

THE IMPORTANCE OF A SMALL RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICT TO THE
COMMUNITY

A Record of Study

by

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ABSTRACT

Hallsburg ISD is a small, rural, K-6 school district struggling to sustain its operations due to reduced funding from the state, decreased enrollment, and a decrease in the local tax base. This Problem in Practice Record of Study examines the sustainability issues associated with this school district and its importance to the community. Key stakeholders in the community and school district were interviewed to help develop a thick description of this district's position in the community. Surveys were also sent to randomly selected, registered voters living in the district, to provide more in-depth data in the development of a thick description. District documents were also studied to provide more information in the plight of the district and provide for the triangulation of data.

The interviews showed a very strong relationship between the participants and the school district. The key stakeholder participants included community leaders as well as parents of current and past students who represent the district demographics. The majority of this group supported raising their taxes to improve the school district and prevent it from consolidating with a neighboring district. While the surveys strongly supported the notion of how important the school was to the community, the results were not as favorable toward raising taxes. Only half of the survey respondents favored raising their taxes to keep the local school open and keeping local control of the district. The other half favored consolidating with a neighboring school district over raising their taxes.

The overall results were very favorable toward the importance of the school district to the community. The challenging economic conditions place a very strong dilemma on many residents, as they would vote to lose their district over raising taxes. One recommendation to the district is to educate the community of the local tax situation. If Hallsburg ISD were to consolidate with any of the neighboring districts, the tax rate would immediately increase. This increase would be higher than the tax rate needed to sustain the district and keep Hallsburg School open.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this paper to the two women in my life, both of whom have sacrificed these past four and a half years as I have pursued this goal.

Hollye, you are the love of my life. I waited a long time to find you, and God blessed me like only He can when he brought you in my life. The last seventeen years have been the best years of my life, and they only keep getting better with you by my side. I know you were not thrilled when I undertook this endeavor but you supported me anyway, knowing it was something I wanted to do. You picked up my slack, spending time on the mower, taking care of the outside as well as the inside of the house, and doing without the many honey-do's that are still waiting to be done.

I look forward to tomorrow, and every day after that, knowing I get to spend it with you. Life truly keeps getting better and better. I love you.

And to the apple of my eye; Hailye, you are everything I could ever ask for in a daughter, and more. You are a truly beautiful person, both inside and out. You are an exceptional student and athlete, but more importantly, you are a kind person and a good friend to everyone. You have a heart for the Lord, which means more than anything else. From the first time I saw you, I felt a love I never knew existed. And that love has grown every day since. God has some amazing plans for you. I don't know what they are, but I look forward to watching your journey as you seek your calling. I am so very proud of you and love you very much.

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Holy Moly! I was beginning to wonder if I would ever be writing this page. Wow, what a journey. And while the final completion of this program will be a huge accomplishment in my life, I realize after spending the last four and a half years in this program, that the journey has just begun. I have been stretched, prodded, punched, and twisted in ways I never knew a person could. I have learned things about myself, both good and bad, and sadly to say, some things I am just embarrassed to admit. Looking back to the summer of 2008 when I learned I was a white male, I have never looked at life the same. I might still be looking through the same lens, but I now realize that lens might not always be in focus with the true picture in front of me. I have to step out of my comfort zone and see each situation for what it is, and each child for what they are, and do everything I can to make sure each and every child gets the opportunity to make a life for themselves, no matter what their present circumstance.

I would like to thank my committee chair, Dr. Scheurich. As busy as you are, you were never too busy for me. The first time I sent an e-mail, hoping to get a reply within a couple of days, it was returned within a couple of hours. I thought I must have luckily caught him when he was checking e-mail. Soon I learned that was the rule with him, not the exception. And it did not matter whether it was a weekday, weekend, or holiday, it was all the same. He does not differentiate. He is truly there for his students. I also greatly appreciate the fact that even though I did not get my paper finished as quickly as both of us would have preferred he stayed with me through a huge move and change in

his life. And even though he was busier than ever, he still made time to make sure I finished this program. All those beautiful fall Saturdays we spent, listening to the fly overs, and the roar of the crowds at Kyle Field; I could have thought of a hundred things I would have rather been doing. But after having those classes with Dr. Scheurich, I can truly say I am glad I was there and I am a better educational leader today because of it.

I am very grateful to the rest of my committee. Dr. Webb-Hasan and Dr. Torres, I asked each of you to be on my committee because of the positive influence you had on me through the classes you taught. Dr. Webb-Hasan worked through the right side of my brain while Dr. Torres worked on the left. I use and will continue to use the lessons you taught every day in my educational career, and many more in my life beyond the job. Dr. Morgan, I appreciate you making the trek across disciplines, and always being the first to respond whenever I sent a note to the committee. I appreciate the work you do in the STEM Center, and the positive effect you have on your students. You did not have to accept my invitation to be on my committee, but you did, and for that, I thank you.

To the rest of the faculty, I cannot express my appreciation enough, for the change you have made in my life. There is not enough room in this acknowledgement to express my appreciation for each of you individually so I will express it collectively. Coming into this program, I did not know what to expect. What I thought I would find however, was a bunch of stuffy professors with their noses in the air, telling me how wonderful they are, and not having time for me. I thought I would just be a number in their roll book. I could not have been more wrong. Every instructor without fail, did an

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I would be remiss to leave out the people who loved me, and raised me, to be the person I am today; my family. To truly give justice to the ones I love so dearly, this acknowledgement would be longer than the Record of Study, which is not allowed at this point. Whether you were part of my original nuclear and extended family, where I began my life, or you were part of my family that took me in later in life, and made me a part of your family. So I will say with a heart full of gratitude, thank you and I love each and every one of you more than you will ever know. I would not be here today if it were not for the loving efforts of each of you.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Small school districts have struggled throughout the history of the American education system to exist and educate children (Post & Stambach, 1999). As small districts reach the point where they can no longer meet their fiscal responsibilities, they must either increase their enrollment, in turn increasing their funding, or they are faced with unpopular consequences such as consolidating with other districts, most often resulting in the closure of the small rural school (Imazeki & Reschovsky, 2003).

School district consolidation has been an educational issue almost as long as school districts have existed (Post & Stambach, 1999). The bottom line explanation for consolidation focuses on school enrollment and funding. Schools are funded based on their enrollment (based on average daily attendance [ADA] of students). When the enrollment drops, so does the funding (Adams & Foster, 2002). Ultimately then, some school administrators find themselves trying to operate a district with fixed costs on a declining revenue base. In terms of fixed costs, even though there might be fewer students, a teacher is still required for each class, a custodian still has to clean the building, and utility bills still have to be paid. Furthermore, required programs such as special education still have to be offered. Thus, the cost of running the district will not decline because fewer students are enrolled (Imazeki & Reschovsky, 2003). The revenue generated for that district will drop however, creating a conundrum.

When faced with challenging economic conditions, schools struggle to balance budgets while meeting federal and state guidelines, as well as community expectations

(Duncomb, et al., 1995). Personnel account for the most significant portion of a school budget, usually around 75% to 80% of the budget (Rolle, 2008). Larger districts are able to address reduced funding through cutting positions in all areas of personnel, from the maintenance department to the central office administration. Larger districts can also explore other cost savings measures which might include consolidating or closing schools with low enrollment (Rolle). Small districts are at a disadvantage when trying to adjust for reduced funding because they typically do not have any extra personnel to cut or schools to consolidate or close. They must operate as lean as possible without sacrificing the needs of the students, and somehow balance the revenue with the expenditures required to operate that district (Gong, 2005).

The lack of funding to provide basic services and core education is not the only significant issue within small school districts. Related to this subject is the lack of capacity to provide extensive special programming in the technology, vocational, and extra-curricular areas (Imazeki & Reschovsky, 2003). Due to the high cost of equipment and materials to support these areas, along with the added personnel cost, small districts cannot offer the same quality and array of these programs as their larger counterparts (Imazeki & Reschovsky). Some argue that students who do not have access to specialized programs of study could be at a disadvantage when competing in the current marketplace for a job or gaining acceptance to a college or university (Boex & Martinez-Vasquez, 1998; Goatcher, 1999). On the other hand, research has emphasized the availability of special programs in small rural schools through collaborative agreements with other educational institutions, and the positive attributes of the small school that

outweigh the advantages, such as extensive special programming in the technology, vocational, and extra-curricular areas as well as specialized programs of study, offered in larger districts (Bard, Gardener, & Wieland, 2005; Boex & Martinez-Vasquez; Gordan & Knight, 2009; Imazeki & Reschovsky; Post & Stambach, 1999).

Hallsburg Independent School District (ISD) is a small rural school district in McLennan County located southeast of Waco, Texas, two miles off of Highway 6 on Hallsburg Road. The district has been in existence since 1906, serving the educational needs of this rural community (www.hallsburgisd.net). Originally, the district served students in grades kindergarten through eighth. In the 1980's the district dropped grades seven and eight. Since then the district has served grades kindergarten through sixth. After students graduate from Hallsburg, they have a choice of attending secondary school at Axtell, Mart, or Riesel ISD provided they meet the individual district's transfer policy. Attendance figures have always been sufficient to support a school, but over the past twenty years, Hallsburg has experienced a trend of decreased enrollment (Texas Education Agency, 2011); a critical element in the fiscal health of a small rural school district.

This district is facing a financially critical time in its 105-year existence. Hallsburg School has managed to defy the odds for decades, staying small and staying open. With the help of a power plant that was built in the district in the 1960's, Hallsburg became a wealthy district due to the local tax revenue generated from the plant, and did not need to heavily rely on outside sources of funding to operate day to day. In 1993, legislation was passed to help equalize the wealth between districts in

Texas (Texas Legislature, 1993). Even so, Hallsburg was still financially healthy.

However, the power plant began cutting its operations in the 2000's due to the high cost of natural gas used to power the plant. The plant completely shut down its operation in 2010 creating a void in tax revenue so heavily relied upon in Hallsburg.

With the closing of the power plant and the decreased student enrollment, Hallsburg ISD has been put in a devastating position. Even though the tax base and student enrollment have decreased, Hallsburg is still considered a Chapter 41 district (see Definition of Key Terms). However, since the plant closed, there is not enough tax collected to send excess revenue to the State. Furthermore, as a Chapter 41 district, Hallsburg is not eligible for many forms of aid and grants other similar districts regularly receive. With financial variables working against Hallsburg ISD, this district is faced with the same threat of closing or consolidating as so many other small districts have faced in the past.

With the consolidation of multitudes of districts in the past, legal precedence has been set with over 450 court cases up to the mid-1970's making decisions concerning consolidation. A majority of these cases dealt with two issues, sometimes combined; consolidating one room school houses, and racial segregation (Howley, 1993). Other cases made decisions concerning the merging of rural with urban districts, the impact of voters in the districts, and the overall responsibility of the newly consolidated districts to honor all obligations of the individual districts before merging (Howley).

The 1930's through the 1950's defined the power of the individual states to consolidate or deconsolidate school districts when needed, although constituents were

given some voice. The state's authority came with the notion of protecting the best interests of the school systems (Young & Green, 2005). The 1960's and 1970's saw the most cases concerning desegregation, with the majority of the legal issues declining toward the end of the decade. Confirmation and refinement of earlier decisions were the majority of legal contributions after the late 1970's.

By 1970, legislation was drafted giving states direction in the consolidation process (Berry, 2007; Post & Stambach, 1999). The first Texas legislation concerning school district consolidation was drafted in 1911 (TEA, 2004). Surveys and studies were ordered and delivered, showing inconclusive evidence to the advantages of consolidation, but consolidation continued nevertheless (Howley, 1993). Texas Education Code (TEC) 13 Subchapter D outlines the consolidation process for school district in Texas. Evidence of earlier court battles is prevalent through sections such as involving new district liabilities, requirements for an agreement, and the role of the public in the consolidation process.

Problem Statement

Hallsburg ISD has sustained as a district serving students in Kindergarten through 8th and Kindergarten through 6th grade since 1906. Reduced funding, decreased student enrollment, and a decreased tax base have combined to form a serious threat to future sustainability of the district.

Hallsburg has always been a small community with the school serving as its focal point. Being within 13 miles of three high schools, adding additional grades to the Hallsburg School would be very difficult, especially considering there are less than 80

resident students in grades 7 through 12. Future planning for Hallsburg ISD must include strategies to increase enrollment in grades Kindergarten through 6th. Increased enrollment would increase funding, guaranteeing the school would continue to stay open and serve the students of Hallsburg and surrounding communities. Raising taxes would also aid to increase revenue, but could only happen through passing a Tax Ratification Election (TRE). Texas school districts wishing to raise their taxes over \$1.04 for maintenance and operations must pass a TRE requiring majority approval of the voters in the district.

If Hallsburg ISD cannot generate enough revenue to function under a balanced budget, there will be no option but to close the district and consolidate the students and tax base with a neighboring district. If consolidation becomes eminent, a secondary goal for Hallsburg would be to keep its school open under the direction of a new consolidated district.

Purpose of the Study

Texas continues to apply pressure to small school districts, through funding formulas, to consolidate with other school districts. Although research is split on the advantages and disadvantages of consolidating schools, this practice continues (Duncombe & Yinger, 2005) throughout the state. One fact remains undisputed when studying the effects of consolidation; the community will suffer due to a decline in its social and economic well-being (Lyson, 2002).

This Problem in Practice examined the fiscal responsibilities of a small Texas district and determined if the community wanted to keep this school district open and

what options the community was willing to support in order to keep it open. The next course of action determined the feasibility of such options and developed a course of action to work in the best interest of the students and the Hallsburg community. This course of action focused on keeping the district financially solvent and open, enabling the district to serve the children of Hallsburg and surrounding communities for many years in the future.

Significance of the Study

Many small, rural schools struggle with having the capacity to offer their students quality educational programs while meeting their financial obligations. This study focused on Hallsburg ISD and offered a plan to stay open and solvent. It also provided insight in to how the community would respond should the district close, and how it would respond if the district was capable of staying open and sustaining its quality programs.

Overview of Methodology

This Record of Study examined some issues facing smaller school districts, specifically Hallsburg ISD. Focal issues discussed related to the financial health of the district, and general consensus and attitude of the stakeholders of the district with respect to the importance of keeping Hallsburg ISD open and functioning as its own district or minimally, an open school as part of a consolidated district.

There were three methods of data collection utilized in this study; interviews, a survey, and document collection (Creswell, 2007). Structured and unstructured interviews were administered to stakeholders (Creswell, 2003). This allowed for the use

of a pre-established coding theme and also open ended conversations to help identify depth of support for keeping the district open (Boyatzis, 1998). Interviews were conducted with four parents, three teachers, four school board members, two community leaders with children in the district, and three community members with no children in the districts. Representatives chosen for interviews consisted of the same diversity represented in the school. Stakeholders were interviewed in both focus groups and individually. Focus groups were more conducive to community members and parents where individual interviews were used with teachers and board members, except for one community member who could not attend a focus group due to conflicts.

A short survey was distributed to approximately 100 citizens residing in the district, randomly chosen from a list of eligible voters. Information obtained from the survey represented citizens in the community that might not have had students in the district or might not have been involved in the local community affairs.

Document collection included financial documents and data needed to complete the TEA (Texas Education Agency) approved funding template. Economic projections were made by applying TEC (Texas Education Code) rules and regulations to data derived from template manipulation. Other documents used for data collection included tax records, board minutes, audit reports, and district financial analysis.

Research Questions

1. What does the community (representative parents, teachers, school board members, community leaders, and other community members) want to do, based on surveys and interviews, about the financial and student population issues facing Hallsburg ISD?

Consolidate the district. If so, with which district?

Attempt to remain open. If so, address necessary tax increase.

2. What reasons do community members (as described above) give for their decisions about the future of Hallsburg ISD?

3. What does the community perceive as an appropriate policy response to consolidation?

Limitations

Qualitative researchers seek to learn about phenomena in its natural environment (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As researchers, they seek to be enlightened and to understand (Hoepfl, 1997). Hoepfl (1997) and Pitney (2004) argue that qualitative methods allow for a phenomenon to be better understood as well as gaining new insight and more in-depth information that cannot always be accomplished through quantitative methods. Cao (2007) takes a stronger approach when referring to qualitative research. He speaks to the power of understanding a problem and seeing the totality of the situation. A holistic approach is used in qualitative research because all the pieces of a problem are interconnected as a system, each having an effect on the other (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Qualitative research is not only valuable, but it is indispensable to our understanding of a phenomenon. Unfortunately, the data gained from a qualitative study is extremely complex to interpret, and is often open to severe criticism due to the lack of well-developed and accepted procedures and criteria for analyzing and interpreting this information (Cao).

Phillips and Carr (2009) counter, noting there are multiple criteria now available to evaluate qualitative research, but no single criteria or instrument is endorsed by the complete academic community. Rolfe (2006) extends this thought stating there is no consensus on quality criteria, or consensus that there should be set criteria. He claims there should not be set criteria for qualitative research but instead, save judgment for each individual study. Pitney (2004) disagrees stating qualitative research is more prominent and accepted, largely due to increased awareness and consensus of trustworthiness criteria in qualitative research.

As one researcher who conducted this study of Hallsburg ISD, it is noted I was not able to talk to every stakeholder in the district to learn their personal feelings on Hallsburg ISD. The representative group I interviewed as well as the group that participated in surveys may or may not represent the views of the entire community. The views of those in the study reflected the views associated with Hallsburg ISD and may or may not represent views from other similar districts. Being the one researcher, interpretation was through the lens of a White, middle class, male who has been associated with a district as small as Hallsburg ISD for five years.

Furthermore, at the time of data collection, I was also the superintendent and principal of Hallsburg ISD. As such, my biases favored keeping the district sustainable and open. I worked to have these biases influence me as little as possible.

Assumptions

Assumptions were made at the onset of this research project. The first was that the community of Hallsburg wanted to keep control of Hallsburg ISD and was willing to

do what was necessary and keep the school open. Secondly, the State will not change its funding formulas to the advantage of small districts in an effort to help them stay open, preventing future consolidation.

Definition of Key Terms

Average Daily Attendance (ADA) - The total number of days of attendance for all students divided by the total number of school days in a given period gives the average daily attendance (<http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/fbs/accounting/data/>).

Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) - The Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) reports provide a great deal of performance information about every public school and district in the state. These reports also provide extensive profile information about staff, finances, and programs (<http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/aeis/faq.html>).

Chapter 41- Chapter 41 of the Texas Education Code makes provisions for certain school districts to share their local tax revenue with other school districts. For the purposes of the school finance system in Texas, districts are designated as either property wealthy or property poor. The relative wealth of the school district is measured in terms of the taxable value of property that lies within the school district borders divided by the number of students in weighted average daily attendance (WADA). Chapter 41's provisions are sometimes referred to as the "share the wealth" or "Robin Hood" plan because districts that are deemed to be property wealthy are required to share their wealth with property-poor school districts. The funds that are distributed by the property-wealthy districts are "recaptured" by the school finance system to assist

with financing of public education in school districts that are property poor

(http://www.tea.state.tx.us/index2.aspx?id=6796&menu_id=645).

Consolidated Independent School District (CISD or CSD) - two or more school districts that merge into one

Texas Education Agency (TEA) - branch of the state government of Texas in the United States responsible for public education

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Texas_Education_Agency).

Texas Education Code (TEC) - a set of the state statutes (laws) governing public education in Texas (<http://portals.tea.state.tx.us/page.aspx?id=920&bc=506>)

Organization of Study

This study is composed of five chapters. Chapter 1 provides an introduction and background to this Problem in Practice Record of Study. This chapter states the purpose and significance of the study. It also gives an overview of the methodology followed by research questions, limitations, and assumptions. The chapter concludes with the definition of key terms. Chapter 2 provides a review of literature associated with the consolidation of school districts. It covers legal and legislative history as well as the controversy and factors of consolidation. Chapter 3 provides a complete explanation of the methodology associated with this study. Chapter 4 provides results of the study, and Chapter 5 concludes with a summary of the study and recommendations for Hallsburg ISD.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

School District Consolidation

Many small, rural school districts struggle to maintain a quality educational program due to the high costs involved in maintaining these programs (Goatcher, 1999). Tight economic times inflate this struggle due to cuts in federal, state and local funding (Duncomb, et al., 1995). Small districts also find difficulty in offering a variety of special programs and extracurricular activities compared to larger districts (Imazeki & Reschovsky, 2003). As the years progress, these problems can escalate, eventually forcing a district to make some very tough, often unpopular decisions. Consolidation of districts is a consideration that can have very positive or negative effects educationally, but will almost always have ill effects, such as a decline in the social and economic welfare, on the communities being served (Lyson, 2002). This review of literature will cover the following aspects of school district consolidation: consolidation history, consolidation factors (financial efficiency, optimal school size, student achievement, and community effects), and state consolidation incentives. This review of literature will address consolidation of school districts and serve to aid administrators and policy makers if ever faced with a difficult decision concerning consolidation. If consolidation is a possibility, there are many factors to consider, the biggest possibly being the financial benefit to the district. At that point the consequences must be weighed to determine if the positive components of consolidation are worth the negative outcomes.

If so, or if there is no other option, great consideration should be made in the attempt to ensure as smooth of a transition as possible for all stakeholders involved.

Consolidation History

The consolidation of rural school districts in the United States has occurred since the 1800's. Consolidation was first recorded in Massachusetts in 1869 when a law was passed to provide the transportation of students to and from school (Probst, 1908). This was the beginning of the controversy over the advantages and disadvantages of merging school districts. Arguments circulated then just as they do now. In the early 1900's, Probst cites the argument over athletics as a successful component of consolidation to keep boys in school. After 100 years, this argument is still used in some parts of the country. Though school districts have been consolidating for more than a century, rural school consolidation continues to be a source of social tension today (Post & Stambach, 1999).

Although consolidation of school districts began in the late 1800's and early 1900's, during the mid-1900s, schools consolidated at a rapid rate. Between 1930 and 1970, ninety percent of school districts in the U.S. were eliminated through consolidation, thus changing the small community-run school district into larger professionally run bureaucracies (Berry, 2007). The high cost of maintaining small schools spurred the consolidation effort, based on the argument that larger schools were seen as more economical and efficient. This same line of thinking produced a "one best model" using urban and larger schools as that model, judging rural schools as deficient (Bard, Gardner, & Wieland, 2005, p. 1). While policy makers and educators encouraged

consolidation, the business sector also found reasons to support it. Bard et al. (2005) note International Harvester, a school bus manufacturing company, whole heartedly supported consolidation in the 1930's, knowing more school busses would be needed to transport students farther distances. Furthermore, during this consolidation movement many state governments took active roles in the consolidation process in an effort to increase state control over public education (Berry). This age of consolidation witnessed the closing of 100,000 districts across the United States. From the 1930s to the 1970s, the average school size increased from 87 to 440 students, and district size increased from 170 to 2,300 students (Berry & West, 2010).

