

## District Consolidation and Rural School Closure: *E Pluribus Unum?*

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*We analyze the debate over the closure of a rural Pennsylvania high school and the subsequent consolidation of its students in a much larger, unified school within the state's largest geographic school district. Our investigation is based on historical research in Clinton County; on interviews with parents, alumnae, administrators, and board members of Keystone Central School District; and on the results of survey we mailed to 550 parents. Our case study highlights a deeper and enduring social tension that is reflected in the conflict: the strain between the centralizing movements of governing bodies and the decentralizing interests of local communities which seek to retain and to define their own identity.*

Since the mid-1960s, the families of Clinton County, Pennsylvania—in common with rural families across the United States—have engaged in a continuing debate about the value of “community” versus “consolidated” schools, two terms so freighted with meaning for their advocates that quotation marks seem unavoidable. The debate’s history reflects the vicissitudes of public opinion about education, and it also reflects, at least for Clinton County and the nearly contiguous Keystone Central School District (KCS D), one of the major fault lines dividing parents in the charter school movement as that urban reform has been manifest in rural America. This article reports on parents’ diverse concerns and interests in the debate in this rural Pennsylvania county. It is based on a year of research in Clinton County; on numerous conversations with parents, alumnae, administrators and board members of Keystone Central School District; and on a survey we mailed to 550 parents.

In Clinton County, the emotion and community mobilization engendered by consolidation suggest that debate about districting reflects a struggle to maintain community—and to define “community”—more than a disagreement about the school’s technical ability to promote the success of individual students. A wealth of studies have discussed the social significance of school district organization in rural communities in the United States (e.g., see DeYoung, 1991; Fanning, 1995; Peshkin, 1982). All past research highlights the critical importance of the rural school as the last bastion of symbolic identity for the community, loss of which is contested whenever possible by parents who grew up in the area or arrived hoping to find a closer

community. Our work builds on past research by uncovering some of the underlying values that are associated with the rejection of central, consolidated district schooling in Clinton County and, perhaps, in the United States more generally. At a policy level, our research points to a tension in today’s climate of school reform: a tension between a drive, on the one hand, to continue reducing educational production cost by increasing facility size, and a commitment, on the other, to serving common, locally articulated educational aims.

The hey day of consolidation occurred in the two decades following World War II, during a time of economic prosperity, increasing urbanization, and growing student enrollments (Alford, 1960; Fitzwater, 1953; Harrison, 1967; Leach, 1972). A second wave, smaller than the first, occurred in the 1970s, when inflation was rampant, enrollments declining, and suburban areas were growing in population. Peshkin (1982, p. 5) captures the dynamic of this second era in his account of a rural Illinois community, fighting to preserve its elementary school by seceding from the consolidated school district. Peshkin writes that the “logic of mass society has extended inevitably to education” and that consolidated schools represent an American assumption about quality of learning: that “larger schools are essential for the educational well-being of our children and the fiscal soundness of our school districts.”

Our work illuminates the fundamental value placed on cost-control through mass production, yet it also illustrates that the politics of consolidation involve another key tenet. Whereas in the 1970s and through the 1980s, educational policies at district, state, and national levels operated under pressure to run schools efficiently (Fanning, 1995), educational policies increasingly are aimed at preserving smallness of scale and low student-to-teacher ratios. For the first time in more than half a century, mass schooling is coming under intense public and policy scrutiny—perhaps

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all the more so in the wake of school shootings that suggest that rampant dangers are inherent in large and impersonal schools. An important contribution of our research is to demonstrate how local actors frame their concerns not only in terms of what they value and want for their children, but in terms of competing arguments embedded in policies. Proponents of consolidation continue to cite policies that condition state monies on efficiency and on the ability to meet equitable education standards; opponents cite recent state and federal legislation (notably home schooling and charter schools) that supports community involvement and parental control.

#### *Clinton County and Keystone Central School District*

A basic understanding the district's history and the county's population is important for understanding the context of current political struggle. Keystone Central School District is geographically the largest district in the Commonwealth. With an overall area of 978 square miles, the district includes all of Clinton County and a portion of adjacent Centre County. Until 1996, the district was divided into four high school attendance areas: Bucktail High School, Lock Haven High School, Bald Eagle High School, and Sugar Valley High School. Bucktail High School is located in the northern-most region and serves the largest attendance area. Because it is so far away from the more densely populated southern parts of the district, Bucktail was excluded from decisions to close and consolidate high schools. Centrally involved were Lock Haven, Bald Eagle Nittany, and Sugar Valley high schools. Of these three, Lock Haven is located in the most densely populated area (98 people per square mile), and Sugar Valley is located in the least densely populated area (28.4 people per square mile).

