants believe teachers should work harder.

Compare this to another comment: “The merger is going to give raises to half the
teachers.” This demonstrates that other members of the online community believed the teacher
unions supported the merger because of the fiscal benefits to their members: These two opinion
samples indicate a real conflict between some online contributors: How would teachers influence votes on consolidation? Would the consolidation help teachers maintain salaries or benefits, or would the merger force teachers to work “harder?”

As Cramer (2013) has pointed out in her research into rural residents’ feelings concerning public-employee unions, informants blame unions for creating a no-win scenario for local rural tax payers. In the minds of rural residents unions have been able to influence local policy-making to benefit their members no matter what question was under discussion (Cramer 2013). Commentary along this line, blaming unions, suggests that members of the community believed the paid professional staff of the districts was undertaking the consolidation study less to help the schools and the community and more to increase their salaries and prestige. This sentiment remains in the following post: “it is not about ‘saving much-needed’ teachers and programs. It is about leveling up, increasing layers, decreasing workload and having bigger/better/nicer. Oh yeah…it’s for the kids.” In many of the posts, the rhetoric used to support consolidations does demonstrate residents’ belief that consolidation would help increase student opportunities. However, some citizens participating in the on-line discussion expressed a belief that this is a false rhetoric as individuals and groups, such as the unions, seek to increase their power and member benefits, and make what to some people seems an easy career even easier. In their research on rural areas, Cramer (2016) and Sherman (2009) both found that many residents view “real work” as manual or physical labor. Rousmaniere (2013) also wrote about the ways that popular culture and political leadership have denigrated teaching as an easy profession. The idea that in teaching, an individual would engage in an “easy profession” emerged in popular culture as communities began to resent supporting teachers in their community. The research found that teachers were viewed as “disabled” citizens and workers, and, according to Rousmaniere (2013),
critics of the teaching profession suggested that teachers were unfit for regular work, and drained society’s resources.

A different contributor online indicated that “…we’ll have lots of empty schools, tons of administrators, and the highest taxes…You need to close buildings, eliminate admin (lots of it), and eliminate redundant costs.” Another contributor could not understand why “…at 125k, [a superintendent] can’t even manage 2 small districts” (in reference to the pay rate of a superintendent). In almost every small town or village in New York, the school superintendent and principal are the highest paid individuals living in the area, and the local media publish a list of the highest paid educators in the area on a yearly basis. This publicity, coupled with a limited understanding (Cramer, 2016; Sherman, 2009) of what the actual jobs entail, often leads to a call from the public to reduce the number and pay of the administrators, and some on-line participants were clearly tying a successful merger with fewer administrators. This idea that there are too many administrators within education demonstrates disconnect between reality and perception of the population and the education profession.

Online, the discourse differed in expressing the goals of a consolidation, and also offered additional cost saving ideas, other than a merger. In the context of this consolidation study, a number of the people posting online stated that they would like to see a regional high school. A regional high school that was supported by the administration and leadership would allow communities to retain their elementary schools while requiring students attend a larger, county-based high school. This concept was proposed at all stages of the consolidation, from beginning to end. There was sparse commentary concerning a regional high school. Several individuals stated some version of “a regional high school makes sense.” Another example includes “have all of the kids go to CL [meaning Chautauqua Lake CSD, newly-formed].” One way to save
money then, some felt, was to send the Brocton-Westfield students to the newly-merged Chautauqua Lake Central School District to the south.

The second recommendation from online sources involved splitting the smallest districts between larger districts. Included in these proposals were Ripley and Brocton: these two districts, which had both undergone failed consolidations, were viewed as small and in fiscal difficulty. In the online participants’ description of the proposals, the state would intervene and “split the schools.” The two districts of Westfield and Fredonia would serve as the receiving districts for Brocton. However, again, this proposal does not contain any level of detail and does not describe how the state would split the districts. In accordance to the New York Constitution, the dissolution of the districts is impossible, residents must actively disband the LEA, and the state cannot order the dissolution (Benjamin & Nathan, 2001). The dissolution of a school district without the citizens’ approval would be unconstitutional.

A third recommendation proposed online, to share superintendents and business offices, was popular in the posts. Many cited the high pay of the positions as a reason to share the offices. Further, many contributors believed that there would not be additional burden on superintendents if they were to run two districts, as is evidenced in the quote, above, that questions why a superintendent could not run two districts for a salary of $125,000. The length of posts varied from one or two words to multiple paragraphs.

The fourth alternative to consolidation discussed online was to negotiate a less lucrative teacher contract. One individual suggested that the voters need to mobilize: “Don’t let these high priced teachers keep robbing us every year.” Another member of the online discussion added, “They will do whatever it takes to make sure the golden goose is not touched. IE there (sic) fat cat contracts.” Very early on in the process, an online comment stated that “the school board
with the guts to stand up to the teacher’s unions with their free health care and high pay for what amounts to a seasonal job.” In the latter phases of the consolidation, another post raised the issue of a strong teacher’s union: “The teacher’s union, sadly, is one of the strongest in the state,” which supports Walsh’s (2014) observation that in times of stress, the public scrutinizes the teachers’ unions and their contracts. The population often does not support the compensation packages for public servants or their union’s power.

The online commentary referred to high tax rates as one of the key reasons that the community was failing and the merger should not go forward. Unless there were significant decreases in school property taxes, Westfield residents especially felt the merger would not be in their best interest for retaining a viable community. Further, the plan that was released revealed that the major fears of the Westfield community would be realized in a new consolidation: an increase in school taxes. Almost from the beginning, members of the online community argued that any merger would be doomed to failure if some tax relief was not forthcoming. The initial salvo online indicated that the people would accept nothing less than a 25% reduction in property taxes. In examining the threads, some comments stand out as capturing residents’ concern and anger directed at the consolidation plan: “Why lose the property [the school] in the village, hurt local business’s (sic), decrease property values and increase taxes. Does more harm than good.”

Resoundingly, the members of the Westfield community felt the plan for consolidation needed to decrease taxes before it would be successful. Another quote pointed out the seemingly simple solution: “Give us a plan that saves money (it’s not hard) and we Westfieldians will support it…It will cost everyone more in the long run.” These statements, which encapsulate the overall thrust of the online discussion involving the consolidation, express concerns raised both statewide and nationally.

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A clear goal emerged in the Westfield side of the consolidation: don’t lose the high school building in the village. For residents in Westfield, the school building provided a community hub. As parents came into the village to retrieve children, there was reason to stop in to local businesses and spend money. The plan for consolidation would have removed the Westfield school and moved it potentially half-way between the two communities. This relocation of the building, in the eyes of some members of the online community, would have significantly hurt the Westfield community.

School officials cited the inability of the district to provide a needed education at $22,000 per student. The online public saw the $22,000 as a failure of the district to provide an education to their students. Therefore, the cost of a public education at $22,000 reveals a disagreement between the school officials and the online discussion groups. The media editorials and reporting agreed that the increasing costs for running school districts should be contained. By reducing costs, according to the media and online participants, the community could be strengthened.

In analyzing official reports, media and online commentary, there appears an overlap in the desire to reduce costs associated with education. These results partially answer my first research question: What are the issues raised in online discussions concerning rural school district consolidation? The official position of the school boards indicated they wanted to ensure that school operated as efficiently as possible. Media reports in favor of consolidation cite the decreasing costs associated with consolidation as a major driver for this policy implementation. Online participants agreed that reducing the costs for education was a key attraction point for consolidation. There was some consensus that administrators and teachers, and the associated expenses were root causes of the problems facing the two districts. As I report in Table 4.4, for residents who see teachers and administrators with double, or even triple their own incomes, paid
out of their income taxes, may have raised hostility towards public employees as their own feelings of insecurity mounted. Cramer (2016) and Wurthnow (2018) have observed this phenomena in their studies of rural areas, and when Scott (1990) examined the Hidden Transcripts in areas where a distinct underclass existed, a similar narrative emerged. These rhetorical points online may point to real class conflict in rural areas, as wages and real buying power have stagnated in areas that have been left behind by the economic recoveries present in more urban areas of the county (Catte, 2019).

Alignment

The next section of this chapter partially answers my second dissertation question about alignment between officials, the media and online. Table 4.8, below, provides a preliminary summary of the initial points of alignment: officials and media aligned on problem and proposed solution, but the online group saw a different problem and a different solution all together. The table reveals that officials and media agreed on the problems of decreasing resources and disappearing opportunities; the online community, however, did not concur and instead identified internal expenses and programming as the “real problem.” The table also indicates that officials and media concurred on merger as the solution, while the online community wanted to see employee pay and benefits reduced, along with decreased programming.
### Table 4.5: Alignment between three sources on problems and solutions.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Officials</th>
<th>Media</th>
<th>Online</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Problem defined</strong></td>
<td>Decreased resources + disappearing opportunity</td>
<td>Decreased resources + disappearing opportunity</td>
<td>Internal expenses and programming costs too high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Solution</strong></td>
<td>Merger</td>
<td>Merger</td>
<td>Teacher pay cuts, reduced programs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Areas of agreement.

All three stakeholders agreed that the schools are inefficient, and must change. Brocton and Westfield community residents, in conjunction with the media and district officials, noticed that the school system, as it was currently functioning, was not meeting their understanding of what a school system should accomplish. For the district officials, a school district should offer an efficient and robust curriculum for students to achieve 21st century learning standards (see the consolidation study). The newspaper editorial boards believed there were more efficient ways to operate schools—through a merger. The public, as represented by online contributors, felt that the schools were not doing enough to cut costs. Community opinion, as represented by the online contributors continue to discuss the need for public education to grow more efficient through pay cuts, benefits reduction, and “cutting the fat” which Cervone (2018) attributes to the Neo-conservative attacks on unions and public employees.

#### The State is a problem

All three groups identified New York State government practices as a problem for the local rural districts. School officials, in the 2011 consolidation study, revealed the declining state
aid for schools and the tax cap created a serious issue for local schools. The study further points out increased demands in the form of standards and graduation requirements as another source of stress the state placed on schools. The media, especially editorials in the Dunkirk Observer, criticized the state for increasing demands on local schools while also decreasing aid. Examining over 300 posts on line revealed that the state was raised in approximately 10% of the posts; fewer than 1% of the posts reviewed were positive about the role the state played in education. Online commentators’ references to the state included their belief that the state would not continue to fund rural schools, that the state would force consolidation and eliminate local choice, and the state would continue squeezing smaller districts to make them disappear. Finally, many members of the online community claimed that the state had abandoned Western New York and favored the urban or downstate areas, especially in terms of money.

The idea that rural individuals are concerned with state policy decisions and are upset at the state is nothing new. What is new is the belief that residents in the communities held about the level of involvement the state could or would have in the consolidation. Many residents believed that the state would force the consolidation of small rural school districts in New York. One person, online, posted that the “Boards of Regents for the State of New York demands each school district (regardless of the population of students) that certain classes are provided to student to qualify for a regents (sic) diploma.” This statement is true, and the author goes on to say “the only way to downsize the mandates from the state is to confront the Board of Regents and demand they relax their standards to enable smaller school districts to be able to afford their educational costs.” It is clear that this individual blames the state for the school district’s problems. Another person, further along in the same thread, posted “face the facts, the state is going to start merging the school.” Some residents clearly believe that the state will force
mergers in districts deemed too small or academically inept. Another post indicated that the threat to local small schools is real, citing the Berger Commission that closed rural hospitals as an example of potential state action.

One online contributor observed that the state mandated consolidation process may be sabotaging the need to bring communities together to create a stronger school system. “What’s ironic, is that the very document required by NYS Ed in the beginning of the process (the feasibility study) is what divided the communities in the first place.” Through the state mandated consolidation process, each community examined every part of its school system. The consolidation report examines district financial reports in detail. The process looks at programmatic offerings within the two communities and how in alignment the resources are. This profound observation by a contributor really gets to the heart of a procedural question, which is often never addressed: why is the process so divisive?

Researchers suggests that some people’s opinions do not often align with the state when rural educational practices are involved: Haller, Nusser & Monk (1999) found a misalignment between people’s perceptions of their schools and state education officials’ judgements. Fieldmann (2003) found that rural communities believe the state will not listen to their will in matters involving rural education programs. Theobald (1997) found significant discord between rural communities’ education goals and the urban-based state government’s stated goals. These goals included the state’s desire to educate people for a global workforce, while rural areas wanted local knowledge and expertise passed along. Scribner (2016) describes rural school consolidation battles as an attempt by local communities to ensure that they could maintain independent “home rule” without interference from neighboring cities or state government, especially in the areas of school reform.
Disagreements: Losing Identity- A Community Concern

As Cocram (Observer 2013) and others online revealed, Westfield was of two minds. Cocram (2013) indicated “we are not fighting over our mascot.” Formally, identity via sports was not really considered an important issue. In the formal report (2013) about consolidation, a member of the advisory panel indicated the merger “was not about which community was better.” Online commentary also indicated that sports and identity weren’t an issue, at least not for some community members who indicated in online posts that it’s “not about sports...do what’s best for our children.”

Some online commentators were not enamored with the prospect of merging the two communities. There were a number of attacks back and forth. The language appearing in posts included derogatory terms such as “stuck up” and “redneck” There were insults concerning welfare rolls, the number of special needs students, and a belief that the board of education members were in it “for their own interests.”

Disagreements: Trust of School Officials

Trust was identified in approximately 15% of the online posts as a reason not to support the consolidation effort. The 15% represents all of the posts examined in this instance, not just those opposed to consolidation. Online, 37 threads existed in the Westfield-Brocton consolidation discussion. One thread was short, only one post; other threads were large, and included over 60+ individual posts. Regarding the issue of trust, one particular quote revealed the quandary district officials often find themselves in when trying to communicate the complex nature of school finances with the public. The consolidation report, over 100 pages in length, contains numerous charts, graphs and figures. School budgets contain multiple line items for
salaries, benefits, equipment, supplies, and reserve funds. (Kogan, Lavertu,, & Peskowitz, 2016)

This quandary often led to accusations of deceit. In one online quote a post spelled out some community members’ reluctance to trust the Board and the State:

The reason mergers have failed and taxpayers don’t trust the school BOEs and superintendents is because they have lied to the public. Whatever they say the public does not trust them. They claim they are broke when it costs 20,000 to educate a student. The system is broke. 20,000 per student and they can’t get it done. What a joke.

Online, this reoccurring theme of trust issues between district officials and the community related to what Cramer (2016) and others have found in interactions between local governments and the community: different perspectives on what each side believes is the truth.

Frequently the word “truth” was used to refer to alternative suggestions, or alternative sources of information, concerning the consolidation information produced by the districts. In multiple threads, readers were directed to Facebook to search “The Real Truth about the Brocton-Westfield merger.” In another example, a post explicitly mentioned the author receiving a mailing that was titled “The Truth about the merger.” A third example cites the reason for the consolidation failure was “when people learned the truth about Brocton’s financial picture.” Additionally, people were concerned that the official school information wasn’t telling the whole story: “seems like a lot of half-truths and positive spin in the school sponsored merger brochures and postcards.” One contribution raised the issue of fiscal information the district provided during Board meetings: “Board member…stated that whether we merge or not, we will still be in fiscal stress….If that’s the case, Westfield should go it alone. Did we mention that the district finished the year with a surplus of $520,000?”

Other contributors appeared to believe that both pro- and anti-merger groups were spreading half-truths: “sounds like this group might have hidden motives. Group of concerned
citizens who care so much yet don’t care enough about [their] cause to be public about who they are, they just post things online.” In summary, a lack of trust between school officials and the community was identified in a number of threads. This perceived lack of trust between the community and the school may stem from what some community members commented on line describing, in their opinion the opaque nature of school budgeting and decision-making. This situation is very similar to what Rey (2014) found when interviewing rural superintendents.

Administration and elected officials are often placed at odds with the residents in a community and how both groups view the status of the local school district: “Both superintendents clearly recognized distinctions among their own, other educators’, and parents' conceptions of the content and goals of ‘a good education,’ but they struggled with how to navigate the tensions” (Rey, 2014, p. 528). The dissonance between professional educator’s views and rural residents can lead to a lack of trust.

The local community often does not understand what the school leadership is attempting to do and why they are undertaking specific actions. The local sentiments expressed online also echo research conducted by Haller, Nusser, and Monk (1999) that found disconnects between the state views of local education and the local community perceptions of school performance. This led to a lack of trust in the rural communities regarding what the state was doing for local schools.

**Disagreements: Programmatic Debates**

Some individuals who posted online during the consolidation debate felt the schools were trying to do too much programmatically. Their structural position was to identify where schools offered too much and identify the excess as a reason for the fiscal problems facing the schools. One such comment referring to the extras the Westfield school offered claimed: “It is
the desire to have an abundance of extras that is pulling the district down sooner.” The question many residents appeared to ask is “why do we need this?” Especially in light of the repeated claims of school resource poverty, residents did not understand why the schools could not do what families often do when times are economically tough: cut back. For some people in these rural areas, the school should provide basic instruction to students that will facilitate success in the rural economy of their area.

Other people argued that the programs offered at both schools were inadequate: “Does anyone care at all about the more complete education our kids are going to get with a merger rather than the basic one they are getting now?” One person was confused by the merger report itself, stating that the two schools had seen a decline in electives: “they [the schools] have just as many electives now as they did 14 years ago.” Yet another contributor rebutted this assertion with this statement: “It’s ridiculous to say that there are more electives than before—ask my kids who sit in 3 study halls each day? Programs, sports, clubs classes are on life support there!” Other participants felt that the program, especially at Westfield was more than adequate: “Westfield already provides quality education, the problem is it is expensive.” The theme contained in fewer than 75 posts out of 300 posts was educational program or quality of program, and a disconnect appears to exist between the perspectives in the online discussion and official school documents and statements prioritizing program improvements. This disconnect could be considered a basic definition of a values conflict within the community. Rey (2014) found this tension while interviewing superintendents in rural schools in New York State: “You have to meet with parents face-to-face and explain how the country and state are requiring more than when they went to school. You have to show them the tests and the standards. They may not
like it, but they know we need to work on academic achievement in ways we did not in the past” (p. 522).

**Phase 4: Community member agency: Voting**

The initial phase of voting, the Straw Vote of June 18, 2013, saw an overwhelming level of support for consolidation. Brocton approved the measure 468-77, while Westfield agreed 508-168. Yet four months later, residents in Brocton and Westfield had a difference of opinion on October 9, 2013. Brocton supported the merger by a wide margin (643 yes/74 no), whereas Westfield defeated it (507 – 718). Turnout was higher for the statutory vote than the straw poll. For comparison, the Consolidation Study (2013, p. 69) reported the 10 year budget votes for Brocton averaging 350 yes and 215 no, while Westfield averaged 305 yes and 167 no. Voter turnout for the straw and binding votes were above the 10 year average for budget votes.

Exit polls and results from the vote appeared on the school districts’ website, and reported in the *Dunkirk Observer* (Fox, 2014). The exit poll results helped the district understand residents’ viewpoints on the consolidation. As reported on the district website and in the Observer, the newly-consolidated high school’s placement and taxation rate issues were raised as the top two reasons the vote failed: “Brocton was going to use the merger incentive money…to benefit greatly, whereas Westfield would not” (Fox, 2014). Ultimately, the consolidation failed because residents of Westfield thought their community would not benefit as much from the merger as Brocton.

A quote from the Brocton superintendent indicated that “economic identity played a part; the people in Westfield felt that if they didn’t have a high school, the people would not go down into the community for activities that took place, then stop at McDonald’s or stop at the drug store on the way home” (Fox, 2014). A third reason raised by the poll was the speed of the vote.
Some residents felt the process of just over one year was too fast. When asked by the school board in a survey conducted in Westfield by SUNY Fredonia staff almost six months after the failed merger vote if the community would like to revote on the merger, a resoundingly number of residents chose to go it alone. For voters in the Westfield community, the consolidation did not meet their needs, as reflected by the vote totals to reject the merger.