The heaviest time of consolidation occurred during the two decades following WW II, thriving on a time of prosperity and increasing urbanization (Post & Stambach, 1999). Another wave followed, starting in the 1970's, for the opposite reason. Inflation was on the rise, and suburban areas were growing. This downturn caused a drop in rural school enrollment, which raised the cost to educate a student in these outlying districts. These increased costs produced financial hardships for districts, resulting in voluntary consolidation of programs and facilities (Bard et al., 2005). For example in the state of Arkansas, 61 districts were absorbed through consolidation between 1983 and 1999, with the total district count changing from 371 to 310 districts. Predictably, these districts were consolidated due to the high cost of maintaining educational standards and offering quality programs (Goatcher, 1999).

Even with the rising costs of educating students in small schools being a factor in the consolidation movement, many school districts resisted the trend to consolidate.

Gordan and Knight (2009) exemplify this notion of resistance where tax payers voted to pay higher taxes and keep local control of their schools, choose who their children's classmates would be, and still set their own tax rate. This type of resistance to consolidation forced state governments to enact legislation that would mandate school district consolidations or offer strong financial incentives for consolidating. Even so, those committed to consolidate and those committed to prevent consolidation continued to debate the merits of consolidation throughout the century and into present times (Gordan & Knight; Post & Stambach, 1999).

Throughout the history of consolidation, arguments have been made to support and reject the merging of districts. Some of these arguments favor consolidation, and some disfavor it. An example was noted by Cooper (1949) who reported a large percentage of high school-age boys from small schools in New York dropped out before graduation where less than half that percentage dropped out from city schools. This line of reasoning runs in contradiction to today's urban issues where the dropout rate in large urban schools is greater than that of smaller schools (Bard et al., 2005). Although these arguments might change, one constant remains; the controversy behind consolidation has been prevalent since the 1800's.

Often, with controversy comes litigation. Though most accounts of consolidation started in the later 1800's, there is court documentation outlining controversial cases over consolidation early in the century. The legal history of school consolidation in the United States began as early as 1819 and as of 1993 there have been at least 450 court cases related to school consolidation, division, annexation, and change of organization.

Some of these cases reached the Supreme Court but most lower court rulings dealt with issues of consolidation related to racial segregation. Of the 450 cases, approximately 400 were decided before 1976 and half of those were between 1936 and 1976. This was the time of a major effort to consolidate the one-room school house (Stephens as cited in Howley, 1993).

Before efforts to consolidate the one-room school house, it was determined that all students must have access to a school. The case of *Commonwealth v. Inhabitants of Dedham* (1819) was a Massachusetts case determining the common school district had to serve the entire town, not just a part of it. This set the key concept for consolidation cases as a territorial issue (Howley, 1993). Another early case set 40 years later was from Iowa, *McDonald v. School District No. 1* (1860), which established continuity in consolidated districts. This particular case dealt with an action being brought against a pre-existing district before consolidation. The court ruled the newly formed consolidated district would be responsible for the action, not just the portion of the district originally involved. Thus, precedent was set that districts had to cover entire geographical areas, and as consolidation of these widespread areas occurred, the newly formed districts were responsible for all debts of all districts consolidated.

Howley (1993) further notes subsequent cases throughout the years that dealt with city districts annexing adjoining rural districts, newly consolidated districts acquiring all property within that newly annexed territory, creation of consolidation upon petition of a majority of voters, and schools being located in proximity for the convenience of travel to attend that school. These cases set the basis for consolidation-

type reform beginning in the 1930's. Two cases from 1931, one in Texas and the other in Kentucky, affirmed the power of the state to enlarge or diminish school territories, with or without approval of the constituents (*Love v. City of Dallas*, 1931, *Whalen v. Board of Education of Harrison County*, 1931). In 1945, another Kentucky case, *Alford v. Board of Education of Campbell County* (1945), amended these 1930's cases slightly, giving the citizens safeguard against abusive powers being employed by county boards. The court ruled that arbitrary exercise of education boards' authority without legitimate claim would result in a violation of their authority from the state. Another similar case in Georgia, *Crawford v. Irwin* (1954) confirmed the authority of the state to grant county boards of education the power to consolidate districts within their counties (Howley).

The central focus of consolidation cases shifted in the late 1960's and early 1970's to dealing with desegregation (Howley, 1993). One particularly complicated case from Florida was brought by the NAACP in pursuit of a unitary school system (*Allen v. Board of Public Instruction of Broward County*, 1970). The court remained involved in the consolidation process, seeking counsel from numerous entities. The consolidation process particular to this case included closing a school and rezoning attendance lines. The court maintained its intent was to create a unitary school system without regard to racial balance (Howley).

In other areas of the country during this time, the courts were affirming previous decisions made in similar cases (Howley, 1993). According to Howley, one consideration that gained impetus during the late 1960's was the consideration of the affected districts, namely its residents. *Granada Independent School District No. 455 v.*

Mattheis (1969) was a Minnesota case where a district refused to consolidate after the state issued an order. The court ruled the Commissioner would have to review the case and consider the community needs.

Most of the legal issues considering consolidation had been heard by the end of the 1970's while later cases mostly dealt with refinement or misinterpretation of set precedent or changes in state laws (Howley, 1993). Two 1989 cases exemplify these type of proceedings. The first, *Kaberna et al. v. School Board of Lead-Deadwood School District 40-1* (1989), was a South Dakota case where the board misinterpreted statutory language and ordered the closure of a school with six students. The second case, *Haynes v. Board of Education of the County of Kanawha* (1989), was a West Virginia case which dealt with a procedural issue regarding how the Kanawha County Board of Education proceeded in closing a district. The Kanawha County Board of Education held a closure hearing, but when the board ordered the closure, an election had taken place changing the make-up of the board that conducted the hearing. The court held that the board was still the same entity regardless of its changing membership.

The underlying theme throughout the history of consolidation court cases has one major common thread: the state has the authority to consolidate school districts if it is determined to be in the best educational interest of the school systems (Howley, 1993). The state's decision is final unless violations occur regarding procedures, constitutional rights, statutory vagueness, and other misappropriations of authority. Courts are reluctant to intervene between residents who disagree with the decisions on educational need made under state authority (Howley).

Controversy Over Consolidation

The controversies associated through the history of school district consolidation revolve around the question; “Why consolidate?” Haller and Monk (1988) express the irony of consolidation when considering that question, making smaller schools larger contradicts research from the 1980’s claiming the benefits of small schools. Some of those benefits include reducing drop-out rates, developing a climate of trust and shared responsibilities, and more localized decision making between parents and administrators. Although these benefits are worthy of great consideration, other responsibilities of a school district must also be measured. Bard et al. (2005) list these responsibilities as efficiency, economics, student achievement, school size, and community identity.

Consolidation Factors

Financial efficiency supported. In many studies, Boex and Martinez-Vasquez (1998) found that small districts have difficulty providing the same quality and level of educational opportunities as larger districts. When the same quality and level of educational opportunity are obtained, the cost per student is greater in the smaller district. This concept is referred to by economists as “economies of scale” (Boex & Martinez-Vasquez). That is, for example, a third grade class with twenty students costs the same to maintain, operate, and pay a teacher as a third grade class with ten students. When dividing that cost, it is much cheaper to have twenty students in the classroom (Imazeki & Reschovsky, 2003).

Adams and Foster (2002) state that conventional wisdom assumes consolidation is beneficial for small schools in both the education process and cost savings. Goatcher

(1999) lists a broader curriculum, greater specialization in teaching, and economies of scale as anticipated benefits through consolidation. Other benefits to consolidation cited by supporters include savings to tax payers, reduction in duplicated services and resources, and an improved quality of education (Robertson, 2007). Through these benefits, it is suggested that as school districts grow, their cost to educate each pupil drops due to economies of scale. Very simply, consolidation is widely regarded as a way for school districts to cut costs (Duncombe & Yinger, 2005). Thus, larger districts are argued to be more cost effective than smaller ones.

Another central issue many small rural public school districts face is the cost per student they will have to spend in order to reach the state and national student performance standards (Imazeki & Reschovsky, 2003). Imazeki and Reschovsky further note rural school districts must spend more money per student than larger school districts in order to provide a basic education. This higher cost is due to certain fixed costs such as physical capital and human resources. Kenny (1982) finds in his study that when all inputs are kept equal (i.e. same quality teachers, same wages, etc.), economies of scale make effective schooling 17% to 37% more expensive for rural high schools than urban high schools.

Studies from across the country have produced similar results regarding school consolidation. Ratcliffe, Riddle, and Yinger (1990) find similar positive fiscal outcomes in a consolidation experiment they conducted on Nebraska schools. They hypothetically consolidated 865 school districts into 93 county school districts. After comparing a financial analysis of these districts before and after consolidation, Ratcliffe et al.

discovered significant financial advantages in the consolidated districts due to economies of scale. In addition, a Bowles and Bosworth (2002) study on Wyoming public schools used a least squares dummy variable model to account for potential economies of scale savings in this state's public schools. They found the results mirrored other studies conducted across the country. That is, it costs more to educate a student in a small school than it does in a large school. Using different models to substantiate this claim, Bowles and Bosworth concluded an average increase of 10% in school size results in an average decrease of 2% in education cost per student.

Furthermore, Duncombe and Yinger (2005) found there are significant economies of size cost savings in the operations of rural school districts in New York. While the greatest cost savings occur when consolidating two very small districts, districts with 1,500 students each can consolidate and save six percent in operating costs. Additionally, Goatcher (1999) notes valid arguments stating that when districts consolidate, there is greater efficiency in services due to the non-duplication of specialists and directors, such as transportation, accounting, curriculum, and so on. Goatcher (1999) also found there is greater equity in financial resources when districts are merged as one.

Lewis and Chakraborty (1996) studied economies of scale in Utah school districts and found the "... most important determinant of education cost per student is the size of the school per capita income in the district, the student-teacher ratio and the twenty year teacher salary" (p. 34). The size of the district was not significant when taking in to account the size of the schools in the study. Lewis and Chakraborty found

that economies of scale are significant but only when the consolidation of districts include the consolidation of schools in those districts.

After Iowa experienced fifty public school mergers or consolidations from 1991 to 2002, Gordon and Knight (2009) studied the reasons behind the consolidations, citing the financial benefits of economies of scale as the main factor for small districts to consolidate. They went on to find the importance of heterogeneity in merging districts, meaning districts with similar demographics had a better chance of merging than unlike districts.

Financial efficiency denounced. Goatcher (1999) found, when examining 113 Arkansas consolidations between 1965 and 1995, that only 15 of these districts reported saving money from the year before to two years after the consolidation. He listed some reasons associated with these findings to include increased costs in transportation and capital outlay for new buildings and related needs. There is also a higher cost in salaries as the salaries of teachers in the lesser paid district are raised to meet those in the joining district. Other reasons for increased costs include enriched curriculum and expanded student services. The addition of assistant superintendents or directors to oversee the different programs in the newly formed consolidated district also attributed to higher costs. Even though the new district only needs one superintendent and one director over each department, the newly formed positions cost more than the savings of the other superintendent and director positions that were consolidated (Goatcher). This Arkansas study clearly shows the savings in different areas of consolidation can be offset by

forced higher costs in other areas after the consolidation takes place (Adams & Foster, 2002; Goatcher).

When examining economies of scale, Bard et al. (2005) find there is not much evidence from studies conducted between 1960 and 2004 that demonstrate consolidation of small districts into larger ones reduces the cost to educate per pupil. It is further noted while the actual cost per pupil might be a little more in small schools, the cost to the government is much less. Small schools have a much higher graduation rate which equates to less people unemployed, on welfare, and in prison than those schools with higher dropout rates (Bard et al.). Taking this notion one step further, through their review of research, Andrews, Duncombe, and Yinger (2002) conclude there is very little convincing evidence on the actual results of consolidation over time. Furthermore, Hicks and Rusalkina (2004) do not even address economies of scale in their study and further note the error in much of the educational literature that measures scale economies through evaluations of production outcomes, which is done in competitive markets.

Optimal school size. A notion of optimum school size has emerged through the studies of school consolidation. As early as the 1940's, Cooper (1949) noted some educational experts were suggesting school districts needed to be a minimum of 4,000 students in order to provide a comprehensive educational program at a reasonable cost. Though these numbers are not duplicated in other studies, it contributed to the research for optimal school size. Throughout the 1970's and 80's New York has operated under the presumption of an optimal school size, emphasizing schools should not be too small or too large. Butler and Monk (1985) add that the intention was not to turn small, New

York, rural districts into urban districts, but to turn small, rural districts into larger rural districts. Bard et al. (2005) found the same results in a 1981 study where not only very small schools were expensive to operate, but so were very large schools.

Examining the costs of larger schools, Robertson (2007) found when researching economies of scale on 99 of the largest districts in the U.S. during the 1999-2000 school year that bigger is not necessarily better. Benefits generally listed in support of the consolidation of districts such as savings to tax payers, reduction in duplicated resources, and improved quality of education, were not benefits in these districts. Robertson's research shows these districts should deconsolidate in order to receive maximum benefit for their students. A Strategic Planning Study Group Committee (2003) study finds as district sizes fall below 750 students, the expenditures per student rise. This committee also found the expenditure per student levels off at 1,000 students and above. When keeping student performance constant, there is evidence that school district consolidation substantially lowers the operating costs of that district with student enrollments in that optimum range (Strategic Planning Study Group Committee, 2003). Andrews et al. (2002) reviewed research from 1977 to 1997 finding potentially significant savings when consolidating districts of less than 500 students. They found optimum size ranges between 2,000 and 4,000 students. This size of a district allows for economies of scale while not losing the individualized attention to the students. Duncombe, Miner, and Ruggiero (1995) found similar results from an analysis of New York school districts indicating potentially large savings when districts with less than 500 students consolidated. Duncombe et al. further recommends states considering school district

consolidation should focus on districts with less than 500 students. The actual numbers vary by study but most support the notion of an optimal school size, that is, not being too small or large.

Student achievement and success. From the end of WWII to the middle 1960's, it was generally accepted by school administrators that small districts did not fit the plan for quality education of the future (Webb, 1989). During Sputnik and the Cold War, concerns centered around the effectiveness of rural schools in producing the human capital to support national security (Webb). It was believed by many that consolidation would help alleviate this problem as large schools continued to be the model for the most effective and efficient means to educate the nation's youth (Bard et al., 2005; Webb).

Bard et al. (2005) repeatedly found that areas other than finance must be addressed when considering consolidation. Student achievement, self-concept, participation in extra-curricular activities, and dropout rates must all be analyzed (Bard et al.). Along with these considerations, they found in small schools, students had more positive attitudes about schooling, better social behaviors, felt they belonged to the school, had better interpersonal relationships, had better attendance rates, as well as had a higher probability of success in college than students in large schools.. Thus, it is important that policy makers carefully judge all aspects and effects when considering school district consolidation (Bard et al.). For example, Hicks and Rusalkina (2004) found no impact on school performance between schools that had been consolidated and those that had not in West Virginia. This information could be beneficial or not depending on the platform being used for considering consolidation. Gong (2005) found

in the results of her study of Pennsylvania school districts, that the greatest in outcomes between small and large districts was not in per pupil expenditures but was instead noted in more course offerings and higher standardized test scores in the larger districts. The two greatest predictors for student academic achievement were found to be the school district socio-economic level (that is, the district being in a wealthy area versus a poor area) and the course offerings at the high school level; the latter being more prevalent at a larger high school (Gong).

Adams and Foster (2002) note in their study the negative side of consolidation; the larger the school, the less the academic quality, the higher the absenteeism rate, and the less support between school and community. Lutz (1990) found in emerging research that students at-risk of not finishing school are particularly vulnerable in larger educational settings. This research has indicated negative effects in achievement and attitudes of these students. Conversely, they found students in smaller districts participate more in extracurricular activities, increasing their self-concepts and feeling more connected than their counterparts in larger schools (Adams & Foster). In a study using 1980 census information, Berry and West (2010) found that students educated in states with smaller schools obtained higher returns on their education and completed more years of school. While larger schools and districts provided a higher degree of educational attainment, the harmful effects of large districts outweighed the gains (Berry & West). The study was not designed to explain these effects or the differences between the outcomes of smaller and larger schools but some possible explanations for the positive influence of small schools offered by Berry and West include student

participation in extra-curricular activities, attachment to community, parental involvement, and self-esteem.

Optimum school size was previously discussed in terms of economic factors. It must also be a factor in researching student achievement. When considering academic achievement, the Strategic Planning Study Group Committee (2003) warns that merging several smaller elementary schools could be detrimental if student performance is a goal of the merger. They found in 30 years of research that the optimum school size for student achievement is 300-500 students. Andrews et al. (2002) found in their study, optimal school sizes in relation to student performance range between 600 and 900 students for high school while elementary school research suggests 300 to 500 students as an optimal size. The numbers differ slightly but indicate moderation in school size as the key for optimal student performance. Small districts can benefit from consolidation as long as the consolidation does not make the district excessively large and travel times for transportation do not become unreasonable (Andrews et al.; Strategic Planning Study Group Committee). A precautionary note should be made at this point. Finding the optimum size school does not guarantee success in terms of student achievement. Small schools and large schools have shown tremendous accomplishment in student achievement proving good schools can come in any size (Strategic Planning Study Group Committee).

Community effects. Adams and Foster (2002) list community identity as an issue that should be addressed when considering school district consolidation. Public schools in rural communities are important both socially and economically. Many times

the schools are the center of the community and community activities while often being the largest employer in the community (Bard et al., 2005). Thus, schools are vital to the health of a community. They provide autonomy, vitality, integration, tradition, and identity to a community (Lyson, 2002). Lyson continues, stating the presence of a school district in a community is connected with many social and economic advantages. When examining the social and economic health of a community, virtually every area examined, such as autonomy, vitality, integration, tradition, and identity, rank higher on larger communities with schools than those without (Lyson). These points clarify why even with the potential cost savings due to economies of scale, many residents in small communities prefer the advantages of a small school district (Boex & Martinez-Vasquez, 1998).

Critics wanting to preserve small school districts claim many communities no longer exist due to the consolidation of their schools (Bard et al., 2005). There is a true fear in communities facing school consolidation; of the loss of their identity and attachment. Following a school closure, research has shown population decline, deterioration of the community, and support for public education declines (Strategic Planning Study Group Committee, 2003). Bard et al. found towns that lost their schools had lower social and fiscal capacities than towns that were able to keep their schools. Certainly, when considering consolidation for financial purposes, all parties must be aware that the money saved through the merger could be forfeited in lost taxes, declining property values, and lost businesses.

Bard et al. (2005) surmise when consolidation discussions begin, the district is likely looking at the inevitable instead of the possible. They recommend making every effort to include the community in deliberations, even when the outcome is inevitable. Bard et al. further offer options to consider such as keeping a school open in both towns. One of the most important tools leading to a successful school consolidation includes community meetings to allow for open communication (Bard et al.). Bard et al. also note that when the interests of the community were ignored during the consolidation process, school attendance decreased as community disintegration increased.

Post and Stambach (1998) sum up the feeling of the community school:

All past research highlight the critical importance of the rural school as the last bastion of symbolic identity for the community, loss of which is contested whenever possible by parents who grew up in the area or arrived hoping to find a closer community. (p. 106)

State Consolidation Incentives

Tholkes and Sederberg (1990) discovered many school districts considering consolidation immediately met difficulty when attempting to fund new facilities to meet the increased number of students in the consolidated district. Without financial incentives, new construction costs, higher salaries, distribution, and transportation could cancel any savings from increased purchasing power and from more efficient use of personnel, facilities, and equipment (Tholkes & Sederberg). In 1993 the Governor of Kentucky, Brereton Jones, pushed for small school consolidation as a needed measure in order for the state to save money and gain efficiency (Adams & Foster, 2002). Jones'

proposal came on the heels of a 1989 report put out by the state's Legislative Task Force on School Finance that concluded small districts, especially those with less than 500 students, operate less efficiently than their larger counterparts (Adams & Foster). An entity of the Kentucky Chambers of Commerce further supported consolidation through recommendations of providing incentives for consolidating districts and forcibly consolidating other districts deemed to be inefficient. Districts with less than 800 students were considered for these recommendations in Kentucky (Adams & Foster). Oklahoma passed similar reform bills in 1990 that provided incentives for district consolidation (Bard et al., 2005).

Georgia passed a Quality Basic Education Act in 1986 that provided financial incentives for school district consolidation in the form of 100% state funding for capital outlays following the voluntary consolidation of two or more districts (Boex & Martinez-Vasquez, 1998). When considering the economies of scale, Georgia found only small savings for most districts. However, Boex and Martinez-Vasquez noted when a small district consolidates with a district several times larger, the savings could exceed \$300 per student annually.

New York and West Virginia are other states that have offered incentives to school districts that consolidate (Bard et al., 2005; Duncombe et al., 1995). New York contributes an additional 40 percent operation funding to consolidated districts for the first five years of consolidation, and then slowly withdraws the additional aid over the following nine years (Duncombe et al.). West Virginia created a capital improvement project for public schools but the schools had to meet a mandated enrollment level to

qualify. Once they qualified, funds were distributed for new construction and substantial remodeling (Bard et al.).

Conclusion

Consolidation of school districts has become a part of the fabric of the American educational process for over 100 years. Whether facing economic crisis or attempting to reach higher levels of achievement; school consolidation will continue to be a source of controversy. The Strategic Planning Study Group Committee (2003) recommends every individual school district facing the possibility of consolidation conduct a complete analysis of their situation. All planning should include representation from all school district stakeholders. If consolidation is the ultimate outcome, transition plans should be developed to ensure as smooth of a process as possible for all consolidating districts (Strategic Planning Study Group Committee).

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Hallsburg ISD is facing one of the most challenging times in its existence. If the low enrollment trend continues, the district may be in danger of consolidation. Research was conducted to get a pulse of the community, that is, to see just how important the existence of this school was to the community. Specifically, I wanted to know, would the community support paying more in taxes either through a Tax Ratification Election (TRE) or a bond, to help keep the school solvent and keep the facilities updated? If not, and enrollment does not increase, the state would eventually have to take over the district and consolidate it with another district. Texas Education Code, Chapter 13 outlines this process. Following code, Hallsburg ISD would be consolidated with Mart ISD. Mart ISD has enough space in their current facilities to absorb all the students at Hallsburg School. Economic conditions would likely dictate that the Hallsburg campus close and the students be bused to Mart. If the Hallsburg community supported a TRE or bond election, the district could update its facilities and continue to recruit transfer students, keeping the district solvent. Even if the district still could not stay solvent, the updated facilities would encourage another district to want to consolidate and keep the Hallsburg campus open as an elementary school in a newly consolidated district.

