

Decision Making Process and Declining Enrollments in Northern New England

by

Robert St. Cyr

Bachelor of Arts
Notre Dame College, 1984

Master of Education
Notre Dame College, 1999

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Education in

Educational Leadership

School of Education

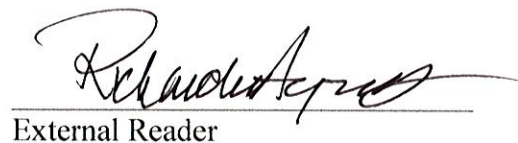
Southern New Hampshire University

2017


Chair


Committee Member


Committee Member


External Reader

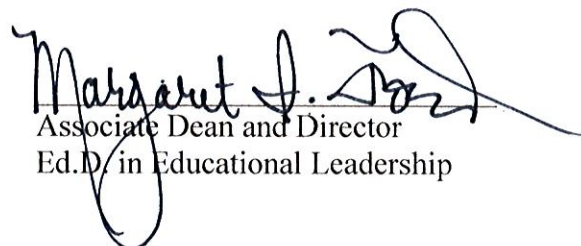

Associate Dean and Director
Ed.D. in Educational Leadership

Table of Contents

Table of Contents.....	2
Dedication.....	6
Abstract.....	7
Chapter I: Statement of the Problem.....	8
Introduction.....	8
Theoretical Framework.....	12
Definition of Terms.....	15
Research Questions.....	16
Significance of the Study.....	16
General Procedures.....	16
Delimitations or Limitations of the Study.....	17
Summary.....	19
Chapter II: Literature Review.....	20
Problem of Declining Enrollments in Rural Schools.....	20
Conditions Leading to Declining School Enrollments.....	24
Responses to Declining Enrollments.....	26
Implications of Responses to Declining Enrollments.....	30
Decision Making Process.....	33
Summary.....	34
Chapter III: Methodology.....	36
Overview of the Research Design.....	36
Research Questions.....	37

Research Sample	39
Plan and Methods of Data Collection and Analysis	41
Trustworthiness and Ethical Issues	42
Dissemination of Policy Relevance	43
Communication of Findings	44
Chapter Summary	44
Chapter IV: Analysis & Introduction.....	46
Data Analysis	49
Research Questions.....	51
Sources of Data	51
Research Question 1 - Allegro.....	54
Leadership.....	55
Population	63
Financial Impact.....	66
Students and Staff	68
Summary of Research Question 1- Allegro	71
Research Question 1 – Picasso	71
Leadership.....	72
Population	76
Financial Impact.....	79
Students and Staff	81
Summary of Research Question 1- Picasso	83
Research Question 2 - Allegro	83

Leadership.....	84
Population	87
Financial Impact.....	89
Students and Staff	91
Summary of Research Question 2- Allegro	95
Research Question 2 – Picasso	95
Leadership.....	95
Population	98
Financial Impact.....	99
Students and Staff	101
Summary of Research Question 2- Picasso	107
Research Question 3 - Allegro	107
Leadership.....	108
Population	110
Financial Impact.....	111
Students and Staff	115
Summary of Research Question 3- Allegro	117
Research Question 3 – Picasso	117
Leadership.....	117
Population	119
Financial Impact.....	121
Students and Staff	123
Summary of Research Question 3- Picasso	126

Summary of Findings of Research Questions 1-3	127
Chapter V: Findings and Conclusions	132
Purpose of the Study	132
Conclusions.....	133
Research Question 1	133
Research Question 2	135
Research Question 3	137
NWREL Framework.....	139
Participatory Decision Making	139
Choice	140
Process	140
Comprehensiveness.....	141
Implications.....	141
Recommendations for Further Research.....	142
Appendix A: Invitation to Participate for Superintendents.....	144
Appendix B: Invitation to Participate for Principals.....	145
Appendix C: Invitation to Participate for Community Members	146
Appendix D: Informed Consent for No or Very Minimal-Risk Procedure	147
Appendix E: Interview Form and Questions: Superintendent	149
Appendix F: Sample Minutes Redacted Analysis Sheet.....	151
References.....	153

Dedication

The journey toward the completion of this work took many twists and turns. I truly believe we do not walk this path alone. That being said, I owe a debt of gratitude to those who helped me with their love and encouragement along the way. First and foremost, to my wife and soul mate, Deedee: without your intelligence, love and support, this would not have been possible. I wish to thank my daughters Helen and Sarah for allowing me to sacrifice our time together. Of no less importance is my cohort, The Wolves and Den Mother, Dr. Peg Ford. You never lost your faith and commitment to helping me finish the program. I will never work with a finer group of individuals whom I will always regard as my second family. I would like to thank especially my Doctoral Committee: Dr. Marilyn Fenton, Dr. Audrey Rogers and Dr. Irving Richardson for your expertise, patience and understanding. I cannot imagine how I would have completed this study without your skills, reminders, humor and gentle prodding. I would like to thank my research participants who agreed to be part of this study, generously offering their time and candor. My final dedication is to my sister Denise, who has earned the equivalency of several doctorates as she faced life's challenges without complaint and never failed to put the needs of others before her own.

Abstract

This research was conducted as a qualitative comparative case study of two Northern New England school districts that were in the process of responding to declining enrollments. The purpose of the study was to explore decision-making through the lens of declining enrollments. An award winning rural school in an affluent town with high performing students and high tax rates was compared to a focus school in a rural economically depressed area with comparable tax rates. The NWREL Framework (1975) was used as a theoretical lens for examining the decision making process. This framework includes the following components: (1) participatory decision-making, (2) choice, (3) process, and (4) comprehensiveness. Results indicated that a decision making process was followed to address declining enrollments in one of the districts, while the other district's response was reactive. Both schools reported negative impacts of program reductions on school staff and climate; however, participants agreed that at the time of the interviews, the impact on the community and students was not noticeable. Results indicated that declining enrollment became a problem in both school districts when student enrollment dropped to a level that required budgetary responses in the form of reducing positions, programs and the high-end tax base. This study, though small in scale, will be useful for larger studies that might explore the phenomenon of declining enrollments.

Chapter I: Statement of the Problem

Introduction

The researcher for this study is the Principal of a small K-8 elementary school, in Northern New England, that has been directly affected by a steady ten-year decline in student population. Attrition of staff members through retirement incentives, staff reductions, and program cuts have been short-term responses to the problem in previous years. Additionally, reorganization of staff members, increased responsibilities for administration, yearly changes in the building configurations as well as inconsistencies in grade level instruction has had an adverse effect on students' overall instructional program. Students have not been provided with opportunities in life skills, foreign languages, health, and sports programs. The effects of declining enrollments are far reaching for rural and neighborhood urban schools.

Like many schools in rural communities in Northern New England, the researchers school has had a steady and rapid decline in student enrollment over the past ten years. In 2004, the October enrollment total for grades K-8 was 503 students. By 2014, enrollment had dropped to 350 students, which is an over thirty percent loss of its total population. The 2013 New Hampshire School Boards Association cohort survival model reported that this school's enrollment is projected to fall to 230 students between 2014 and 2022, reaching a reduction in student enrollment of over fifty-five percent compared to 2004 statistics. This decline potentially impacts student achievement, budget, long-range planning, operations, and curriculum as well as teacher retention. How school leaders address declining enrollment will directly impact the quality of their school program.

The focus of this research study was to examine the decision-making processes that school districts employ to address conditions of declining enrollments in two Northern New England rural schools facing the condition of declining enrollment. The design of this research was a comparative case study. Data, collected through interviews with research participants included central office personnel, principals and community members. In addition, teachers in each school were surveyed and document analysis from the local school districts was conducted.

There is a significant gap in the research literature about the relationship of declining school enrollment and decision-making at the state and local levels in the Northern New England Region. Additionally, there is little information in the literature on how decision makers respond to the factors that contribute to the phenomenon of declining enrollment. Based on data from the New Hampshire Department of Education (2014), many schools are facing a negative growth impact. To illustrate the negative growth impact more clearly, twenty-four New Hampshire schools have completed a consolidation process since 2004. In severe cases, declining enrollments resulting in school closings will have a significant impact on local communities and the way students access their education. Jimerson (2006) asserted that, “closing local schools touches entire communities, not just the students, especially in rural areas. In many small rural towns, local schools are the heart and soul of the community –its historical and cultural center” (p. 7). There is a need to investigate declining school enrollments from the viewpoints of the decision makers in school district because their actions have a direct impact on the school and local community. The results from such a study would add to the body of knowledge surrounding the subject and might be useful for future research in developing guidelines for schools with declining enrollment. Additionally, the results could be useful for informing policy makers.

Many of New Hampshire's school districts are currently experiencing a steady decline in enrollments (New Hampshire Department of Education, 2015). This decline is another factor that makes New Hampshire's communities dissimilar from national trends. Contrary to state data, NCES (2013) reported that despite a national decline in school enrollments at the end of the 1970's, enrollments were steadily increasing nationally. Trends in New Hampshire's population data reflect variability, depending on geographical location within the state. Johnson (2012) identified population gains in the peripheral areas of southern New Hampshire, while just the opposite occurred to the north and western areas. Why does one district continue to grow their student population, while others maintain and even decline? Declines in larger school districts create less of an impact compared to schools in singular school districts of 500 students or less, because of the programs and resources that larger districts are able to draw from. The problem is not limited to New Hampshire but to the northeast as a whole. According to the Center for Public Education (2012), the United States is growing rapidly with 308.7 million people in 2010 toward a projected growth of 82 million more people in 2030 (see Figure 1). Figure 1 shows that only 7.6% of the total projected growth will occur in the northeast. The majority of the remaining growth will be in the south with a growth of 42.9% or 43 million, and the west growing by 45.8% or 28.9 million.

Figure 1

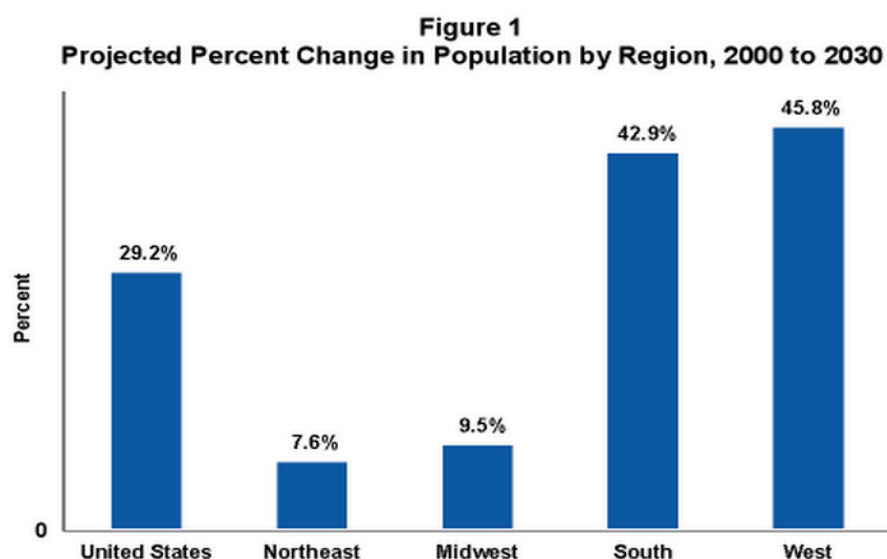


Figure 1. Projected percent change in population. Reprinted from “The United States of Education: The Changing Demographics of the United States and Their Schools,” by R. Crouch, 2012 *Center for Public Education*.

While the table above indicates a 7.6 percent increase in the population for the entire Northeast quadrant over the next sixteen years, it is important to note that this figure represents overall population growth and not school population. In fact, there are school districts in the northeast and specifically in New Hampshire that are not experiencing population gains while others are in holding patterns for growth. Schools with declining enrollments will need to go through a process of major change as communities respond to declining enrollments as well as calls for closure and consolidation. According to the literature, the common responses to declining enrollments in smaller schools are restructuring, consolidation, and closure. Howley and Howley (2006) reported on school consolidation as a new type of reform effort stating, “This reform package is, ironically, to some extent unrelated to what is actually taking place naturally in small schools and districts, where more “traditional” practices are said to be more common”

(p.1). In short, school leaders are responding to declining enrollments in ways that are reactionary in nature.

The complexities of rural school communities include the social context of place, poverty, and funding or lack of resources. Gruenwald (2003) suggested that “place conscious education” extends pedagogy to relevant experiences of students and teachers who are engaged in their local settings. Haas and Nachtigal (1998) defined “place conscious education” as “... a healthy respect for the physical and social communities they inhabit” (p. 13). Schools will have to be innovative in redesigning their programs as they meet the changing needs of the community. Neighborhood schools in cities as well as small schools in rural areas are often the social nerve center for the communities they serve.

Fullan (2007) described change as “technically simple and socially complex” (p. 84). There is a definite need to examine how administrators and community leaders respond to the complex reform efforts of reorganization, consolidation, and school closure, as well as how these decisions affect the community. What factors come into play during the decision making process for superintendents and principals regarding declining enrollments? A reexamination of current local factors contributing to recent declining enrollments in New Hampshire may uncover answers that could lead to additional guidelines for administrators and policy makers for schools and school districts.

Theoretical framework for the proposed qualitative study

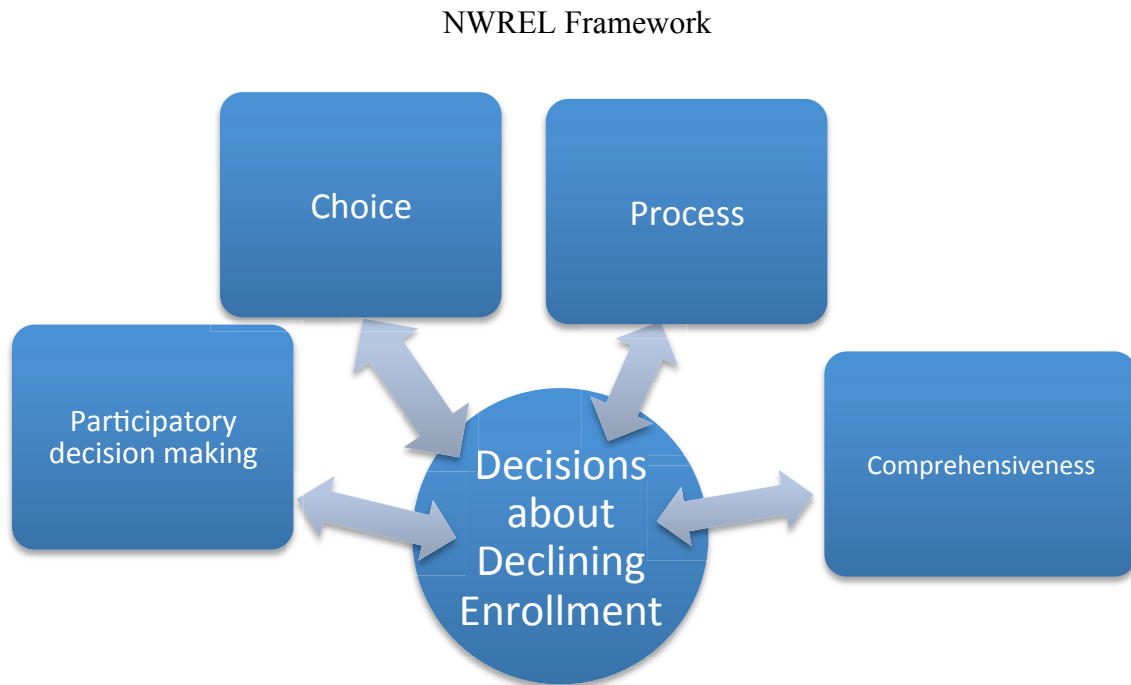
Four similar theoretical frameworks were considered this qualitative study. While all four of the frameworks were similar, only one aligned with the research questions. Budge (1998) conducted a case study of rural leaders in rural places and the influence of rurality and developed the six habits of place. The contributing research toward Budge’s framework was helpful

explaining the uniqueness of rural towns. The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (1975) in Portland, Oregon, studied the works of several researchers to “learn how people learn and how organizations can be changed” (Nachtigal, 1982, p. 158). Senge (1990) studied social models to explain the process of change, and Stephens (1991) studied the needs of rural communities to inform process as well as state and local policy decisions.

The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) (1975) created the Rural Futures Development Program (RFD) designed to assist rural communities in response to their unique environmental needs. The NWREL developed four principles based on the work of Woodruff, Havelock, Williamson, Schmuck and Runkel (1987) as they studied learning and changing organizations. The four principles of the NWREL framework are: (1) participatory decision-making, (2) choice, (3) process and (4) comprehensiveness. This study will utilize these four principles as a lens to examine the decision making process that addresses the conditions of declining enrollments. The perspectives of central office administrators, principals, teachers and community members will be considered in this study. Participants’ responses will be documented and categorized through one or more of the four principles.

Although the framework was developed over thirty years ago, the four areas align with current theory and are still important and relevant today. They align with major theorists. For example, the first principle of participatory decision-making is in concert with Greenleaf’s (1991) theory on shared decision-making. The Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium’s Standards for School Leaders (2008) includes choice, process, relationships and community engagement. Figure 2 outlines the four legs of the framework.

Figure 2:



The NWREL Framework (1975) defines the four principles as follows:

1. Participatory decision-making refers to the support for school programs and the opportunity for stakeholders to be part of the decision and the way that it is made.
2. Choice implies that educational solutions are not the same for all communities and the quality of programming increases when decision makers are skilled in selecting strategies that match values and resources of the school or school district.
3. Process is when people follow a systemic procedure for making choices and changes.
4. Comprehensiveness refers to complex relationships between students and adults, between teaching and learning, communities, support agencies and a global strategy versus several separate innovations (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 1975).

In addition to serving as a lens for looking at decision-making processes, the PrOACT Model (1998) was employed to assist the researcher in providing as a more detailed look at the third NWREL principal of process.

The PrOACT Decision Making Model, as developed by Hammond, Keeney & Raiffa (1998), was created as a framework for guiding important decisions and will also be used in the proposed study to structure interviews with research participants. The components of the framework include the following: defining the problem (Pr), specifying objectives (O), identifying alternatives (A), considering consequences (C) and evaluating tradeoffs (T). For the purposes of the proposed study, the five components of the PrOACT model augment the third principle (process) of the NWREL framework.

Definition of Terms

Smaller Schools:

For the purposes of this proposed study, smaller schools will include those with a population of fewer than 500 students. This definition is based on the many variations and multiple definitions of rural found in the literature. There is a lack of consensus in the literature to bring a definitive description of rural that would be widely accepted. The term small rural school will be replaced with smaller school(s) and will refer to schools in rural settings with populations of fewer than five hundred (Uphoff, 2008).

School Consolidation:

This study will refer to school consolidation as the combining of two or more smaller schools in the same school district or two different school districts to combine student populations and resources (Howley, Johnson, and Petrie's (2011).

Research Questions

The following research questions are posed to discover the relationship of declining school enrollment and decision-making in two local schools in Northern New England.

- a. What decision-making process do leaders in rural school districts employ to address the conditions of declining enrollment?
- b. What is the impact/effect of declining enrollments on the school and the community?
- c. When does declining enrollment become a problem in a school district?

Significance of the Study

This research is intended to help understand the decision making process that administrative leaders in school districts employ to address conditions of declining enrollments in rural schools. This will help to shed light on the gaps that currently exist between reactionary decision-making and innovative, proactive planning. For example, visionary leaders who have the foresight to respond to projections of declining enrollments will be better able to frame them within the context of higher levels of student performance. This would include opportunities for smaller teacher/student ratios, more effective structures for interventions, embedded common planning time and professional development, and more personalized learning.

General Procedures

School districts with declining populations will have to face the inevitability of changing the way their schools operate through purposeful and considered reorganization. The purpose of this qualitative comparative case study was to examine the decision making process in response to declining enrollment. Two schools were chosen based on data from the State Department of Education's Yearly October enrollment reports over the past ten years. The selection process included a careful analysis to identify downward trends of student populations statewide and in

individual schools or school districts. The samples were chosen based on the size of the school district (school population of 500 or less), and a steady declining enrollment for the past five years. The two school districts were from two Northern New England Towns and to protect the identity of both school districts, the school names of Allegro and Picasso were chosen as pseudonyms. Interviews, document analysis, and surveys were additional sources of data used to address the research questions. The Allegro School served pre-kindergarten through fourth grade with a total student enrollment of 193 in 2014. This enrollment figure was down 6.8% over a five-year period. There were a total of twelve classrooms, and from year to year, the number of classes in a grade level would shift between two and three teachers. The comparison school district was the Picasso School serving kindergarten through fourth grade with a total student enrollment of 143 in 2014 and two teachers at each grade level. This enrollment figure was down 11% over a five-year period. The teacher surveys were developed after the first round of interviews of each of the participants. After several attempts however, to distribute them through the school principals, the rate of return was less than two percent for both schools. In one school, the principal noted that his teachers had taken several surveys during the recent school year and he was reluctant to pressure his staff due to existing problems with morale and bargaining unit issues. In the other school, the lack of participation was in part, due to recent information about possible staff reductions and an unhappy environment. The principal made several attempts and also brought the subject up at PLC meetings but only two teachers responded and filled out only part of the survey.

Delimitations or Limitations of the Study

The following limitations apply to a qualitative comparative case study of two schools in Northern New England:

1. The study was limited to two school districts in New Hampshire. Some rural school districts in New Hampshire govern only one school.

2. Data for analysis were collected from the NCES and the state's Department of Education Website and were limited to public information only.

3. Agendas and School Board meeting minutes were limited to access and availability of public documents in the two school districts.

4. Superintendents, principals and community members were interviewed using an open-ended semi structured interview process in a very limited time frame.

5. Teachers in the two schools included in the study were invited to complete a survey based on the responses gleaned from the interview participants. Responses were to be limited to those teachers who volunteered to complete the survey but lack of participation resulted in inconclusive data. Principals from both schools made several attempts to intervene but were not successful; therefore, the study did not collect data from teachers working at the schools.

6. The time frame for the study began in January of 2016 and concluded in May of 2016. Findings from participant interviews were limited to that time frame. Data was analyzed using Saldana's (2013) two cycle coding method.

8. This study was limited to two school districts; therefore, the findings will not necessarily be generalizable to other schools experiencing declining enrollment. The study should add to the body of knowledge surrounding declining enrollment for future administrators and policy makers facing similar changes.

9. Research participants were recruited through snowball or chain referral sampling, which is described by Heckathorn (2011) as a type of nonprobability sampling of acquiring respondents through the recommendations from the initial subjects. Each principal in the two

school districts (the initial research participants) recommended a Central Office representative and a community member to serve as additional research participants. While this type of sampling is helpful to researchers based on convenience, the results are not generalizable, and it does not allow for a random sample. Another potential limitation is that the school principals in both districts could have recommended the participants with a biased agenda.

Summary

Smaller schools face many challenges related to programming, curriculum, funding and geographical locations. Declining enrollment can have devastating effects on smaller schools and communities. This qualitative comparative case study will investigate the direct responses to declining enrollments in two school districts. With a declining enrollment in several school districts in Northern New England, it was beneficial to study the decision making process to determine if there were any unique patterns that may have emerged. In depth knowledge of the elements surrounding declining enrollment in smaller schools includes participatory management, choice, process and comprehensive relationships (NWREL, 1975), as they relate to the views of decision makers.

While the body of knowledge surrounding the topic of declining enrollment in schools is growing, there is little recent research concerning smaller schools with declining enrollments in the northeast. This comparative qualitative study will bring an updated perspective that includes viewpoints of the decision makers who face the problem of declining enrollment and its effects on the school district and the communities they serve.

Chapter II: Literature Review

The Problem of Declining Enrollments in Rural Schools

Declining student population is a major concern for those communities with geographic locations that make school consolidation nearly impossible. The cost of building maintenance and safety issues continue to place demands on school administrators' time and energy. Staffing considerations and retention of quality teachers are important concerns for all principals; however, rural school districts' pay scales are usually less competitive than their urban and suburban counterparts. This chapter will explore the concept of rural in the Northern New England area and the disagreement over the definition. Research on smaller versus larger schools as well as consolidation and school closure emerged as fundamental focal points. The political landscape of school boards, and the decision making process are discussed in terms of the implications and available resources. The historical journey of school of districts across the United States provide a context for the unique phenomenon of declining enrollments in Northern New England.

Rural has many definitions, and researchers have yet to agree on one definition. Many of these definitions are based on calculations, census data and geographical distances from urban areas. Describing rural areas, Monk (2007) stated, "Among the inherent characteristics are small size, sparse settlement, narrowness of choice (with regard, for example, to shopping, schools, and medical services), distance from population concentrations, and an economic reliance on agricultural industries, sometimes in tandem with tourism" (p. 156). The rural area is a specifically defined classification that is contrasted with urban and suburban areas.

NCES (2007) developed a reclassification system for the three major locales of city, suburban, and rural and further subdivided into three subcategories based on the rural town's

distance to an urban or suburban town or city. Rural populations are classified as fringe (less than or equal to 5 miles from an urban area and 2.5 miles from an urban cluster), distant (more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area) and remote (more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and more than 10 miles from an urban cluster). Iserman (2005) asserted that rural is often described in terms of what rural is not in relation to urban. Iserman further suggested, based on accurate statistical information from the Office of Management and Budget, that the smallest measure of an area is the county. This measurement poses another problem as it mixes metropolitan and rural areas. The definition of rural is important to all research involving these areas because as Iserman stated:

Key economic and demographic data are not available for urban and rural areas, and metropolitan and nonmetropolitan commingle urban and rural, leaving us unable to separate them. Yet getting rural right is in the national interest. When we get rural wrong, we reach incorrect research conclusions and fail to reach the people, places, and businesses our governmental programs are meant to serve (p. 466).

Federal accountability laws such as No Child Left Behind (2001) for example, focused on urban areas, yet required all schools in America to comply regardless of demographics, classification or population. While causes and factors vary for declining enrollment, Jimerson (2006) states, “though education and educational policies influence population shifts, they are seldom the principal cause. Economic and demographic changes are primarily responsible for declining enrollment in rural areas” (p. 5) and can directly affect academic success.

Johnson, Strange and Madden (2010) studied dropout rates in 800 rural school districts located in 15 southern and southwestern states. The researchers chose these school districts based on their highest poverty rates. They noted that the high poverty rural school districts were

“more racially and ethnically diverse than all other rural school districts of any kind. Nearly three in five of the students in these districts are people of color” (p. 4). This suggests that rural schools encounter different problems based on their location and ethnic diversity, calling for different approaches to address student achievement. As Versland (2013) points out, “the work in rural schools requires principals to hone several different skill sets and assume multiple responsibilities” (p. 2). This statement supports the idea that rural education is different from city and suburban school settings in areas throughout the country.

Jimerson (2005) recognized the importance of rural students in his assertion, “Although widely dispersed by definition, rural students represent a significant proportion of our nation’s youth” (p. 211). Rural schools differ from their urban and suburban counterparts in several ways based on economics, proximity to urban centers, location, population, region and needs. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) of 2001 was a federal legislative act reauthorizing the Elementary Secondary Education Act of 1965. Jimerson (2005) stated, “the main components of NCLB, however, are biased against students in small and rural schools” (p. 211). Adding to Jimerson’s argument is the fact that a large percentage of the research on rural education in recent decades was conducted in the larger southern and midwestern states.

A glaring gap exists in the literature regarding smaller schools of the northeast and declining enrollments; however, a great deal of literature exists as researchers examined school consolidation as one response to declining enrollments. For example, Cox and Cox (2010) studied declining enrollments from the perspective of school consolidation in Tennessee while Lewis (2004) conducted research in West Virginia. Cox and Cox defined consolidation as eliminating one or more schools or school districts to create “one distinct, larger school system” (p. 83). The authors also pointed out that consolidation has occurred for decades in America, and

there is very little evidence that the practice improves the educational process. Researchers also studied situations that were a direct cause of consolidation. For example, Lewis reported on the long hours that students in West Virginia were travelling on buses stating, “West Virginia school buses carry 220,000 children over 46,600 miles of road each year” (p. 3). The busing issue in West Virginia developed as smaller school districts were consolidated into larger districts that covered a much larger geographical area. Lewis warned of the hidden costs to the children’s well being.

