

The Impact of School Consolidation on Teachers: Implications for Administrators

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Abstract

With little to no evidence to support the impact of school consolidation on teachers' job satisfaction and classroom productivity, this study suggests that there is a relationship between teachers with more than five years experience in a school and those with five years or less. School culture, values, and social relationships within a school building are important to teachers and their professional life. When teachers are moved from a school building in which they have been emotionally invested into a larger school setting where their relationships, values, and familiar school culture are severed, there is a strong possibility for a negative impact on the classroom. Employing a mixed methods approach, this study identifies emotions and feelings of teachers who are involved in a consolidation process and differentiates the emotions between more senior and less senior teachers. It is important for administrators to be cognizant of these emotions so staff morale remains high, the transition is smooth, and subsequent instructional practices and student outcomes do not suffer.

Key Words: school consolidation, teachers, morale, values, emotions

School Consolidation and Teachers

As school district officials across the United States face extremely difficult financial futures, discussion of school consolidation becomes more prevalent in the minds of educational leaders. This may be a creative solution to saving money without compromising the education of the students they are entrusted to educate. According to Howley, Johnson, and Petrie (2011), the primary arguments for consolidating schools are “fiscal efficiency and higher educational quality.” However, they stress that no overall generalizability can be made and each district across the country must view their needs individually. In some cases, school consolidation can be harmful and policy makers must approach these decisions on a case-by-case basis (Howley, Johnson, & Petrie, 2011).

The topic of school consolidation evokes strong opinions from those in favor and those against who are directly and indirectly involved. School consolidation exemplifies the concept of “economies of scale” – production costs are decreased when the size of the operation increases (Duncombe, Miner, & Ruggiero, 1995). In addition to the possible gain of financial resources by eliminating duplicate roles at the administrative level, fiscal benefits can also be ascertained at the clerical and custodial levels. Some students would be afforded the opportunity to increase curricular and extra-curricular activities, but likely at the expense of increased class sizes.

In a study of eight North Dakota communities affected by school consolidation, Sell, Leistriz, and Thompson (1996) found that community residents believed that students were better off socially after consolidation because they were able to make a larger and more diverse network of friends.

Consolidation is defined as:

...a familiar strategy used by business management to reduce costs and increase uniformity. In education, the term usually refers to (a) combining districts and (b) closing schools and sending students from the closed schools to other schools (or building a new and larger school). (Howley, Johnson, & Petrie, 2011, p. 1)

As evidenced in the aforementioned definition, the emphasis of school consolidation research is on students, as it should be, and finances.

In their study, Sell, Leistritz, and Thompson (1996) found that, “The impact of school consolidation on students is immediate, or nearly so; however, the impacts of consolidation on the respective communities-socially and economically-may take place over several years” (p.1). One critical stakeholder in a school community and one that is underresearched is the effect of school consolidation on teacher productivity. Although some may not live geographically near the students they serve, teachers are very much a part of the community they work in. In these difficult economic times, it is critical to understand how the phenomena of school consolidation affects teachers and what can be done to assist them so their productivity remains uninterrupted and they remain satisfied and feeling valued in their chosen profession.

Teachers, especially those with seniority, tend to be ingrained in the culture of the schools in which they work. They not only form relationships with their many students over the years, but also with the parents of those students, their colleagues, and often, the

administration (Cyprian, 2007). When schools consolidate, the loss of those constructs can impact a teacher's comfort zone, which can impact his/her performance and overall professional state of mind.

Hypothesis. Untenured teachers and those with five years or less experience in the same school will fare better emotionally and productively during a school consolidation process than more senior teachers.

Review of the Literature

The reoccurring trend in the research on small schools is that small schools produce greater student outcomes and happier teachers (Epstein, 2011; Howley, Johnson, & Petrie, 2011; Hylden, 2004; Irmsher, 1997). The thrust for small schools and its effectiveness, at all levels, has been at the center of much foundational research as well. In 2001, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation committed \$350 million to supporting the small schools movement. According to Hylden (2004), smaller schools result in increased job satisfaction on the part of teachers. Cyprian (2009) is in agreement with this statement. Irmsher (1997) also concurs that teacher satisfaction tends to be lower in larger schools. Teachers in small schools are recorded as having higher morale and being more personable (Cyprian, 2009).