The methodology used in this project is presented below, including the relevance, emergent design, and an explanation of the researcher as the primary instrument. This section is followed by description of the participants chosen for this study. Research design, data collection, and data analysis are outlined followed by an explanation of the

methods used to ensure trustworthiness. The chapter concludes with the description of the professional positionality of the researcher followed by a summary.

Methodology

A school district often serves as a binder in a community. Whether a school continues to exist might make the difference of whether a community continues to exist. Assessing the importance of a school district to a community can be very complicated. Complications can certainly arise from economic issues, but possibly an even greater complication stems from the sense of belonging schools offer as hubs of community activity.

This was a mixed study that used both qualitative and quantitative methods. Qualitative methodology was used to gain a deeper understanding of the depth of commitment the community of Hallsburg has toward its school (Hoepfl, 1997). Denzin and Lincoln (1994) state that qualitative research is multimethod in focus, and involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. Qualitative researchers study phenomena in its natural environment, such as that of the Hallsburg community (Hoepfl). They attempt to bring meaning to light through a variety of different empirical materials, one being case study (Denzin & Lincoln).

Quantitative methodology was used as a means for objective measurement with representation sampling and the use of statistical procedures to analyze the collected data (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). In this study, “survey research provides a quantitative or numeric description of trends, attitudes, or opinions of a population by studying a sample of that population” (Creswell, 2009, p. 12). Gall et al. (2007) state an objective reality

can be described through the statistical analysis of survey data collected from a sample of the Hallsburg community.

Relevance

Creswell (2007) notes the difficulty in finding definitions of qualitative research among scholarly work. He notes the ever-changing nature of qualitative inquiry through the following definition.

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including fieldnotes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (Denzin & Lincoln as cited in Creswell, p. 36)

Gall et al. (2007) "... define case study research as (a) the in-depth study of (b) one or more instances of a phenomenon (c) in its real-life context that (d) reflects the perspective of the participants involved in the phenomenon" (p. 447). This case study illuminates for the reader the feelings of a diversified representation of citizens in Hallsburg toward their desire to keep their community school open. This study, as with all qualitative research, produced a report that represented the voice and feelings of the participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, and a thorough interpretation of the

problem coupled with possible solutions (Creswell, 2007). A goal of the findings from this research includes its applicability to other communities and school districts in similar situations to that of Hallsburg and Hallsburg ISD (Gall et al.). Hoepfl (1997) cites Lincoln and Guba (1985) on the transferability of a working hypothesis in the naturalistic paradigm. Sufficient information is provided from this study to allow the reader the ability to determine whether it will fit his or her particular situation.

Emergent Design

Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, and Allen (1993) emphasize the design of a study as the crutch for the researcher to be able to understand the phenomena and convey that knowledge to others where they can understand and relate it to their situation. The researcher can usually configure a design for the study to gain information on the phenomena of interest. Understanding the complexity of the human setting, the naturalistic researcher must be flexible enough to adjust the design to meet the needs of gaining the information relevant to the study. This flexibility will continue to exist as the understanding of the researcher develops, in turn creating an emerging design for the study.

As the study progresses and information is collected, it is likely the design of the study will continue to change or emerge (Gall et al., 2007). Creswell (2007) states the key idea behind qualitative research is to learn about the problem through participants and then take any steps necessary to change the research to obtain that information. In qualitative research, questions might change just as the list of those answering the questions might be modified. The questions and lists in this study did not change, but the

initial focus of this study emerged from one of determining the views of a community to the need to educate the community on current school funding issues and how those issues relate to local school taxation.

Researcher as the Primary Instrument

Hoepfl (1997), citing Lincoln and Guba's (1985) work, lists one of many features of qualitative research as the researcher being the "human instrument" of data collection.

... humans [are] the "instrument of choice" for naturalistic inquiry. Humans are responsive to environmental cues, and able to interact with the situation; they have the ability to collect information at multiple levels simultaneously; they are able to perceive situations holistically; they are able to process data as soon as they become available; they can provide immediate feedback and request verification of data; and they can explore atypical or unexpected responses. (p. 50-51)

Gall et al. (2007) acknowledge the role of the qualitative researcher as a "measuring instrument" but realize the complexity of data collection due to the human factor. Part of the complexity involves the researcher becoming personally involved in the study and working closely with the research participants.

Due to the complex role of the qualitative researcher, Hoepfl (1997) uses Glaser and Straus (1967) and Strauss and Corbin's (1990) terminology of "theoretical sensitivity" to gauge a researcher's skill and readiness to attempt qualitative inquiry. This sensitivity includes three things a researcher must be able to do. They must be able to take a naturalist paradigm stance, develop skills to be a human instrument, and

prepare a research design using accepted strategies for naturalistic inquiry. Being responsive to environmental cues are an example of the skills that must be developed as is the ability to give meaning to data after sorting through, separating the important from the not important. The bottom line is then, the credibility of the report relies on the reader's confidence in the researcher's ability to be sensitive to the data (Hoepfl).

When gaining the confidence of the reader, a major challenge for the researcher is to demonstrate that his or her personal interest will not bias the study (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Gall et al. (2007) note other challenges facing the qualitative researcher such as the lack of standardized or specified procedures prior to data collection and the shift or addition of data collection methods after data collection begins. Although challenging, Gall et al. stress the importance of using those added multiple methods to collect data, enhancing the validity of the study through triangulation (a method to ensure "trustworthiness," explained later in this chapter). Finally, collecting one's own data, examining documents, observing behavior, interviewing participants, and developing their own questionnaires and data collection instruments are a few other challenges facing the qualitative researcher (Creswell, 2007).

As the researcher and primary data collection instrument, I continually checked myself for bias reactions, comments, questions, or actions in general during the data collection phase of this research study. As the superintendent of Hallsburg ISD, I have definite ideas of how I think the district facilities, including its maintenance and operation procedures, should be upgraded to provide its students with a quality learning environment. I had to sever these thoughts from my consciousness while collecting data,

to ensure I was hearing and understanding what the participants were saying, either through their interviews or in response to the surveys. This proved to be especially difficult when collecting information that was extremely different than my own idea.

Sampling Techniques

Creswell (2007) explains purposive sampling is used in qualitative research because it enables the researcher to select specific individuals and sites for study—on purpose—that will produce an understanding of the phenomenon being researched. Multiple types of sampling were used to choose interview and survey participants for this study. Maximum variation calls for selecting participants for the interviews that are quite different. Maximum variation was used in the selection of participants so that a diverse group would reflect differences in perspective. Critical case sampling was also incorporated to obtain specific information about the problem being studied. Lastly, convenience sampling was used to enable the researcher easy access to data collection through the interview process. Random sampling was used when sending the surveys to community members registered to vote in the district. Multiple samples were used in this study as an effort to off-set the complexity of the human make-up of a school district (Creswell).

Participants

Participants are "... individuals with whom the researcher begins in data collection because they are well informed, are accessible, and can provide leads about other information" (Gilchrist as cited in Creswell, 2007, p. 243). As such, participants for this study were selected primarily from the residents of this school district. A school

district has geographic boundaries within which its residents reside. If these residents own property within the district, they pay taxes to the school district. If they live in a district and pay rent to live on a property, the landlord will take a portion of that rent money and pay taxes to the school district. Either way, most all residents of a school district have a connection through the local property tax system. Whether they have children that attend a school in that district or simply reside in that locale, a portion of their money goes to that district. Since this Problem in Practice Record of Study hinges on the support of the residents of this district, it was imperative to get a grasp of the actual feelings between residents of the district and their support of the district. Many residents might say they support their local school, but when it comes time to “put their money where their mouth is,” I wondered in terms of this study, if they were willing to take that step?

Interviewees were representatives from a cross-section of the district. I interviewed three teachers or staff members. The first was selected from teachers who had been with the district for 30 or more years. The second was selected from the teachers who lived in the district, and the staff member was selected from the office staff that had been with the district for over 20 years and also lived in the district.

The next group that was interviewed was also directly connected to the district. I interviewed four board members. When choosing board members to be interviewed, I was looking for diverse backgrounds and views as indicated in their voting histories and comments they made concerning different issues that had been addressed by the board over the years. The sitting board president was interviewed because of his selected

leadership to speak for the citizens and students of the district. The other three interviews were conducted with board members selected from a past and present pool. At least one member was chosen who had never had a child attend Hallsburg School. This member was important because they represented a voice from a stakeholder who was closely tied to the district, but was not emotionally tied through having children who attended Hallsburg School. The other members selected were from a pool of members who had community involvement beyond that of just the school board. Involvement may have include other community organizations such as the water district board, member of the volunteer fire department, or working in the community with clubs such as 4-H.

I interviewed two members of the community recognized as being community leaders. As leaders, many people listen to their opinions on matters such as the school district. Other membership from the community was also included. I interviewed three community members who had no ties to the school with respect to having children or grandchildren who attended school in the district. This group had representation from low and middle socio-economic status as well as ethnic diversity in proportion to that of the district population. There were four parents of current students selected under the same parameters as the community member selection.

The selection of parents, teachers, board members, community leaders, and community members with no children in the district to be interviewed provided an opportunity to gain a diversified pulse of the community with respect to school support. These participants were diverse with respect to their socio-economic status, racial/ethnic identity, and position in the community.

Participants for the survey were randomly selected. A numbered list was generated with all registered voters in the district. I generated 100 random numbers using a random number generator, with the range of the number of registered voters in the district. Surveys were sent to those community members whose list numbers matched the random numbers generated. These 100 participants were important because they consisted of a greater percentage of the school district residents. When they answered the surveys in the privacy of their own home, with no one watching or asking what they thought, the data reflected true community thoughts and feelings or desires.

Research Design and Data Collection

There were three methods of data collection utilized in this study; interviews, a survey, and document collection (Creswell, 2007). Structured and unstructured interviews were administered to the participants (Creswell, 2003). This allowed for the use of a pre-established coding theme and also open-ended conversations to help identify the true feelings and emotions of the participants (Boyatzis, 1998). Interview questions were used to establish community connections, perceptions, general knowledge of the current situation, opinions, preferences, and finally facts concerning whether this person would rather vote to raise their own taxes or let the school district consolidate with a neighboring district (see Appendix A).

Surveys were sent to Hallsburg ISD residents who were registered to vote and who had not already been selected as participants for interviews. The survey was composed of two parts. Part one consisted of demographic questions and questions similar to those asked in interviews, to determine how the respondent felt about the

school and their taxes supporting the school. Part two of the survey consisted of a ranking of a few of the interview questions determining how the respondent felt concerning Hallsburg ISD remaining open versus consolidating. The second part of this section consisted of the same ranking with an added caveat, the respondent had to choose to raise taxes between \$.17 and \$.25 to keep the district open (see Appendix B). The survey was easy to read and answer in an effort to encourage a greater percentage of completed documents returned. Within a week after mailing the surveys, five were returned due to those residences being vacant. After one month of collecting completed surveys, of the 95 remaining, 49 surveys were completed and sent back in the stamped, self-addressed envelope provided with the survey.

Document collection included financial documents and data needed to complete the TEA (Texas Education Agency) approved financial templates. This information included the district Summary of Finance, tax information, and information extracted from the Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS). Historical tax rate information as well as enrollment figures were also collected from the McLennan County Tax Office and TEA website.

Data Analysis

Hoepfl (1997) quotes Bogdan and Bilken in defining qualitative data analysis as “... working with data, organizing it, breaking it into manageable units, synthesizing it, searching for patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned, and deciding what you will tell others” (p. 154). Creswell (2009) is more specific with his description. He states the first two steps in data analysis actually come before the

analysis. One must make sense out of the text before preparing the text for analysis. Different analysis can be done, giving a deeper understanding of the data and phenomenon to the researcher. He must then represent that data and make interpretations, bringing meaning from the data (Creswell, 2007; 2009).

Gall et al. (2007) note data obtained from a survey can be analyzed in both a quantitative and qualitative format, depending on the design of the instrument. Glesne and Webb (as cited in Gall et al.) entered all forced-choice answers, from a survey, in a computer program to generate quantitative results in the form of percentages, means, ranges, and cross tabulations. Additionally, Glesne and Webb (as cited in Gall et al.) also had a program to assist in providing qualitative results from the open-ended answers and comments provided from respondents on the same survey. The program assisted in coding and sorting respondent's words so patterns could be developed. While computer programs were not used in this study, the same principles were applied to utilize both quantitative and qualitative data obtained from the surveys.

When analyzing the qualitative data, I tailored the categories and themes under segments that were meaningful with regard to the importance of sustaining Hallsburg ISD in the Hallsburg community (Creswell, 2003). Caution was taken when identifying data using thematic codes, as these patterns must emerge from the data rather than being imposed prior to the collection (Bowen, 2005). As the thematic codes emerged, I linked them in a logical fashion (Boyatzis, 1998). I also generated a simple comparative analysis using percentages from the quantitative component of the survey. The segment, codes, and statistics were then combined into over-arching themes. Finally, decisions

were made to determine the most conducive way to visually display or represent these themes (Creswell, 2007).

Trustworthiness

Some have great difficulty trying to define trustworthiness in qualitative research. Williams and Morrow (2009) represent many when they address this definition with a humble struggle, equating it to another subject that might be difficult for many to explain in simple words; love: "... so easy to recognize and so difficult to define" (p. 581). . With the lack of agreement on procedures and criteria, Lincoln and Guba (1985) ask this well cited question: "How can an inquirer persuade his or her audiences (including self) that the findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to, worth taking account of" (p. 290)? Hence the need for trustworthiness develops.

Many qualitative researchers have been searching for years to find the ingredients to debunk the criticism and skepticism from the hard-science community arguing the validity of qualitative research. Trustworthiness in a qualitative study refers to the attainment of validity and reliability, terms often used in quantitative research (Curtin & Fossey, 2007). Trustworthiness is questioned by positivists due to their inability to relate validity and reliability to a qualitative study (Shenton, 2004). Quantitative researchers use experimental methods and quantitative measures to test their hypotheses (Creswell, 2007). As researchers, they seek cause and effect, make predictions, and generalize their findings. Creswell (2007) continues, stating qualitative researchers seek to learn about phenomena in its natural environment. As qualitative researchers, they seek to be enlightened and to understand (Hoepfl, 1997). Hoepfl (1997)

and Pitney (2004) argue that qualitative methods allow for a phenomenon to be better understood as well as gaining new insight and more in-depth information that cannot always be accomplished through quantitative methods.

Cao (2007) takes a stronger approach when referring to qualitative research. He speaks to the power of understanding a problem and seeing the totality of the situation. A holistic approach is used in qualitative research because all the pieces of a problem are interconnected as a system, each having an effect on the other (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Qualitative research is not only valuable, but it is indispensable to our understanding of a phenomenon. Unfortunately, the data gained from a qualitative study is extremely complex to interpret, and is often open to severe criticism due to the lack of well-developed and accepted procedures and criteria for analyzing and interpreting this information (Cao).

Phillips and Carr (2009) counter, noting there are multiple criteria now available to evaluate qualitative research, but no single criteria or instrument is endorsed holistically by the academic community. Rolfe (2006) extends this thought stating there is no consensus on quality criteria, or consensus that there should be set criteria. He claims there should not be set criteria for qualitative research but instead, save judgment for each individual study. Pitney (2004) disagrees stating qualitative research is more prominent and accepted, largely due to increased awareness and consensus of trustworthiness criteria in qualitative research.

It is important the terminology used in qualitative inquiry be universal enough for complete understanding (Williams & Morrow, 2009). Williams and Morrow add that

any researcher, whether quantitative or qualitative, has an obligation to the academic community to present a clear study, including the elements to make the study valid and reliable or trustworthy.

Trustworthiness is necessary to establish confidence in the findings of a qualitative study (Arminio & Hultgren, 2002). Furthermore, trustworthiness is necessary to ensure the findings in a study reflect the intent of the participants. Lietz, Langer, and Furman (2006) continue that trustworthiness does not just happen, but is the result of high rigor and following set procedures (discussed earlier, to be criticized if not implemented with a great deal of thought). This high rigor includes methods to ensure trustworthiness such as, the transparency of process, thoroughly describing the strategies and methods used, gathering data for a purpose, and seeking multiple perspectives (Curtin & Fossey, 2007; Phillips & Carr, 2009). When done well, not only the researcher, but the reader of a study will feel confident in the findings of the study (Curtin & Fossey).

Trustworthiness separates research from storytelling or journalism and validates the voices, actions, and lived experiences of the subjects (Phillips & Carr; Williams & Morrow, 2009). Williams and Morrow (2009) list three major categories that must be adequately addressed to ensure trustworthiness: data integrity, objectivity of the researcher, and clearly articulated findings. Contrary to statements previously alluded earlier in this chapter, Lietz et al. (2006) claim concepts and strategies have been established to offer researchers criteria to meet the rigor of the equivalent of validity and reliability in quantitative studies. Lincoln and Guba (1985) introduced these concepts as

credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Many strategies have been developed to strengthen these concepts. Below, I discuss the four concepts of trustworthiness, followed by an explanation of five of the strategies or techniques used to establish or strengthen the concepts of trustworthiness.

Credibility is the qualitative equivalent to the conventional, or quantitative, concept of internal validity. Internal validity is used to determine if the instrument or test is measuring what it was intended to measure. Likewise, credibility refers to the findings and reality being one in the same. For example, in attempting to ensure credibility in qualitative research, the researcher must ask, Do the findings truly reflect what is occurring (Pitney, 2004; Shenton, 2004)? Lincoln and Guba (1985) relate credibility as the truthfulness of particular findings and emphasize credibility as one of the most important factors ensuring trustworthiness. Triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checks were strategies used in this study to help ensure its credibility and will be discussed later in this chapter (Lincoln & Guba, 1986).

Transferability coincides with the conventional, or quantitative, concept of external validity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Whereas external validity requires the generalization of findings, transferability refers to the ability to transfer the findings from one situation to another (Pitney, 2004). Transferability is completely dependent upon the similarity of the two research situations. The researcher can only provide sufficient information to allow the reader to determine if the information is transferable or not (Hoepfl, 1997). Thick descriptive data, or thick description is used to aid and improve transferability, a key criterion in trustworthiness (Cao, 2007; Lincoln & Guba,

1985, 1986; Shenton, 2004). A thick description is a detailed account of every aspect of a study, leaving nothing open for interpretation or assumption. Curtin and Fossey (2007) add the inclusion of rationale for methods used, clarity of the research process, complete description of data collection strategies, detail of all data collected, and to specify the analysis process used. After reading a thick description, the reader should feel they are as familiar with the study as the actual researcher (Curtin & Fossey). Cao (2007) stresses the importance of the working hypothesis and the underlying theories supporting the research in the description. This will help people make informed decisions on the transferability of the study (Cao). A thick description of this study is included in Chapter IV.

Reliability in conventional, or quantitative, terms refers to the consistency of the findings and whether the study can be reproduced (Pitney, 2004). The qualitative equivalent to reliability is dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). When explaining dependability, Lincoln and Guba use the comparison of validity and reliability. They note you cannot have validity without reliability; likewise you cannot have credibility without dependability. Pitney explains dependability as reasonableness of the findings when comparing them to the data. Dependability can be enhanced through the use of an audit trail where both the process and product of the study are reviewed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; 1986). An audit trail refers to the documentation on how a study was conducted (Gall et al., 2007). Such documentation is presented in Chapter IV.

The last of the four concepts of trustworthiness is confirmability. Confirmability aligns with objectivity in the conventional, or quantitative, terminology. Objectivity is

the result of separating oneself from any personal bias or preconceived ideas when addressing a phenomenon. Qualitative research relies heavily on the use of interpretations, bringing subjectivity into the realm. Confirmability refers to the researcher staying as non-biased as possible, delivering a report covering all aspects of the phenomenon (Hoepfl, 1997). Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommend an audit, as presented in Chapter IV, to help strengthen the confirmability of a study.

Creswell (2007) recommends the use of at least two procedures or techniques to establish or strengthen the concepts of trustworthiness on any given study. There are several techniques, five of which being triangulation, member checking, reflexivity, thick description, and peer debriefing. These five procedures are discussed in the following paragraphs. Of these techniques, Creswell offers triangulation, thick description, and member checking as relatively easy procedures to conduct and are the most popular and cost-efficient techniques used in qualitative research.

Triangulation is a very common technique used for the establishment of trustworthiness. This technique allows the researcher to increase credibility by using different or multiple sources and is used in multiple forms (Pitney, 2004). That is, data can be collected in multiple forms and multiple analysts can be used to interpret and cross-check that information. Lietz et al. (2006) offer an example of triangulation by observation. In this scenario, two observers will analyze the same qualitative data. In doing so, commonalities and differences will surface, allowing for further analysis. Bringing opposing perspectives together can help increase the understanding of the data (Lietz et al.). In a study by Lietz et al., an expert colleague was brought in to analyze

data that one of the researchers on the team had already analyzed. This extra analysis helped bring added enlightenment to the project. When the analysis was complete from all researchers, they were able to compare analyses and discuss the similarities and differences through peer debriefing (addressed later in this chapter).

Shenton (2004) points to other forms of triangulation, that of the use of multiple data collection methods. Different methods such as observations, focus groups, and individual interviews can be performed, and data derived from these methods can be compared or triangulated for accuracy. Lincoln and Guba (1985) advocate the triangulation of different methods, noting that the shortcomings of individual methods such as interviews and focus groups can be minimized and the benefits gained can be maximized. Furthermore, documentation that provides background information on participants in a study can be used to help better understand behaviors and attitudes displayed or observed (Shenton). This study included the use of focus groups and individual interviews as one form of triangulation.

Another form of triangulation Shenton (2004) discusses is the use of multiple or a wide range of informants. Having multiple informants in a study allows the researcher to collect multiple viewpoints and experiences, compare and verify those experiences, and develop a rich picture of the attitudes, needs, and behaviors of the participants (Shenton). This study interviewed 17 people either individually or through two focus groups to engage this type of triangulation. The dynamics involved when addressing the education of our youth and the taxation of our adults can be daunting, so multiple informants were used to create a truer picture of the phenomenon being studied.

Curtin and Fossey (2007) discuss two types of methodological triangulation, the use of two or more research methods, in their appraisal of trustworthiness; across-method and within-method. The across-method refers to the use of qualitative and quantitative approaches to study the same phenomenon (Curtin & Fossey). Within-method is the triangulation of qualitative research previously mentioned. An example here might include a research team gathering data from a focus group. The information from this data can then be used to develop a quantitative survey and distributed to a large sample (Curtin & Fossey). A form of within-method triangulation was used in this study through the use of information obtained through individual and focus group interviews with information obtained from a quantitative survey.

Triangulation comes in more forms than there are trustworthiness strategies due to the multiple combinations of cross-checking that can occur. These combinations can be very simple and relatively easy to conduct or they can become much more labor intensive and complicated, depending on the depth of the study. Either way, triangulation is a valuable strategy in the accomplishment of trustworthiness.