Other researchers studied consolidation from the perspectives of academic and economic efficiency. Duncombe and Yinger (2005) argued in favor of consolidation to create larger schools with greater numbers of experienced faculties that could offer innovation more efficiently, thereby lowering professional development costs to train teachers. On the other hand, Lashaway (1999) found that students in smaller schools have higher attendance rates, increased participation in extracurricular activities and lower incidences of negative social behaviors. Weber (1996) explored several factors associated with school consolidation efforts such as program cuts, morale, creativity, community involvement and available resources. His findings suggested that if the process is well planned and executed by school leaders, then the consolidation effort can seem to be less stressful for those affected. School closures are another product of declining enrollments. Freuda-Kwarteng (2005) stated, “school boards close down schools permanently for a variety of reasons such as inadequate funding, escalating operating costs, dwindling enrollment rates, or uninhabitable buildings” (p. 2).

While much of the existing literature is based on rural declining enrollments, this study examined the effects of declining enrollments in rural New England states. In this state there are 180 school districts with approximately 500 schools. More than half of the school districts are in

rural communities, and two-thirds of the students attend urban or suburban schools (REL, 2011). Therefore, students attending rural schools in this state comprise approximately one-third of the overall student population in the state. On the national level, data from the New Hampshire Department of Education (2014) shows that declining student enrollment in New Hampshire has been occurring over the past ten years with a loss of over 21,000 students during that time period (New Hampshire Department of Education, 2014).

Conditions Leading to Declining School Enrollments

The problem of declining enrollment is not new and has occurred previously according to historical accounts of education in the United States. In the late 1960's and early 1970's, public schools experienced a major decline in student enrollment as a result of declining birthrates and an aging population (Valencia, 2001). In the present day, history from previous decades seems to be repeated in various parts of this state. While national trends in enrollment are projected to increase through 2024 (NCES 2014), data from the New Hampshire Department of Education (2014) show overall declining student enrollment in New Hampshire over the past ten years. Johnson (2012) reported that while the demographic trends in some parts of New Hampshire are similar to the national trends, population loss is occurring in the "north and in scattered pockets of western New Hampshire" (Johnson, 2012, p. 5). Overall, statewide declines in public school enrollment are significant in New Hampshire, with enrollments dropping by 21,000 students in the ten-year period from 2004 to 2014 (New Hampshire Department of Education, 2014). Johnson (2012) reported on factors and trends affecting population variances in New Hampshire. He identified two demographic components that impacted population changes: (1) the birth and death rate ratio, and (2) migration from neighboring states. Johnson (2012) defined the birth and death rate ratio as a natural decrease or increase in population. While Johnson reported on the

New Hampshire general population increase during the time period from 2000 to 2010, he also cited rapid increases in the older population as factors affecting the change in the growth trends. The main factor impacting population changes in Johnson's study was the decrease in migration from other states. Another factor affecting New Hampshire local school enrollments has been the ratio of births and deaths. In recent years, the birth rate in New Hampshire has decreased so that it is now lower than the state's death rate (Johnson, 2012). In other words, the numbers of births in New Hampshire are outnumbered by the death rate. Johnson (2012) also pointed out that decreased migration from the neighboring states of Massachusetts and Maine has contributed to decreased population gains and income losses to the state. Income loss has a direct impact on the economic conditions in the state.

As previously stated, the problem of declining enrollment is not new; however, it is clearly a phenomenon for many school districts in New Hampshire. School population in the United States grew steadily from the 1900's to the early 1960's. However, "a decline in the birthrate and an aging population meant fewer students enrolled in the public schools" (Valencia, 2001, p. 43) in the late 1960's and early 1970's. In contrast, the National Center for Educational Statistics (1988) reported on the historical consolidation of the school districts in the United States from the end of World War II to 1980. During that time period, the number of school districts in the United States decreased from 101,382 to 15,747. Recent data from the Center for Public Education (2012) indicates that the United States population will increase by 82 million people between 2012 and 2030. One would assume that such an increase would ease concerns over declining enrollments. In reality, the northeast is projected to receive only 7.6 percent of the projected population increase. 88.7% of the increase is expected in the southern and western parts of the country. While it would appear that any projections of a population increase in the

northeast would be advantageous, it is important to note that the 7.6 percent increase represents the total population and not student enrollment. Additionally, this increase is expected over an 18-year period for the entire northeast, not just New Hampshire. Francese and Merrill (2008) list factors leading to slower growth in New Hampshire as a decline in the following: in-migration, year round resident growth, natural increase and younger people leaving the state. Francese and Merrill (2008) defined the slowing of in-migration as a reduction in the number of people moving into the state each year from neighboring states. Declining natural increase was defined as the “number of births minus the number of deaths” (Francese & Merrill, p. 3), or put another way, a rising death rate in combination with a dropping birth rate resulting in a loss of population. According to the US Census Bureau, New Hampshire’s median age is older than the national average. Francese and Merrill (2008) assert:

For every resident age 65 and older in 1990, there were 1.6 young adults 25 to 34 years of age. But by 2005, that ratio had dropped precipitously to only 0.9 young adults for every resident age 65 or older (p. 3).

In New Hampshire, with a general loss in the young adult population, there is a clear connection between birth rates and student populations, and researchers have reported increased per pupil costs as a result of these major declines in student enrollments (Johnson, 2012). The increased per pupil cost is but one facet that impacts responses to declining enrollments.

Responses to Declining Enrollments

The research shows that common responses to declining enrollments have been closure and consolidation (i.e., Anderson, 2009; Howley, et al., 2011; Lyson, 2001), while Berliner (1990) identified different approaches to declining enrollments as “interdistrict sharing, partial

reorganizations, extra district cooperation and the use of intermediary units and instructional technologies” (p. 4). According to Cohen and Ahern (2014):

... there are both well-managed and poorly managed closure decisions, and there are diverse community groups with interests in the decision who can interact with each other in nuanced ways. Furthermore, across stakeholder groups, there is not always agreement as to if closure would help or harm students’ education (p. 198).

Hobbs (2003) argued in favor of small schools because of the “greater opportunity for students to excel in the context of a manageable, caring, cohesive, and safe environment” (p. 5).

Hobbs further suggested the implementation of distance learning opportunities to avoid consolidation or closure. The research on school consolidation and mergers continues to be mixed with supporters and opponents. Other reactions to declining enrollments have resulted in consolidating school districts through mergers from several buildings in the surrounding area into one building creating a regional school (Coulson, 2007). Another form of consolidation includes the closing of one school and combining the students and staff members into one building. When districts consolidate, they increase the size of the total building population. Coulson (2007) researched mergers and consolidations in Michigan, and found that the ideal size for a school district was around 2,900 students. The mergers also included reductions in per pupil expenditures, labor costs and higher student achievement. Weber (1996) reported that higher student achievement was attributed more to the quality of instruction and better learning models versus reductions in class size.

Anderson (2009) studied causes of school consolidation and found that state incentives, financial pressures and opportunities for students were the main drivers behind the phenomenon. However, Berliner (1990) reported that proponents of school consolidation argue that mergers

will increase equity and efficiency. Opponents of school consolidation would argue that while the practice of consolidation may appear as more efficient, what cannot be overlooked are the hidden costs of higher transportation fees, unemployment benefits for laid off staff members, and storage fees for unused equipment and materials (Berliner, 1990).

School consolidation efforts, as a response to declining enrollments, have been used as reform efforts, as evidenced by Howley, Johnson, and Petrie's (2011) assertion that the historical strategy of consolidation was to improve educational outcomes. Howley and her colleagues defined school consolidation as "(a) combining districts and (b) closing schools and sending students from the closed schools to other schools (or building a new and larger school)" (p. 2). It is clear that enrollments have been the driving force behind school district reorganization and consolidation. Lyson (2001) studied New York state data of over two hundred schools and found that combining and consolidating schools was used as a type of educational reform in response to declining enrollments.

The phenomenon of declining enrollments in New Hampshire has resulted in both school closings and consolidation with other schools in the same school administrative unit (SAU) or city school district. Kampits (1996) studied the New England Association of Schools and Colleges' Rural Partnerships for Student Success Project. The project included partnerships between schools and colleges of the six New England States to "enhance conditions which will improve equity and access to postsecondary education" (p. 171). The focus of the partnerships shifted as "principals and other facilitators in creating the partnerships turned to raising student aspirations as the vehicle for promoting a wide variety of options" (p. 175). While the study reported findings over seventeen years ago, it was significant in scope as it outlined the school wide needs of smaller schools. It also opened discussions on the value of small school sizes

versus the consolidation of smaller schools into larger regional models. Smaller northern rural schools, including smaller schools in the State of New Hampshire, are dealing with the effects of declining enrollments. Cook (2008) warned that the growing pressures of consolidation affect states with small rural schools more significantly than urban or suburban areas.

Data from the State Department of Education (2014) revealed that 21 schools in New Hampshire have shown growth in student population, while 25 schools consolidated from 2004 to 2012. The schools with growth patterns were identified in seven out of ten counties in New Hampshire while the consolidated schools were in all ten counties. The research shows that declining school enrollment is not a temporary issue, and presents other serious problems. As Lyson (2002) pointed out:

School consolidation is likely to remain a threat to many rural communities in the coming decades. For at least a century, rural areas in the U.S. have been marked by a profound depopulation. In most cases, rural areas are losing economically and socially viable populations, tax bases, essential services, such as schools, and retail establishments (p. 8).

In New Hampshire, local school districts are funded through property taxes that are distributed according to a formula. Local property taxes are the major source of revenues that fund local school district budgets with very little federal and state aid available to ease the burden. Williams and Nierengarten (2011) state, “Administrators in America's rural school districts are uniquely challenged to meet increased achievement expectations despite decreasing resources” (p. 2). The challenge of declining enrollments in urban and rural areas will require school districts to do more with less financial, social and educational resources. School closures, consolidation and restructuring have been the strongest course of action for many school systems across the country. Deeds and Patillo (2014) described school closure as a market-based reform

designed to increase the quality of education and fiscal efficiency. New Hampshire falls directly into the line of sight for this type of reform and “as a result, the overcrowding anxiety that school districts suffered a decade ago has abruptly transformed into difficult decisions about possible school closing and consolidation” (NHHFA, 2012, p.7).

Implications of Responses to Declining Enrollments

As school districts respond to the dilemma of declining enrollments, multiple factors are impacted, including student achievement, costs, school climate, extra curricula activities, and the community. Recent literature examines the implications of declining enrollments on these factors to address questions such as: How will school district’s responses to declining enrollments affect student achievement? What costs are associated with maintaining smaller schools versus consolidation to larger models? What are the differences in the approaches to curricula? How does consolidation affect school climate? What effects do the decisions regarding declining enrollment have on the community?

Gelb (2002) stated that, “student achievement, especially disadvantaged student achievement, increases as school size decreases. Smaller schools ensure that no student falls through the cracks, and all students receive the attention they need” (p. 1). Gelb’s exploration of school size offered compelling evidence suggesting that improved attendance, higher grades and test scores, increased participation in school and extracurricular activities, lower dropout rates and fewer discipline problems were positive characteristics in elementary schools with less than 300 students and high schools with 600 to 700 students. The literature on student achievement and smaller schools does not support the formation of larger schools as a result of school consolidation. Sackney (1983) however, warned that school districts too often reject the idea of school consolidation, even when small school programs lacking in resources provide students

with limited resources. Nevertheless, opponents and proponents of school consolidation or mergers continue to surface. Opponents of small schools complain of higher costs associated with running smaller schools. They argue that consolidation can result in a more efficient use of resources (Flowers, 2010)

Costs are often thought of in terms of financial and economic impacts to an organization or school district. Bingler, et al. (2002) studied alternatives to building new and larger facilities and suggested that school districts could create “schools-within-a-school (SWaS)” to offer a more personalized learning environment than that of larger schools. This approach embraces the idea of consolidation in the context of promoting the concept of smaller environments within a larger setting. Bingler, et al., also acknowledged the argument that smaller schools are “prohibitively expensive” (p. 11). Their study results also indicated that larger schools actually create higher costs. Data from the New York University’s Institute for Education and Social Policy showed that schools with fewer than 600 students spent \$1,410 less than schools with 2,000 or more students, based on per graduate costs rather than the typical per pupil costs that are calculated on a yearly basis. However, Bingler, et al. (2002) pointed out that smaller schools show increased per pupil costs, as compared to larger schools, citing the fact that a higher expenditure is spread out over fewer students.

Opponents of consolidation argue that smaller schools provide superior learning environments resulting in higher student achievement. For example, Bailey (2000) stated:

As important, is the sense of belonging and connection to the school environment students get from participation. Alienation from the school environment is a bad outcome itself, and is connected with other undesirable outcomes - lack of confidence and self-

esteem, lack of responsibility for self-direction, absenteeism and increased dropout rates (p.2).

Research suggests that students in larger schools often feel alienated and become disengaged from their school communities (Bailey, 2000). Additionally, Bailey reviewed as many as twenty-three research studies and found that extracurricular participation rates are higher and more varied in small schools than in large schools, and that alienation from the school environment is lower in small schools.

In many communities, the school serves as the nucleus of the small rural town. Small towns in rural areas look to the school as the only place where all members of the community can come together (Lewis, 2004). According to researchers, it is possible, however, to mitigate negative perceptions about school consolidation when community leaders try to understand the culture of the community and engage parents and community members during the process (Howley, Johnson & Petrie, 2004). Harmon & Schafft (2009) explained the need for leadership to respond to "...a new crop of community...as those of the baby boomer generation retire" (p. 8). While schools in small towns serve as community centers and provide an economic base, other effects of consolidation include regret, population decline, and diminished support for public education (Rincones, 1988). Regardless of the area, school closures have effects on students, families, teachers, programs and communities. "Districts with persistent declining enrollments are forced to make deep cuts in existing staff, programs, and resources" (Jimerson, 2006, p. 6). These cuts result in major changes for any school district and difficult decisions affecting teachers, parents, community members, and most importantly the students.

Decision Making Process

Administrators and policy makers often find themselves in the difficult position of problem solving when it comes to declining enrollments. Sackney (1983) identified three components of problem solving as precedent, expediency and convenience. “According to this approach decisions become more political than rational” (p. 3), thereby provoking responses that overlook alternatives. School districts comprised of smaller rural schools will have to plan carefully and creatively. King (1980) surveyed sixty superintendents from New Mexico with first hand knowledge and experience in making decisions related to declining enrollments. He explained that:

While the primary burden for relieving pressure brought by decline is upon local school district officials, teachers and community members, various state agencies (e.g., New Mexico State Department of Education and Public School Finance Division) and Colleges of Education in the state should assume a greater role in providing leadership to schools and districts confronting decline (p. 43).

Sackney (1983) proposed that organizational leaders should approach consolidation with the idea of innovation in mind as he suggested minimizing reactionary decisions while at the same time, promoting ingenuity for new program development as an alternative. Greenfield and Klem (2001) stated, “new programs run the great risk of failure unless the needs of all key participants are adequately met” (p. 5).

The theoretical framework to be utilized in the proposed study was developed by The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL, 1975). This framework will serve as a lens for examining the decision making process for declining enrollments. The NWREL developed four principles based on the work of Woodruff, Havelock, Williamson, Schmuck and

Runkel (1987) as they studied learning and changing organizations. The four principles of the NWREL framework are: (1) participatory decision-making, (2) choice, (3) process and (4) comprehensiveness. These four areas of the NWREL framework align with current theory, as well as with major theorists, and are still important and relevant today. For example, the first principle of participatory decision-making is in concert with Greenleaf's (1991) theory on shared decision-making. More recent research of top participatory management teams (TMT) in organizations revealed that "higher level of participative decision making processes make more effective strategic decisions and enhanced firm performance. This suggests that participatory decision making processes may be a useful means for improving strategic choices and ultimately the viability of an organization" (p. 710). The Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium's Standards for School Leaders (2008) includes choice, process, relationships and community engagement. The PrOACT Decision Making Model, developed by Hammond, Keeney & Raiffa (1998), was created as a framework for guiding important decisions and will be used in the proposed study to structure interviews with research participants. The components of the framework include the following: defining the problem (Pr), specifying objectives (O), identifying alternatives (A), considering consequences (C) and evaluating tradeoffs (T). For the purposes of the proposed study, the five components of the PrOACT model augment the third principle (process) of the NWREL framework.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to examine the decision-making process through the lens of declining enrollments. A great deal of the research, however, is focused on the condition of rural places, consolidation, closure and restructuring. Much less is devoted to rural schools in the Northern New England area. This research has been designed to explore the decision making

process, the impact of declining enrollment and when declining enrollment becomes problematic in a school district. This study will add to the existing body of knowledge of rural schools and declining enrollments.

Chapter III: Methodology

Overview of the Research Design

The comparative qualitative case study attempted to identify the factors that drive decision making of those who are charged with leading schools with declining enrollments. Interviews and document analysis were employed to gather data. Siedman's (2006) three-interview series protocol was utilized with principals and community members. One open-ended semi-structured interview was conducted with each of the central office representatives. Teachers were to be surveyed to get a broader perspective of the decision making process in school districts with declining enrollments but the lack of response made the results inconclusive.

Interview participants were asked questions that had been carefully developed based on the NWREL (1975) framework and Hammond, Keeney & Raiffa's (1998) PrOACT Decision Making Model (see Appendix E). Questions were aimed at participatory decision-making, the level of community involvement, matching community values and resources, procedures for making changes and relationships with constituents, students and teachers. The PrOACT model "seeks to analyze and clarify situations in which we make complex decisions" (Decision Methodology, 2005, p. 116). The model was used as a flexible tool that allowed the researcher to select any number of the eight elements (Problem, Objectives, Alternative, Consequences, Trade-offs, Uncertainty, Risk Tolerance and Linked decisions). The survey instrument for teachers included questions on policy, the effects of declining enrollment on instruction, classroom environment, school climate, and career choices but as previously stated, the lack of participation resulted in inconclusive data.

Interview data followed the heuristic method as chunks of code were analyzed to

“develop higher level analytic meanings for assertion, proposition, hypothesis, and/ or theory development” (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014, p. 73). The process for analyzing the data began with a word for word transcription of the interviews. Each transcription was analyzed separately to ensure a comparison model. The researcher continued to highlight phrases and key words as a first round. All key words and phrases were compiled in list format using a spreadsheet. Analysis of the spreadsheet revealed as many as thirty-four different words and phrases. The NWREL Framework and the three research questions were used as a lens to identify the four categories of leadership, population, students and staff and financial impact. The remaining phrases and words were assigned to one of the four categories (see p. 53). Data were collected from two school districts and the New Hampshire State Department of Education website. School district policies, mission statements, and vision statements in the two school districts were reviewed as well. A redacted sample of the analysis of school board meeting minutes is included in the study (see Appendix F). The study employed the use of the NWREL (1975) frameworks and the ProACT Decision Making Model (Hammond, Keeney & Raiffa, 1998) to measure and analyze interviews of the central office personnel, community members and principals.

The interview questions were designed as open-ended in order to allow participants to freely express and expand on the subjects of interest, but there was a need for more depth and exploration of other sources. Document analysis from the two towns, as well as data from the State of New Hampshire Department of Education, local websites, meeting minutes, policies and vision statements were reviewed and analyzed to confirm information gleaned from interviews.

Research Questions

The following questions guided this research study:

1. What decision-making process do districts employ to address the conditions of declining enrollment?
2. What is the impact/effect of declining enrollments on the school and community?
3. When does declining enrollment become a problem in a school district?

The perceptions and viewpoints of school board members as school policy makers will be important data in determining criteria that should be considered in the decision making process related to declining enrollments. School and school district administrators are often in an advisory position for school boards. Their perceptions and viewpoints can often sway a particular vote or decision of policy makers. Knowing how administrators feel about the problem will help define possible future recommendations for towns and school districts that are experiencing declining student enrollments as well. Principals are on the front line of the declining enrollment problem as they grapple with staffing configurations, impending reductions and reallocation of resources. The research questions will require careful and comprehensive examination of interviews, surveys, and document analysis. The NWREL (1975) frameworks will be used as an instrument to synthesize and categorize the data samples.

Table 1: Declining Enrollment Instrument

NWREL's (1975) Framework Principle	School District #1 & 2	Participants	Evidence
Participatory Decision Making	Sample Evidence: Opportunity to influence decisions and how the decision is made	S1, Pr T P	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviews • Document Reviews
Choice	Do solutions match values and resources?	S, Pr T P, MM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviews • Document Reviews

Process	Systematic procedures in play?	S, Pr P, MM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviews • Document Reviews
Comprehensiveness	Factors considered: student relationships, teaching and learning, global change, support agencies.	S, Pr Co P, MM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviews • Document Reviews

The following is a key to organize the information from the data sources.

S= Superintendents, Pr= Principals, Co=Community Members, T=Teachers, P= Policies, MM= Meeting Minutes

The table was repeated for each of the participating schools or school districts. Through careful analysis, the researcher attempted to gain insight into the problem of declining enrollments and how decision makers reacted to the phenomenon of declining student enrollments.

Research Sample

The selected sites involved two schools in New Hampshire. The selection criteria for the study are listed below:

1. The schools must have a population of fewer than five hundred.
2. The site selections will include schools in rural settings.
3. The school must have a declining enrollment over a five-year period.

Schools with a population of under five hundred have been identified as smaller schools. For comparison purposes, the smaller schools were selected using the data from the New Hampshire State Department of Education Website (2014).

Following Seidman's (2006) three series approach, one principal and one community member was interviewed three times from each of the two school districts. The superintendent or central office representative of the school district was interviewed only once because of restricted availability. The two principals were the initial participants in this study. Additional research participants (a Central Office representative and a community member in each school district) were recruited through recommendations by these initial participants. This method of sampling is referred to as snowball or chain referral sampling (Heckathorn, 2011), a type of nonprobability sampling of acquiring respondents through the recommendations from the initial subjects.

Documents such as school board policies, school board agendas, minutes, statements, and public records of meetings were analyzed to identify critical factors, trends, and patterns that influence decision makers who were dealing with declining enrollments.

Teachers in the two schools included in the study were invited to complete a survey. Responses were limited to those teachers who volunteered to complete the survey. The data from teacher surveys was statistically insignificant based on the lack of participation.

This qualitative study was limited to two participating school district/schools and participants include one superintendent, one student services director, two principals, and two community members. The value in determining the factors that influence decision makers in school districts with declining enrollments will allow school districts to develop plans and procedures based on values, choices, participation, and relationships. The prospect of school closure, reorganization, and consolidation are change concepts that have to be considered as solutions are explored or developed.

Plan and Methods of Data Collection and Analysis

The Miles, Huberman, and Saldana's (2014) approach was used to align, integrate and analyze data from the comparative qualitative case studies. While this study was based on a small sample size of participants and surveys, the combination of documents, websites, and other data from meetings helped to triangulate and add depth to the results.

Open-ended semi-structured interviews of superintendents and principals will begin with a historical overview of the participant's professional career path in order to gain a deeper understanding of his/her educational vision, values, and dispositions. Community members from each school/district were interviewed three times during the process. Community members were selected based on recommendations from the Principal and or the Superintendent of Schools in both towns. The interviews were developed using the NWREL's (1975) four principles of: participatory decision-making, choice, process and comprehensiveness, as well as the PrOACT Decision Making Model (Hammond, Keeney & Raiffa, 1998). The PrOACT framework includes the following elements: (Pr), specifying objectives (O), identifying alternatives (A), considering consequences (C) and evaluating tradeoffs (T). The case included document reviews of school board meeting minutes, available town documentation (zoning laws), websites, school policies and publicly available planning board meeting minutes. Bowen (2009) determined five functions of document analysis: (1) to provide context through past events, background information, and historical insight, (2) to suggest questions pertinent to the research to be conducted, (3) to provide supplementary data, (4) to track change and development, and (5) to verify evidence from other sources. School boards may consider the many aforementioned factors during annual budget development and planning. Reviewing school board websites, agendas and meeting

minutes offered insight as to whether the political agenda was aligned with the vision and or mission statements of the school district.

Superintendents or a central office representative, school principals, teachers and community members were asked to participate in the study. The choice of superintendent and principal participation will be determined based on availability and schedules. For the purposes of this study, the Director of Student Services served as the central office representative in place of the Superintendent for the Allegro School District. The Director of Student Services acts as the leading administrator for school districts in many instances. All participants were provided with consent forms including a clear explanation that there was no requirement to participate and no penalty for withdrawal. Initial phone contacts of superintendents and principals preceded a confirmation email and consent form. Interviews were recorded and transcribed within one week of each interview for accuracy and consistency. Analysis consisted of determining the “code for a chunk of data by careful reading and reflection of its core content or meaning” (Miles, et al., p. 73). The researcher identified themes that are in direct relation to the NWREL (1975) framework and the PrOACT Decision Making Model (Hammond, Keeney & Raiffa, 1998). The selected process required within case and cross case analysis. There were several individual components of the proposed study that needed to be analyzed and interpreted to find emerging patterns and inferences. Two school districts, interviews of several individuals, state and local data required within case and cross case analysis. Saldana (2013) suggested, “...one of the most critical outcomes of qualitative data analysis is to interpret how the individual components of the study weave together” (p. 248). “Codeweaving is the actual integration of key code words and phrases into narrative form to see how the puzzle pieces fit together” (Saldana, 2013, p. 248). The selected process helped to draw inferences and patterns to create broader themes.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Issues

Informed consent was established in accordance with the requirements of the Southern New Hampshire University Institutional Review Board and prior to conducting any interviews or surveys. Participants were made aware of the purpose of the research study proposal. All participants were given the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time without repercussions or penalties. The research process was conducted with the first priority to do no harm to any individuals or organizations. There were no financial rewards.

The validity of the data is supported by the consistency in the question design. The importance of preserving the integrity of the process included controlling for the researchers' own bias as a principal and how decisions should be approached. A private journal helped the researcher in processing and reflecting on his views and beliefs. The analysis of local and state data, as public documents, meeting minutes, and websites helped to strengthen the validity of the study. An in vivo coding process from verbatim transcripts helped to establish themes and categories of the research.

An essential component to ensure validity of data was to engender the trust of study participants. A high level of trust was developed to ensure that participants felt comfortable to respond candidly. Data will be kept secure and destroyed at an appropriate time to protect the identity and confidentiality of all participants. Pseudonyms for school districts and individual participants were created to ensure anonymity.

Dissemination of Policy Relevance

This study finds relevance in the phenomenon of declining enrollments in some New Hampshire school districts while others are experiencing no declines. While schools across the nation consider new reform efforts, revised standards and federal regulations, the prospect of

school consolidation, reorganization and closure further complicate these challenges. The lack of current research on declining enrollments in smaller schools in the northeast calls for more insight into the causal factors as well as the need to understand processes and mindsets (Dweck, 2014) of those who make daily decisions for our children in schools with declining enrollments. This insight could be a driving factor in developing policy, looking for new solutions and reevaluating priorities for these communities. Of no less importance is the subsequent increased awareness of the problem of declining enrollments and related factors.

Communication of Findings

A comparative analysis was conducted among respondents in two different school districts. Research data consisted of in-depth analysis of interviews conducted with research participants, as well as information from documents collected in each district. Research data were presented in the form of narrative descriptions and visual interpretations (tables and graphs). Findings were reported in the discussion and recommendations sections of the dissertation.

Chapter Summary

The proposed qualitative study was designed to understand the decision making process that school districts employ to address condition of declining enrollments in rural New Hampshire schools. A more in-depth understanding of viewpoints of decision makers who will ultimately decide on the fate of these smaller schools in the near future will be valuable data in making recommendations for decision makers who may be facing similar challenges.