The southern portion of the district is cross-cut by Interstate 80 and separated from the more densely populated areas of Bald Eagle Nittany and Lock Haven by a 15-mile long mountain ridge. On either side of the interstate and ridge lie two distinct settlements and (some would say) distinct communities. Sugar Valley, to the south of the ridge, is an agricultural region that includes a half dozen small towns stretched out along a two-lane state route. The largest, Loganton, consists of a major crossroad, a community grange, post office, gas station, several churches, and private homes, most of which are well-maintained and date from the early twentieth century. On the southeast corner of the main intersection in Loganton is the school, a pieced-together set of structures that attests to years of renovations and additions.

Lock Haven, to the north of the ridge, is a small industrial city and the seat of the county (population 9,230 in 1990). Lock Haven extends along the West Branch of the Susquehanna River and is accessed by a four-lane expressway. Compared to Sugar Valley, the northern side of the

ridge appears urban, and even fast-paced. SR150, also known as "Main Street" in Lock Haven, is lined with new and used automobile dealerships and fast-food restaurants on the western, outer edge of the city, and with boarded-up stores and small family-owned businesses in the downtown area. Several of the old industrial warehouses and factories located on the perimeters of the city were closed in the mid-1980s (among them the once-profitable Piper Aeronautics industry). However, the International Paper Company continues to operate around the clock and to employ a sizable portion of the workforce. Lock Haven University and Lock Haven Hospital lend the town a metropolitan feel that belies its small size. The downtown high school—itsself, like the Sugar Valley school, a conglomeration of older and newer constructions—provides focal center for the social lives of the more than 2,800 students who attend.

To the southwest of Lock Haven, but also on the northern side of the ridge and I-80, are several old mill towns. These towns, among them, Mill Hall, Beech Creek, Salona, and Mackeyville, make up a portion of the Bald Eagle Nittany High School attendance area. These communities are more suburban and geographically diffuse than Lock Haven, yet they are also less agricultural and rural than Sugar Valley. Local strip malls and large grocery stores attract customers from Lock Haven and Sugar Valley, and proximity to the four-lane expressway makes travel by car to the area very easy.

#### *Historical Overview*

The history of school district consolidation and reorganization in Pennsylvania is one of recapitulation of debate and redefinition of the lines of battle. The Pennsylvania Commonwealth funded municipal-level schools in 1834 (Boscoe, 1997). Originally, each of the Commonwealth's townships constituted an independent school district. Later, the Commonwealth passed legislation to enable two or more townships or school districts to establish "joint" schools. For more than a century, this jointure system operated in predominantly rural areas of the Commonwealth, including Clinton County, where 29 individual school districts were organized into four jointures. By the early 1960s, however, as many rural school districts nationwide consolidated in order to promote more efficient operations, the Commonwealth proposed (and later required) school jointures to consolidate into districts that were geographically larger and numerically fewer. The legislature actually voted twice, once in 1961 and again in 1963, to consolidate 2,056 districts into fewer than 500. Voters statewide protested vehemently in 1961 against a reorganization act, not least because it did not allow for an appeal process. However, by 1963, with a limited appeals process in place, a reorganization law was enacted and 471 consolidated districts were formed (Harrison, 1967, p. 11).

In part, the motivation during the 1960s reflected a desire to achieve economies of scale (Leach, 1972). Such reorganizations also depended on the general faith in the technological efficacy of large organizations, in the modern technology they embodied, and in the need to prepare Americans to compete in the Cold War. Pennsylvania's Department of Public Instruction prepared a guide for administrators and citizens who would implement the district consolidation. In this guide, the Commonwealth's then superintendent, Charles Boehm, listed his personal assumptions about the function of schools and the challenge of the 1960s. Boehm's first assumption was that "the ideological conflict with communism will continue. The ever-present threat will bring free societies closer together and our country will cement a closer relationship of the schools to the country's defense." Other assumptions reveal the depths of Pennsylvania's faith in technical progress and innovation. Writing in 1962, Boehm argued that, "Today's concepts of time and space will be as limited to future generations as the 15th century cartographer's concept of the world is to us. Communication satellites will bring the Congo to Main Street through world wide television." In retrospect this faith now appears prescient, as can be seen from the KCSD Web site (<http://oak.kcsd.k12.pa.us/>).