For this study, triangulation occurred through the multitudes of information and data collected from multiple sources. Triangulation was particularly important in this study as the future of a school district could possibly be at stake. Thus, misinformation or incorrect data could jeopardize the future of the district. Reports and data from TEA, school board policy, legislation, Region 12, local derived data, and stakeholders were collected and analyzed. It was important to cross-check the information to ensure accuracy. Due to the complex rules, regulations, and policies governing school districts,

and considering the overwhelmed human factor at the state level, there was a great potential for incomplete or inaccurate information. This same human factor holds true at the local level as well.

Member checking could be one of the single most important strategies to ensure credibility according to Lincoln and Guba (1985). The researcher performs member checks to provide the study participants an opportunity to review the data and verify its accuracy (Pitney, 2004). Lietz et al. (2006) confirm the importance of this strategy claiming it controls researcher bias by giving the participants authority to confirm or critique the findings. When compiling the data for this study, any information that was questionable as to its intent was confirmed to be accurate through direct confirmation by the respondent.

Qualitative researchers investigate life issues that fall under constant scrutiny as mentioned previously in this chapter. Member checking is another strategy that might seem redundant to some, but is critical for the researcher wanting to increase credibility. Member checking assesses whether or not the researcher truly reflected the sentiment of the participant. Only the participant can make that call.

Board members, staff, students, parents, community, and business members all have a stake in the decisions made concerning the future of Hallsburg ISD. When the data was collected and analyzed, it was imperative that all these stakeholders had a chance to review their data and make sure it was a true reflection of the district as a whole. Another strategy promoting the trustworthiness of a qualitative study is reflexivity. A researcher must acknowledge they are human and as a human realize they

have certain beliefs that could cause bias in a study (Lietz et al., 2006; Williams & Morrow, 2009). Williams and Morrow suggest two methods of engaging in a self-reflexive process for a qualitative researcher. One is to journal their known biases ahead of time, to help keep those biases on the mind of the researcher. The other is to use a self-reflective journal throughout the study. Shenton (2004) refers to this strategy as reflective commentary. He extends the use of the commentary to record initial impressions, emerging patterns, and theory development as the study progresses. Ultimately, Lietz et al. cite MacBeth when stating "... reflexivity involves deconstructing who we are and the ways in which our beliefs, experiences and identity intersect with that of the participant" (p. 447). They state this is an ongoing reflection to be shared with ourselves and with others throughout the study. Instead of trying to hide and cover up biases, this strategy puts the bias in the open for the researchers to acknowledge and act accordingly (Lietz et al.). Reflexivity is used in this study, both in the following section of this chapter and again in Chapter V.

Thick description can be used to improve transferability, a key criterion in trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004). A thick description is a detailed account of every aspect of a study, leaving nothing open for interpretation or assumption. Curtin and Fossey (2007) add the inclusion of rationale for methods used, clarity of the research process, complete description of data collection strategies, detail of all data collected, and to specify the analysis process used. After reading a thick description, the reader should feel they are as familiar with the study as the actual researcher (Curtin & Fossey). Cao (2007) stresses the importance of the working

hypothesis and the underlying theories supporting the research in the description. This will help people make informed decisions on the transferability of the study (Cao).

The final strategy to be discussed in this chapter is peer debriefing. Peer debriefing refers to the researcher utilizing the skills and knowledge of a colleague not involved, but having knowledge of the information in the study (Lietz et al., 2006). The peer or peers will review the processes and data analysis and ensure all methods were applied appropriately, and many times he or she will check the reasonableness of the results (Pitney, 2004). Often researchers get too close to the study and sometimes let their biased or preconceived notions cloud their perceptions or conclusions from the data. Peer debriefing allows for assumptions to be challenged and a fresh perspective from someone who is not connected to the study (Shenton, 2004). A colleague familiar with Hallsburg ISD but not closely related to the district, was used to provide peer debriefing in relation to the overall study. Financial experts in the field of education were used to confirm the results of the financial section of the study.

To ensure the data collected for this study were accurate, peer debriefing was vital. The Texas Education Agency has final decision-making authority over school districts that must consolidate with other school districts. It was important to have an expert from the financial area analyze the data to ensure the district was encompassing the full realm of possible solutions.

The Region 12 Education Service Center (ESC 12) provided a wealth of information and experience in peer debriefing sessions. Financial data was of foremost

concern considering the options to the district. It was imperative that all financial data generated by the district was double-checked by the experts at ESC 12.

Every program in the district was reviewed and scrutinized, looking for any areas that were not vital to a school providing an exemplary education for its students, and had the possibility of being cut. Other considerations included improvements to the current programs or procedures to help streamline the process, adding to the efficiency. Experts from other departments at ESC 12 were utilized in the same way the business and finance experts were used. Other areas considered, but not all inclusive, were special education, curriculum, transportation, food service, and student services.

Colleagues and professors from my Texas A&M University doctoral cohort, and my fellow superintendents from across Texas provided valuable input and insight throughout this study. As stated earlier, sometimes the researcher can get too close to the research and not see the whole picture objectively. Input from multiple sources throughout the study process proved invaluable. Some of these people proved invaluable through their assistance as peer debriefers, but most were appreciated for their ongoing input and suggestions through formal and informal means, such as during a classroom project, or simply discussing a situation over lunch.

As stated earlier, trustworthiness in qualitative research is essential when developing a qualitative study. The findings of the study will either be worth paying attention to, or not (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This section has discussed the importance of trustworthiness in qualitative research, outlining the key concepts polarized by Lincoln and Guba, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Triangulation,

member checking, reflexivity, thick description, and peer debriefing were a few strategies to help ensure these concepts increase trustworthiness. Finally, triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checking were discussed as strategies that were used in this study. I must agree with Williams and Morrow (2009) who state “Defining trustworthiness in qualitative research is like love: it is “so easy to recognize and so difficult to define” (p. 581).

My Professional Positionality

I have been a professional educator for 24 years; 9 as a teacher, and 15 as an administrator. I started my professional career as a teacher and a coach in the Littlefield ISD, a poor, small 3A district in the panhandle of west Texas. I spent the next six years as a teacher and coach in the Grapevine-Colleyville ISD, a 5A district in a wealthy, growing suburb in the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex. The following two years were spent as a math teacher in Keller ISD, another 5A district in a growing suburb north of Fort Worth. I began my administrative career in Keller, as the assistant principal in the same school where I had taught the previous two years, Keller Middle School. My next administrative assignment was at Fredericksburg High School in Fredericksburg, Texas, a 4A high school with approximately 1,000 students. After five years in Fredericksburg, I moved to Groesbeck High School as the principal in a 3A district with approximately 500 students in the high school. I spent four years in Groesbeck before moving to my present position as Superintendent and Principal of a small K-6 school district, Hallsburg ISD. The enrollment at Hallsburg has ranged from 118 students to 86 students over the past five years (2007 to 2012).

As I conducted this Problem in Practice Record of Study, I was looking through the lens of a professional educator who had experience working in environments ranging from small to large, and rich to poor school districts. As an educator, I always look through the lens of creating the best learning environment for the students. In the case of an extremely small district, I must be able to determine whether the students are receiving a premium education in a very small, rural environment or if they could gain a better education in a little larger district with more resources to apply toward the students' education. While judging the educational quality, I must also develop a true understanding of the importance this school district is to the Hallsburg community. Lastly, at the time of this writing, I was employed by Hallsburg ISD and loved my job. If the Hallsburg ISD consolidated with another school district, I could have possibly lost my job. I worked to separate myself from my employment security and find the best case scenario for the students and community of Hallsburg.

Summary

This was a mixed methods study but qualitative methodology was the primary methodology utilized in this study because quantitative methods could not adequately interpret this Problem in Practice (Hoepfl, 1997). However, quantitative measures were used to supplement and accentuate the qualitative data collected in this study (Gall et al., 2007). Qualitative researchers are concerned with how people make sense of the world and interpret events, both of which were required in this study (Willig, 2001). The qualitative methodology has been discussed, followed by the selection of participants, research design and data collection, and data analysis. An in-depth discussion of

trustworthiness followed. This chapter concluded with a statement of my professional positionality in accordance with this study.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to determine and understand the degree of importance a small, rural K-6 school district has on the community it serves. The degree of importance can be determined by analyzing the results of the data collected, showing, in part, the support of raising taxes to keep the district financially sustainable. The data were obtained through surveys and interviews conducted with community members, district employees, and district officials. Before these results are discussed, and can be thoroughly understood, it is important to understand the history of the district and the way it came to be in its current economic condition. (Due to the lack of existing documents, the following section discussing the story of Hallsburg ISD was read and corroborated by the district secretary of 27 years. It was then double-checked for accuracy by the current school board president for accounts happening during his tenure on the school board. A lifelong Hallsburg resident and former board president was asked to confirm the information prior to the current school board president's tenure.)

The Story of Hallsburg ISD

History of the District

Hallsburg ISD opened as an elementary school in 1906, serving the Hallsburg community. Between 1927 and 1931, several community schools joined Hallsburg forming a two-year high school. It is not known why Hallsburg did not continue serving high school students after 1931, but as of 1932 students started attending neighboring

districts if they wanted to continue their secondary education. Hallsburg ISD has never served any students beyond the eighth grade since 1931

(<http://hallsburgisd.com/history/>).

In 1938, a new school was constructed by the Works Progress Administration (WPA). This building is still in use today, 74 years later, as an un-air conditioned, under-heated gym. Connected to the gym are four debilitated rooms, once used for an administrative office, classrooms, and cafeteria. These rooms are now used for storage and a concession stand during the annual school carnival. The current school was built 42 years later, in 1970, and was financed through a \$200,000 bond that was passed by the voters. This was the last successful bond election in Hallsburg. The school was renovated in 1981 due to a fire. A new library and administrative offices were added during this renovation. A new cafetorium was built in 1996 and a new music room was added to the cafetorium in 2010. Even with these new facilities built in the last fifteen years, the main building built in 1970 is still in use today as the primary classroom facility (<http://hallsburgisd.com/history/>).

Financial History

Texas lawmakers have been addressing public school finance since its inception, but with greater diligence since the Gilmer-Aikin Act was passed by the 51st Legislature in 1949. The court case of *Rodriguez v. San Antonio ISD* was heard by a U.S. District Court in 1971, deeming the state's school finance system unconstitutional. Although overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1973, it was evident in the majority opinion that the legislature should create a more equitable method of school finance (Walker &

Casey, 1996). The next two decades saw the legislature continuing to address school finance issues but it was not until 1993, when laws were passed, that Hallsburg would be the most directly impacted. The Texas legislature passed Senate Bill 7 in 1993, greatly affecting property rich districts such as Hallsburg. The bill classified districts as property rich (Chapter 41) or property poor (Chapter 42), which is still in effect today. Hallsburg was and still is classified as a Chapter 41 district due to the large tax base generated from a power plant built and operated in the district. As a result of Senate Bill 7 (sometimes referred to as the Robin Hood Plan), Hallsburg had to start sending a portion of their tax revenue to the state every year in the form of recapture (Walker & Casey).

A discussion of historic tax rates and district milestones will help to better understand the effects of Senate Bill 7. As noted above, a bond was passed in 1970 to pay for a new school. This passage transpired after a gas-powered electric plant was built in the district in the late 1960's. This plant provided the district with an increased tax base. When researching the tax rates for the district, I obtained historic tax information from the McLennan County Tax Office. There, I discovered that the tax rate beginning with the first year of my research, 1962, was \$1.50. It remained \$1.50 through 1971. This was one of the lowest, if not the lowest tax rate of all schools in the county through this time period. In 1972, the rate dropped to \$1.40 and dropped another ten cents to \$1.30 in 1973. The rate climbed back to \$1.40 in 1974, \$1.60 in 1975, and leveled off at \$1.50 for the next four years. These numbers are significant for a couple of reasons. While the taxes in the district remained as low or lower than all of the other county districts, the taxes never increased when the bond was passed in 1970. They actually

decreased for a few years before increasing back to \$1.50 (except in 1975 when the rate rose to \$1.60 for that one year), the rate when the bond was passed. Essentially, the voters of the district were voting to receive \$200,000 to build a new school, and not only keep from having a tax increase, but their taxes would remain one of the lowest rates in the county (T. Curry, personal communication, March 3, 2012).

For the next decade, the Hallsburg ISD taxes were among the lowest in the county. Mentioned earlier, an administrative complex and library addition was added to the school after a fire in the early 1980's damaged the structure but did not destroy it. An insurance settlement was used for renovating the damaged school, but the district had to pay for the new addition out of their fund balance. Again, while the district expended larger than normal funds adding to the school, their tax rate remained between \$.44 and \$.68 throughout the 1980's. In comparison, other districts in the county were paying anywhere from \$.39 to \$1.53 during this time period. Hallsburg had the lowest rate of the 13 other school districts in the county, six different years during the 1980's. It is evident through the posting of the tax rates, and the moderation of the facilities built, that the trustees of the district were very frugal and conservative in their actions involving the district. Their frugality was very prudent at the time, but might have been a hindrance to the district in the future, as more aggressive measures were implemented by the Texas Legislature in the 1990's that would have a direct impact on Hallsburg ISD (McLennan County Tax Department, 2006; Walker & Casey, 1996).

Since the inception of Senate Bill 7, the power plant in the Hallsburg district began to decline in value, and continued to decline until it was retired in 2009. There is

still enough tax value in the district, however, that Hallsburg remains classified as a Chapter 41 district. This situation puts Hallsburg at a financial disadvantage in several ways. If the tax base was very high, as it once was relative to other costs, a bond could be passed for district improvements, and it would cost the residents very little extra in taxes, with the main tax burden being covered by the power plant, very similar to the situation in 1970 discussed above. Presently, taxes have to be increased by a considerable amount to generate moderate revenue in the form of a bond. For example, in 2008 when the district attempted to pass a bond to update its facilities, the tax rate would have been increased \$.25 from \$1.04 to \$1.29 to pay off a \$2 million bond over a 20 year period (Thompson, 2008).

Facing the adversity of rising taxes, in 2008 the Hallsburg community voted against the bond that would have replaced the dilapidated gym and music room. Since the music room was no longer serviceable, it was decided by the school board to build a new music room using money from the district fund balance account. There was enough money in this account to build the new facility, but it left the district fund balance at a minimal functional level to cover any unanticipated costs that might arise in the future. With districts funds at an alarmingly low level, school funding became ever increasingly important (HISD Board, personal communication, October 7, 2008; Kirk, Richardson & Poole, 2008-2009).

The primary sources for generating funds for Texas school districts are student enrollment and attendance. The state has developed very complicated formulas to determine how much funding each school district will receive, between local and state

funds, but all the formulas are built around the student enrollment and attendance in each district. Hallsburg ISD is dependent on having enough student enrollment to generate enough revenue to operate the district and provide a “general diffusion of knowledge” (Texas Const. art. VII, sec. 1) to the students (Texas Association of School Boards, 2010).

History of Transfers

Since school funding is directly linked to student enrollment and attendance, discussions in the district have occurred over the years addressing enrollment issues. Hallsburg ISD serves a geographic area of approximately 33 square miles. The community of Hallsburg is rural, and therefore, sparsely populated. Past school officials and trustees had to make decisions regarding the student enrollment at Hallsburg ISD. Historically, Hallsburg only served the residents of the district. As time progressed, it was evident that the student enrollment of solely Hallsburg residents would not provide enough revenue to operate the district under a balanced budget. Conversations regarding the acceptance of transfer students into the district were inevitable, if the district was to continue to sustain. Early records with information concerning transfers to Hallsburg were destroyed in a fire in 1981. Since then, Hallsburg had accepted transfer students from other districts until 1993 when the board voted to change its policy and no longer accept transfers. In 2000, the decline in school funding due to lower student enrollment reached a point where Hallsburg reevaluated its current financial situation and decided to once again accept transfer students; thereby increasing enrollment which directly translated into increased funding. Even though the district once again accepted transfers,

many people in surrounding school districts were not aware of the change in policy. It is not known if the lack of general knowledge of Hallsburg's transfer policy affected student enrollment, but at one point during the 2009-2010 school year, the student enrollment at Hallsburg dropped to 86 students; 16 of which were transfers (HISD board meeting minutes, March, 1993, March, 2000; HISD District Enrollment Records, 2009-2010).

Advertising to Increase Enrollment—*Waco Today*, Banners, and Sign

The informal conversations I had with parents and citizens who were visiting the school began to paint a picture of the Hallsburg dilemma. Not only were many people not aware that Hallsburg accepted transfers, many people did not even know Hallsburg ISD existed as a K-6 school district. Starting in the 2010-2011 school year, greater efforts were made by school administration and personnel to raise awareness of the district and its successes, as well as its acceptance of transfers without charging a transfer fee. The plan was to increase awareness, thereby increasing enrollment through the added transfer students, and ultimately increase school funding (E. Magee & J. Muhl, personal communication, June 7, 2010).

Although not part of the day to day operations of most school districts, Hallsburg had to reach out to the surrounding communities through advertisement. A local business located on a heavily traveled state highway allowed the district to place a big banner on the fence surrounding their property. The banner boasted Hallsburg ISD as an Exemplary District (the highest rating in the Texas school accountability system) and welcomed transfers assuring parents there was no transfer fee. A permanent sign was

also obtained with help through donations from a local steel company and welder. The sign was raised on another part of Highway 6, two miles from the school. This sign also welcomed transfer students and informed all passersby of the outstanding education provided by Hallsburg School since 1906.

Other forms of advertising included an ad in the August, 2011, “Back to School” edition of the *Waco Today* magazine and a public service interview between the program host, myself, and one other school employee on a local radio station. It is often said, the best advertising is by word of mouth. Therefore, parents of Hallsburg students were made aware of the financial inadequacies of the district and informed the only way to alleviate the inadequacies and sustain the district was through increased student enrollment. They were encouraged to share the Hallsburg story with their friends who might have children in other districts, who could benefit from an outstanding, small school education.

Relations with Receiving Districts

Once students graduate from the sixth grade at Hallsburg, the transfer students must go back to their home districts, and Hallsburg students must make a choice of where they would like to attend middle and high school, provided they meet all transfer criteria of that particular district. Axtell, Mart, and Riesel ISD’s act, in many ways, as receiving districts for these students. Historically, districts that only serve students through the sixth or eighth grades contract with a neighboring district to continue their students’ educations through high school. This receiving district agrees to accept all the students coming from the K-6 or K-8 district. The receiving school benefits because the

added enrollment increases the funding the receiving district earns from the state. Not only does the district earn extra funding due to increased enrollment, sometimes these districts also receive tuition, or a transfer fee, from the sending district. This funding can be very beneficial to a receiving district, especially when that receiving district is able to absorb all the transfer students without having to hire any new staff to accommodate the increased enrollment.

In the past, Hallsburg students have always had their choice of attending Axtell, Mart, or Riesel after they graduate from the sixth grade. They could then attend this school until they graduate high school. Beginning in the 2008-2009 school year, the agreements between Hallsburg and receiving schools began to change. Some of the receiving schools began holding the Hallsburg transfers to a certain criteria, and if the individual student did not meet all the criteria, their transfers could be revoked and they could no longer attend that receiving school.

The receiving districts' having the ability to deny the transfers of Hallsburg students has been a source of great concern for the Hallsburg district. Hallsburg is an independent school district, and being so, is responsible to provide an education to its resident students through twelfth grade, even though the district only goes through sixth. If a student is denied transfer to Axtell, Mart, and Riesel ISD, Hallsburg must find another district willing to accept that student, and provide transportation for that student to the new school. If a school willing to accept this student cannot be found, negotiations must be made with an alternative learning center in the area, to educate the Hallsburg middle or high school-aged student.

Shared Services

Just as Hallsburg would have to negotiate a special deal with an alternative school to educate select high school students, it is also in the best interest of the district to negotiate and combine as many services as feasible with other entities. Hallsburg has entered into shared service arrangements (SSA's) and contracted services with several different education entities to save funds through a cooperative model. The district contracts with the region service center for business and finance services as well as federal and special programs. Hallsburg partners with another district to provide special education service. It contracts with a different district to educate some high-needs, special education students, beyond the scope of the services Hallsburg is equipped to provide. The district also contracts with a third district for an instructional technology specialist, one day per week. Special arrangements such as these make it possible for Hallsburg to receive specialized services without having to pay fulltime employees, thereby saving district funds.

Survey Results

Survey results are usually tallied and quantified using appropriate statistical methods to find an answer (Rolle, 2008). The data from this survey will be displayed in a multiple table format to aid in its readability and comparability (Rolle). For this inquiry, since there were only 100 surveys mailed, the sample was extremely small, and efforts to quantify information from such a small sample were done with extreme caution (Rolle). Descriptive statistics were the only statistics used in this study due to the small sample size. Of the 100 surveys distributed across the Hallsburg ISD, 48

completed surveys were returned, for a return rate of 48 percent. While numbers are predominantly used to quantify and compare, after I present the findings of the survey in this chapter, I take a more qualitative approach, seeking the story behind the numbers. These stories, or qualitative data, were gathered through interviews with individuals from the district and focus group interviews with community members.

The following descriptive statistics provide information regarding the community members who returned their surveys. Table 1 demonstrates the age of the survey respondents. Very few surveys were returned by residents under 45 years of age. Most of those who completed and returned their surveys were between 46 and 64 years old or 65 and older. This means that the results are strongly weighted in the direction of the older residents with those over 46 making up 69% of those who completed the survey. Thus, all results must be considered with this age group in mind.

Table 1
Age (Years) of Respondents

Age (Years) Range	N	Percentage
18-25	1	2
26-35	7	15
36-45	7	15
46-64	22	46
65 or older	11	23
Total	48	100

All of the respondents had received a high school diploma or a general equivalency diploma (GED). As shown in Table 2, 26 percent attended some college or

technical school after high school, but never finished. Additionally, 21 percent received a two-year degree or certificate, and 23 percent received a four-year degree or certificate. There were 2 respondents that obtained more than a four-year degree or certificate.

Table 2
Educational Attainment of Respondents

Schooling Attained	N	Percentage
Never graduated high school	0	0
High school diploma or GED	12	26
Some college to technical school	12	26
2-year degree or certification	10	21
4-year degree or certification	11	23
More than a 4-year degree or certification	2	4
Total	47	100

The vast majority, 93 percent, of the respondents identified as White. There were only three respondents, 7 percent, which listed their race or ethnicity as Black or African-American. As seen in Table 3, there were no respondents who identified as Hispanic or Latina/o, American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian, or Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. Because there are more residents of color than are indicated by those who completed the surveys, the results are weighted in terms of Whites.