Data were collected, analyzed and interpreted using Miles, Huberman, and Saldana's (2014) framework. How decisions are made, the stakeholders' involvement, the choices given and the comprehensive approaches served to be critical factors that smaller schools will need to

consider when looking toward their elected officials, school leaders and teachers for solutions to the problem of declining enrollments. Recommendations for decision-making will bring a deeper understanding of the problem and possible alternatives to school closure.

Chapter 4-Analysis

Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of a study of two northern New England rural elementary schools using a qualitative method of data collection. The purpose of the study was to investigate the relationship of declining school enrollment and the decision-making process at the local levels in New Hampshire. The two schools were similar in size, each with a student population of fewer than 500. Further investigation revealed that with the exception of current and historical data, there was an absence of policy or guidelines related to declining enrollment from the New Hampshire State Department of Education (2014). A review of the research also revealed that there is little information in the literature on how decision makers respond to the factors that contribute to the phenomenon of declining enrollment.

In New Hampshire, declining enrollment has been evident over the past ten years. The table below is representative of the total public school enrollment in New Hampshire for the time period beginning in 2004 and ending in 2015. It is important to remember that a full school year includes a part of the preceding and following year. For example, the first school year in the chart will read 2004 to 2005 for the first year and 2005 to 2006 as the next year etc. In the state of New Hampshire, total enrollments are reported by all school districts in October of every school year. The chart shows a ten-year decrease in total public school enrollments of 23,276 students or an approximate 9% decline for the reported time periods.

Table 1: State Totals – Ten Years Public School Enrollments – 2004-2005 Through 2013-2014

	School Year 04-05	School Year 05-06	School Year 06-07	School Year 07-08	School Year 08-09	School Year 09-10	School Year 10-11	School Year 11-12	School Year 12-13	School Year 13-14
Preschool	2,360	2,525	2,531	2,614	2,834	2,987	3,095	3,165	3,200	3,401
Kindergarten	10,116	10,360	10,370	10,479	10,956	11,958	11,910	11,873	11,836	11,528
Readiness	260	210	193	246	223	182	114	66	63	44
Grade 1	15,009	14,733	14,639	14,332	14,169	13,925	13,908	13,540	13,486	13,328
Grade 2	14,978	14,940	14,603	14,404	14,196	14,171	13,836	13,788	13,401	13,361
Grade 3	15,019	14,976	14,941	14,598	14,431	14,199	14,107	13,815	13,728	13,399
Grade 4	15,495	15,147	15,065	14,999	14,582	14,512	14,189	14,107	13,794	13,783
Grade 5	15,950	15,627	15,274	15,186	14,996	14,642	14,500	14,150	14,143	13,804
Grade 6	16,200	16,093	15,758	15,307	15,160	15,048	14,685	14,453	14,048	14,026
Grade 7	17,009	16,358	16,295	15,794	15,429	15,277	15,029	14,678	14,444	14,111
Grade 8	17,224	17,035	16,429	16,205	15,748	15,456	15,241	14,986	14,554	14,408
Grade 9	17,302	16,973	16,935	16,235	15,929	15,714	15,374	15,107	14,836	14,305
Grade 10	16,012	16,224	15,688	15,655	15,092	15,042	14,678	14,084	13,841	13,697
Grade 11	14,766	15,203	15,474	14,798	14,747	14,279	14,115	13,830	13,245	12,978
Grade 12	13,893	13,998	14,430	14,775	14,297	14,390	13,793	13,616	13,274	12,762
Totals	201,593	200,402	198,625	195,627	192,789	191,782	188,574	185,258	181,893	178,935

Statistics obtained from the New Hampshire Department of Education represent the data as self-reported by the school districts for the 2004-2014 school years.

(http://education.nh.gov/data/school_sau.html)

The idea for the study was prompted by the researcher's experiences as a K-8 Principal in a district with declining enrollments over the past ten years. Reactive responses such as retirement incentives, staff reductions, and program cuts have been a common short-term response to a problem that is, in part, the result of a statewide population decline in NH, "as the numbers of children and young adults are on the decline throughout the state, and the rising older population has vaulted New Hampshire into the ranks of the oldest in the nation" (Francese and Merrill, 2008, p. 2). Population has been a driving force behind school mergers and consolidation efforts at the national level for decades in the United States. School districts, across the US, as a result of mergers and consolidations, have decreased by over 85,000 from 1930 to 1980 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1988). The effects of declining enrollments are

far reaching for rural and neighborhood urban schools. Reorganization efforts have been “prompted by state incentives, financial pressures, and the desire to increase opportunities for students” (Anderson, 2009, p. 4).

Like many schools in rural communities, the researchers school district, has had a steady and rapid decline in student enrollment over the past ten years. For example, in 2004, the October enrollment total for grades K-8 was 503 students. By 2014, enrollment had dropped to 350 students, which is an over thirty percent loss of its total population. The 2013 New Hampshire School Boards Association cohort survival model reported that this school’s enrollment is projected to fall to 230 students between 2014 and 2022, reaching a reduction in student enrollment of over fifty-five percent as compared to 2004 statistics. This decline represents a major reduction in student population. Researchers such as Kerbow (1996) explained that when reductions in student populations result in school reform efforts, the effects on student instability can have “far reaching implications” (p. 2). How school leaders address declining enrollment will directly impact the quality of their school program.

This research examined the decision-making processes that school districts employ to address conditions of declining enrollments in two rural New Hampshire schools facing a similar declining enrollment to the Moore School. The design of this research was a qualitative comparative case study. Data collected through interviews of research participants included two central office personnel, two principals and two community members of the two different school districts. Teachers in each school district were asked to fill out a voluntary questionnaire, but the participation rate was less than two percent in each school making the data irrelevant in terms of a statistically significant contribution. Other forms of data collection included document analysis from school districts, state data and school websites. The majority of the data came from the fourteen qualitative interviews using the Siedman (2006) protocol. Document analysis was limited due to the comfort level of administrators willing to share the information and the

availability of public minutes of school board meetings. The Superintendent of Schools for the [one of the school districts shared results of an analysis of his SAU outlining trends and possible reasons for increases in one district and declines in others. Data will be carefully presented to protect the identity of each school district. For example, both school districts will be referred to using the pseudonyms of the Allegro School and the Picasso School.

Website reviews consisted of newsletters and demographic data, which included grade level configurations, staff directories and mission statements, for example.

Data Analysis

The study explored the decision making process through the lens of declining student enrollment in two Northern New England rural schools, each with under 500 students. A four level in vivo coding process based on the work of Saldaña (2013) revealed four major categories: (1) population, (2) leadership, (3) financial impact, and (4) students and staff. The process of... included, (1) identification of key words and phrases from the word-for-word transcriptions, (2) identification of the key words and phrases as concepts, (3) analysis using the NWREL (1975) frameworks and (4) the three research questions. Each theme had approximately ten subsets that will be outlined in major findings and discussed using the lens of the three research questions, the NWREL (1975) framework and Hammond's et al. (1999) ProAct model.

The four components of the primary framework for the study were developed by The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) (1975). The curators of NWREL, created the Rural Futures Development Program (RFD). RFD's major focus was to assist rural communities in response to their unique environmental needs. The four principles of the NWREL framework are: (1) participatory decision-making, (2) choice, (3) process, and (4) comprehensiveness. As previously stated, the NWREL frameworks are explained below:

Participatory decision-making refers to the support for school programs and the opportunity for stakeholders to be part of the decision and the way that it is made. Bringing the

community, staff members, teachers and students to forums, hearings and meetings allow different voices to be heard during the process.

Choice implies that educational solutions are not the same for all communities and the quality of programming increases when decision makers are skilled in selecting strategies that match values and resources of the school or school district. Northern New England rural schools by definition are unique based on location, population and their proximity to urban and suburban areas as well as the county they represent.

Process is when people follow a systemic procedure for making choices and changes. These procedures can be in the form of written directives, policies, mandates or outlines.

Comprehensiveness refers to complex relationships between students and adults, between teaching and learning, communities, support agencies and a global strategy versus separate innovations. (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 1975).

Because this study focused on decision-making through the lens of declining enrollment, it was necessary to bring more specificity to NWREL's third principle of process. Hammond's (1999) ProAct model served this purpose well.

The acronym ProAct stands for: defining the problem (Pr), specifying objectives (O), identifying alternatives (A), considering consequences (C) and evaluating tradeoffs (T). The components of the NWREL and ProAct models were instrumental in categorizing data to discover patterns and trends that became apparent from the data transcriptions.

Some of the subsets were repeated in one or more of the major themes that emerged. The research presented in the literature review for this study suggested that declining student enrollment had negative connotations as "the primary demand of declining enrollment may lead to decreasing instructional, staffing, and facilities resources along with the possibility of school closings and consolidation due to the secondary demands" (Dimmitt, 2011, p. 103). In contrast

to Dimmitt's statement, this study also revealed that declining enrollments potentially offered some positive opportunities rather than solely negative outcomes.

Research Questions

The following research questions were designed to explore the process of decision-making through the lens of declining enrollment:

1. What decision-making process do leaders in rural school districts employ to address the conditions of declining enrollment?
2. What is the impact/effect of declining enrollments on the school and the community?
3. When does declining enrollment become a problem in a school district?

Sources of Data

The selection of participating schools consisted of the following criteria: (1) each school had to be located in a rural town, (2) the school population in each school had to be under five hundred, (3) both schools had to show a decrease in student enrollment over a minimum of five years. Tables four and five serve as reference points for the selection of the two schools based on the October enrollments for a five year period beginning in 2009 and ending in 2014. The tables include the school year, the school's total enrollment, the grade levels taught in each school and the number of teachers in each grade level. Pseudonyms were created to protect the identity of the schools and the participants. For the purposes of this research study, the schools are referred to as Allegro and Picasso.

For the first school (Allegro), table four shows a 6.8% decrease over the five year period or 88 fewer students from 2009 to 2014. This equates to an approximate decrease of 17 students per year. For the second school (Picasso), table four shows a 7.2% decrease over the five year period or 57 fewer students from 2009 to 2014, resulting in an average decrease of 11 students per year.

Allegro School

School Year	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14
Total Enrollment	281	287	273	253	193
Grade Levels	Pre-K-1	1	2	3	4
Teachers in each grade level	3	2	2	2	3

Table 4: October Enrollments

Picasso School

School Year	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14
Total Enrollment	204	197	179	174	147
Grade Levels	K	1	2	3	4
Teachers in each grade level	1	2	2	2	2

Table 5 October Enrollments

Statistics obtained from the New Hampshire Department of Education represent the data as self-reported by the school districts for the 2010-2015 school years.

(http://education.nh.gov/data/school_sau.html)

The enrollments in both schools show a significant decline, with the exception of one year (2010-2011), showing a six- student increase at the Allegro School. Both schools overall showed decreases over the five year period; however, the Allegro School had the most significant drop of 88 students in five years, or an average of 17 %. The Picasso school saw a drop of 57 students over the five-year period or an average of 11%. Tables four and five represent the criteria for the selection of the two schools. Interviews exposed differing opinions regarding the causes of the declines.

The data from the interviews formed the basis for the bulk of the discussion of the research questions and the additional themes that emerged. The findings for each school will be

presented in the order of research questions. For example, each research question will have the responses of the participants in the Allegro School followed by the participants of the Picasso School. The same will follow for question two and three. The findings will be organized as they relate to the three research questions, and further structured into the four major themes of leadership, population financial impact and staff and students. Table 6 outlines 36 subsets in four categories. The subsets represent major points raised by the participants that surfaced in more than one interview. The subsets were categorized according to the context of the response, the research questions and the framework. Under each major category, the subsets are listed alphabetically.

LEADERSHIP	POPULATION	FINANCIAL IMPACT	STAFF AND STUDENTS
Alignment	Community (admin)	Budgets	Morale
Autonomy	Demographic	Equity	Closure
Child Centered	Enrollment	Facility	Consolidation
Choice	Families	Local Control	Learners
Culture	Geographic	Politics	Opportunity
Directives	Growth	Programming	Personalized Learning
Relationships	Rural	Resources	Reorganization
Trust	Socio-economics	Taxes	Staff Members
Values			Support
			Teaching

Table 6

After analyzing the transcriptions of each of the fourteen interviews, the participants raised one or more points as subsets that fit into the four categories of leadership, population, financial impact and staff and students. For example, one participant may have been the only one to bring up autonomy, but three participants might have brought up culture. Following each

research question, data from each participant will be presented in the following order for each school: Community Member, Principal, and Central Office Personnel (Superintendent or Director of Special Services). Because the interviews are presented in order of the research questions and categories, the participant's responses are not introduced by the chronological order in which they took place.

Research Question 1: What decision-making processes do school leaders in districts employ to address the conditions of declining enrollment?

Respondents were asked each research question directly. During the interview phases, they related important points under the four categories of Leadership, Population, Finance and Students and Staff. There was no specific process, but the respondents related elements such as communication, politics, budgeting, autonomy, beliefs, values and trust.

Allegro School

The Allegro School is a kindergarten through fourth grade elementary school in a small rural town in New Hampshire. Overwhelmingly, participants were not able to identify a specific process that included all of the following four NWREL framework components: (1) participatory decision-making, (2) choice, (3) process or (4) comprehensiveness. Responses to the first question included the four themes of population, leadership, financial impact, and students and staff. The three participants in the Allegro School District included Mrs. Smith, a lifelong native and community member with young children in the primary grades, Mr. Robbins, a second year school principal with ten years of experience in the school district and Ms. August, the central office representative was completing her second year as the Director of Student Services in the district. To protect the identity of the school district, the names for the three participants have been replaced with pseudonyms.

Mrs. Smith (community member) represented the public viewpoint. She indicated that she was happy with the school district, but felt that the community was not informed about major

changes. This is an important factor in determining what if any of the framework components were evident to the greater community. Component two (choice) in the NWREL frameworks was definitely seen as lacking because she offered no evidence of a process that included matching the needs or values of the school district to an important decision. According to Mr. Robbins, the budget process was a driving factor of decisions about declining enrollment conditions. Mr. Robbins referred to the decisions made by the school board as arbitrary, after he created the budget and made specific recommendations. There was a marked difference in Ms. August's (Central Office Representative) description of the decision making process as compared to the Principal's view. She described a leadership team that was empowered to make decisions through a collaborative approach. The third NWREL component (process), as described by the principal and the director of student services was comprehensive, but according to Mrs. Smith (community member), few knew of the decisions. There were glaring differences in how the administrators described the decision making process. Ms. August felt it was collaborative and empowered, while Mr. Robbins felt his recommendations were ignored and referred to school board decisions as arbitrary. The community member, Mrs. Smith emphasized that the community was not informed.

Leadership

Mrs. Smith's response to the first research question also addresses problems in communication and process in the leadership category.

Not in Allegro. I was surprised they were doing full day kindergarten! Not in my community, I have heard other people speak about what's going on in their communities.

I never heard anything mentioned about offering full day kindergarten until I called the school district.

Mrs. Smith was referring to an important decision about full day kindergarten being offered by the school district for the first time. It seems that there was no communication from the school or

the school district about full day kindergarten. In reviewing the minutes of school board meetings, a decision was made to move forward with full day but no mention of publicizing the new program. Mrs. Smith pointed out that she did not know about the change in her school district from half day to full day kindergarten until she called the school:

Not in this town, I was surprised they were doing full day kindergarten and that there was going to be two classes. So I'm like okay, and that's when they told me they were going to offer two classrooms in full day. And I was thinking okay because I know a lot of the schools like [Grenich] have certain schools that did offer half day and now it's all the schools going full day?

Mrs. Smith gave the first sign of evidence that the school district leadership may have missed an opportunity to keep the public informed. If this study was more generalizable to the population in the Allegro School District, then it could be determined that there was no evidence of the NWREL Framework components, specifically participatory decision making (the first NWREL framework principle). Mrs. Smith was not only surprised; she was also unaware of a new kindergarten program that had been implemented by the school system. If a community member is unaware of a major change, then it logically follows that she did not participate in an important decision that directly affected her as a parent of two young children. School boards often make important decisions on policy and programs. There is a greater degree of success when a process includes stakeholders. Dervarics and O'Brien (2011) reported on comparative studies of high and low achieving school districts and found that school boards in high achieving school districts "communicate with and engage staff and community" (p. 1). In contrast, Irwin (2012) articulated that community residents often feel powerless with the processes that leaders engage in. Freuda-Kwarteng (2005) has analyzed several court cases involving school closures in Ontario, Canada, and found that "the principle of procedural fairness does not obscure the fact that school boards are the real makers of school closure decisions, not communities affected by

closure decisions.” (p. 19). Additionally, Frueda-Kwarteng noted that the procedures to include the public in serious decisions seldom amounted to anything more than an opportunity to merely voice an opinion without having an effect on the decision making process. In other words, community input if any, was superficial and had no impact. While their analysis originated in schools located in the Provinces of Canada, the same holds true in New Hampshire, as the realities of procedures and politics prove to be unbalanced in relation to the needs and values of the communities they serve (Irwin, 2012). That is, school boards have the ultimate power to make the final decisions. Spradlin, Fatima, Carson, Hess and Plucker (2010) studied school consolidation, and reported that legislators in Maine passed a very aggressive reorganization law emphasizing the protection of teachers and students against closing schools. The law also required a municipal vote and regional board approval before any action of reorganization, consolidation or closure could follow. This law required school districts to provide opportunities for community members to have consistent input in the process of making major decisions regarding reorganization and school closure.

Mr. Robbins was in his second year as the full time school principal of the Allegro Elementary School. This was the first time he had served as a principal during his career. The Allegro School includes kindergarten through grade four. The middle school holds grades five through eight. In responding to research question 1, he spoke of staffing decisions, budgeting directives and trust:

I think it depends, because there's layers to this, there's us you know at the ground level and you know you've got special education and you know... I'm very close to the special education coordinator in the district. But she's making decisions about staffing in the building. That's still coming out of the budget so we have to talk about that, and then we have weekly meetings with the superintendent, so we have pretty close contact, regular contact with her. So there's that layer to it and a lot of times we make decisions on just a

small portion of the budget. I mean, we're not dealing with benefits, the high school tuition, the out-of-district, all of the stuff that happens outside of here where the money is spent. So, I mean, Ms. August is the Sped. Coordinator, there's the Superintendent and there's myself. We meet with Jim, the middle school administrator next door. So we meet every week, oftentimes we're looking at the preschool through eighth grade.

Mr. Robbins focused on the budget process and staffing as they related to personnel decisions. He outlined the leadership structure and weekly meetings but did not mention a set of procedures to indicate choice. He outlined a segment of the process principle as school district administrators and principals considered the system wide view of preschool through eighth grade during the budgetary process. There seems to be a question of autonomy over whether the Special Education Director should be making arbitrary decisions about staffing in the Allegro School. While the NWREL principle of process was evident, the description of the process was not clear. It was not enough to confirm that process was evident, but more importantly, it was critical to evaluate the process through a more detailed lens with Hammond's (1999) ProAct model of defining the problem, specifying objectives, identifying alternative, considering consequences and evaluating tradeoffs. Mr. Robbins identified the objectives of their budget, but did not mention exploring alternatives to a school board directive that required level funding the budget. He stated,

Because the school board wanted us to show them what a level fund budget looked like. So we had to come up with what turned to be, natural increases of contracts and tuition and stuff like that. It turned out to be an 8.3% increase so we had to take 8.3% out of our current existing budget which turned out to be, well it's a 9 1/2 million dollar budget so, take 8.3% and you're almost near \$1 million, it's like \$800,000.

Mr. Robbins explained that there were layers to the process. As part of the leadership category, one subset that became evident was autonomy. Mr. Robbins explained how the school

administrators were charged with coming up with the cuts to the budget. He was directed to partner with the middle school principal and come up with cuts that affected shared staff members of both schools. Through a collaborative process, Mr. Robbins and the middle school principal recommended that Unified Arts (physical education, music, art and library media) positions be reduced to .8 positions. Mr. Robbins notes that one of the positions was restored to full time status as a result of a political move that included a relative of a school board member.

She is not teaching any more classes...But here's the best part. You'll understand this, I don't care if you print it or not because it's pretty public information, her brother is the chair of the school board.

Mr. Robbins cited nepotism as a big factor when his recommendations were ignored and a family member's position was restored. He felt that the decision to override his recommendation created a situation of inequity for remaining the Unified Arts staff members. Many times leaders are forced to make cuts that affect the lives of teachers and students causing a great deal of stress (Kyriacou and Harriman, 1993). The impact is serious because staff reductions as a response to declining enrollment, do not necessarily indicate that the responsibilities decrease for remaining staff members. Weber (1996) reported that in many cases, remaining staff members are forced to perform the same functions in a shorter time frame with fewer wages. In response to the first research question, Robbins continues,

I mean, I remember that day, and I will not forget that day and I know there's a lot of stress involved that day and it wasn't until I brought the guidance counselor in. She looked at me and kind of matter-of-factly took it in, listened, and just was listening to... active listening you know, and I was the one that ended up crying. And I was like; I can't believe I'm telling you this. I was the one that ended up crying.

Mr. Robbins recounts the emotional stress that affects morale for all involved in times of a budgetary crisis, or as Weber (1996) stated, "In schools, the consequences of layoffs strike hard

on the remaining staff. The instructional staff must teach the same numbers of students (or even more students) with less funding. The strain can range from wearing to crushing” (p. 4). Mr. Robbins raised trust as an issue, also another subset in the leadership category. The researcher asked for an example of a trust issue after his comments on nepotism. He explained his recommendations of staff cuts that could potentially affect sixteen or seventeen people from interventionists, classroom teachers, Unified Arts and office staff members. He responded,

There’s clearly a trust problem. We are telling you that if we have to level fund the budget, these are our recommendations. And they went in all kinds of different directions after we talked to the staff to inform them that their positions were up for discussion.

Mr. Robbins went on to comment on the alignment of his personal beliefs and values as they related to the actions of the school board:

Pretty far off. I had a staff member ask me “are you leaving?” I said I love all of you, I love the town I work in, but I said you get to that point as a person where your values are far off from what you’re trying to do day to day...we’ve got to believe in what we do for work. And if you’re not believing in the direction that the school district is going and people pick up on it, you can’t fake that stuff. I mean we don’t talk about the kids and the impact. It’s kind of made me rethink my value system of wanting to be in that type of climate.

It is obvious that Mr. Robbins cites trust issues with the school board, another subset in the leadership category. Later in the process, he alluded to similar issues in the way in which the SAU conducted business and reported to school board. He compares his values to the climate or culture of the school community.

I thought I was more on the same page as the SAU... and this year has been very different. I just don't know what else is going on up at the SAU level, which I believe led us to the budget freeze...when the business administrator and the superintendent tells the

school board that we have a \$255,000 deficit... they your budget is frozen now and anything over 500 dollars has to go to the school board. Three weeks later they come back with an update, and we have \$141,000 surplus, we have had no major building issues, we have had no special education placements in those three weeks. How do you make up \$400,000 in three weeks?

Again, there is a lack of trust as Mr. Robbins explained how a significant deficit of over a quarter million dollar was reported by upper administration, and within three weeks, there was actually a surplus of funds. This followed a period of weeks with a frozen budget.

In her second year as the Director of Student Services, Ms. August succeeded Mr. Robbins and served as the Central Office Representative of the SAU for the study. Her time being limited, she responded to the questions skillfully and with precise and deliberate answers. Surprisingly, she was able to outline a more structured description of decision-making and, overall, expressed positive feelings about the process.

We have a four-member admin team, myself, the middle school principal, the elementary school principal, and our superintendent. So there's the four of us. Our superintendent is a co-superintendent in Allegro School District, and works with a counterpart who is in the neighboring town. Our four member team, I would say, the two principals, myself and the superintendent, meet on a weekly basis as a leadership team, so we are discussing, you know, any type of issues that you know are presented to the district together as a group.

The process as described, is collaborative in structure, but outside stakeholders were not involved and evidence of choice or systematic procedures was not evident.

Our decision-making process, I think depending on the decision, you know, sometimes we can make it just with the four of us, and we definitely have those healthy conversations where sometimes we don't agree. But, you know, we will work around the problem, I think we will do a good job with listening to each other's perspectives, you

know, seeing the big goal for the district as a group. The Superintendent helps to guide that process, and you know from there, with major decisions, we do include the school board if we're talking policy. We go to every school board meeting in Allegro.

Ms. August seemed to be happy with the way decisions were made. Her viewpoint is in direct contrast to the school principal's. According to the NWREL framework, there were no measurable connections that would indicate anything other than a top down approach to decision making. Teachers, parents or community members were not involved according to Ms. August and Mr. Robbins.

Ms. August made it a point to recognize a new administration and the need to develop trust and relationships between administrators and the school board. She felt that they were making progress earning trust and building relationships over time. This was in direct contrast to Mr. Robbin's view of the school board.

We are all pretty new to our positions, Mr. Robbins and I started in our roles. He was here in my role for several years and then moved to principal. I came in during the same year. And our middle school principal was the district assistant principal and then they went back to the two principal model. So he became the principal also all at once. So the three of us started in new roles altogether. Last year it was a lot of, this is how we did it in the past when decisions are made. Now it's more, I think they're gaining trust in our decisions.

Ms. August emphasizes the fact that the administrators in the district were all new to their positions. She also describes the development of the administrative structure in the two schools (elementary and middle). Between the two schools, there was one principal and an assistant principal. This administrative model changed as a principal was hired for each building. It seems, according to Ms. August, that the assistant principal became the principal at the middle school. She also makes the point that the administrators in the school district have begun to earn the trust

of the school board. In response to the question “How long does it take to build that kind of trust?” she responded,

A long while. I mean it's a little different from my colleagues who have been in the district but in different roles. Like for me, we all entered our roles in the same year, but they had been in other roles in the district before that. For me, I would say, a couple months, a couple of opportunities for me to be able to speak to the school board and for them to develop a relationship with me, for them to see my values in action. You know it's one thing for them to know, this is what I believe and this is what's on my resume, but it's another thing for me to articulate to them, like my concerns that affect kids and how I respond to it.

An important point to note is the longevity of the Principal and the Director of Student Services. Mr. Robbins (Principal) had served the district for several years as the Director of Student Services and Ms. August was in her second year without a veteran perspective of the school district.

Population

Mrs. Smith, Mr. Robbins and Ms. August provided their viewpoints on rural schools, town demographics, statewide population trends and age groups. Additionally, there was an emphasis on the low-income families and the limited tax base resulting from protected lands.

Mrs. Smith touches on two important subsets in the population category as she describes the rural school dilemma. She touches also, on the demographic of the elderly community and rural school characteristics. She said,

There's definitely a lot more and bigger population of students in other cities. I think some of the smaller towns get kind of, I don't know, kind of left behind, you know not top priority kind of thing, definitely rural.

Mrs. Smith's responses focused on the importance or relevance of rural schools based on their populations. Quickly, she described her school district as one that is "left behind or not top priority." Her comment resonated with current research as the attention has been focused primarily on schools located in urban areas with very little attention to rural schools (Johnson, Strange & Madden, 2010).

Mrs. Smith cited possible reasons for the lack of growth and the lack of families in the town, as part of the problem:

I've noticed in our town a lot of the decrease. I think has to do with um, people aren't allowed to build new houses because we are limited on our water and sewer. So the towns only allowed 10 new houses per year and I noticed a lot of it has started to be more the elderly staying in town, so not as many families.

Mrs. Smith's response is a testament to the statewide imbalance in the population. She referred to the decrease of families that support school populations, but the problem is not specific to only a few towns in New Hampshire. Francese and Merrill (2008) warn that "unless some generational balance is restored, the state will not be able to meet the 21st-century educational needs of its children, the workforce needs of its industries, or the healthcare needs of the growing elderly population" (p.12).

Mr. Robbins cited the well-known phenomenon of declining enrollment in the state over the last five years. He also explained his thoughts on specific demographic reasons for the continuous population decline in the town of Allegro that prohibit growth.