Like other reforms statewide, the formation of Keystone Central occurred following the 1963 law. Yet, as one school administrator told us, it was "a local not a state decision." Under the terms of the 1963 law, newly consolidated districts could choose either at-large or representational school board membership. They could specify the boundaries of representational areas. Although districts' consolidation plans were ultimately subject to Commonwealth approval, local representatives were authorized to define the parameters of the plan. Of special importance to the understanding of the later conflicts, the original 1961 law was exquisitely specific—and vague—about the criteria the Commonwealth would accept as legitimate for maintaining pre-existing districts as separate organizational units. Under the 1961 plan, the standards for the approval of administrative units included the consideration of "topography," "pupil population," "facility of transportation," and "socioeconomic characteristics":

*Socioeconomic characteristics.* Consideration should be given to whether a geographic area has developed characteristics of a community. Community, as used here, includes one or more municipalities and the surrounding territory from which people come for business, social, recreational, fraternal, or similar reasons. Neither race nor religion shall be a factor in determining administrative unit boundaries and differences in the social and economic level of the population shall

not be a basis to determine these boundaries.  
(Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 1962)

In Clinton County, the members of the interim county board combined all four of the county school jointures—Lock Haven, Bald Eagle Nittany, Sugar Valley, and Bucktail—and they eventually agreed upon a representational rather than at-large school board membership. As a consequence, the interim board preserved many of the outward characteristics of the four former, unconsolidated districts while at the same time creating a financially integrated system.

For 18 years following consolidation, the four jointures that were *de jure* consolidated as "Keystone Central" in 1970 continued to operate separate high schools, which were represented by board members from those former jointures. The now-defunct jointures retained the appearance of autonomous districts. Each high school had its own sports teams, musical associations, graduation ceremonies, and school colors. Each had its own set of course offerings and electives. Each had its own student government and school traditions.

One corollary of maintaining four separate high schools was the preservation of socially distinct communities. This distinction was far from a mere by-product, however, and according to many of our informants it constituted a primary reason for the maintenance of separate high schools. To this day, many parents and local citizens continue to identify their community schools as "their own," independent of any larger school system, and they continued to see the other three high schools in the district as rivals of their "home team." Parents' locally-oriented visions differed in quality from the economically-oriented views of school administrators and planners, who faced the job of dealing with declining school enrollments and a shrinking tax base.

Demographic transitions accelerated throughout the 1970s and 1980s, and school enrollment in Keystone District declined from 8,400 to 5,500. As several major manufacturing businesses moved out of the area, further out-migration and a declining tax base forced the school board to consider the possibility of closing one or more of the component high schools, and building a new school that could serve more students at a lower cost. On at least two occasions, members of the Keystone Central school board identified a new location for a consolidated high school. On one occasion the board went so far as to purchase the land. However, resistance from parents' groups—in particular, a group known as the Sugar Valley Concern Citizens, which formed in the late 1970s—prevented a consolidated high school from being built and contributed to the maintenance of a school district composed of four geographically separated and socially distinct high schools . . . until 1996.

### *The 1990s*

It was within this historical context of extended debate about consolidation that the closure of Sugar Valley High School in August 1996 exploded the passions of its partisans. By a 5-4 vote, the board elected to close the Sugar Valley High School and transport its students over the ridge to attend the Bald Eagle Nittany High School (BEN). Sugar Valley Concerned Citizens filed several lawsuits to block the closure, but a local county judge dismissed the group's complaints. Parents responded by organizing a candlelight vigil, and a "hands around our school" day to protest what some were calling the "illegal" and "undemocratic" act of closing a community school. The candlelight prayer vigil and protests became headline news in local papers, and parents' placards—among them a sign that read "Democracy Born 1776, Died in Sugar Valley 1996"—captured the depth of the sentiment many parents felt toward the generations-old community high school.

A sizable number of the parents whose children were to have been bused to BEN organized around the goal of creating a charter school. They received a \$15,000 Charter School Planning grant from the Pennsylvania Department of Education, which under the leadership of Republican Governor Tom Ridge has been a strong proponent of grassroots efforts to establish charter schools. At the start of the 1996 academic year, 37 parents formally decided to home school their high school children.

### *Our Investigation*

The goal of our study was to uncover the interests, perceptions, and values of parents who rejected the concept and practice of consolidating their children in larger schools. We began our study by contacting board members, administrators, and parents who had been especially active in recent consolidation efforts. Our early conversations indicated that "consolidation" meant different things to different people. For some, it referred to the closure of Sugar Valley High School and the busing of students to Bald Eagle Nittany. For others, it meant building a new high school. For still others, consolidation referred to the past decisions leading to the 1970 creation of KCSD. In this view, consolidation already was a legal reality, and the opponents simply were in denial about the need to "reorganize" attendance boundaries (from the district's perspective).