Table 3
Race/Ethnicity of Respondents

Race/Ethnicity	N	Percentage
Hispanic or Latina/o	0	0
American Indian or Alaskan Native	0	0
Asian	0	0
Black or African American	3	7
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0	0
White	43	93
Total	46	100

Note: Respondents were encouraged to circle all Race/Ethnicity categories that apply

The vast majority of the respondents had lived in the district for more than a decade. As Table 4 illustrates, 13 percent of the respondents had lived in the district for one to five years, and 10 percent for 6 to 10 years. Only one respondent had lived in the district less than one year. Thus, an overwhelming percentage had lived in the district for a relatively long time.

Table 4
Years Respondents Have Lived in Hallsburg Community

Years in Hallsburg	N	Percentage
Less than 1 year	1	2
1 - 5 years	6	13
6 – 10 years	5	10
More than 10 years	36	75
Total	48	100

As Table 5 demonstrates, most of the respondents were familiar with the Hallsburg School campus. Sixty percent of the respondents reported visiting the campus within the past year. Another 23 percent had been on the campus within one to five years, and six percent of the participants reported having not been on the campus in over five years. Only five participants, or 11 percent, reported they had never been on the Hallsburg School campus.

Table 5
Years Since Respondents Visited Hallsburg School Campus

Years Since Last Visit to Hallsburg Campus	N	Percentage
Never	5	11
Within the past year	28	60
1 - 5 years	11	23
More than 5 years	3	6
Total	47	100

A small majority of the respondents (55 percent) either at the time of data collection, or in the past, had children who attended Hallsburg School. As Table 6 shows, the remaining 45 percent of respondents never had children who attended the school.

Table 6
Respondents with Children Attending Hallsburg School Currently or in the Past

Respondents with Children in Hallsburg ISD Currently or in the Past	N	Percentage
Yes	26	55
No	21	45
Total	47	100

As Table 7 demonstrates, for the majority of the respondents (54 percent), the continued existence of the school was extremely important. Another 7 percent said it was highly important followed by 24 percent feeling it was important. Only 11 percent and 4 percent of the respondents felt the school was either not very important or not important at all, respectively, to the community.

Table 7
Respondents' Ratings of Importance of Hallsburg School to the Community

Level of Importance	Rating	N	Percentage
Extremely Important	1	25	54
Highly Important	2	3	7
Important	3	11	24
Not Very Important	4	5	11
Not Important at All	5	2	4
Total		46	100

Most of the respondents, 63 percent, reported that they thought the Hallsburg facilities were about the same as other area schools. As Table 8 illustrates, an additional 26 percent felt the Hallsburg facilities were better than other local schools, and eleven percent thought the facilities were worse than others.

Table 8
Respondents' Opinions of Hallsburg School Facilities Compared to Other Schools

Opinion of Hallsburg Facilities	N	Percentage
Hallsburg facilities are better than other local schools	10	26
Hallsburg facilities are worse than other local schools	4	11
Hallsburg facilities are about the same as other local schools	24	63
Total	38	100

The majority of the respondents, 40 percent, thought the Hallsburg facilities were in good condition. As Table 9 demonstrates, nearly the same number of participants, 35 percent, did not know what kind of physical condition the facilities were in. A good portion, 19 percent, of the respondents felt the facilities were in fair condition. Only one participant felt the facilities were in poor condition. At the other end of the extreme, only two participants felt the school buildings were in excellent condition.

Table 9
Respondents' Opinions of Current Physical Condition of Hallsburg School

Opinion of Physical Condition	N	Percentage
Don't know	17	35
Excellent condition	2	4
Good condition	19	40
Fair condition	9	19
Poor condition	1	2
Total	48	100

In terms of facility renovation, the survey prompted respondents to choose as many areas as they thought needed renovations, thus the totals were greater than the number of respondents. As Table 10 shows, the most frequent responses were for renovations to the gym (20 checks), the classroom/building area (12 checks), and the outside facilities such as the grounds, playground, parking areas, and track (7 checks). A few checks were given to renovating the library/office area (2 checks), the music room (2 checks), and cafetorium (2 checks). Eight checks were also given to the option “no renovations needed.”

Table 10
Respondents’ Opinions of Location of Needed Renovations to Hallsburg School

Opinion of Location of Needed Renovations	N	Percentage
No renovations needed	8	15
Library/office area	2	4
Main building/classroom area	12	23
Cafeteria	1	2
Gym	20	38
Music room	2	4
Grounds (playground, track, parking areas)	7	13
Total	52	99

Most of the respondents said they were likely to vote in a local election that concerned the school. As Table 11 illustrates, when asked how likely they were to vote in such an election, 67 percent of the respondents listed their choice as very likely, with 23 percent saying likely, and 10 percent listing themselves as not very likely to vote.

Table 11
Likelihood of Respondents to Vote in Local Election Concerning the School

Likelihood to Vote	N	Percentage
Very Likely	32	67
Likely	11	23
Not Very Likely	5	10
Probably Would Not Vote	0	0
Total	48	100

Most of the respondents felt that the gym needed to be air conditioned (70 percent), as Table 12 shows. Interestingly, however, as Table 13 illustrates, only 41 percent thought the community should fund the air conditioning through raising taxes for a bond. This means there is considerable difference between what is seen as needed and whether the community is willing to fund the air conditioning.

Table 12
Respondents' Opinions Regarding Air Conditioning in the Gym

Opinions Regarding Air Conditioning in the Gym	N	Percentage
Air conditioning is needed	31	70
Air conditioning is not needed	13	30
Total	44	100

Table 13

Respondents' Opinions Regarding Community Funding for Air Conditioning in the Hallsburg School Gym through a Bond to Raise Taxes

Opinion of Raising Taxes to Fund Air Conditioning in Gym	N	Percentage
Yes, raise taxes to air condition the gym	15	41
No, do not raise taxes to air condition the gym	22	59
Total	37	99

One survey question required that the respondent be familiar with the current gym, built in 1939. In terms of respondents' recommendations for the gym, the majority (52 percent) thought the current structure should be renovated. As Table 14 demonstrates, a few respondents (14 percent) thought the current gym should be demolished, and a new one built (costing more than renovating). A larger portion of the respondents, 33 percent, were not familiar enough with the gym to make a recommendation.

Table 14

Respondents' Opinions Regarding Future Action to be Taken with Hallsburg School Gym

Opinion Regarding Future of Hallsburg Gym	N	Percentage
Not familiar with gym	14	33
Renovate	22	52
Demolish and rebuild	6	14
Total	42	100

The respondents were asked to rate the current financial condition of the school on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being very healthy with no major financial concerns, and 5 being very weak, struggling to survive. As Table 15 shows, most of the respondents (72 percent) reported they did not know the financial condition of the school. Twelve percent of the respondents gave the ratings of “3” and “4”, respectively. Four percent of the respondents provided ratings at opposite ends of the scale. That is, two percent rated the current financial condition as a “1”, or very healthy, and two percent provided the rating of “5”, or “very weak.”

Table 15
Respondents’ Ratings of the Current Financial Condition of the Hallsburg School

Current Financial Condition	Rating	N	Percentage
Very healthy/ No major financial issues	1	1	2
Healthy	2	5	11
Sustaining	3	3	6
Weak	4	3	6
Very weak/ Struggling to survive	5	1	2
Don’t know		34	72
Total		47	99

As Table 16 illustrates, most of the respondents (70 percent) reported that they would like Hallsburg School to stay open. However, 24 percent of the respondents had no opinion regarding the school staying open, and seven percent responded “close.” Furthermore, although the survey did not ask for open-ended responses, two were provided. One stated, “consolidate with RISD,” and the other, “not for more taxes.”

Table 16
Respondents' Opinions of Future of Hallsburg School: Remaining Open or Closing

Opinions of Future of Hallsburg School	N	Percentage
Stay open	32	70
Close	3	7
No opinion	11	24
Total	46	101

If the Hallsburg School were to close, and a decision regarding student placement was made by the state, most of the respondents thought the students should have the choice of attending Axtell, Mart, or Riesel ISD. As Table 17 shows, the next most popular response was that the respondents thought the students would attend Riesel ISD.

Table 17
Respondents' Opinions Regarding Potential Student Placement if Hallsburg School Were to Close (Decision Made by State)

Opinion of Student Placement if Hallsburg School Closed (State Decision)	N	Percentage
Axtell	1	2
Mart	4	9
Riesel	8	17
Student choice of Axtell, Mart, or Riesel	32	68
Other	2	4
Total	47	100

The same question was asked again, except this time asking where they thought the students should go, if they (as parents/guardians) were given a choice. As Table 18

shows, the participants responded: Axtell, 2; Mart, 5; Riesel, 13; their choice, 25; and Other, 2.

Table 18
Respondents' Opinions of Student Placement if Hallsburg School Were to Close (Decision/Choice Made by Parent/Guardian)

Opinion of Student Placement if Hallsburg School Closed (Parent/Guardian) Choice	N	Percentage
Axtell	2	4
Mart	5	11
Riesel	13	28
Student choice of Axtell, Mart, or Riesel	25	53
Other	2	4
Total	47	100

Given the above data, it is not surprising that the majority of the respondents thought that if consolidation were imminent, Hallsburg should consolidate with Riesel ISD. As Table 19 demonstrates, several respondents had no opinion; however, Mart ISD was the next most popular option, followed by Axtell ISD.

Table 19
Respondents' Choice for Hallsburg ISD's Consolidation Partner

Choice of Consolidation Partner	N	Percentage
Axtell	4	8
Mart	9	18
Riesel	23	47
No opinion	13	27
Total	49	100

Most of the respondents (35 percent) reported that they felt Hallsburg Elementary would stay open even if consolidation were to occur. However, as Table 20 illustrates, a large percentage (38 percent) did not know if the elementary school would stay open.

Table 20
Respondents' Opinions Regarding Consolidation at Hallsburg Elementary

Opinion of Consolidation at Hallsburg Elementary	N	Percentage
Hallsburg Elementary would stay open even if HISD is consolidated with another district	17	35
Hallsburg Elementary would close if HISD is consolidated with another district	13	27
Don't know if Hallsburg Elementary would stay open or close	18	38
Total	48	100

The next question asked if consolidation were to occur, would it affect their local taxes.

Most of the respondents (50 percent) did not know if consolidation would affect their local taxes. However, as Table 21 shows, a large portion of the respondents (44 percent) felt it would, and only six percent felt it would not affect their local taxes.

Table 21
Respondents' Opinions of Consolidation and Local Taxes

Opinion of Consolidation and Local Taxes	N	Percentage
Consolidation would affect local taxes	21	44
Consolidation would not affect local taxes	3	6
Don't know	24	50
Total	48	100

For the participants that answered in the affirmative—that their local taxes would be affected if consolidation were to occur, they were asked a follow-up question regarding how they felt their taxes would be affected. Again, more participants answered this second part of the question than the original 21 who had answered yes. As Table 22 demonstrates, there were 15 respondents who felt their current taxes would go up, two felt the taxes would go down, and 12 who were not sure. Of the actual 21 who responded yes, the 15 respondents who felt their taxes would go up, and two that thought they would go down, stayed the same. The only change was the “not sure” category which dropped from 12 to 4 respondents.

Table 22

Respondents' Opinions of How Local Taxes Would Be Affected in the Case of Consolidation

Opinion of How Consolidation Would Affect Local Taxes	N	Percentage
Local taxes would increase	15	52
Local taxes would decrease	2	7
Not sure	12	41
Total	29	100

Interestingly, when asked if they would vote to raise their taxes between \$.17 and \$.25 to prevent Hallsburg ISD from consolidating with another district, 22 of the respondents reported “yes” and 22 respondents reported “no.” Table 23 details this even 50-50 split.

Table 23

Respondents' Voting Preferences Regarding a Tax Increase (between \$.17 and \$.25) in Order to Prevent HISD from Consolidation

Voting Preference on Tax Increase to Prevent HISD from Consolidation	N	Percentage
Vote yes	22	50
Vote no	22	50
Total	44	100

In the final section of the survey, I asked participants to rank three scenarios as their first choice and second choice. The first scenario was to sustain Hallsburg ISD, keeping it open and operating. The second scenario was for Hallsburg ISD to consolidate with Mart or Riesel and keep the Hallsburg School open as a campus. The third scenario

was to close Hallsburg School completely. As Table 24 demonstrates, as their first choice, 74 percent of the respondents chose the first scenario, to sustain Hallsburg ISD. Eight percent chose to consolidate and keep the school open, and 18 percent chose to consolidate and close the school.

As a second choice, only seven percent chose to sustain the district. Eighty-six percent chose to consolidate, leaving the campus open. And finally, seven percent chose to consolidate, and close the Hallsburg School. Furthermore, the respondents chose Riesel ISD over Mart ISD by a margin of 21 to 8, if consolidation were to occur.

Table 24
Respondents' Scenario Rankings by Choice

Scenarios	First Choice (%)	Second Choice (%)
Keep HISD open and operating	74	7
Consolidate HISD with Mart or Riesel and keep Hallsburg School open as a campus	8	86
Consolidate HISD with Mart or Riesel and close Hallsburg School completely	18	7
Total	100	100

For those respondents who chose to sustain the district, I asked them to consider their choice, given an increase in their local taxes between \$.17 and \$.25. As Table 25 shows, the results altered slightly. Eighty-three percent or 24 of the 29 participants still wanted to sustain the district. There was one respondent who chose to consolidate and close the school with the other four voting to consolidate and keep the school open.

Riesel was chosen again as the favorite for consolidation if it were to occur, by a vote of 15 to 3 from this group.

Table 25
Respondents' Scenario Rankings by Choice Considering a Vote to Increase Taxes (between \$.17 and \$.25)

Scenarios	N	Percentage
Keep HISD open and operating	24	83
Consolidate HISD with Mart or Riesel and keep Hallsburg School open as a campus	4	14
Consolidate HISD with Mart or Riesel and close Hallsburg School completely	1	3
Total	29	100

Again, while the surveys did not solicit any open-ended comments, a few respondents added written remarks. One read,

Our taxes are high enough. It would be sad to see the school close but continuing to raise taxes would not be a good option. The district use to be considered a rich district due to the power plant. I'm sure the closing [of the plant] has really affected the district. I think at one point during a previous superintendent, money was wasted and know [sic] the district appears to be suffering.

Another read,

Be a satellite [sic] campus – consolidate with RISD but remain open as a satellite [sic] campus.” And finally, the last write-in comment was, “Do not raise taxes.

We are taxed enough. Even though education is important, in the current economy, we can't pay more taxes, local, state or federal.

The holistic meaning of these survey results will be discussed in Chapter 5.

Interviews

Initial individual interviews were conducted with residents and major stakeholders who had direct contact with the school; past and present board members, employees, and one prior employee who was still a resident and considered a leader in the community. All of the individual interviews took place in my private office at Hallsburg School, and at times that were convenient for the interviewees. The one-on-one interviews were straight-forward and provided a wealth of information, also allowing for those being interviewed to learn more about the district and possible consolidation scenarios, along with the related taxes that could ensue. The focus groups included community members with and without children who attend or had attended Hallsburg School. The two focus groups were informative as well, adding a group dynamic that allowed those being interviewed to build on each other's answers.

The first focus group interview was quite different than the individual interviews and very enlightening with the mix of personalities, all having information to contribute. It consisted of five individuals; a Hispanic parent of current students in Hallsburg, an African-American community member who had children that went to school in Hallsburg, and the other three, White individuals, two of whom had children in the district within the past six years, and one who never had any children that attended school in Hallsburg. Other identifiers of this group include a mayor, city councilman,

and a Hallsburg graduate. While the individual interviews were answered in a straight-forward fashion, the first focus group tended to “bird-walk” in different directions. Those present seemed to genuinely enjoy visiting with their neighbors, and talking about the school district, mainly as a part of their community. The group did a very good job of giving input when needed, listening and reminiscing during the other times. No one dominated the conversation, although some participants had more input than others. On questions of universal concern, the group expanded thoughts and ideas of the others, creating an opportunity to hear what this representation of the community really thought about their district. It was a very positive event and provided me an opportunity to discuss the school district with people who were no longer directly involved with the school for the most part, but were very much a part of the community.

The second focus group more closely resembled four individual interviews being conducted simultaneously. The group members included three parents and a community member who had ties to the school having at one time been a third generation board member from his family. The parents represented traditional families as well as single parent families. Low socio-economic groups were also represented, by a participating parent or parents having children who were eligible for the free and reduced lunch program. This group was content to provide short answers to the questions and did not expand on each other’s comments as did the first group. But even with the short answered questions, a wealth of information was obtained from this group, as well as the other focus group and individual interviews. As this information was processed, three

themes emerged: the school is the hub of the community, raising taxes is questionable, and consolidation raises issues.

The School is the Hub of the Community

As individuals were interviewed and focus groups conducted, the term “community” was used extensively, both in the questions and the answers. Some of these questions were, “Do you think the school is important to the community?” and “If the school closed, how do you think losing it would affect the community?” Some of the replies included, “It would just be a very negative impact on our community.” And “We moved out to this community just because of the smallness.” The term “community” can have a vast array of definitions. Merriam and Webster define one aspect of community as “a unified body of individuals: as the people with common interests living in a particular area; broadly: the area itself” (community [merriam], n.d.). Another definition stresses that a community is a group of people that interact, live in proximity of one another, share common values, and have social cohesion; bonds that bring people together (community [wiki], n.d.). From their research, MacQueen et al. (2001) formulated a definition of community for participatory public health. Their analysis revealed a core definition of community “as a group of people with diverse characteristics who are linked by social ties, share common perspectives, and engage in joint action in geographical locations or settings” (p. 1,936). The community of Hallsburg with its local school exemplifies parts or all of these definitions. As the interviews and surveys were analyzed in keeping with these definitions of community, three subthemes emerged. The first subtheme, community, discusses the people that live

in a common area and share common perspectives. The next subtheme, change, interprets the changes in the school over time, in atmosphere, education, and the physical plant. The last subtheme, bond, illustrates the bonding force of the school in the community.

Community. People that live in proximity to one another, in a general geographic area, were mentioned in every definition above, when describing community. Hallsburg ISD has a geographic boundary of 33 square miles. Within these 33 square miles, families and individuals live and work together, creating a community. Technically, there is an incorporated city of Hallsburg, with a population of just over 500 residents. However, the community of Hallsburg reaches beyond the city limits, incorporating the 33 square miles of Hallsburg ISD. Although there is not an official census count for the ISD, there are 721 registered voters in the district, from which 100 randomly selected participants were chosen to receive the survey. Not only do people live in Hallsburg, many have lived here for several years, further developing that sense of community. Of the 48 surveys that were returned, 75 percent of those individuals have lived in Hallsburg over 10 years. The individuals selected for interviews had an even higher percentage of living in the district over 10 years, but with just cause. Part of the selection process was to interview leaders in the community and representatives that were familiar with the community and or school. In either event, it takes time to reach that point of familiarity. The average time of living in the district for those that were interviewed was over 25 years, with several having spent their whole lives in the community. The amount of time living in the community ranged from one parent who

had lived in the community for eight years to one community member who had lived and been active in the community for 62 years.

One aspect of a community is children, and schools often serve as a community resource to bring those children and families together (Lyson, 2002). The majority of those interviewed either had children attending Hallsburg ISD or had children that had attended Hallsburg in the past. Of the 16 Hallsburg residents interviewed, 13 either had children attending, or had children that once attended Hallsburg ISD. Again, the high percentage of interviewees that had children that attended school in the district is a reflection of the type person profiled for the interview process. Of the survey respondents, 55 percent had children that had attended the district. From this representation of the community, over half of its members have had children at Hallsburg ISD and, as such, have common community experiences that accompany having children in school, such as attending ball games, programs and plays as well as school festivals and celebrations.

Change. Part of being a community, likely, is having the ability to identify the need to change, and the adaptability and flexibility to embody change over time (Bard et al., 2005). When those interviewed were asked if the school had changed over the years, their replies implied the school was not exempt from the passage of time. One resident interpreted this question from a school environment standpoint when she said,

... it's always been a wonderful school but I think after you get a different principal or superintendent, you know, a little bit about the environment is going

to change naturally. Such as the staff and everything like that. It makes the attitudes and things change a little.

A few others mentioned change in administration as a good thing. For example, one participant described administrative change as “being the biggest change to the good.” Another respondent, familiar with the school, also echoed sentiments of school environment. She alluded to the change in atmosphere “over the last years just because of the lifestyle that people have now.” She felt school was not as high of a priority for the community as it once was.

Other residents interpreted the question of change in a different frame. They equated change to improvement with time. Some were amazed at how this small district was able to keep up with technology and advancements of the times. One stated [of the school], “It has continued to improve over the years that I have been here, keeping up with technology and soliciting, when necessary, the finest teachers around. Yes, it has continued to improve the whole time I’ve been out here.” Some areas have not changed however; some participants talked about how the district has not changed in areas important to the parents of the students attending the school, like the “good relationships with the principal and teachers.” They also talked about “the feel of the school, the small classes, the teacher-student ratios” as being desirable traits that have not changed. As one participant noted, Hallsburg is a place “where everybody kind of knows everybody. It’s a good thing.”

There were only a few comments made in reflection of changes in the physical facility. One participant noted, of the basic “physical condition. Now that’s changed over

the years. I remember coming here [this same building] when I was 18 years old to vote. Physically, there's been some changes that need to be addressed to stand up with time." Another interviewee commented that it "looks like it's in pretty good condition to me, physically."

Bond. A community identity and community pride may come from organizations or entities that tie a community together, which give the people of that community a common bond. The community school serves that exact purpose for communities all over this nation (Adams & Foster, 2002; Bard et al., 2005; Lyson, 2002). Hallsburg School is a perfect example of such connection. When asked of the importance of the school in Hallsburg, one resident said,

I think it really is the hub. Usually the church and the school serve that purpose. Our church is really not that [hub] with some of our community. It could be a lot of our residents are members of other churches when they came to our community and that's where they still go.

Another participant simply said, "Absolutely, I think it's the hub of the community." Another participant responded, "It is the center point of the community and everything revolves around it." When discussing the importance of the role of this school in the community, one resident was able to wrap up what many tried to say when he replied,

Oh absolutely. It's the focal point for the community. You can tell that by the assemblies that we have. When we have a program by the children, a lot of times you may end up standing up because there's not enough chairs to seat everybody. The community just comes together as a whole to support that. It also brings

people to the community because as people move, we have a very mobile society these days, most parents should be looking at the academic achievements of the schools that will be in the area where they will be moving. I feel like Hallsburg Elementary has such high academic standards that if I were looking for a place to relocate, and going somewhere to get my children started with an education, and a good solid educational foundation, this would be where I would want them to be. So I would be looking for a home and property in this area.

When asked in ten separate interviews, if Hallsburg School was important to the community, a simple affirmative answer was the least reflective of the participants' feelings. The word "hub" was used to describe the school in three different interviews, as was "focus" or "focal point." The school was referred to as the "center" of the community twice and simply as the "glue that holds the community together" once. The replies to this question were not simple affirmations but were more strongly felt exclamations of "absolutely", "definitely", and not just important, but "very important."