It seems like in New Hampshire we're getting hit with declines. I think that one of the studies that was put out a couple of years ago when I was talking to a fellow high school principal who I do some coaching with...umm, they looked at it and there was only one or two towns that they looked at that actually had trends of children going up and the rest of the towns were all going down. I know where I live, you know the breakdown in

population has slowed, so what population is the smallest? You know 21 and less younger populations are a smaller percentage. A big chunk of it is like 45 to 65, with the next biggest one being the older population. So I don't know is it the lifestyles are too slow and people don't want to go to New Hampshire but they want to go to more vibrant places? I grew up in Massachusetts and like, your heart slows down, your pulse slows down, how you drive how you think... and people may not like that.

Mr. Robbins' recall of a study and his experiences align with current research:

For every New Hampshire resident age 65 and older in 1990, there were 1.6 young adults 25 to 34 years old. But by 2005, that ratio had dropped precipitously to only 0.9 young adults for every resident age 65 or older (Francese and Merrill, 2008, p. 3).

Ms. August highlighted specific points relating to the decrease in population related to socio economic status, geographic location and a limited tax base that inhibits expansion in the town. She said:

We also have some pretty significant areas of lower socioeconomic status. That plays a role in the overall town's perception and we've got a few trailer park homes, and in those communities I think while we have great families, but I think that people don't always want to look to live near those areas as well. Were not experiencing a lot of growth and development. We have a state park that takes up a significant component of our landmass here in the town. There's really not much of a tax base there, and we've got primarily just properties, you know, homes not necessarily businesses.

These statements outline a demographic condition of the community that, over time, describe how the town's population has been and continues to be affected from a desirability standpoint for potential newcomers. The town is not attracting newcomers. Johnson (2012) reminds us that in migration from Maine and Massachusetts were the main driving force behind the most recent increases in overall state population. Future research is needed on the subject of

small New Hampshire towns that thrive and those that don't in order to provide insight for town planners, school districts and zoning boards.

Financial Impact

In this section, participants discuss the rise in costs resulting from increasing numbers of special education identifications and a lack of revenue. One of the participants provides evidence that other school districts are able to offer more advantages to their students than the Allegro School District. There is also a difference in autonomy over budgetary decisions.

The community perspective as represented by Mrs. Smith, introduces the ideas of an investment in the teaching staff, educational values and the political process. Mrs. Smith's school district is one of higher poverty than that of the comparison school district, but specific demographic information has been intentionally left out to protect the identity of the school district. Document analysis of school board agendas and meeting minutes confirmed a one million dollar cut in the school budget for a recent school year. The next quotation reveals the concept of human capital and contractual issues as Mrs. Smith describes her concerns for teachers.

We kind of invest ourselves into them, making sure that they are okay, looking out for their families; after all, they are with our children every day. The teachers that are there deserve to be paid for what they do, I mean, to go without a contract, to go without a raise, even the standard of living raise- anything!

It is evident that Mrs. Smith sees value in the educational process and alludes to the political process of local control and emphasizes her concern that teachers in the district have gone for two years without a contract or cost of living raises.

Mr. Robbins focused on the budgetary process, staffing and resources as he responded to the declining enrollment decisions in his school district. An administrative team approach led to the autonomy of creating the budget, but did not appear to be credible information for the school

board to carry out the team's recommendations. A glaring fact that Mr. Robbins pointed out was the lack of consistency and the frustration that ensued as a result. Against recommendations of the administrative team, the school board cut the integration specialist just after the decision was made to invest in newer technology for the students.

But we're losing our tech integrator, so the 100 and something Chromebooks we got there, we won't know how to use. But we're going to have someone to sit in an empty library. So I mean as a laundry list we went through last night, there was probably twelve or thirteen different positions affected.

It is evident that participatory decision-making was not followed and stakeholders were not included when making the decision to cut the integration specialist. This interrupted the consistency for the implementation of a Chromebook program and speaks to a lack of support. The school board made arbitrary decisions without considering alternatives presented by the building administrators. Additionally, Ms. August raises the question of equity as it relates to the limited services that the district can offer.

It's hard for us to generate a revenue elsewhere. There's really not much of a tax base there. It's frustrating to us when we're dealing with a budget that proposes significant cuts to services, which we had to do this year. Yet other school districts of lower tax rates are offering 10 times as much to a student. I think families see that now, you know?

Ms. August clearly outlines a lack of revenue for the school district and cites better services in neighboring towns with lower tax rates. She articulates this concern in light of the children in her school district. Ms. August's role as she aptly stated, "keeps me on my toes." She explained that despite a declining enrollment, special needs were increasing. Rising costs of special education are a result of the specialized training and teacher retention.

I think that, it's hard for me to always have this perspective of declining enrollment in this town, with my role, because unlike the shift of everyone's enrollment going down, we are

experiencing a very high rise of special education students. I have, 27% of the middle school identified and 20% of the elementary school.

Despite the significant drop in the overall enrollment of the school, Ms. August was concerned about cuts, in services as the need for those same services increased based on the rising number of identified students. She reported 27% of middle school and 20% of elementary school students as being identified. The state average was reportedly at 16% (New Hampshire Department of Education, 2014). She spoke of comparisons to other school districts in neighboring towns that appear to be flourishing with the services and programs they are able to offer at lower tax rates. The rising costs of Special Education continue to pose budgetary challenges that require as a significant portion of rural school funding. Mathis (2003) studied the challenges in rural schools and found that, “in special education, the financial burden for high cost/ low incidence student needs must be higher in rural (and perhaps other) areas simply because the ability of a small enrollment district to absorb the cost is much less. Likewise, the ability to provide unique special services in remote locations is lessened” (p. 12).

Students and Staff

Mrs. Smith comments on the facility and the school culture, which have a direct effect on morale. She mentions the principal by name and the fact that he knows the names of parents and students.

Everyone's always very personable. It's clean, even the kids... I was there and like, you know I knew a couple of them and they were like oh hi Mrs. Smith and talking to me. They were like, “Oh hi, I saw Tim and Madi outside.” You know that type of thing. “But even the teachers, they'll say, “Hey how you doing? How's [Tim and Madi]?” And I'm thinking how do you guys remember all the names? Even Mr. Robbins knows, you know he sees me, and I'm thinking, do you know how many parents you have? How can you remember all the parents' names, you know, but he does.

This speaks to a child-centered community with personalization that is common in smaller schools. Mrs. Smith's evidence combines two themes from the Leadership and the Staff and Students categories as she talks about morale and a child-centered staff.

It's definitely not teacher centered. I see a lot of child centered definitely, they... like I noticed a lot of their stuff in there is at child level, um it's where the kids it's kind of like with our kids you know, it has to be at their height in order for them to be able to understand it. I feel that the teachers are there for the children, um they make the rooms look as pleasing as possible to the children's eyes, and I know they have limited funds and stuff, you know?

Mr. Robbins's responses suggest that morale is an integral part of the conversation around declining enrollment decisions. His response covers a description of the leadership structure from the School Board, School Administrative Unit (SAU), to the Principals.

You know, and some of the stuff I don't think the staff realizes what happens. I brought it up in the staff meeting and I got killed in my survey because some people are saying, "Oh we're hearing this for the first time." I took the hit.

Mr. Robbins spoke of the negative ramifications after staff members learned about potential staffing cuts during a staff meeting. He explains that he "took the hit" in an annual survey that he sends to staff members to evaluate the overall practice of the school. Mr. Robbins felt that staff members blamed him and took out their frustrations on him in personal attacks.

When I thought I was doing a great job by letting them know about it well in advance of next year, they just didn't like the way it happened, they wanted a personal conversation.

Mr. Robbins's frustration was evident as he thought he was doing the right thing by informing the staff members well in advance. According to Weber's (1996) thinking, Mr. Robbins was right on target as he tried to keep his staff informed as stakeholders acknowledging that a restructuring plan should not be a secret. Mr. Robbins made it possible to allow those who

were most deeply affected by the decisions to voice their concerns through a survey. He made the process transparent but missed the opportunity to get their input before or during the process. In short, the first NWREL principle (Participatory Decision Making) was absent, but there was no evidence that the third principle (Process) was employed.

Ms. August also comments on the morale of the staff members as well as the effects of cuts on programming. She describes the cuts and once more, the elimination of the tech integrator.

Morale is low, we're talking about taking a full-time librarian to a part-time librarian, and community members here know the library is not going to be open all the time. We eliminated a tech integrator when we said we needed to expose our kids to more technology. It's challenging.

Ms. August speaks of low morale as a function of reducing positions from full to part time. Decisions regarding enrollment can cause a great deal of stress among staff members and support staff in terms of job security and responsibilities. It places more demands on workers to get the same amount of work done with fewer people. King (1982) stated, "internal and external pressures as diverse as shrinking supply budgets for classrooms and the loss of community enthusiasm demand response from school officials" (p. 8). Noer (1993) studied two schools in Oregon after major budget cuts and concluded,

At times of crisis, such as downsizing, leaders should also "lead with the heart first and follow with the head"--that is, first acknowledge the staff's feelings and difficulties and then analyze the reasons and the areas for creating efficiencies to deal with the new, more strained arrangements (p. 4).

The NWREL component of Participatory Management requires input from stakeholders and proposes that, "planners should communicate how decisions are being made and where the priority programs lie" (Weber, 2000, p. 13). It is evident, based on Ms. August's responses that

she is sensitive to the effects of the decisions made in light of declining enrollments. There is however, little proof of Participatory Management in Ms. August's responses to the first question.

Summary of Research Question 1, Allegro School District.

Interview participants from the Allegro School District cited several elements that indicated problems with the process, communication and choice. Trust factors between the school board and the school administration factored into a discussion of personal values. A different viewpoint of the leadership structure was evident between Mr. Robbins and Ms. August. Population growth as it relates to the rural schools included demographic conditions, and the socioeconomic status of the community. Mrs. Smith cited budget cuts and teacher welfare as Mr. Robbins remarked on the perceived autonomy in creating the budget, while at the same time, he recounted the experience of watching decisions move forward that were against his recommendations. Mrs. Smith and Ms. August both spoke of morale differently. Mrs. Smith remarked on the positive child centered atmosphere in the school, while Ms. August raised concerns over staff morale, programming and staff cuts. Mr. Robbins echoed the same concerns over morale as well. Budget concerns and the integrity of the teaching staff were common themes for both schools. The element of process continues to be a focal point in both districts. Process seemed to be easier to identify in the Picasso School District.

The comparison school district's participants were asked the same research questions as those from the Allegro School District. In the next section, responses from the participants of the Picasso School District will show some similarities between the principal's viewpoints of the SAU. A more formalized process for studying problems is outlined by each of the participants.

Research Question 1: What decision-making processes do school leaders in districts employ to address the conditions of declining enrollment?

Picasso School

The Picasso School is a kindergarten through fourth grade elementary school in a small rural town in New Hampshire with 143 students. Study participants identified processes that included some or all of the four NWREL framework components at different times. The study participants in the Picasso School District included Mrs. Carmen (community member), a 22 year resident serving as the school board chair of the Picasso School District. Mr. Jones is a twelve-year veteran principal with prior administrative experiences in different school districts. The third participant is Mr. Johnson, (central office representative) who serves as the Superintendent of Schools in a multi-town School Administrative Unit. In an effort to provide consistency throughout this research, the findings will continue to be presented in order of the four categories and not the chronological order of the interviews. As stated earlier, all names are pseudonyms to protect the identity of the school district and the participants.

Leadership

The three participants highlight several points. They are: autonomy for building administrators, consolidation, evidence of three of the NWREL elements, and criteria from Hammond et al. Consolidation continues to be a constant theme in most of the interviews.

Mrs. Carmen represented the community member for the Picasso School District. She spoke of the process in terms of the School Administrative Unit (SAU) and support for the local school administrator and contemplated whether the idea of consolidation should be explored.

I think it's SAU wide, for the elementary level, we haven't seen so much again at the Picasso core junior high level or middle school and high school. So I think they're [SAU Leadership] trying to be supportive for those individual districts that have smaller declining enrollments. The support that I see is left to the building administrator and they're willing to support the administrator but they say maybe we need to look at combining Picasso and [Granfield] consolidating from those two districts to one district. You know, so those are tough conversations to have had. But, you know it does make

sense. I mean is it worth investigating? Probably, it might happen. I don't know, it might have to get looked into.

Mrs. Carmen's response to the idea of exploring consolidation as suggested by the upper administrative leaders, acknowledges that these types of the conversations will be difficult but may be necessary. The process will be important if the school board and administration decides to move forward. With few guidelines in place at the local and state levels, school district leaders must approach the challenge of consolidation and reorganization in isolation. Weber (1996) suggests,

A plan for restructuring a school or district should not be a secret. Several groups may be directly affected by decisions to reduce staff or services. Such stakeholders include parents and students, the teachers and their union, non-instructional staff, and building administrators. Planners should come prepared with accurate and current data. Adequate opportunities for comment and suggestions can turn up uncertainties and gaps in information. Regular progress reports from the committee planning reductions in programs can be made to the superintendent, to the board, and to open meetings involving the community (p. 3).

Weber's research resulted in the identification of potential stakeholders and calls for community input and disseminating information to keep the community informed. Weber's work helps to clarify the elements of Participatory Decision-Making and Process. According to Mrs. Carmen's response to research question 1 (What decision-making processes do school leaders in districts employ to address the conditions of declining enrollment?), there is not a formal mechanism in place that indicates the NWREL framework are employed. She does however; confirm that the administrators in the school district practice with a certain amount of autonomy.

Mr. Jones has been the principal of the Picasso district for twelve years. His school is an “Eddies” award winning school. Eddies is an acronym for the New Hampshire Educational Excellence Award Program. During his second interview, Mr. Jones informed the researcher that he announced his retirement to begin at the end of the academic school year. He spoke of the decision-making process at the administrative level and also emphasized the fact that Principals are given autonomy over the operations and major decisions affecting their schools. He said,

Um, this is how it’s done. Basically, we meet once a month as a group of administrators and they've got their bang list of, here are the things you need to get done and then basically other than that they say, here are the curricula and so we've given you all this and we've told you what you need to do- now how you do it, that's up to you. Now they do have some markers along the way you know. They want to see Professional Learning Communities model but, and I will say this is morphed over time, there was a time when there was no guidance at all when I first came, I was like the superintendent of [the SAU].

We actually, we have our partnership advisory council as our community-based group. It’s teachers, administrators and community members. And the question was, how are we going to deal with these changes? So for a year they really studied where we wanted the school to go, and looking at what was coming down the pike, and with competency based education coming, we did a yearlong study of multi-age classrooms. We studied for a year whether we really...how we wanted to address our reducing population.

Mr. Jones, an experienced educator, administrator and leader, started the process of studying the response to declining enrollment from the perspective of a future outcome. In the process, he included various stakeholders such as teachers, community members and administrators to start the conversations. The approach that Mr. Jones followed included the NWREL concepts of Participatory Decision-Making, Process and Comprehensiveness. He

outlined who was involved in the yearlong project to ensure voices from stakeholders were included (NWREL- Participatory Decision Making). The team followed an approach that defined the problem as declining enrollments (NWREL-Process). Additionally, the team decided to examine multi-age classrooms, the direction of the school and competency based education (NWREL- Comprehensiveness). The next section reveals another process.

Mr. Johnson is the Superintendent of a six-town SAU. The Picasso School is among the smallest schools in the unit. He spoke of decisions as a general process:

I have used probably a three-step process. I think it's very, very important to gather information, I call the observation phase, get all the data you can get, all the statistics, and I'm giving you a quick summary, with pockets of poverty, the local control, the political climate, and people who want to have stability for kids. So that's an observation. In gathering all that stuff, we look at data. We look at a lot of data and a lot of that stuff is online. So that's step one and I sort of think of this as the sands of an hourglass, so I think all the information feeds into the first and the top, and it all comes together in the middle of what I call the judging phase. By judging, you sit down and you analyze. You've got all the stuff, now what you can do? You analyze. What does this mean? And the third and final phase is what I call the action phase. What actions are we going to get to come out of here, because it really is very important that we do this as a community?

Mr. Johnson includes a three step process; (1) gathering data, (2) judging and analysis, and (3) action. His process is evident but lacks participatory management. The process is comprehensive with data gathering and analysis but by NWREL standards is incomplete. His final question, "what actions are we going to get to come out of here because it really is very important that we do this as a community?" is representative of involving the community (NWREL, participatory decision-making), but he doesn't describe how this is carried out. Hammond, Keeney & Raiffa (1999) explained that there is an important connection between

decisions and how they are made. Making a good decision depends on a good decision making process. Hammond et al. describes six criteria for making decisions. They are: (1) Focusing on what is important, (2) Choices that are logical and consistent, (3) Choices must acknowledge both subjective and objective factors and blend analytical with intuitive thinking, (4) The available options require only as much information and analysis as is necessary for resolution, (5) The possible choices should encourage and guide the gathering of relevant information and informed opinion and (6) The decisions should be straightforward, reliable and easy to use with flexibility (p. 11).

Mr. Johnson's responses suggest that he has identified what needs to be studied in his three-step process. It is evident that his explanation includes three of Hammond's criteria (1, 3, and 5). For example, the observation phase could be interpreted as focusing on what is important. This is the first element of Hammond's criteria list for making decisions. Mr. Johnson doesn't mention or discuss intuitive thinking as described in the list as well. While he doesn't set a limit for the amount of information that should be gathered, the fourth element (studying options) is definitely present, but the fifth and sixth elements are not mentioned as Hammond suggested. Mrs. Carmen and Mr. Jones agree on the idea of autonomy for the building administrators. Mrs. Carmen brings up the concept of school consolidation as a possibility that should be explored, but there was no mention of any plans to do so. Mr. Jones and Mr. Johnsons follow a process, but there are major differences regarding stakeholders and community involvement. Both autonomy and school consolidation are focus areas that continue in the next section.

Population

Principal autonomy in decision-making, state policy, population and class sizes comprise the important concepts that are discussed, but Mr. Johnson reveals a fascinating pupil enrollment phenomenon in the SAU.

Mrs. Carmen identifies the autonomy that principals have as they go through the process of responding to declining enrollments. She also describes the role of the School Administrative Unit as being supportive, but at the same time she indicates that SAU has suggested the possibility of consolidation. She speaks of neighboring towns that are part of the same school district (SAU). Mrs. Carmen also mentions a lack of state assistance for implementing a pre-kindergarten program and also talks openly about the lack of policy at the state level for school districts with declining enrollments.

Um, because [Granfield], one of our closest districts, they have a worse decline than we do. Their tax dollars are very high. I think in [our SAU], what they're trying to do is look at what the influx in population is and, you know, looking at studies of when do you see that it will go back to normal levels instead of lower levels? So they are there for that kind of support. I think it's tough. I haven't seen anything from a protocol perspective like a policy that says, hey, we've seen this happen in the past and here are the things that you can expect to happen, but we've also seen after ebb and flow an average of 8.3 years... like this, with none of that strong analytical data to help support some of the concerns.

It appears that there is a lack of process from a top down perspective, but she acknowledges the SAU's initiative to study the problem in search of a pattern or trend that might indicate a future population increase. It is clear from the community perspective that Mrs. Carmen is more informed than her counterpart in the comparison school district (Allegro School).

Mr. Jones supports the practice of personalized learning, teaching with a differentiated model and optimal class sizes to preserve the core teaching staff.

We're going to do that but we will keep the core strength of our school which is the teachers, and in keeping our numbers low so that we can continue to personalize and

differentiate teaching using the workshop models and other tools like that. So, that will give us average class sizes of typically anywhere from 16 kids in a class with the 9 teachers. That's been the shift.

As detailed earlier in this chapter, the principal formed a committee to study the shift towards multi-age classrooms to preserve the integrity of the core teaching staff. Mr. Jones's recommendation to study multi-age as an answer to the declining enrollments in his school resonates with researchers. Anderson (1993) concluded that students learn in different ways and rates, therefore, multi-age classrooms offer a natural learning environment for all students. The benefits of multi-age classrooms also provide appropriate curricula that meet the developmental levels of students (Kruglik, 1993). He includes three goals for the process: (1) personalized learning, (2) differentiation and (3) small class sizes. Mr. Jones runs a school in a sleepy bedroom community similar to the Allegro school only in size. The school is part of an affluent community with little poverty. Both schools share the same enrollment dilemma that has resulted in staffing reductions. Mr. Jones has been able to preserve the integrity of the teaching staff through attrition; however, he has made it clear that staff reductions would be the next step.

Mr. Johnson describes the makeup of the six town School Administrative Unit and the phenomenon of the high school's increase in student population as the sending elementary schools are decreasing.

So all six towns feed into the Cooperative middle school and you will see where, despite the declining enrollment so far, we see pretty stable, we had one fluke year because the fifth grades coming in this year were a little low, so this year we saw about a 5% decline into the 1290 range, generally speaking, you know, you're in that 1,340-1,350 average. And on the backside is the high school. [Mezzo] high school is 9 to 12. The kids automatically go from grade eight into grade nine and you'll see a steady growth, which

is a counter indicator. I suppose with some things that you're studying because of our low enrollments. The high school is seeing a tremendous growth.

The fact that the high school is growing while the sending schools are experiencing a decline in their school populations seems difficult to believe. Mr. Johnson, as a result of analysis, explained this trend through the economic and demographic conditions. Families will live in cheaper housing areas located in the larger community and wait until they are financially established before moving into the smaller bedroom communities. These more established families have children who are older and the fact that they are moving into the community has little or no effect on the local school population at the elementary school. The fact that the sending schools with declining enrollments has resulted in a steady and growing enrollment in the middle and high school, presents a phenomenon that illustrates the individual characteristics that make rural schools in New Hampshire unique and very different despite similarities in town size, school quality, and population. While they may appear to have many common factors, the reasons for their current conditions are markedly different.

Financial Impact

Mrs. Carmen comments on the lack of help from the state or the administrative unit. She also warns of bringing in new programs until the decline in enrollment is reversed.

We tried to do our own data on it, you know population, size of family, birth age, if that's going to increase based on people who've moved into the community and the ages of families, but there's no help either from the state or within the administrative unit to help with that guideline. It's kind of left up to each of the districts to figure out, and in [the SAU], they put together a committee to help at one point, to help figure out declining enrollments. That's because we wanted to support a public pre-K, but at the time it looked like things were going to continue to decline for a few years. You know only until we get an increase in straight student enrollments can you think about pre-K enrollment.

But we felt that if we do a pre-K it will bring people into the community. If you are supporting with a pre-K program that's funded as opposed to, you know, [financing] it on their own which can be very costly.

Mrs. Carmen's comments indicated that the idea of developing a new program (pre-K) might have brought more people into the community, but it was too costly for the district to fund a startup program without guidance or assistance. Again, this speaks to a lack of support from the state and requires school districts to incur the financial burden for new programs that could potentially attract newcomers to the town.

Mr. Jones explains the budget cuts and strategies he used to cut a significant amount from the budget.

So this year alone I trimmed out of our budget of 165,000 dollars making cuts to positions, so know what's interesting though, insurance is going up 3% and some other things in the end even though I made all these cuts, our actual savings by that time was only about \$45,000. So, only about a 2% savings. So I have to make another set of cuts so those maybe taking paraprofessionals, which are now thirty-two and half-hours and cutting them to 27 1/2 hours.

Mr. Jones was committed to keeping the core of nine classroom teachers intact and held to that line by choosing to cut hours of support personnel over reducing positions.

Mr. Johnson explains results of an independent study he conducted on the enrollment figures over time in all six of the towns and makes some interesting conclusions about average housing costs and timeframes.

The average home in the outlying communities of Picasso, [Granfield] and [Ponemah], the average home today costs about \$350,000. What we're finding is that young families can't afford a \$350,000 home. So what is happening from the study that we've been doing... what's happening is that families are moving into the SAU because they want a

good education for middle school and high school. And they are buying the houses at \$350,000 when the parents are a little older; the kids are a little older so they can afford the higher tax burden on homes. They can afford the higher mortgage costs.

Mr. Johnson points out that the families with younger children who are just starting out can't afford to live in the bedroom community of Picasso. They end up living in a city nearby, where housing is cheaper, and until the students are older. When the parents are financially established, they make decisions to move into a smaller community. They may add to the tax base if they move into a smaller town such as Picasso or Allegro, but the student population fails to increase as a result. The rising costs will force cuts in programs and staffing in order to keep the schools open and free of closure or consolidation. School systems will have to raise revenue. Abshier, Harris & Hopson (2011) studied small rural schools in the state of Texas and found that Superintendents searched for creative ways to raise revenue through out of district transfers. They also controlled budgets with efficient personnel assignments and measures to reduce energy costs. These ideas are examples of how researchers reported on different ways of achieving goals that might be alternatives to school consolidation and closure.

Students and Staff

Mrs. Carmen explains that there has been a delay in how the students have been impacted, but warns of more budget cuts and an increase in class sizes.

I think the compromises will be more teacher cuts and bigger classrooms, and then it is more impact to the learners, of each of the children. We haven't had that impact yet; we felt the difference of reducing our teacher count by two with these combined classrooms.

And I think there's been some compromise there with concerned parents.

The Picasso school district studied the concept of multi age classrooms and ultimately recommended the idea to school board for adoption. The school board adopted the idea as part of

the process and there were no staff reductions during that school year. The position was absorbed through a retirement.

Mr. Jones acknowledges with gratitude, the school board's decision to maintain the nine teaching positions but warns of more cuts.

Thankfully, the board has agreed to maintain the nine teaching positions but were making cuts all around that. We're saying we want to hang on to the core, the strength, of our school are our classroom teachers. That means we've got to cut the supports around that.

The school board's decision was made as a result of the study committee that the school principal convened to recommend the combined multi age classroom. While this saved a teaching position for one year, the costs of educating students continues to escalate, creating more demands on administrators to respond based on public scrutiny. Mr. Jones leads a high performing, award-winning school with a declining enrollment in an affluent community. He followed the four principles of NWREL (Participatory Management, Choice, Process and Comprehensiveness) closely studying alternatives through research based practice and yet, he still finds his school in a situation that requires cutting program supports. This response to declining enrolment is very similar to the decisions made by the principal at the Allegro School with high poverty, lower performance, and declining enrollments. Both school are in the same predicament as they look to cutting programs, support staff and even teachers.

Mr. Johnson opens his discussion about consolidation and explains the parent sentiment about having students travel to another school.

I can show you on a map they're really close together and could all fit in one building. Either of the buildings could absorb all the students. But it would mean that some first-graders in either of the towns would be on a bus for an hour or hour and 10 minutes each day. So that's one of the data points or observation points that you take into

consideration. Parents don't want their little kids on a bus that early and that long. It won't happen, not in my lifetime, not in this district!

In examining the decisions resulting from declining enrollments, it is clear, that administrators in both districts have elected to reduce programs, support staff and teaching positions. Community members expressed concerns over cuts. In contrast, to the Allegro School's Principal, the Picasso School Principal elected to follow a process of studying the problem versus the common reaction of reduction.

Summary of Research Question 1, Picasso School District

Consolidation is common factor in both school districts, and is discussed openly by participants in the Picasso School District. The Allegro School participants discuss consolidation in response to the second research question to follow. Participants in both school districts discuss autonomy and budget. The Picasso School Principal acknowledges that the board usually adopts his budget recommendations to the school board whereas; the Allegro School Principal felt that his budget recommendations were ignored. Some evidence process existed in both school districts, but the interviews from the Picasso School revealed specificity and community involvement in the form of committees, choices and gathering evidence/data. In the Picasso School District, there was more agreement on how the school district approached decision-making versus the Allegro School District where the participants saw the process as arbitrary versus collaborative.

Research Question 2: What is the impact/effect of declining enrollments on the school and the community?

Allegro

The participants in both districts all agreed that there was no impact to the students at the time of the interviews. There was a serious concern among the Allegro School participants about student impact in the near future if significant cuts to programs and staff were to continue. Staff

impact, budget cuts, class size, and school culture were the major factors that surfaced as the question was explored.