According to Irmsher (1997), smaller schools encourage more pedagogical innovation and student participation. This results in more academic buy-in from students and a greater commitment on the part of teachers. Hylden (2004) notes that in smaller learning environments, teachers and students get to know one another. Relationships that

impact students' lives are formed and trust is developed. Irmsher (1997) also points out that teachers feel safer in smaller schools. When schools in a community begin to consolidate, small schools no longer exist.

A study by Nitta, Holley, and Wrobel (2008) found that students adjusted to a school consolidation much easier than teachers and administrators. Their research went on to point out that for all three groups, those connected to the receiving school reported a less negative experience than did those affiliated with the closed school.

Epstein (2011) and Nelson (1985) state that fewer teachers need to be employed when schools consolidate. Combined classes tend to result in increased class size. Although this is financially advantageous, issues arise as to which teachers will be retained. The most qualified individuals may not continue in the district based on seniority. When announcements of school consolidation are made, teachers in the designated schools naturally have increased stress before the process begins as employment concerns arise.

In their qualitative study, Nitta, Holley, and Wrobel (2008) found the consolidation process was very stressful for teachers, particularly in their social interactions and when negotiating new materials and curricula. Nitta, Holley, and Wrobel (2008) further described "significant tension" perceived by the receiving staff. This was further defined as differences in teaching styles and how state standards were

approached. They concluded that teachers had much more difficulty establishing new social and academic relationships than the students.

With the absence of research on the effects of school consolidation on teachers, the review of the literature shifted towards teachers' reactions to change, specifically types of reform focusing on new initiatives, curricula, practices, and school culture. These constructs would also be present in school consolidation. Reio (2005) adds that any school reform must consider teachers' emotions. Often, insufficient information and vague perceptions of loss will evoke negative internal responses. Reio (2005) also goes on to note that risk taking and learning and development, critical to teaching, and also additional components of the identity formation process, are greatly impacted when confronted with change.

Hargreaves' (2005) research focuses on how age affects teachers' emotional responses to change. He argues that teachers are not just defined by their age or even the stage of their career, but also by their generation and, therefore, so are their experiences and understandings of educational change. According to Collins and Waugh (1998), a teacher's age and years of experience are related to receptivity. Surprisingly, they found that older teachers tend to evaluate change in a more positive manner than their younger colleagues. Hargreaves (2005) offers different rationales for this statement. The circumstances of a young teacher's professional beginning will determine the emotional reactions to change. Factors such as the demographics of the school, availability of

support, the receptivity of senior staff, and their own insecurity as to what they offer to the profession impact their reaction to change. Both studies concede that in order for teachers to feel positively about school reform they need to be part of the planning process.

In their study, Daly, Moolenaar, Bolivar, and Burke (2010) emphasize the importance of social networks in schools and how they affect reform efforts over time. They define social network analysis as “a systemic approach used to quantify and visualize the ties and overall structures of formal and informal networks” (Daly et al., 2010, p. 360). Utilizing the concept of social capital, the more resources available, in this case teachers, the greater the opportunity for information transfer and development of new knowledge. Within the broad range of literature on social network analysis, the researchers set out to identify how teachers can be supported socially during systemic reform. However, when schools consolidate, social networks change as teachers are reassigned to different grade levels, classrooms, and schools. Daly et al., (2010) conclude that a better understanding of social relations through which information and pedagogy is transferred could very well be a valuable strategy in supporting reform efforts. This is a strong theory to consider when blending two faculties and student bodies to create a new school environment.

