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# Minnesota Public School Consolidation: Factors Most Influential When Voting in Favor of Consolidation

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Minnesota Public School Consolidation: Factors Most Influential When  
Voting in Favor of Consolidation

by

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## Minnesota Public School Consolidation: Factors Most Influential When Voting in Favor of Consolidation

Lowell A. Haagenson

The purpose of this study was to ascertain and rate the importance of factors which were perceived by school board members as pivotal in their decisions to consolidate their school districts with one or more other school districts. Additionally, this study intended to determine whether or not school board members – serving at the time of a school district’s consolidation—continued to agree with the value of that consolidation decision and if so, the comparative strength of their perceptions of the outcomes of consolidation of the school district at the time of consolidation and the degree to which those perceptions continued to hold true at the time of the conduct of this study.

Data from select Minnesota school board members serving on governing Boards at the time of a school district consolidation vote. The sample included school board members from among the 11 different school districts which voted to consolidate into five school districts between the years 2000 and 2006. Data were gathered from two sample groups. Quantitative data were gathered from the aggregate sample of school board members. Qualitative data were gathered from a subset of the aggregate sample to provide a more detailed examination of the experiences and perceptions related to the research questions.

The study found that declining student enrollment ranked highest among selected factors by responding school board members as the factor most influencing their votes in favor of school district consolidation. The factors declining programs, services, staffing and/or courses and an imbalanced or declining general fund were second or third most influential depending upon the type of analysis. As many as fifteen years after respondents’

voted in favor of consolidating their school districts, strong levels of agreement remained with the votes in favor of the consolidations.

The study of factors influencing votes in favor of Minnesota public school consolidation is important because consolidation of school districts nationally and in Minnesota has occurred over the past one hundred-fifty years (Minnesota School Law, 1849). Despite this fact, consolidation is a reform choice that has rarely been examined in Minnesota public school districts. Given existing fiscal constraints at the state level, increasing expectations for accountability and changing demographics - largely evidenced by declining student enrollment - among a large majority of Minnesota school districts, consolidation likely will remain a viable option for consideration in the foreseeable future and, thus, merits comprehensive study.

## Table of Contents

	Page
LIST OF TABLES .....	6
Chapter	
I. Introduction .....	7
Conceptual Framework .....	11
Statement of the Problem .....	12
Purpose of the Study .....	13
Assumptions of the Study .....	13
Delimitations of the Study .....	14
Research Questions .....	15
Significance of the Study .....	16
Definition of Terms .....	16
Summary .....	16
II. Literature Review .....	17
Consolidation Research .....	19
Summary of Consolidation Research Proponents .....	22
Research Opposed to Consolidation .....	27
Major Research Related to Factors of Consolidation .....	38
Summary .....	39
III. Methodology .....	41
Purpose of the Study .....	41
Research Design .....	42
Procedures and Timeline .....	42

Chapter	Page
Research Questions .....	42
Rationale for Mixed Methods .....	43
Identification and Selection of Study Participants .....	44
Human Subject Approval–Institutional Review Board (IRB) .....	45
Instrumentation for Data Collection and Analysis .....	45
Summary .....	50
IV. Results .....	51
Results for Each Research Question .....	55
Synthesis .....	74
Summary .....	74
V. Discussion .....	76
Introduction .....	76
Discussion and Conclusions .....	76
Limitations .....	87
Recommendations for the Field .....	88
Recommendations for Future Research .....	88
Summary .....	90
References .....	93
Appendices	
A. Participants .....	106
B. IRB Certification .....	107
C. Survey with Informed Consent .....	109
D. Interview with Informed Consent .....	111