Leadership

Mrs. Smith raised concerns about the families moving away and about resources. Mrs. Smith speaks of leadership in terms of what the potential effects of declining enrollment might bring and how the leaders may have to start letting teachers go. She discusses the idea of larger class sizes and student needs being met. She had concerns for ESOL students and the need to increase jobs in order to attract more people to the area.

It's not like everyone who moves away comes back. Once they're gone, they're gone. I know for a long time too, people looked at the school district as not being of higher quality, but I mean you deal with it, the school can only do with what they have the money to do with.

Mrs. Smith connects the two subsets of resources and family. Her perception of the impact of declining enrollments is rooted in the idea that the town is not growing due to the quality of the school. She is, however, careful in making the point that schools have to function with the resources they have and earlier she reported that she was happy with the school district. However, Ms. August (Director of Special Services) confirmed that the Allegro School District had in fact, been identified as a focus school. The New Hampshire Department of Education (2015) defines a focus school as:

A Title I school that has the largest within-school gaps between the highest-achieving subgroup or subgroups and the lowest-achieving subgroup or subgroups or, at the high school level, has the largest within-school gaps in graduation rates (“within-school-gaps” focus school); or A Title I school that has a subgroup or subgroups with low achievement or, at the high school level, low graduation rates (“low-achieving subgroup” focus school) (<http://education.nh.gov/instruction/priority-focus/focus-schools.htm>).

There were twenty-one schools in New Hampshire that had been identified as focus or priority schools for the 2015-2016 school year. In the Allegro School, the connection between a low performing school and lack of resources and the town population phenomenon seems to follow a logical sequence as possible reasons for the declining enrollments in the school, but the opposite was true with the comparison school district. The Picasso school is high performing with ample resources, yet the same declining enrollment and lack of growth in the town remains as a common factor in both cases. The participants in both school districts commented on the conditions of town population and perceived them as contributing factors to the declining school enrollment. Possible reasons directly related to the school enrollment might be worthy of more research for future studies.

Mr. Robbins (Allegro School Principal) expresses concerns about communication protocols but doesn't seem to see any negative effects on the students. His emphasis is focused on the SAU and budgetary impacts. Mr. Robbins commented about the school board's actions that contradicted district goals around technology and RTI. He seemed to be vocal about the alignment of communication between the SAU and the school principals as well.

I'm not really sure but I think most impacted is the budget and teachers. It seems like in New Hampshire we're getting hit with declines... And then the budget... When you try and figure... So the school board has goals around technology, RTI and it all looks good on paper, and all of the cuts go against the goals. Well, we're going to have, supposedly we're going to have a debrief on this whole budget mess at some point. You know, like an after action review type of thing, and I think that's the point where we are to say that the communication has been way off this year. There has been an impact from a culture standpoint.

The school board goals and the budget cuts according to Mr. Robbins, were in direct conflict. Mr. Robbins was obviously upset with the school board and the alignment of

communication from the SAU. He refers to the “culture standpoint” but was unclear as to whether the impact included students, staff or both. Culture could also be the relationship between building, SAU administration and the school board. Mr. Robbins appeared to look forward to the debriefing with the SAU and the administrative team. Successful school leadership requires a shared vision, common beliefs and mission statements. (Callan and Levinson, 2011). The alignment of goals and communication between the SAU, school board and school principals is a significant issue when schools are in need of reform or major changes.

Ms. August reported that there hasn’t been an impact on students. Instead, the impact has been on the teaching. There is trepidation about the future cuts and suggests the idea of consolidation as an answer to declining enrollments in the school district.

You know, I can't say that there have been effects on the kids. Do I feel like the kids sense any type of difference in their education? No, I think we do a great job of making do with what we've got. I see that at some point we're talking minimum standards at board meetings, you know?

Ms. August is equally concerned about budgetary impacts and introduces consolidation as a possible remedy to the impact of declining enrollment. She said,

At some point it's going to hit a wall where we're not going to be able to cut anything and we're just going to have to deal with whatever cost rises we get. I think that the town itself should consider in the future going to one building. It was something they talked about years ago and there was a warrant article when building aid was available and the warrant article wasn’t passed.

Ms. August did not recall effects on the students because of declining enrollments nor did she think that they have seen any change in their educational experience. She is concerned about running out of options when cutting resources and staff members. Ms. August suggests consolidating the middle and elementary school into one K-8. As a cost effectiveness measure

this could be, in part, a viable answer based on the proximity of the two schools according to Lewis (2004) who studied consolidation and student transportation, asserting that it is cost effective to transport students to other schools. Lewis calls this assertion a myth as school districts discover hidden costs for busses, drivers, building maintenance and, most importantly, the cost to students who may ride a bus for over one hour on a one-way trip to and from school. The Allegro School District dispels this argument because both the elementary school and the middle school buildings are close enough to share common property and resources as well as staff services, and buses drop off at the same time in the current configuration. This speaks to the uniqueness of the each school system in New Hampshire having different needs. For example, the situation in the Picasso School district supports Lewis's claim based on the town demographics and the proximity to the nearest school district.

Population

Mrs. Smith admitted that she was worried about cuts to special services.

And it's like; you still got to make sure that even though there is this decline in enrollment you need to make sure that there is...that you're not getting lax on the things that are needed. My worry is that if enrollment starts declining, are they going to start cutting things like special ed.? And I know for my family that would be difficult.

Mrs. Smith mirrored concerns about the future of the school district if the enrollments continue to decline. From reviews of over two years' worth of school board agendas and meeting minutes, the researcher was able to find one paragraph dedicated to long range planning. The discussion centered around goals and technology. Declining enrollments was only mentioned as a budget driver during two of the meetings. Both discussions occurred during the budget development period in the second year.

Mr. Robbins was appreciative of the need for communication and he explains how he has led the staff through a difficult and stressful time.

I think the way I've tried to handle it is to make sure there's plenty of communication about it. That they know first before anyone else, whether it's individual staff or the full staff itself. We just handled it as respectfully as possible. There's nothing pleasurable about sitting across from a staff member and telling them they don't have a job next year. But I think that declining enrollment is what puts stress on everybody. I mean when you start looking at staffing amongst buildings and people having to work, particularly in small towns.

The problems associated with declining enrollments are common to many school districts and they are not new to some of the Midwestern states prompting studies as early as 1980. Mazzoni & Mueller (1980) identified five pressures that school districts contend with internally and externally when dealing with declining enrollment. They are: (1) fiscal stress, (2) enlarged service demands, (3) community support, (4) school control controversies, and (5) defeatist attitudes. The fifth element, (defeatist attitudes) applies directly to Mr. Robbins reporting on the impact of the declining enrollments. Mazzoni & Mueller explained that defeatist attitudes stem from job vulnerability, limited professional opportunities, shrunken resources and declining enrollments as an excuse for poor performing schools. Mazzoni & Mueller also found that the state of Minnesota mitigated these attitudes through the development of legislation that included “an effective planning capability” (p. 406). The New Hampshire Legislature has yet to initiate a discussion on the subject of planning and capability.

Ms. August speaks of possibilities that might address the declining enrollments in the Allegro School District, but is pessimistic about success.

I think if we were able to gain momentum that we would get some more positive press about our school, perhaps that would help our community as a whole. It would attract people into the town. But I don't necessarily know that that's going to be enough. Like even if we were a top Eddies award-winning school or you know a blue ribbon school of

excellence, I don't think that that would be enough to solve the budget crisis we're in. We need more from our town than just the school.

Ironically, Ms. August, at the time of the interview was unaware that the comparison school district was a high performing award winning school that was still losing enrollment. She seemed to rethink her position and added that she did not think improving the school would stand on its own to grow the town population. She suggests that the town needed to be more involved in finding ways to promote growth. This seems to be an endless loop in the discussions over possible solutions. Participants in both school districts (community members and a central office representatives) indicated that the school could grow if the town would do more to attract the growth and at the same time, they have suggested improving the schools to attract newer families into the town. The common thread appears to be the town and the school system acting as separate entities. From the comparison of both school districts, school quality doesn't seem to have an effect on the condition of declining enrollments however; the town and school leaders might have a mutually beneficial outcome if they were able to work together for a common goal. The participants in both districts call on the community and it's leaders to support growth as a common goal. Harmon (2009) suggested,

In sum, we argue that enlightened educational leadership that seriously takes into account the 21st Century needs of students - as well as the communities in which they reside - cannot help but interpret academic and community improvement goals as mutually reinforcing priorities (p. 4).

Financial Impact

Mrs. Smith introduces taxes through the budget cuts and the concept of choice as well:

I understand that they're cutting the budget. Do I agree with it? No. Would I be willing to pay more in taxes? Yes, because it's affecting my kids. Um, would I be happy about it? No, but in the long run it's going towards my kids and their education, so one way or the

other I am going to pay for it. You choose to live there so you've got to be invested in the town you're living in and the quality.

Mrs. Smith mentions higher taxes as an investment and asserts that she will have to pay for educating her children in other ways if not through the cost of supporting the schools.

Mr. Robbins recalled the positive initiatives that were put in place, such as full day kindergarten and the acquisition of technology and a tech integrator.

You know? I'm lucky I'm keeping full day kindergarten, because they could easily say go back to half time and will take a teacher, then what? You look at technology, you try and get teachers to be more integrated when we have, you know there's a good chunk of our staff that are on the older side... so they need help learning how to integrate some of that technology into their lessons. And you know we buy them all this technology. Every room has a Nino board, every room has a document camera, every teacher has their own laptop and we have shared chromebook carts. Not to mention an assortment of iPads, so we've got all the stuff and now we're just taking the vehicle away to try and show them how to use it. I tried to imagine what it would be like if we didn't have a tech integrator and now we've had one for two years and I can't picture our school without that person. And they just cut it out like it wasn't even there. Like, it was gone and there wasn't even an argument over it.

The Allegro School is well equipped with specialized equipment to use as learning tools in the classroom. Mr. Robbins raises his concerns over the challenge of training staff without a technology integrator to help with the process. The burdens will either fall on Mr. Robbins or the technology will be implemented in pockets by those teachers who are willing to take risks and experiment. Weber (1996) reminds us that cutting staff members, limits creativity, causes stress among those who are being cut, and puts demands on those left behind to take on more responsibilities.

Ms. August repeats the idea of consolidation in concert with the idea that the town should “do their part” to attract industry and businesses into the community.

For the community as a whole, I think the town needs to attract businesses, we get more business and industry into the town. There's definitely business parks on Route [66] that aren't filled and I think that they need to do their part in bringing industry into the community. I think of the school district with two buildings, that we shift the kids into one building. We consolidate, we expand this building in some capacity, we've got the fields back here, playground space and we make this the central school. You know, and hopefully we're able to cut costs by sharing staff members. I think it's a K-8 town, I think it should be. We're small and people take pride in, you know the town. We have great things in the town that are going on here. I see this as a great K-8 school.

In addition to consolidation of the two buildings, Ms. August explains how personnel costs might be reduced through a plan that includes sharing staff members. She also talks about the rural school characteristic of pride in a small town setting.

Students and Staff

Mrs. Smith expressed strong concerns for the financial welfare of staff members as well as cuts to extracurricular programs and the Unified Arts programming.

I mean they have to. Teachers went to school. They went for a reason.

They are doing this and they know it's not a big money thing. You know they're not in it for the money but they still need to make a living. They need to be able to pay their student loans off. They need to be able to provide for their family. And when they start getting rid of the things like the extracurricular things or, you know, getting rid of the, you know, when they started getting rid of the arts and music, and that's all-important too. It's not just the education portion they need. I don't mind paying higher taxes, I'm going to pay for it anyway.

Mrs. Smith felt strongly about her commitment to the community, but her response to the question seemed to provoke a fearful outlook despite her willingness to pay higher taxes. None of her answers indicated the presence of any of the framework principles, but they did include subsets of the four major themes. For example, in her remarks about school quality, she explained her understanding that schools can only work with the resources allotted to them. She presented program cuts as a result of declining enrollment and her concerns for teacher welfare. Fowler (1980) reports that the most difficult problem associated with declining enrollments is personnel, mainly because of the imbalance of reduced funding, loss of teachers and administrators in relation to the rate of the decline.

Mr. Robbins discusses the difficult process of eliminating positions and the effects that these decisions have had on the staff members who were losing jobs and the personal toll it took on him as an administrator.

So I think the great example of that is, I know that the people that know whose positions have been affected or eliminated or reduced, they're looking for full-time jobs right now. So the tech integrator has come to me and said, "Can you write me a letter?" So I proposed the classes (physical education) based on the reductions we had in place with declining enrollment. I just don't know what else is going on up at the SAU level, which I believe led us to the budget freeze. While, as someone that deals with such a small part of the budget, your budget is frozen now and anything over \$500 has to go to the school board. Three weeks later they come back with an update, and we have a \$141,000 surplus. I think there's probably 5 to 7 people and a chunk of those are shared staff that are probably disgruntled and rightfully so. I will not forget that day and I know there's a lot of stress involved that day, and it wasn't until I brought the guidance counselor in. When I told her she might be going between two buildings, and she looked at me and

kind of matter-of-factly took it in, listened, and just was listening, active listening you know, I was the one that ended up crying.

Mr. Robbins saw the impact towards teachers, technology and communication.

According to his perception, the cuts that the school board made were not based on informed decision-making (no clear process evident) and would have a negative impact on the school.

Kober and Rentner (2011) said it best,

Education reform has been a particular victim of declining budgets in many districts.

Two-thirds of districts with funding decreases have responded by either slowing progress on reform initiatives or postponing or stopping some reform initiatives altogether. This situation has implications for the nation's future economic strength (p. 15).

Clearly, stakeholders were not involved in any of the decisions to reduce positions at the Principal's or the school board's level. Communication between principals and staff members was clearly evident as measured through the frameworks (Process), but according to Mr. Robbins, it was "way off" with the SAU.

Ms. August raises the question of impact on the teaching process and highlights the need to combine Health and Physical Education. Her focus is on the schedule and the instructional time for students being shortened:

You know it certainly impacts with teaching. We shifted with a health teacher and combined PE so it certainly shortens the time the kids have health class. It's going to impact their schedule. Either we're going to see health in a different time and contact time will be different at the middle school. We can't provide things that are above and beyond that other places can. But the principal, he is just such a great outside the box thinker and we do enrichment clubs for kids during lunch because we have our teachers there then. So then we grab our music clubs during lunch, as we have teachers that are contracted for those times and we can't pay them to stay after and we can't pay to run

buses after. So we try to offer the experiences with what we've got. We are a “focus” school and there are things that we need to improve on. We've got a lot of special education students... We do the best with what we've got and the community sees. I also don't think they see what it's like in other places. This would be an ideal opportunity to create one K-8 school from the two existing ones. Staff members and resources could be combined in one building.

Ms. August suggests consolidation, a subset of the staff and student category. She also includes consolidation as a partial answer to cost savings with personnel as she pointed out that the current configuration for the two schools is to share staff members. The research is divided on the issue of cost savings as a result of consolidating two schools into one. According to Fowler (2008), decisions around declining enrollments follow two paths: cutting tangible items such as books, equipment and transportation, and intangible items such as personnel and teaching programs. Ms. August's idea of consolidation includes closing of one of the schools to create one K-8 school. In this case, the middle school would close and the Allegro School would absorb the students in grades five through eight. There is a great deal of research around school consolidation, however, Ms. August also mentioned that their school, based on the standard scores, is a focus school, or low performing.

Mrs. Smith speaks of leadership in terms of what the potential effects of declining enrollment might bring and how the leaders may have to start letting teachers go. She discusses the idea of larger class sizes and student needs being met. She had concerns for ESOL students and the need to increase jobs in order to attract more people to the area.

Several effects of declining enrollment were reported including the disparity between the regular education population and the increasing special education numbers. Both administrators at the building and SAU level agreed that the Allegro School and the middle school should be combined to form a kindergarten through eighth grade school. The community member was

concerned about teacher salaries, future program cuts and the special education services. It was also clear that the impact was more on teachers and staff members and not necessarily affecting the students at the time.

Summary of Research Question 2, Allegro School District

The participants of the Allegro School District offered no evidence of a direct impact on students. Stress levels for teacher and administrators contributed to low morale affecting the internal culture of the school as employees worried about program cuts that might directly affect their livelihood. Cuts to interventionists and high taxes affected decisions of school board members who would ultimately override the recommendations of the principal after the budget development process. A lack of communication between both the SAU and building level administration was referenced in both the Allegro and Picasso School Districts.

Research Question 2: What is the impact/effect of declining enrollments on the school and the community?

Picasso School

Major points are revealed from respondents that include the high performing and low performing school phenomenon and a general agreement that the only impact of declining enrollments was on staff members and programs. Exploration and a yearlong study of a possible solution to declining enrollment is a major difference in how the two districts approached declining enrollment. Opportunities, relationships, collaboration, taxes are subsets of the four main categories (Leadership, Population, Financial Impact and Staff and Students).

Leadership

Mrs. Carmen describes Mr. Jones's response to declining enrollments and highlights his leadership style. She draws conclusions based on Mr. Jones's actions and his responses to declining enrollments based on the study committee.

Mr. Jones brings ideas to the board and says, “ Oh that might be a great idea for the P.A.C. (Principal’s Advisory Committee) committee as an item.” So I think he thinks through what would be a good challenge for them, he brings recommendations to the board and we pick one based on that, so um, it might be based on what's happening in the community. I think he probably talked about multi-age classrooms and pre-K; it was around the fact that we had declining enrollments, so it was a strategic suggested approach from his perspective.

Mrs. Carmen did not answer research question 2 on the impact of declining enrollments directly, but she seems to make the connection through describing Mr. Jones’s action. It is clear that she is forming this viewpoint as a school board member. Mrs. Carmen introduces Mr. Jones’s response to declining enrollments and speculates whether or not his decision to study the concepts of multi-age classrooms and pre-k might be related to the community population trend. This approach is collaborative in nature. (Budge, 1999) The creation of the committee to study the problem is comprehensive in nature, involves community members, presents choice through a process. School leaders will have to rely less on isolated “strategies and more on building collaborative partnerships with old and new entities” (Harmon and Schafft, 2009, p. 6).

Mr. Jones includes an optimistic view as he ponders the possibilities of the declining enrollment. He and Mr. Johnson were the only participants in the study to come up with the idea of looking for a possible opportunity to the challenges of declining enrollments.

As the numbers drop down, you know the other side of the sword is a good thing. Let's take advantage of the fact that our numbers are reducing and then we can look at kids in different ways and we don't have to stick with models.

Mr. Jones later contradicted his statement about creating opportunity and stated why he was retiring.

I've spent the last 11 years building this school and building programs, and now I'm being told dismantle it. The challenge is how do you maintain quality of programming while dealing with the fact that you have to be cutting programs. You have to. You have no choice. This has been part of the reason I am retiring. I'm being asked to dismantle something that I worked to build over eleven years. I hope they find the right person. And I think it will be because I think the district, the community, knows what they want. Because I know these people, I know the people in town and I know what they're looking for in an administrator, and the previous administration they had prior to me, and the administrator prior to that whom I knew.

Mr. Jones acknowledges his part in the community through his relationships in the community. Administrators who understand the community in a rural school setting prove to be very valuable to the success of the school through his/her leadership. Leaders in rural communities who understand the social values of the rural community are said to have a "sense of place" Budge, 2006) in a rural community. Harmon and Schafft further support this idea:

Collaboration must extend beyond a singular focus on student achievement to a blended community and educational leadership strategy that takes as a fundamental assumption that ensuring the academic success of students, on the one hand, and the social and economic vitality of the rural community, on the other, are not mutually exclusive priorities, but are instead deeply and indeed inextricably connected (p.5).

Mr. Jones is clearly connected to the community, its history and the people.

Mr. Johnson discusses his approach and leadership style as a superintendent and an educator:

I spend a lot of time with people, everything from the town police chief to the town business administrators. We talk with principals of the schools, again, because I have different school boards - it's not just one district like [yours] that's three, then you have

the SAU board, which is four. I have, well, double that. So you try to get the flavor, and I have a very strong philosophy and what I call honoring the past. Honoring the history of what's gone on. And by honoring the past you can't just come in and take an idea and think that you're going to be the Savior. You're not.

He confirms in part, the idea of involving community members by gathering information from them. He doesn't speak in terms of how he collaborates or incorporates choice according to the NWREL framework. It is clear that he follows a process and feels very strongly about traditions and established cultures.

Population

Mrs. Carmen commented on the impact to the community from the perspectives of community and parent. Research question 2 is addressed in terms of small schools and the demographic make-up of the community.

I think it's a mix from a parent and community perspective. Its kind of interesting being in a smaller community like Picasso because of the population mix of having a large adult community. Actually, we have two adult communities in our small little town.

Well, I mean I think the sentiment is split. I think that, um, parents who really take pride in the elementary school don't want to see any changes, they want to keep it as is.

And...the adult community asks, "Why do we need the school?"

The elements of the NWREL framework seem absent in this evidence. Mrs. Carmen doesn't mention an impact to students, but she sees an impact from the adult community as they question the need for a school. The other view from the parents is the just the opposite: they don't want to see any changes. In comparison, both community members reported on the need for the school. Mrs. Carmen mentions that parents have pride in their school and that small schools are an important part of a rural community and often are the nucleus in small towns. Smaller rural schools nurture a sense of belonging and community, more student involvement

and a positive, humane and caring environment (Lashway, 1999). In a contrary view, Lyson (2002) suggested that community declines are a direct result of school closure.

Mr. Jones seemed confident in his recommendations to the school board to cut two teaching positions for a remaining total of nine teachers in the school.

So I've made the commitment to, and I've said to the board, "All right you've cut two positions - that's fine, I get that, but until we reach 120 kids I need nine teachers to do the work." So last year we made the decision, - once we hit, we went below 150 students we made the decision that we needed to eliminate two classroom positions.

You know, they are good people, they're school people, they are student-centered people. The town hasn't started to rebel yet, and they're not showing up at school district meetings and saying what the heck is going on here, but...

Mr. Jones praised the school board for making the decision to stay with nine teachers. He also speculated that the town would start questioning the decisions being made around declining enrollments. What was not clear was whether he thought town members would question the need for cuts or the need for keeping the school open with only 120 students.

The impact that Mr. Johnson referred to was the actual numbers and the per pupil cost in two of his school districts, which are among the highest in the state.

Look at this, 2007-08 we were up probably around 210, and today we are at 110 and next year will be under 100. Per-pupil cost at [Adagio] and Picasso are both at 18,200. The two schools, probably, as the crow flies are 4 miles apart.

Mr. Johnson explains the dramatic drop in enrollment as the major reason for the higher per pupil costs.

Financial Impact

Tax rates, a single school district and the need for a small school is questioned. Mrs. Carmen reacted to the high rate of taxes reaching twenty dollars per thousand in only ten years.

She correlated the high taxes with the school. As schools shrink in size, especially in small towns, the fixed costs remain the same and need for services, continue to rise. In New Hampshire, schools are funded solely on property taxes. The taxes rise as the tax base shrinks or stays the same.

When I first moved in, taxes per thousand were somewhere in the teens, and now they're up close to 20 and just over 20 in just a matter of 10 years. So with those tax increases people tend to hone into those big expenses, and the school being one of them, and say well, do we even need a school in our district?

The high tax rate and the questions from town members contemplating the need for a school in the town are important and significant factors that may require a stronger defense for keeping the school open.

Mr. Jones compares figures of tuition rates from the 2011-2012 school year, as they went from the lowest to the highest over the course of nine years.

Well, the biggest challenge is if you were to look at a spreadsheet of tuition rates in [The SAU] back in 2011- 2012 if we didn't have the lowest tuition rate we had the second lowest in the state. It was like 100 bucks difference dividing us between who was the lowest. So we would be really creative with our dollars, but still being able to provide lots of different supports. And now we're cutting many of those supports because we can't afford them and yet we had the highest tuition rate in [this SAU], in the course of five years, which we went from essentially the lowest to the highest, and we were losing programs over the course of 2002 through 2011.

The most significant impact is what has happened as a result of the highest tuition rate combined with declining enrollments. Programs that brought individualized services to students were being reduced over a nine-year time frame.

Mr. Johnson compares the Picasso school to a private school setting. Additionally, he touches briefly on the consolidating administrators for the two schools that are only four miles apart.

I get back to this; it's almost like a private school education in a public school environment. Very much, they use the school for their meeting places as we talked about before. I think the staff is the only one that gets hurt. As an example, we've talked about even consolidating administrators. But neither school board wanted to abide. And I said you could probably save \$40,000 or \$50,000, and they said, "No, that's not enough. They said it wasn't a big deal."

Mr. Johnson suggested an alternative to consolidating the schools in the two towns and proposed combining the services of one building administrator as a significant cost-saving measure. The research indicates that sharing services between two schools, as a partial consolidation effort is a common response. It allows the schools to have autonomy over transportation and other services. Both towns rejected the idea and each continued with one principal.

Students and Staff

Mrs. Carmen responded to research question 2 and the impact on students and staff as she referred to studies conducted on class sizes and the parental concern arising from cutting teachers as a result of declining enrollments. She also spoke of the different viewpoints of community members. In her community, the website review and interviews with Mr. Jones revealed "since 2011, we've had to go from eleven classroom teachers to nine." She continued,

When there was a cut in teachers there was a concern in the community of class sizes getting too big, that there might not be personalized training of the kids, where the focus is on getting them successful as opposed to you know, meeting numbers and statistics. And then you have the whole other side of the community, where they feel their tax

dollars keep climbing and they want to see some kind of reductions, and they hit the school because that's one of the larger tax items on their property. One thing with the comments that came out with the social media thing was about getting rid of our school because the community knows our enrollment is down. Other parents - it's interesting, you can talk to some parents and they are concerned that our classroom sizes are getting too big, so when you have 18 students in a classroom they are concerned that we don't have enough teachers and then you talk to some others in the community and they say, well, do we need that many teachers? Why don't they double up on classes? It's interesting, person-by-person. They all have different opinions, and so, yeah. But studies show that a good mix is somewhere between that 15 to 18 mark and anything less hurts you and anything more hurts you, so that sweet spot is right where we have it.

Ready and Lee (2006) corroborate her view as they presented pertinent facts about the prominent studies conducted in Tennessee and Wisconsin, citing higher student achievement in elementary school classes of 16 to 20 students. Ready and Lee warned that the studies were conducted without taking variables of school size or grade size into consideration. In other words the measurement of student achievement could have been applied to students in a large school with smaller class sizes. The opposite is also true: the comparison group could have been a larger class in a smaller school. Researchers have called for more investigation on the correlation of grade size, class size and school size, as well as grade levels included in the studies.

Community members from both school districts were concerned with higher taxes resulting in major personnel reductions from budget cuts, mixed sentiment from parents and the adult community on school consolidation, program reductions, and class sizes. Class size has become controversial as an argument among researchers. The Council of Chief State School Officers (2012) conducted meta studies to develop their handbook on class sizes. Their research

revealed that while the arguments for smaller class sizes affecting student achievement holds true, there is an equal amount of research that supports larger class sizes. The Council of Chief State School Officers (2012) asserted that while smaller class sizes had a greater impact on improved student achievement among minority and poor students, it was the quality of the teacher that made the most significant difference in the classroom. Both principals and central office participants stated that they did not see any effects on students, only staff members and teachers. Their biggest concern was stress and anxiety for teachers with positions that would be reduced or even cut completely from the roster. Teacher stress has been widely researched over the years, specifically, stress related to consolidation and mergers of schools. In fact, researchers reported that teachers go through a process of worry, anxiety, trauma and even bereavement when faced with the prospect of leaving their school (Kyriacou and Harriman, 1993). The principal, Mr. Robbins, seemed equally concerned about program cuts that reduced interventionists, library and other peripheral support positions. Fowler (1980) posits “districts that have declining enrollments but yet refuse to close schools, maintain those schools primarily at the expense of the salaries of district personnel. The result is lower morale and productivity” (p. 1). Mazzoni and Mueller (1982) studied the transition from growth to decline in the Minnesota school system. They reported on internal and external conditions as well as demographic change interwoven with powerful forces that affect schools with declining enrollment. The work of Mazzoni and Mueller (1980) also identified six problems connected with enrollment loss as: (1) Fiscal stress, associated with mounting expenditures and inflated costs, together with resource scarcity brought about by competition from other public services and tax relief measures; (2) Enlarged service demands, associated with legislative and judicial actions (federal as well as state) expanding services to underserved populations and extending fundamental rights to all employees and clients; (3) Uncertain community support, associated with skepticism about school quality, changed societal expectations for education, anxieties

about residential patterns and community maintenance, and public perceptions of increased taxes paying for reduced programs; (4) School control controversies associated with federal and state assertiveness in school governance, teacher collective bargaining, and citizen efforts to influence educational decision-making; (5) Defeatist attitudes, associated with job vulnerability, limited professional opportunities, shrunken resources, and (6) The use of decline as a convenient scapegoat for real school ills (p. 406).

