

# A Phenomenological Study of Rural School Consolidation

Keith A. Nitta

*University of Washington, Bothell*

Marc J. Holley

*University of Arkansas, Fayetteville*

Sharon L. Wrobel

*University of Arkansas, Little Rock*

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*This study is an investigation of how school consolidation between 2003 and 2006 affected the lived experience of students and educators in four Arkansas high schools. We present findings from twenty-three interviews with students, teachers, and school administrators who moved to a new high school because of consolidation, as well as those who were already in the receiving schools. While educators' and students' lived experiences were diverse and sometimes contradictory, two themes emerged in the interviews. Because of the study design, these findings cannot be generalized to all consolidation contexts, but they were common across the four consolidations studied. First, students adapted better than teachers to the social disruption created by consolidation; teachers struggled with new relationships, both with other teachers and students. Facing the same social disruption, students described more successful transitions. Educators and students alike explained that because "kids are kids," initial tensions tended to resolve themselves eventually. The second theme that emerged from our interviews was that nearly all students and all teachers, moving and receiving, reported experiencing at least some benefits from consolidation. Students experienced broader course offerings and more diverse social opportunities. Teachers had fewer courses to prepare and better professional development opportunities. However, moving teachers and students experienced special challenges. Although students described a "blended" community after consolidation, moving students typically reported having greater challenges fitting in. Finally, the consolidation experience tended to be most difficult for moving teachers.*

Consolidation is a broad term applied to describe the combining of schools or districts in an effort to create administrative efficiencies and provide improved academic and social experiences for students in sparsely-populated areas. Consolidation policies have impacted the landscape of public school organization since the early twentieth century. Since 1938, the number of school districts nationwide has declined by 100,000, or 90 percent (Duncombe & Yinger, 2007). Consolidation has been implemented in states as diverse as New York, Iowa, Louisiana, West Virginia, Montana, Kentucky, and Arkansas. Consolidation has

recently surfaced on the policy agendas of state legislatures in Michigan, Vermont, and Maine.

Despite this broad implementation of consolidation around the country, relatively little is known about how consolidation has affected the educators and especially the students who have experienced it. The existing school consolidation literature has primarily focused on debates over financial and community effects. To the extent that the literature examines what happens within schools, it has focused on a debate over optimal school size.

To help fill this gap, we conducted twenty-three in-depth interviews in four consolidated Arkansas high schools. In addition to interviewing high school administrators, teachers, and students that were forced to move schools as a result of consolidation, we also interviewed educators and students who were already at the receiving high schools.

We limited our study to those most directly affected by consolidation: students, teachers, and school administrators. While parents and community members are also importantly affected by consolidation, we limited our focus for three

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Correspondence regarding this manuscript should be addressed to the first author: Keith Nitta, University of Washington, Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences, Bothell, WA. Email: [knitta@uwb.edu](mailto:knitta@uwb.edu).

reasons. First, those working and studying inside schools have had their life world most transformed by consolidation. While consolidation can have far-reaching effects, the primary effect is on the everyday life of school administrators, teachers, and students, whose daily lives are transformed by working or studying in a new place or by the arrival of dozens of newcomers. Second, the existing literature on school consolidation has failed to adequately prioritize the experience of those within schools. Few studies have documented the life worlds of the students, teachers, and administrators who have experienced consolidation. Finally, because advocates both supporting and opposing school consolidation premise their arguments on the experience of those within schools, particularly students, it is important to understand from the educators and students themselves how consolidation has affected them. Conclusions about the desirability of consolidation must address changes that occur within the consolidated schools, and these changes are best described by those who daily live in them. We make no conclusions or policy recommendations about the desirability of consolidation, but by describing its effects as perceived by direct participants, this study aims to inform discussions around and decisions about consolidation policies.

Our interviews occurred in four rural locations around the state of Arkansas. Although each context was unique, the four contexts can be categorized by formal type: two were merger consolidations and two experienced annexation. In the mergers, Walnut<sup>1</sup> and Pine in northern Arkansas as well as Field and Creek in the south were combined. Both mergers involved districts with roughly similar racial and socioeconomic student populations and similarly sized enrollments. Although one high school closed and the other received both sets of students, the new consolidated high schools were given new names, with new school colors and sports team names. In the case of the two annexations, Oak of Hill in central Arkansas and Rice of Cherry in the east, a relatively small number of students and educators joined a much larger district. The annexed Cherry and Hill student populations differed culturally and socioeconomically from the much larger Rice and Oak student populations. This dynamic of smaller groups of demographically dissimilar students being forced into new larger schools with unfamiliar climates was especially true for Cherry. It had a much higher proportion of low income and African American students than Rice and was involuntarily annexed in the middle of the academic year. Unlike in the two mergers, which resulted in two new high schools, Oak and Rice High experienced no changes except for receiving Hill and Cherry students and educators.

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<sup>1</sup> We have used pseudonyms for the names of districts, schools, students, teachers, and administrators.

Taken together, our twenty-three interviews in four consolidated high schools describe a complicated picture with unique individual stories that sometimes contradict one another. Commonalities did emerge, however. Students adapted better than teachers to the social disruption caused by consolidation. Sharing the narrative that “kids are kids,” students generally formed relationships and enjoyed more diverse social opportunities. In contrast, even veteran teachers who stayed in the same school reported struggling to form new relationships with the new teachers from the consolidated school.

A second common theme was that students and educators generally experienced academic and professional benefits after consolidation. Teachers experienced improved working conditions and professional development opportunities after consolidation, and both moving and receiving students received broader course offerings, with more Advanced Placement and vocational courses. However, there was one notable exception, as some moving teachers and perhaps some moving students experienced difficulty. Moving teachers were the most critical of consolidation and experienced the most problems, including relationships with other teachers and with students, which became more distant and bureaucratic.

Before exploring these themes in detail, we first present a review of the existing literature on the effects of school consolidation, describe the four contexts in greater detail, and describe our research method. Finally, we present the voices of the students and educators that lived through consolidation through their own words and stories. These are organized around three broad research categories pulled from the literature: relationships, learning opportunities, and teacher working conditions.

### Literature Review

Since the early 1900s, rural school district consolidation has fallen in and out of favor as educational reform. Given this long history, there have been many attempts to settle the question of school consolidation. Proponents of consolidation have seen it as a means of ensuring educational equity and resource efficiency. In particular, they cite economies of scale and broader curricula as evidence supporting consolidation (Duncombe & Yinger, 2007). Opponents of the approach focus largely on the impact of consolidation on rural communities. They show that schools are vital to a community’s economic and social well-being (De Young, 1995; Lyson, 2002; Peshkin, 1982; Sell, Leistriz & Thompson, 1996). In these studies, the role of the local school goes beyond the education of children. It serves the symbolic functions of autonomy, vitality, integration, and traditions of the community (Peshkin, 1982). As stewards of citizens’ rights and resources, state governments often find arguments for consolidation compelling. At the same

time, it is not difficult to see why rural citizens and school administrators are more concerned with how consolidation will harm their communities. It is clear that this is not just a debate over the evidence, but one of perspective.

Few studies specifically examine student, teacher, and administrator perspectives on school consolidation. We argue that in order to determine the full effects of consolidation, the experiences of those affected directly by it must be investigated. We reviewed the existing literature with this approach in mind. In doing so, we identified three research categories with particular relevance to our study population: *Relationships*, *Learning Opportunities*, and *Working Conditions*. In examining these categories, we consider the literature addressing both consolidation and school size as a consequence of consolidation.