### List of Tables

Table	Page
1. Respondents Support/Non-Support of Consolidation .....	53
2. Current Membership on School Board .....	53
3. Years of School Board Experience at the Time of the Consolidation Vote .....	54
4. Influential Factors Regarding a Consolidation Vote .....	55
5. Weighted Influential Factors Regarding a Consolidation Vote .....	58
6. Level of Agreement or Disagreement with Influential Factors Regarding a Consolidation Vote .....	60
7. Weighted Level of Agreement or Disagreement with Influential Factors Regarding a Consolidation Vote .....	63
8. Highest Three Influential Factors Selected by Current and Former School Board Members .....	65
9. Influential Factors on the Basis of School Board Service Experience .....	67
10. Level of Agreement on the Consolidation Decision .....	70
11. Level of Current Agreement Regarding the Consolidation Decision .....	71

## Chapter I: Introduction

The Land Ordinance of 1785 was adopted by the Continental Congress in the United States on May 20, 1785. The ordinance was the first federal legislation to specifically provide land for public education (Onuf, 1987). The ordinance was significant in that it established a mechanism for funding public education (White, 1983). The ordinance specified as follows:

There shall be reserved for the United States out of every township, the four lots, being numbered 8, 11, 26, 29, and out of every fractional part of a township, so many lots of the same numbers as shall be found thereon. There shall be reserved the lot No. 16, of every township, for the maintenance of public schools within the said township. (Land Ordinance, 1785)

Subsequently, section 36 of each township was also to be designated as a section for schools (Oregon Territory Act, 1848).

Minnesota was admitted to statehood on May 11, 1858 and within 3 years had enacted Minnesota School Law establishing the Reservation of Land for Schools in which “Sections sixteen and thirty-six in each township shall be and are hereby reserved for the purpose of being applied to schools” (Schlebecker, 1975).

During its first half-century of its statehood—from 1860 until 1910—Minnesota experienced a twelve-fold population gain from 173,023 to nearly 2,076, 000 residents (Ruggles et al., 2010). Along with population growth and geographic expansion, the number of school districts increased to 271,000 by 1920 (Hylden, 2004). By far, most of those school districts were located in rural areas and were generally one room structures with limited student enrollments (Reynolds, 2001). Those small school districts were to face early criticism for their perceived inadequacies.



By the late 1880s, both nationally and in Minnesota, concerns arose among parents and educators about existing disparities between the quality of education offered by rural and non-rural school districts (Foster, 1975). Further criticisms focused on the fiscal inefficiencies, unprofessional leadership, unequally distributed resources, and “backward educational practice” of small school districts (Strang, 1987).

At the national level, “The first calls for school district consolidation were sounded in New England in the mid-1800’s.” Horace Mann, secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education, and Horace Eaton, state superintendent in Vermont, sought to make the township the fundamental unit of educational administration by consolidating neighboring school districts (Strang, 1987).

By 1902, concerns were also being expressed about small schools in Minnesota along with growing support for school district consolidation. “The most pressing problem in this country and in Minnesota is the problem of the rural school, especially the small school” (MDE, 1902). Consolidation was being supported by the State and County Superintendents as the solution for the “country school problem” (MDE, 1902).

Less than 10 years after such sentiments were expressed about small schools (and districts), the Holmberg Act, was enacted in Minnesota on April 18, 1911 (MDE, 1911), authorizing the consolidation of schools in the state.

The first consolidation that occurred under the Holmberg Act was Doran Consolidated School in Doran, Minnesota, a restructured organization with a three story building, 90 students, and two wagons (MDE, 1911). By 1913, there were sixty school consolidations in the State of Minnesota.

Throughout the ensuing half-century, school consolidations continued to be undertaken until, in 1967, Minnesota Statutes 122:42-51 created the basis for large-scale school consolidations and closings. The statute stipulated that those school districts not offering grades 1-12 programming within the next 3 academic years would be forced to consolidate or face involuntary dissolution. The 1967 law resulted in the elimination of all one-room schools in Minnesota, the reduction in the number of school districts to less than 500, and the elimination of the county superintendent position (Foster, 1975).

Nationwide, Berry (2006) concluded that, between 1930 and 1970, nine out of every ten school districts had been eliminated through consolidation. The state of Minnesota replicated that national pattern of school district consolidation when it experienced a decline in school district organizations from 8,362 in 1940 to less than 500 by the mid to late 1960s (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1960).