One interviewee reflected on the school as a place where "the community just comes together as a whole." Another mentioned the school as being "the hub of everything that goes on here [in Hallsburg] as far as community." One interviewee elaborated on the "hub" and "center point" commenting on how everything in the community "revolves around it [the school]." Recall, the returned surveys were also very favorable toward the importance of the continued existence of the school to the community. Although, based on the survey results, there were seven community members that did not feel the school was important to the community. However, over

85 percent did find the school important, and 54 percent of that group reported the school to be “extremely important” to the community. As the school is reported to be the bonding force or hub of the community, a simple but important (due to later ramifications in this study) question was asked to all the interviewees, “Would you like the school to stay open?” The participants overwhelmingly responded in the affirmative. For example, one interviewee noted,

Oh, absolutely. Our children are our future and elementary school is where they get their foundation and training of learning and how to study. We need schools that give them that strong foundation. Too many times today, schools are, because of funding issues, forced to have oversized classes which adds to the stress of the teaching staff. They are not then able to give students the attention that they need to properly develop them and bring them along. Not everyone moves at the same pace. I think it’s just really critical that we maintain the school and maintain the level of academic excellence that we’ve had here.

Another participant reiterated the bonding force of the school with the community when she stated, “Of course. It’s the glue that holds the community together and I cannot imagine it not being here.” One parent confirmed what others had said at other times when she explained she wanted the school to stay open because, “that’s why we moved out here. I like the small classrooms. I think the kids are getting a fantastic education by having smaller classrooms.”

With the importance of the school to the community discussed, a follow-up question later in the interview asked what would happen to the community if the school

closed. A few respondents indicated that we would “start to see people in the community moving away.” Another participant felt similarly and noted, “a lot of people would probably leave” because “a lot of people move here just for the school.” One interviewee seemed somewhat saddened when she replied, “I would hate to think that we lose the school” seeming to be the first time the thought had ever crossed her mind. One participant replied that he felt the “school binds the community together” and feared “Hallsburg would lose its identity.” Another respondent seconded those feelings when he mentioned a “loss of pride” that would follow the closing the “focal point of the community.” Furthermore, this participant was concerned the parents might not get as involved with their child’s education in another school district because they would be losing the “family atmosphere” that so many enjoy at Hallsburg. One interviewee felt “it would just be a very negative impact on our community” while another felt the community “would not be anything anymore.” Yet another added the impact “would be degrading” and a visual reminder every time you drove by and saw a “functional building [Hallsburg School] sitting vacant.” Without fail, all members interviewed and a vast majority surveyed felt very strongly that Hallsburg School is a very important part and a binding force in its community.

As the survey and interview results demonstrate, Hallsburg School has continuously been represented as the hub of the community. Whether the community is characterized as people with common interests living in a common area, or those with diverse characteristics linked by social ties, Hallsburg School serves as a strong link in its community. As a link, the school has withstood the test of time, embracing change

with flexibility and adaptability. Whether in the school atmosphere, administration or staff, general improvements such as technology upgrades, or the facilities themselves, Hallsburg School has made changes and continues to change to meet the demands of the present and future. Hallsburg School continues to act as the bond in the community, being compared to a church in other communities, in terms of its ability to bring people together. Thus, Hallsburg School serves as the hub of the community, defining community, enduring change, and providing the bond for the community it serves.

Raising Taxes is Questionable

Although the participants felt strongly that Hallsburg School was important to the community, their willingness to sacrifice in the form of voting to raise their own taxes to keep the district solvent, was a much more strong indicator of just how important the school district actually was to the community (J. Smith, personal communication, July 3, 2012). In 1773, the Boston Tea Party exemplified, with passion, the American's disgust with many aspects of their government at the time (Boston Tea Party, 2012). Similar feelings prevail today, as taxes remain one of the most prevalent issues on a politician's docket (J. Smith, personal communication, July 3, 2012). As the Texas legislature cuts funding to schools, districts are forced to address this unpopular issue, and many choose to go to the voters to raise taxes in the form of a tax ratification election (TRE) or a bond (J. Smith, personal communication, July 3, 2012). As of June, 2012, the citizens in 883 out of 1,024 school districts in Texas are paying higher taxes because they voted on bonds, TRE's, or both, as a measure of necessity to continue operations and provide "a general diffusion of knowledge" (Texas Const. art. VII sec. 1) in the form of free public

schools for all its residents (Smith, 2012). When a district reaches the point of needing more revenue to reach its goals, the residents of the district are called on to vote to raise their taxes. They are essentially voting to sacrifice, to pay more to ensure the local school district has the funds needed to fulfill its obligation to the residents of the district. The theme of raising taxes is broken down into several sub-themes that are discussed below. These sub-themes are the financial condition of the district, the physical condition, Tax Ratification Elections, and bonds.

Financial condition of the district. The financial condition of a public school district should not be a secret; however, it seems to be a question for which many citizens in the Hallsburg ISD do not have an answer. The greatest expenditure for any district is its payroll (Rolle, 2008). While the human resources are of utmost importance, it is also very important for the people who work in a school district to be able to have a good, functional building to carry out operations, and most importantly, to educate students (Berry & West, 2010; Boex & Martinez-Vasquez, 1998). As a result, the conditions of the facilities of a school district are very important. There is a great need to invest in the facilities to keep them operational as long as possible, to avoid an even greater expense of replacing a facility, or building a new facility in the future. It is important for citizens of a district to be informed on the conditions of its facilities, for much of the same reason as citizens should be aware of the financial condition of the district. Citizens pay their taxes to the school district and as a result, have a certain tie or connection with that district. As such, they should be well informed citizens (Ratcliffe, Riddle, & Yinger, 1990).

Before a relationship can be made between the school taxes and the fiscal and physical condition of the Hallsburg School, all of the participants were asked, and had a chance to respond to, their knowledge of both Hallsburg ISD's fiscal and physical condition. When asked what kind of financial shape the school was in, one participant replied, "I don't know. You tell me." A very similar response came from another participant, "You'll have to cover that. I don't know." Another participant had a little better grasp of the situation. She replied,

There's no school that's in good condition from what I understand. You hear that on the news and everything. The fact that we're getting more kids is definitely helping our situation but I know we still have a long way to go.

The increased enrollment was echoed by a different participant who said "Our strong academic record has brought transfer students in, which has allowed us to gain a little bit more income." Another interviewee spoke of the upturn in student enrollment when he replied, "I think the school's in good shape compared to what we were in the past, with our numbers [student enrollment] up and all." Yet that does not speak to the current financial state of the district, only to its relative past. Speaking to the past, one participant remembered, "We were talking about having the power plant, and we were considered rich, and others would say, 'Oh, you're at the rich school.'" Another participant alluded to the power plant in the district, stating that he "would say medium or poor since we don't have the power plant anymore." One participant showed cautious optimism when she answered, "I think the school is holding its own but with the legislation changing daily, there is probably no telling what will happen." When asked

on the survey to rate the financial condition of the school, 72 percent would not even try, replying they did not know. Of the 28 percent who did rank it, the rankings were very similar across the line from “very healthy” to “very weak.” On a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being “very healthy,” six people ranked the financial health of the district a 1 or 2 while four people ranked it a 4 or 5. There were three people ranking the district in the middle with a 3. The surveys reinforced the interviews with the notion that the participants were not very aware of the financial condition of the district.

Physical condition. Related to the financial condition of the district is the physical condition of the facilities, as mentioned previously. Also important, is that the citizens of the district have a grasp of the facility condition, so they are more aware of district needs, such as additional funding, and there are no surprises (J. Smith, personal communication, July 3, 2012). When asked what kind of physical condition the school was in, the survey respondents felt more informed to answer this question than they did the financial question. There were only 35 percent that did not think they knew what kind of physical shape the school was in. A majority, 40 and 19 percent, felt the school was in good or fair condition, respectively. The interviews provided the same general response but with more information. For example, “I would say it’s in fair condition” or “I would say on a scale from one to a hundred, I would say around 50 or 60” and “Moneywise, it looks like it’s in pretty good shape to me” were some of the comments recorded. Other participants added comments like “For as old as it is, I think it’s in pretty good shape” and “Structural parts are good but the gym is in pretty rough shape though.”

Some of the comments started drawing more of a picture, such as “They could stand some upgrading now.” This comment was justified by an ex-student of the district who said, “I think just the fact that it’s as old as it is, it’s pretty much the same way as when I was here 30 years ago. I can’t imagine it’s in great shape.” Another comment from a stakeholder within the school came from a teacher, who said,

I certainly think there are some areas that need to be taken care of. The old music room I think is an issue. It needs to be removed or repaired. This is basically the school that was here when I came 36 years ago. Not too much has changed.

Another teacher stated,

You know, we got the new music building which is wonderful. I started out teaching in the old gym and I know what kind of shape it’s in. It is in terrible shape. We’ve needed a gym for a long time. The library and office area is nice but the school classrooms are old and starting to see some shifting and having some issues.

Teachers work in this building every day, year in and year out. And some of these teachers making these observations have worked in this building from 10 years to 35 years. They have seen, first hand, the deterioration of the school facility.

Others who have not been associated with the school for many years added their own perspective to the state of the facilities. One parent assessed the situation as this,

I tend to get a little jealous when I go to the newer schools because everything is so bright and shiny and new, but again that’s not all that’s important. It’s what’s

inside, the staff. There's nowhere else that I think the kids would get a better education.

Even though one of the participants did not have a chance to hear any of the other responses, he seemed to sum them all up with this statement,

Overall it's in good condition. There are some signs of aging. The school has been here quite some time. And I think things will need to be addressed in the near future but for the most part, it's cosmetic, not structural issues other than maybe the gymnasium. Our gymnasium needs to be replaced right now, but it's coming up with the funding in order to be able to do that.

Tax Ratification Election (TRE). Texas school districts use a variety of means to obtain funding at the level required to operate efficiently. TRE's are becoming more popular as an avenue to reach the financial goals of a district. As of the end of June, 2012, there have been 424 TRE's held in 366 school districts since (not including) 2005. That means that 58 elections were held a second or third time in the same district over the past seven years (Smith, 2012). The bottom line however; a TRE is an election to raise taxes, so the participants in the study were asked about their thoughts on the subject. The interviewees were more favorable toward raising taxes than the survey respondents, but those interviewed were quick to point out that the community as a whole might not hold the same feelings as they did.

When discussing raising taxes in general, one interviewee stated, "I might be in a minority, but I would vote for a bond, definitely." Another expressed frustration over the resistance to vote for a bond or TRE when she rhetorically asked, "Why can't this

community bond together. We have a responsibility for the school.” Another interviewee seemed to answer this question when she described Hallsburg as a “conservative community [where] everyone is pinching pennies.” Not everyone subscribed to this philosophy though. One interviewee said,

We already have a low tax rate anyway, so a small increase in the tax rate is still probably lower than Mart or Riesel anyway. To me that's just an easy solution. I'm a homeowner here and I realize that it could be a significant increase but I would vote for it [tax increase] because I value the education of the children here in Hallsburg.

Another interviewee shared the same sentiment when he stated, “I would. I’m all about paying for improvements to the school.”

Most every comment and concern from any citizens concerning their local school district is important, but when a citizen has a better understanding of the global needs of a school district, their comments can be even more important. As one more familiar with the operations of a school district, this participant replied,

Yes, I would go ahead and vote for the tax increase. The school needs the operating money. It’s a financial situation. We have to have money to run the schools. The good schools are the future of our country. They should never be cut.

One participant was obviously in favor of the school but like many, against raising taxes. His thoughts were optimistic toward raising taxes for a short time but lowering them again when the financial need alleviates. He said, “I would vote for the TRE tax increase

probably more so. When you have plenty of money, the school board can always lower the taxes again.”

A few of the respondents could not separate the need for funding, and the need for upgraded facilities as was mentioned earlier. One interviewee commented,

Yes, I would vote for the TRE. I feel like a bond can limit you on what you can spend your money on. The TRE, from what I understand, you can spend the money on whatever you want to. Wait, I take that back. I do think we need the money up front for the gym. It’s a major thing.

Another interviewee had a similar thought when he said,

I would vote for that [a tax increase] because I know it’s needed and I’m assuming that money would be used for the gym probably. I don’t know, I’m just guessing. But whatever it would be used for, it’s a small enough amount I don’t have a problem voting for that.

Although bonds are usually connected to facility upgrades, these individuals see such a need for upgrades, they will vote for any means to achieve those upgrades.

Others had a more difficult time with this question of voting for a tax increase. They did not connect the question to upgraded facilities or anything specific. One respondent replied,

I’m really mixed. I would probably vote for the TRE, mainly just because I live in the community, even though I don’t have kids going to school now. I think the school is important and can be important to my kids down the road if they come back. I would vote for that one.

Another interviewee knew their answer immediately. She replied, “Probably not. It’s a financial thing. I don’t have the money coming in like I used to.” Although a majority of those interviewed had somewhat favorable responses toward raising their taxes in the form of a TRE, not all residents felt that way. When the survey asked about raising taxes between \$.17 and \$.25 for a TRE or bond to prevent the district from consolidating, there was a 50 percent split. There were 22 respondents who said they would vote for the increase, and 22 who said they would not.

Bond. The interviews and surveys showed there was not a great deal of difference between passing a bond or a TRE, but there were a few who were able to differentiate the two. The bottom line for most tax payers; their taxes will increase if the bond or TRE passes. At the time of data collection, the greatest concern in the district was the gym. Some of the questions in the survey and interviews dealt directly with the gym. When interviewees heard discussions about a bond, most related that bond to a new or renovated gym. Some examples are the following responses from two participants. When asked if they would vote for a bond to raise their taxes \$.20 to \$.25. One said, “I would vote for a bond if it was going for a specific purpose. Yes, I would vote a bond to demolish and rebuild a good, quality gym.” The next said, “You know I already made it clear we need a new gym. Yes, I might be in a minority but I would vote for the bond, definitely.”

When asked if the community should pass a bond to air condition the gym, one interviewee responded;

I think so, yes, because it's 108 degrees in the summertime in Texas and you have kids playing in that [gym]. It's so hot, they can't even enjoy it. It could be a safety hazard. I think the community should pay for that [gym AC] through the taxes [bond] because every other community around, their taxes go to schools.

Several others spoke in the affirmative toward voting for a bond. However, one interviewee was still concerned about other voters when he answered, "Again, I would vote yes. But that's another one of those things to get the community to vote for."

With the consolidation rumors and possibly due to prior questions in the interview, a few respondents immediately associated passing a bond with preventing the school from consolidating. One interviewee stated, "Yes, I would vote for a bond because I don't want to consolidate. I want to keep the school here for a long time." Another interviewee replied, "Well, I would just because I want the school to stay here, but I would rather have a little tax increase." Another interviewee echoed the sentiment of a lesser tax increase when he said, "I would say, slightly raise taxes." One participant was even more specific when he said, "I could vote for a bond if it was for \$20,000 to \$50,000." These more conservative views were depicted in a few of the participants' comments. For example, one participant said,

I think the mindset is that we have to have that kind of building or we're not keeping up with the Joneses, but you take a look at some of the buildings that were built 40 years ago. They were just the basic fundamental. We've got nothing fancy, but it serves the purpose.

The addendum to this statement came from another interviewee stating, “We don't need Baylor stadium. You know what I'm talking about? Don't go overboard; get what we need, keep it small and simple and good.”

Other participants did not clarify what they would vote for but they did say what they would not vote for, with answers to the question of voting for a bond, such as, “Probably no, because of more money to be honest” and “To raise our taxes to 25 cents? Probably not.” One interviewee simply said, “I would not vote for 25 cents. That would be more than I would like to spend.” Similar to the interviews, the survey also showed mixed results. When respondents who felt the gym should be air conditioned were asked if the community should fund that project through a bond, 49 percent felt it should, and 49 percent said it should not. One person had no opinion. As previously mentioned, another bond question in the survey received a 50 percent split by respondents, when asked if they would vote for a \$.17 to \$.25 tax increase in the form of a TRE or bond.

The internal strife community members feel over raising taxes was very evident in many of their comments and the outcomes of their surveys. The surveys showed the respondents had very strong feelings toward the need for air conditioning in the gym, yet only half the number of those who said air conditioning was needed, would vote to raise their taxes to pay for that air conditioning. Similar outcomes prevailed with the strong sentiment in the survey sample. The majority of respondents did not want Hallsburg ISD to consolidate. But they were split when asked if they would vote to raise their taxes to avoid consolidation.

Although the strife can be detected in the surveys, it was very clear in the interviews. As I visited with one interviewee who was also a senior citizen, I developed an appreciation for her plight. She showed a real love of the school district, and the community in which she was ingrained. And as much as she loved her school and community, she disliked taxes even more. Her first statement concerning taxes was evident when she said, “Well to be frank with you, I’ve had it up to here with taxes.” She continued, stating “people that are in the senior variety really don’t need to pay any more taxes because they don’t have the money coming in like they did.” The internal conflict became apparent when I asked her if she would vote to raise her taxes to prevent the school district from consolidating with another district. I could hear the distress in her voice. It was not anger. It was not agitation. It was from the heart when she paused, almost quivering, and replied, “I would hate to do that. I would really hate to have to vote to consolidate or raise my taxes.” She could not answer the question.

The issue of taxes drew a myriad of responses. It was evident none of the participants wanted their taxes to increase, but it was much divided on the lengths some would go to increase their taxes to improve their school, keep it from consolidating, or just sustain it as it is. Other participants were not willing to budge on raising their taxes. One resident seemed to find the happy medium regarding a tax increase for school improvements when he said, “I would say, slightly raise taxes.”

Currently, the tax rate for Hallsburg ISD is \$1.04. The only way the district can generate additional revenue is to raise taxes, which would require an affirmative vote by the residents of the district. When considering raising taxes, it is important that the

residents of the district are kept informed of the financial condition of the district. Likewise, they should also be knowledgeable on the physical condition of the school facilities, when additional funding is going to be linked to facility upgrades. One way to raise taxes is through a TRE which would allow the district to use the increased funds on the maintenance and operations of the district. Another scenario for increased funding is for the district to pass a bond in which the added revenue must be used on predetermined needs such as facility construction, upgrading technology, or buying new buses. The results from the surveys and interviews showed support both for and against raising taxes in the form of TRE's or bonds. These results also confirmed the residents' lack of knowledge concerning the district's financial condition and the physical condition of the facilities.

Consolidation Raises Issues

Research shows communities rarely want their local schools to consolidate with neighboring districts (Adams & Foster, 2002; Bard et al., 2005; Boex & Martinez-Vasquez, 1998; Lyson, 2002). Hallsburg is no exception. Both the surveys and interviews support this notion without doubt. After it had been established that consolidation was not preferable, one resident could not let go when asked a hypothetical question of which district Hallsburg should consolidate with if the event were ever to occur. She could not answer without first interjecting, "Of course I don't want to consolidate. Let's make that very clear." To get a deeper understanding of how the community feels in case consolidation was to become inevitable, questions were

asked and three subthemes emerged; consolidation with other districts, maintenance of Hallsburg Elementary, and the tax effect of consolidation.

Consolidation with other districts. When asked which district Hallsburg should consolidate with, all three current receiving districts were mentioned, but Riesel was overwhelmingly the favorite. One participant who felt Hallsburg should consider consolidating with Mart stated,

I would like to see them go to Mart because I'm familiar with that school. I know they would get a good education and have diversity. It is very important the kids grow up and not just be in their comfort zone. Being around different races and different cultural backgrounds really helps the kid mature and grow to be a productive member of society.

Another interviewee stated "Axtell would be my first recommendation for consolidation. I think it's a better school than Riesel myself, but there is a transportation problem to get to Axtell." This individual chose to take his secondary school-aged children to Axtell after researching all three receiving districts.

The remainder of those interviewed felt Riesel would be the best fit for consolidation. Several echoed the sentiment that "the majority of our students go to Riesel right now" making it easier on "the families because they won't have to be changing their kids' school." The difficulty in transportation to Axtell worked in favor for Riesel. One respondent mentioned, "I assume that Riesel would continue to provide a bus which would make it easier for most kids to go ahead and go to Riesel if they did not have transportation to Mart or Axtell." Even though any district that consolidated would

furnish transportation, the fact that Riesel has provided transportation for several years has made that district the most popular choice for the majority of Hallsburg students attending middle and high school.

Another point several of those interviewed made related to the new wealth Riesel was perceived to be encountering, with a new power plant being built within the district. A bond was passed in the Riesel district allowing for a new high school to be built, along with new technology. One participant seemed to sum up all the interview comments when he replied,

Again I would have to go with Riesel. I think they are staying up with technology better than some of the other area schools and to be quite honest, with the power plant moving in right now, they're going to have more funding than some of the other school districts. They will be able to supply the kids with the best of everything that they need in order to further their careers. I know that next year they're going to do away with textbooks and everything is going to be done on iPads or some similar device. So I can see them progressing in the way the world is going, as far as technology is concerned, so I would have to move with Riesel. It was simply felt, as one interviewee noted, "the new school they [Riesel] are building...would be an added incentive."

Another area mentioned by some who favored consolidation with Riesel was the district's academic program. One participant stated, "I've seen good academics with my granddaughter who goes to Riesel and they've been very supportive of her. So if I had to choose I would say Riesel." Another interviewee added, "Well, coming from a personal

issue, my kids go to Riesel now and I'm happy with the education they're getting there." This statement was followed with, "I'm impressed with the education the kids are receiving at Riesel."

Riesel has also gained favor through its relationship with Hallsburg. When asked which district Hallsburg should consolidate with, one participant answered,

Probably Riesel because Riesel has been very supportive of taking all of our students, no matter what the situation was. At least for the first years whereas some of the others, Axtell, has stipulations even the first year of taking our students and I believe Riesel really wants our students.

Another interviewee said, "I think Riesel, because I think Riesel has always taken our students and a majority of our students go there." Several participants alluded to the fact that a majority of Hallsburg students go to Riesel. One respondent was empathetic to the families with children attending Mart and Axtell but perhaps was looking at the global picture when he said,

I think it would pose a problem for kids who are already going to other schools like Mart and Axtell but the majority of our kids go to Riesel. That would help us in the long run and the families because they won't have to be changing their kids to the school because the majority goes there.

Again, the overwhelming favorite for consolidation was Riesel, with the caveat expressed by many, "Of course I don't want to consolidate.

Maintenance of Hallsburg Elementary. If Hallsburg were to consolidate with Riesel or any other district, three scenarios exist pertaining to Hallsburg Elementary

School. The newly consolidated district could choose to leave Hallsburg Elementary open and operate very similar to the way it does now except under a different district. Or Hallsburg Elementary could be closed, and all the Hallsburg resident students would be bussed to the elementary school in the consolidating district. Another scenario was offered by one of the respondents when I asked if they thought Hallsburg School would stay open as a campus if a consolidation occurred. He replied, “Yes, I feel like they would stay open because they can offer a good facility for either a primary center or maybe junior high. I don’t know but some classes could be held here.”