### **Relationships**

Research on the experiences of those directly affected by consolidation is not only limited, it is often contradictory. One relevant example is the relationship between school size and a school's social environment. Some assert that larger, consolidated schools provide improved social opportunities. They argue that students benefit because they have access to a broader and more diverse network of friends (Sell et al., 1996). Further, it has been suggested that the relative anonymity of larger schools is beneficial to students' social wellbeing. Individual and family reputations are more difficult to shed in smaller environments. Because members of small school communities must interact consistently and over time, conflicts between students, between students and teachers, and among staff in smaller schools are more difficult to avoid or ignore (Lee, Smerdon, Alfred-Liro, & Brown, 2000; McClelland, 1997).

On the other hand, smaller schools are said to provide a more caring and supportive school environment, one more inclusive and accepting of outsiders. Informal sharing of information may also help to ensure that students are not ignored (Hillman, 2003; Lee et al., 2000). Other purported benefits of small schools include fewer disciplinary problems, higher graduation rates, and more positive school climates (Barker & Gump, 1964; Duncombe & Yinger, 2001; Haller, 1992; Post & Stambach, 1999).

### **Learning Opportunities**

Following consolidation, schools are able to offer broader curricula including more elective and Advanced Placement classes (Benton, 1992; Self, 2001). Monk and Haller (1993) show that larger schools offer more classes than smaller schools, though the relationship between school size and course offerings is complicated by a number of other factors, including types of courses, types of schools, and structural features.

There is evidence, however, that increased course offerings do not necessarily solve the problems school

consolidation is intended to address (Lee & Smith, 1997; Monk & Haller, 1993). Students in very small schools appear to learn less than students in larger schools; such a finding would seemingly support consolidation. However, this finding is complicated by evidence that students in the largest schools also learn less. Moreover, this negative achievement pattern in extremely large schools has been found to be more pronounced among minorities and disadvantaged students (Lee & Smith, 1997).

Finally, transportation issues are often cited as one of the most negative consequence of consolidation (Lewis, 2003; Sell et al., 1996). A common criticism of consolidation is lengthy, onerous bus rides. Longer bus rides are not just inconvenient and potentially damaging to students' academics, but create negative budget implications for the district as well. Not all agree, however, that transportation costs are crippling only for consolidated districts, for as Hillman (2003) points out, student transportation represents considerable cost and risk to rural districts generally.

### **Working Conditions**

Finally, we present the literature concerning the relationship between consolidation and working conditions, which we define broadly to include educators' professional development, courses to prepare, and job security. While professional development is an important issue for all schools, it is perhaps more so in rural schools. Rural teachers generally have fewer years of experience and are less likely to have advanced degrees than teachers in non-rural schools (Monk, 2007). This phenomenon does not appear to be universal, however. De Young (1995) found that the teachers in his study of a rural high school often held multiple certifications. In rural communities, teaching is one of the few professional occupations available, and thus highly sought after. De Young notes: "Professionalism...is as much defensive occupational positioning as it is driven by concerns to improve one's understanding or performance" (p. 197). Consolidation may also lead to improvements in teacher salary and teacher perceptions of effectiveness. Some teachers claim they grew more professionally after a consolidation than at any other time in their careers. They gained more tools for teaching, enjoyed more interaction with other teachers, and benefitted from the increased salaries brought on by consolidation (Self, 2001).

Not all teacher experiences with consolidation are so positive, however. Consolidation, or the threat of consolidation, may lead to teacher stress and turnover due to related fears and uncertainties (Kyriacou & Harriman, 1993; McHugh & Kyle, 1993). Teachers may suffer loss of confidence, be tempted to take time off work, and rely more heavily on support networks (Kyriacou & Harriman, 1993). So while there is evidence that teachers may benefit *professionally* when schools consolidate, the *personal* costs may be quite high.

Table 1

## Characteristics of Districts Participating in Study

Site	Region	Total Enrollment 2006-2007	Number of Students who Moved	Percent Free/Reduced Lunch	Percent Minority
Oak/Hill	Central	3036	325	32	6
Walnut/Pine	North/Ozarks	793	120	59	2
Rice/Cherry	East/Delta	3046	100	16	34
Creek/Field	South/Timberlands	921	425	74	62

Note: The names are all pseudonyms to protect anonymity.

Overall, the literature points to a number of areas that may be particularly salient to those directly affected by school consolidation. However, the Peshkin, De Young, and McClelland works notwithstanding, our review of the literature revealed little in the way of scholarly, peer-reviewed qualitative research that has directly addressed how students and educators, both moving and receiving, experience consolidation. The policy relevance of this study is in its exploration of what consolidation has meant to those students, teachers, and administrators who have lived this phenomenon from these different vantage points.

### Sample

By the spring of 2007, 57 public school districts in Arkansas had been restructured following the passage of Act 60. We conducted a purposive sample in an attempt to draw as representative of a sample as possible from that population using four selection criteria.

First, the restructured districts had to involve the closing of at least one high school because we thought it necessary to talk to older students. A primary motivation for our study was to hear students' experiences and stories first-hand. An important limitation in directly interviewing children is their ability to understand and explain abstract ideas, especially about complicated cause-and-effect relationships. Accordingly, we worried that understanding and explaining the academic and social effects of consolidation would prove challenging for younger, less mature children. So, in order to collect the most reliable responses, we decided to limit our interviews to high school students. Next, there had to be a large enough movement of teachers, administrators, and students to expect that we would have study participants in each interview group. In many instances of consolidation, few educators change schools. Third, we sought geographic diversity. Arkansas is typically divided into six regions, and although some regions encountered more consolidation than others, we attempted to draw a site from each region.

Finally, we sought racial and income diversity across our four sites and used percent free/reduced lunch and percent minority as indicators.

After selecting the potential sites, we contacted the district superintendent by phone and with a follow-up letter. Because of the controversy associated with consolidation, not all of our first-choice sites agreed to participate in the study. When district leaders declined to participate, we selected another site to contact, using the four criteria listed above. In some regions, we gained access to another site, but not in all six. As a result, we were only able to include districts in four of the six regions. We discuss the limitations this sampling process places on our findings at the end of this section. The characteristics of the four participating districts are presented in Table 1.

Each participating district operated only one high school, even after consolidation. To select our interview participants, we asked the four high school principals to randomly identify five students who had arrived at the high school as a result of consolidation, five students who were already attending the high school at the time of consolidation, five teachers who had arrived as a result of consolidation, five teachers who were working at the high school at the time of consolidation, all administrators who had arrived as a result of consolidation, and all administrators who were working at the high school at the time of consolidation. The numbers of moving and receiving teachers and administrators were small enough that selecting five of each offered little discretion for principals. In fact, in two sites there was an insufficient number of moving teachers and educators for a full list of five. We asked principals to select a limited list of students for logistical reasons. The students needed to be available on the days of our visits, and we needed to collect consent forms signed by parents before student interviews began. Realizing the discretion this sampling procedure offered to principals, we asked principals to make available a group of students that would represent accurately a broad

Table 2

*Interviewed Educators and Students*

School	Administrators	Teachers	Students
Hill (moving)	William	Lois	Sam
Oak (receiving)	Renee	Marshall	Gareth
Pine (moving)		Allison	Taylor
Walnut (receiving)	Martin	Daniel	Kyle
Field (moving)	Reece	Caleb	Kendall
		Kelly	
Creek (receiving)	Julia	Brian	Jeremy
Cherry (moving)		Emma	Jocelyn
Rice (receiving)	Janet	Justine	Caitlin

Note: The names are all pseudonyms to protect anonymity.

range of experiences and specifically requested that they randomly select students from this pool.