Over the past 150 years, the rationale for school district consolidation was constructed on the basis of a broad, though consistent, set of benefits to students (mostly), staff and taxpayers if school districts were merged through consolidation (Cotton, 1996a; Fairman, Allen, & Bolster, 2003; Gardner, 2001; Gong, 2005; Hall, Olds, & Closen, 2006; Howley, 1996; ISBE, 2007; Trostel, 2002; Walberg, 1992).

According to the early 20th century education reformer, Ellwood P. Cubberley—as cited in Berry (2004)—there were three distinct advantages of larger schools: a reduced ratio of administrators to teachers, creating a more centralized and efficient system of administration; more specialized instruction, achieved by dividing students on age, subject area, and ability; and better facilities at lower costs (Cubberley, 1912).

The Conant Report (1959) accelerated the trend in consolidation when it argued “consolidation would solve the educational ills revealed by Sputnik 1” the first artificial Earth satellite launched by the Soviet Union on October 4, 1957. Conant wrote, “Hundreds of very small districts are receiving a significant loss in opportunity to learn when the courses available to them are compared with those available to students in high schools with over 500 students” (Conant, 1967). Conant was one of the first modern day educational policymakers to release a specific study that declared bigger high schools were needed to allow American students to be competitive (Gilliland, 2008).

The research literature prior to 1970 supported consolidation on the basis of improved educational opportunity for students and reduced financial costs (Streifel, Foldesy, & Holman, 1991). So, too, were these and other factors instrumental in later consolidations (Gjelten, 1978).

Guthrie posited financial necessity and curriculum were the two chief reasons for consolidation (Guthrie, 1979). This notion was reinforced when Hall and others stated, “The closure and consolidation of schools are seen by cash-strapped boards of education as a means to save money” (Hall et al., 2006).

Studies of the impact of district consolidation on educational costs suggest considerable savings can be achieved if very small districts (fewer than 500 students) consolidate with other districts, while there may be negligible cost savings if larger districts (1,500 or more students) consolidate with other districts (Andrews, Duncombe, & Yinger, 2002; Duncombe & Yinger, 2001).

Warner and others claimed consolidation was the process of combining school and/or school district administrative functions for the purpose of improving efficiency and/or improving educational opportunities and to address declining enrollments and poor academic performance (Warner, Brown, & Lindle, 2010).

Andrews et al. (2002) asserted that consolidation remains a frequent recommendation of state governments seeking to improve educational cost effectiveness, particularly in rural school districts.

### **Conceptual Framework**

States across the nation faced aggregate budget gaps of over \$83 billion for the 2011 fiscal year (National Conference of State Legislators, 2012). School district consolidation has been debated as a potential source of cost savings for local and state governments (Spradlin, Carson, Hess, & Pluckner, 2010).

Factors examined in the study model the factors identified in “Twelve Criteria for Gauging the Need for Organizational Restructuring,” formulated by Dr. Roger Worner and Associates (Worner & Worner, 2005). The study factors included are declining student enrollment; imbalanced or declining General Fund budget and/or recent budget reductions; unable to pass operating referendum; cost inefficient (small class sizes and/or low pupil/teacher ratios); declining programs, services, staffing and/or courses; cost inefficient (high facility square footage per pupil and/or excess space/excess buildings); community opinion; and “other factors” to accommodate specific write-in responses.

Despite the continued employment of consolidation as a mechanism to address the perceived cost inefficiencies of, embrace cost containment in, and enhance achievement and

opportunities for students in school districts throughout the United States, it should be noted that, since the very onset of school consolidations, there has been opposition to such school reorganization (Berry, 2006).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Despite the fact that school consolidations have occurred in the state of Minnesota for over 150 years, no published studies have been undertaken in Minnesota to ascertain from members of the governing boards of consolidated school districts those factors which influenced them in their decisions to support the consolidations of their school enterprises, the factors influencing their decisions, and upon reflection, whether or not those board members continued to be supportive of the consolidation decision in which they previously participated.