Conclusion

Returning to the three dissertation questions I asked in chapter 1, I found that online, community members were very concerned about their school and village. The picture in 2013, economically, socially, and educationally, caused real concern among members of the Brocton and Westfield educational leadership. The media in Chautauqua County actively sought to support consolidation. In the background, residents of the two communities began to ask “What can we do besides merge?” as the on-line discussions indicated that, to many working-class residents, the expenditure side of the equation was too high. Instead of consolidating their school, make the public employees take a pay cut and rethink the status quo. Others wanted the tax cut to be “at least 30%” and “not have bells and whistles” because if the savings weren’t substantial for the taxpayers “why bother?”

Some members of the community felt the process was not genuine, it was too fast, or the goal wasn’t for the public’s benefit but for individuals or specific group’s enhancement. Their viewpoint, clearly helped them believe the system was broke. As Binelli and Loveless (2016) found in their research, and Cramer (2016) found in Wisconsin, there are often two different perspectives on the notions of inequality and the solutions to solve those inequalities. For the formal leadership, the schools need to provide students with skills for the next century. For some residents, the merger was a way for the unions and administrators to “line their pockets…”
In returning to dissertation question two, the lack of alignment between officials, the media and online defeated the proposed merger. The voting results – passing in one districts and failing in the other – clearly indicate that the two communities did not agree upon the solution proposed in this merger. Nor did members of the two communities believe that consolidation was the solution to the problems of declining resources and increased educational demands on the districts. One of the local papers, the Observer, is still pushing for consolidations.

Regionally, the issue is still under discussion. In the case of a neighboring district, Ripley, the decision was made to tuition their secondary students to a neighboring community. This mirrors decisions made in the Adirondacks, where Piseco Common and Raquette Lake UFSD have both tuitioned their students to neighboring schools. Community members in the western New York region still feel that Albany does not support the western areas of the state. The website “Unshackle Upstate” describes how decisions made in Albany continue to hurt Western NY and the southern tier. With other schools that merged now facing declining state aid as the 14 years runs out, the debate over school consolidation still appears.

Table 4.6 below summarizes the concerns of the three groups (school officials, the media and online discussion). Along the top axis, the issues raised in the consolidation study are identified and then marked in the cross box in the chart to demonstrate which group raised the issue. This chart answers my first research question: what were the issues raided across the three groups studied as part of this case? The groups raised five issues: cost, opportunity for students, trust in school officials, increased state standards, and forced merger. The chart also displays the alignment between the school officials and media who agreed that the school officials are to be trusted and that a consolidation would increase efficiency, improve educational outcomes, and address the increased state standards.
Table 4.6: Issue Alignment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue raised</th>
<th>Cost</th>
<th>Opportunity for students via programming</th>
<th>Trust in school officials</th>
<th>Increased State standards</th>
<th>State will force a merger</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Official</td>
<td>x-efficiency</td>
<td>+ (improvement)</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media</td>
<td>x-efficiency</td>
<td>+ (improvement)</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online</td>
<td>x-efficiency and reduction (tax rates too high)</td>
<td>- (program overreach)</td>
<td>- Did not trust</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.6 describes a commonality across all three sources, namely in the areas of cost and rising state standards. All three groups identified costs as an area that was integral to the consolidation efforts, and they agreed there was a need to increase efficiency in how the two school districts worked. There were disagreements between online sources and the officials and the media over programming, with online contributors identifying program overreach as a problem, while the media and the officials wanted to increase the programming. There were two threads unique to the online contributors alone: trust and state forcing consolidation. These may be part of a “hidden transcript.”

As Scott (1990) describes, the “hidden transcript” emerged online: namely, the costs driving school expenses needed to be contained “in house” before a district merger occurred. Second, some members of the community did not trust that the officials involved in consolidation had the best intentions for the district at heart. Third, some members of the online community were afraid the state would take away their ability to exercise control in their home structure. Merger on the current terms would forestall later problems.
My third dissertation question is partially answered throughout this chapter. The Westfield community exercised agency by defeating the consolidation. With Westfield losing its high school, and the increase in tax rate following a successful merger, then one of the most critical goals for the actual merger would not be accomplished: lowering local tax rates in both communities. This was a non-negotiable outcome for many online participants. If there was not a savings, then why bother merging? A dissonance appeared between the official narrative and the “hidden transcript,” between the desire of school officials to downplay the location of the school building and the significance the location really held to community residents.

There was agreement between the official school position and the media. They both agreed the status quo could not continue. There was disagreement between these two groups and some members of the online community. A small but vocal group argued that the schools should reduce costs by cutting the existing structures and programs before any further consolidation should be discussed.

The people of Westfield spoke by voting down the consolidation efforts. Enough residents were concerned about the increased tax rate and the lack of programmatic benefits, the community chose to defeat the merger.
Table 4.7: Community alignment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Brocton</th>
<th>Westfield</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Problem existence</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solution acceptance</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.11 summarizes results of the analysis of the three sources of information: the official consolidation documentation, media reports, and online posts. It shows that both communities agreed that a problem did exist in the current education environment: the status quo would no longer work. The continued policy of raising taxes was no longer sufficient to carry resident support for schools. The two communities disagreed about how to solve this problem. Brocton accepted school consolidation as an alternative option; the voters in Westfield did not.
CHAPTER 5:
OPPENHEIM-EPHRATA AND ST. JOHNsville: COMPLETED CONSOLIDATION

Introduction

This chapter explores an implemented consolidation that took place in the Adirondack/Mohawk Valley Region of New York State. The effort in the two school district communities of Oppenheim-Ephrata and St. Johnsville occurred while three other consolidation attempts were underway in nearby regions. Media and online discussions of school district consolidations focused both locally and regionally as newspapers and individuals included information on all consolidation attempts, not just the local one selected for the presented case study.

This results chapter will provide evidence to address the dissertation questions asked in Chapter 1, specifically the issues that emerged online concerning consolidation and whether there was alignment between the three narrative sources of consolidation. Finally, using the five phase framework I am proposing, I explore how the communities finally decided that combining school districts would benefit both populations.

Background

Situated in the Mohawk River Valley and the Adirondack Foothills, the communities of Oppenheim-Ephrata and St. Johnsville have deep roots historically in the region. Founded after the westward movement of farmers, following the opening of the New York frontier, Oppenheim-Ephrata became a farming-centered community. St Johnsville, founded along the Erie Canal, became a way station between Albany and Utica, as resources and produce from the area made its way eastward and manufacturing products headed west. After the decline of the Erie Canal, and the economic downturns following World War II, both communities experienced
recession like conditions. Since both communities are on the fringe of the Adirondacks’ tourism and the Tech hub of Utica/Rome, the economic growth of those two industries has not yet positively impacted the areas.

Oppenheim- Ephrata School District was created in 1939 out of 18 common schools. The newly-formed school district was supposed to combine with Dolgeville and Stratford Central School Districts under the master plan (NYSED, 1958, p. 293). St. Johnsville was created in 1942 from 20 separate schools in the areas surrounding the village. No further consolidations were anticipated (NYSED, 1958, p. 434).

According to the Master Plan for school district reorganization (NYSED, 1958) Oppenheim-Ephrata was supposed to consolidate with Dolgeville, a neighboring village to the northwest. St. Johnsville was not included in future consolidation plans. Due to this soft directive from the state, Oppenheimer-Ephrata had explored further consolidations with neighboring districts for the past 60 years. In addition, St. Johnsville had also been part of multiple consolidation attempts with their neighbors during the same time period. Both school communities had experienced multiple failed merger attempts with their neighbors since the publication of the Master Plan in 1958.

**Phase 1: Situational development**

As the economic situation deteriorated in 2008, St. Johnsville school district experienced a crisis moment, when a much needed building project proposal was defeated. The elementary school in the district needed, in the words of the pre-consolidation study, “significant updates.” In order to access state funding for building projects, and additional operating aid to stem the shrinking resources and increasing budget cuts, the St. Johnsville Board of Education approached its neighbors, Fort Plain Central School District and Oppenheim-Ephrata Central School about a
pre-merger study. Following a “pre-merger” study, the report and consultants concluded that Oppenheim-Ephrata would benefit from merging with either of the two schools. The St. Johnsville would only benefit if the merger with Oppenheim-Ephrata succeeded. This benefit would be fiscal, as the tax rates in St. Johnsville and Oppenheim-Ephrata would decrease with the application of consolidation aid. St. Johnsville residents would not see a fiscal benefit if a three way consolidation happened, or if Fort Plain was the merging partner.

Community Demographic Statistics

In this next section, I examine both communities in greater detail in order to provide a “thick description” (Creswell, 2014) of the realities that community members experienced daily which may have influenced their thinking during the consolidation process. I start with demographics, then detail the ethnic composition of the two communities. My third comparison examines the local school district and finally, compare salaries between the community’s residents and employees within the district.

Table 5.1 presents overall demographic data for Oppenheim-Ephrata and St. Johnsville. As Brasington (2003) pointed out, districts considering consolidation should be similar in order to facilitate a successful attempt.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 5.1: Community Demographics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oppenheim-Ephrata</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population 2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size (sq. miles)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tax Levy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approved expenditures</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Consolidation study, 2011
Table 5.1 shows that the St. Johnsville community experiences a slight decline in its population, while Oppenheim-Ephrata demonstrated a slight increase. The St. Johnsville school district is compact as it is centered on its namesake village, while Oppenheim-Ephrata, created from rural one room school houses is more than twice the size. Both areas have similar income levels, and a similar tax rate. These similarities meet Brasington (2003) definition of similar schools and predict a successful consolidation outcome. Table 5.2, below, examines each community in more demographic depth.

Table 5.2: Ethnic Comparisons

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Oppenheim-Ephrata</th>
<th>St. Johnsville</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>99%</td>
<td>98%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Consolidation study, 2011

Table 5.2 shows the remarkable ethnic homogeneity in the two communities. Both communities have almost no ethnic diversity, and are even less ethnically diverse than the two communities presented in Chapter 4, Brocton and Westfield. This is abnormally high, even for rural areas with majority white populations (Goyette, 2017). The homogeneity also translates into the schools, as table 5.3 below reveals.

Table 5.3: School Comparisons

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Oppenheim-Ephrata</th>
<th>St. Johnsville</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student enrollment</td>
<td>347</td>
<td>448</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Free &amp; Reduced Lunch</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduation rate</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Consolidation study, 2011.

Table 5.3 demonstrates the two school districts are remarkably similar. The only difference is the St. Johnsville district, which is 20% larger than the Oppenheim-Ephrata school district. In all other areas, the two school districts are very similar, including in poverty rates as demonstrated by Free and Reduced Lunches. The graduation rates are exactly the same, and
indicate that both districts are not meeting the state requirement of 80%. Table 5.4, below, begins to show some differences, in finance and income, between the two communities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Oppenheim-Ephrata</th>
<th>St. Johnsville</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Superintendent</td>
<td>$120,000</td>
<td>$125,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>$49,007 (median)</td>
<td>$58,987 (median)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support Staff</td>
<td>$16,000</td>
<td>$17,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>$36,503</td>
<td>$37,574</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Consolidation study, 2011

Table 5.4 demonstrates that there are some differences between the two school districts. The employees in St. Johnsville seem to benefit from a larger, and slightly wealthier district, in terms of pay. The teaching and administrative staff in both districts received better compensated than the local community population. These salary differences would again foreshadow some of the online dialogue, which accused professional staff in the schools of advocating for consolidation in order to level up their contracts. Turning now to the second part of Phase 1: Situational development, I now describe what the school boards in both districts did prior to consolidation.

**Board Action Prior to this consolidation attempt**

The consolidation study indicated both Boards of Education faced “abundant challenges” (Study, 2011, p. 5). The study further describes “[s]tate standards continue to rise, requiring students to do more in order to attain a high school diploma… As districts strive to provide more for their students, financial challenges continue to grow in the nation and in New York State in particular” (Study, 2011, p. 5). In the midst of the rising standards and shrinking resources, the study indicated both Boards of Education had made significant budget reductions, eliminating teaching positions and programs, combining sports between schools, and raising tax rates under the tax cap of 2%. In the face of the dissonance between rising standards and expectations from
the state and the need at the local level to cut costs, the consultants stated, “[i]t is clearly time for courageous school leaders to begin discussions about doing business differently.” (Study, 2011, p. 5). The study’s language sets up the official narrative—the two school boards were undertaking a consolidation attempt in order to change the business-as-usual paradigm in their local district.

Both school district Board of Education had reduced overall budgets while attempting to maintain programming. Both budgets are similar, with St. Johnsville reporting a 5.8 million dollars a year approved expenditure plan, while Oppenheim-Ephrata approved a 5.1 million dollars a year plan. Both districts also had cut, as per the study, a significant portion of extra and co-curricular activities. As a cost savings measure, the Boards in both schools had combined multiple sports teams into a two-district endeavor starting three years prior to the consolidation attempt. The biggest difference between the two communities had been the St. Johnsville renovations, which focused on the middle-high school in the previous five years.

As the Great Recession had impacted districts heavily dependent on state aid, and the Gap Elimination Adjustment began to impact districts, a number of surrounding communities were voting on consolidations, and defeating the proposals. As other districts were impacted by the economy, policy, and voter agency, as stated earlier in this chapter, the school boards of Oppenheim-Ephrata, St. Johnsville, and Fort Plain chose to conduct a pre-consolidation study. The pre-consolidation study revealed that Fort Plain would not be a logical part of a merger going forward.

**Phase 2: Local governing board reaction**

After the three-way pre-consolidation study was published, and the report indicated that Oppenheim-Ephrata and St. Johnsville would be the logical consolidation pair, the two Boards of
Education called for volunteers to serve on the advisory committees. The pre-consolidation study indicated that the Oppenheim-Ephrata and St. Johnsville taxpayers would both see immediate tax relief in a successful consolidation. Further, the pre-consolidation study indicated the two communities would programmatically benefit from a joint effort as a newly formed school district going forward.

The official narrative

The Boards, the superintendents and other officials participated in a series of discussions with local stakeholders with a focus on helping to educate the public about the benefits of consolidation. The board, the advisory committees and the consultants then produced a report, approved by State Education Department, which stated the goal of consolidating the two school districts would be increased opportunity and improved efficiency.

Goal 1: Increased Opportunity

As the consolidation study indicated, the combined Oppenheim-Ephrata and St. Johnsville School districts would offer students more opportunities to undertake additional curricular and extra-curricular activities. Within the consolidation report, the consultants indicated that students in both school districts would share greater access to higher level courses, as the two schools offered Advanced Placement and Herkimer Community College Classes not offered in the other district. The additional classes would help the district address one of the concerns expressed in the consolidation study: that standards and expectations were rising for all students to complete a Regents Diploma. With both districts facing potential state sanctions for graduation rates of 77%, any additional courses and resources would be driven to the goal.

The report also indicated that students in Oppenheim-Ephrata had access to more extra-curricular clubs than students in St. Johnsville. If the two schools were combined, the students in
the two communities could equally benefit from these additional offerings. The report cited specifically the opportunity for additional Board of Cooperative Education Services opportunities presented to students in a combined district. The report cited that the number of programs previously cut due to budget challenges could be restored following a successful merger.

In the merger study, the official narrative was clear: the goal of increased opportunities for students by removing redundancies in course offerings would allow a shift in funds to increase curriculum offerings. The report specifically cited overlap in core courses in each subject that were undersubscribed. The examples provided indicated that smaller enrollments in core courses, such as Social Studies 9, could be re-directed to support additional electives for senior students.

The consolidation report indicated that increased opportunity would appear in extra-curricular activities. As previously difficult budgets limited what the two schools could do on their own, the report indicated the districts had combined some sports teams. A combined school district could offer residents additional opportunities at all levels of schooling. This would include additional sports and clubs for elementary and middle school students, along with additional high school opportunities.

**Goal 2: Increased Efficiency**

The consolidation study document indicates across multiple sections, such as personnel, facilities, and programming, a combined school district could use the districts’ scarce resources much more efficiently. Two areas received emphasis within the consolidation report: reallocation of staff and decreased tax rates. The report spent considerable space discussing how a combined district could explore these two sub-goals of increased efficiency.
The consolidation report indicated that a merged district could reduce the number of staff in the combined district by reallocating those positions to other uses. The two separate school districts employed seven total administrative staff. The report suggested eliminating two administrative positions for a cost savings or reallocation of approximately $250,000 (Study, 2011, p. 107). This reduction would realize an almost 30% savings in administrative expenses.

The second major efficiency the study recommended is that “filling each position should be evaluated” (Study, 2011, p. 122). The report indicated that the two districts’ staff are similar in size and similar in function, but not title. It proposed that, as attrition occurs, and after a typically negotiated “freeze” period of 5 years after a consolidation, the newly constituted Boards of Education would be free to re-structure positions as they saw fit. This restructuring would include re-negotiating contracts with staff, creating or eliminating positions, and re-evaluating district budgetary outlays.

A third major efficiency described in the report was transportation and building usage. The report recommended that all school structures be used after the consolidation, with an elementary program existing in both communities, the newly constituted district’s middle school in Oppenheim-Ephrata, and the high school in St. Johnsville. This alignment would allow for reallocating resources from existing separate programs into combined programs. Additionally, the report indicated newly constituted bussing routes would reduce expenses by combining “fringe runs” into more centralized runs.

The fourth major efficiency the report describes is reducing tax rates for both communities. The report proposed using up to one third (33%) of the additional state aid to reduce the property tax rates for both communities. Both communities would experience an almost immediate decrease in tax rates. Further, a newly-combined district would receive
additional state aid for the purposes of retiring debt on previous construction and funding new
collection with zero impact to the community (Study, 2011, p. 71-74).

As described by the consolidation study report, a combined Oppenheim-Ephrata St.
Johnsville School District would increase opportunities for its students and greater efficiency in
implementing newer programs. During public hearings and meetings on the subject, residents in
both communities said that they were pleased and looked forward to the opportunity to vote in
the advisory or straw poll (Bump, 2011). The St. Johnsville Board of Education approved the
report and sent it on to the Oppenheim-Ephrata School Board. During the Board of Education
meeting, however, the Oppenheim-Ephrata board voted 3-4 and rejected the report, thereby
stopping the consolidation process.

An official counter narrative

To this point in the consolidation process, all officials engaged in the process, be it Board
members, school employees, or members of the advisory committee members, seemed in favor
of consolidation; however, a majority of Oppenheim-Ephrata Board members indicated that they
were against the consolidation because they felt the community “needed more information” and
that the “process was too fast.” As reported in the Courier-Standard-Enterprise article covering
the process, board members described too many questions left unanswered, and their “sense of
the community” was such that they wanted to hold with moving forward (Courier-Standard
Enterprise, October 11, 2011). To that end, St. Johnsville lost their merger partner, and the
Oppenheim-Ephrata School District would not consolidate.

An official reversal

Following the announcement of the decision to stop the merger process, residents in the
Oppenheim-Ephrata school district began a campaign to lobby the board to allow an advisory, or
straw, vote. At the Board of Education meeting at the end of October, 2011, a motion to allow the advisory vote was again on the agenda, and at this meeting, a 4-3 vote approved the process going forward. When interviewed by local media outlets, one Oppenheim-Ephrata board member indicated he “wanted people to have their say” (*Courier-Standard Enterprise*, October, 2011). In the case of Oppenheim-Ephrata, the official narrative (Phase 2) blended into Community Sense making (Phase 3) as residents lobbied officials to allow for a vote on implementation.

**From advisory vote to binding vote**

As both communities began to ready for their advisory, or straw vote in December of 2011, the two school districts jointly held information sessions to inform residents of the process, and the potential outcomes from a positive binding vote. One way the districts accomplished this task involved holding meetings in both communities. District leaders, consultants, and local elected officials attended the events and presented to the community and answered questions. As the *Times Telegram* indicated in articles from November 1st, 2nd, and 8th, local political leaders from the Assembly and State Senate, as well as school officials presented information on the merger process, the potential benefits of consolidation, and state actions necessary to schedule a binding Vote. The *Times Telegram* then reported on November 24th the State Education Department approved the consolidation report, and the binding vote was scheduled for December 7th, 2011.