Using these lists provided by the school principal, we randomly selected one moving student, one receiving student, one moving teacher, one receiving teacher, one moving administrator, and one receiving administrator to interview at each site. No Cherry administrator had moved to Rice, and no Pine administrator had moved to Walnut. Due to a scheduling error, we also interviewed two teachers who moved from Field to Creek, resulting in a total of twenty-three interviews (see Table 2). The eight student interviews included male and female, white and African American, high school students aged 15-18 from grades 9-12. The nine teacher interviews included male and female, white and African American, teachers from multiple disciplines. The six administrator interviews also included both male and female participants. These teachers and administrators ranged in teaching experience from eight to 32 years.

As this is an exploratory study, there are a number of limitations that must be addressed. First, while we chose the phenomenological approach as the best means by which to understand the lived experience of those most intimately affected by consolidation, we recognize the reliability problems inherent in this approach. It would be inappropriate to generalize these experiences beyond the specific contexts in which they occurred. Second, the selection of schools to participate in the study was not random, and therefore may not be representative of all consolidated schools in the state. Third, some schools selected refused to participate in the study. It is likely that these schools had more difficult, negative experiences with consolidation than those schools that agreed to participate. We expect our

interview participants thus to generally have had a more positive, less contentious experience than many others in the state. Accordingly, we cannot draw conclusions about the overall success or desirability of consolidation. Finally, although we randomly selected interview participants, we selected from lists composed by school principals. This is particularly an issue with students, since the five students selected by the principals represented, in some cases, a small sample of eligible students. Principals may have listed students who were more well-adjusted or successful. We attempted to mitigate this bias in two ways: by explaining to principals the importance of randomly selecting students and by promising anonymity. Nevertheless, we recognize the potential bias in the selection of the students. In drawing out themes and generalizing about the phenomena of consolidation, we took care to cross-check students' perceptions with those of educators in the same school and where possible with perceptions of students and educators in other schools. In summary, given these limitations, it would be inappropriate to generalize these findings to all schools that experienced consolidation, particularly to those that had more contentious experiences.

#### **The Four Consolidation Contexts**

Formally, districts may be combined in two ways: annexation or merger consolidation. As defined by the Arkansas State Board of Education and the Arkansas Department of Education in May 2006, annexation is defined as the "joining of an affected school district or part of the school district with a receiving district" (Rule 3.01). Consolidation is defined as "the joining of two or more districts or parts thereof to create a new single district"

Table 3

*Comparison of District Enrollments and Minority Status Pre and Post Consolidation*

Year Pre	District Pre	Enrollment	Percent Minority	Year Post	District Post	Enrollment	Percent Minority
2002-03	Field	493	63%	2006-07	Creek/Field	921	62%
2002-03	Creek	611	57%				
2003-04	Oak	2,453	5%	2006-07	Oak	3036	6%
2003-04	Hill	313	0%				
2003-04	Walnut	500	2%	2006-07	Walnut/Pine	793	2%
2003-04	Pine	304	1%				
2004-05	Rice	2,864	31%	2006-07	Rice	3046	62%
2004-05	Cherry	327	94%				

(Rule 3.03). All four sites experienced consolidation in the wake of the passage of Act 60. Of the four sites selected, two experienced annexation and two were merger consolidations. The four sites were located around the state of Arkansas, in the central, eastern, northern, and southern parts of the state. In all four cases, at least one of the superintendents from the affected districts left the new district, either for employment in another district or, in one case, retirement.

In central Arkansas, the Oak district annexed the Hill district and in eastern Arkansas the Rice district annexed the Cherry district. In both these cases of annexation, the annexed district's high school was closed and all high school students were moved to the annexing district's high school. The Hill District was annexed voluntarily into the Oak district, though it occurred under threat of state intervention because Hill's enrollment fell below the Act 60 350 student threshold. The Cherry district was also below the minimum student threshold, but it was also in academic distress. The Arkansas Board of Education ordered Rice to annex Cherry in the middle of the academic year. The Rice superintendent explained that his district received the majority of Cherry students but allowed Cherry families to choose to enroll in other nearby districts.

The other two sites were not annexations but mergers. In northern Arkansas, the Walnut and Pine districts merged to create a new district, as did the Field and Creek districts in southern Arkansas. In the case of the Walnut and Pine consolidation, the Pine district fell below the 350 student threshold. The smaller Pine High School was closed and the larger Walnut High School remained open and received the old Pine students. In the case of the Field and Creek

consolidation, both high schools were relatively equal in size, and the decision to close the Field High School and keep the Creek High School open came out of discussions and negotiations leading up to the consolidation. Neither district had enrollment below 350 at the time Act 60 was passed, but state officials made it clear that it was only a matter of time before enrollment dropped below the Act 60 threshold in both districts. District leaders decided to act ahead of state intervention.

The changes in districts' demographic characteristics as a result of consolidation provide some context for the findings presented below. In Table 3, we present data on sizes and minority status of student populations involved in these district mergers. The mergers of Field and Creek and of Walnut and Pine were similar in that two small districts with generally similar racial demographics were combined. Accordingly, one would expect moving students and educators in these two consolidations to experience an easier social transition than those forced to move schools in other types of consolidation. In contrast, Oak's annexation of Hill and Rice's annexation of Cherry both involved the movement of students from small districts to larger districts. One would expect a relatively more disorienting experience for moving students and educators than in the other two contexts. This was particularly true for the Rice annexation of Cherry, in which a student population with a much higher percentage of minority and low-income students was absorbed into a much larger student population with a relatively low percentage of minority students and fewer low-income students. Almost twice as many students at Cherry (94%) received free or reduced price lunch as

Table 4

*Number of Certified Personnel Staff in Consolidated Districts Pre and Post*

	Field (2002-03)	Creek (2002-03)	Field/Creek (2006-07)	Oak (2002-03)	Hill (2002-03)	Oak (2006-07)	Walnut (2003-04)	Pine (2003-04)	Walnut/Pine (2006-07)	Rice (2004-05)	Cherry (2004-05)	Rice (2006-07)
Primary				34								65
Elementary	26	30	44	29	17	57	45	17	50	54	25	65
Intermediate				27		35				53		58
Middle				36		36						66
Jr. High				44		41				54		79
High School	28	24	49	58	22	106	33	22	35	71	26	10
Central Office	2	3	6	9	2	12	4	6	6	17	5	278
Total	56	57	99	237	41	287	82	45	91	249	56	
Change			-14 (-12%)		+9 (+3%)				-36 (-28%)			-27 (-10%)

Table 5

*Student Teacher Ratios in Consolidated Districts Pre and Post*

	Field (2002-03)	Creek (2002-03)	Field/Creek (2006-07)	Oak (2002-03)	Hill (2003-04)	Oak (2006-07)	Walnut (2003-04)	Pine (2003-04)	Walnut/Pine (2006-07)	Rice (2004-05)	Cherry (2004-05)	Rice (2006-07)
Number of students	493	611	921	2,453	313	3,036	500	304	793	2,864	327	3,046
Number of teachers	56	57	99	237	41	287	82	45	91	249	56	278
Student/teacher ratio	8.8	10.7	9.3	10.4	7.6	10.6	6.1	6.8	8.7	11.5	5.8	11.0

students at Rice (52%). Once Rice annexed Cherry, the school's participation rate in the free or reduced price lunch program was 79%.