For the purposes of our methodologies, we used "consolidation" to refer to all of the above. Our approach was to ask informants what they thought about current decisions to close Sugar Valley High School in light of their views about the meaning of public education. Several themes emerged. The most common understanding turned around the related issues of "financing" and "quality edu-

cation." Our informants—parents, board members, and district personnel—all agreed with the general goal of providing the best education for the least amount of money. However, there were wide disagreements on how this could be accomplished. Those who generally favored closing Sugar Valley High School, busing students to BEN, and building a new high school, argued that consolidation would save the district many millions of dollars over the next several years. During the entire period of the conflict, the KCSD superintendent kept a large sign posted above his desk which read: "\$49,901,459 over 20 years" (the amount of money he argued would be saved by schooling students in a centrally-located high school). When he was asked why critics were still unconvinced by the large savings, another administrator responded that "there is a lack of trust in the district. We've never become a district; we've been a series of enclaves." The fatal flaw, in his view, was the 1960s decision of the interim county board to set up a regional rather than at-large representation on the school board. Had the district not been governed by region since 1970, families in Sugar Valley would have been more integrated into the social fabric of the larger school district, and the problems with school closure would have been avoided. He continued:

In effect, what you have is people there [i.e., in Sugar Valley] who sold their soul to the devil in 1970. They lost control of their school district in order to get their taxes down. . . . See, that's one of the big problems we have now. These people don't want to lose their high school, but they did lose it, because they lost control of their destiny by getting into this Keystone Central School District and they did so basically to get their taxes down.

A recurring appeal of the district's reorganization plan, and among pro-consolidation parents, is the prospect of attracting new residents—and a higher income tax base—by building a new school. One pro-consolidation administrator put this argument particularly succinctly:

It appears to a lot of us as a given that you have to have jobs. And you like to think they'd be a mixture of white and blue collar jobs. In order to do that you need an attractive area. We all pat ourselves on the back and say we live in a nice area, but you can find that in a lot of places. A new high school that would be attractive to middle management people—a new high school would be an attractive item.

Advocates for a community high school in Sugar Valley reacted with disbelief to the argument for expanding

the tax base. Our Sugar Valley informants further doubted the possibility of creating a fair at-large versus representational organization for the school board. Many Sugar Valley parents point to the fact that the per-student cost of educating students at Sugar Valley (\$2,636) is lower than that at either Lock Haven (\$2,810) or Bald Eagle Nittany (\$2,940). They further contend that, in fact, Sugar Valley taxes support students living in *other* attendance areas. Our informants from Sugar Valley rejected the assumptions of technical superiority of the large organization, as advocated by consolidation proponents. In contrast to the model implicit in pro-consolidationists' arguments, anticonsolidationists stressed the importance of parental, not administrative, involvement in students' education. "The school is the heart of our community. Why shouldn't we represent it and defend it?" asked one Sugar Valley parent. A board member, sympathetic to the Sugar Valley parents, emphatically stated: "When we place our kids in schools we're not handing them over to a deity. . . . Some teachers think they're like God." In this view, even the most technologically sophisticated school, or one which offers the widest range of curricular options, can not replace the value associate with a rural community school.

These arguments are perennial in Clinton County, and they grow from the 1979 class action suit filed by SVCC against the district. At that time, the district settled the conflict by signing an agreement that was thought to protect the interests of Sugar Valley parents. The Agreement read, in part:

It is agreed that the district does not intend to close the Sugar Valley Junior-Senior High School so long as an acceptable education can be provided at a spending level not out of proportion to other schools in the district. The school board will continue to study the feasibility of keeping the school open, will continue the efforts of the existing Sugar Valley Curriculum Committee to develop a viable curriculum for the school and suitable physical facilities, and will take into account ways in which an acceptable education can be provided in a manner in which the costs at Sugar Valley do not become excessive compared to other schools in the district. (*Sugar Valley Curriculum Committee v. Keystone Central School District School Board, 1979, Paragraph #4*)

In the views of the most active supporters of SVCC, Keystone Central School District has failed to keep this agreement and has infringed on parents' rights to decide what is best for their children in terms of education. Sugar Valley parents' sentiments about the intrusive nature of the school board and about parents' authority over children's education are apparent in many other comments we received:

I truly resent that the choice of moving our children and closing our school was unfairly and illegally taken from us!

I feel the closing of Sugar Valley High School should have been a decision us parents should have voted on not just the board members.

School board has too much authority. There's got to be a better way to control school board on their decision for all tax payers.

Related to taxes and to the rights of parents to control education is the theme of curriculum and instruction, a theme that, as Hannigan (1995) notes, is a mainstay of pro-consolidationist argument. Those who advocated closing Sugar Valley and building a new high school generally felt that a larger school will be able to provide more students with the opportunity to study more and more specialized subjects, including courses that in computer technologies and communications. One informant argued that consolidation will offer students

a broader selection of courses. It will give them access to the latest computer technologies and to the World Wide Web—Sugar Valley students could never have this opportunity. It's too expensive to provide for only 30 or 40 kids [the approximate size of Sugar Valley graduating classes].