Teachers’ values also play an important role in determining job satisfaction and commitment (Pang, 1996). For purposes of this study on the correlation of school values and teachers’ feelings, values are defined as “taken-for-granted beliefs about the proper

functioning of a school” (Pang, 1996, p. 66). Every organization has a set of values about what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior within the organization. It is very easy for values in varying schools to be different. For example, in some schools, abiding by regulations and policies and avoiding any risk of failure can be seen as the most important guiding principle. In some achievement-based schools, getting the job done regardless of the cost is the message that permeates the organization. Using both quantitative and qualitative approaches, Pang (1996) concluded that there is a relationship between a school’s values and teachers’ feelings. There is a positive correlation between teachers’ feelings about their school life and the culture of the school. During a school consolidation process, each school’s values need to be determined so a shared culture can be established through a mutual vision.

Background

The Baldwin School District located on the south shore of Nassau County on Long Island, New York, about 25 miles from mid-town Manhattan, will be closing at least one elementary school in September 2012. The Baldwin School District prides itself on its small school model. However, due to declining enrollment and decreased state aid, the district can no longer financially maintain three elementary schools with less than 300 students and two schools with fewer than 200 students. Using this opportunity to assist teachers in consolidating schools in the future, the researcher will gather pre- and post-data to assist administrators in easing the transition for teachers directly involved in these types of reforms.

Methods

A pre-consolidation survey to gauge teachers' anxieties and perceptions of the largest obstacles they will have to face in order to be successful and happy in their new environment will be administered to all teachers (approximately 85) in the five small elementary schools in Baldwin. Participation will be voluntary. In addition, follow-up interviews will take place with some of the teachers who participate in the survey. The researcher will focus on using the data from teachers with five years or less experience (Hargreaves, 2005) in their existing school and those with more than five years experience in their existing school. Questions will delineate perceptions between teachers in receiving and in closing schools.

Pre- and post-consolidation student data will also be used to determine teachers' job satisfaction and classroom effectiveness. Standardized test scores in grades two through five and other performance measures the district uses to rate teachers according to the new state-wide Annual Professional Performance Review will be utilized.

Employing a mixed methods approach will assist in the development of theories, supported by both empirical and qualitative data, associated with successful school consolidation transition for teachers.

Variables. There are many independent, dependent, and situational variables that will affect how school consolidation impacts teachers' performance in the classroom and their overall happiness on the job. Some of the critical dependent variables are the school(s) selected to close and the one(s) recommended to remain open. The selection of

administrators at the receiving school(s) as well as the bureaucracy involved in the decision making. The prevalent values of the involved schools are also important dependent variables. These dependent variables have a direct correlation in regard to how teachers feel going into the process of school consolidation. Independent variables such as “potential grade level” to be taught and “grade level colleagues” impact the aforementioned dependent variables. Based on the research, each of the named independent variables has direct causal outcomes based on the listed dependent variables.

It is anticipated that situational variables such as age, years of experience, and school size will also affect teachers’ productivity and happiness in their new school environment.

Discussion

School consolidation is a difficult process for all stakeholders. However, the data regarding the direct impact on teachers before, during, and after the process, is extremely limited and practically nonexistent. In order for administrators to ease this process of change, there are factors that should be considered in order for classroom outcomes to be fruitful and teachers to be happy in their new schools.

Based on the existing research on teachers and change, this study concludes that teachers, usually those with five or more years of experience, are steeped in school tradition and values. Less senior teachers are still forming their own professional identities and confidence in their role. It is important for the closing school buildings’

values to be acknowledged and for everyone to share a common set within the new school setting. It is the values that help to determine a school's culture.

In addition, all teachers value their social relationships within a school setting. These relationships allow for trust among colleagues and for the sharing of best practices, especially among teachers of the same grade level. They are the indirect cause for some very successful teaching in a classroom.

Conclusion

After evaluating some of the different scenarios that could result from the research, the researcher concludes that the hypothesis will be supported - more senior teachers will have greater difficulty adjusting to a consolidated school setting due to the tremendous amount of change. Teachers with five years or less experience are less emotionally invested and should be able to adjust more easily.

The study has tremendous implications for administrators. Understanding the theories that develop from this research should allow administrators to make the consolidation process easier for senior teachers in both receiving and closing schools. If administrators better understand how the process affects teachers they will be more informed as to how to make the transition easier. Ultimately happy teachers make happy and productive students.

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