Finally, in Tables 4 and 5, we present data on the changes in staffing at the eight affected districts. The data in Table 4 indicate that job losses at these districts ranged from 9 to 28%. In only one consolidation were positions added, and in this case, the increase in staffing was only 3%. In the sections below, educators describe how this loss of jobs created tensions for both moving and receiving educators. The data in Table 5 indicate the changes in student to teacher ratios pre- and post-consolidation. For students and teachers in six of the eight pre-consolidation districts, the student-teacher ratios increased after consolidation. Below, students and educators describe the effects that the increase in the number of students relative to the number of educators had on relationships and instruction.

### **Methodology**

We followed a phenomenological research approach as most appropriate to understanding the lived experience of those affected by consolidation. According to Creswell (2006), "the basic purpose of phenomenology is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence" (p. 58).

A phenomenological approach is well-suited to studying consolidation because it is important to understand how individuals with different roles and perspectives share common experiences in order to develop a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of consolidation. In particular, it is important to understand the experiences of individuals who experienced consolidation from different perspectives: the students, teachers, and administrators who were forced to move high schools as well as those already at receiving high schools.

According to Creswell (2006), the first step in phenomenological research is to collect data from individuals who have experienced the phenomenon. He recommends in-depth interviews with participants. We arranged hour-long interviews with educators and students, using a sampling procedure described above. To discover the meaning that the experience of consolidation had for educators and students, we asked two types of questions. We asked the same open-ended questions of each educator and student to allow them to describe their experience of consolidation in their own words.

We also asked more specific, additional questions of each interview group—moving student, receiving student, moving teacher, receiving teacher, moving administrator, and receiving administrator. These follow-up questions were informed by our review of the literature on consolidation and can be broadly grouped into three "research categories": relationships, learning

opportunities, and working conditions. While developing and investigating research categories is more consistent with a grounded theory approach, we did not attempt to validate pre-existing theories or to generate future theories about consolidation. Instead, the questions were intended to uncover the essence of the phenomenon of consolidation that all persons experienced (Creswell, Hanson, Plano Clark, & Morales, 2007). Interview scripts are included in the Appendix.

All interviews were conducted in person on site during the spring of 2007. Two researchers were present at all interviews. One was assigned to ask questions, and the other to take notes, keep track of the time, and work the recorder. All interviewees volunteered for the study and were promised anonymity. All interviews were taped and transcribed.

Following the procedure recommended by Creswell (2006), we analyzed the transcripts by first highlighting significant statements and words that provided an understanding of how students and educators experienced consolidation. We developed clusters of meaning from these significant statements into themes. As noted above, two themes emerged: 1) students' success in adapting to the social disruption versus teachers' struggles and 2) general benefits to all educators and students but special additional challenges for moving teachers and students. Based on these significant statements and themes, we then wrote a "textural description" of what the participants experienced as well as a "structural description" of the context that influenced how the participants experienced consolidation. These descriptions were presented in the introductory section above. Finally, based on the textural and structural descriptions, we wrote a "composite description" that presents the essence of the phenomenon of consolidation. Before presenting the essential composite description in the concluding section, we present our findings, organized by the three broad research categories identified from the literature. Evidence for both themes is present in all three sections.

### **Relationships**

Consolidation affected students' relationships and teachers' relationships quite differently. Adults often object to consolidation by arguing about how consolidation hurts students' social lives, but we found that educators and students alike believed that students who were forced to move to new high schools formed relationships more easily than the teachers who were also forced to move. Arguing that "kids are kids," educators and students alike described students as eager to make friends and blend in, though in the case of annexations, the onus of fitting in was on the moving students, and some failed to fit in. While students tried hard to blend in and make friends, moving and receiving teachers

experienced difficulties forming relationships, even years after the consolidation occurred. These social difficulties included student-teacher relationships.

### **Student Relationships: “Kids Are Kids” and More Diverse Social Opportunities**

Students admitted to worrying about consolidation, especially those students moving from small districts to much larger ones. For example, Sam, who moved from Hill High to the much larger Oak High, explained,

I'll admit the very first day I came to Oak I was a little scared and I didn't really know what to expect. But my first class was full of people...I mean, just really friendly people... One girl even stood up on a chair and acted like a gargoyle. It was kind of a freaky thing but... now she's our student council president.

Both educators and students argued that the moving students and receiving students blended together because “kids are kids.” Lois, a teacher who moved from Hill to Oak explained,

The kids are basically the same. In fact, when all of the consolidation first came up, the kids were... so upset, and they were so adamant about how they were not going to school over there. I heard . . . that there wouldn't be anything but fights going on... That never happened. Kids are kids no matter where they go to school.

In contexts where more equally-sized districts merged, educators and students created a similar narrative. At Rice High School, receiving teacher Justine remarked, “I don't see any difference. . . It took them a little while to get adjusted, but it worked out fine. I don't even know now which students are from which school until I pull out their phone number or their address.” Similarly, a Walnut student named Kyle described what happened when Pine kids arrived: “I mean, we're all the same. Like, we're all interested in the same things, and so, it wasn't really any big controversy.”

Because consolidated schools draw students from a wider community, students often become part of a more diverse student body and a broadened network of friends (Sell et al., 1996). Across all four consolidations, students unanimously appreciated the broader social opportunities consolidation afforded, though it is important to note that because of selection processes, students were more likely to have had positive experiences. For example, Kendall, a student moving from Field to Creek, declared it was the main reason she liked consolidation: “I think consolidating is the best because it gives you more opportunities to meet more people. It gets you to interact with more people and stuff like that.”

The increased diversity was not just social but racial. Emma, a teacher who moved from a Cherry to Rice observed new racial diversity among students as a result of consolidation as well as accompanying challenges:

We were a predominantly black school and we were a small little farming community... [The Cherry parents] were a little concerned about if [their children] would be treated fairly. . . From what I saw, the teachers at [Rice] were so good to our kids and went out of their way to make them feel welcome.

Kelly, a teacher who moved from Field to Creek, described a similar racial integration:

It's kind of equaled out, as far as the make-up of the classes. We had mostly black students in Field. And they had quite a few white students in Creek. Since we went together it's kind of evened it out. So that's probably the biggest difference that we see in our kids.

Even when students recognized differences among moving and receiving students, they were eager to conclude that students could blend and fit in. Gareth, a student already attending Oak, described what happened when the much smaller Hill High was annexed:

Hill had a lot of rednecks. . . They thought we were a bunch of preps who were going to treat them mean but we really weren't... First off sophomore year they really were just kind of shy and scared to say anything to us, because I guess they thought we were mean or something, I don't know. They all kind of loosened up junior year... really, really loosened up and talked a lot... Now everybody just blends together so things work out.

We observed two important qualifications about the nature of this blending. First, as Gareth's explanation suggests, when a smaller district was annexed by a much larger one, it was the moving students who had to blend in with the larger group of receiving students. This was particularly true when the moving students were different racially and socioeconomically than the receiving students as with the Rice annexation of Cherry. Caitlin, a student already attending Rice High, hinted at the adjustments the Cherry students faced:

Well, when the students who were new first came over here, they didn't know how our school was. And they might have had behavior problems that they couldn't have gotten away with at their other school, but I think they quickly learned all the rules and how we do things over here.