In the eyes of consolidation advocates, the opportunity to build a new school and combine students from three different communities represented a chance to renew the lifeblood of a dying rural community with high technology, and to attract middle class families to the area.

If the Keystone debate illustrates anything, however, it is the adage that "one person's meat is another person's poison." For it is precisely these same factors—reasons of economy of scale and community renewal—that trigger the concerns of charter school and the "anti-consolidation" advocates. Many Sugar Valley parents seek a "no frills" education that fosters students' individual sense of self, a setting in which many students can achieve at their own rates, and need not compete with the masses to distinguish themselves. Their ideal is a system that is run by parents who are active in the schools. In their words:

One of the reasons we moved to this area was because of the school. A small community school with smaller classes gives the teachers a chance to work more one on one with students.

In a small school, teachers personally know students and parents. In a large school, they are just a

number and the teachers don't have time to help students who need it.

Differences between proponents of the two sides should not be overdrawn, however. One of our most interesting findings is the recognition—by both “pro” and “anti” consolidation advocates—that the “other side’s argument” has merit. Several ostensibly pro-consolidation people acknowledged that maintaining small community schools is laudable. Said one Keystone administrator:

If I were [a Sugar Valley resident], I would be trying to do exactly the same thing. I understand why they want to keep Sugar Valley open. Community schools are great things. But at the same time, the district cannot continue to pay for four separate high schools, particularly not when enrollment is declining and the tax base is shrinking.

At the same time, many vocal opponents of school district consolidation acknowledged the merit of trying to shore up an economically and socially disintegrating county by building a “new and improved” high school. “People move in and out of areas based on the kind of school they see,” said one parent, echoing the arguments of the pro-consolidation administrator cited above. “Sure, a new high school will make life better for more people in Clinton County.”

It would overstate the divisions in this debate to conclude that everyone in Sugar Valley is *against* consolidation, just as it would be inaccurate to characterize all parents north of I-80 and the mountain ridge as pleased about consolidation. As the following comments illustrate, our informants held complex, composite views about the issue. Parents made the following observations:

The bottom line is for me: My choice will be made based on “quality” of education. I’m willing to sacrifice some comfort so my children can be educated well. [A Sugar Valley resident]

The size of a building has nothing to do with the quality of education. It’s the devotion of the teacher that matters most. [A Sugar Valley resident]

I am not against small schools, but I feel my children are getting a better education right where they are [at Bald Eagle Nittany High School]. I have seen the education most of the home schoolers are getting. It seems to be centered around religion, plus the fact most of them are running on the streets by noon. My children need an education so they can live and find employment in the world out-

side of the small rural area of Loganton. [Sugar Valley resident; 008-3]

I feel that a larger school will create over-crowded classes and less chance of any individual help when needed, which in turn leads to a poorer education for our children. I also can't see the expense of a new school when the existing schools are perfectly sound. [A non-Sugar Valley resident]

I think smaller schools with *high quality* teachers are worth higher taxes, over larger schools with high tech gadgets and teachers who could care less. *School choice* would help in this case. [A non-Sugar Valley resident]

### Charter Schools

As the last comment illustrates, several parents on both sides of the debate expressed interest in charter schools, which as of this writing had become a new option for Pennsylvanians. Keystone Central School District and Sugar Valley Concerned Citizens both applied for, and were awarded, grants from the Department of Education to study and organize charter schools in their attendance areas. The primary rationale behind the Sugar Valley proposal is to serve students who perform well in small classrooms and a rural setting. One district administrator criticized this plan:

If you open up a charter school in Sugar Valley, you’ve got to let in kids from Lock Haven, Bald Eagle Nittany, anybody who wants to go to that charter school, and I think they’re going to be surprised, because there are going to be kids from Lock Haven who ought to go [to the charter school in Sugar Valley]. If Sugar Valley is looking to have that be their school, it’s not going to be that way and they may be surprised.

Parents in Sugar Valley dismissed this concern. The overriding sentiment in Sugar Valley is that a charter school will help parents regain a degree of what it is they feel they have lost, namely, control over deciding what is best for their children educationally.

I would like to see Sugar Valley have a charter school, I feel that a smaller school is the way to go.

I support a charter school for Sugar Valley. I also think there should be a way for school districts to be deconsolidated so that they can operate more efficiently and effectively.

Table 1

Question 5. "At any time in the past 12 months, did you ever consider alternatives to enrolling [your] children in Bald Eagle Nittany H.S., for example Home Schooling? \_\_\_ NO \_\_\_ YES"

Respondent's ZIP Code	No		Yes	
	N	Percent	N	Percent
Non-Sugar Valley Zip Codes	147	90%	16	10%
Sugar Valley Zip Codes	22	36%	39	64%

What is noteworthy here, as we mentioned previously, is that *anti-consolidationists* are citing educational policies. Newly created legislation makes it easier for them to counter consolidationists' arguments about the value of large schools. School consolidation is no longer the only solution to the problems of public schooling. Indeed, one of the main educational rationales supporting charter schooling is based on an entirely different premise: Community schools serve students best. The argument that "community is teacher" is a point Jim Fanning (1995) made in theory a few years ago and one that we see being played out here, on the ground, at Keystone Central.