The list identifies many of the ill effects of declining enrollment. Mr. Jones refuted the defeatist attitude and pointed out that declining enrollments might offer an opportunity. In his second interview he stated:

As the numbers drop down you know the other side of the sword is a good thing. Let's take advantage of the fact that our numbers are reducing and then we can look at kids in different ways and we don't have to stick with models.

Clearly, he was referring to ways that educators can help students improve their learning, and at the time of the interview, seemed accepting of the conditions he was dealing with.

Mrs. Smith, the community member in the Allegro School, expressed concern over the possibility of major program cuts such as the arts and Special Education. The issues raised by both community members suggests strong concerns surrounding the choices of creating larger class sizes, cutting programs and teacher reductions in their communities. This is significant because the second element of the NWREL framework is, in fact, choice. According to the framework, choice implies that not all solutions will have the same effect for every school district and that the quality increases when decision makers align strategies with values and resources.

Mr. Jones recognizes cuts to important support staff, special education, paraprofessionals and speech services, and possibly another classroom teacher for the following school year.

Programs that we brought to the school with things like RTI tutors, reading recovery, I know there's more like math support, a literacy coach, and a math coach. Those are part-time positions but these are tools. These are supports that we were able to bring to the school to really be able to personalize learning for kids. But since 2011, we've had to go from 11 classroom teachers to nine. Thankfully, they can allow us to stay at nine for one more year. It wouldn't surprise me if we lost another teacher in a year because of the new season's dip in our enrollment. We will lose our math coach, we will lose the math tutor and that particular individual will go into special ed. We're going to lose about probably a third of our special ed. support, paraprofessional support and speech services are getting cut to 80% from 100, OT from 40 to 30% and PE is being cut from 100 to 80%. Just go down the list of the cuts that are taking place across the school. So all those have impacts on what we're able to do for kids. Mr. Jones is detailed in his description of the cuts and sets the stage for the challenges for remaining staff members:

I think it's more challenging on the staff. I think there's a lot of anxiety, particularly the people on the fringes. Again, I made it very clear to the whole staff that my job is, I've got to protect the professional core of this staff in terms of, you know, in terms of the philosophy and keeping classes small. So when you're one of those people on the outside of that. You know these are all quality people, you know, like the PE teacher, and one of the ones I didn't mention was our media generalist's position was getting cut from 60% to 50%, which is a small cut. She could've been cut more but she needs time to work in the stacks, 'cause 40% of her time is taken just teaching. So I need to give her some time to be able to keep the library up and running. So, um but it's been right across the school and you know, the speech pathologist is in my office crying because she's afraid she's going to lose her house.

Mr. Jones takes full responsibility for the reductions that have taken place in response to declining enrollments. He explained that the students will be impacted by the quality of the personalized education the students have been receiving versus the services they will receive after the cuts have been realized.

Mr. Johnson explained his concern for staff members over the students based on the history of how the school operates.

The only impact that it has had is a reduction in force. We've had some really young people over the years and really great, great energy! So we've lost them because last one in first one out and we've had situations with regard to some of our more veteran staff who are really no more ready to retire. They came here themselves when they were 25 years old. They've been here 25 years and they're in her mid-50s and they're not ready to retire. So again, I don't think the kids have suffered at all. I get back to this; it's almost like a private school education in a public school environment. I think the staff is the only one that gets hurt. I don't think we've had any direct effects right now, but I think next year we might because we made more significant cuts.

Mr. Johnson echoed the sentiment of administrators from both school districts, stating that he did not see any effects on students, only staff members and teachers. Their biggest concern was stress and anxiety for teachers with positions that would be reduced or even cut completely from the roster. Clearly, he was referring to ways that educators can help students improve their learning and at the time of the interview, seemed accepting of the conditions he was dealing with:

The parents and school board members of both towns have voiced their opposition to consolidation as an alternative to explore. We don't want first graders riding a bus for over an hour before or after school.

Nevertheless, community members, principals and central office personnel indicated those affected most were the teachers and staff members. Mr. Johnson referred to veteran teachers who were not ready to retire in terms of having to make staffing cuts without the possibility of attrition. It appears as if he was referring to the newer teachers as being more valuable with fresher ideas than some veteran staff members. Members of the Picasso School District reported that the initial impact of declining enrollments on staff and students almost non-existent. It seems that the following year was more of a concern if more cuts to staff members, programs and services were on the horizon.

Summary of Research Question 2, Picasso

The Picasso School Districts participants have similar points regarding communication between the SAU and building level administration. In contrast to the Allegro School District, the Principal and the Superintendent emphasized the possibility of an opportunity versus a negative impact. The approach to multi-age classrooms was explored as a possible answer to the problem of declining enrollments. Respondents from both school districts cited problems arising with staff members because of program cuts and the fears associated with job security. Problems around declining enrollments are explored in more detail from answers to the next research question.

Research Question 3: When does declining enrollment become a problem in a school district?

Allegro

Leadership

Some of the subsets are repeated as problems associated with declining enrollments. The common threads in both school districts are class sizes, consolidation efforts of past and present and staff reductions.

Mrs. Smith speaks of leadership decisions that will raise class sizes through teacher reductions.

I'm starting to think at that point, that probably, the number of kids will go down and possibly the class sizes will get larger if they start letting teachers go.

Researchers support this concern as Gruman, Harachi, Abbot, Catalano and Fleming (2008) found declines in academics and classroom participation as well as higher incidences of family stress, peer acceptance and more teacher supports.

Mr. Robbins answered question three directly, citing empty classrooms as a problem.

When the rooms start opening up and you start having empty classrooms. That's a big thing. It's very visible; I think that's what has pushed... I have a few parents that are hell-bent on wanting the board to look at going into one building to try and save costs to be able to add back programs. These parents do, but the board is going through this process.

Well, they put a proposal forward about 10 or 11 years ago and they tried to get it through and voted on it. It didn't make it. It lost back-to-back years by a few votes.

The proposal that Mr. Robbins referred to consisted of consolidating the two schools into the Allegro School. The project included an addition to the school for middle grades. The researcher prompted Mr. Robbins with a follow up question, asking how a consolidation effort might be accomplished at the present time:

We would have to talk about it in a leadership group, we have to have discussions with the school board and probably set up a separate subcommittee to go after it. But I'm not doing the legwork on my own, not without them involved. Because they can just turn around and vote to undo everything you did.

Mr. Robbins clearly expresses his lack of trust with the school board as his reasoning for not taking an initiative to study the possibility of consolidation for the Allegro School. He does speak of the need to have a process in a leadership group, the school board and a subcommittee.

In the case of the Allegro School, he is referring to closing the middle school and consolidating all students to the Allegro School. In the literature there are many topics associated with closure and consolidation in the research with proponents and opponents. For example, mobility is defined as a problem for students (Gruman, et al), the roles of schools as part of a successful community and the effects of closure (Howley & Howley, 2006), closing schools as a positive cost savings measure (Valencia, 2001) and the economic decline of communities as a result of school closure (Kwarteng, 2005). The research indicates that the effects of school closure and consolidation are specific to the community in terms of the success or failure.

In praise of the two principals in the school district, Ms. August presents the strategies employed to involve stakeholders.

We work I think, pretty hard. You know we are all present at the municipal budget committee meeting where we are invited and extending invitations of our own quite often.

Our building principals will try to get to the Allegro business community meeting. They try to get to that meeting to talk about the needs of the school or even use it as a forum.

Ms. August reports on the quality of the town administrator, but in the same phrase, she explains how the political climate will always harbor people who will not support the school. In the first sentence, she praises the town administrator, (the former chief of police) and in the same sentence, introduces town members who are opponents of the school district.

We have a great town administrator who used to be the chief of police, so you know; I think we've got some people who are just always going to be against us. I don't know how we would ever get them on board because I think right now we are pretty powerless to convince them. You know they will ask for right to know, articles and we give them. We provide opportunities to meet with them to talk about any of the issues and invite them to school board meetings. We don't always get them there, I think we will always

continue to extend the olive branch but I'm not sure if we'll get those particular adversarial people on board.

Ms. August doesn't ignore the other side of the positive efforts of school administrators, but she is not optimistic about turning the tide of the adversarial community members, and expresses serious doubts about the potential success that their efforts might bring. It seems that the Ms. August recognizes the political influence of community members who have influence over the growth of the school and town.

Population

One part of the problem of school population includes the decisions administrators have to make when creating student groupings. Mrs. Smith thematically refers to class size and the effects of student teacher ratios:

So they will wind up making the classes bigger, while not necessarily in size but the number of pupils in each class. That can cut into some of the kids that need more of that one on one. Those who need the teacher's help, which compared to a teacher and an aide with 15 children and a teacher and an aide with 30 in a class is impossible.

Mrs. Smith remarked about the effectiveness of teachers in a class of fifteen children versus a class of thirty with an aide. Ready and Lee (2007) found that student achievement was higher in classes that held a student to teacher ratio of between thirteen and seventeen to one.

Mr. Robbins talks about the size of a building in terms of total student population and the problem of declining enrollments in direct relation to the curriculum:

It's a perfect size; I mean 350 kids in one building. It's a dream situation. But I think the empty classrooms are the indicator. Also, it's a problem when the curriculum starts unraveling, that's the best word for it.

Mr. Robbins's reference to the total school population of 350 students is part of an idea to create a kindergarten through eighth grade school. School size versus class size is an issue that

has yet to be explored thoroughly. School size in most cases is studied at the high school level and very little at the elementary level. Ready and Lee (2007) also raise concerns over unexplored territory in regards to grade level size and the relationship to school size.

Ms. August's questions as to whether positive press about the school district would be enough reason to attract newcomers to the town:

I think if we were able to gain momentum that we would get some more positive press about our school, perhaps that would help our community as a whole. It would attract people into the town. But I don't necessarily know that that's going to be enough.

Later, during the interviewing process, she confirms her last sentence as she contemplates whether an award winning school would be enough, and decides what the town would need to do more to attract people to the town.

Financial Impact

Declining enrollments are clearly affected by business and employment. Towns that fail to attract businesses offer little opportunity for growth based on the job market and therefore, the working class families don't move into the smaller towns (Francese & Merrill, 2008). (Mrs. Smith speaks of the problem in terms of the local businesses in town that have given way to larger commercial corporations.

There used to be the furniture store now it's a Dunkin' Donuts, just seeing those things gone. An Irving station where there was just, rocks you know? Just seeing that it's not enough to bring in, you know, I think we said you know the number of jobs to draw more people in the area.

She makes the point clear that, even with new businesses in town, there hasn't been enough to draw working families. Francese & Merrill warn that New Hampshire is caught in a "social trap" that prohibits workforce housing that excludes children from communities in an attempt to keep property taxes at bay. Working class families in New Hampshire are less likely

to move to smaller towns where property taxes and housing prices are out of reach. This creates a dilemma even for towns that might welcome growth. In other New Hampshire towns, small governing bodies such as conservation commissions, town councils and planning/zoning boards purposefully create rules to control growth.

Mr. Robbins expresses his disdain for the budget process during the third and final interview, as he explains how the bottom line changed:

We just met with the budget committee last Tuesday. They made kind of a bizarre move, which just shocked us all...they voted to add two teaching positions back into the budget. So now our default, let me get this right, our default is higher than our proposed budget for the previous year. One of my first two years here, they lost like back-to-back years by a handful of votes to build one school or to build an addition onto this school, which would've made it a nice K-8 setting.

Consolidation and process are common threads in Mr. Robbins's responses to question three. Leadership takes on a strong role in the process of making enrollment decisions, and "closing schools is a politically difficult decision for any district. It has implications for students and families who must be transferred to a new school" (Sunderman & Payne, 2009, p. 1). Mr. Robbins also explains how a process should unfold for the exploration of a K-8 school with leadership discussions, school board involvement and subcommittees. Irwin (2012) calls for support: "there is a need for a more nuanced planning style that acknowledges the realities of politics, unequal power relations and the validity of community residents' needs and values" (p. 45). Mr. Robbins mentions how the consolidation to a K-8 school could be a cost savings, but Cox and Cox (2010) posited there is little evidence of consolidation efforts leading to increased efficiency or academics. Others have found different results as Duncombe and Yinger (2001) studied consolidation data from New York, and found savings in capital costs when small districts merged (1,500 students or less). The opposite was true with districts of 1,500 or more.

Young (1994) conducted a study of schools and found higher costs in consolidated school districts as well. Obviously, Mr. Robbins favors the idea of school consolidation and the Allegro School District is one of well under 1,500 students, but the research supporting or refuting the idea of consolidation is geared toward the merging of school districts as opposed to two small rural schools in the same town and neighborhood. Once again, this point emphasizes the unique circumstances of smaller schools in New Hampshire.

Mr. Robbins refers to a total school population of 350 students as “a dream situation.” Current research on the ideal class sizes cite higher student achievement as a result, but more importantly, teacher quality, not class size has proven to be more effective with better learning models (CCSR, 2010). The direction of the interview continued in the direction of school budgeting and Mr. Robbins responded to the idea of a bottom line budget:

Yes. So now that they've added money into the budget; now our budget rose over the default. So now it looks better that it would be better to vote for the default now, where before we were in a position where everything was lined up, and we knew where all the money was going to be allocated. Now it looks like the default number is better, which means, they'll probably vote for the default, and then we'll have to figure out how that... how the money gets moved around. Does that make sense?

The lines between process, choice and comprehensiveness are blurred according to the NWREL framework. Mr. Robbins expresses deep concern over the budget committee's decision to arbitrarily restore two teaching positions. This change increases the total amount of the original proposed budget over the default budget. He is worried that voters will choose to defeat the proposed budget as amended by the school board in favor of a lower amount of the default budget. If this were to happen, administrators would be forced to reallocate funds and positions for the third time in the process. The budget process in New Hampshire towns follows several steps: (1) school districts create the budget, (2) the school boards review and approve or change

the original budget and send them to a town budget committee for approval, (3) the budget committee makes changes to the bottom line or amends specific parts of the budget, (4) the budget committee votes to accept or reject the budget, (5) the budget is sent to the town voters in a deliberative session (town meeting style) to amend or change the bottom line, (6) the public votes to approve the amount for a ballot vote in March of every school year. Once the budget is voted on, the school board typically directs the school district administrators to make adjustments to the allocation of funds. Depending on the final amount voted on, this might include drastic reductions to the budget in terms of personnel, program cuts and even supplies for the school. In some cases, program additions are created when there is an unexpected increase to the budget. Depending on the result and the contiguous process or lack thereof, school districts are required to spend many, many hours on planning and development, only to start the process again after changes are made from three different forms of public input. This is how local control can affect school districts in smaller rural towns.

Ms. August suggests more support from the town to promote growth. She questions whether or not the quality of the school district would have an impact on the budget crisis.

Like even if we were a top Eddies award-winning school or you know a blue ribbon school of excellence, I don't think that would be enough to solve the budget crisis we're in. We need more from our town than just the school.

Ms. August raises the question of school quality as an answer to the declining enrollment that is driving the budget crisis in her school district. Additionally, she explains that the town needs to support growth in order for the schools to survive. Francese & Merrill (2006) shed light on other factors in New Hampshire, such as supply and demand stating that "...new housing construction has indeed been concentrated in the moderate-high to high-priced categories, as opposed to the moderate and lower prices needed by much of the state's workforce" (p. 23). Affordable housing in the smaller bedroom communities has been a challenge in the past few

years as conservation commissions seek to change zoning laws while preventing large tracts of land from future development.

Students and Staff

Mrs. Smith speaks of the community's responsibility to all children regardless of the fewer resources one associates with downsizing and budget cuts.

Are there going to be more resources? Are we going to be sure there is adequate staff to speak their language? But, if they are just living in apartments and they're not paying taxes or anything, where is the money coming from? You know we are taking it away and I want to be able to get them the help they need too. We need, we have to look out for all of them.

Mrs. Smith introduces the concept of staff reduction. Staff reduction has been a common reaction to declining enrollments as administrators respond to rising per pupil costs. This reaction also results in deeper budget cuts. This is an important concept as the Allegro School participants mention it more than once. Teacher layoffs are the first line of defense in proposing reasonable budgets to school boards. School leaders looking to reduce budgets look to the most expensive portion of the budget, labor costs. On this playing field, all school districts are equal when it comes to staff reductions. Kober (2011) reported that by 2011, teaching staffs in the United States had been reduced by 50% in half of the school systems across the nation. Kober's research also revealed that the declining enrollment resulted in budget cuts and those cuts, also impeded school reform efforts across the nation. There are other views of downsizing, as Weber (1996) argues, "with preparation, downsizing will look like the pruning that well-run operations experience periodically." Mrs. Smith questions how the cuts will affect teacher effectiveness with a 15 to 1 student ratio versus a 30 to 1 if teacher cuts were to continue.

Mr. Robbins outlines the budget cuts affecting personnel at the Allegro School:

So I think the great example of that is the people that know whose positions are or have been affected or eliminated. They cut our interventionist - they're not filling a classroom retirement position – we're going down two interventionists and special education is also spreading out the speech pathologist who is doing a lot of early intervention work in kindergarten, so we're taking a pretty big hit in that area.

As previously stated, downsizing in the form of personnel cuts affect the staff members who might be losing their jobs, and the staff members that will be left behind wondering if they are next. Additionally, Kyriacou & Harriman (1993) reported that the staff members left behind after a downsizing effort experienced higher levels of stress due to added responsibilities as they shared the same workload with less personnel.

Ms. August discusses the transportation issue for high school students, and how different the school district is in comparison to other school districts.

Yeah, and we are committed and our teachers are committed, but I think we are going to hit a breaking point at some point. They've just become accustomed to, for example, we don't have high school transportation. We don't transport any of our high schoolers to the high school because it's not required by [state] law after eighth grade. And I think we are one of the few towns that do that. And the people of the community are just aware that's what happens. You could go anywhere else and it's not something you would see and that people would stand for. I think it's something you wouldn't ask when you're purchasing a home.

When reading her comments, one might get the impression that there is complacency or acceptance with the conditions among parents and community members. Yet she warns of a breaking point in the teaching community. This falls in line with both school districts, as those who are most directly affected by the loss of enrollment are teachers and staff members.

Summary of Research Question 3, Allegro School District

Student and teacher ratios and class sizes are parts of the consolidation conversation. Consolidation seemed to be inescapable throughout the participant's responses in both school districts. Mr. Robbins indicated that a Kindergarten through eighth grade school should be explored but he had no intention of leading such an effort because of the political climate. In contrast, the Picasso School District explored this issue as explained in the next section.

Research Question 3: When does declining enrollment become a problem in a school district?

Picasso School

Leadership

Leadership decisions and enrollment loss are major discussion points as the three interviewees discuss potential problems that administrators and school board members are required to address.

Consolidation is a common theme among upper administration in the Picasso School District with the central office leadership. Mrs. Carmen said,

I think the superintendent would really like to see consolidation happen, but it's a tough move because it's a big decision. That would be a problem. It would have to be planned very well and it would have to be communicated extremely well and you have to sometimes pick a side and say all right we'll ship in all our kids to [Modesto], you guys all wanted us to close our school, our enrollment is down, their enrollments down, so now our kids are going [there].

Mrs. Carmen describes consolidation for her school district as a problem. She called for planning and communication. Irwin (2012) echoed similar concerns, acknowledging that the realities of procedures and politics often reveal an unequalized power in relationship to needs and values of the community. Research falls heavily on both sides of the consolidation debate.

For example, Cohen & Ahern (2014) studied school closure to inform their own research on hospital closings and they found that school closure decisions fall into two categories, well planned and poorly planned. They also found that there is disagreement as to whether school closure is helpful or harmful to the education of students.

It was clear across the three interviews that Mr. Jones's primary goal as a response to declining enrollment was to preserve the integrity of the nine existing teaching positions.

When I had to argue for teaching positions, and dealing with my supervisors at the SAU, and just arguing that the best route to go really was we want to maintain our core of nine teachers.

Mr. Jones had a clear goal in mind, and he shared that goal with the school board and his administration as well as his teachers. He made it clear that the final decision was ultimately his and his alone.

So we've made a conscious decision, and when I tell you "we", it really was me going to the leadership team saying, how do you want to do this guys? But I own all the decisions!

He clearly followed a process, involved stakeholders, but took the responsibility for the leadership decisions. Both principals followed the same path but with different results. Mr. Robbins kept his staff informed and felt attacked as a result of school board decisions that went against district goals and the principal's recommendations. In contrast, Mr. Jones had one simple goal in mind, and communicated it early and clearly to the school board. In response, the school board accepted his recommendations without changes.

The idea of consolidation is a consistent theme with three administrators in both school districts. Mr. Johnson explains why it won't come to fruition in the Picasso school district:

We have a lot of schools in New Hampshire that are a heck of a lot smaller than Picasso and they're surviving. They may not be as good as some of the things that you could do,

but they are surviving! And so, the reasons why we talked about, for example, about Picasso and [Modesto], two towns I can show you on a map they're really close together and could all fit in one building. Either of the buildings could absorb all the students. But it would mean that some first-graders in either of the towns would be on a bus for an hour or hour and 10 minutes each day. So that's one of the data points or observation points that you take into consideration. Parents don't want their little kids on a bus that early and that long. So this is the study and when you talk about your study that's rural, it's a rural area. Rural areas are far more spread out than we are.

The cost of transportation is a major factor when consolidating two schools. First, the transportation cost to move students from one town to the next has the potential to create longer bus rides for younger students and an increase in the per pupil expenditure for the sending school district. Research also shows that tuition costs do not necessarily result in a savings and in some cases there is an increase in per pupil expenditure.

Population

Mrs. Carmen expresses her concern for the lack of growth despite the Excellence in Education award.

Well it depends, I hope that people start to move in. We thought that actually once we won the excellence award that we'd see a little uptick in the community, but we're not seeing it yet. You know if we keep continuing to see declines then you will see a different conversation, because then you're left with, we're trying to cut, and we've cut a lot this year to be fiscally responsible to the community. You know I don't want to cut any more teachers right? So that's just that nervous point like, I hope we're flat lined at this point where we might adjust by five less, five more, so I hope we're in the pocket of stabilizing and we're sitting at these numbers for the next six years or so. We'll probably see increases again as things ebb and flow.

The old adage says, “If you build it they will come.” In the case of the Picasso School, people are not choosing to move into the school district based on public information about the award winning school. Instead, the town population is not growing at all. Research supports this idea as the outmigration of parents with younger children, who are moving away from the rural areas based on property taxes, conservation land preserves and economic downturns (Johnson, 2013).

Mr. Jones makes the point that losing 30% of the student base population becomes a problem in justifying staff members against a declining enrollment backdrop.

Its just math, Bob, it's just math you know? When you lose 30% of your kids, it's just math. The challenge is how do you maintain quality of programming while dealing with the fact that you have to be cutting programs? You have to. You have no choice. So I've made the commitment and I've said to the board, “All right, you've cut two positions, that's fine, I get that, but until we reach 120 kids I need nine teachers to do the work.” I need nine teachers. I don't care. I would also cut around that. I don't care if we have one special educator, and an associate para with them and we hire out all of our speech and OT, and we let these people go. I want small classroom ratios with high quality teachers providing the core fundamental curriculum for these kids so that it is still strong.

The emphasis is focused on preserving the integrity of the core teaching staff by letting support staff members go. He doesn't speak of involving any other stakeholders; instead he maintains that he will fight against cutting teachers in order to maintain quality programming.

Mr. Johnson optimistically explains his general view of situations that he deals with as an educational opportunity. He also explains how the process should affect the community:

I personally believe that every situation that we have in education is an opportunity. How can I use this to strengthen the communities where we are? I see myself even in my role I am still a teacher. That's all I am, I'm a simple teacher. And you know my classroom

now is a little different. My classroom maybe, is a school board meeting, my class may be a deliberative session, and my classroom may be a faculty or staff meeting of 700 people. But I am still a teacher. I still see declining enrollment, then, as a lesson that we are covering. It's a unit, shall we say, and I think that you, you have to use the collective wisdom of the class to look at how we going to solve this issue. Or don't call it a problem - how are we going to address "this issue"?

Mr. Johnson clearly sees his role as a facilitative leader of a classroom of sorts. He explains that he is using his teaching skills to navigate the problem of declining enrollments and makes the analogy to planning for a unit that he would be covering in class.

Financial Impact

Mrs. Carmen explains the need for a strategy to avoid larger classrooms with fewer teachers:

Because then you're going to have to lay off teachers, you have larger classrooms, so again, with the new principal coming in, if you can't strategically think through it the best. Still, the best educational experiences[are] where your students can get the best learning that they can, and not hamper that by all of a sudden having larger classrooms, less teachers and less paras. Maybe you like cut the para's hours when they're not in the classroom that much. That's the side that's the scary side. You kind of have that balance right now but anything aside from that you, just don't know what will happen.

An important factor that Mrs. Carmen mentions is the balance between the number of teachers and students. She seems to indicate that cutting hours for paraprofessionals will be a possible solution to curb the cutting of more teachers. Support staff such as paraprofessionals, reading and math coordinators and title one teachers serve an integral part of the personalized educational experience that constitutes a big part of the success story for the Picasso school.

Mr. Jones explains his reasoning for retiring, and while his reasoning seems sound, it appears that the superintendent did not agree with the cost savings.

But I kind of threw myself on fire too, and I said I'm getting to a point where I'm, considering change, and I'm cutting all these positions and another place that a savings could be made is leadership of this school. And, why not now? So, I made the decision that was... another of the reasons out of many reasons that I made the decision to retire this year and/or next year, was that it could conceivably save the district some money. When you've got 132 maybe 135 kids and I would have been making, you know, \$102,000 next year if I had stayed on. You know that's not appropriate. And I said that to the superintendent and he agreed, but then I know what this hiring that's going to take place is, they are going to hire back someone at the same level.

Mr. Jones's reason for retiring was in part to save money as he anticipated a new principal would be hired for a smaller salary based on the number of children in the school. Mr. Jones had worked for eleven years as the principal of the Picasso school and rationalized his annual salary at \$102,000 was irresponsible for a school with a total enrollment of 130 students and nine classroom teachers.

Mr. Johnson explains how home prices in the sleepy bedroom community where the Picasso school is located keeps younger families from settling in the town.

The average home in the outlying communities of Picasso, and [Silver], the average home today costs about \$350,000. What we're finding is that young families can't afford a \$350,000 home. So what is happening from the study that we've been doing what's happening is that families are moving in to [the] SAU because they want a good education for middle school and high school. And they are buying the houses at \$350,000 when the parents are a little older, the kids are a little older, so they can afford the higher tax burden on homes. They can afford the higher mortgage costs.

Mr. Johnson explains only a part of the problem of declining enrollments in the schools. Their relationship to small town population and school enrollments is more complex than housing prices in small communities. Francese & Merrill (2008) explain,

A host of measures--growth-control ordinances, large-lot zoning, impact fees, buying up developable land for conservation, plus an array of expensive restrictions and requirements on the new construction, from wide roads to occupancy permits--have effectively priced many young people and families with children out of the housing market. Even renting is prohibitively expensive in many communities (p. 20).