Some research studies suggest consolidation was a sound decision (MDE, 1902 and 1911; Brinton, 1938; Conant, 1959; Cotton, 1996b; Cubberley, 1914; Fairman et al., 2003; Fanning, 1995; Gardner, 2001; Gilliland, 2008; Gong, 2005; Hall et al., 2006; Howley, 1996; Mansfield, 1963; Mohr, 1969; Orr, 1992; Scott, 1968; Thompson, 1965; Trostel, 2002; Walberg, 1992; Walker, 1969). Other research studies suggest consolidation may not have been supportable (Andrews et al., 2002; Ayers, Klonsky & Lyon 2000; Bailey, 2000; Coulson, 2007; Gilliland, 2008; Goatcher, 1999; Groen & Murray, 2004; Hylden, 2004; Killeen & Sipple, 2004; LaPlant, 2005; Lawrence et al., 2002; Mohr, 2000; Patterson, 2006; Raywind, 1998; Schurick, 1913; Snyder, Tan, & Hoffman, 2004; Streifel et al., 1991; Young, 1994).

School district consolidation will continue to occur, and proponents and opponents of such reorganization will debate and disagree about the value of these proceedings. It is

believed beneficial information may be derived from this study that can assist those opposing parties in understanding current forces that are fostering consolidation and the thoughts of governing board members as they deliberate about and vote to support or oppose school consolidations in their communities.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to ascertain and rate the importance of factors which were perceived by school board members as pivotal in their decisions to consolidate their school district with one or more other school districts. Additionally, this study intends to determine whether or not school board members—serving at the time of a school district’s consolidation—continued to agree with the value of that consolidation decision and if so, the comparative strength of their perceptions of the outcomes of consolidation of the school district at the time of consolidation and the degree to which those perceptions continued to hold true at the time of the conduct of this study.

### **Assumptions of the Study**

Research of related literature cites increased accountability, decreased funding and changes in population demographics as overarching factors contributing to education reform. Consolidation is one reform choice that emerged, historically, in response to those factors. Consolidation of school districts within Minnesota has been a reality for more than one hundred-fifty years. Given existing fiscal constraints at the federal and state levels, statutory measures focused on increased accountability and changing demographics, consolidation likely will remain a viable alternative for addressing these issues in the foreseeable future.

Denzin and Lincoln (1994) stated that among other factors credibility, transferability, and dependability be present in qualitative research data. In the study it is assumed that quantitative survey instrument respondents and respondents participating in the qualitative interview instrument are credible, trustworthy, and dependable.

### **Delimitations of the Study**

According to Roberts' (2010) study delimitations are choices made by the researcher that describe the boundaries set for the study. With respect to this study, the following delimitations were set by the researcher and central to this study:

The study population was established as 100% of the 11 former Minnesota public school districts which consolidated into five respective districts between the years 2000 and 2006. The intentional selection of all 11 consolidations between the years 2000 and 2006 provide the researcher the opportunity to gather data most relevant to contemporary influences on consolidation votes while at the same time providing respondents adequate distance from the time of their vote to reflect upon their study responses.

The boundary of study respondents were school board members who served on school districts' governing boards at the time of the consolidation vote. Because this study is interested in determining those factors which weighed most heavily on the consolidation vote, it is beyond the scope of this study to include respondents who did not cast a consolidation vote. Also, the study answers questions regarding the degree of agreement with regard to consolidation and whether the respondent would vote the same given the opportunity. Therefore, the boundary of respondents was set at those school board members who voted "yes" regarding consolidation.

The study instrument was designed using influencing factors cited by researchers within the review of related literature and used in numerous consolidation studies by Worner and Associates. Although the instrument includes influencing factors most frequently cited in related literature and used in the Worner and Associates studies, the addition of “Other” within the study provides an opportunity for the respondent to include those factor(s) which were influential yet not provided by previous research nor within the context of the Worner and Associates studies.