#### *A Survey of High School Preferences*

From the public record, as well as from our months of interviews, it was apparent that the greatest difference between those who opposed and those who supported school consolidation was their place of residence, and the proximity of families to the Bald Eagle Nittany High School. It should not be surprising that the political opposition to the closing of the Sugar Valley High School, and the merger of its student population with that of Bald Eagle Nittany, came from parents living in Sugar Valley. Beyond this obvious explanation for the conflict, our interviews with community representatives and parents in Keystone Central School District suggested that there were possible differences in the publicly expressed values about education, between the proponents and the opponents of merger.

To explore further the possible differences in values, we conducted a survey of families who could potentially have enrolled their children in Bald Eagle Nittany (BEN) High School. Through this survey, we aimed to gauge the effect of both residence and values, controlling for the effects of other factors that might influence preferences, such as religious or political-party affiliation, income, and education.

We targeted three different groups of families. First, we mailed questionnaires to the households of all children attending BEN but who resided in Sugar Valley. In addition, we mailed questionnaires to all Sugar Valley families

who were known by the school district to be home schooling their children. Finally, we mailed questionnaires to the homes of approximately two thirds of the Bald Eagle Nittany students who resided *outside* of Sugar Valley (residence was defined using ZIP codes). To differentiate the three groups of parents, we color-coded our survey forms. In total, we mailed approximately 550 questionnaires, including addressed, postage-paid return envelopes. After 1 month, 236 parents returned the questionnaire. Six forms were returned by the postal service as being undeliverable. The high level of interest in the survey can be indicated by the fact that, in addition to answering our multiple-choice questions, about half of all respondents (an equal proportion inside and out of Sugar Valley) elected to provide additional comments in an area at the end of the questionnaire form.

The results of our survey revealed, unsurprisingly, that Sugar Valley families during the previous year had been far more likely to consider alternatives to enrolling their children in Bald Eagle Nittany High School as compared to families outside Sugar Valley. While only 10% of respondents living outside Sugar Valley reported having considered alternatives to BEN, nearly two thirds of the Sugar Valley residents indicated that they had considered such alternatives (see Table 1). The sheer distance to BEN was, of course, far greater in the cases of Sugar Valley families, who reported an average of 26 minutes driving time, as opposed to the 10 minute average reported by respondents living outside Sugar Valley.

Our questions about family income, parent's education, and political and religious affiliations revealed few differences in these factors between the respondents who lived inside and outside of Sugar Valley. Nor did there appear to be important differences in these socioeconomic factors between those parents who had considered alternatives to BEN and those who had not. Given the similarities between the two groups of families, we might suspect that the only important difference between them concerned their physical location. As one of the board members who favored the closure of Sugar Valley High School informed

Table 2  
*Determinants of Considering High School Alternatives: Logistic Regression Analysis*

	Coefficient	Standard Error
Family lives in Sugar Valley rather than outside of it	2.331*	0.521
Number questions answered in favor of community schools	0.454*	0.133
“Final level of education completed” by respondent	-0.075	0.332
Total family income for past year	-0.131	0.135
Attends church “regularly” rather than not regularly	0.325	0.582
Tends to vote Democratic rather than Republican	0.345	0.529
Intercept	-3.321	1.560
$\chi^2 = 50.480$		
Pseudo- $R^2 = .334$		

\* $p < .001$ .

us, he would himself oppose closure if he lived in Sugar Valley, because BEN would be less convenient.

Our interviews revealed several issues that divided Sugar Valley advocates from those favoring consolidation. Some of these issues dividing Sugar Valley advocates from consolidation advocates included: concerns for efficiency and the equation of size with efficiency, cost-effectiveness, the importance of family-school relationships, transportation concerns, and the importance of high schools for community identity. In our survey, we further sought to quantify the importance of these differences in value, as they affected parents' desires for educational alternatives to BEN. To do this, we investigated the differences between Sugar Valley and non-Sugar Valley responses to seven questions derived from our interviews. (The questions and response distributions are represented in the appendix.) These questions each echoed the different reasons parents had provided, during our field interviews, for maintaining a “community” high school, as opposed to consolidating the Sugar Valley and BEN students in a single school. We discovered that there were marked differences in the distribution of answers to most of these questions between Sugar Valley and non-Sugar Valley parents. Further bivariate analysis also revealed that there were differences in the distribution of responses between those who had considered alternatives to BEN and those who had not considered alternatives.