The question of Hallsburg Elementary remaining open after a consolidation was not an easy one. One participant’s reply seemed to answer this question two different ways; optimistically and realistically,

I would like to think it would [stay open] because of the quality of the facility that we have here, with the track and the physical operation being in good shape. The only weak point again, would be the gymnasium. I would like to think that they would keep it open but in all likelihood I would say that they would probably shut it down and relocate all the kids to the Riesel campus.

Another interviewee had a similar thought, “I would worry if they went with Riesel. I think with Riesel getting the new school and all, that I would worry that they would just have everybody come to their campus.” One respondent simply said, “I would be very leery of another district keeping this campus open.” While the majority of those interviewed hoped the elementary school would stay open, realistically they did not think it would happen. On the other hand, the survey participants had different

perspectives when asked if the school would remain open during a consolidation. Of the 48 who responded, 17 felt the school would stay open and 13 thought it would close, with 18 not providing an opinion.

Tax effect of consolidation. An area many residents do not think about when discussing consolidation issues is taxes. Participants were very vocal in not wanting their taxes to increase, but it was very evident they had not processed the full impact of a school district consolidation in relation to their taxes. Survey and interview results were similar but showed some differences. Some that were interviewed felt the taxes would go up but the majority simply replied, “I don’t know.” One participant successfully thought her way through the question, answering,

I guess they would. If we consolidated, our taxes would probably go up because I know Riesel's taxes are higher than ours, so I'm not sure about that but it does make sense, that if we consolidated with Riesel, we would end up paying the same taxes that Riesel is paying for school.

Answers such as this reflected citizens who kept up with the taxes they were paying, and the taxes of neighboring districts.

There was one participant who showed partial knowledge answering, “I think it would depend on the district we’re consolidating with. I can see taxes staying pretty much the same if we consolidated with Riesel, and then increase if we consolidated with Mart.” In actuality, they were correct in assuming the taxes would increase if Hallsburg consolidated with Mart. They were incorrect assuming the taxes at Riesel would be about the same as those in Hallsburg. Riesel’s taxes are actually ten cents higher than

Mart's. Another incorrect assumption is reflected in the following participant's quote, "I don't see that it would change it, as far as going up or down." Some of the responses that were reflective of those who had a little better understanding of the taxing situation included, "Yes, I would continue to pay whatever the other district's tax rate is" and "Definitely, I think it would go up." Some others who had a better understanding said, "Oh I'm sure it would. Probably local taxes would go up. I can't see them going down any. With a bigger district I fully believe they would go up" and "Yes, if we consolidated, of course. I'm assuming you would take over the tax rate of that school district. All of the surrounding school districts, from what I understand, have higher tax rates than ours."

The survey results, as mentioned above, showed similarities to the interview results, but also showed some differences. Of the 48 people who answered the question regarding taxes, half replied they did not know if their taxes would be affected. Of the other half, only three thought the taxes would not be affected. A difference from the interviews, of those that thought the tax rate would be affected; just over half of them thought the taxes would go up while 41 percent did not know. There were two who incorrectly assumed the taxes would go down. These results showed a great amount of unawareness related to the tax rates associated with consolidations of school districts. Similarly, even the correct comments from the interviews showed levels of uncertainty.

The last strain of consolidation tax questioning pitted two evils against each other, looking for the lesser of the two. When asked whether the residents would rather vote to raise taxes either in the form of a bond or TRE or vote to consolidate, the

respondents to the survey were split with half voting to raise taxes and the other have voting to consolidate (which ironically would probably raise taxes even more than a bond or TRE). Those that were being interviewed were more favorable to raising taxes over consolidating. Some were very frank, noting they would not vote for a bond to help the district, but they would if it meant keeping the district from consolidating. One replied,

I would vote for the bond over consolidation because I think it would just displace a lot of families and kids to consolidate. I would not vote for the bond just straight out but if the only other option was consolidation, I would vote for the bond.

Many referred to the quality of the school and made similar comments to one interviewee who said,

I would vote to pass the bond before I would consolidate. I would rather pony up a little more money to keep our school open and keep our kids here where we know what kind of educational environment and quality staff we have, than to vote to consolidate and take whatever you get.

Another participant similarly replied,

Again, maintaining a school that has a caring, nurturing, family environment of high quality teachers and appropriate student to teacher ratios. A school that keeps up with technology and guides the children in the direction they need to go to be successful in their future once they leave here. So to me, it's a no-brainer;

keep the kids here where we know what we've got. I would vote for a TRE or bond to keep the school open and keep it in the community.

These comments relayed a different message on the tax effects of consolidation. The participants may or may not have totally understood the ramifications of the taxes after consolidation, but they did understand the ramifications of raising their taxes to keep their local school.

There was a plethora of considerations when consolidation discussions began. Some of these considerations included which district to consolidate with, would the existing school stay open, and how would the local taxes be affected. These considerations were addressed through surveys and interviews, and the ramifications of the results will be discussed in the next chapter.

Summary

This chapter served two purposes. First, it presented the “story” and history of Hallsburg as it pertained to this study. It also outlined the three themes that emerged as a result of the analyses; the school is the hub of the community, raising taxes is questionable, and consolidation issues. These themes emerged from interviews with school and community members and surveys sent to random community members that were registered to vote. The following chapter begins with a summary of the results outlined in Chapter IV followed by a discussion of the meaning of these results as they relate to the research questions and literature review presented earlier in this paper.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The final chapter of this study will discuss the holistic meaning of the findings and their relationship to the literature (i.e., do the findings support the relevant literature, disagree with it, or raise new issues) and offer implications for policy, practice, and future research. The chapter will conclude with recommendations for Hallsburg ISD that are based on the results of this study, as well as a personal reflection, and a conclusion.

This Problem in Practice Record of Study examined a small, K-6 school district in Texas that is in jeopardy of consolidation with a larger, neighboring district. With the combination of reduced student enrollment and reduced funding from the state facing Hallsburg ISD, plans had to be made to determine the future of this small district. Hallsburg ISD has been a Chapter 41 school district for years, but the power plant located in the district has closed, causing the tax base to drop in value. This drop in value coupled with reduced funding from the state and reduced enrollment that generates funding created the conundrum under which Hallsburg ISD is currently experiencing. If the district continues on the current path, its sustainability would be threatened by consolidation with a neighboring district in order to resolve its financial discrepancies.

The purpose of this study was to examine the fiscal responsibilities of Hallsburg ISD, determine if the community wanted to keep the school district open, and if so, what measures the community was willing to support in order to do so. Secondly, the feasibility of these options must be measured, and a plan of action developed, that would

offer the students and citizens of Hallsburg ISD a best case scenario to meet their wishes, regarding the continuation of their local school district. This course of action will focus on keeping the district financially solvent and open, enabling the district to serve the children of Hallsburg and surrounding communities for many years to come.

To gain a deeper understanding of the feelings of the community, several members of the community were either interviewed or surveyed. Some questions answered through these interviews and surveys were, what does the community (representative parents, teachers, school board members, community leaders, and other community members) want to do about the financial and student population issues facing Hallsburg ISD? If consolidation was the answer, with which district should Hallsburg consolidate? If remaining open was the consensus, tax increases must be addressed. Another question was, what reasons do community members (as described above) give for their decisions about the future of Hallsburg ISD? The last question was, what does the community perceive as the appropriate policy response to consolidation?

As I sifted through the surveys, and transcribed the interviews to address these questions, the “story” began to open for me. As a career educator, I have spent my entire life, since I was five years old, in a school. I was either attending school or I was working in one. Having dedicated my life to education, I have created my own paradigm surrounding the importance of education. I know what happens every day within the walls of our public schools. I often lose sight of others whose lives do not revolve around the school, might have other paradigms, or might not think about our schools at all. I know taxes are often a taboo subject. However, I also know that taxes are the

backbone of our school system. During data collection, certain themes unfolded as I stepped out of my paradigm and truly tried to listen to what these stakeholders were saying through their surveys and interviews. Through this process, three themes emerged; the school is the hub of the community, raising taxes is questionable, and consolidation raises issues.

Research as It Relates to the Literature

The School is the Hub of the Community

The first theme, the school is the hub of the community, focused on the school as a bonding force in the community, with three subthemes surfacing; community, change, and bond. A community consists of people that live in a common geographic area and have common perspectives (MacQueen, 2001). Over 50 percent of the respondents from the surveys and interviews either had children who were attending Hallsburg School, or had children who attended Hallsburg School in the past. Thus, the school is the central point in the community that brings people together. Community members come together for ballgames, programs, festivals, and celebrations that occur throughout the school year. According to the research, being the center point for the community for over 100 years, Hallsburg School has experienced change; change in atmosphere, education, and the physical plant itself. The atmosphere or environment changes as the administration and staff change. The school strives to keep up with changes in the delivery of education to the students by staying up to date with teaching methodology and technology. But then there are areas Hallsburg School is known for, which have not changed. These areas include the good relationships between the parents, staff, and administration. The school

also continues to function as a small school where everyone knows everyone, and the students are given more individual attention.

The results from this research revealed the good relationships between the community and school as an expectation in the community. Quotes such as, “I can’t even imagine the school not here” and “sad to even think about [the school not being in the community]” were echoed through the interviews and surveys. One participant explained how the school has acted in this community, like a church does in many other communities, being the bonding force that brings people together. This research showed, without a doubt, that Hallsburg School is the hub of the Hallsburg community.

The literature supports the results of this study when examining the role the school plays in shaping community identity. For example, Adams and Foster (2002) list community identity as an issue to be addressed if school consolidation was ever a possibility. The results from this study strongly support Adams and Foster with strong connections between the community and the Hallsburg School. Furthermore, Bard et al. (2005) state the school is often the center point of the community. Again, the results from this study strongly support this notion. Lyson (2002) discusses the social and economic health advantages of a school in a community. The economic health of Hallsburg was never broached in the research, except in the case where a respondent spoke of families moving into the community so their children could attend Hallsburg School. On the other hand, the social health that Lyson mentioned was very evident, in the many community events hosted at the Hallsburg School.

Bard et al. (2005) found that communities deteriorated after losing their schools; that they (the communities) lost their identity, and support for public education declined (Strategic Planning Study Group Committee, 2003). Lyson (2002) continued that consolidation will almost always have ill effects on the community being served. This study of Hallsburg ISD mirrors those findings with the concerns of participants when asked what would happen if the Hallsburg School had to close. Participants were saddened at the thought, and feared the deterioration of the community. One interviewee was concerned the families would not be as involved in their children's education because they would be losing the family atmosphere provided at Hallsburg School. Bard et al. made a suggestion if consolidation was imminent, to keep a school open in both communities (of the community schools being consolidated). This recommendation was echoed by the participants in this study. Consolidation was not favored, but if inevitable, they want to keep their school open under a new consolidated district. Generally, feelings of the participants from the study mirrored those from Post and Stambach (1999), rural school consolidation continues to be a source of social tension today, just as it was 100 years ago.

Raising Taxes is Questionable

The second theme considered raising taxes which is not a popular topic in today's unstable economic conditions, but sometimes necessary to reach financial goals of public entities such as school districts. There are 883 out of 1,024 districts in the state of Texas where residents voted to generate more revenue for the school district, by raising taxes, through a bond or a TRE (texasisd.com). Through the development of this

theme, several subthemes emerged; financial condition of the district, physical condition of the district, and TRE's and bonds. The results of this study showed that a majority of the participants were not aware of the financial condition of the district. In terms of physical condition, more respondents felt comfortable rating the facilities, with more than half listing them as good or fair. There were no discrepancies in the assessment of the 80+ year old gym needing to be renovated or demolished and rebuilt.

The responses from the surveys and interviews revealed the participants were greatly unaware of the financial condition of the school which would be very important when assessing how the district would pay to renovate or replace the gym mentioned earlier. Many school districts are raising their revenue by passing TRE's. For example, between 2005 and June of 2012, 424 TRE's were held in 366 different Texas districts (texasisd.com). Those interviewed showed favorable responses to raising their taxes in an effort to raise the revenue for the school district. Even though they were favorable in their response, they felt the majority of the residents in the district might not have the same supportive attitude. The results from the survey supported this claim as only half of the respondents said they would vote to raise their taxes, even at the expense of consolidation. Those who were supportive of the TRE were also supportive of the bond, and those against, vice versa. The biggest caveat when discussing a bond was to be frugal with the money, that is, building modest structures—nothing excessive.

Finance is one of the main issues in school consolidation scenarios (Adams & Foster, 2002; Boex & Martinez-Vasquez, 1998; Goatcher, 1999; Imazeki & Reschovsky, 2003; Robertson, 2007). In a study by Gordon and Knight (2009), taxpayers resisted

consolidation by voting to pay higher taxes and keep local control of their school. The results from this Hallsburg study both support and contradict the research by Gordon and Knight, with the survey showing mixed results for raising taxes. Alternatively, interviews showed very strong support for raising taxes to keep local control of the school. Robertson (2007) cited savings to tax payers through lower tax rates, as a benefit to consolidation. Results from the surveys showed half the respondents support the line of thinking in Robertson's study, but in actuality, develop an ironic situation. Half of the respondents from the survey reported they would rather consolidate than vote to raise taxes. The irony is in direct opposition to Robertson's findings, because the local taxes would increase if Hallsburg ISD consolidated with any of the surrounding districts.

The majority of the literature relied on to inform this study addressed finance after school consolidation. With the exception of the article by Robertson (2007), mentioned in the prior paragraph, the scholarship reviewed did not discuss the measures taken by districts prior to consolidation, such as voting to raise taxes in order to generate extra revenue for the district in an effort to keep it solvent. This scenario presents a new issue not addressed in the scholarship concerning the commitment level of the residents of a school district in jeopardy of consolidation. The residents of Hallsburg declared they wanted their local school to stay open, but when asked if they were willing to pay more taxes to keep their school open, their loyalty to the district swayed as previously discussed.

Consolidation Raises Issues

The third and final theme, consolidation raises issues, suggests that, based on the surveys and interviews, almost unanimously the community does not want Hallsburg ISD to consolidate with another school district. The subthemes that emerged were; consolidation with other districts, maintenance of Hallsburg Elementary, and tax effect of consolidation. When asked with which district Hallsburg ISD should consolidate if consolidation was imminent, the respondents listed all three receiving districts, Axtell, Mart, and Riesel ISD. The majority of responses, however, listed Riesel as the best choice for consolidation for several reasons. The first reason was, at the time of data collection, the majority of Hallsburg secondary students already attended Riesel so it would be easier for the majority of families to transition to Riesel as the consolidating district. Another reason cited was the ease of transportation since Riesel has been running a bus route into Hallsburg for several years, picking up and delivering the secondary students to and from Hallsburg School. The last reason provided was the new facilities and technology that Riesel had just acquired, due to the passing of a bond in their district in the recent past.

Another issue associated with consolidation was the maintenance of Hallsburg Elementary, the question of whether the school would stay open under the new consolidated district. When participants had a chance to respond, they were very optimistic in their wishes and desires that the school would stay open, but they realistically felt it would close. The survey had mixed results between staying open, closing, and no opinion. One respondent offered another outcome for the campus—if it

could not remain open as an elementary campus, perhaps the facility could be used as an alternative or magnet school.

The third subtheme discussed the willingness of the participants to vote to raise their taxes in an effort to improve their school, or even prevent it from consolidating with another district. This subtheme examined the general knowledge of the respondents with regard to the resulting tax base after a school district consolidation. The participants were very vocal that they were not in favor of raising taxes, although many were willing to pay increased taxes if it would help the district. What several participants did not consider, however, was the resulting tax rate after a consolidation. Some of those interviewed thought their taxes would go up if Hallsburg ISD consolidated with any of the surrounding districts, but the majority did not know. Results from the survey showed half those that responded did not know. And of the half who thought their taxes would be affected, almost half were not sure how, if they would go up or down. On another survey question, half the respondents said they would vote to consolidate rather than vote to raise their taxes. Ironically, a vote to consolidate with any of the surrounding districts would automatically raise their taxes, possibly greater than voting for a TRE or bond, which would keep Hallsburg ISD from consolidating.

Bard et al. (2005) surmised when consolidation discussions begin, the district is likely looking at the inevitable rather than the possible. This finding supports the plight of Hallsburg ISD. The results from this inquiry clearly show the respondents are not in favor of consolidating, so if consolidation discussions were to ever occur, it would be more of a last resort mandate rather than a planning strategy. If these discussions had to

occur, Gordon and Knight (2009) found that like districts (districts with similar demographics) had a better chance of merging than unlike districts. Their results support the findings of this study, as a majority of the respondents chose Riesel ISD as the best choice for consolidation with Hallsburg ISD. As noted above, the majority of respondents felt comfortable with Riesel ISD due to the high number of Hallsburg secondary students already attending high school in that district.

Larger Holistic Meaning of the Results

To this point, the themes have been discussed individually, with the development of subthemes under each overarching theme. To get a better sense of the global picture revealed from the research, the findings from this study will be discussed in an integrated, holistic fashion. A metaphor will be used to help simplify the global view of these findings.

A small, rural community called Pleasant Valley exists several miles from the nearest town. There is a local, general store in the middle of Pleasant Valley, which serves the citizens in this rural area. This general store carries all the staples needed for cooking, hardware needed for general repairs, gas, and so on. Within this store is also a grill where the locals often eat breakfast and lunch, and keep up with the community events. The store has been a part of Pleasant Valley for years and years, and serves as a meeting place for the community, where neighbors can stay in touch. The store has always served an invaluable service to Pleasant Valley, always being there to provide many of the needs of the community. The members of the community have always been

very appreciative and supportive of the store, knowing how inconvenient it would be to have to travel great distances to purchase the simplest of items.

Over time the Pleasant Valley store has done very well, both financially and in terms of keeping the physical condition of the building in good shape. But as the economy has declined, everything the store owners buy costs more, which means they will have to pass those increased costs on to their loyal customers or earn less profit. Having been lifelong residents of Pleasant Valley, the owners opted to keep their prices low for their customers, and just try to get by. Over the next few years, the store continued their steady business, but there was not enough profit generated for general upkeep of the physical building and all the operations connected to the business. The owners finally reached a point where they could not continue to operate under the current economic conditions. They came to the decision that they would either have to raise the prices of all their goods and services, or they would have to close the store. They chose to raise their prices.

The regular customers who have always been so loyal to the store understood why the prices had to be raised and were glad to pay the higher prices, knowing the convenience of the business saved them time and money in the long run. They would not have to travel to the nearest town to buy goods they can currently purchase locally. Others in Pleasant Valley were not quite as appreciative of the store, nor did they understand the value in purchasing their goods locally, as opposed to traveling a great distance to purchase what they need at a lower price. These residents would occasionally buy something at the local store if they got in a bind and needed it right then, but as a

rule, they started traveling to town to buy their goods at a slightly lower price than what they would pay at their local store. What they did not process, is the fact that every time they drove to town, they would spend ten dollars just for gas. If they would have added up their savings of purchasing in town versus buying at their local store, they were only saving five dollars. In essence, they were paying five dollars more for the inconvenience of a drive to town to purchase their goods.

Several members of the community fell into this trap of thinking. They thought they were saving money when in fact it was costing them more money. Additionally, because so many had quit shopping at the local store, the store finally had to close. It was a very hard time for the residents of Pleasant Valley, when their local store closed. For those that had regularly supported the store throughout the years, they had to make great adjustments in their daily life, to make arrangements to take care of business they used to take care of without forethought at their local store. The rest of the community was not quite as affected as the regulars since they had already been going to town to do their business. But after a couple of years, some unforeseen events began to take place.

When the Pleasant Valley store was open, the community had influence and input as to what kind of products they needed, and what they liked. Since the owners were community members as well, the store somewhat “belonged” to the community. When Pleasant Valley residents had to start traveling to town, the business owners in town did not care as much about the needs of the rural community members. And, knowing the community members did not have a choice, the town businesses did not hesitate to raise their prices higher than ever before. The Pleasant Valley citizens now

had to pay higher prices for their goods and services than they did at their local store, plus contend with the inconvenience and cost of having to drive to town to purchase those goods and services.

This story illustrates the plight of Hallsburg ISD. The results from this research have drawn a picture of a small, rural school that serves as the hub of the community. The community is very proud of their school, and members believe it serves a very important function in the community. Unfortunately, the school has reached a point of needing assistance, in the form of greater revenue, from the community. This added revenue is needed for general maintenance and operations, but more importantly, for renovation and replacement of dilapidated buildings and aged facilities. This is the point where the story of Hallsburg ISD can follow the trajectory of the rural general store above, or it can write its own story. The results from this study show, in general, the community is not aware of the poor conditions of the campus facilities. They are also unaware of the general financial health of the district as well as their own tax rates compared to those of districts surrounding Hallsburg. If the Hallsburg community members continue to be uneducated of these facts, they are very likely to vote “no” to a bond or TRE needed by the district to continue its operation. As a result, the district could be forced to consolidate with a neighboring district. According to the results of this study, Riesel would be the first choice for consolidation. If the two districts consolidated, Hallsburg would inherit the tax rate of Riesel, and increase from \$1.04 to \$1.29, an increase of \$.25. Not only will the residents of Hallsburg be paying higher

taxes, they will no longer have their local school and will have very little, if any, control in the new district.

An alternative ending to the story would be the education of the residents of Hallsburg, ensuring they are well aware of the plight of the district. They should know beyond a shadow of a doubt, if Hallsburg ISD had to consolidate, their taxes are going to increase, and their local school is likely to close. The citizens also need to know if they pass a bond and or a TRE, they could very well keep their taxes lower than any of the surrounding school districts, and keep their local school open.

Implications for Policy, Practice, and Future Research

Policy

Policy is a difficult consideration in the case of Hallsburg ISD. From the standpoint of a legislator at the state level, it is imperative that school districts in the state are efficient in their operations and keep the cost of education as low as possible (Robertson, 2007). The research shows it costs more to educate a child in a small school than it does in a large school, but the trade-offs have been shown to be worth the increased costs (Bard et al., 2005). At some point however, operating schools with excessively low and declining enrollment becomes a burden to the state and the tax payers (Duncombe & Yinger, 2005).

Typically, schools stay open as long as they have funds, either through revenue they are generating with their enrollment, or through funds they have saved in their fund balance. When school districts reach critically low levels of enrollment, they will not generate enough revenue to operate under a balanced budget, forcing the district to

transfer money from its fund balance or savings to balance the budget. With a district's commitment to their students and community, they will continue to operate under a deficit budget for as long as possible, using all of the district's fund balance, and usually borrowing excess funds in the process. Perhaps a better plan would be for policymakers to develop some static minimum enrollment figures for schools to meet rather than basing the continued existence of a district strictly on its financial status, which usually means the school district has already incurred a great amount of debt in an effort to stay open. Addressing consolidation from an enrollment standard would be a more proactive measure, saving taxpayer dollars, ensuring the safekeeping of the excess fund balance savings, and keeping the district from going into debt.