Second, a few educators recognized that consolidation into larger schools created social adjustment problems among students, especially for moving students. According to Lois, a teacher moving from Hill to Oak, “We had several kids that didn’t make it through the first year over here, because they got lost, and they went home and stayed there and didn’t come back.” It is important to note that no other educators or students mentioned such severe adjustment problems for moving students. However, others did mention other social tensions. Martin, a Walnut High administrator who received students from Pine, remarked: “I’ll just say it like this. I’ve had a few fights here this year, most of them girl fights. And ... most of them have been...from the other district, from Pine.” Allison, a moving teacher from Pine, attributed student fights to the larger school size:

We seem to have a lot of fighting, especially recently. I don’t know if something is in the water or what, but... We just didn’t have a lot of fights at Pine, and I guess it was the small atmosphere. There wasn’t a lot of cliques at Pine. The kids didn’t have the friend choices that they have now, so, you know, ‘I can be friends with them, so I don’t need you anymore,’... You know, there’s more of that over here... That’s just part of a bigger school.

Students, however, were more positive about these social changes. Kyle, a student already attending Walnut High, observed the same events as Martin and Allison but drew a different conclusion:

I mean, everyone has a social group now. It doesn’t feel like anyone’s an outcast or anything. A lot of kids would make more friends up here just because there’s more kids who are interested in the same thing. You could just sort of tell, like some kids from Pine... just sort of, you know, outsiders ... weren’t really in the group. But they came over here and found some friends like that, and everyone seemed to be able to bond.

### Teachers: A Death in the Family

Teachers had a more difficult time adjusting to consolidation than students, especially teachers who moved from small districts that were annexed into larger ones. Emma, a teacher who moved from tiny Cherry to the Rice district, told the most emotional story:

After he told us that we would be paid and that they didn’t need us, I sat at home for two weeks and... it was me in the house, and it was awful... When it happened it ranked with the death of my mother and our store burning... I had been at Cherry all my life. I had done my student

teaching there, and went to work there. We live there and have a business there. I was teaching grandchildren of children I started with. And when [the superintendent] told us that we were going ... I was crushed. Now I’m happy as I’ve ever been, so it’s worked out OK. The initial shock of it was a little overwhelming... As bad as it is at first that in the long run they have to remember that it’s for the kids. And it still makes me cry to drive by our empty school. Because my job was to check the school every night to make sure that it was locked up. And we still do that even though it’s the city hall now, but you know, it’s better for the kids.

Another teacher, Lois, was angry at having to move from Hill to the much larger Oak district: “I was pissed. I was very, very upset that they forced us to close. We had a good school.” Lois admitted:

It’s much more difficult to form relationships here than it was over there. It’s more difficult for me to form relationships with my coworkers. I feel like I have been readily accepted by my students. I don’t feel like I was readily accepted by the staff at all. Especially by some of the other older English teachers that are here, because I came over and I had been teaching for eleven years and I had my way of doing things, and they wanted me to do things their way, and I said ‘You can’t tell me what to do; you’re not my boss,’ you know, that kind of thing.

However, even when two more equally sized districts merged, teachers experienced similar problems. A receiving teacher at Walnut High, Daniel, reflected:

The teachers are the ones that had the biggest problem about coming over. The students, as a whole... I mean, kids here today, you wouldn’t know who came from Pine and who came from Walnut. They had friends, they blended, but the teachers, they wanted to stay in their same little groups, because that is their comfort zone, and never... they would just stay there and really wouldn’t try to blend in ... Let me give you another example. Over there, they’re always bringing up ‘We’re a family, we’re a family.’ OK, so they come over here, and they don’t think we’re a family over here. Anyways, different communities, but there was this one lady, that would bake cakes for birthdays, for the ones from there. And she wouldn’t invite any of us. The whole year she did that. Now how can you become, you know, a faculty, you know, a close faculty, with that going on? I don’t know if someone talked to her, but ... I don’t know of her doing that this year.

As noted above, one reason teachers were unsettled during consolidation was because the process frequently meant Reduction in Force, or layoff, orders. These were more likely for teachers in annexed schools, but as Table 3 demonstrated, except for the growing Oak District, all districts experienced a significant decrease in school personnel. A Creek administrator named Julia summed it up: “I think everyone gets a little shaky with job security.”

### **More Distant Student-Adult Relationships**

Some teachers and students forced to leave smaller schools for larger ones, even if it involved merging two equally-sized small schools, described a more bureaucratic relationship between faculty and students and mourned the loss of a “tight-knit family” atmosphere. Taylor, a student who moved from Pine to Walnut when the districts merged explained:

At our old school ... the teachers were people you'd see at the store somewhere, and you're always talking to them, and you could tell they really wanted you to do well, and always offered you help and stuff. Where over here, it's a little bit more...I don't know, kind of reserved. Like they teach, but then again, they're not, you know, 100% wanting you to...I don't know, I guess sometimes it just feels like you're a bother to them... [In Pine] we were all really tight and close...just a tight-knit family really. Where over here it's more...everyone's just kind of spread out. Of course, over there it was just really one big building. I guess, just knew everybody and was friends with everyone.

Lois, the teacher who expressed anger at moving from Hill to the larger Oak High, described the problems the more impersonal environment created for students and her relationships with them:

We had teachers over there that really cared about the students...and I'm not saying that teachers over here don't... Because we were such a close knit family over there, and because we knew the kids and we knew their families and we knew what we could do for them to try to help them. It was almost like we were more effective over there than over here. Sometimes I feel, over here...I like it here, but sometimes I feel like I'm helpless when it comes to some things, when over there I felt like I had power to do something about it, because we were so much smaller...Over there, it seemed like it was OK for teachers to interact with students. Over here, they kind of give the impression that there's a line that we're not allowed to cross, as far as professionalism and

being personal. They kind of...they don't want us to become personally involved in the students' lives almost over here, where as over there it was acceptable, almost encouraged. And by becoming personally involved, and I'm not talking about anything inappropriate...getting to know them, and if they needed to talk they could come to us. Whereas here, it's almost as if it's a no-no. It's like if they come to us, then we're supposed to send them to the counselor. They don't know the counselor; they don't want to talk to her.

### **Learning Opportunities**

An important purported benefit of consolidation is that larger schools provide a broader curriculum that not only offers students a wider variety of educational options, but offers them the opportunity to take advanced classes that will better prepare them for college (Benton, 1992; Duncombe & Yinger, 2007; Self, 2001). We found that in all four consolidated high schools, students, teachers and administrators who moved schools, as well as those who were already at receiving high schools, all believed that consolidation did increase academic opportunities for students primarily through increased course offerings, though they also recognized that consolidation came with larger class sizes and less one-on-one student teacher interaction. We also found that educators and students believed any changes in facilities or transportation issues after consolidation had little effect on learning opportunities.

### **More Courses and Expanded Academic Opportunities**

Students believed they had improved opportunities at their new, larger consolidated schools, particularly through a broader selection of courses. According to Taylor, a student moving from Pine to Walnut:

I think for the most part [consolidation] probably opened up a lot of doors for people...I don't remember having AP courses over there, but over here we do...and there's physics and anatomy, so there's science classes offered over here that we didn't have at our old school... With just the more classes being offered, I think there's probably more opportunities and stuff. Just in college you'd be more prepared for different things you'd have to take.