Why did those who considered alternatives to BEN do so? Were they motivated by their geographical distance

from the school? While there were few socioeconomic differences found between Sugar Valley and non-Sugar Valley respondents, the two groups are clearly quite different in terms of the average time each reported they needed to drive to BEN. Therefore, it may be that the simple fact of residing in Sugar Valley led parents to consider alternatives to BEN.

On closer examination, however, we can see from the responses to Question #5 that one-third of Sugar Valley respondents had *not* considered an alternative for their children (in Table 1). Whatever the impact on parent's deliberations of living in Sugar Valley, clearly the impact did not override all other considerations. Furthermore, there was at least some modest receptiveness to alternatives among families residing *outside* of Sugar Valley, and where the average drive to BEN is reported as only 10 minutes.

We suspected that, in addition to the physical proximity of families to BEN, the underlying importance that families attach to the institution of a “community school” plays a significant role in determining whether or not families had considered alternatives to placing their children in BEN. To investigate this possibility, we created a composite indicator for the importance of a “community” school by aggregating each of the seven separate either/or questions (items 7-13). For each response endorsing an argument for maintaining a community school, we assigned a value of “1”; for each response rejecting that argument for a community school, we assigned a value of “0”. Summing these responses, we created a 7-point scale indicating how im-



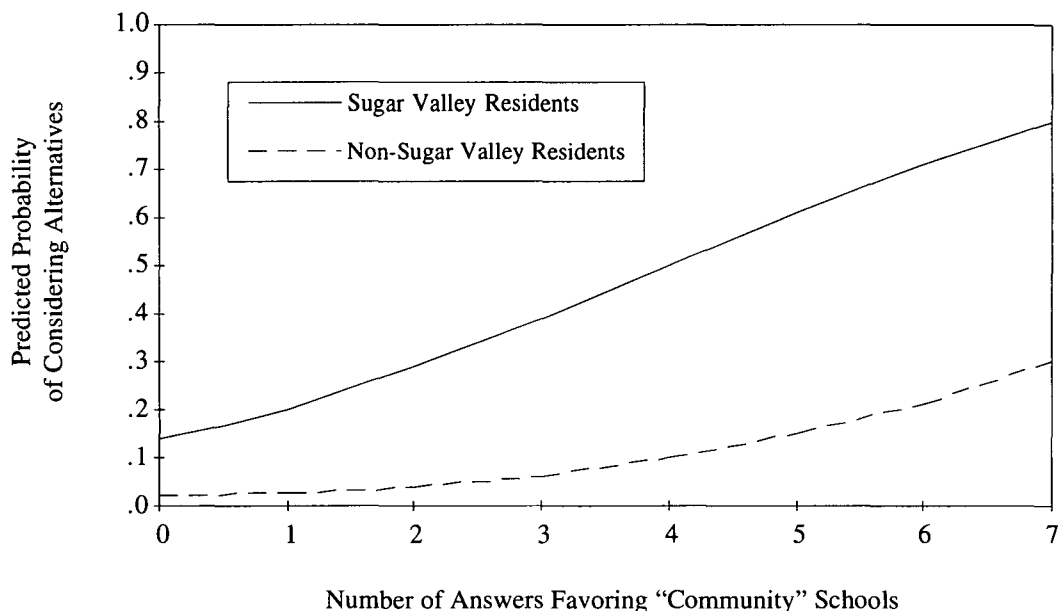


Figure 1. *Effects of location and values on willingness to consider alternatives to consolidated school.*

portant community schooling was to the respondent for a variety of reasons.

To test for the respective roles in preferences that are played by parents' locations and their "values," we conducted a multivariate logistic regression analysis. This type of analysis simultaneously gauges the impact of several hypothetical factors that may influence the (log of the) odds of responding affirmatively to question #5—i.e., on the odds of seeking an educational alternative to BEN. In these analyses, we found *no effect* of family income, parents' education, party affiliation, or church-going on the outcome variable, which was whether or not the respondent had considered alternatives to placing their child at BEN (see Table 2). As expected, we found that the mere fact of living in Sugar Valley made respondents significantly more likely to have considered alternatives to BEN. Finally, and most importantly, after controlling for the effects of residential location and socioeconomic factors, we found that the value respondents placed on "community" schools had a significant effect on their openness to alternatives to BEN.

The estimates in Table 2 can be used to calculate the predicted probability of seeking alternatives, depending on place of residence and on the number of responses that indicate a high value of community schooling. These predicted probabilities are presented graphically in Figure 1. As can be appreciated from Figure 1, there are substantial differences in the likelihood that a parent would consider alternatives to BEN, differences that depended on *both* the number of responses that favor the concept of a "community" school. Regardless of their residential location, all

respondents who endorsed more arguments in favor of community schools tended to be more open to the possibility of alternatives to BEN for their children. At the same time, even after taking into account differences in values placed on community schools, residents of Sugar Valley were more likely to consider alternatives to BEN. Finally, even after taking into account the place of residence, the expression of values supporting community schools was associated with respondents' openness to alternatives to BEN for their children.