**Actions after the first binding vote**

With an advisory vote passed successfully, the second or statutory vote was on the horizon for the two districts. As in the study reported in Chapter 4, one community defeated the binding vote. Oppenheim-Ephrata’s residents chose by a slim margin to defeat the proposed
merger. In the subsequent administrative actions in response to the defeat, the proposed school budget included significant cuts, just as the administration had warned would happen. The Board and administrators placed this budget up for vote in the spring. The district also lost one of its administrators, as the Oppenheim-Ephrata principal accepted a position in St. Johnsville after that district’s principal was promoted to deputy superintendent to ease their leadership transition. Oppenheim-Ephrata lost programming, positions, and activities. The district had lost one of its leaders. The combined sports agreement with St. Johnsville lapsed.

This chapter now turns to describing what the media and online discussions reveal about the community’s attempt at sense-making during their consolidation process.

**Analysis of data**

This section of the chapter now examines my analysis of the source material, and how the story of the Oppenheim-Ephrata and St. Johnsville merger evolved during the third phase, community sense-making. Like the analysis provided in Chapter 4, Brocton-Westfield, the media narrative supported the official narrative, while online, a different “hidden transcript” emerged.

**Phase 3: Community sense making**

In reviewing two elements of community sense making, the media and online sources, a number of echoes from Chapter 4 emerge. Media sources soundly support consolidation, and online contributors ask what internal action steps should happen before a consolidation. As noted earlier in this chapter, a number of media sources were covering this consolidation attempt in conjunction with others happening regionally.

**Media Narrative**

Three newspapers, the *Herkimer Times-Telegram*, the *Gloversville Courier-Standard Enterprise* and the large regional paper, the *Utica Observer-Dispatch*, serve Oppenheim-Ephrata
and St. Johnsville. As Tracy (2011) described, local newspapers cover local educational news heavily due to interest displayed by their readership. All three papers clearly supported consolidation and used editorials, reporter’s articles, and published letters to the editor to raise readers’ awareness of the issue.

The media first expressed support for consolidation when the *Times Telegram* issued an editorial praising the Boards of Education for funding the consolidation study out of district funding first, and then seeking a grant as a “commitment to study a merger” (*Times Telegram*, May 12, 2010). This praise is echoed in an editorial carried in the *Observer-Dispatch* praising Board of Education for exploring regional consolidation, taking “brave steps” to examine merging, and chastised other smaller districts for not following suit (*Observer-Dispatch*, September 1, 2010). The two papers were praising this commitment to study a merger due to the controversy erupting locally when school officials raised the issue, considering how contentious consolidation studies become locally (NYSSBA, 2014). The themes emerging from the three newspapers in the area are similar to themes reported in Chapter 4: efficiency and educating the public about the consolidation process were the focus of media coverage.

*Media Narrative 1: Efficiency:* The three media outlets covering the Oppenheim-Ephrata and St. Johnsville consolidation attempted to emphasize the improved efficiency a combined school would bring to residents in the area. The theme was presented to readers in two ways. First, the media emphasized that a combined school district could reduce taxes and receive greater state aid. Second, media reported that a more efficient school district would offer better programming to current and future residents, ensuring community survival. An examination of the two narratives related to efficiency reveals that they clearly align with the official school district narratives and align with the narratives presented in Chapter 4.
Reducing taxes as part of efficiency: All three papers covering the consolidation attempt indicated that a combined school would reduce taxes and bring additional revenue into the area. The Utica Observer Dispatch editorial board argued that reducing taxes and increasing educational opportunities for students made sense in an economically depressed region (Observer-Dispatch, Nov. 11, 2011). A second article supported the goal of increased efficiency by indicating “local districts are not alone...[as] many other schools are considering consolidation to save money” (Observer-Dispatch, November 28, 2011). The Observer Dispatch’s editorial board also served as the editors for the Times-Telegram and used that outlet to promote the tax reduction theme in its coverage.

A successful school consolidation would bring an additional $14 million dollars in state aid to the two communities (Times Telegram, Feb 12, 2011). The paper’s continued coverage of the merger indicated that shared services and decreased redundancies would provide “savings to the taxpayer…” (Times Telegram, April 2, 2011). The phrase “taxpayer savings” could be interpreted as reduced tax rates. State law in New York State compels school districts to limit an unrestricted fund balance. The fund balance is achieved by collecting more taxes than are spent. By reducing expenditures and by reducing tax rates, local tax payers would see savings in their yearly school tax bills.

The editor and reporters of the Courier Standard Enterprise emphasized the twin points of improved efficiency and greater state aid. In the paper’s coverage of the initial merger discussion, a headline read, “Merged District to see Huge State Aid Boost.” In the body of the article, the paper indicated a successfully merged district would see an additional $14 million in state aid (Courier Standard Enterprise, Feb 17, 2011).
The three papers seem to emphasize the savings to taxpayers in their coverage of consolidation. The papers emphasized the ability of a newly formed district to reduce redundancy, and waste by combining into a single district. The improved efficiency from combined districts would then translate into savings to the taxpayer by eliminating overlap in budgets, which would then result in lower taxes for residents. The three papers also tacitly endorsed using some of the increased state aid to reduce taxes for taxpayers. By shifting local burden (local taxes) onto the state (consolidation aid) the papers were tacitly creating an “us” versus “them” sub-narrative. As Thomas & Smith (2009) found in researching New York State, upstate rural areas often feel Albany (the state) actively supports downstate, and withholds much needed resources (or school aid) from rural areas, especially schools. In the opinion of local upstate residents, shifting local tax burden onto the state is one step in righting a perceived inequality expressed over state tax funding. This subtext is similar to what was seen in media coverage described in chapter 4.

The emphasis on reducing taxes and saving taxpayer money is a theme that emerges locally and in previous research into rationale for merging rural schools (Biddle & Aznao, 2016). Other authors (Feldmann, 2003; Parkerson & Parkerson, 2015; Schmuck & Schmuck, 1982) have shown how reformers have historically cast rural schools as inefficient and wasteful. The media coverage locally aligns with research trends in the field of rural education. The efficiency narrative from the papers also bolstered the narrative that local communities were desperate for survival, and the only action that would save the areas was a school consolidation.

*Media Narrative 2: Community Survival:* Newspaper reports emphasized community survival was tied to successful consolidation. This rhetorical technique by newspapers created a heightened sense of urgency attached to the consolidation efforts in the region, and by extension,
voter decisions on the ballot. Opening the narrative of community survival was the Observer-Dispatch’s editorial board’s observation on consolidation:

merger may be the only way for these districts to continue to meet the education goals of providing a viable program and sustainable budget …[the] bottom line is what will be best for students …(Observer-Dispatch, Nov 7, 2011).

In black and white, the regional newspaper equated combining two school districts with the very survival of their communities.

The narrative of the Times-Telegram matched the Observer Dispatch. Superintendent Russon of Oppenheim-Ephrata was quoted that “merger may be the only way to survive” (Times Telegram, Jan 7, 2010). By selecting to quote a superintendent equating merger with survival, the paper presented a heightened sense of urgency to its readers. The quote from the superintendent is profound because of the typical role a superintendent plays in a district. As the chief spokesperson for their school, a superintendent usually shares a positive narrative with the community. Communicating with the taxpaying public, the superintendent wants to create a normal narrative of trust- the school is spending tax money judiciously, and students attending the school are well prepared to meet the future. The narrative presented in the superintendent’s quote of “survive” is the exact opposite of the normal, expected, and encouraged view concerning the local school (Kotter, 2009; Kowalski, et al, 2011).

Part of survival for the two school districts was combining sports programs (Times Telegram, January 23, 2010). Survival of the community also means yearly traditions. As such, the Times Telegram gave extensive coverage to the joint homecoming event shared by the two community’s athletics (Times Telegram, September 2011). High school sports and homecoming are significant parts of rural student’s schooling experiences. Tieken (2014) describes the role of
homecoming in her exploration of Hope, Arkansas. DeYoung (1987) and Peshkin (1978), when exploring rural schools in the Midwest, spent extensive space reporting on homecoming activities and events. Recent research explores how rural areas are portrayed in American media—with a focus on dances and sports (Fulkerson & Thomas, 2016).

As the economy in New York State continued to decline during the consolidation process, news from Albany indicated that local schools were about to receive worse news. Explaining to their audience the economic downturn would lead to a “massive state aid cut...mergers may be the only way to survive…” (Times Telegram, December 29, 2011). The Times Telegram continued presenting consolidation as survival narrative. With a cut in regular state aid expected, the only possibility of additional aid would be consolidation. And the only way to survive was consolidation.

With the narrative goal of efficiency and the sub goals of savings and survival via consolidation, educating residents about consolidations emerged as the second goal within the narrative.

**Media Goal 3: Educating Readers:** As described earlier, a school district consolidation process is complicated with multiple steps. The process requires expert help for school professionals. The first sub narrative emerging in reports were reports designed to educate their readership about the consolidation process and the role residents play in voting. A second sub goal emerging from media reports indicated a concerted effort to combat “merger myths.” The media’s desire to educate readers aligns with the media narrative presented in chapter 4’s case study.

**The process:** In 2008, the Utica Observer-Dispatch ran an editorial challenging local schools, and by extension, taxpayers to “talk merger” in light of the Commission on Property
Tax Relief’s finding that school spending was “50% above national average.” The editorial further mentioned the Commission’s suggestion that small districts consolidate. The paper suggested that

Merging schools is nothing new in New York state. It happened with more regularity years ago as union free and common schools discovered the advantages of combining resources and became part of centralized districts... *(Observer-Dispatch, December 14, 2008).*

The editorial next describes a type of consolidation, annexation, and districts in existence emerged from the process. A list of failed consolidation attempts in the area is used to highlight the number of attempts. The editorial also gives readers some positives of consolidation, such as savings, improved programming, and aid to improve buildings. The last part of the article challenges readers:

The fear of losing community identity and tradition are no longer good enough reasons to ignore the realities confronting taxpayers’ ability to provide an affordable, sound education for our young people. A state-mandated merger would likely be much more painful than one worked out between consenting districts. That talk needs to start now. *(Observer-Dispatch, December 14, 2008)*

Almost a year later, the editors published another editorial asking local residents to “talk merger” *(Observer-Dispatch, October 27, 2009).* The editorial encourages local school districts to study consolidation as a way to save money and improve programs for their local communities. When the pre-consolidation study conducted by Oppenheim-Ephrata, St. Johnsville, and Fort Plain recommended a two school consolidation, the paper published an information piece on the study
and its conclusions of improved programming and increased efficiencies (Observer-Dispatch, January 11, 2010).

The two other regional papers, the Times Telegram and the Courier Standard Enterprise also produced similar articles and editorials. The major difference between the three papers’ coverage of the process was the depth to which the Times Telegram spent on the actual process. The editors, reporters, letter to the editors, and web presence for the Times Telegram allocated space to the actual process steps—which included covering the advisory committee meetings and the public hearings, and publishing letters from Board of Education members concerning the process and how voters could stay engaged and informed.

The papers also critiqued the state and the process of consolidating schools. When the Oppenheim-Ephrata binding vote failed the first time, the Courier Standard Enterprise’s editor expressed his frustration (Courier Standard Enterprise, December 15, 2011). In the title of the editorial, the line “What are we Waiting For?” reveals an exasperation at local voters’ failure to grasp the desperate situation their district faced. The editor also indicates the state is to blame by making the process of consolidating cumbersome.

The view that the state is to blame for a poor process emerges in an Observer Dispatch editorial describing the process as long “cumbersome…full of emotions.” The editorial ends with a call to the state to “make the merger process easier” (Observer Dispatch, December 18, 2012). The editors identified two flaws other consolidation experts have expressed about the state consolidation process in New York. First, the process can take a year or more. Second, the process is emotional, especially to individuals who attach personal identity to the school. Chabe (2011), and other authors (cited in chapter 2, literature review) discuss the difficulties of school consolidation when emotions emerge.
In summary, all three regional papers supported consolidation, and provided readers with information on how a successful consolidation would benefit their community and school. The editorial decisions among the media seemed to indicate a desire to convince voters to move away from emotional decision-making and embrace a more rational decision making process emphasizing the economic and programmatic benefits of consolidations for the school and community. As the consolidation process moved, papers included articles and information designed to bolster the official narrative and to combat rumors and myths.

**Combating Merger Myths:** An area of alignment emerged between officials, the media, and online consolidation supporters: the need to combat myths surrounding the process. The media, as a source of mass information, took steps via editorials, articles and published letters to the editor to combat myths or misunderstandings concerning consolidation.

Myths are potentially a code word for false information or propaganda spread in hopes of defeating consolidations. One myth that usually surrounds school communities during consolidations is the organic nature of school-community’s shared identity. In other words, some residents feel that their local school is their community, when reality and history are two different things. Ostrud (2012) demonstrated how in the early 20th century in Broome County, NY, people’s identities shifted from a focus in their residential village to the centralized school they attended.

The editors of the *Times Telegram* specifically gave space to a local historian who described the formation of the Oppenheim-Ephrata school. Hector Allen, who had written on the history of Oppenheim, included a chapter in his work describing the centralization of the school in the 1930s (Times Telegram, November 24, 2011). The editors of the paper may have been
trying to demonstrate to reluctant supporters that the Oppenheim-Ephrata school was a creation from previous schools, and a merger with a neighboring district was not out of the ordinary. Just under a month later, the *Times Telegram* paper published an article describing the two superintendents’ work on the merger:

In the weeks leading up to the Dec. 7 vote, Oppenheim-Ephratah Superintendent Dan Russom and interim St. Johnsville Superintendent Ralph Acquaro have worked to dispel what they described as “misinformation” and “myths” about the proposed merger of the two districts (Juteau, *Times Telegram*, December 7, 2011).

Later that school year, the editors of the *Times Telegram* interviewed school officials and others engaged in the consolidation process as a means to “combat merger myths circulating” (*Times Telegram*, May 3, 2012). As before, the word myth indicates that disinformation had been spreading and countering the official documents and narratives provided to the two communities.

In summary, two narratives emerged from the media sources I examined in this particular case study. The first narrative explains how school consolidation would lead to local efficiency through costs savings associated with personnel reduction and a decrease in local tax levies through state aid. The narrative’s sub-text indicates that tax payers will benefit from efficiency in the form of a reduced tax burden. Local residents will need more efficiency in the school system if the local community is to survive. Successful school consolidation is a concrete step to community survival. The second narrative emerging from media sources involved educating readers about the process of school consolidation. The papers also gave space to officials to combat “myths” or dis-information about the consolidation spreading among residents.

Where did dis-information about the merger originate? I turn now to the online community’s discussions about consolidating, a pro- and anti-consolidation narrative.
Phase 3: Community sense making: Online narrative

How did residents react to and respond to the official and media narratives? This section examines the online discussion that occurred during local debates over school consolidation in Oppenheim Ephrata and St. Johnsville. Part of this section will help answer one of my proposed dissertation question (see Chapter 1) regarding what issues were raised online during the consolidation process and will answer a second question I raised: does the alignment between the three narrative sources matter in a successful consolidation? Two competing narratives emerged online—one in support of consolidation and one in opposition. Within the two competing online narratives, subtexts emerge explaining why consolidation was perceived positive or negative.

The two narratives in this particular case study, similar to Chapter 4 case study, appeared online simultaneously. As frequently occurs in real time political conversations, both a supportive and oppositional narrative existed in the sample communities. For this section, I first examine the pro-consolidation narrative, and then report on the anti-consolidation narrative for clarity.

Support consolidation

Four subtexts emerged from online discussion about consolidation. The first indicated the local population wanted the ability to weigh in on the merger process. The second described a demand for greater efficiency in school operations. The third theme focused on enhanced programming in the combined school. Finally, the fourth subtext indicated a consolidation was the right thing for the communities to do.
Have their say: When the Oppenheim-Ephrata School Board of Education initially stopped the consolidation process by refusing to approve the Consolidation Study report, the reaction on the Internet was quite clearly in opposition. One example in an online post indicated that “[p]eople [meaning the Board of Education members] who were elected by the people have a responsibility to let the people decide.” A second post used powerful rhetoric to describe the school’s situation: “your board has sentenced your school to a slow death. Do you think the state department isn’t going to notice your decision.” You could have done something proactive but instead your board took the coward's approach.” The accusatory language online indicated that some members of the community felt the Board of Education had denied residents the right to decide their own future.

Online discussion further reiterated this denied opportunity by comparing St. Johnville’s Board action with Oppenheim-Ephrata’s action: “At least the STJ board realized that they have educated the public and now the public should get a chance to make their own decision. I would have felt better about this whole thing getting rejected if I did in fact know that it was a community decision, not a decision by 4 people.” As research into rural education has suggested, rural residents often fear consolidations because they remove decision making options from local residents (Renyolds, 1999). The Oppenheim-Ephrata Board of Education’s action brought this fear home to residents by taking away their right to decide.

Online contributors reinforced support for consolidation by indicating that the state would step in and merge the schools by force. Some examples of these posts included: “Our state is broke and can’t continue to support schools with 500 kids in them.” Another person claimed that “200 schools will cease to exist in two to three years according to the Deputy commissioner....Call Him Call Farley, call anyone higher and you will be told the same
thing.” With the fear of a state-imposed merger, one online post expressed the idea that “a school of 350 kids is an obsolete school.” Some online contributors were trying to support consolidation as a way to ensure that local residents would have a say in how their community provided education. The fear that the state would impose a merger is seen in the case study in Chapter 4. In other studies about consolidation, state-imposed consolidation is a dreaded fear in rural areas (Tieken, 2014).

One particular example of the range of community feelings about the Oppenheim-Ephrata Board’s decision to halt the consolidation process really emerges in this example: “how the hell do I now tell my school age kids they will not be able to play and sports, or have arts or electives due to a few nuts in our district?” The use of “nuts” indicates a sense of a person who is crazy or who cannot see reality. For some parents in the district who had seen programs eliminated due to the budget shortfalls, consolidation offered an opportunity to restore lost experiences for their children.

Discussion on-line began to move from hypothetical situations and feelings to more concrete discussions after the consultants released the consolidation study to the public. Once both Boards of Education accepted the study, discussion online shifted to concerns about voting. When the Oppenheim-Ephrata Board of Education initially canceled the straw or advisory vote in late October of 2011, online respondents demanded an opportunity to vote. When the Oppenheim-Ephrata Board of Education reversed their decision and permitted the non-binding advisory (straw vote) to proceed in late October, 2011, the other three subtexts emerged in support of consolidation.

Efficiency: Once the initial consolidation advisory meetings were held, online commentary indicated the merger seemed to make sense for both communities: “I went to the
meeting last night. The consultants...merely presented the facts.... I believe it sounds like a win-win situation for both students and communities.” Within the thread, a different person raised the specter of state take-over, but emphasized the consolidation makes sense: “The state is trying to force smaller school districts to merge and provide them with the means to do so.... Any administrator or anyone with common sense can see the numbers and how taxpayers and students will benefit.” The use of the word “common sense” is coded language in rural areas: as Cramer (2016) points out, it’s a differentiator between bureaucrats and “regular folk” who use common sense to make decisions, rather than some unintelligible rationale.

A second part of a need for efficiency emerged, as online discussions described the ability of a combined district to eliminate redundancies. The posts clearly identified administrators, teachers, and other employees as examples of inefficiencies in the separate school systems: “Why does such a small school have 3 administrators? What a WASTE of money.” The theme of further eliminating redundancies expanded to an individual who stated the schools in the area “should have merged with fort plain and canjo years ago every school has spent way to much could of built one great big school.” A backhanded support for consolidation criticized salary and benefits, but did support the merger:

“How many people in St. J and OE make over $50,000 without being a teacher and have those benefits? If you believe the unions, teaching is a calling like being a minister. What BS!...That being said, we need to merge, If not we will all be screwed....”