Sam, who moved from Hill to the larger Oak district, observed similar improvements: “I think that they offer more computer classes and more of your family and consumer science classes. I think it's getting me ready for college better than it was at Hill, so I like it better.”

Moving teachers also saw improved academic opportunities for students. Emma, who was devastated by her move from Cherry to Rice said of her new school:

“It’s much stronger. They offer more. Our kids have more opportunities over here. Even in junior high, there is more offered. We’d gotten to the point where foreign language was done by distance learning in Cherry.” Caleb, a teacher who moved from Field to Creek when the two merged, offered a specific example: “Last year we offered AP Calculus and we would not have been able to have offered that. The student teacher ratio would have been too small.” Even educators already at receiving schools believed that consolidation improved the curriculum. Martin, a receiving administrator at Walnut, explained:

We’re probably next year...going to offer more things than we’ve ever offered before, because of the kid number... Before, we’d basically just offer two [AP classes]: AP literature and AP history. Next year we’re starting AP environmental science and AP language, too, so we’ll have five AP classes in place next year.

### **Larger Class Sizes**

Along with more classes, educators and students believed that class sizes had increased after consolidation. Caitlin, who was already attending Rice High when Cherry was annexed, explained her concerns about consolidation: “It’s just that the classes have gotten bigger, and it’s harder to ask questions.” This was also true of mergers to two small districts. Kelly, a teacher at Field, explained,

With the smaller school we had small class sizes and now we have larger class sizes. And that’s the one major downfall to me. Before we were able to devote more time to our smaller classes than we are to each student in our larger classes.

Martin, a Walnut administrator, recognized the cost of increased course offerings: “I’ll just tell you like it is. In the high school here, we took the brunt of the cuts, which made our class sizes larger.”

### **Transportation Challenges**

Several studies have noted that consolidation creates longer bus rides that cut into students’ homework or extra-curricular activities (Hillman, 2003; Lewis, 2003; Sell et al., 1996). Accordingly, we asked students, teachers, and administrators several questions about the length and impact of commutes. With the important caveat that these experiences cannot be generalized beyond the four contexts and that our educators and students likely had a more positive consolidation experience than average, our educators and students believed consolidation had a small effect on learning opportunities. Students in particular did not believe their longer commutes affected their academics. For example, when asked if his commute affects his ability to get his homework completed, Sam, a Hill student with a longer commute to Oak replied, “Oh no, no, no. Not at all.”

It is important to note, however, that some educators did describe transportation challenges with extra-curricular participation and parent participation. According to Lois, the teacher moving from Hill to the Oak district: “I have a lot less interaction with the parents than I did over there... I have less parents come to parent-teacher conferences... I would say I had 30 to 40% come over there...Here I probably don’t even have 20% come.” Because we did not interview parents, we cannot make any conclusions about how consolidation affected parents’ participation nor their support for their children’s extra-curricular activities. We do note that transportation problems were strongest for former Rice students at Cherry. Janet, an administrator at Rice, acknowledged transportation challenges for some Cherry students’ extra-curricular activities:

I know we’ve had some students that played basketball and football and didn’t have a ride. And in the first year [the superintendent] provided a trip bus, an extracurricular bus that would make a trip late in the day, but this year they didn’t provide that, so this year we had some that couldn’t participate because they didn’t have a ride.

Emma, the former Cherry teacher, explained why many parents from Cherry faced challenges participating at Rice:

A lot of our parents, if they don’t have cars, it’s kind of hard to come to school, because they’re charging \$20 now to get from Cherry to Rice. So, if they don’t have a car, then they have to get a friend who does. And so the going rate now is \$20, to get someone to take you. So that makes it a little hard to come to school.

### **Working Conditions**

A third research category we identified in the literature on school consolidation focused on teachers and changes in their working conditions. Research by Self (2001) and Sell et al., (1996) concluded that consolidated schools benefit from better trained and professionally developed teachers. In the four contexts we studied, it appears that teachers, and moving teachers in particular, enjoyed improved working conditions as a result of consolidation.

### **Reduced Number of Classes to Prepare**

An important change for moving and receiving teachers alike was a reduction in the number of classes they had to prepare daily. Brian, a Creek teacher exiled to a portable building, explained how consolidation nevertheless helped his teaching:

Whereas before I might have taught half a day of English and half a day of Math... Now I only just teach English. Whereas before you would wear so many different hats throughout the day you know it was hard to really focus on one content

area... Man, when you get hired at a small school you can be anything. You can be the counselor, you can be the math teacher, the English teacher, whatever. If you go into a bigger school they are hiring you for one job and that's it. That has really helped me as a teacher.

Even Lois, a teacher who expressed anger at having to move from Hill to Oak, concurred:

It's a little easier on me in one sense, because I only have one prep a day now, and that is easier... I had between four and five preps a day over there. Because I taught tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grade English, and I was the yearbook advisor, and I taught speech.

### **Improved Formal Professional Development Opportunities**

Both moving and receiving teachers also described improved opportunities for formal professional development. Caleb, a teacher moving from Field to Creek when the two districts merged, described the effect of consolidation on his technical skills:

I think it is because of the consolidation that we have more money that's allotted for professional development. I'm able to go to more training. I've enjoyed going to a lot of technology training classes. Technology was catching up with me really fast. I was one of those teachers who had been taught one way and wanted to continue to teach that way and I realized that way wasn't the best way as far as technology. I still wanted students to do certain things by hand, when the calculator was doing them and I finally had to adjust to allowing them to do certain things with the calculator. So I had to go to more training. I think because of the consolidation we have more money that is allotted for professional development and I'm able to go.

Emma, the teacher devastated by having to leave Cherry, described more targeted, helpful professional development at Rice:

I've had more opportunities for better professional development things that fitted me better than just blanket professional development. We got lots of hours in Cherry because our school was under academic distress so we had lots and lots of hours, but there was a whole lot of that that wasn't beneficial. And I consider that a waste of...because they would always take you out of class to do it and that's a waste of my time and my kids. And what I get here, most things we do here are done building-wide. So it relates... and it applies to me, so it's better because I get relevant

information not sit through something just to get six hours... And you can ask if you want to do something [in particular.]

Renee, an administrator at Oak High, explained why Hill teachers enjoyed such improved opportunities when they arrived at Oak:

There are so many more people in this district that you have to have professional development, and the district tries to provide a lot of it...For example, all of the first grade teachers, or all of the second grade teachers... [get] some of the same kinds of training, so that they could work as a collaborative group. So much of our professional development is handled right here in the district, so they don't have to go out and look for it, and every first grade teacher winds up taking a different workshop, and nobody being able to feed off of the other one, or bounce ideas off of them, so there's definitely more professional development possibilities here.

School administrators also benefitted from improved formal professional development opportunities. Reece, an administrator at Field explained,

I went to a national convention that I had never been to before. I'm going to the model school, the model school convention that's in Washington, DC. This summer stuff I've never had an opportunity to do... Why? I have an assistant principal and I'm not scared to leave. That's all it boils down to.

### **Little Change in Facilities and Technology**

Finally, in contrast to some previous studies on school consolidation (Sell et al., 1996) our educators and students did not believe that the larger, consolidated schools had better facilities or instructional technology. Those who did recognize a change actually saw worse facilities. Brian, a teacher already working at Creek, described what happened after consolidation with Field created a single secondary building:

The seventh and eighth grade teachers and students, we're out behind the high school building here in portable buildings... Now that has an impact in that teachers want what everybody else has got for our kids. If the tenth grade teachers and students get to be in the building where their computers work all the time, then we want our eighth graders to be in the building where the computers work all of the time. We can see that. We want that.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

In four rural locations around Arkansas, students,

teachers, and administrators in eight high schools experienced consolidation between the 2002-03 and 2006-07 school years. Despite many differences among contexts and among participants' experiences, two policy-relevant themes emerged in our interviews.