### Conclusions

Our data suggest that rural school consolidation remains the flash point of an enduring social tension. There have long been strains between the centralizing movements of governing bodies and the decentralizing interests of local communities seeking to retain their own identity, a dialectic noted in the observations of De Toqueville. Struggles at Keystone Central attest to the salience of ideologies of efficiency, technology, and the desirability of a "larger community." At the same time, grassroots efforts to retain the essence of Sugar Valley's distinctiveness by home schooling students and creating a charter school attest to a competing American value: the freedom of families to define their own communities (cf. Post, 1992). Both views are represented in contemporary education policy: the former in such initiatives as "Education for All" and "Goals 2000," the second in home schooling and charter school planning legislation that seeks to support local ventures.

The direction in which the rural school consolidation will proceed in Clinton County and the nation's rural districts is still an open question. A present, charter schools are ascendant, but we view these as only the latest swing in an American pendulum. One thing is certain: arguments about district organization—be they about consolidation, home schooling, or charter schools within districts—do not turn only on issues of money, as advocates on both sides are wont to maintain. They depend upon values and experiences communities collectively bring to deliberations about school district organization.

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## Appendix

*Results of Opinion Poll Used to Construct Scale of Value of "Community" Schools*

[NOTE: For each answer in favor of community schooling, the value of "1" is assigned. The value of "0" is assigned to answers in favor of larger or more consolidated schools.]

7. CIRCLE ONE of the following statements that comes closest to your own views.

"A larger school, with more students and more course offerings, can provide my child with a better-quality education."

-or-

Community schools, with fewer students and fewer course offerings, can provide a better-quality education for my child."

number: 61  
percent: 38%

Non-Sugar Valley  
ZIP Codes

100  
62%

number: 13  
percent: 20%

Sugar Valley  
ZIP Codes

51  
80%

8. CIRCLE ONE of the following statements that comes closest to your own views.

"Even if the higher costs of community schools made it necessary to raise taxes, I would *still* be in favor of community schools."

-or-

"I would support maintaining community schools, but only if it meant our taxes did not go up."

number: 69  
percent: 45%

Non-Sugar Valley  
ZIP Codes

86  
55%

number: 41  
percent: 67%

Sugar Valley  
ZIP Codes

20  
33%

9. CIRCLE ONE of the following statements that comes closest to your own views.

"It is important that in high school my child makes friends with students from different backgrounds, and learns to succeed outside of our own family and community."

-or-

"It is important that in high school my child learns to succeed by receiving the support of our own family and our own community."

number: 106  
percent: 66%

Non-Sugar Valley  
ZIP Codes

55  
34%

number: 23  
percent: 37%

Sugar Valley  
ZIP Codes

39  
63%

10. CIRCLE ONE of the following statements that comes closest to your own views.

“Aside from benefiting my child’s education, community schools maintain connections between neighbors and families.”	-or-	“I see schools as being mainly about education, and there are other ways, for example churches, that can create a sense of community.”
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number:	98	Non-Sugar Valley	62
percent:	61%	ZIP Codes	39%
number:	44	Sugar Valley	20
percent:	69%	ZIP Codes	31%

11. CIRCLE ONE of the following statements that comes closest to your own views.

“I would be willing to participate in my child’s school and meet with teachers no matter how near or far I live from the school.”	-or-	“It is important for me to live close to my child’s school so that I can interact more easily with teachers and administrators.”
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number:	93	Non-Sugar Valley	70
percent:	57%	ZIP Codes	43%
number:	24	Sugar Valley	40
percent:	38%	ZIP Codes	63%

12. CIRCLE ONE of the following statements that comes closest to your own views.

“It is important to me that my child spend as little time as possible in transportation between my home and school.”	-or-	“I am confident the school district can transport my child safely and quickly enough to school.”
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number:	95	Non-Sugar Valley	67
percent:	59%	ZIP Codes	41%
number:	54	Sugar Valley	10
percent:	84%	ZIP Codes	16%

13. CIRCLE ONE of the following statements that comes closest to your own views.

“It is very important for our children to have access to the new facilities and technologies that a new school building would provide.”	-or-	“Other things are more important for children’s education than the new facilities and technologies that a new school building would provide.”
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number:	67	Non-Sugar Valley	86
percent:	44%	ZIP Codes	56%
number:	12	Sugar Valley	51
percent:	19%	ZIP Codes	81%