While calling into question the reality, this post illustrates a sense of anger about pay and benefits, but does recognize that the status quo was no longer sustainable. For many posts, echoing the official narrative and the media narrative, status quo was not sustainable. One
solution to the problem facing the schools was eliminating redundancies and attempting to gain economies of scale.

_Programming:_ The pro-consolidation online commentators recognized that past cuts to programming had hurt their schools. One such post indicated that “schools are making tough decisions...cutting programs.” For some, the prospect of losing art, music, and extracurricular was a concern: “OE’s band is a point of pride.” The consistent program elimination, and the pride the community placed in a non-sport extra-curricular activities, indicated the messages that people posting online had heard the official and media narrative that promised more cuts would come if the consolidation failed.

Other pro-consolidation posts indicated that some members of the community supported the idea that children needed to be prepared the world after school: “Vote Yes on the merger...students need more opportunities to compete in the world today.” Further in the discussion, another person stated, “hate to tell you but small class sizes have their benefits...so you tell me where we could make some cuts to save a little money without firing teachers or putting them on part time.” This post indicates that the contributor had heard the official and media narrative position that without a merger, additional and detrimental cuts would be enacted to the school district budget.

Another post demonstrates that some members of the community were concerned the schools’ graduates were not ready to compete in a wider world: “When I see that the local newspaper lists HVCC as the choice of where the valedictorian and salutatorian plan on attending, opportunity is what comes to mind.” This posts implies that the schools were not providing sufficient opportunity for further education. Specifying that the top two members of a graduation class were attending community college is a stereotypical way of denigrating the
school’s efforts to prepare graduates for post-high school opportunities. Carr & Kefalas (2009) found that in some rural areas, attending a community college equated failure in the eyes of some residents. The phrasing within the online discussion suggests that some residents were concerned about how well the two separate school programs were preparing students for post-high school career choices.

In a different thread, a member of the Oppenheim-Ephrata community complained “we can’t even keep our sports teams.” A little later on, a post stated that OECSD could learn from the Amish Schools in the area. A follow up started, “Are you kidding me?!?...Are any of their children going to have to compete in today’s world? Personally i do not want that for my children.” The last post in the thread, shouting online in all caps, stated quite clearly: “IF YOU TRULY CARE ABOUT EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES, PREPARING THE YOUTH OF OUR COMMUNITIES FOR FUTURE CAREERS AND MAINTAINING INPUT BECOME INFORMED.” In a related thread, one individual argued “it is simple not fiscally possible to keep programs we have now and provide for the future education of the youth of the communities.” Local students’ ability to compete emerged as a source of concern for people discussing the consolidation.

Right thing to do: When the OE board changed its mind, and allowed the straw vote to continue, people began posting: “we need to work together and stop the fear.” Further along in the thread, a person insisted, “we need to stop the rumors.” One particular thread reminded readers how close the two schools were geographically: “…4.9 miles to OE, should have been 10 years ago.” The opening line of conversation recalled the failed attempt to consolidate valley schools previously. Near the end of the thread, a poster stated quite succinctly: “Best you leave unless you can talk about facts.” Later in the thread, a commenter pointed out, “all small districts
are facing similar problems. We can solve ours by merging ...By merging we can keep some local control.” The opening line of conversation recalled the failed attempt to consolidate valley schools previously.

In response to a concern expressed among parents that a merged district will cause conflicts among students, one person indicated “I’ve been involved with kids from both schools. They get along fine...I’ve seen the interaction between kids between OE and StJ. That’s not even going to be an issue. On a positive note the teachers will be able to teach in their fields of expertise.” This thread recognizes two points. First, as Nitta, et al. (2009) found, students in a newly-formed districts tend to integrate well. Second, in smaller rural districts, teachers are often asked to teach outside of their training, certification, or comfort zone (Schulte & Walker-Gibbs, 2018).

In a series of posts, online contributors listed a series of points to support the argument that the merger between Oppenheim-Ephrata and St. Johnsville would be best for the two student communities: “O-E is the best choice. It is similar size school and more commonalities with the STJ District. It will open up opportunities with 850 students.” Another person stated that the future is bleak: “...it is 4.9 miles to that school 7 minutes by bus. The road will be long, but don’t look 2 or 3 years down the road. In 5 years these 2 schools if not merged will not have any programs except state mandated, and probably only basketball as sports team.” The thread continues with another supporter indicating, “The students are obviously not getting enough...focus on math.” Another person echoed, “I think the St.JoeOE merg was a great occurrence...these kids get along great. The STJ and OE parents have also been great to kids and each other.” This series of points clearly suggests that for some members online, the time was right to combine districts.
A final and very poignant way supporters appealed to their fellow residents was through emotional appeals: “LET’S MERGE AND TRY TO SAVE BOTH SCHOOLS,” trying to provoke some fear in their readers. Another individual pleaded with residents, challenging them to care about the students: “Don’t make the kids suffer because adults are too stubborn to see this.” At the end of a thread supporting the consolidation, an individual asked readers to reflect: “What is the major complaint here seriously. Think about why complain if a merger happens maybe better and greater things will happen between the two school districts.” Appealing to the residents’ emotions in the areas of Oppenheim-Ephrata and St. Johnsville, in addition to using the logical facts surrounding consolidation’s benefits is often found as a critical route to gain voter approval.

In summary, some community members in both St. Johnsville and Oppenheim-Ephrata were, as illustrated by themes emerging from online discussions, convinced for a variety of reasons that a consolidation was the best approach for both communities. Four themes emerged in the online discussion. First, the voters of Oppenheim-Ephrata wanted to have their say in the process. Second, they believed that a combined school was more efficient, with taxpayers benefiting from reduced costs and more aid. Three, programming in the districts did not support post-graduation goals for their children. Four, it was the right thing to do. Past failures to consolidate resulted in what was perceived, online, as a crisis. With the significant budget cuts enacted after the initial failed binding merger vote, the official and media narrative had warned the status quo was unsustainable. Community members could see the effects of failed consolidation attempts in their own districts, and regionally in other districts as other consolidation attempts failed and some cuts were enacted. This chapter turns now to the counter narrative.
Opposition

Four themes emerged in my analysis of the online opposition to consolidation in Oppenheim-Ephrata. First, the salary and benefits levels of school employees were cited as unreasonable. Second, the school districts had over-reached in their programming. Third, there were alternatives to consolidation, apart from the option under review. Finally, a perception emerged that St. Johnsville would benefit more from the merger than Oppenheim-Ephrata. These reasons are similar to those reported in the case study in Chapter 4.

Salaries and Benefits: For one individual online, the entire system of schooling was a waste. This post enumerated all the reasons why:

I think all school systems and most of the employees are out of touch with the real world.

Big paychecks generous benefits and biased studies and reports as to why we need to spend massive amounts of money. More money should be spent on students, not wages, benefits, vehicles, or bogus projects…

The sentiment echoed the evaluation that “[t]he salaries and benefits are staggering.” Further along in the online discussion, one person quoted a neoliberal educational reform idea: “higher taxes do not equate with better education.” As Howley and Howley (2015) found, many neoliberal reform movements are attempting to reverse the belief, long held, that education can be improved by increasing fiscal supports through higher local property taxes and improved state aid, which is often generated from higher income taxes.

In a criticism mirroring Chapter 4’s online opposition, one person argued, “I dont understand why pay cant be leveled down,” and later on, another post indicated “...But of course they always want more.” The complaint that salaries are too high is echoed in another post: “the merger experts with all the answers cant figure out a way to contain salaries and benefits,” and a
clear opinion that the root of the district’s problems lay with “the unions.” Additional union bashing continued with this rhetorical question: “how will this merger stop the greed of some unions...Taxes will skyrocket.” As Cramer (2016) cites in her work on rural residents, there is a belief that public employees, via their unions, always demand more out of overtaxed residents.

One critic tried to use math to prove that school employees are overpaid: “pay is very deceiving because it doesn’t include benefits. And then divide that pay by 186 days and then divide that by hours worked...about 93.00 and hour work time.” This post is reminiscent of the work that Sherman (1999) conducted in rural areas, interviewing residents and finding that for many, “work” was considered time spent at the job. Some residents, as Rousmaniere. (2013) pointed out, believe that teachers do not engage in real work, and the perceived “short” hours at school are a sore point with laborers who are expected to be at work longer hours (Weis, 1990).

Another point discussed in Chapter 4 is the number of administrators. One post described the administrators: “What a waste of money!!! Why doesn’t anyone say anything? ...way to burn money StJ. If cuts need to be made I hope you look to an administrator first.”

In summary, as also reported in Chapter 4 and in other research into rural areas, residents question the salary, benefits, numbers and utilization of resources required by local schools. The opposition to the resource-intensive nature of schooling also appears in the second theme emerging from the opposition posts: Program over-reach.

Program Over-reach: Online critics of the merger felt the schools had drifted beyond the basics, and the merger would result in a school with too many children in their opinion. Some members of opposition felt the local Amish schools were a better fit for the communities because they were focused on the “basics.” Why would members of the community support Amish schools? This small group was asking their community to return to pre-World War I-based
education. As described in Fischer and Stahl (1997), Amish schooling is religion-based and focused on very basic K-8 educational expectations. The schooling program shuns all manner of present-world educational programming in favor of traditional curricula based on religion and basic literacy and numeracy. As Scribner (2016) points out, the back to basics movement in education among conservatives supports religious and social conservativism. The back to basics reform effort opposes teaching children critical thinking and questioning authority and supports a western European focused world view.

Other opposition discussion points suggested that a consolidated school would be too large. One concerned resident stated, “I live in Stj for one reason...my children are in a small and safe school.” Concern emerged about the number of students who would be able to play on the sports teams, and participate in extracurricular activities specialized programs and how they would be affected by the merger. Additional opposition indicated concern about class sizes and alienation between the two communities; one example indicated worry about “teachers not paying attention...[to the] children from OE.” These concerns echo opposition points raised in Chapter 4. Further, these findings echo reports from other studies regarding opposition to consolidation based on fear of larger schools (NYSSBA, 2014) and the fear of lost opportunities or exclusion practices in a merged school (Tieken, 2014).

*Other alternative partners:* Some consolidation opposition supported the concept in principal, but not with the proposed partner discussed in this study. For residents in Oppenheim-Ephrata, other potential partners were possible. The pre-merger study had indicated the district would benefit from partnering with St. Johnsville or Fort Plain. For some residents, one other neighboring district had been part of past failed consolidation studies was Dolgeville. The Dolgeville Central School District appeared as a sound alternative to some, and was more like
Oppenheim-Ephrata in opinions expressed online. St. Johnsville was limited in partners and had essentially become “landlocked” with Fort Plain as a non-viable partner according to the pre-study, and its neighbor Little Falls was uninterested in consolidating. The opposition to the current consolidation partner aligns with the online opposition I present in Chapter 4. This belief in the “right” or better partner also supports Brasington’s (1993) findings that suggest successful consolidations are correlated with similar partners. While demographic data indicates that the two districts are indeed similar, in some online opinions the two communities appeared different. Data is often not sufficient enough to convince people their perceptions do not match reality. Research by Sethi & Rangaraju (2018) echoed earlier findings by Nyhan & Reifler (2010) who explained that people’s perceptions, or beliefs do not change, even when data that factually refutes those perceptions is presented to individuals and groups.

*Us-not-others*: While on the surface the two school communities seemed ideal partners, a strong undercurrent emerged in Oppenheim-Ephrata criticizing the merger as St. Johnsville’s only hope. This was evident in comments like: “Does anyone believe they wont raise taxes?” and “Another slimey hole for Oppenheim taxpayers to sink their money in.” The opposition online established a vocal us-versus-them narrative and concluded, “Oppenheim will be fine without St. johnsville or dolgeville! Yep we will have to cut programs,” but alone, the school will survive.

A second line of opposition indicated: “STJ just wanted OE taxpayers to pay for their mistakes” and that “STJ should look at closing a building first” before merging. Some members of the opposition used this line as a way to refer back to one of the triggering events that lead to the current consolidation study: the defeated St. Johnsville facilities bond.

A third line of opposition cited the fiscal imbalances between the two districts, specifically identifying that: “...oe has 1.8 million dollars in reserve and 750000 in fund balance
so can run our school on just that for 3 years without state aid.” Additional evidence used by the opposition included a reference to the tax rates: “tax rates for the O-E district are going to see an increase of 52 cents per 1,000 of true value. St. johnsville’s community would see a decrease of 56 cents per 1,000.”

In summary, the four threads emerging from the online opposition posts indicated similar concerns raised in Chapter 4 and in other rural educational research studies. First, the perception that salaries, benefits, and too many staff in the two districts is a common narrative, which Cramer (2016) has found in research on public employees. The second point of opposition, program over-reach by the local schools, is similar to what other researchers have found in rural educational studies (Rey, 2014). Third, with other viable consolidation partners still available to Oppenheim-Ephrata, an undercurrent of belief that St. Johnsville was the wrong partner emerged. Finally, some opposition to consolidation indicated St. Johnsville would receive benefits that would outweigh the Oppenheim-Ephrata’s district’s benefits.

As explained in Chapter 4, and here, opposition to consolidation emerged almost from the official announcement of the two districts undergoing the process. The pro and anti narratives, like other examples from policy discussions, emerged simultaneously.

Alignment

This section of the chapter partially answers my second dissertation question about alignment between narrative sources. The Table 5.5 below indicates significant alignment between officials, media and online participants.
Table 5.5: Alignment between three sources on problems and solutions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Officials</th>
<th>Media</th>
<th>Online</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Problem defined</td>
<td>Decreased resources + disappearing opportunity</td>
<td>Decreased resources + disappearing opportunity</td>
<td>Decreased resources + disappearing opportunity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solution</td>
<td>Merger</td>
<td>Merger</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.5 shows that all three groups agreed that decreasing resources and disappearing opportunities were problems facing the local school district. Also, officials, media, and some members of the on-line community felt a merger would be the best possible solution for the local school districts and their respective communities.

School officials and the local media were aligned in stating that a merger was the only policy solution to the problems facing the local schools, and that a merger was the only possible way of providing sufficient resources for restoring lost opportunities and supporting a more robust area. In addition to the overall agreement, another trend emerged, where officials and the media, as well as some members contributing online emphasized factual information about mergers in contrast to rumors.

**Fact over myth**

As the merger process progressed, and more information became available to community residents, increasing concerned statements emerged from officials, the media, and online forums arguing that merger myths needed to stop, and additional information became available to combat these myths.

The consolidation study used a wide variety of sources that were readily available to the public as published information. The sources were cross-listed with school data sets, state data sets, and federal data sets. Members of the merger committee, who received data and were part
of the conversation, represented a wide variety of stakeholders. The meetings were public, and information from the meetings was published on the school website.

The *Times Telegram* published two articles (Nov 24 & December 7) specifically devoted to addressing merger myths. The article cited the public process, and the public availability of all merger information to interested parties. The media assured readers that the process was open and factual in the final editorial leading up to the community votes on consolidation.

Online, supporters of consolidation specifically challenged opposition when posts against the process failed to cite specific information or factual data from the process. Online supporters reinforced the open process, data availability, and the willingness of both administrative teams to meet and discuss the consolidation. Supporters further cited the consolidation process across the state and previous consolidation processes as a way to ensure fact was not overcome by myth.

Research into rural education (Biddle & Anzano, 2016; Parkerson & Parkerson, 2015; Scribner, 2016) has shown that mythmaking emerges in education as a way to bolster or undermine the realities that people perceive, even if facts do not support the realities. In the myth generation from consolidation, residents may latch onto a single story, or an outlying data point as proof that a policy will negatively impact their reality. All three groups tried to ensure that the narrative that reached voters supported the claim that consolidation would improve programming and efficiency.

**Improving program and efficiency**

All three sources presented materials supporting consolidation as a means to improve programming and efficiency. The publically-produced materials showed decreased tax rates for all involved and improved programming with a consolidation. Media materials stressed repeatedly the additional resources the school received following consolidation. Online
supporters cited the study and media reports demonstrating better programming and better efficiency for the area’s schools after consolidation.

**Disagreement**

The only clear disagreement emerging between the three sources studied was about the belief that a merger was the only solution to school district problems. While officials, media sources, and a number of online contributors agreed that status quo could not continue, some online posts wanted alternatives to the merger. Mostly, people unsupportive of the merger felt the selected partner was wrong, and a different district should be selected. Two posts did wonder if the area might be better off with a policy of dissolving all the schools and letting BOCES run education. One or two posts did express a need for greater state investment in the area, but the volume of these online posts did not match the number of posts examined in the Chapter 4 case study.

Turning now to Phase 4: Community agency, the chapter explores how voters in St. Johnsville approved the merger, but also how a significant conflict emerged in neighboring Oppenheim-Ephrata.

**Phase 4: Community member agency: Voting**

In this case study of Oppenheim-Ephrata and St. Johnsville, there are at least two clear phases of community member agency. The first phase, focused in Oppenheim-Ephrata, demonstrated that community members demanded an opportunity to vote on the proposed consolidation, after the school board initially decided to halt the consolidation process. The Oppenheim-Ephrata voter agency continued after the first failed binding vote when the school budget was defeated that following spring, and anti-merger board members (the three who voted against the proposal to merge) were defeated in an election. The second phase of voter agency
occurred when the joint/pro merger activities in the two communities convinced enough people in Oppenheim-Ephrata to either support the merger or stay home and not cast a ballot during the next binding vote.

As Table 5.6 demonstrates, St. Johnsville residents overwhelmingly supported consolidation. Oppenheim-Ephrata experienced three close votes, with the last binding vote passing by less than 10% of the registered total electorate. For comparisons, the voter turnouts in both districts were within expected, regular numbers from budget votes in the previous decade. This is different than the information presented in Chapter 4, where voter turnout for consolidation was higher than the straw vote, and previous budget votes.

Table 5.6: Voter agency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Straw vote</th>
<th>Binding Vote 1</th>
<th>School budget vote</th>
<th>Binding vote 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oppenheim-</td>
<td>391-326 (Y)</td>
<td>400-458 (N)</td>
<td>104-275 (N)</td>
<td>385-366 (Y)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ephrata</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Johnsville</td>
<td>493-85 (Y)</td>
<td>461-71 (Y)</td>
<td>169-35 (Y)</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passed</td>
<td>Failed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Passed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As reported in Woodruff (2012), most voters who were interviewed in an exit poll in Oppenheim-Ephrata sought to revisit the defeated merger before significant budget increases and capital expenses were approved for the district. During this school budget vote following the failed binding vote, community members also changed who was on the school board. As reported by Kellett (2012), the changes to the OE board swung support by the board of education behind a merger.
Conclusion

The Oppenheim-Ephrata/ St. Johnsville consolidation provides researchers an opportunity to study an implemented merger. First, the state wanted to enact consolidations in order to save taxpayers money. Second, the schools were in need of significant assistance if they were to offer their community more than basic school programs. Third, the consolidation study identified a reduction in taxes and an infusion of state aid as the primary reason to consolidate. Because the preliminary merger study identified two choices—enhanced programming or reduced taxes—that were based on which school district St. Johnsville partnered with, there was really no question that St. Johnsville favored the merger. Based on official action, including 5-0 school board votes, and overwhelming support in the straw and binding vote, the community wanted to consolidate. The overarching need to expand the program offerings and upgrade the elementary school building weighed heavily on the community.

On the other hand, in Oppenheimer-Ephrata the decision to consolidate created feelings of conflict. The district had provided students a wide array of programming and had a modern school building, but was running out of money. The district, rural in nature, had administrators announcing that the end of balanced budgets was within 2 years, and the school would be relegated to offering a required curriculum, not a well-rounded one. Oppenheimer-Ephrata also had a unique situation related to the Amish K-6 schools in the area. These voters keep their own community schools and do not often intermingle with the “English” or American communities. However, for some people, the existence of the Amish schools provided a possible solution to the school issues the district faced.