First, students adapted better than teachers to the new social environment created by consolidation. We heard the same narrative from students and educators in all four contexts: "kids are kids." Students described a relatively smooth and successful transition. Students also reported participating in more diverse social and academic opportunities. In contrast, teachers struggled with their new relationships. In fact, teachers already at receiving high schools reported more social disruption after consolidation than moving students did, even though the students were completely new to the school. We do note one important qualification to this theme. Our site selection and student sampling processes created a general bias toward positive consolidation experiences, especially for students. As such, we cannot generalize any conclusion about the desirability of other consolidations or consolidation generally. A more general conclusion would require a study with a larger sample of students and a more representative sampling procedure.

Future studies might explore this general difference in how teachers and students interpreted consolidation. Why did students as a group and teachers as a group have quite different lived experiences, even across different consolidation contexts? Even more intriguingly, in the same consolidation context, why did teachers interpret improving professional conditions but disrupted social conditions as a problem, while students interpreted the same conditions as an opportunity? How important are relationships in teachers' assessments of consolidation? Based on our interviews, we would hypothesize that while teachers need both social and professional support during the consolidation process, social support is needed most.

The second theme that emerged from our interviews was that students and educators generally experienced benefits from consolidation. Teachers experienced improved working conditions and professional development opportunities after consolidation, and as noted above, students generally adapted to their new social environments and experienced more diverse social and academic opportunities. By all accounts, not only moving but receiving students had broader course offerings, with more Advanced Placement

and vocational courses. Again, we note the important limitation in our method that prevents generalizing this finding to other consolidation contexts. With this important caveat, we suggest that policy debates over the desirability of consolidation might benefit from our finding that many students are able to take advantage of the additional opportunities that consolidation can offer. Beyond mitigating social disruption, educators must help students find these new opportunities, especially new courses, or the disruption caused by consolidation will have been for naught.

However, there were notable exceptions to this theme of general benefits, as some moving teachers and perhaps some moving students experienced significant problems as a result of consolidation. Of all interviewees, moving teachers were the most critical of consolidation. Several moving teachers expressed dissatisfaction with consolidation because of the disruption to their relationships, mourning the loss of the old "tight-knit family." Many moving teachers struggled to adjust to their new social environments, continuing to socialize primarily with colleagues from their old schools and generally failing to form new relationships. Perhaps most problematically, these problems often extended to their relationships with students, which became more distant and bureaucratic. Although students reported generally creating a blended community after consolidation, moving students had the greater challenges fitting in. Some moving teachers reported that a few moving students became alienated, and these teachers felt that consolidation actually contributed to those students' eventually dropping out of school. These reports came from consolidations in which small schools in Hill and Cherry were annexed by much larger schools in Oak and Rice. It is important to note that no students or administrators mentioned any students who had become alienated after consolidation. This raises a puzzle that could perhaps be addressed by future studies: Are teachers dissatisfied with consolidation jumping to conclusions about students who might have already been alienated before consolidation? Or are moving teachers more clearly seeing students than students see one another? If further study confirms that moving teachers do have special insights, this finding would place special responsibilities on moving teachers to monitor and identify which students are at risk of alienation before, during, and after consolidation.

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## Appendix

Interview Questions for *Students who Moved* to a New School as a Result of Consolidation

1. *General introduction question:* You have moved from your previous school to your new school as a result of the state's consolidation policy.
  - 1.1. How do you feel about moving to your new school?
  - 1.2. Do you think consolidation is good thing? Why?
2. *Social integration questions:*
  - 2.1. How has your peer group changed as a result of having new students come to your school?
  - 2.2. How do you feel about making friends at your new school?
  - 2.3. Do new students and students who were already in the school interact, or do they stick to their old groups? How do you feel about that?
  - 2.4. Describe any differences between the students who moved and the students who were already at the school.
3. *Academics questions:*
  - 3.1. Are your classes easier or more difficult?
  - 3.2. Are you able to take classes at your new school that were not offered at your old school?
  - 3.3. In general, are classes larger, smaller, or about the same size as classes in your old school? Do you think the changes in class size make a difference?
  - 3.4. How do you feel about the academics at your new school?
4. *General integration/alienation questions:*
  - 4.1. Do you think that students like you who moved from your old school are treated differently by teachers and administrators at your new school? Why do you think that is, and if not, why not?
  - 4.2. How hard do you think it is to get attention from teachers at your new school compared to your old school? Why do you think that is?
  - 4.3. How hard do you think it is to get attention from administrators at your new school compared to your old school? Why do you think that is?
  - 4.4. How close were your relationships with teachers and administrators at your old school? Why do you think that is?
  - 4.5. How easy is it to get away with bending the rules at your new school? Why do you think that is?
5. *Co-curricular integration questions:*
  - 5.1. Do you feel as though you have different opportunities to participate in more clubs and sports at your new school?
  - 5.2. How hard is it to get involved in after-school clubs, student government, and sports at your new school? Why do you feel this way?
6. *Transportation questions:*
  - 6.1. How does your commute to your new school differ from the commute to your old school?
  - 6.2. How do you feel about your new commute?
  - 6.3. Do you think that the length of commute affects your choices to get involved in after-school activities?
  - 6.4. Do you think that the length of your commute affects your ability to get your homework completed? In what way?
  - 6.5. What do you know about the change in the commute of other students like you who have moved to the new school?

Interview Questions for *Teachers who Moved* to a New School as a Result of Consolidation

1. *General Introduction Question:* You have had to switch schools because of the state's consolidation efforts.
  - 1.1. How do you feel about consolidation?
  - 1.2. Do you think it is a good or bad thing and why?
2. *Employment Questions:*
  - 2.1. Can you describe the process of how you made the switch to your new school from the time you first heard about the closing of your old school up to today?
  - 2.2. How did you feel about making the switch?
  - 2.3. How did you find the process of getting a new job?
  - 2.4. How do you think your colleagues coped with the change?
  - 2.5. Have you had more or fewer opportunities for professional development since moving to the new school? Please describe.
3. *Academic climate:*
  - 3.1. How does the academic climate at your new school compare to the climate at the old school?
  - 3.2. Do you have larger classes, and if so, how has that impacted your ability to teach?
  - 3.3. Are you teaching the same classes at your new school? If not, how have they changed?
  - 3.4. How has your course load changed?
  - 3.5. Were you teaching classes outside of your field prior to consolidation? If yes, please explain.
  - 3.6. Are you currently teaching classes outside your field? If yes, please explain.
  - 3.7. Are students able to take classes now that were not offered before consolidation? If so, which courses?
4. *Relationships with students:*
  - 4.1. Please describe the nature of the interaction between teachers and students at your old school and any differences you perceive in nature of interactions at your new school.
  - 4.2. Do you think that you have different types or amounts of discipline problems at your new school? Why or why not?
  - 4.3. Do you think students find it easier to bend the rules at your new school? Why or why not?
  - 4.4. Do you think teachers and students find it easier, more difficult, or about the same to form relationships at your new school? Why or why not?
  - 4.5. Describe any differences between the students who moved and the students who were already at the school.
5. *Relationships with colleagues:*
  - 5.1. How do you feel about the interactions between teachers who moved and teachers who were already at your school before consolidation?
  - 5.2. What are your impressions about the level of collegiality or the willingness of teachers to collaborate at your new school as compared to your old school?
6. *Relationships with administration and parents:*
  - 6.1. How do your duties at your new school compare with your duties at your old school?
  - 6.2. How does access to administration compare between schools?
  - 6.3. What is your impression the reception of new teachers by administration?
  - 6.4. Have you noticed any difference in parental involvement since consolidation? Please explain.
  - 6.5. How difficult is it to schedule parent conferences since consolidation?
7. *Facilities:*
  - 7.1. Does the new school have better facilities than your old school? Please explain.
  - 7.2. Does the new school have better instructional technology than your old school? Please explain.
8. *Transportation:*
  - 8.1. How does your commute to your new school compare to your previous commute?
  - 8.2. Do teachers with longer commutes have any preferences in selecting duties?  
Do you think the length of commute affects your ability to be an effective teacher? If yes, in what way?
9. *Relationships with Community:*
  - 9.1. How do you think consolidation has impacted communities where schools have closed? Why do you think this?
  - 9.2. How do you think consolidation has impacted communities where schools have received students? Why do you think this?