Staff and Students

Mrs. Carmen identifies the community sentiment on consolidating or moving the students to another school:

The community is saying no, I don't want my kids to go there - if I did, I would live there. And the adult community would be, like, yaay! So, you know you have a big conflict and that would be the difficult challenge. Who would be willing to say that makes sense? Well then, is it really going to impact the education of the students?

Similar to Mr. Jones's philosophy, Mrs. Carmen's concern seems to be focused on student learning in the wake of a consolidation effort. Current research on consolidation has revealed arguments on both sides of the issue. Pappas (2012) conducted an ethnographic study of parental involvement and engagement. Results of the study indicated that all parents agree that their children have the right to the best possible education. They disagreed, however, on whether that goal should be attained by school closure.

Mr. Jones refers to the staff in his school as a family and expresses his concern over the 30% drop in student population.

You know like any family you want it to be healthy, like anything, you want people to enjoy being there, being part of that community, and when you get into a situation where

your enrollments start to drop significant levels like we're facing, over 30% of the student population in about a four-year period, and you start having to make decisions about who stays and who goes because at some point you have to start cutting in to bone. And what I mean by bones is people, because they are - your ultimate resource is your people, not the things, not the stuff.

Mr. Jones's leadership style is reflected in his comments about the "ultimate resource" as being people, not "things or stuff." The budget cuts in his school district are a direct result of the decline in enrollments and the School Board/SAU directives to reduce the overall school budget. The Center for Education Policy (2011) identified the negative impact of economic downturn and declining budgets due to falling enrollment patterns across the country. The report aptly states,

No type of school district—city, suburban, town, or rural—has been immune from declining budgets. The result is an erosion of some basic educational services. Teaching staff has been cut in about half of the nation's school districts. Many other activities have also been reduced or eliminated, such as staff professional development, purchases of instructional materials, facilities maintenance, and student services (p. 15).

Mr. Jones is uncomfortable with the recent cuts he has made to the program and warns that more cuts in the future could affect the core teaching positions thereby unraveling an eleven-year effort to build a successful award winning school.

Mr. Johnson speaks of the reason for the opposition to consolidation. In terms of the students, he raises concerns for the future and identifies the impact to the staff members.

I don't think we've had any direct effects right now, but I think next year we might because we made more significant cuts. The parents and school board members of both towns have voiced their opposition to consolidation as an alternative to explore. We don't want first graders riding a bus for over an hour before or after school.

Mr. Johnson stated that he did not see any effects on students, only staff members and teachers. Along with the superintendent in the Picasso school districts, it was articulated that the biggest concern was stress and anxiety for teachers with positions that would be reduced or even cut completely from the roster. Teacher stress has been widely researched over the years, specifically, stress related to consolidation and mergers of schools. In fact, researchers reported that teachers go through a process of worry, anxiety, trauma and even bereavement when faced with the prospect of leaving their school (Kyriacou & Harriman, 1993). Mr. Jones seemed equally concerned about program cuts that reduced interventionists, library and other personnel in support positions. Fowler (1980) posits “districts that have declining enrollments but yet refuse to close schools, maintain those schools primarily at the expense of the salaries of district personnel. The result is lower morale and productivity” (p. 1). Coupled with the decrease in morale among staff members, are the internal and external elements of declining enrollment. Mazzoni and Mueller (1982) studied the transition from growth to decline in the Minnesota school system and reported on internal and external conditions as well as demographic change interwoven with powerful forces that affect schools with declining enrollment.

Mr. Johnson and Mr. Jones each refuted the defeatist attitude. Mr. Jones stated,

As the numbers drop down you know the other side of the sword is a good thing. Let's take advantage of the fact that our numbers are reducing and then we can look at kids in different ways and we don't have to stick with models.”

Clearly, he was referring to ways that educators can help students improve their learning and at the time of the interview, he seemed accepting of the conditions he was dealing with and reiterated that there may be opportunities to declining enrollment. Yet, he also made the announcement to retire as a result.

Mr. Johnson and Mr. Jones both recognized the potential opportunities, but in comparison, Mr. Jones seemed to be more passionate about the curriculum, program and

intervention supports that were under consideration for elimination or drastic cuts because he believed that these components were a large part of the success story of the Picasso School. The essence of their sentiment on declining enrollments is obviously related to the differences in their professional positions, i.e. as principal and the superintendent. Responding to the phenomenon of declining enrollment through a decision making process will depend on several factors. Fowler (1980) said it best,

Administrators who survive declining enrollments are the ones who recognize that the problem exists, and build their programs and plans to meet the problem. They know the demography of their communities, and develop farsighted, actuarially-sound projections of the effects. They know the fiscal characteristics of their particular decline, and the possible resources that are available (p. 5).

Summary of Research Question 3, Picasso School District

As previously stated, common threads of both school districts were the concepts of consolidation and staff reduction. The evidence indicates that the idea was explored or at least suggested at one time or another. The Picasso School Board explored the issue very recently during the 2014-2015 school year. The Picasso Superintendent proposed the idea of consolidating the duties of two principals into one position for both school districts as a cost savings measure. Both school boards refused to consider the option. The Principal of the Allegro school district recounted an effort to consolidate the two schools into one. The proposal was approximately ten years before he became principal. The town voted down the idea by less than forty votes. The subject of the political make-up of the town included two opposing factions of the Picasso School District, the parents and the adult community. Mrs. Carmen (community member) recalled conversations of adult community members questioning the need for a school, as the parents seemed to fear the idea of losing their school as part of the community.

Mr. Jones has a twelve-year tenure as the Principal. He involved the teachers in developing the philosophy that guides the instructional and educational process. The students, as part of the Picasso school community have had great success as a result of the teacher's ability to offer individualized education.

Summary of Findings of Research Questions 1-3

The decisions to cut the budgets in both towns are driven by declining enrollments. One school is a focus school and the other is an award winning school but ironically, both schools are at the highest end of the tax base and face more personnel cuts. The Picasso school is more progressive from the perspective of the Mrs. Carmen. Mrs. Carmen, however, speaks of adding programs as a measure to increase student population. The contrast is interesting in comparison to the Allegro school when it was made clear that a public kindergarten program was added and the community member (Mrs. Smith) had little or no knowledge of the addition to the kindergarten program.

Mrs. Carmen's (community member) responses confirmed that there was not a decision-making protocol in place from recent experiences. Yet, further analysis revealed that the district in her town recognized the condition of declining enrollment and took steps to explore the feasibility of implementing a pre-kindergarten program. During the second interview, she questioned the goals or objectives of implementing a pre-kindergarten program and whether or not the idea might attract more families and help to increase enrollment. Her questioning of the idea indicates an unclear purpose for the exploration of pre-kindergarten, but also revealed that there was a definite acknowledgement of the condition of declining enrollment. This revealed a disconnect in the use of a defined process and brings a lack of communication into the foreground. The concept of process in the NWREL framework as well as the ProAct model calls for a systematic procedure for making choices and changes. Both frameworks called for defining the problem and clearly specifying the objectives. The fact that a planning process was

something that both communities did not identify seems to suggest that substantive change is not likely. Fullan (2007) warned, “painful unclarity is experienced when unclear innovations are attempted under conditions that do not support the development of the subjective meaning of the change” (p. 29). While both participant community members recalled specific events, it was evident that the purpose of some of the steps to address declining enrollment in one district proved to be unclear, and at the same time, Mrs. Smith (Allegro) had no knowledge of any type of process. The viewpoints of the community members indicated a strong concern for the teachers and the future of the town, suggesting a connection between the school enrollment figures and the declining or stagnant population in each town. Mrs. Carmen (Picasso), referred to a lack of cohesion between the school and the town. The interviews of both school principals in response to the first research question revealed a different focus from that of the community members.

Some type of process is evident in both districts according to the principals, but both agreed that they lacked the autonomy to make the final decisions over budget. Those decisions were in large part made by the School Board or the SAU administrators. Mr. Robbins of the Allegro School had autonomy over program design and curriculum, but it was clear that the Director of Student Services also made staffing decisions in the building. Mr. Jones of the Picasso School had a partnership advisory council and a leadership team, whereas Mr. Robbins, met weekly during budget season with the superintendent, special education director and another principal in the district. Principals from the Allegro and Picasso schools answered the question of process, as they outlined routine meetings. Mr. Jones included an advisory council made of parents, teachers and school personnel to study a possible solution. This is significant as a contrasting point between the two districts, and it falls in line with the participatory decision-making component in the NWREL framework, as well as the community involvement piece. The Allegro school district included only administrators in weekly meetings, whereas the Picasso

studied the multi-age approach over the course of a year, as a possible solution. While both districts deemed it necessary to address part of the problem, only one district included outside stakeholders to help explore the possibilities as they related to the values of the school district.

Central office participants, included interviews with the Director of Student Services serving the Allegro School District, and the Superintendent of Schools serving the Picasso School District. Both participants from each school confirmed a process through a team-leadership approach but significant differences were evident. The two schools were very different in their approach to decision making. Ms. August interpreted conversations among the team members, though she was unclear about how the process is related to making any decisions regarding declining enrollments. It was evident that the decisions made at the Central Office level were driven by the specific situations. Details about the process were vague but it was apparent, nevertheless, that there was an opportunity for members of the team (Participatory Decision Making, NWREL principle 1) to participate in the process through discussions. Goals were mentioned, but there was little or no evidence of how the goals were set, how strategies were selected and employed, if systemic procedures were put in place or evidence of comprehensive complex relationships (NWREL, 1975) in either school district. There is clearly a disconnect in the decision making process between the principal and the central office. Both were similar in their descriptions of meetings with the leadership team, but Ms. August's description differed from Mr. Robbins as evidenced in the following statement: "You know I'm very close to the special education coordinator in the district. But she's making decisions about staffing in the building." In comparison to the Picasso School District, Mr. Johnson outlined what he called a three-step process confirming the need for community input, but offered little evidence as an exemplar. In contrast, Mr. Jones (Picasso School District) convened a committee involving stakeholders to study and develop a recommendation to the school board for the adoption of a multi-age program.

Community members had varying experiences in dealing with the school district. NWREL (1975) defined process as following a systemic procedure for making choices and changes. Mrs. Carmen (Picasso), had detailed knowledge of the process for making decisions in terms of declining enrollment, whereas Mrs. Smith (Allegro School District) had little knowledge of the process or major changes that directly affected her personal situation for educating her children. Mrs. Carmen (Picasso) described the makeup of a committee that included parents, teachers and administrators to study declining enrollments for a year. Her knowledge speaks to a strong community link. Brown-Welty and Sharon (2004) state, “Valuable school-community linkages are based on collaboration and active engagement of parents and constituencies from throughout the school and the community” (p. 32). Principals in each school had autonomy based on budget development and central office directives to accomplish goals and objectives.

Central office participants from each town highlighted a process, but it seems unclear as to the effectiveness of the process or how their actions supported the work of the principals. As Honig & Hatch (2004) stated, “Research also fails to illuminate specifically what district central offices do when they help schools implement productive goals and strategies” (p. 10). Effective leadership is grounded in practice, research and theory. As Fullan (2011) asserted, “Of course, research and theory can be useful, but only insofar as they help leaders move forward” (p. 3). Leaders and policymakers will need to have mechanisms in place to support building administrators, teachers, parents and community members as they grapple with the challenges and opportunities associated with declining enrollments. Researchers have suggested that declining enrollments are an opportunity for reform through consolidation efforts or as Berliner (1990) suggests, “those who would consolidate for efficiency point out that bigger districts can allocate fixed costs over a larger enrollment base and offer a more varied curriculum by increasing class sizes” (p. 3). On the other hand, Monk and Haller, (1986) assert that while there

is no certainty for improvement in equity or efficiency, there are important educational and social costs to consolidation. King (1982) stated, “Through cooperative and innovative planning the pressures of decline will yield to an even stronger movement toward improvement of education in the coming decade” (p. 37). King’s assertion was right on target as evidenced by the implementation of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act (2001) aimed at solving the achievement gap of the minority classes and the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (that replaced NCLB), with fourteen key elements that address low performing schools. In the context of declining enrollment, consolidation is but one alternative to the process. It will be equally important to explore the impact and effects of declining enrollment on the school and the communities they serve. This is important because the value of school districts is not tied solely to achievement scores or a single reform effort. For example, researchers found that smaller schools have fewer dropout rates, higher attendance rates and fewer negative student behaviors, combined with greater teacher and student satisfaction (Flowers, 2010).

The research on smaller schools presents viewpoints of proponents as well as opponents. Smaller schools are not a definitive answer to achievement gaps. Coulson (2006) pointed out that the quality of teaching far outweighs the importance of school or class size.

Chapter 5: Findings and Conclusions

Purpose of the Study

In the year 1920, there were over 271,000 school districts in the United States. The process of school consolidation in response to declining enrollment and economic conditions reduced that number to approximately 83,000 in 1980 (Spradlin, Carson, Hess & Plucker (2010). There has been a statewide dramatic reduction in student population over the past ten years in New Hampshire. According to the New Hampshire State Department of Education (2014), enrollments have dropped by approximately nine percent, or 178,935 students in 2014 from a high of 201,593, a difference of 22,658 students in a ten-year period. While many factors contribute to declining enrollment, it was evident that little research exists that examines the condition of declining enrollments in the Northern New England region of the United States. Consequently, there was a need to study rural school districts as they responded to declining enrollments through decision-making processes, community impact and related problems that surfaced.

The purpose of the study was to explore decision-making through the lens of declining enrollments. An award winning rural school in an affluent town with high performing students and high tax rates was compared to a focus school in a rural economically depressed area with comparable tax rates. The NWREL Framework (1975) was used as a theoretical lens for examining the decision making process. This framework includes the following components: (1) participatory decision-making, (2) choice, (3) process, and (4) comprehensiveness. The study, though small in scale, will be useful for larger studies that might explore the phenomenon of declining enrollments. The first research question revealed responses that indicated formal and informal processes for decision making in both school districts that were studied.

Conclusions

Research Question 1: What decision-making processes do leaders in rural school districts employ to address the conditions of declining enrollment?

Review of the responses from participants revealed differences in the processes employed to address declining enrollment. The two schools were referred to by the pseudonyms of Allegro and Picasso.

Allegro School participants offered different answers regarding decision-making processes in response to declining enrollments, but could not recall or define any specific process in terms of components that could be evaluated using the lens of the NWREL Framework. The Allegro School community member (Mrs. Smith) seemed less informed about any decisions or processes that might be followed, but she knew the structure of the school, i.e. grade levels and number of classrooms. The school principal of the Allegro School (Mr. Robbins) acknowledged a weekly team meeting with Central Office and building administrators. The meetings focused on general topics and included the problem of declining enrollments as part of the budget process. The principal (Mr. Robbins) did not report a specific process for responding to declining enrollments resulting from these meetings, other than discussions that resulted in decisions to be implemented. The Central Office representative (Ms. August) in the Allegro School District explained that a collaborative approach to discuss and solve problems was employed; however, she did not elaborate on any specific process other than discussions and top down decisions. While Ms. August believed that these collaborative meetings were effective, Mr. Robbins did not. Respondents' descriptions of a process did not reveal a clear connection to the NWREL Framework consisting of: (1) participatory decision-making, (2) choice, (3) process, and (4) comprehensiveness. Time, however, was a factor that limited Mr. Robbins's ability to implement a participatory decision-making process, as he was charged with making cuts to the program and staff as a response to the declining enrollment during budget season. In addition, it was more

difficult for Mr. Robbins to engage in long range planning with less than two years in the position of principal.

Two of the Picasso School respondents (the principal and superintendent) reported on procedures they developed for making decisions. The principal's process included three of the four components of the NWREL (1975) framework, but it was clear that the superintendent's process did not. While the superintendent followed a step-by step process, he did not include the components of participatory decision-making, choice or comprehensiveness. The Picasso School community member (Mrs. Carmen) knew of the process that the school principal (Mr. Jones) followed in the form of an advisory committee. Mr. Jones described the advisory committee as a group he developed and facilitated to research specific problems and situations. One of the issues discussed by the advisory committee was the potential implementation of multi-age classrooms as a response to declining enrollments. The results and recommendations from the committee's research were reported to the school board for a final decision. The advisory committee included parents, teachers, an administrator, and a school board member, and they spent a year studying multi-age classrooms. The formation of the committee confirmed that there were, in fact, elements of the principles of the NWREL Framework (1975).

The NWREL framework principle of Participatory Decision-Making was demonstrated as the Picasso School Principal assembled the advisory committee to support the conditions of declining enrollments with the participation of various stakeholders to allow for different voices. Choice, in the form of one or more solutions, was explored and recommendations were made to the school board for the final decisions. Process was part of the development of the committee to study multi-age classrooms as a specific procedure for selection. Comprehensiveness was difficult to explore in this particular situation. The formation of a committee, facilitated by the principal for one full school year, indicates that skill and experience was a factor in managing relationships, but the process failed to include students. In short, the process for making

decisions in the Picasso School District included three of the four framework principles.

The situation in both schools is distressing to all involved when the challenges of declining enrollment result in school districts having to change practices that might have a direct impact on student achievement. Mr. Robbins (Allegro) and Mr. Jones (Picasso) were equally concerned about the cuts to interventionists. Mr. Jones also credited the teaching staff with the success of the school, and he expressed his ultimate goal of preserving the integrity of the teaching staff for one more year. Cutting staff was a major concern of both principals. In his recommendations for organizations that find it necessary to downsize, Weber (1996) stated:

At times of crisis, such as downsizing, leaders should also "lead with the heart first and follow with the head"--that is, first acknowledge the staff's feelings and difficulties and then analyze the reasons and the areas for creating efficiencies to deal with the new, more strained arrangements (p. 4).

Based on this researcher's experiences as a school principal, for some schools, consolidation and school closure may be the only answer to declining enrollments, but the important factors will be how the process unfolds, who is involved, how the results are communicated, and how leaders plan the process. In this researcher's opinion, the challenges and decisions are likely to be met with less trepidation in the Picasso School District because of the evidence of following a process that included the components of the NWREL framework, as compared to the Allegro School District that did not have a process that included any of the framework components.

Research Question 2: What is the impact/effect of declining enrollments on the school and the community?

All of the participants in both school districts agreed that at the time of the interviews, the impact on the community was not noticeable, but the staff members were affected. In both school districts, respondents reported serious effects on administrators as leaders. For example,

two of the Allegro school participants (the principal and the central office representative) reported lower morale and a general apathetic attitude that ultimately affected the internal culture of the school. This apathetic attitude was evident as staff members were informed that their positions would be up for discussion during the development of the school budget. When positions were cut, there was a definite change in how staff members treated the principal. While some offered support, others could only accuse and blame administrators. Important subjects that reappeared were autonomy, political structures and communication. Mrs. Smith (Community Member) could only comment on the welfare of the teachers during a crisis of budget cuts. Mr. Robbins (Principal) remarked on the subject of communication being strained between the Central Office personnel and the building level principal. Similarly, a breakdown in communication between the school and the community was described by Mrs. Smith, who recalled a major decision to install full day kindergarten that was not well publicized within the town. After a document review of minutes from a School Board meeting, it was confirmed that the school board voted to implement full day kindergarten, but there was no discussion on how the message would be delivered to the community. It seemed that the climate was negatively impacted by the budgetary crisis that required a response from leaders to cut programming and positions. This domino effect started with declining enrollments.

Similar to the Allegro School District, the Principal from the Picasso School District reported that communication between the Central Office personnel and the building level was strained. The Picasso School also had to make budget and personnel cuts that affected the climate. Another similarity between both districts is the fact that none of the respondents reported any effects on the students at the time of the interviews. The Superintendent (Mr. Johnson) of the Picasso School District and the School Principal (Mr. Jones) both looked at the condition of declining enrollments as a possible opportunity, whereas the comparison school district's participants did not see anything positive. The School Principal (Mr. Jones) and the

Superintendent (Mr. Johnson) from the Picasso School District were in agreement with the Community Member (Mrs. Carmen), that the biggest impact was on the professional staff as the news of personnel and programming cuts were announced. One of the most difficult parts of an administrator's job is to deliver the news of a reduction in force to employees. Very important elements in the process of responding to declining enrollments are the community within the school and the greater community that includes the parents. Adjusting to declining enrollments will require some difficult decision-making. Fowler (1980) suggests that the likelihood of parental support for the difficult decisions is directly related to the level of involvement and input in the process. The staffing and program cuts that resulted from the decisions based on declining enrollments created stress and strain on faculty and staff members in both school districts involved in this study. Nevertheless, the Picasso School District has the potential for a more positive outcome than the Allegro School District simply because the process that was followed included the NWREL framework components. More importantly, the process laid a foundation to prepare for the outcome.

Research Question 3: When does declining enrollment become a problem in a school district?

Declining enrollment became a problem in both school districts when student enrollment dropped to a level that required budgetary responses in the form of reducing positions, programs and the high-end tax base. Fowler (1980) identified the tipping point that might call for school closure:

When school systems reach a point where they can no longer offer the needed curriculum, they have no recourse but to close schools. Districts that have declining enrollment but yet refuse to close schools, maintain those schools primarily at the expense of the salaries of district personnel. The result is lower morale and productivity (p. 2-3).

Declining enrollment was a problem for staff, administration and teachers in both school districts according to the respondents. While the research question assumed that declining enrollment was a problem, it should be noted that two of the respondents, Mr. Johnson (Superintendent, Picasso) and Mr. Jones (Principal, Picasso), made it a point to explore the possibility of opportunities that might result from declining enrollments. Mr. Robbins's (Allegro School) answer to the question of when declining enrollment becomes a problem was short and to the point. He stated, "When you start seeing empty classrooms." Both he and the Central Office representative (Ms. August) agreed that consolidation might be a way to answer the declining enrollment problem. They suggested closing the middle school and altering the existing Allegro School building to accommodate a kindergarten through eighth grade elementary school. Much of the research suggested that closing a small rural school would have a negative impact on the town's economy. This negative effect would be mitigated in the Allegro School District due to the fact that the middle school and the Allegro School are on the same property. Therefore, the schools are close enough to share school personnel, and the idea of consolidation might be a positive cost savings measure for the school district in the long run. Transportation would not be an issue because the same property for the K-8 school would be used. It was clear to this researcher that the principal did not recognize school consolidation as an opportunity, because the negative political climate in the town was such that he was not willing to spearhead such an idea. For example, he recalled the perceived autonomy that he was given to create a budget with recommendations for cuts that met the financial goals of the school board. After presenting the budget, Mr. Robbins became disillusioned when the school board made uninformed decisions regarding programming and positions. In one instance, nepotism was very evident as a political figure restored the position of a relative to full time but cut similar positions of other employees.

School consolidation as a cost cutting measure was not considered in the Picasso school district. Mrs. Carmen (community member) recalled the suggestion from Mr. Johnson (Superintendent) to partner with the neighboring town and hire one principal to run the two schools. She reported that the cost savings for both school districts was approximately \$40,000, and both school boards voted the idea down. As Mr. Johnson tells the same story, he explained that the school boards from both towns were emotionally attached to their school and they were willing to overlook a significant cost saving factor to ensure that their school district employed its own principal to oversee their school. The money was very much a secondary factor, and the idea was voted down unanimously in both towns. Mrs. Carmen also reported on the senior community (without children in the school system) that questioned the need for a school with such a low enrollment. At the time of Mrs. Carmen's interview, the total school population had declined from 204 to 147 students in a five-year period. She worried about the senior community who failed to see the value of the school in the town and indicated that this kind of dissension was a strong indicator that declining enrollments were a problem.

NWREL Framework

Participatory Decision Making

Within the Allegro School District, decision-making in response to declining enrollment resulted from internal meetings that generated directives to be carried out. The school principal in the Allegro School District was charged with analyzing programs and staff configurations that would be presented to the school board. There was no evidence of including staff, community members or parents in the process. Guidelines for the implementation of a process might have made it easier for the Allegro School principal and the staff members to accept the difficult decisions that came to pass. Within the Picasso School District, a committee studied multi-age classrooms as one option for responding to declining enrollment. Budgetary demands and directives from the school board required the principal to make recommendations for program

and staffing cuts. Processes and committees that were developed to respond to declining enrollments included key stakeholders such as parents, teachers, administrators and community members.

Choice

It may have been beneficial for the principal of the Allegro School to form a committee to study October enrollment figures with key staff and community members with the goal of exploring choices that could be presented to the school board. Giving a voice to stakeholders might lessen the negative impact of the difficult decisions related to the condition of declining enrollment. Administrators of schools in rural towns typically operate within a complex network of social constructs that form the culture, including religious beliefs, values, politics, and deep-rooted emotional connections to the school that can span generations. In many cases, rural schools serve as the nucleus of the community. Involving people in the community in decision-making enriches the process, as viewpoints and choices are generated within the context of the local knowledge and culture. Community involvement in generating choices also increases the potential to look at problems in terms of opportunities. The term place conscious education as defined by Haas and Nachtigal (1988) is "...a healthy respect for the physical and social communities they inhabit" (p. 13). Because of the complex characteristics of rural school communities, declining enrollment decisions in one school district may not be equally applicable in another school district. Gruenwald (2003) suggested that "place conscious education" extends pedagogy to relevant experiences of students and teachers. At the Allegro School, considering the idea of place conscious education might have given the staff and community members the opportunity to offer alternatives from a different perspective.

Process

Results of this study suggested that the decision-making process in response to declining enrollment differed greatly between the Allegro and the Picasso school districts. The

superintendent and principal of the Picasso School District each identified a process that was followed when making decisions. They both approached the process with the goal of finding the best solution. Mr. Jones (Principal, Picasso) included important elements of staff and community involvement when addressing the condition of declining enrollments. The process included the principal's recommendations to the board based on the input of the study committee, and the school board seemed to accept and trust the vision of their principal. The Allegro School District administrators seemed to be in a reactive mode for most of the major decisions. It should be noted that there was a lack of trust on the part of the school board in considering the administrator's recommendations. The relationship between the school board and the principal in the Allegro School District appeared to be strained, in contrast to the Picasso School District where this relationship was trusting and positive.

Comprehensiveness

The level of involvement in the decision-making process that takes the relationships of students, staff members and community members into consideration was easier to recognize in the Picasso School District. The principal was able to engage staff members, but he was quick to point out that the final decisions were his responsibility. Comprehensiveness in following a process involving advisory committee meetings a year in advance of implementing changes seemed to cause less turmoil when the decisions were announced. The Allegro School principal had in-depth knowledge of school programs and understood his rural community, including the conditions of the demographic setting. Time, however, was not on his side as he was charged with making cuts to the program and staff as a response to the declining enrollment during budget season. This limited his ability to implement a comprehensive decision-making process.

Implications

This qualitative research project included several perspectives from school officials and community members that highlighted some of the complexities of decision-making in response

to declining enrollments in rural New England schools. The condition of declining enrollments has been part of the educational landscape for almost ninety years in the United States. Current data on statewide school populations suggests that schools will need to reorganize, make changes in programming, reallocate resources to meet current needs and, at the same time, balance these efforts with political leaders and community members. Educators, students and parents will be looking to administrators for answers that will employ a comprehensive approach that takes all viewpoints into consideration, and voters will have to make decisions related to declining enrollment. Without clear processes and guidelines to address the conditions of declining enrollments, schools will have to survive these situations rather than prepare and thrive as a result. The lack of a clearly defined process will force school districts to react to problems associated with declining enrollment and make it more difficult to look for opportunities.

The development of a process to offer guidelines to school districts that are dealing with the condition of declining enrollment could provide a foundation to prepare for positive outcomes. Detailed comprehensive planning by administrators requires knowledge about personnel, training, certification and programs, and the NWREL framework is a useful model that could provide a structure for creating a set of guidelines for the decision making process. An informed decision is the best approach, and a decision that is borne out of a decision-making process is far better than a reaction to a problem. It is preferable to arrive at a problem than to be confronted with it.