In the end, the decreased taxes, increased state aid, and laser-like focus of the district administrators on survival and reducing costs, helped to pass the merger vote. With the canceled
straw vote and the voter rebellion in Oppenheim-Ephrata after the merger vote failed the first time, the district and its residents decided to accept increased state aid and a partnership with the St. Johnsville CSD. As Jacobson (2015) notes, “where voters begin with little or no knowledge of one or both of the contestants, or where the cue of a party label is unavailable, the potential for the information provided by campaigns to influence citizens choices is obviously enhanced” (p. 36). The information provided to residents, coupled with the significant change in the board and budget cuts, resulted in a successful second vote in OE for consolidation.

Table 5.6 shows how officials and media agreed that the problems of decreasing resources and opportunities were negatively affecting the two school communities. Both the officials and media were aligned in the belief that a school district consolidation or merger was the only viable solution to the twin problems. The online community also agreed on the twin problems of decreased resources and opportunities. The solution proposed by the online group included increased programmatic cuts before a merger. After the failed binding referendum vote in one of the school districts, the superintendent and board of education followed through with the warning that additional, deep cuts to the budget were necessary. For some voters, this event triggered a realization that no more internal reductions could be made; a pro-merger board was elected, and a successful binding vote followed. As evidenced in online discussions, focus on the benefits of consolidation, and repeated calls to utilize factual based reports generated from the consolidation process were evident.
Table 5.7: Issue Alignment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Problem</th>
<th>Solution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Officials</td>
<td>Decreased resources and opportunities</td>
<td>Merger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media</td>
<td>Decreased resources and opportunities</td>
<td>Merger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online</td>
<td>Decreased resources and opportunities</td>
<td>Merger after budget cut and BOE election</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.7, above illustrates that as the communities moved through the five stages, the initial situational development and the Official Board action resulted in community sense making that was in-line with the official and media narrative in the second vote. When the Oppenheim Board voted to not place the question of consolidation up for a vote, the public used their Phase 4 agency to change the situation and the Governing Board’s action.

Table 5.8: Community Alignment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community</th>
<th>Problem</th>
<th>Solution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oppenheim-Ephrata</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y (Post BOE election)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Johnsville</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Table 5.8 summarizes, both school communities agreed there was a problem and that the solution was consolidation. A significant moment was needed in Oppenheim-Ephrata to encourage reluctant voters to support consolidation. As the residents saw significant decreases to their programming and increased tax rates, some of the community concluded that a merger was the only means left to maintain effective education levels previously enjoyed.
CHAPTER 6:  
DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

The two cases studied in my dissertation represent the rural reality many New York School Districts and non-metro areas face. Both case study examples involved school communities struggling with the economic impact of the Great Recession (Sipple & Yao, 2015). Also, the four school communities profiled in my dissertation were struggling to meet the increased standards from federal and state sources. As the case studies demonstrated, school consolidation, while voluntary in New York State, creates conflict in rural areas that often does not match outsiders’ stereotypes of harmony (Corbett, 2015; Jakubowski, 2019).

This chapter concludes my dissertation by returning to the over-arching question of why, in times of economic need, would some communities choose to forgo additional state aid? In examining the three specific questions proposed in the first chapter. By using discourse analysis (Gee 2014) and triangulation of sources (Creswell, 2014), I discovered that the narratives of officials and media do not often match online narratives, or “hidden transcripts,” which Scott (1990) observed when non-elite members of society discussed events away from the elites. As I will describe, my research suggests that there are a number of alignments in the case studies between what research identifies as concerns of rural residents, but there are some differences. These differences in the narrative do, however, align with what Cramer (2016) has found when researching rural areas: specifically, rural people feel that education does not constitute real work and that educators are overpaid. I also explain why a potential framework I proposed in Chapter 1 begins to explain how voter agency is a critical variable, especially in referendum states such as New York.
Online Narrative

As discussed in both chapter 4 and 5, participants raised the cost of running a school district as a major issue. In the Brocton and Westfield case (Chapter 4), online posts raised all manner of issues related to finance. Discussions in the Mohawk Valley example (Chapter 5) mirrored these concerns.

Teacher/ Administrator pay and benefits

In both case studies, pay and benefits that teachers and administrators received were cited as issues in the official reorganization studies. The pay and benefits the school employees were out of line with rural residents sensibilities. Members in both areas wanted to know why their tax dollars were going to pay someone else a salary and benefits package larger than their own. This specific question of public employee pay mirrors Cramer’s (2016) findings about rural residents’ belief that bureaucrats and public employees made too much money. In both my case studies and in Cramer’s (2016) work, as well as in findings by Ford & McMahone (2019), residents/ community members use language from education reformers (Cervone, 2019; Scribner, 2016) blaming unions for the rise in pay, benefits, and by default, local taxes.

Some discussion in New York State has called for educator pay reforms. During the time frame under discussion, three local government reform panels called for consolidation as a way to decrease costs associated with schools, specifically by reducing redundancies found in salaries (Duncombe & Hou, 2014). Andrew Cuomo, the New York State Governor, brought attention to educator pay and benefits by publically calling for caps on superintendent salary (Kaplan, 2011). Media outlets yearly publish information available on seethruny.org and other data sources on teacher pay and benefit (seethruny.org). As Cervone (2019) has indicated, some people believe that their local teachers deserve a pay raise, but that teachers in general are overpaid.
Previous research studies, such as Sherman (1999) and Duncan (1999), have also found rural residents question the status of educators’ work as “real work.” In online discussions in my two case studies, some posts questioned how hard teachers actually worked in the schools considering consolidation. Contributors asked why teachers needed additional stipends for advising clubs and coaching. Other posts across both case studies asked why teachers were not expected to “do more” because they left school after 3:30 p.m. and “have summers free.” These posts, in conjunction with Sherman (1999) and Duncan (1999), seem to indicate that, while the majority of the population attended public schools school, there is a real lack of understanding among the general population about what professional educators’ positions actually entail.

As to why residents felt more comfortable calling into question educator compensation online and anonymously, Scott’s (1990) hidden transcript, when coupled with Carr & Kefalas’s (2009) work can partially answer this question. As Scott (1990) indicates, non-elites have conversations calling into question the elites’ motivations in places where discovery and retribution are potentially limited. For Carr & Kefalas (2009), parents in rural areas who challenged the local schools were afraid their children in those very schools would be harmed through loss of opportunity. Duncan (1999) found the same issue when interviewing rural residents who were taken advantage of by elites. In Duncan’s (1999) study, services promised by landlords were withheld, and threats were made to the subaltern renter that they would be arrested. One respondent indicated retaliation was a real concern when challenging local elites. In rural areas in New York, Lyson (2002) and Sipple, et al., (2019) both found rural school systems are often the leading employer in rural areas, and the superintendent and the teachers are often the highest paid residents in the community. Professionally, rural administrators have
indicated their role as an administrator often means working with the local political, economic, and social power base (DeYoung, 1978; Eppley, 2015; Fieore, 2016).

With many of the rural areas in New York suffering from economic stagnation and the constant threat of rising property taxes to pay for educator salaries and benefits, lower income residents feared losing their homes because they could not pay school taxes, used to pay public school teacher salaries and benefits (Doukais, 2006).

In both of the areas, posts call for lowering school taxes indicate that consolidation needs to achieve one goal: lower costs via a lower tax for local residents. As shown in both case studies (Chapters 4 and 5), some online discussion participants want to ensure that costs are reduced by decreasing educator pay, benefits, and the numbers of people who are employed by the school.

Overall, individuals who raised these issues online expressed a need to do more internally before consolidation. Both case studies contained clear points by residents who wanted to reduce costs before consolidation. This may indicate that many community residents do not understand the complexity of school finance. Examples of how complex public education finance includes the following example: First, New York State mandates all Board of Education members receive training in the fiscal processes associated with running a school district. Second, all districts leave the day to day operations of running schools to trained individuals with post-graduate-level credentials. Third, school districts are required to present to the public “plain language” versions of their budget and policies. Quite often, as demonstrated in online posts, the districts were not successful in this goal of plain language reports. With the complexity of public school finances under review during consolidation process, many residents felt that the process was too fast and needed to slow down. English (2019), in discussing voter understanding of Brexit in the U.K., found that the majority had no idea (and still do not know) what they were voting on.
School consolidation votes, like other public policy votes in referendums can cause confusion, especially when complex.

**Local Control/ State Control**

To many New Yorkers, voting for Board of Education members and participating in school budget votes is seen as an important right (NYSSBA, 2014). Yet the appearance of a long term, orderly system is not reality. Fischel (2010) points out, school districts emerged rather haphazardly in the past. Some districts were created by accident of geography, others created as a way to keep groups in conflict apart. The state, as an administrative function of the increasing demand to educate populations, coopted the existing systems into law for expediency. Scribner (2016) echoes this finding and specifically identifies reforms enacted at the state and federal level as triggers for conservative reactionaries who would use local schools, and the idea of local control, as a method to counter reform efforts.

Both case study examples contain specific references to maintaining local control for education. Both sides of the debate used school consolidation as a way to keep local control, or a vote against consolidation as a way to keep decision-making local. Both case studies cited examples of how increasing state mandates were burdening local schools. For people who favored consolidation, the added funds from state consolidation incentives would allow local districts to better meet the mandates. For those opposed to consolidation, state mandates were another example of the state harming rural interests. Haller, Nusser and Monk (1999) and Rey (2014) found dissonance in how “the state” viewed school performances versus local residents’ views, which echoes what Feldmann (2003) found in rural areas confronted by state consolidation discussions. This dissonance appeared in both case studies, as an analysis of some
online posts indicates that their authors did not understand why the school leaders and media were calling for better opportunity for students through consolidation.

In both case studies, residents were aware, and often hostile, to reforms in Albany. Some people who contributed to the online discussion in both case studies emphasized that the state had not supported local rural areas, and had supported downstate to the detriment of upstate. Posts in both case studies suggest that state government provides more school revenues, and neglects upstate. These findings support studies by Thomas (2009) and Thomas and Smith (2014), who found rural upstate residents tend to believe that state government in New York is pro “downstate.”

**The benefits of consolidation**

Especially among residents who supported consolidation in both case studies, there were clear examples of benefits available to students and residents after successful implementation of consolidation process. Supporters did mention the fiscal advantages of consolidation, though they did not emphasize this point. Supportive online posts discussed additional state aid, in the form of consolidation aid and building aid, and also mentioned reducing redundancies. What supporters of consolidation in both case studies clearly understood were the program restoration or enhancements that consolidation guaranteed. These posts indicated that the residents believed the schools had cut as much as possible, and that low teacher salaries would not attract the best educators. The enhancements were the major positive point in both case studies. In both case studies, consolidation supporters indicated the programming at their local districts was not preparing children for the “real world” and that the school system was no longer just local. Schools in the state were now part of a global network of human resource creation.
Consolidation, in the eyes of supporters would not only prepare students for work, but also save the community which had fallen on hard times.

**Save the Community**

In both case studies, the online discussion used the school as a symbol of community survival. This echoes Steele (2010), who pointed to a rural superintendent asking after a failed consolidation how the school would survive. In online discussions, community members asked if the community would survive without consolidation. In the Oppenheim-Ephrata and St. Johnsville (Chapter 5) merger, community members in both schools use the St. Johnsville and Little Falls shopping services, and indicated that the students in both schools enjoyed a longstanding relationship outside of school from joint sporting and community-based extra-curricular sports and club activities. In the Brocton-Westfield (Chapter 4) discussion, community survival was also an issue, with supporters of consolidation indicating a joint school would strengthen the two communities. However, in Westfield and Brocton, there appears to be limited overlaps between the two communities concerning shopping and regional events. The separate circles of the two communities may be due to the presence of a regional hub in Fredonia-Dunkirk, just to the north of Brocton, which services the local state college and city residents. Westfield contains many of the same services Brocton residents use in Fredonia-Dunkirk, so Westfield residents can stay “at home” while Brocton residents travel for services.

The “merge and save the community” discussion was evident in Oppenheim-Ephrata and St. Johnsville much more clearly than in Brocton-Westfield. Specifically, residents in Brocton believed a merger would be the only way to meet their school’s challenges. Another major difference was the status of Westfield in the merger. Westfield was approached by a smaller district, Ripley, as a merger partner. Westfield voters rejected their merger attempt with Ripley.
before the consolidation attempt with Brocton, and Brocton had previously approached Fredonia Central in a merger discussion, but Fredonia defeated that merger vote. Brocton then approached Westfield, fresh from defeating their own merger attempt. Essentially, the voters in Brocton felt a merger was the only way to save their school (or community) while Westfield voters twice indicated that a merger was not necessary.

The four themes that appeared in online discussions—teacher pay/benefits, local/state control, the benefits of consolidating, and saving the community—also appear to align with research into rural education. The language/discussion points matched what Cramer (2016) found in researching rural areas, namely a belief that educators are paid too much. This also echoes Parkerson and Parkerson (2015) and Scribner’s (2016) findings of fears of state takeover and removal of local control from residents. The notion that rural schools are in some way not preparing their students or need improvement is reported in Carr and Kefalas (2009) and Corbett’s (2007) research into self-critiques from rural regions.

**Anger**

While examining the online threads, and reading individual posts, it became readily apparent that research emerging from Catte (2019), Corbett (2014), McHenry-Sorber and Schafft (2015), and Wurthnow (2018) is critical for understanding rural residents. They are **ANGRY** (my emphasis). Online posts were angry at the state, angry at board members, angry at administrators, and angry at other communities. Rural residents perceived that the crisis of school consolidation happened because someone did them wrong. Residents in both case studies indicated that New York State was to blame for a whole host of reasons, ranging from state tax rates and state policies, to state rules and regulations. The state had created the mess and was not supporting local communities in rural areas.
The online discussion posts readily called into question the motives of elected, appointed, and volunteer officials at every level of government. Words like “greedy” and “incompetent” appeared as emotion-based reactions. Long-standing volunteer leaders who served on the Board of Education in the community were considered partially to blame for the school’s conditions because they had hired the leadership or negotiated the contracts, or had not lobbied for more. Online contributors asked why professional administrators had not predicted the fiscal crisis and done more to insulate the community against disaster. The posts claimed that state officials did not understand rural communities, and they challenged the reform agenda from the education department as urban-centric and inappropriate to rural realities.

Anger emerged at other communities, first in some instances for voting in Board members who had “done it to them.” Several contributors were angry at other communities for defeating previous merger attempts. Brocton posts were strewn with anger at Fredonia for rejecting their merger. Westfield residents were angry at Brocton for the level of building debt incurred when upgrading their school. Oppenheim-Ephrata residents were mad at their own board for denying the initial straw vote, then mad at St. Johnsville for not closing an elementary school. Finally, Oppenheim-Ephrata people were mad at Dolgeville for not merging with the school previously. St. Johnsville, after the first defeated binding vote, were mad at the Oppenheim-Ephrata voters for “sentencing both their communities to decline.” This anger and lashing out was readily apparent in the percentage of personal attacks in discussion threads. Threads contained personal attacks in every single case study school district. Posts exhibited name calling and accusations without civility.
School Based Identity: An almost nonexistent theme

Another theme which many rural education consolidation studies and technical reports cite, “identity,” occurred less frequently in the online discussions followed in these case studies. The idea of identity, which studies such as Peshkin (1982), Renyolds (1999), Schmuck and Schmuck (1995) and others have identified as a leading cause of consolidation failures, refers to the school, its mascot, and all of the interconnectedness which the image entails. According to Tieken (2014) and others cited in Chapter 2, people will oppose consolidation because they do not want to lose their school and its history and traditions. The idea of school identity emerged in posts, but not extensively. When a point about losing identity or saving the mascot was made, other contributors often countered the argument with factual points supporting consolidation. It was surprising, given how often identity is cited as a cause for consolidation failure, even in 2019 that the theme did not appear in more online discussions.

In an almost counter point to perceived identity issues, which were not apparent online, school officials and media indicated that the process was undertaken despite of potential lost school based identity. In both Chapter 4 and Chapter 5’s official reports, barriers to consolidation both identified loss of identity as reasons a merger may fail. When interviewed in the media, in both case studies, officials, elected and appointed, clarified that the consolidation process was underway, and both communities engaged in the attempt were looking beyond identity towards a greater good. The NYSASBO (2014) citied losing identity as a reason school consolidations fail. While my two case studies did not incorporate multiple potential consolidations, the level of reaction by officials to perceived school based identity issues was not in line in the online discussions.
Rural Identity

In my analysis of the media and online sources, especially, I noticed a theme emerging which mirrors national writing on rural areas. Namely, rural residents are identifying not with a specific community, but rather as a rural resident in opposition to suburban or urban resident. This identity language may be code for the perceptions of what it means to exist in a “real role” or a “heartland role” which politicians have used recently to create an “us versus them” in the dialogue across society (Catte, 2019; Wurthnow, 2018). Rural residents in my study were, along with the media, adamant in assigning blame to metro- and urban based reforms which had emerged from metro areas and the capital. I also found that these feelings carry over after school districts consolidate into the late 2010s (Jakubowski, 2019a).

While the media supported consolidation in both cases presented in my dissertation, editors of all the local and regional papers cited “abandonment of upstate” by capitol based politicians as the real reason and root cause of the area’s decline. Both case studies examined in my dissertation are part of micro-statistical areas that have ranked in the bottom of economic recovery since the “Great Recession.” The delays in seeing economic recovery, while simultaneously watching other, more metro regions of the state benefit from growth and improvement has created a parallel, and often divergent, view of the benefits of schooling, and state government interventions. The divide, a cultural divide, and in some ways, a political divide, have created a bifurcated sense-making and understandings (Cramer, 2016; Zuckerman, 2016) of New York State policy. The divide, as Catte (2019) and Wurthnow (2018) have reported on are destabilizing to the goals of New York State, and may have serious implications for rural students in their attempts to find a place in the continued globalizing economy (Brown & Schafft, 2011).
Alignment Between Sources

My second dissertation question sought to understand if alignment between officials, the media, and online contributors differed in a passed consolidation versus a defeated consolidation. What I discovered indicated school officials and the media in both case studies are aligned on the need to consolidate schools. Officials in the two case studies, as well as the authors of the media sources I referenced, concluded that consolidation would offer additional opportunities and greater efficiency to residents. Both officials and the media also aligned in their belief that consolidation was the only tenable solution to the difficulties facing schools.

The only exception to the alignment between officials and media was in Oppenheim-Ephrata, where the school board voted to stop the consolidation process. As discussed in Chapter 5, voters managed to reverse that decision and then later to elect a pro-consolidation board. Based upon my review of officials and media, it seems there was an agreement that consolidation became the only feasible option for the school districts.

In the successful consolidation, Chapter 5, all three groups did present alignment in identifying the problem facing the two communities, but the online discussion did reveal some opposition to the official narrative emerging from school and media sources. That narrative quickly ended once voters defeated the Oppenheim-Ephrata budget and ousted the Board of Education members who had originally opposed consolidation.

In the unsuccessful consolidation, Chapter 4, Westfield and Brocton, all three groups agreed on the problems facing the school. However, although officials and the media agreed that consolidation was the only solution, online, alternatives to consolidation were proposed as viable alternatives, including a regional school or alternative consolidation partners. The official media narratives did not prove convincing, and voters in one of the communities (Westfield) chose
continued independence. In subsequent exit polls and a study conducted by the Westfield board, voters indicated the merger did not offer enough benefits to their community, and the losses were too steep. This phraseology is often code for losing a building and increased tax rates. While the consolidation study had presented a decline in tax rates and a potential newly-constructed joint campus, Westfield residents found that their tax rate would not decrease for almost 5 years after the merger. Westfield residents did not want a new campus constructed outside of the village.

The location of the school in the successful consolidation of Oppenheim-Ephrata and St. Johnsville was rendered moot, specifically because only the St. Johnsville campus was in an actual business area. The Oppenheim-Ephrata school campus is located in a rural, not a village, setting. With the decision to place the high school in St. Johnsville and place the middle school in Oppenheim, there was little community opposition. The consolidation plan also indicated each community would maintain its own elementary school, so that, too, helped reduce opposition to the consolidation. Both communities would equally benefit.