Interview Questions for *Administrators who Moved* to a New School or a Combined Central Office as a Result of Consolidation

1. *General Introduction Question:* You have had to switch schools because of the state's consolidation efforts.
  - 1.1. How do you feel about consolidation?
  - 1.2. Do you think it is a good or bad thing and why?
2. *Employment Questions:*
  - 2.1. Can you describe the process of how you made the switch to your new school from the time you first heard about the closing of your old school up to today?
  - 2.2. How did you feel about making the switch?
  - 2.3. How did you find the process of getting a new job?
  - 2.4. How do you think your colleagues coped with the change?
  - 2.5. Have you had more or fewer opportunities for professional development since moving to the new school? Please describe.
3. *Academic climate:*
  - 3.1. How does the academic climate at your new school compare to the climate at the old school?
  - 3.2. How does class size compare?
  - 3.3. How do you think differences in class size have impacted the academic experience for teachers and students?
  - 3.4. How has the moving of teachers as a result of consolidation affected teaching loads and teaching responsibilities at your new school?
  - 3.5. Are students able to take classes now that were not offered before consolidation? If so, which courses?
4. *Relationships with students:*
  - 4.1. Do you find it easier or more difficult to relate to students at your new school? Please explain.
  - 4.2. Do you think that there is a change in the *amount* of discipline problems at your new school? Please explain.
  - 4.3. Do you think that there is a change in the *severity* of discipline problems at your new school? Please explain.
  - 4.4. Do you think teachers and students find it easier or more difficult to form relationships at your new school? Please explain.
  - 4.5. Describe any differences between the students who moved and the students who were already at the school?
5. *Relationships with colleagues:*
  - 5.1. How do you feel about the interactions between teachers who moved and teachers who were already at your school before consolidation?
  - 5.2. What are your impressions about the level of collegiality or the willingness of teachers to collaborate at your new school as compared to your old school?
  - 5.3. How do your interactions with teachers and other administrators compare at your new school?
6. *Relationships with administration and parents:*
  - 6.1. How do your duties at your new school compare with your duties at your old school?
  - 6.2. How does access to administration compare between schools?
  - 6.3. How do you feel about the reception of new teachers and administrators by the existing administration?
  - 6.4. Have you noticed any difference in parental involvement since consolidation? Please explain.
  - 6.5. How difficult is it to schedule parent conferences since consolidation? Please explain.
7. *Facilities:*
  - 7.1. Does the new school have better facilities than your old school? If yes, please explain.
  - 7.2. Does the new school have better instructional technology than your old school? If yes, please explain.
8. *Transportation:*
  - 8.1. How does your commute to your new school compare to your previous commute?
  - 8.2. Do teachers with longer commutes have any preferences in selecting duties?
  - 8.3. Do you think the length of commute affects teachers' effectiveness?
  - 8.4. Do you think the length of commute affects your ability to be an effective administrator?
9. *Relationships with Community:*
  - 9.1. How do you think consolidation has impacted communities where schools have closed?
  - 9.2. How do you think consolidation has impacted communities where schools have received students?

Interview Questions for *Administrators in a School who Received Students, Teachers, and/or Administrators from a District that was Closed as a Result of Consolidation*

1. *General Introduction Question:* You are an administrator in a school that received students, teachers, and administrators as a result of the state's consolidation policy.
  - 1.1. How do you feel about these changes?
  - 1.2. Do you think consolidation is good thing? Why or why not?
2. *Employment Questions:*
  - 2.1. Has the introduction of new personnel from the closed school affected your feelings of job security in any way? Please explain.
  - 2.2. How have you or teachers felt about changes brought about by consolidation with respect to having new teachers and administrators in the school?
  - 2.3. How do you think your colleagues who have made the move to your school have coped with the changes brought about by consolidation?
  - 2.4. How do your duties at your school now compare with your duties prior to consolidation?
  - 2.5. Have you had more or fewer opportunities for professional development since consolidation? Please describe.
3. *Academic climate:*
  - 3.1. How does the academic climate at your school since consolidation compare to the climate at the school before consolidation?
  - 3.2. Has your school experienced any changes in class sizes?
  - 3.3. If so, how have those changes impacted the academic experience for teachers and students?
  - 3.4. How has the moving of teachers as a result of consolidation affected teaching loads and teaching responsibilities at your school?
  - 3.5. Are students able to take classes now that were not offered before consolidation? If so, which courses?
4. *Relationships with students:*
  - 4.1. Please describe the nature of the interaction between teachers and students at your school before consolidation and any differences you perceive in nature of interactions at your school since consolidation.
  - 4.2. Do you think that there is a difference in the *amount* of discipline problems at your school since consolidation?
  - 4.3. Do you think that there is a difference in the *severity* of discipline problems at your school since consolidation?
  - 4.4. Do you think students find it easier to bend the rules at your school since consolidation?
  - 4.5. Do you think teachers and students find it easier, more difficult, or about the same to form relationships at your new school? Please explain.
  - 4.6. Describe any differences between the students who moved and the students who were already at the school.
5. *Relationships with colleagues:*
  - 5.1. How do you feel about the interactions between teachers who moved and teachers who were already at your school before consolidation?
  - 5.2. What are your impressions about the level of collegiality or the willingness of teachers to collaborate at your school before and after consolidation?
  - 5.3. How do your interactions with teachers and other administrators compare at your school before and after consolidation?
6. *Relationships with parents:*
  - 6.1. Have you noticed any difference in parental involvement since consolidation? Please explain.
7. *Transportation:*
  - 7.1. Do teachers with longer commutes have any preferences in selecting duties?
  - 7.2. Do you think the length of commute affects teachers' levels of effectiveness? If yes, how?
  - 7.3. What do you know about the change in the commute of students who have moved to the new school?
  - 7.4. Do you think that the length of commute affects student and parent choices to get involved in after-school activities?
  - 7.5. Do you think that the length of commute affects student ability to get homework completed?
8. *Relationships with Community:*
  - 8.1. How do you think consolidation has impacted communities where schools have closed?
  - 8.2. How do you think consolidation has impacted communities where schools have received students?