Recommendations for Further Research

This research was conducted as a qualitative comparison of two school districts and was not generalizable to the larger public. It is recommended that this study be repeated and expanded to include more schools as well as teacher and student input to broaden the results. Further exploration is also necessary to answer the following questions: What guidelines are most effective for school districts in responding to declining enrollment in the Northern New

England area? What is the tipping point for when decision-making around declining enrollment becomes necessary? Who should be involved in decision making as districts confront the conditions of declining enrollments? What are the deciding factors in closing, restructuring or consolidating schools?

Additionally, future research is warranted to determine the impact of the decision-making process on stakeholders including community members, students and staff. It would be important to consider the differential effects of various decision-making processes and responses to declining enrollment on student achievement, including possible opportunities in dealing with the conditions of declining enrollment.

Finally, research or a meta-analysis is warranted on state legislation regulating decisions related to declining enrollment. The resulting data would offer further guidance on the paths we can best take in responding to declining enrollment, while ensuring children are provided with the appropriate opportunities for learning. As leaders continue to respond to the condition of declining enrollments, it will be important to consider the structures of leadership, population, financial status, and the effects of decision-making on students, staff members and communities. These elements can help ensure that best practices are delivered for the next generation of New England and American students in rural areas with declining populations.

Appendix A

Invitation to Participate for Superintendents

Date:

Dear _____,

I am a doctoral candidate in the Southern New Hampshire University Educational Leadership Program. I am in the process of completing the dissertation requirement under the direction of Dr. Margaret Ford. I am writing to ask you if you would be willing to take part in the case study. Your involvement would require an interview at your convenience.

The purpose of my study is to examine the drivers that influence decision making as leaders respond to declining enrollments in smaller schools. If you agree to take part in the study, I will contact you by phone to let you know what the process will be. There will be one sixty-minute interview involving superintendents. More details regarding the questions involved in the interview and any assurances to you and your school district will be discussed during our phone conversation. Please see the list of assurances below for your review:

Assurances to all participants:

Should you agree to complete a survey, any information you share will be treated in the strictest confidence.

You may decide not to answer any questions without an explanation.

You may withdraw from the survey at any time during the process without explanation.

Any quotes from interviews or surveys will be used under a pseudonym for your district and only with your expressed permission.

Sincerely,

Robert St.Cyr
robert.steyr1@snhu.edu

Appendix B

Invitation to Participate for Principals

Date:

Dear _____,

I am a doctoral candidate in the Southern New Hampshire University Educational Leadership Program. I am in the process of completing the dissertation requirement under the direction of Dr. Margaret Ford. I am writing to ask you if you would be willing to take part in the case study. Your involvement would require three interviews at your convenience.

The purpose of my study is to examine the drivers that influence decision making as leaders respond to declining enrollments in smaller schools. If you agree to take part in the study, I will contact you by phone to let you know what the process will be. There will be three sixty-minute interviews involving principals. More details regarding the questions involved in the interview and any assurances to you and your school district will be discussed during our phone conversation. Please see the list of assurances below for your review:

Assurances to all participants:

Should you agree to complete a survey, any information you share will be treated in the strictest confidence.

You may decide not to answer any questions without an explanation.

You may withdraw from the survey at any time during the process without explanation.

Any quotes from interviews or surveys will be used under a pseudonym for your district and only with your expressed permission.

Sincerely,

Robert St.Cyr
robert.steyr1@snhu.edu

Appendix C

Invitation to Participate for Community Members

Date:

Dear _____,

I am a doctoral candidate in the Southern New Hampshire University Educational Leadership Program. I am in the process of completing the dissertation requirement under the direction of Dr. Margaret Ford. I am writing to ask you if you would be willing to take part in the case study. Your involvement would require three interviews at your convenience.

The purpose of my study is to examine the drivers that influence decision making as leaders respond to declining enrollments in smaller schools. If you agree to take part in the study, I will contact you by phone to let you know what the process will be. There will be three sixty-minute interviews involving community members. More details regarding the questions involved in the interview and any assurances to you and your school district will be discussed during our phone conversation. Please see the list of assurances below for your review:

Assurances to all participants:

Should you agree to complete a survey, any information you share will be treated in the strictest confidence.

You may decide not to answer any questions without an explanation.

You may withdraw from the survey at any time during the process without explanation.

Any quotes from interviews or surveys will be used under a pseudonym for your district and only with your expressed permission.

Sincerely,

Robert St.Cyr
robert.stcyr1@snhu.edu

Appendix D

Informed Consent for No or Very Minimal-Risk Procedure

Project Title: Administrator's Responses to Declining Enrollment in Smaller Schools of New Hampshire

Please read this consent agreement carefully before your decision to participate in the study.

Purpose of the research study: The purpose of this qualitative case study is to identify the factors related to declining enrollments in smaller schools through the perspectives of community members, superintendents/principals and teachers in New Hampshire.

What you will do in the study: As an interview participant in the study, you will be contacted by phone to arrange a series of up to three interviews. Prior to your first interview, you will be given details about the research as well as the opportunity to provide consent. You will be asked a series of open-ended questions in each interview. As a survey participant, you will complete a research survey.

Time Commitment: Each interview will last approximately 60 minutes. Research surveys will take approximately 15 minutes to complete.

Risks: There are no anticipated risks in this study

Benefits: There are no direct benefits for participants in this study. The findings of this study will be made available to you upon request.

Confidentiality: All participant information will be kept private and confidential. Recorded text from interviews will be kept confidential and disposed of appropriately after the study has been completed and the data has been analyzed. Any information containing your identity will be referred to using a code. The list identifying the codes will be kept under lock and key. Your name will not be used in any report.

Voluntary participation: Participation in this study is strictly voluntary with no obligation.

IRB-SBS Office Use Only	
Protocol#	
Approved SBS Staff	<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between; align-items: center;"> from: to: </div>

Right to withdraw from the study: You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without obligation to explain and without penalty.

How to withdraw from the study: To withdraw from the study, please notify Robert St.Cyr at Robert.stcyr1@snhu.edu or call 603-801-5068.

Please contact me with any questions about the study or your rights at robert.stcyr1@snhu.edu or by calling 603-801-5068.

Robert St.Cyr
Southern New Hampshire University
2500 North River Road
Manchester, NH 03106
Phone: (800) 626-9100

Agreement:

I agree to participate in the research study describe above.

Participant's Name _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's Name: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

You will receive a copy of this form for your records.

IRB-SBS Office Use Only	
Protocol #	
Approved SBS Staff	from: _____ to: _____

Appendix E

Interview Form and Questions: Superintendent/Principal

Date of Interview _____

Name of Participant _____

Organization _____

Date Interviewed _____

Interviewed by
Robert M. St.Cyr _____

Sample Interview Questions

Interview 1-Superintendent/:

1. How long have you served as a Superintendent/Principal in this school system?
2. Who is included in major decisions regarding the school district?
3. What do you think are the major reasons or causes of declining school enrollments in your school or school district?
4. When did declining enrollment become a problem in your school/district?
5. What decision making process do you follow to address the conditions of declining enrollment?
6. How has declining enrollment impacted the school and the community?

Interview 1Principal

1. How long have you served as the Principal in this school system?
2. Who is included in major decisions regarding the school district?
3. What do you think are the major reasons or causes of declining school enrollments in your school or school district?
4. When did declining enrollment become a problem in your school/district?

Interview 2 Principal

1. Can you expand on the effects of declining enrollment on teachers (students and community members)?
2. What is most important to consider as you approach decisions regarding declining enrollments?
3. What role do values and mission statements play in the decision making process?
4. How are curricular decisions made in your school district?
5. Can you explain how declining enrollments affect resource allocation?
6. What types of change do you foresee in the near future for your school/school district?

Interview 3: Principal

1. What decision making process do you follow to address the conditions of declining enrollment?
2. Are there systems in place for strategic change in your school district?
3. Is there a specific leadership strategy that you have employed in relation to the subject of declining enrollments?
4. What opportunities have arisen as a result of declining enrollments?
5. What kind of impact would there be with school closure in the community?
6. What other strategies other than school consolidation or closure have you considered in this era of declining enrollments?

Interview 1-Community Members:

1. What do you think are the major causes for the declining enrollment in your school?
2. How has the declining enrollment in your town affected the community?
3. Was the community involved during the process of responding to declining enrollments?

Interview 2-Community Members:

1. What was your perception of the decision making process as leaders responded to the conditions of declining enrollments in your schools?
2. What kind of impact has declining enrollment had on the school and community?
3. Were there positive opportunities that surfaced during this process?
4. Were there negative elements associated with the process followed?

Interview 3-Community Members:

1. Can you expand on the impact of declining enrollments in your school and community?
2. When did declining enrollments become a problem in your school?
4. As leaders responded to declining enrollments, were there clear objectives for the process?
5. What compromises were made that affected community members, students and staff members?

Appendix F

Sample Meeting Minutes
Analysis
Redacted

Allegro School Board
Allegro, NE
Monday, July 13, 2014 at 5:30 P.M.

Attendees:

1. Call to Order- called the meeting to order at 5:55 P.M.
2. Minutes of the Previous Meeting-June 8, 2014
Mr. X asked about the two bags of mulch-it was actually two pallets of mulch. That correction will be made in the minutes. A motion was made by Ms. X and seconded by Ms. X to approve the minutes as corrected. All in favor- the motion carried.
3. Immediate Business
4.
 - A. Citizens' Comments-none
 - B. Agenda Review-the following items will be included on the next agenda:
SRO Contract, Lot Line Adjustments, Handbook Approval
 - C. [REDACTED] School Board Goals Review-We discussed the goals and progress to date. Much has been accomplished this year and there has been progress in many areas.
 - D. [REDACTED] School Board Goals-a few revisions were made to the 2014-2015 School Board Goals which were designed to be three year goals (see attached).
5. New Business
 - A. Agenda Preparation-see above
 - B. [REDACTED] shared the application for a variance with the Board. Mr. Robbins prepared the application to inform the abutters even though the Allegro School District is exempt. [REDACTED] will attend the town meeting to present the application.
 - C. Policy
 - [REDACTED]-Food Service Charge Policy- 1st Reading
A motion was made by [REDACTED] to move the policy to a 2nd reading. All in favor-yes; the motion carried.
 - [REDACTED]-Use of Facilities Policy-1st Reading
The Board asked to have a line added [REDACTED] This will be added in addition to an introductory paragraph. A motion was made by [REDACTED] to move the policy to a 2nd reading. All in favor-yes; the motion carried.

Goals, no discussion on budget or enrollment

Possible climate with peer recognition

6. Old/Unfinished Business

- A. Peer Recognition- [REDACTED] shared that there were only a few nominations. He indicated that the award is for the faculty and staff and it is up to them to submit nominations. A discussion took place as to what might be done to encourage more nominations. This will be brought up at the beginning of the year meeting when [REDACTED] presents the awards. [REDACTED] suggested that a written explanation and criteria for the award might be helpful. The Leadership Tem will work on this explanation.

7. Informational Items

Confirms Principal's second interview

[REDACTED] indicated that he and a team interviewed candidates for the [REDACTED] position at [REDACTED]. A candidate, [REDACTED] has been offered the position and accepted. [REDACTED] start date is to be determined but will be as soon as possible.

8. Non-Public Session-A motion was made by [REDACTED] to go into non-pubic session at 8:10 P.M. under NH RSA 91-A: 3, II, c. Roll Call Vote: [REDACTED] the motion carried.

*Four personnel matters were discussed.

A motion was made by [REDACTED]. Roll Call Vote: [REDACTED] the motion carried.

*No action was taken in non-public session.

9. Adjournment-A motion was made [REDACTED] and seconded by [REDACTED] to adjourn the meeting at 9:50 P.M. All in favor-yes; the motion carried.

References

- Abraham Carmeli Zachary Sheaffer Meyrav Yitzack Halevi, (2009), "Does participatory decision-making in top management teams enhance decision effectiveness and firm performance?", *Personnel Review*, Vol. 38 Iss 6 pp. 696 - 714 Permanent link to this document: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/00483480910992283>.
- Anderson C. L. (2009, January 1). School District Reorganization in Iowa: Considerations for Administrators, School Boards, and Communities. *ProQuest LLC*.
- Andrews, M., Duncombe, W., & Yinger, J. (2002). Revisiting economies of size in American education: Are we any closer to a consensus? *Economics Of Education Review*, 21(3), 245-262.
- Ashton, B., & Duncan, H. E. (2012). A beginning rural principal's toolkit: A guide for success *The Rural Educator*, 34, 1; ProQuest Central.
- Bailey, J. (2000). The case for small schools. A special series from the Center for Rural Affairs Monthly Newsletter, Walthill, NE.
- Barley, Z. A., & Beasley, A. D. (2007, January 10). Rural school success: What can we learn? *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 22(1).
- Battistich, V., Solomon, D., Kim, D., Watson, M., & Schaps, E. (1995). School communities, poverty levels of student populations, and student's attitudes: A multilevel analysis []. *American Education Research Association*, 32(3), 627-658.
- Berliner, B. (1990). Alternatives to school district consolidation. Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
- Beeson, E. (2001). Rural schools: facing unique challenges. *Principal*, 81(1), 22-24.

- Bowen, G. A. (2009). Document analysis as a qualitative research method [Entire issue]. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 9(2).
- Brown-Welty, S. (2009). Case study of leadership practices and school community interrelationships in high performing, high-poverty, rural California high schools [Entire issue]. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 24(1).
- Budge, K. (2006). Rural places: Problem, privilege, and possibility [Entire issue]. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 21(13). Retrieved from <http://www.umaine.edu/jrre/21-13.pdf>
- Census Bureau, U. S. (2010). *The urban and rural classifications* [Taken from chapter 12 of the terms and definitions from the US Census Bureau Website]. Retrieved from <http://www.census.gov/popest/about/terms.html>
- Changing demographics: At a glance. (2012). Retrieved from <http://www.centerforpubliceducation.org/Main-Menu/Staffingstudents/Changing-Demographics-At-a-glance>
- Cohen, A. K., & Ahern, J. (2014). Invited commentary: How research on public school closures can inform research on public hospital closures. *Social Science & Medicine*, 114(0), 197-199. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2014.05.008>
- Cremin, L. A. (1970). *American education: The colonial experience* (1st ed.). New York, NY: Harper & Row Publishers.
- Cox, B., Cox, B. (2010). A decade of results: A case for school district consolidation? *Education*. ProQuest Central.

- Coulson, A. J., & Mackinac Center for Public, P. (2007). School district consolidation, size and spending: "An evaluation". A Mackinac Center Report. *Mackinac Center for Public Policy*
- Cremin, L. A. (1970). *American education: The colonial experience* (1st ed.). New York, NY: Harper & Row Publishers.
- Crouch, R. (2012). The United States of education: The changing demographics of the United States and their schools. *Center for Public Education*. Retrieved from <http://www.centerforpubliceducation.org/>
- Decision methodology. (2005). *A to Z of Management Concepts & Models*, 116-119.
- Deeds, V., Pattillo, M. (2014). Organizational "failure" and institutional pluralism: A case study of an urban school closure. *Urban Education*. 1-31. Retrieved from: unex.sagepub.com; <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0042085913519337>
- Dimmitt, E. J. (2011). *Declining student enrollment: A case study exploring how three suburban school districts crafted coherence*. (Order No. 3517769, Cardinal Stritch University). *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses*, 287-n/a. Retrieved from http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.snhu.edu/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&rft_val_fmt=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:dissertation&res_dat=xri:pqm&rft_dat=xri:pqdis:s:3517769
- Duncan, H., Range, B., & Scherz, S. (Eds.). (2011). From professional preparation to on-the-job development: What do beginning principals need? [Entire issue]. *International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation*, 6(3). Retrieved from <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>

- Duncombe, W. D., & Yinger, J. M. (2010). SCHOOL DISTRICT CONSOLIDATION: The Benefits and Costs and Costs. *School Administrator*, 67(5), 10.
- Dweck, C. S. (2006). *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, New York: Random House.
- Flowers, R., & Education Partnerships, I. (2010). Closing Small Rural Schools. Research Brief. *Education Partnerships, Inc.*
- Fowler, D. H. (1980). Effects of declining dumbers: Poverty? Procrastination? planning? *NASSP Bulletin*, 64(439), 1.
- Francese, P., & Merrill, L. (2008). *Communities & consequences the unbalancing of New Hampshire's human ecology, & what we can do about it*. Enfield, NH: Enfield Publishing & Distribution Company.
- Fredua-Kwarteng, E. (2005). School closures in Ontario: Who has the final say? *Canadian Journal Of Educational Administration And Policy*, (46),
- Fullan, M. (2001). *Leading in a Culture of Change*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass
- Gelb, J. (2002). School Size and Academic Achievement. OLR Research Report
- Greenfiled, T.A., Klemm, E.B. (2001).
- Greenleaf, R. K. (1991). *Servant leadership: A journey into the nature of legitimate power and greatness*. New York, NY: Paulist Press.
- Gruenwald, D. A. (2003). Foundations of place: A multidisciplinary framework for place-conscious education [Entire issue]. *American Education Research Journal*, 40(3).
- Haas, T., & Nachtigal, P. (1998). *Place value an educators guide to good literature on rural lifeways, enviornments, and purposes of education*. Eric Publications, Washington, DC: National Library of Education.
- Hammond, J. S., Keeney, R. L., & Raiffa, H. (1998). *Smart Choices: A Practical Guide to*

Making Better Life Decisions. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press.

Hargreaves, A., & Goodson, I. (2006). Educational change over time? The sustainability and nonsustainability of three decades of secondary school change and continuity.

Educational Administration Quarterly, 42(1), 3-41. Retrieved from

<http://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=cookie,ip,url,cpid&custid=shapiro&db=eric&AN=EJ723348&site=ehost-live;http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0013161X05277975>

Harmon, H. L. & Schafft, K. (2009). Rural School leadership for collaborative community development. *The Rural Educator*, 50(3), 4-9.

Harrison, D. A., & Busher, H. (1995). Small schools, big ideas: Primary education in rural areas.

British Journal of Educational Studies, 43(4), 384-397. Retrieved from

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3121807>

Heckathorn, D. D. (2011). Comment: Snowball versus respondent-driven sampling. *Sociological Methodology*, 355.

Hobbs, V. (2003). Distance learning capabilities: Giving small schools big capabilities. Rural School Community Trust.

Holly, M. R. (2009). *Effective leadership qualities and characteristics of urban school*

principals. (Order No. 3388738, Robert Morris University). *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses*, , 221-n/a. Retrieved from

[http://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/305172780?accountid=3783. \(305172780\).](http://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/305172780?accountid=3783. (305172780).)

Honig, M. I., & Hatch, T. C. (2004, November). Crafting coherence: How schools

strategically manage multiple, external demands. *Educational Researcher*, 33(8),

16-30.

Howley, A., & Howley, C. (2006). Small schools and the pressure to consolidate [Entire issue].

Education Policy Analysis Archives, 14(10). Retrieved from <http://epaa.asu/epaa/v14n10/>

Howley, C., Johnson, J., & Petrie, J. (2011). *Consolidation of schools and districts: What the*

research says and what it mean. Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center.

Retrieved from <http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/consolidation-schools-districts>.

Huang, G. G. (1999). Sociodemographic changes: Promise and problems for rural education.

ERIC Digest, 1-6.

Irvin, M. J., Hannum, W. H., de, I. V., Farmer, T. W., & Keane, J. (2012). Factors related to rural school administrators' satisfaction with distance education. *Distance Education*, 33(3),

331-345. Retrieved from

<http://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=cookie,ip,url,cpid&custid=shapiro&db=eric&AN=EJ986001&site=ehost-live;http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2012.723163>

Irwin, B., & Seasons, M. (2012). School closure decision-making processes: Problems and prospects. *Canadian Journal Of Urban Research*, 21(2), 45-67.

Irwin, E. G., Isserman, A. M., Kilkenny, M., & Partridge, M. D. (2010). A century of research on rural development and regional issues. *American Journal of Agricultural Economics*,

92(2, Commemorating the Centennial of the AAEA), 522-553. Retrieved from

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40648001>

ISLLC standards (interstate school leaders licensure consortium). (2009). In L. Sullivan (Ed.),

The SAGE glossary of the social and behavioral sciences. (p. 274). Thousand Oaks, CA:

SAGE Publications, Inc. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412972024.n1374>

- Jimerson, L. (2005). Placism in NCLB—How rural children are left behind. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 38:3, 211-219.
- Jimerson, L. (2006). *Breaking the fall: Cushioning the impact of rural declining enrollment*. Rural School and Community Trust. Washington, DC.
- Johnson, J., Strange, M., Madden, K., & Rural School and, C. T. (2010). *The rural dropout problem: An invisible achievement gap*. Rural School and Community Trust. Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=cookie,ip,url,cpid&custid=shapiro&db=eric&AN=ED516681&site=ehost-live>
- Johnson, K. M. (2012). *New Hampshire demographic trends in the twenty-first century* (Reports on New England No. 4). Carsey Institute: University of New Hampshire.
- Jung, S. (1998). *Rural Ministry: The shape of renewal to come*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.
- Kampits, E. I. (1996). Rural Partnerships in new england: Learning from kids [Entire issue]. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 12(3).
- Kerbow, D., & Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At Risk, B. M. (1996). Patterns of urban student mobility and local school reform.
- King, R. A., & New Mexico Univ., A. E. (1982). Declining enrollment: Implications for public education in New Mexico. Report of a Survey of New Mexico Superintendents Regarding the Impact of Declining Enrollment.
- Kober, N., & Rentner, D., S. (2011) Districts foresee budget cuts, teacher layoffs, and a slowing of education reform efforts. Center on Education Policy.

- Kober, N., Usher, A., & Center on, E. P. (2012). *A public education primer: Basic (and sometimes surprising) facts about the U.S. educational system. 2012 revised edition.* (). Center on Education Policy. Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=cookie,ip,url,cpid&custid=shapiro&db=eric&AN=ED528710&site=ehost-live>
- Kyriacou, C., & Harriman, P. (1993). Teacher stress and school merger. *School Organization*, 13(3), 297.
- Lashway, L., ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, E. O., & National Association of Elementary School Principals, A. V. (1999). School size: Is small better?.
- Levin, B., & Wiens, J. (2003). There is another way: A different approach to education reform. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 84(9), 658-664. Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/218528816?accountid=3783>
- Levin, J., Manship, K., Chambers, J., Johnson, J., and Blankenship, C. (2011). *Do schools in rural and nonrural districts allocate resources differently? An analysis of spending and staffing patterns in the West Region states.* (Issues & Answers Report, REL 2011–No. 099). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory West. Retrieved from <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs>.
- Lewis, J. (2004) *The long and winding road: Consolidation-the separation of school and community.* Challenge West Virginia, Charleston, WV.
- Lyson, T. A. (2002). *What does a school mean to a community? Assessing the social and economic benefits of schools to rural villages in New York* (NSF-9905904). National

- Science Foundation: State University of New York, Ithaca.
- Marzano, R. J., Pickering, D. J., & Pollock, J. E. (2001). *Classroom instruction that works: Research-based strategies for increasing student achievement*. Alexandria, VA: Association of Curriculum and Instruction.
- Mathis, W. J. (2003). *Equity and Adequacy Challenges in Rural Schools and Communities*.
- Mazzoni, T. L., & Mueller, V. D. (1980). School district planning for enrollment decline: The Minnesota Approach. *The Phi Delta Kappan*, (6), 406.
- Michener, R. D. (2013). *NH school district enrollment projections*. Concord, NH: New Hampshire School Boards Association.
- Monk, D. H. (2007). Recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers in rural areas. *The Future of Children*, 17(1, Excellence in the Classroom), 155-174. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4150024>
- Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldana, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis a methods sourcebook* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Nachtigal, P. M. (1975). San Juan, Utah: Ending a white-indian school battle by the process method. In P. M. Nachtigal (Ed.), *Northwest Regional Education Laboratory's Rural Futures Development Program* (p. 158). Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- New Hampshire Department of Education. (2012). *Data collection and reports*. Retrieved from <http://education.nh.gov/data/index.htm>
- Noer, D. M. (1993) *Healing the wounds*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Papas, L., N. (2012) *School Closings and Parent Engagement*. Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology, Vol 18(2)(p.165-172).
<http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.snhu.edu/10.1037/a0028100>

- Provasnik, S., KewalRamani, A., Coleman, M. M., Gilbertson, L., Herring, W., and Xie, Q. (2007). *Status of Education in Rural America* (NCES 2007-040). National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC. Regional Educational Laboratory (2011). New Hampshire. Retrieved from <http://www.relnei.org/about-the-region/new-hampshire.html>
- Ready, D. D., & Lee, V. E. (2007). Optimal context size in elementary schools: Disentangling the effects of class size and school size. *Bookings Papers on Education Policy*. 99-135
- Regional Educational Laboratory (2011). New Hampshire. Retrieved from <http://www.relnei.org/about-the-region/new-hampshire.html>
- Rinecones, R., & ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, L. N. (1988). *Exploring Alternatives to Consolidation, ERIC Digest*.
- Rural. (2014). In *Merriam-Webster.com*. Retrieved from <http://www.merriam-webster.com>
- Sackney, L. E. (1983). Managing decline in rural school systems: Program organization and delivery. Paper presented at et Annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Montreal, Quebec, Canada, April 11-15).
- Saldaña, Johnny. (2013). *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (2nded.). London: Sage Publications.
- Seidman, I. (2006). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Self, T. (2001). Post-consolidation evaluation – The effects eight years later. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Mid-Western Educational Research Association, Chicago, IL.
- Senge, P. M. (1990). *The fifth discipline the art & practice of the learning organization* (1st ed.). New York, NY: Doubleday.

- Sher, J. P. (1983). Education's ugly duckling: Rural schools in urban nations. *The Phi Delta Kappan*, 65(4), 257-262. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20386995>
- Spradlin, T. E., Carson, F. R., Plucker, J. A., & Indiana University, S. P. (2010). Revisiting school district consolidation issues. *Education Policy Brief*.
- Stephens, E. R., Appalachia, E. L., & ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and, Small Schools. (1991). *A framework for evaluating state policy options for the reorganization of rural, small school districts. occasional paper no. 32* Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=cookie,ip,url,cpid&custid=shapiro&db=eric&AN=ED332855&site=ehost-live>
- Strange, M., Johnson, J., Showalter, D., and Klein, R. (2012) *Why rural matters 2011-2012: The condition of rural education in the 50 states*. Rural School and Community Trust. Washington, DC.
- Sunderman, G. L., Payne, A., & Mid-Atlantic Equity, C. (2009). Does closing schools cause educational harm? A Review of the research. Information Brief. *Mid-Atlantic Equity Center*
- Uphoff, C. B. (2008). *Two rural schools: A study of the planning, process and leadership of school improvement*. (Order No. 3347548, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign). *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses*, 174-n/a. Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/304624358?accountid=3783>. (304624358).
- Urban, J. & Wagoner, J. L. (2014) *American education: A history*. (5th ed.). New York, NY: Routledge

U.S. Department of Education. Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics.

Valencia, R. R. (1985). Public school closures and policy issues: Financial and social implications. *Public Budgeting & Finance*, 5(1), 43. Doi:10.1111/1540-5850.00671

Versland, T. M. (2013). Principal efficacy: Implications for rural 'grow your own' leadership programs. *The Rural Educator*, 35(1), 13-22. Retrieved from <http://www.eric.ed.gov/contentdelivery/servlet/ERICServlet?accno=EJ1022600>

Vollrath, D. (2013). Inequality and school funding in the rural united states, 1890. *Explorations in Economic History*, 50(2), 267-284. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.eeh.2012.11.003>

Ward, J. G. (2003). Demographics and the rural ethos. *Journal of Education Finance*, 29(2), 107-18. Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=cookie,ip,url,cpid&custid=shapiro&db=eric&AN=EJ678618&site=ehost-live>

Weber, J., & ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, E. O. (1996). Can Cutbacks leave school programs viable?. *ERIC Digest*, Number 106.

Williams, J. M., & Nierengarten, G. (2011). Recommendations from the north star state: Rural administrators speak out. *The Rural Educator*. 15-24.