In the successful consolidation (Chapter 5), all three sources were aligned, and most opposition to consolidation ended after the budget defeat and board of education change. In the unsuccessful consolidation, alignment existed between the media and school officials, and the online concerns about consolidation up to the final, defeated vote.

**Timing of consolidation attempts**

Did the timing of when school officials proposed consolidation attempts impact the results? While not necessarily a question that I started to ask in my dissertation, the timing of the consolidation process *may* have influenced the outcomes. Timing is everything, and explained below, in Phase 1: Situational Development, both case study attempts saw their component
districts, heavily dependent on state aid, impacted by the great recession. The first chronological
attempt at consolidation in my study was the successful, Chapter 5 Oppenheim-Ephrata-St.
Johnsville consolidation process. Coming off the Great Recession’s start in 2008, and the
implementation of the GEA, and tax levy cap, the pre-consolidation study launched by the two
districts and Fort Plain was at the height of the negative fiscal period of that time period. As
reported in Chapter 3, it was also in the middle of a number of other consolidation attempts in
the region, with the four district attempt next door in Mohawk, Ilion, Frankfort-Schuler, and
Herkimer. To the north, Lake Pleasant and Wells had just defeated an attempt. Northville and
Mayfield were in the middle of the process. Local media, state government officials, and citizen
groups were watching as increasing numbers of reports were indicating that districts would be
“Programmatically Bankrupt” within five years. As described in Chapter 2, the Suozzi and
Lundine Commissions had just completed their reports, endorsing the proposal that rural schools
in New York consolidate.

In the second study, the unsuccessful consolidation attempt describing Brocton and
Westfield’s efforts in Chapter 4, the process was later in the period. In 2012-2013, State aid for
education had started to increase after five years of cuts and the Gap Elimination Adjustment.
While Chautauqua County’s economic prospective were still poor, Governor Cuomo had
publically stated that no more aid was in sight (Gormley, 2013), the situation must not have
appeared as end of the road desperate for the Westfield voters as it appeared in the Brocton
School district, or two years earlier in the Mohawk Valley.

Timing may have influenced the consolidation attempts, but like Steele (2010) had
pointed out in rural education research, rural superintendents were still concerned with their
district’s survival, even with increasing school aid. Rural New York communities are still on a
downward population and economic trend, and after 2016, more attention has been paid to how significant and serious rural areas seem to have been left behind by the structural changes in the economy (Catte, 2019; Wurthnow, 2018).

**Proposed Framework**

My proposed five-phase framework, described in Chapter 1 and 2, is a potentially more nuanced alternative to explaining local policy implementation in New York. Using this framework. I reviewed a number of policy implementation frameworks and noticed two issues. First, those frameworks view policy implementation as a government action imposed on residents in an area. My framework examines local voter agency in complying or rejecting the policy. Second, other frameworks assume that officially-appointed government actors have control over how the policy is implemented and then enforced; however, local education policy is slightly different. New York is a local control state: it recognizes the “home rule” status of any constituted authority (Benjamin and Nathan, 2001). This means that any authority voted into existence by its residents cannot be dissolved except by voter decision. Parnell (2019) has studied the dissolution of local villages in New York State and found that, even with incentives, voters tend to retain the status quo.

My proposed framework may only work in New York State, and only for school district consolidation, but it does recognize the power that local voters have in approving or canceling a local decision. With increasing decision-making placed into the hands of federal and state level professional politicians and bureaucrats, local voters are increasingly seeking to protect their options of voting for local school district policies via budgets and Board members in New York State. As Mutz (2018) found, many white voters felt a keen loss of status, and especially in rural
areas, reacted by voting *against* the perceived “liberal reform” candidate. Voters engaged in rural school consolidation may see these efforts as “liberal reform”, based upon online discussion evidence presented in Chapter 4 and 5, and tend to react against the efforts.

As information access spreads beyond historical models (tv, radio, newspapers) and into other modes, community sense making is increasingly divided among the source of information and the confidence the person places in that source. My proposed Phase 3, Community Sense Making, attempts to capture how residentially-clustered community members view information with very different lenses. Catte (2019) and Wurthnow (2018) have both found that researchers’ definitions of rural are inadequate. When dealing with rural communities, there is a clear need to define the community, and provide effective contextualization in research. Fulkerson and Thomas (2016) have explicitly called for redefining rural areas without relying on the “not urban” standard definition. This dissertation study calls for more nuanced discussions of rural areas as individual communities. By providing a more nuanced understanding of a rural area, researchers can change the blunt “rural is poor and not urban” narrative. Rural communities need a thick description (Creswell 2014) of their uniqueness missing in discussion of broader trends. The broader rural trends indicate areas still struggling to maintain viability and continued existence (Sipple, et al., 2019).

**Phase 1: Situational development**

As Chapters 4 and 5 found, all four communities experienced a long term trend in economic and population decline. The regions, Southern Western New York, and the Mohawk River, have not experienced economic recovery since the deindustrialization of Upstate New York began in the 1950s (Thomas, 2003). With the downward economic and population trends,
coupled with the 2008 Great Recession, these districts, heavily dependent on state school aid, experienced a simultaneous increase in mandated expectations from State Officials.

The local school districts, as discussed in Chapter 4 and 5, were experiencing heightened fiscal accountability from the office of the New York State comptroller to justify not just federal aid expenditures, but state aid expenditure as well. The State had implemented a property levy limit, thereby restricting what local school districts could fiscally do to raise additional resources at a local level. The State also implemented a Gap Elimination Adjustment, which had reduced expected aid to poor districts heavily depended on state aid. The state also severely limited how much of a rainy day reserve fund districts could keep. These fiscal actions, coupled with an overall economic downturn nationally, and with greater impact in the rural upstate area, created a perfect storm of economic challenges facing rural officials.

Further, the State was implementing the Regents Reform Agenda, which carried a three prong approach to “reform.” First, students would be tested more frequently, and with higher stakes to the school for the results. These tests were directed at Grades 3-8 in English language Arts and math, as well as a fourth grade science exam. If the school’s population did not meet state standards of performance on the exam, which had been raised, and performance indicators downgraded based upon the Board of Regents expectations, the schools would be placed in accountability status, and subject to a myriad of fiscal and programmatic and administrative penalties. Second, the standards, curriculum, and graduation requirements were changed, and added a burden of purchasing all new materials for these new standards. School districts needed to adopt the Common Core For State Learning Standards or CCLS. Districts in rural areas were strongly encouraged to work with BOCES implementation teams to learn about the new curriculum and standards, and were required to attend training at state and regional levels. If the
schools were found, based upon testing to have not preformed well, then a series of state level audits of curriculum and teaching were launched. These interventions were time consuming and high stress events for local districts. I have first hand knowledge as I was a member of the State Education Department’s team assigned to perform these audits at this time. Third, principals and teachers were now subject to an Annual Professional Performance Review, consisting of student results, and more frequent in class observations and meetings. Principals were now expected to conduct at least three pre meetings with teachers, three full class observations, and three post observation meetings and document the APPR process. The previous teacher evaluation process most districts used consisted of one pre meeting, one full class observation and one post meeting observation. The timing and financial commitment for most districts expanded exponentially as principals, who are often the only administrator in a rural school, were now increasingly engaged in compliance tasks, and not on other issues that usually required their attention. For some districts, the only feasible alternative was to hire an “APPR” evaluator as an additional expense to the budget.

For the case studies I presented in Chapter 4 and 5, the online discussion in some ways demonstrated that the local population was not truly aware of the impact these reforms were inflicting on their local schools. One such quote stood out: “Why do teachers make any more money than Walmart People greeters…” Retrieved from Topix in the Brocton-Westfield merger attempt, this online point shows that even though almost 100 percent of Americans have attended a public school, many do not realize the daily job requirements of teachers. Additionally, most Americans have only interacted with administrators at a local school in very limited circumstances: if they or their child was in trouble, at a Committee on Special Education event, at an Open House, or at graduation. Just like many other professions, educator’s daily work are
hidden from public view and require extensive training to assume those positions. But the barrier
to entry is considerably lower than medial or legal, or accounting, and so many people have a
perception of teaching as a “lower status job” (Labaree, 2006). This reality often skews the
general population’s view of the type and level of detail the work educators undertake requires.

**Phase 2: Local governing board reaction**

In both case studies presented in Chapters 4 and 5, the boards of education, and school
superintendents believed that they had *done everything in their power* to keep the districts
operating within the context of changing New York State economic, political, social, and legal
realities. In Chapter 4, the unsuccessful consolidation, both the Brocton and Westfield Boards of
Education had eliminated many of the co-and extra-curricular activities over the previous budget
cycles. The Boards had eliminated a number of non-core academic programs, and had reduced
staffing by eliminating positions, or purchasing shared services through the BOCES agreements.
The Boards had also participated previously in regional high school studies, and sought ways to
utilize the legally allowable shared programs with other districts. The Brocton and Westfield
Boards had attempted previous consolidations, with Brocton reaching out to its neighbor
Fredonia, and Westfield studying consolidation with Ripley. After those two attempts failed, the
boards, limited by geography, approached each other, and began to share sports teams,
participate in student exchanges, and underwent the process together by holding joint Board
meetings, and hiring a consulting group to run the process and convene residential and business
focus groups. The Boards agreed that a change to the consolidation report was necessary, and
insisted that both communities retain their elementary schools after residents raised a concern.
The boards also agreed that a potentially new state of the art facility, constructed mid-way
between the two communities, would be ideal for a combined school district. The consolidation consultants, Board of Education members, and local government officials did not grasp how significant the dual issues of losing Westfield’s high school from the village, and the delayed benefit of decreasing taxes would impact the residents.

In Oppenheim-Ephrata and St. Johnsville, school officials, with the assistance of state level legislatures also convened meetings to inform the public about the future of education in the area. What was different about this particular consolidation was the pre-consolidation feasibility study conducted between the two school districts and Fort Plain Central School. Board officials, then acting on recommendations from the pre-study dropped Fort Plain from the process, and concentrated on a two district consolidation. The pre-merger report indicated that Oppenheim-Ephrata would benefit from a consolidation with either partner. St Johnsville would benefit from a consolidation with only Oppenheim Ephrata, and Fort Plain would only benefit from a consolidation with Oppenheim-Ephrata. The pre-merger report also indicated that the tax payers in Oppenheim-Ephrata would receive a better tax break with a consolidation with St. Johnsville. Further the report indicated that the process of consolidation should be conducted as an equal centralization, where both school districts are de-established and reconstituted as a new district. Officials also acted decisively, and implemented severe cost cutting measures following the failed merger vote in the next budget proposal.

**Phase 3: Community sense making**

As both consolidation attempts (Chapter 4 and 5) revealed, community sense making from media and online discussions contained themes that were apparent in both cases. The media’s reporting on consolidation news were similar in both cases, while online, the narratives had some areas of overlap, including administrator and teacher pay, state versus local control,
and support for children’s future. What was different in the two consolidations were the online narrative and its support for consolidation in the successful case (Chapter 5: Oppenheim-Ephrata and St. Johnsville) and the demand for truth and using reputable sources, and not allowing hearsay to defeat the process. An additional difference can be seen in viable alternatives to consolidation in the two case studies. The Mohawk Valley example (Chapter 5) had no real alternative, whereas the Chapter 4 (Brocton-Westfield) example had the regional school suggestion as a viable option in the eyes of online discussants.

*Media Narrative:* In both Chapters 4 and 5, newspaper media supported consolidation. From the larger regional papers (*Buffalo News* and the *Utica Observer Dispatch*) to the medium regional and local papers (including the *Dunkirk Observer* and *Herkimer Times Telegram*) editorials, articles, and sources quoted for the articles provided a pro-consolidation narrative to the local populations. The papers in both case studies clearly indicated that consolidation would bring efficiency and improved opportunity for the local communities. The papers also continued to espouse a belief that Albany (the capital) had not done enough to support the region, and that consolidation was the only way to access additional needed state aid. This narrative is quite strong in New York State, that Upstate suffers from the political learnings of Down State politicians (Thomas & Smith, 2009).

The media narrative in both communities also indicated that consolidation may be the only way for taxpayers to enact tax rate/levy relief on their local communities. The newspapers in both case studies indicated that public officials, including school employees, are expensive, receive “perks” such as retirement and healthcare plans that are out of line with what the everyday residents of the area receive. The media narrative continues to support the reform efforts which Cervone (2017) and Scribner (2016) found in their nationally based research into
educational reform efforts. As Goyette (2017) discovered, many mainstream media outlets are very willing to describe public education as failing due to simplified measures of test results and accountability press releases that do not discuss the nuanced research and understandings which have developed in academic research circles. Dearing & Rodgers (1996) have indicated that the media is extremely powerful in setting public discussion agendas. With the rise of social media, and the movement away from traditional outlets to new social media outlets, the narrative on many policy issues has moved from presenting centered discussions to more ideologically motivated slants in coverage.

*Online Discussion:* In both Chapter 4 and 5, online discussion narratives emerged under the pro-consolidation and anti-consolidation umbrella. Both communities experienced pro and con narratives, but the difference between the two case studies is revealed in the specific points that rose to the level of significant and influential.

In Chapter 4, the pro-consolidation narrative was not very strong. It appealed for voters to do the right thing by consolidating. The narrative provided examples to readers of the lack of educational opportunities for children in both schools. The narrative’s component parts indicated that the additional aid, in foundational funds, renovation funds, and other cost savings would give a newly combined district abilities to restore lost programming, increase curricular offerings, and restore lost extracurricular activities. The pro narrative also described the vote as an opportunity for local residents to assert, for potentially the last time, agency over the disposition of their local school districts. The State, in some posts commentary, would force a consolidation in the future if the vote failed.

The anti-consolidation narrative in Chapter four revealed a strong belief that the answer to the school district’s problems did not lie with consolidation. Rather, the online discussion
described many, many, alternatives. First, the narrative indicated that the districts should demand administrators and teachers give up significant pay and benefits packages. The anti-consolidation efforts specifically cited the teacher’s unions as a *key reason* for the school district’s troubles. This mirrors Cramer (2016) research into rural areas. A second major narrative identified a significant lack of trust in the officials’ who are elected and appointed. People believed for a variety of reasons the real reason behind the consolidation were not in the community’s best interest. The narrative of people in rural areas leery of trusting public officials again mirrors Cramer’s (2016) work into rural areas. Third, the anti-consolidation online narrative indicated that a perfectly viable alternative, regional schools, was the path that should be taken by the districts. Why merge one district when all of Chautauqua County could benefit from a county-wide school system? The online narrative against consolidation reveals residents are not aware of many of the legal, regulatory, and educational restrictions placed on school districts by the federal and state laws and regulations and local contracts. Online dialogue, while impassioned, does indicate a fatal flaw in the process: explaining in plain language why the district cannot continue in the status quo from the official perspective.

The officials, media, and online, in both case studies, clearly saw the status quo as no longer practical. In Chapter 4, viable alternatives and questions about the consolidation process created a sense for voters in Westfield that the proposed action was not in their best interests.

In Chapter 5, the online narrative revealed some of the same points as in Chapter 4, but with one significant difference, there was no viable alternative to consolidating. The pro-consolidation narrative re-enforced the programmatic and fiscal benefits the two communities of Oppenheim-Ephrata and St. Johnsville would receive. The pro consolidation merger also clearly answered opposition to the consolidation with facts, and reasoned arguments, and with examples
from the region of the results of other failed school consolidations. There were concrete
elements of neighboring districts who had defeated consolidations and were struggling to
provide basic programming and extra-curricular activities. The pro-consolidation narrative also
indicated the merger would help both communities equally. No one would benefit at the expense
of the other community. The tax rates in both districts would decrease after a consolidation. Both
sets of children would have greater access to advanced placement courses. Both sets of children
would have access to more extracurricular activities. Additionally, the pro-consolidation
narrative reminded readers that both communities were part of a bigger regional whole— the
Mohawk River Valley. Outsiders have often taken advantage of the region, and the merger may
be the last way to save the area, and not rely on the state forcing a consolidation, or expecting an
outside company to create jobs (Doukas, 2003).

The anti-consolidation online discussion was also present, and raised similar issues as did
the narrative in chapter 4. What was different was the almost total lack of an anti-consolidation
narrative after budget in Oppenheim-Ephrata was defeated following the binding vote defeat.
The pro consolidation narrative re-emerged and became dominate following that event, with
groups in both Oppenheim-Ephrata and St. Johnsville collaborating and sharing those
collaborations online. More factually based discussion emerged as well, as the public forum
materials produced by the districts were copy and pasted online. Personal testimonials emerged
from individuals who had called around to different districts emerged, answering point by point
the anti-consolidation points. For instance one post against the consolidation had raised an alarm
that tax rates would go up, not down. A pro-consolidation individual responded with a refutation,
citing the newly consolidated district, its phone number, the name of the business manager and
the New York State School District Budget report card site as examples of where to obtain correct information.

As Steele (2010) discussed in his dissertation, districts that actually included student participation in the consolidation tended to fare better than those consolidation attempts which did not. As Oppenheim-Ephrata children and St. Johnsville students exchanged visits and played together on sports teams, their parents began to hold joint activities. These joint activities by the two school districts, hoping to become one, led to a type community formation which would overcome *local* identification (Ostrud, 2012).

In summary, community sense making in both chapter 4 and 5 were influenced by a wide range of activities, sources of information, and lived experiences. In Brocton, residents felt a real need to consolidate. Westfield residents felt that the price to pay for additional support was too high. In St. Johnsville, the residents felt the advantages of consolidation far outweighed the negatives. It took a little longer to convince the Oppenheim-Ephrata public, but they too saw the need to consolidate after the board almost took away their right to vote on the matter, the school budget indicated the end was near, and neighbors in St. Johnsville were welcoming, even after the merger was voted down the first time.

**Phase 4: Community member agency**

In Chapter 4, the voters of Brocton supported consolidation at the straw and binding vote phase. Westfield voters supported the attempt at the straw vote phase but not during the binding phase. In Chapter 5, the St. Johnsville community supported consolidating during the straw and binding vote attempts. Oppenheim-Ephrata board initial supported consolidation, then refused to allow a straw vote. After significant pressure from local residents, the Board allowed the straw vote, which saw support within the community. Initially the residents did not support the binding
vote, but after voting to elect a new board of education, and defeating a proposed budget, the Oppenheim-Ephrata community approved the second attempt at consolidation. On June 1st of the following year, the new Oppenheim-Ephrata-St. Johnsville Central School District was officially created.

**Voter Turnout**

In local elections, voter turnout is often low (Warshaw, 2019). Even in state and national elections, with a “coattails effect” voter turnout may only hover around 50% of eligible voters (Warshaw, 2019). New York State’s rural school consolidation requires local voters to participate in two referendums in order to successfully enact the policy (Chabe, 2011). In both case studies, Chapter 4 Brocton-Westfield, and Chapter 5, Oppenheim-Ephrata and St. Johnsville, the percentage of eligible voters participating in the vote was in line with these national research findings. However, in the defeated process, Chapter 4, Brocton, Westfield, voter turnout was significantly higher than normal yearly school budget votes. Another observation was the near reversal of voting pattern from advisory (straw) to binding vote in this case study. As reported in Chapter 4, Brocton overwhelmingly supported consolidation during both votes, however, Westfield’s voters shifted from an overwhelming support on the straw vote of 508 supporting and 168 opposing to 507 in support of consolidation and 718 opposed to consolidation.

In Chapter 5, the successful consolidation of Oppenheim-Ephrata and St. Johnsville, the voter turnout for both the advisory and binding votes were similar to normal budget voting totals. The defeated binding vote, as reported in Chapter 5, was reversed by less than 50 voters in the next ballot. These extremely close vote totals indicate the division between supporters and
opposition was firmed up, and the difference in the outcome may be explained by who chose to stay home when the vote was schedule (Warshaw, 2019).