When consolidation is unavoidable, the larger, receiving district will already be at a disadvantage due to the debt for which they are becoming responsible. Another plan for policy makers would be to offer debt relief to potential consolidating districts. This would encourage larger districts to engage in consolidation talks without the concern of acquiring greater debt. Larger districts may not desire to engage in such talks if they were going to be responsible for considerable debt as soon as they accept the consolidation. This consideration for policy should act as a supplement to current consolidation incentives. Therefore, I recommend sustaining the existing policy of the newly formed consolidated district such that it receives the funding both districts would have earned if they were still separate districts. This would generate more revenue for the new district so it could cover the initial costs associated with new programs and

services to be implemented. Currently, in Texas, the state pays this added incentive for 10 years (Texas Education Code 13.281).

Practice

School boards members are required to obtain continuing education hours every year (Texas Education Code 11.159). Unfortunately, in-depth finance training is not a required component of the continuing education hours. School finance is one of the most complicated areas, if not *the* most complicated area, a board will ever have to consider. As finance is one of the most important operations of a district, it would benefit all involved if the school board was acutely aware of how the school finance system operates. As boards become more aware of the intricacies of school funding, they may be better prepared to make more informed decisions and recommendations to the superintendent. That is, a team of eight, seven trustees and a superintendent, would be much more well equipped than a single superintendent, to analyze and evaluate district trends and finances. Such a team might be able to foresee undesirable events early enough to develop plans that could deter the otherwise inevitable. An example of an undesirable event may be school district consolidation.

Another practice to be considered is regular community or town hall meetings. Currently, many districts do the minimum effort required by law of placing an ad in the local newspaper to announce a budget or finance hearing. If regular community or town hall meetings occurred, once or twice per year, community members would be kept up to date regarding all aspects of the district, especially the finances. At regular community or town hall meetings, meals or children's programs could be offered to help boost

attendance. If the community were aware of the state of the school, they may be more inclined to listen to proposals, and get involved in planning committees. Furthermore, if a time came to call for a bond or raise taxes, the community would be more able to make an informed vote.

Future Research

The scholarship regarding school district consolidation addresses many areas in considerable depth. However, certain areas should be examined through future research. One area is community understanding. The community is extremely important any time a school consolidation is under consideration. Information regarding past consolidations that have been deemed beneficial by the community would be helpful to schools and communities that might be investigating consolidation. For example, community members will want to understand how a past consolidation was beneficial. The community will also want to understand who was responsible for the final decision to consolidate, as well as why and how were they responsible for decision-making. Thus, by learning more about the various aspects of decision-making, a community might change their paradigm toward consolidation. Moreover, they may consider consolidation a more workable option to benefit the community rather than potentially perceiving it as a forced evil on the community.

Future research should also include districts that were on the cusp of consolidation, but did not consolidate. Researchers should work to uncover the reasons why the district did not consolidate. Such information could provide other districts on

the verge of consolidation with some tools that might help save their district and community.

Recommendations for Hallsburg ISD

As the superintendent and principal of a very small district, some might not consider my position all that important, compared to superintendents who lead districts with 10, 20, and even 100 times more students. But I am reminded of the story of a boy walking on a beach full of starfish. He starts throwing the starfish back in to the ocean, one by one. As a passerby approaches the boy, he asks what the boy is doing. The boy responds that he is saving the lives of the starfish he is throwing back in the ocean. The man replies, “There are thousands of starfish on this beach, surely you can’t make a difference.” The boy threw another starfish in the water and then looked at the man and replied, “I just made a difference with that one.” Hallsburg is not more than a speck on the map, and the complete district enrollment is smaller than most individual school campuses across this state and nation. But I am making a difference for these students I have under my care, and I will do all I can to provide them with a quality education beyond what they could receive anywhere in the area, and I will work to keep the doors of this special rural district open for years and even generations to come.

The research from this Problem in Practice brought to light some community thoughts, perceptions, and misperceptions regarding the potential consolidation of Hallsburg ISD. Hallsburg ISD is facing a very critical time in its 100 plus years of serving the students of the Hallsburg community as well as transfer students from outside the community. Hallsburg ISD will not be able to continue to sustain itself

without having greater attendance numbers every year and support from the community in the form of increased taxes. The results from this study indicate the community of Hallsburg wants to keep Hallsburg ISD open and to continue to serve the students in the district. The following recommendations represent my professional plan of action and will be made to Hallsburg ISD. Embedded in these recommendations is an opportunity for the Hallsburg community to consider options that will improve its current financial duress. I will offer recommendations related to finance, development of community support, and a plan of action.

Finance

Before plans can be made concerning the financial future of the district, the community must have a thorough understanding of the current financial situation. The district needs to have an up-to-date financial analysis conducted. This analysis should include the past financial history, current financial condition, and trends for the future. It should also offer scenarios concerning TRE's, bonds, and any other recommendation the district might consider to raise revenue. This information should include the pros and cons associated with both TRE's and bonds. Once the pros and cons are communicated, long range plans can be updated using the information obtained from the financial analysis. This should be enough information for the taxpayers to compare the different options and decide which would be best for the district. Other financial information that should be made available to the community includes consolidation scenarios, and how consolidation with possible districts will affect Hallsburg finances, namely taxes. Every

resident should know the tax repercussions of consolidation between Hallsburg and an adjoining district.

Development of Community Support

The community has been a central thread throughout this study. It will be imperative to include the community in every step or phase of planning for the future of Hallsburg ISD. A team of community members will be established to work with the district in developing a plan for the future of Hallsburg ISD. This committee or team will include strong supporters of the district as well as those community members who are very vocal in their opposition to raising taxes. The diverse views of all groups within the district should be represented on this committee. It will be of utmost importance to have several community meetings, giving all community members a chance to provide input to this committee. Every effort will be made to encourage and motivate every community member to attend at least one meeting. Evening meals and children's programs will be used to boost attendance at these community or town hall type meetings. Again, the future of the district rests with the community members, so they will be included throughout the decision making process.

Plan of Action

The plan of action for Hallsburg ISD will be drafted by the committee representing the stakeholders of the district. There must be commitment to this plan from the community members before there can be any chance of successfully moving forward to sustain the district. There are several options for the community committee to consider in gaining commitment from community members. One option may be to send

out an informational bulletin to all residents of the district or all the voting residents of the district if an address list of the former is too difficult to ascertain. Another option may be to reach out to the senior citizens in the community. Seniors may be on fixed incomes and afraid to vote to raise taxes. The district could offer a financial consultant to meet with individuals, and explain how TRE's, bonds, and consolidation would affect their taxes.

One point discovered from this study was the desire of some participants to ensure the district does not spend money frivolously. New buildings should be built of good quality, but should not be excessive of what is needed. The buildings should be simple and modest. Many participants in this study responded that they would rather have the old gym renovated than demolished and rebuilt. As the Hallsburg School principal and superintendent, I know the true condition of the gym as well as its shortcomings in meeting the needs of the district. I also know that renovation is not a good option. Every taxpayer in Hallsburg should be made aware of the reasons why the gym needs to be rebuilt instead of renovated.

Other areas that might be included in the plan of action relate to finance indirectly. Revenue for the school is earned through daily attendance of students. Therefore, when the attendance drops, so does the revenue. Methods to increase the student enrollment numbers should be discussed by stakeholders. Advertising could be very beneficial to help boost the number of transfer students. Another transfer friendly idea is to offer a quality after school program. This program would allow parents two extra hours to pick up their children after school. Finally, one must look at the bottom

line. Schools are in existence to educate children. The teachers should be highly effective and efficient in their trade. The administration can help teachers achieve higher standards with their students through quality staff development.

These recommendations are by no means an exhaustive list. They are simply ideas that may help a small, rural school district sustain itself and avoid consolidation.

Personal Reflections of the Study

When I reached the point in my doctoral work to decide on a topic for my Record of Study, I considered many possibilities. I could see how the field of education is as diverse and in-depth as any field of study available. The possibilities are limitless, as to the contributions that can be made to a discipline that in itself, has been declared one of the most important, if not the most important, discipline in the world. The field of education has the opportunity to make lives better, to help people improve, to enable people to become anything they want to become. The awesome responsibility can also be very daunting for teachers, who sometimes enter the profession unprepared or uninspired. These educators who stand in front of a room full of our nation's future, waiting to be taught, can do more damage than good, taking the future teachers of these students years to overcome the damage instilled, if ever. With the reality exposed, this Record of Study was going to be more than an assignment to finish as quickly as possible, and get credit so life can move on. This Record of Study was going to be research to help someone somewhere. When I learned of the Problem in Practice, it became evident for me to use the research on which I was about to embark, to help the students, parents, and very community in which I have invested the last few years of my

life. Although the term “consolidation” is a common term used for years and experienced by an untold amount of communities, the importance of this term, and its incredible influence on the lives of so many, have only come to my understanding since beginning this project.

Seeing the enrollment drop at Hallsburg ISD, while experiencing unprecedented cuts in funding from state sources, presented a reality that I had not previously experienced. My first thought as I sifted through the documents and information indicating a downward trend that would ultimately terminate with consolidation, was one of “matter of fact.” That is, we would ride along as long as we could, then we would shut the doors and consolidate with another district. It would not be pleasant, the students would relocate to another school, I would have to get a new job, along with the rest of the staff, but that was the way it was. After talking with citizens in the community and parents of the students, it suddenly became apparent; this school was more than a building, it was a community. It was alive, and had been for over one hundred years. Generations of community members had attended school in the same building (the current gym) for over 72 years. It became apparent to me that the pride resonating from this school community was more than the pride one feels when they have a great school for their children to attend. This was a pride of being a part of a family. When grandparents and great-grandparents can attend functions at the school, and reminisce of their elementary school days in the same place as their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, something special happens. This place becomes more than just a school.

With the realization that I was employed in a very special place, I felt a very strong obligation to do everything in my power to prevent this wonderful community school from ever consolidating. I realized I had been hired to be more than a superintendent or principal. There was a much greater need than just running a school district. There was a need to save a school district. Not only did these current students depend on this school, but the many generations before them continue to value the existence of this hub of the community. They are all proud of their heritage, and their connection with this school. I am proud to have been able to join this tradition, and look forward to putting my full heart and soul into keeping it alive and well for generations to come.

This research has been an integral part of the plan to keep Hallsburg ISD open. Through this process I have learned a great deal about myself. Many times I have been disappointed with myself when I have made choices to do things other than sit down and write this paper. I sacrificed many weekends over a three year period, attending classes, and then completing assignments in the evenings during the week. I never faltered during this time of the process. But when I was on my own to work at my own pace, I did not make the same sacrifice I knew I needed to in order to finish. As a result, this paper is being completed a year later than I had planned or would have preferred. I now have a better understanding of myself, and know what I have to do in similar circumstances in the future. Another even greater enlightenment has been a new found love of my family and love of life, enjoying life every single day. I have felt like I have been on the outside looking in over the past four years. When I was not working on this

project (when I should have been), I was not able to completely enjoy myself due to the guilt of not doing as I should have been doing. Lastly, my spiritual relationship has suffered. Again, I found myself making bad choices such as skipping church to work on this project. My priorities have been stretched, tested, and reassessed through this process.

This Record of Study has been the culmination of more than just a study of a small, rural school district in jeopardy of consolidation. It is the result of three years of courses leading up to this study; courses that touched on every aspect of the district, either directly or indirectly. Though the results of the study are stated here, the true results will hopefully not be known for several years, at which time the desirable finding will be a healthy school district prepared to serve its proud community for many generations to come.

Conclusion

Education has always been critical to the development and sustainability of the United States. As the country grew, so did the need for schools to provide education to its citizens. Small, rural, one-room schoolhouses dotted the landscape of education for years. As new school districts were developed, states started to discover the needs and advantages of consolidating smaller districts. Consolidations occurred very early on in the development of school systems around this nation, under the pretense of providing a better and more efficient education through more specialized instruction. The rationale being larger schools could hire more teachers and offer more course selection than was available in the one-room schoolhouse.

Proponents for consolidation argued that economies of scale made education in larger schools more efficient and cost effective. They still use this argument with a simple example; when comparing the education costs of a class of 10 students versus a class of 20 students. Educating the class of 20 students is much more cost effective. A teacher has to be paid the same amount, whether there are 10 students or 20 students in the room. It costs the same amount to heat and cool a room whether there are 10 students or 20 students in that room. The difference comes in the cost per student to provide that education. Obviously, it will cost less per student to provide an education to the class of 20 students.

Another strong argument for consolidation is the increased ability for a district to provide more curriculum choices and greater specialization for the students. With a greater number of students, they can be grouped by their age or ability, and taught at their readiness level. Larger schools are also able to offer more elective courses that cater to the interests of the students. While the arguments are compelling, critics of consolidation state the positive attributes of small schools outweigh the advantages of their larger counterparts. Some of these advantages include participation in extra-curricular activities, attachment to community, parental involvement, and self-esteem (Berry & West, 2010).

Hallsburg ISD is a school district that has served its community for over 100 years. During those 100 years, it has exemplified every aspect of the proponents' and critics' arguments for consolidation. The proponents' argument concerning more specialized instruction would benefit Hallsburg students who are in need of more in-

depth and individual attention. Areas such as dyslexia, English as a Second Language, and Gifted and Talented are just a few examples of programs that are offered to students who qualify. In a larger district, there would be individuals who specialize in each of these areas, and offer services in those areas all day. In Hallsburg, these areas are covered by teachers or other personnel who might be teaching a fifth grade class or have other major duties. The economies of scale can also be exemplified by the smaller classes for which Hallsburg ISD has historically been known to provide. It costs the same to educate 10 students in a fifth grade class, as it does to educate 20 students in that same class. The cost per student however, is half in the larger class than that of the smaller, therefore theoretically saving taxpayer dollars.

The community of Hallsburg has typically supported the critic's arguments toward consolidation. Every student participates in extra-curricular activities when they perform in school programs which include music, band, and physical education. The school has a very strong attachment to the community and enjoys the benefits of positive parental involvement. The students develop their self-esteem by being important, participating citizens of the school where all the adults know them by name. Unfortunately, despite all the positive attributes of Hallsburg ISD, the fractured economy has taken its toll on the district. Student enrollment has declined as the community has aged and stayed in their homes, leaving no room for new families with children to move in. The state of Texas has also imposed major reductions in school funding in addition to the funding cut due to reduced enrollment at Hallsburg ISD. This situation has served as a double threat to the continued existence of the school district.

The research from this study demonstrated a very strong connection between the school district and the community. This same research also showed some mixed results when the community was asked about raising their taxes to support the sustainability of the school. The damaged economy is illuminated through these results as close to half the participants claimed their community school was important, but would not vote to raise taxes to keep it open. The future of the school district could hinge on the community's choice of whether to vote to raise taxes or not. Ironically, if the community votes against raising taxes and forces a consolidation with a neighboring district, their taxes will go up, possibly more than if they had voted to raise their own taxes. Education of the community, as well as communication between the school district and community, will be of utmost importance if Hallsburg ISD is going to sustain as a district. Education of the community is also necessary for the district to continue to serve the next generation of children living in Hallsburg, as well as those from other communities who transfer to Hallsburg to take advantage of the positive attributes previously mentioned. The destiny of this small, rural school district lies in the hands of the community it serves. They will rightfully have the final word; raise taxes and sustain, or consolidate, ending over 100 years of serving the children and families of the community.

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APPENDIX A

HALLSBURG ISD INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. How long have you lived in Hallsburg?
2. Did you go to school here?
3. How long has it been since you've been on the campus?
4. Have you had children that went or are going to school here?
5. What do you generally think about the Hallsburg School?
6. Has the school changed over the years? How?
7. Do you think the school is important to the community? How?
8. What kind of physical condition do you think the school is in?
9. Do you think it needs some renovation? If so, what parts of the school?
10. Does the gym need to be air conditioned? Do you think the community should fund air conditioning for the gym through a bond to raise taxes? If so or not, why?
11. If you are familiar with the gym, built in the late '30s, would you recommend renovating the current structure or demolishing the current gym and building a new one, which would obviously cost considerably more?
12. What kind of financial condition do you think the school is in?
13. Would you like the school to stay open? Why or why not?
14. What do you think would happen with the students in the district if the school no longer existed?
15. If the school closed, how do you think losing it would affect the community?
16. Where do you think the students would go to school?
17. Where would you like the students to go to school? Why?

Explain Consolidation

- 18. If consolidation was an option, which district should Hallsburg consolidate with? Why?
- 19. If the district were to consolidate, what district would you prefer to consolidate with? Why?
- 20. If the district consolidated with another district, do you think Hallsburg Elementary would stay open as a campus?
- 21. How would consolidation affect or not affect your family?
- 22. If consolidation were to occur, do you think it would affect your taxes? In what ways?

Explain TRE and bonds

Current school taxes - \$1.04 per \$100 in valuation

Residents' over age 65 have frozen taxes and would not see an increase except on new additions to the property.

Currently a \$100,000 house would require \$1,040 per year in taxes, or \$86.67 per month.

An increase in taxes of \$.17 would raise the taxes for the same \$100,000 house by \$170/yr or \$14.17/month.

\$.20 = \$200/yr or \$16.67/month

\$.25 = \$250/yr or \$20.83/month

- 23. Would you vote or not vote in favor of a TRE for \$.17? Please explain your answer.
- 24. Would you vote or not vote in favor of a bond for \$.20 to \$.25? Please explain your answer.
- 25. What if your choice were to consolidate or do a TRE/bond, which would you choose and why?

26. What would be the benefits of your choice?

27. In your opinion, do you think the majority of the community would respond to these questions similarly to you, or do you feel there would be quite a few different views? What do you think the other views would be?

Current Tax Rates

Mart - \$1.04 + \$.16179 I&S

Riesel - \$1.04 + \$.25893 I&S

Hallsburg - \$1.04

APPENDIX B

HALLSBURG ISD SURVEY

This survey is part of a research project and in no way indicates Hallsburg ISD is in the process of consolidation with any other school district. This research will only be used for future planning purposes in the event the State of Texas attempts to force smaller districts into consolidation through reduced funding or other means.

Please complete the following two parts of the survey and return in the enclosed stamped, addressed envelope.

Your time and attention to this survey is greatly appreciated.

1. What is your current age?

- 18 – 25
- 26 – 35
- 36 – 45
- 46 – 64
- 65 or over

2. Educational attainment:

- Never graduated high school
- High School or GED
- Some college to tech school
- 2 year degree or certification
- 4 year degree or certification
- More than a 4 year degree or certification

3. Race/Ethnicity (circle all that apply):

- Hispanic or Latino Origin
- American Indian or Alaskan Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- White

4. How likely are you to vote in a local election concerning the school?

- Very Likely
- Likely

- Not Very Likely
- Probably Would Not Vote

5. How long have you lived in the Hallsburg community?

- Less than 1 year
- 1 - 5 years
- 6 – 10 years
- More than 10 years

6. How long has it been since you've been on the Hallsburg School campus?

- Never
- Within the past year
- 1 - 5 years
- More than 5 years

7. Have you had children that went or are going to school here?

- Yes
- No

8. How important do you believe the continued existence of the school is to the community?

1	2	3	4	5
Extremely Important	Highly Important	Important	Not Very Important	Not Important At All

9. Rate the condition of Hallsburg facilities compared to other local schools:

- Hallsburg facilities are better than other local schools
- Hallsburg facilities are worse than other local schools
- Hallsburg facilities are about the same as other local schools

10. What kind of physical condition do you think the school is in?

- Don't know
- Excellent condition
- Good condition
- Fair condition
- Poor condition

11. If renovations are needed, circle the following areas of the school that you think need renovation.

- No renovation needed
- Library/Office area
- Main building – classroom area
- Gym
- Music room
- Cafetorium
- Grounds – surrounding grounds, playground, parking areas, track

12. Does the gym need to be air conditioned?

- Yes
 - No
- If yes, do you think the community should fund air conditioning for the gym through a bond to raise taxes?
- Yes
 - No

13. If you are familiar with the gym, built in the late '30s, which of the following would you recommend?

- Not familiar with current gym
- Renovating the current structure
- Demolishing the current gym and building a new one (which would cost considerably more than renovations)

14. Rate the financial condition of the school on a scale of 1 to 5.

- | | | | | |
|-------------|--------------|-----------|-----------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Do not know | Very healthy | Very Weak | No major financial concerns | Struggling to survive |

15. Would you like the school to stay open?

- Yes
- No
- No opinion

16. If the school closed, where do you think the students would go to school?

- Axtell
- Mart
- Riesel

- Their choice of Axtell, Mart, or Riesel
- Other

17. If the school closed, where would you like the students to go to school?

- Axtell
- Mart
- Riesel
- Their choice of the Axtell, Mart, or Riesel
- Other

18. If consolidation was imminent, which district should Hallsburg consolidate with?

- Axtell
- Mart
- Riesel
- Other
- No opinion

19. If Hallsburg ISD consolidated with another district, do you think Hallsburg Elementary would stay open as a campus?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

20. If consolidation were to occur, do you think it would affect your taxes?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

If yes, in what way?

- Raise the current taxes
- Lower the current taxes
- Not sure

Hallsburg ISD

Current school taxes - \$1.04 per \$100 in valuation

Residents over age 65 have frozen taxes and would not see an increase except on new additions to the property.

Currently a \$100,000 house would require \$1,040 per year in taxes, or \$86.67 per month.

An increase in taxes of \$.17 would raise the taxes for the same \$100,000 house by \$170/yr or \$14.17/month.

\$.20 = \$200/yr or \$16.67/month

\$.25 = \$250/yr or \$20.83/month

21. Looking at the information above, would you vote to raise your taxes between \$.17 and \$.25 to prevent Hallsburg ISD from consolidating with another district?

-Yes

-No

Rank the three scenarios in order of your preference:

_____ -Sustain Hallsburg ISD. Keep it open and operating.

_____ -Consolidate the district with Mart ISD or Riesel ISD (choose one) and close the Hallsburg School.

_____ -Consolidate the district with Mart ISD or Riesel ISD (choose one) and keep Hallsburg School open.

If you chose to sustain Hallsburg ISD as your 1st choice, rank the three scenarios again. This time, if you choose to sustain Hallsburg ISD as your first choice, you must also vote to raise your taxes between \$.17 and \$.25.

_____ -Sustain Hallsburg ISD. Keep it open and operating. Raise taxes \$.17 to \$.25.

_____ -Consolidate the district with Mart ISD or Riesel ISD (choose one) and close the Hallsburg School.

_____ -Consolidate the district with Mart ISD or Riesel ISD (choose one) and keep Hallsburg School open.