Recent research into local elections have called for additional studies of who votes, why people vote, and how national and state level policies are impacting the local level. One study indicated that local politicians are unable to change citizen priorities, and were in fact stymied in their attempts to garner support. Translated to educational policy, and action by school officials, then this quote may be disconcerting:

We find that public officials are not able to change these citizens’ priorities. In fact, the treatment effect is negative. When the public officials wrote that an issue was important, the constituents who saw those messages were less likely to move towards saying the issue should be a priority. (Butler & Hassell, 2019).

As the researchers indicate, school officials, who face two masters, their local boards of education, and the state education department, will continue to struggle to serve as the intermediaries between local needs and wants, and state level expectations (O’Rourke & Ylimaki, 2014; Rey, 2014) These conflicts will continue to stress the are ready limited pool of candidates for school leadership positions, as many rural districts see frequent turnover in superintendents and principals (Davis, 2015).

**Phase 5: Post-Referendum**

While I did not specifically address Phase 5: Post-referendum in the individual case studies, school consolidation continues to be a hot topic in New York State. In 2019, the Erie County Executive has publically called for school consolidations in Erie County as a way to improve efficiency. The *Dunkirk Observer* has also carried a series of articles about the benefits
of school consolidation. Across New York State, rural areas continue to lose population, and consolidation attempts were made in Western New York, Central New York, Northern New York, and the Southern Tier of New York. Districts are continuing to struggle with population loss, resource loss, and decreases in property values. Some of the state and federal mandates of Common Core State Standards have been altered or repealed, but others, such as computer-based testing continue to challenge administrators.

Research into rural areas is a trending topic, especially within the media’s realm. Increased attention is focused on rural communities, their struggles, and ideas for what can be done to change the trajectory. It will be important for researchers to continue investigating rural areas, especially in light of the anger many residents express towards policies emerging from state capitols (Catte, 2019; Wurthnow, 2018).

In the Brocton-Westfield case study, the Westfield Board specifically conducted a survey with the help of SUNY Fredonia faculty to find out why the consolidation failed. In the post-merger study, the consultants found that residents felt the loss of the high school, the length of time before property taxes were reduced, and other smaller reasons all led to a defeat. Westfield has chosen to not revisit consolidation. The Chautauqua County region also saw another school consolidation attempt fail when Ripley, Sherman, Panama and Clymer Central Schools, targeted for reorganization by the 1958 Master Plan for School District Re-organization held a preliminary study which lead to the 2018 consolidation attempt by Clymer and Panama Central School District. It too was defeated.

In the Mohawk Valley, Oppenheim-Ephrata & St. Johnsville’s neighbors Ilion, Mohawk, Frankfort-Schuler and Herkimer Central School Districts underwent a Reorganization study. In the end, Mohawk-Ilion combined to form the Central Valley Central School District. In the
Adirondacks, the Boquet Valley Central School District was the result of a successful consolidation attempt by Elizabethtown/Lewis and Westport Central School District. Other districts, such as West Valley and Ellicottville Central School District have explored consolidation, but ended the process. As I describe in a different study, many districts in the state are attempting to functionally consolidate without administratively consolidate (Jakubowski & Kulka, 2016). For instance, Piseco Common entered into a tuition arrangement with Wells Central School District. Ripley has arranged for its secondary students to attend Chautauqua Lake Central School District via a tuition arrangement. As stated earlier, a number of rural BOCES have begun early college programs or P-Tech programs for students in their catchment basin.

Future research

My dissertation has used two case studies and three categories of sources to describe the consolidation process in four upstate rural communities between 2008 and 2014. New York State alone offers both historical, contemporary, and future research case studies that provide insights into rural school consolidation. Future research into online discussions of potential consolidations will now be able to utilize different platforms, such as twitter and Facebook, as the accessibility to those programs has exploded since the beginning of my study. Additional work could also examine the sociological, economic, or historical analysis of school consolidation in further detail. Pugh (1994) called on educational historians to examine as many rural school consolidation attempts as possible to find examples of local agency within the State’s policy drivers. Since my two case studies did not actually interview participants, residents, or others engaged in the area, additional work could explore those variables.
Interviewing local people can examine how rural residents experienced the process, as well as evaluate their perceptions of a “new reality” following a completed consolidation. There also exists the possibility of conducting studies similar to Self (2001) revisit of a school district consolidation and evaluation of the success of programmatic and fiscal changes.

With the consistent drive in public education to improve educational opportunities and improve efficiency in public expenditures, research into the overall structure, reform, and results of education needs to continue. Rural communities offer a rich uniqueness and want others to hear their stories—not to pity their realities, but to learn that they exist.

**Implications**

In the Brocton-Westfield region (Chapter 4), Westfield had almost lost their hospital during the State’s Burger Commission designed to re-organize and close some under preforming hospitals. The loss of the high school in Westfield was a real significant scare which community members were not prepared to face, yet again, the State politicians (code for downstate politicians) pushing for the loss of a community agency. The loss of the high school, coupled with delays in seeing tax decreases were too much for the Westfield residents to accept. Additionally, residents in the area were “going it alone” as there were no other simultaneous school district consolidation attempts, except for their own previous attempts, underway during the process.

In the Mohawk Valley region, the consistent de-industrialization of the area since the 1950s, along with the closure of the Griffis Air Base under the Base Closing and Re-alignment Commission had subjected the region to intensive economic stress. Coupled with the Remington Arms downsizing which was occurring almost simultaneously as the school districts were considering consolidation, the communities of Oppenheim-Ephrata and St. Johnsville were faced
with an end-of the line existence. The community was also part of a “merger moment” in the area, as a number of district pairs within their region were undergoing or had just concluded a consolidation process. Residents within the community could see how a successful consolidation could lead to benefits, whereas a number of unsuccessful consolidations had produced serious consequences for some of the neighboring school districts.

**Implications for school district officials**

As part of my dissertation study, I examined how school district officials, such as Boards of Education members, superintendents, and others, communicated to their communities the urgency to undergo and approve a consolidation process. I want to share two observations: first the data presented to community members does not often resonate with people who unaware of how school district complexity impacts reality. For instance, a local rural home will, in times of fiscal stress, make sure every possible option internally has been considered and implemented before asking for neighborhood or government assistance. As Sherman (2009) found in studying rural areas, a belief exists that if you do not clean up your own home first, you as a person have no business asking for outside assistance. Cramer (2016) also found this independent mythos in her study of rural areas. Residents felt that bureaucrats and state officials did not actively seek difficult, necessary, and cost savings solutions before raising tax rates and asking for “handouts” from the “hard working people” (Sherman, 1999).

Second, I saw a pattern where many local residents do not trust elected or appointed school officials. Especially for “outsider” superintendent, any information which does not align with what local residents believe about their community can result in a “backlash effect” (Kolbert, 2017). A “backlash effect” occurs when data or information presented to an individual
which is supposed to change their position actually hardens the position. Especially in light of a superintendent and Board of Education’s regular job of serving as the “chief cheerleader” for a school district, and highlighting the positives of the district to a community, the sudden swing to a negative narrative can be jarring and sound disingenuous to community members. It behooves the educational leadership to ensure that district residents are aware of developing situations, plain language information is disseminated, and community members are given ample opportunities to meet and discuss changes in settings that are convenient to residents. In research conducted into refutational texts by Agulair, et al., (2019) a very specific pattern of source materials were required to move people’s beliefs from certain and incorrect based upon evidence to questioning their internal beliefs and open to new information.

If a district wishes to undertake a consolidation effort, then the facts must exceed the perceptions of local residents. A school district official cannot claim district fiscal stress while maintaining an end of year surplus. The Oppenheim-Ephrata Case study shows the power of shared communications and shared community activities. The St. Johnsville residents and community members demonstrated that the proposed consolidation was a welcome and equal partnership. This extends beyond sports and clubs. As Steele (2010) demonstrated, the students must experience and communicate the benefits of a consolidation in real terms, with real impact on their lives.

District officials must also be up front about fiscal savings in a consolidation. The expectation in Brocton-Westfield for a tax levy savings were significant. When the consolidation attempt’s report indicated that the Westfield community would not see real savings for almost a decade, the community, as described online felt fooled. Expectations for savings must be placed into context, and reasonability. This is especially poignant because members within the two
communities specifically identified online a goal of significant tax savings resulting from a successful consolidation. The members of the Brocton and Westfield communities were also concerned about the impact administrative consolidation would have when actual physical consolidations of the school buildings were not stressed in the attempt. Online, residents questioned the decision to keep both campuses open, and the inherent costs associated with what was perceived as inaction. Why keep both expensive buildings open?

Online residents also did not understand, nor in some ways appreciate the impact of the reform efforts emerging from Albany. While the Brocton-Westfield online community members appreciated the efforts to reduce tax levy, and curb spending, the programmatic, teacher and administrator accountability, and curricular implications were not clear to non-professionals in the communities. While school officials had communicated, and media outlets had reported on, the changes that Albany had mandated under the Regents Reform Agenda, the actual understandings of the implications were not apparent in the online dialogues captured. This reality supports the work which Haller, Nusser & Monk, (1999) and Rey (2014) discovered in earlier research into public perceptions of school performance and the state or district official’s perceptions. The finding also echoes research that Tieken (2014) found in Arkansas, and Renyolds (1999) found in Iowa.

If school district leaders are to actually convey the impact of realities faced by their local school districts, then communication in plain language, and in formats which invite and facilitate public, non specialist participation will be the only way to go about the work. As Essert & Howard (1952) expressed in their work on rural school centralization, visiting kitchen and dining room table’s best achieved explaining the needs of the school community. Cramer (2016) found one of the best possible areas to achieve the communication goals for any public official: the
daily coffee klatch. Informal thought leaders, and community “backbenchers” who were active at these locations had opinions, were willing to share, and speculate on the reasons for policy actions. This point is most clearly demonstrated in Chapter 5: Oppenheim-Ephrata & St. Johnsville, which successfully merged. After the defeated binding vote, the superintendent of Oppenheim-Ephrata proposed a budget that demonstrated to the community how serious the situation was within their district. The budget, which was defeated, offered massive cuts and threatened to eliminate not just nice to have extra-curricular activities, but core, point of pride extracurricular like the band. The budget cuts in Oppenheim-Ephrata also exposed to the public the reality that the district no longer had any reserves. Usually district officials will set up reserve funds across multiple areas as a way to ensure continuation of programs even if a down economy impacts income. In Oppenheim-Ephrata, that last budget proposal was the end of the road. In Brocton-Westfield, the defeated consolidation did not result in the same level of fiscal and programmatic crisis.

Officials will also need to ensure that they closely monitor online conversations. Now that social media has moved into more open formats, such as twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and other identifying sites, officials will be able to identify and engage with individuals who are not “convinced” that the efforts are in the best interest of communities. Online communication research (cited in Chapter 2) has indicated that unsubstantiated rumors are spread quicker and with greater impact online than realistic information. Officials need to recognize and be ready to deal with rumor, myth, innuendo, and half-truths from the beginning of any process.

Implications for Policy level decision makers

New York State officials must rethink the structure of local school districts in upstate New York. Many regions and BOCES have created P-Tech programs as a way to skirt the rules
that do not allow the creation of a regional high school. For the policy makers at the state level, the “soft” consolidation of open enrollment, BOCES based career and technical educational programs, and New Visions programs for college credit can achieve functional consolidation without the traumatic impact of actual consolidation attempts (Jakubowski & Kulka, 2016). As I point out in one of my research studies (Jakubowski, 2019) the consolidation process in New York has been an almost plague like process which “unsettles” communities already grappling with how to best meet the needs of their residents in a very global environment.

The State Legislature should examine the work of the New York State Center for Rural Schools, based at Cornell University, and led by Dr. John Sipple, who has found that the unevenness of tax levies and tax rates in many consolidation pairs leads to a dead on arrival consolidation attempt. The incentives offered by the state, in the form of a 40% increase in state aid to districts, is actually a red herring, as many school communities would like additional aid without consolidation. What would be a better policy option is increased aid to BOCES or consortiums of school districts to share all administrative costs. Further, a change in state law to allow BOCES or consortia to supply “core academic” supports, such as elementary or 7-12 subject teachers would relieve some of the stresses on local school districts. A core academic class are considered by the state as mandated by Commissioner’s Regulations Part 100. These classes include elementary, middle, and high school subjects which are enumerated within Part 100 regulations. With the advent of distance educational programs (Culbertson, 2018), many schools are now in the process of implementing distance education classes with schools and BOCES across the state. Laws do not permit core classes delivered by this format.

A third change that State level policy leaders should undertake is a revision of the New York State Master Plan of 1958 informed by research into best practices in education. The urban
normative and metro dominated “bigger is better” policy towards rural schools stands in stark contrast to the “smaller is better” policy towards failing urban schools (Jakubowski, 2019a). The continued insistence at the state level that consolidation is the only answer to reforming rural education stands in stark contrast to reality demonstrating that many rural schools are, in fact, supporting creative and extremely innovative programs (Wilcox, et al., 2017). As Parshall (2019) found in her research into rural village dissolutions in New York State, people want the villages, and feel psychologically the impact of closed public buildings is negative and harmful to the future.

**Implications for media**

While the goal of most privately held media outlets are to make money, Dearing & Rodgers (1996) do point out the significant power those outlets have in setting the tone of the narrative, and conveying information to the public. Media, especially newspapers, are 100% pro consolidation in every case I have studied. The media has also created an environment where the reporting efforts have called into question salaries and expenditure decisions of publically funded programs, such as schools. Using alarming language such as “waste” and “extreme” to characterize salaries, benefits, and programmatic costs ties into neo-conservative (Scribner, 2016) and neo-liberal political (Cervone, 2017) agendas to dismantle public education, break public sector unions (Cramer, 2016), and move governance into private sector controls.

While the media has a responsibility to inform the public, question decisions by public officials, and investigate potential abuses of power, the hype level has reached dangerous proportions. Conservative and some rural members of the American population do not trust schools as institutions to carry out their function to educate children (Salam, 2018). Some Americans, especially conservative who tend live in rural areas, believe that teachers are
encouraging children to adopt viewpoints against the values which their families espouse (Biery, 2018).

With the increased concentration of media outlets into single ownership groups, and the decreasing number of traditional media outlets, and lack of internet availability in rural areas, rural residents are often restricted in the availability of information sources which urban and suburban residents take for granted (Benson, 2019; Perrin, 2019). The single stream narrative of public expenditures are wasteful has given rise to a belief by many in rural areas that educational programs and personnel are overpaid, and are not value added in the sense that Cramer (2016); Duncan (1999); and Sherman (1999) found in research into understandings of “real work.”

**Implications for Researchers**

As Biddle, Sutherland & McHenry-Sorber (2019) eloquently explain in their piece on rural education research:

In short, a focus on inherent rurality can create problematic barriers that preclude rural research from both making meaningful contributions to the broader discipline and benefiting from its insights through dialogic engagement in its argument building. Yet the field’s focus on relational boundaries, which are reinforced in Swan Song as scholarly boundaries, limits our ability to build coalitions and consensus that will ultimately best serve research, policy, and practice. The question of the theoretical relevance of rurality to one’s scholarship is a useful one in the course of study design intended to contribute to rural research and to benefit rural and small schools, and Coladarci’s (2007) aim—to increase the yield of rural education research—has in some ways been realized through adherence to these standards. However, our cases demonstrate that its utility in evaluating the suitability of an article for inclusion in a rural research program or journal is too
limiting to be the primary consideration in addition to the obvious standards of methodological and intellectual rigor. While this may not have been the intent of Swan Song, in practice, particularly among young scholars, the work has served as a major marker of what counts/does not count as legitimate rural education research.(p. 9).

Three of the leading young scholars in the field of rural education research call upon the field, practitioners, and students to ensure the research undertaken *advances* the stories that each community can tell. In advancing these stories, research can then help *make meaning* across case studies. While honoring the uniqueness which each community, or event offers to researchers, finding patterns, and common themes, will help tie experiences together and begin to help researchers understand the “why” questions which are so difficult to answer. My particular case studies surfaces a hidden narrative in four rural communities undertaking a urban centric reform approach that does not take into account a very real feeling that rural residents do not feel heard by their elected and professional education leadership. As discussed in the literature review of Chapter 2, the deficit model used most often to tell rural educational story fails to surface the deep seated understandings held by many local non-elite members of communities. My research case studies gave voice to the residents, who rightfully asked questions, about the singular push of consolidation as the *only solution* to the problems facing the four smaller, rural communities. Researchers need to heed the subaltern voices, and recognize what Scott (1990) identified: away from the powerful and influential, people will tell their stories, and observe the actions, behaviors, and thought process the elite live. If there is a dissonance between the words and deeds, rural residents are not afraid to call the question, but will do so with guaranteed anonymity, such as the ballot box, or online, away from elite.
Conclusion

Education reform policies in an urban dominated, metro-centered (Thomas, 2009) state such as New York State has failed to address some profoundly important issues in the almost 40% rural areas. First, no two rural places are the same (Catte, 2019), and researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and media need to be cognizant of this fact. Second, and most relevant to my dissertation, the perceptions that people carry about concerning their schools are quite often not the same as what the elected officials or bureaucrats perceive about the “field” (Rey, 2014). The local realities, perceptions, beliefs, and values are transmitted with the rural area by the “hidden transcript” which Scott (1990) proposed as a one of the narratives emerging among subaltern peoples. My research work was fortunate enough to have benefited from the anonymity of the internet, and the way in which online discussions captured normally lost discussions from participants with opinions normally not included in the historical record.

School district consolidation in New York, in my two exemplary case studies (Stake, 1995), shows alignment between school officials and traditional media. Both stakeholder groups have realized status quo is no longer feasible, with rising expectations, and repeated difficult fiscal realities. My two case studies also shows that a vibrant counter narrative exists among people who believe that other, less drastic policy measures are potential solutions to issues in schools. As Azano & Biddle (2016) have written, the “rural school problem” is a frequent troupe in scholarly, policy, and political writings. For the people living in the communities who underwent consolidation attempts studied in my dissertation, the urgency the leaders

The data presented by the consolidation consultants in one community did not achieve the goals which Kotter’s (2005) theory on change management suggest leaders need to do: effectively communicate a need for change. Most critically, in my opinion, was the actions of
leaders in the two schools following the failed consolidation attempt. Oppenheim-Ephrata’s community revolted, and emphatically defeated the district budget and re-election bids by Board of Education members who had initially opposed consolidation. With the budget defeated, the communities saw first-hand how the districts were going to falter even more programmatically without the additional human and fiscal capital from a consolidation. In the end, the reality of not consolidating was not worth status quo.

Rural residents want what every other person wants: a good home, a good community, and a good life. While the details of the definition may vary, it is very clear that residents do not want to lose the option to make their own decision on what that reality means. Especially evident, rural residents are informed, are active, and engaged, especially when their schools, which impacts their wallets and their children, are up for debate.
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Appendix 1: Coding Instrument Example

Please Note: as of January 1, 2020 TOPIX is no longer an active website. Researchers will need to use a web archives search site to access the materials.

Source: http://www.topix.com/forum/city/westfield-ny/TCSG3RGSAI0SP7HT-

Example 1:

#1 Oct 19, 2012
if there is a merger close one of the schools down. it makes no sense to merge and keep both schools open.

Code level 1 (Descriptive): Close 1 school building

Code level 2 (Pattern): building

Example #2:

#5 Oct 20, 2012
Two things will decide this merger vote: where the high school is located and reduced taxes. Nothing else will matter. The community, for years, has heard that "we must do it for the kids." Bupkis. As I have said in previous postings, the kids are well taken care of. This is a matter of taking care of the taxpayers.

Code level 1 Descriptive: School location and taxes

Code level 2: building Code 2: finances

Example #3:

#25 Mar 21, 2013
The proposal says to build a new school. Whatever they do right now is just to save the money for a few years so that we save the 2% local share to get the new school built with no tax increase. It is also to get the kids the best of what we have now to get them graduated in the meantime. It was indicated to move to one school but there was no hard and fast rule to close Westfield. It appeared that closing both and building an efficient school in a new location midway between the towns was the preferred option. If both schools are closing then nobody is treated different and the new school will be more cost efficient to operate. I hope you are not
concerned that there is some conspiracy to make one district a loser and another a winner. We have to do something and the best place for the high school and the school with the most current resources is the Brocton Campus as they have the latest equipment for our kids to do their best and have the best advantages. Not having our building on the same par with Brocton is not slur to us. We did what we have done to preserve our school until the state forced everyone to do something before they take the decision out of our hands and send our kids where they tell us they will go and we have no choice. If Westfield had everyone on laptops and brand new science labs and had the pool and huge gyms and the entire building networked and all the other brand new and refurbished assets then obviously Westfield would be the place to have the students. I have been looking at what colleges want and when I have to consider how to show them what they want to see it is going to be so much easier for our students to perform to high standards on the Brocton campus.

Code level 1 (descriptive) Building

Code level 2 (pattern): building

**Source #2: Feasibility Study for Consolidation**

“**Finding 6:** By consolidating the two districts and reducing the number of buildings needed for instruction, it will be necessary to reduce staff as shown in Chapter 10, pages 146 – 153. Finding savings in the area of personnel is critical to the financial future of the district.” (p. 158).

“**RECOMMENDATION 19:** There should be a thorough and deliberate assessment of building needs in the new district. A capital project should be proposed to meet those needs. Planned well, the project should not require any local funding to cover costs.” (p. 167)


Downloaded from:

The discussions about the merger of Brocton and Westfield school districts are just beginning. Those attending seemed to agree that merger is an economic necessity…

While the first recommendation of the study is for a merger, The members of the boards seemed most uncomfortable with the recommendation concerning housing the students.

According to the study, "The WNYSEC study team strongly promotes a three phase multi-year plan to use parts of both buildings in the beginning, and then eventually phase into a single building."

In the first phase, for three years, K-3 students would attend at Brocton; Pre-K through 5 in Westfield and 6-12 in Brocton.

In the second phase, for a two year period, all elementary students would be housed in Westfield and 6-12 would remain in Brocton.

In the third phase, there would be one building using either existing facilities which may require renovations, or the construction of a new facility between existing facilities.

Brocton board member Susan Hardy offered the opinion that in an effort to balance programs and meet the educational needs of the middle school students, it might be better to house the middle school separately…"We need to pay attention to middle school."

…

Code 1: Building

Code 2: Building

Sample summary:

In three types of sources, the school buildings cause concern as the Consolidation is progressing. On the internet, people are wondering why buildings would be kept open. Another commentator indicated the consolidation would falter on the location of the building. In the official report, the school buildings were raised as an area of need for the district. In the traditional media, concerns about the school buildings were reported on. National research demonstrates that the location of a building for a school is an issue. (Renyolds, 1999; Lyson, 2002; Thomas, 2003).
Memo example 1:

Log Alpha- On line data from topix coding
1) personal attack
2) personal
3) personal
4) personal
5) personal
6) Kids need more opportunities/don’t let wallet rule
7) Westfield gain little lose a lot/ increase taxes/decrease value
8) westfield doesn’t offer strong programs
9) personal
10) What does “Compete in a world economy look like.”
11) We need to prepare kids “Third world countries are passing westfield”
12) personal
13) Third world does not compare to westfield and Brocton
14) kenya better than westfield
15) post 14 was a fluke
16) countries named not 3rd world
17) WACS would never allow big classes
18) quotes stats about poor academics of americans
19) Remember who sold out westfield
20) personal attack
21) personal attack
22) personal attack
23) personal attack
24) attack
25) kids need better options
26) 25K per student- system broke
27) Combine system- no teacher tenure
28) “Did not include a better education opportunities for westfield students.”
29) We have to start somewhere- over taxed
30) Mergers have failed in past
31) agree
32) Programs slashed/taxes up/ overpaid sups
33) Merged districts create positions and spend money
34) Upstate doing badly compared to rest of state academically- poverty
35) attack
36) people like money, perks and power

Summary: a number of posts in this thread are personal attacks and add no value to the topics or themes which emerge from this thread on Topix. This ties into Phillips (2015) idea of attacks to delegitimize people who the “trolls” disagree with.
A second topic/ theme emerging is the belief by some that the “system is broken” example: cost per student, place of US on international tests, place of district on state wide comparisons. This echoes work by Cramer (2004) describing established systems as failures. Also echoes political rhetoric by governor about effectiveness of schools in state.
Appendix 2: Application of proposed frameworks

Similar issues across multiple disciplines
In local control/voter agency states, which utilize any form of direct citizen action during the policy process, my proposed framework may help explain why planned proposals are defeated at the local ballot box. New York State’s Constitution enshrines the rights of New York Citizens to vote on policy proposals directly, via annual referendums, or in directly, with a ballot cast for a representative (Benjamin & Nathan, 2001). Quite a number of local issues in New York State, not related to school consolidation have recently emerged which may benefit from the application of my five phase framework to understanding why voters endorsed or rejected the proposed policy.

Overview of theoretical components and prior examples
As described in Chapter 2, Literature review, and many public policy implementation research studies suffer from some gaps. The first gap, the studies tend to skew national in focus and nature (Liu, et al., 2010). Yet as Scribner (2016) points out, the local government agencies, such as the school district, or as Parshall (2019) states, villages, are the closest, most concrete, and most influential level of government that citizens interact with on a daily basis. The local schools or villages are symbols to local residents of their place in the greater nation. There is also a skewed recording of elite voices, and media voices. The hidden transcript (Scott, 1990) of non-elite voices has become relevant and critical, especially with the turn politically on many levels of government of people who feel their voice has not heard to populism and waves of hate crimes, speeches, and attacks on government representatives (Cramer, 2016). If the subaltern voices are not listened to, and not actively sought out, not only is the research picture incomplete, but the policy is flawed and does not represent the community, or commonwealth writ large.
The literature also tends to focus on legislative/ executive intent, and the actions taken by bureaucrats beholden to those state and national agencies take in order to adjust or implement, as written, the public policy as proposed. As expressed earlier in Chapter 2, literature review, there is often a gap between intent and implementation. Further, the three waves of research which De Leon & De Leon (2002) identify of top down, bottom-up and the third wave miss the critical role of citizen agency and action, especially when a referendum is needed to implement the government action. This gap can be explained by the lack of attention to Weick, et al., (2005) and Zuckerman (2016) discussions on sense making. If researchers, as well as policy creators and implementers do not heed the process of sense-making, then the policy will experience the Backfire effect which Sethi & Rangaraju (2018) describe as the process where individuals discount, ignore, or critique data which does not support their personally held belief on a controversial topic. The Backfire effect can then lead to a believable alternative narrative which discounts the arguments presented by people who believe change is crucial via a policy that needs implementing.

**Contributions from this study**

As my study discovered, first, the Backfire effect is powerful, and is difficult to overcome, even with significant and overwhelming evidence presented to members of a community. As was demonstrated in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, at least one of the school communities was on the brink of economic bankruptcy, had reduced significantly their programming, and had proposed consolidation. And yet people were not convinced that the end of the road was upon the district because alternative narratives were compelling, plausible, and possible in their view. Therefore, in Chapter 4, where the consolidation attempt failed, the sense making with the community voting down the merger was clear: the proposed policy was not viable.
My proposed 5 part framework also contributes to the literature. Specifically, it addresses the critical need to include non-elite community member’s sense making, and their narratives via the hidden transcript. If we examine the five phases, with some additional examples, it may become clear to researchers and practitioners what I mean.

As Phase 1: Situational Development explains, the history, decisions, and actions before the event can influence how a community perceives or reacts to a local governing body’s attempt to alter the structure of local governance. For instance, in a rural area, Argyle recently challenged the “dry” laws which prohibited the sale of alcohol (Cazentre, 2019). In Argyle’s area, Washington County, NY, agritourism and the affiliated hospitality industry have seen a recent surge in economic growth. With the restriction in the local village on selling alcohol, a number of hospitality related industry businesses were struggling with capturing this growth. At dinner, many patrons would like a glass of wine or beer. In a dry town this was not possible. So the village wanted a change. A second, closer related area, the dissolution of a local government structure, or village, has occurred in New York a number of times, as local residents look to reduce layers (Parshall, 2019). The local residents in many villages across New York State desired a decrease in taxes if they dissolved the surrounding village and instead eliminated some duplication of services, such as police, trash, and highways. In Hamburg, NY, my hometown, members of the community want to ban asphalt plants in the area. The debate among members of business community and residents is one of economic rationale versus aesthetic reasons. Hamburg is a residential suburb and enjoys a reputation as a livable community without the associated industrial issues of two nearby cities.

Within policy analysis literature, my framework provides practitioners, researchers, and students with a two pronged support for more precision in analyzing decision-making at the local
level. First, global events and processes do have, in some instances, rather profound impacts on local communities. The change in the American Economic structure from the 1970s is dominated by the fall of locally owned, controlled, operated, and invested corporations (Kunstler, 1994). Walmart is a perfect example of how global economic, political, and social issues impacted local people. In choosing to zone for a Walmart in rural areas, boards were trying to use their best decision making ability to react to situational developments of declining jobs, souring demographic data, and increasing budget gaps. Within the decade of a Walmart opening, the face of many villages and main streets were permanently altered (Thomas, 2003).

In Phase 1: Situational Development, I recommend the researcher becomes immersed in the history, geography, politics, economics, and sociology of the area, very similar to what an anthropology student would do if they wished to embed in a field based community for an extended period of time. The region may have a long history (depending on sources and available knowledge base) and in some instances, the researcher may need local “knowledge brokers” or experts who can provide a basic overview of the topics, situations, or processes. As I described in my conclusion chapter (Chapter 6) is the emergence of two very different, and often competing narratives of how the situation developed. For the members of the governing board, and the media, events outside of the control of local school district boards created a situation where something needed to change and the status quo was no longer feasible. For other public policy studies, or other “Wicked Problems” a general feeling exists that something must be done because the situation has become unbearable for members of the locality. For the residents of Argyle, NY, the lack of alcohol sales limited the community’s ability to access and benefit from the travel and tourism economy emerging in Washington County, NY. For the residents of Hamburg, NY, the proposed Asphalt plant would categorically change the community in a way
the residents did not want to see. For residents in New York State, most governmental reforms have developed through a series of actions by governing boards, but the narrative interpretation between the elites and the subalterns is often very different, and at odds.

Phase 2: Local governing board reaction, provides a concrete narrative moment which can explain how governing boards chose to react to the situational development. By capturing what a governing body did, and their rationale, publically for the decision making, helps explain how a local area can view its place in events which may have local impact, but global origins. Local governing body reaction ties together what Kingdon (2011) described as “Garbage Can decision making” with Baumgartner and Jones (1993) “Punctuated Equilibrium.” Often, the reasons behind a decision are lost to the dust of time. Historians, analysts and others see the decision has been made, but the question still remains: Why did the board choose the decision it made?

Most policy implementations fail to see how local resident agency at the ballot box is an important step in the process. Voters need to affirm the policy, as implemented is a desired one through direct or referendum, voting, or indirectly, through the re-election, or defeat of elected representatives who voted to enact the policy. Local voters, as described above, have the ability to choose representatives who will enact laws which may hasten or slow down globally impactful changes. In Phase 2: Local governing board reaction, I recommend that the researcher find and trace the origin of the government action in implementing a policy. Research using records and media reports the debates surrounding the discussion. Structure the reaction as a decision making process which addresses the situation developed through their own previous actions, or imposed from outside forces. The body’s official narrative will emerge as the way “one side” of the story is presented to the public. The official side is often the only one left in the
record, or the only story that becomes the record due to researchers unable to previously, find more artifacts, journals, diaries, or other forms of remembrances as the past researchers often viewed local populations as unimportant, or only represented the elite viewpoints, who were often the only literate members of an area until the introduction of mass education in the US post-Civil War.

If the literature also wants to be more inclusive, then my framework provides the body with a way to honor and listen to subaltern voices. In Phase 3 and 4, people with power can cajole, persuade, and educate local residents. However, collectively, non-elite players mix, match, and mingle among themselves, and take cues from trusted individuals, rather than distant experts, with whom they may not trust. The list of not trusted sources of information can including the individuals who, to a local, represent a distant source of power that does not have the local area’s best interest in mind. This is clearly seen in identity politics in the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Europe, where othering and insinuations are quite often used to convince party loyalists, and some undecided voters, that the opposition should not be trusted (Cramer, 2016).

Phase 3: Community sense making has almost universal ability to begin to organize the discussion, debate, and dialogue local community members are formally, via meetings and media, and informally, through conversations, engage in with neighbors. Within many local communities, the “hidden narrative” (Scott, 1990) previously lost to the historical record, are accessible as part of the increased use of the internet, and the increased level of participation on the various social media platforms. In Hamburg, residents are petitioning the Town planning board to keep zoning laws intact, which would deny the owners of the plant an opportunity to build an asphalt manifesting space. Phase 3: Community sense making requires understanding
the conversations among the leadership, the media, and members of the community without formal power. Because researchers often had an agenda, or were outsiders, or did not actually know how to talk with and to different types of informants, it is necessary to embed in the community, or find locals who will vouch, or bring information back to you researching the area. While I used TOPIXs, going forward, a whole host of social media, quite often with identifying information, will be readily available. The WAMC Northeast Public Radio station has a roundtable program with Rex Smith, the Times Union editor. The panel of media experts often discuss how every person, with the invention of the cell phone, the internet, and social media reports on news worthy items, posts to the internet platforms all sorts of personal observations and often does so with abandon from the privacy perspectives of previous generations. The Roundtable also called Americans the “surveillance generation” as many have had every single moment of their lives posted online, with Fitbit apps tracking health data tied to Big Data companies. Whereas previously materials were confined to local libraries, and local archives, information is now much more available on the web and on many different platforms. Some traditional print media outlets, such as newspapers, have gone exclusively digital. It is critically important that as many viewpoints on policy implementation be acknowledged, honored, and included in analytics.

Phase 4: Community member agency explores how voters participate in referendums, in recalls, or general election cycles. Candidates for election are sometimes surprised by results, as polling data at the national level can be flawed. At the local level, community members who choose to engage in voting, or social media posts, or contributing to campaigns, are passionate, and often vocal and represented in media reports and the historical record. Unless after voting polling is utilized, quieter voices can be lost in the wind. Phase 4: Agency allows for scholars to
examine how a local electorate reacted after implementing a decision. Opinion is important, argument is critical, but action makes or breaks history. As we have seen in the United States’ election cycle, almost 50% of the electorate chooses to stay home on Election Day. Understanding why will be important, but actually understanding what people who actually voted on will help determine if the policy implementation moved people to go beyond other forms of participation and actually make a clear decisive decision: via ballot. Franklin is once quipped to have said to somebody after the Constitutional Convention to describe the type of government enacted. The quip goes: A republic, if you can keep it. Many Americans have collectively chosen to not vote on issues of local school governance. This holds true for almost every other decision placed before voters. Over 45% annually choose not to exercise their right to vote (Kuber, et al., 2019). This is a critical, and somewhat distressing statistic, but it says a lot about what Americans do care about. Many more millions choose to vote for an American Idol, or somebody with talent than about the schools their children or neighbors attend.

Phase 5: Post referendum seeks to understand why policy solutions defeated in the past re-emerge. In terms of village dissolution, the option, even if defeated, remains viable. Other communities see reactions to policies implemented when citizens begin petitions, letter writing campaigns, or move on from the issue to something more pressing. Argyle, which chose to legalize alcohol sales, described the morphing from religious reasons for prohibition to business reasons supporting a change. Phase 5: Post referendum, is often the continuation of the process, via implementation, or the end of the issue attention cycle. I, too, feel this is an area that the literature does not adequately examine what happens in local decision making. The research questions which can abound out of this phase are almost limitless. Keeping up with social media, and with electronic media will allow researchers to ask “What happened after?” and find
answers. While journalism, sociology, political science, and other social sciences do not often have a long view, like history sometimes take on an event, researchers must really begin to see how events from 50 years, 100 years, and even earlier have resounding effects into the present. Parkerson & Parkerson (2016) and Scribner (2016) are two of the best examples of really analyzing Phase 5: Post referendum and truly beginning to grapple with the implications, actions, and consequences, of how a policy implantation can radically, and unintentionally alter a nation.

**Recommendations for others**

For qualitative researchers who wish to tell, and then analyze the story of an occurrence, active research must include painting a clear picture of the community, the event, and the after action. Using the five phase framework can provide to a researcher some clear scaffolding for painting a Thick Description (Creswell, 2014) of a community and its history and collective agency via sense making and then action. I propose researchers clearly examine the entirety of a community and its situational nesting within at least one to two levels of government. The sociological description, when coupled with historical and political narratives within and surrounding the community can explain how and why a situation developed, and lead to the governing body enacting a decision. I also recommend that researchers establish a clear understanding of elite and subaltern informants in their research. As Biddle ,et al,. (2019) describe in their call for more inclusive, and more authentic research in rural education, I would expand this call to all researchers. With the goal of a public policy to change a reality, as perceived by some members of the community as less than ideal, then the narratives must also include voices who may actually see the reality as acceptable, or the proposed solution as unacceptable, and other alternatives are better.

I also recommend that researchers in many fields ensure that time is taken to effectively explore the routes of sense making in a community. My research model of the official
communication, media communication, and online communication fits well with Cramer (2016) exploration of how rural residents make sense of their worlds. Sense making is the gathering of information, opinion, and beliefs from across a formal or informal network to create a narrative to explain some event or reality for people. Sense making uses official, public, and credible sources, as well as unofficial, private, and “un-credible” sources. How individuals within a community chose who to believe, and how much weight to give that individual, communication source, or group is a critically important area for study.

My findings indicate that for some members of schools facing consolidations, the narratives presented by officials and the media were self-serving. Adding the teacher’s unions, the administrative apparatus of the state, and the powerful, some members of the communities turned to sources of information which were just credible enough to fit the perception that the consolidation was not the only answer.

As Tieken (2014) points out, after interviewing people, research could paint a better picture due to the people interviewed. However, I do wish to remind researchers of Duncan’s (1999) critical point, in areas where power dynamics are so prevalent, and raw, the powerless may not wish to speak and risk their own livelihoods, or in the case of Carr & Kefalas (2009), their children’s academic future. Seeing online, anonymous sites may provide a narrative, which up until 2016, was kept below the surface in policy discussions and debates (Theobald, 2019).

**Geography and time alignment**

One part of this study which needs reiteration is the concept of geography and time as part of the policy discussion. What happens where and when are just as important as what is happening. As Kingdon (2011) described, policy researchers have done well to tell:

- Who has the problem
• What is the problem

Yet researchers also need to consider where and when. In the case of school consolidations, the where and when emerged in comparing the two cases presented in Chapter 4 and 5. In Chapter 4, the schools were in Western New York, and towards the end of the Great Recession. Chapter 5, Mohawk Valley, and at the beginning of the Recession, helped to craft the narrative, and the reaction of a failed merger in Chapter 4, and a successful merger in Chapter 5. The western New York economy, while depressed, had not been subject to the massive economic de-industrialization of the Mohawk Valley (Doukais, 2006). The employers in the areas described in Chapter 4 included hospitals, colleges, and state correction agencies. In the Mohawk Valley, the two small villages did not have such local employment. Further, the areas of Chapter 4 contained a number of viable alternatives due to the policies and political leadership of the area. Western New York was home to strong supporters of regional high schools, whereas Chapter 5, Mohawk Valley, that option was not considered feasible.

Liu, et al., (2010) indicates strongly that local government differences and uniqueness needs more study, and more evaluation. It is the continued study of local governmental policies, locally implemented decisions which will help strengthen research across the field, and improve the practitioner’s implementations. While Creswell (2014) points out that research is designed to tell stories across a number of incidents, researchers forget that like a rope, what is considered a solid object, is actually composed of 1000s of strands. So too is the policy implementation story: a general story with thousands of voices.

References