### **Research Questions**

1. What factors will school board members of select Minnesota school districts identify as influential in their votes in favor of consolidating their school district with one or more other school districts?
2. How strongly will school board members of select Minnesota school districts rate factors that influenced their decision to support consolidation of their school district with one or more other school districts?
3. How strongly will school board members of select Minnesota school districts agree with the consolidation of the school district at the time of the consolidation decision?
4. How strongly will school board members of select Minnesota school districts continue to agree with their consolidation decision?
5. What advice will school board members of select Minnesota school districts have to offer school board members facing a present or future consolidation vote?



### **Significance of the Study**

Significantly, no published studies have been undertaken in Minnesota to ascertain from past members of the governing boards of consolidating school districts those factors which weighed most heavily in their decisions to support a vote to consolidate. This study proposes to expand upon a limited body of knowledge regarding Minnesota school district consolidation.

### **Definition of Terms**

Consolidation: Minn. Stat. 123A.48 defines consolidation as two or more school districts creating a new school district.

School board member: Minn. Stat 123B.09 defines a school board member as one member within a school board of members vested with the care, management, and control of independent districts. The term of office of a school board member in Minnesota is 4 years commencing on the first Monday in January.

### **Summary**

The study is presented in five chapters. Chapter I contains an introduction to the study, statement of the problem, purpose of the study, research questions, significance of the study, operational definitions, assumptions of the study, delimitations of the study and conceptual framework. Chapter II presents a review of the related literature as it pertains to public school consolidation. Chapter III provides the methodology employed during the conduct of the study including an overview of methods, research design, setting, participant process, data collection and data analysis. Chapter IV details the findings of the study, and Chapter V delineates the summary, conclusions, recommendations and suggestions for further research.

## Chapter II: Literature Review

As cited in Minnesota School Law 1861, public school district consolidation has been a vehicle for school reorganization in Minnesota since before 1858 when Minnesota was admitted as the 32nd State in the United States. As early as the mid-1800s, public school district consolidation was believed to result in students gaining a more thorough education experience by eliminating small schools in favor of larger ones (Potter, 1987).

One of the significant factors that structured future Minnesota public school district consolidations was the 1849 statute entitled “Reservation of Lands for Schools” enacted by the Minnesota State Legislature (Minnesota School Law, 1849). The Reservation of Lands for Schools Act assigned and designated sections 16 and 36 of each township in the State for the establishment of or usage for schools without regard to the number of school-aged children residing in each township. By virtue of this statute, thousands of future public school districts and schools were created in Minnesota resulting in many very small school districts—approximately 8000—with very low enrollments—approximately 50 students per school (MDE, 1917). This statutory decision subsequently resulted in the Minnesota state legislature enacting legislation in 1863 which allowed that, “County Commissioners shall have power to create new public school districts, change the boundaries of public school districts, or unite two or more public school districts whenever a petition signed by a majority of the legal voters of the territory to be affected thereby shall be presented to them, requesting such organization or change” (Minnesota School Law, 1863).

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, population began to shift from rural areas to more concentrated centers in response to industrial growth in urban areas, thereby further fueling

the public school district consolidation movement (Bard, Gardener, & Wieland, 2005). Given the early catalysts for public school district consolidation, Minnesota County Commissioners began to exercise their consolidation authority, and in 1902, “District 137” agreed to consolidate with “District 140” as an “experiment” for reorganization. Such an action was consistent with Minnesota policy makers and education officials’ beliefs that public school district consolidation was a way to improve rural inefficiencies, economy, teacher quality, expanded programming options and provide a more equitable education between rural and urban student groups (Bard et al., 2005).

In 1911 the Holmberg Act formalized the process of consolidation in Minnesota public school districts (MDE, 1911). As defined in the *Annual Report of the State Treasurer of Minnesota for the Fiscal Year Ending July 31, 1918*, “The passage of the Holmberg Act of 1911 marked the beginning of the era of formal consolidation of rural public school districts.” Beyond the 1902 experiment, the first formal public school district consolidation under the Holmberg Act was Doran Consolidated School in Doran, Minnesota (Laken, 2008). Laken writes,

In 1911, the board members of District 71, District 50 and District 29 met to consider the possibility of consolidating these three public school districts. As a result, the Doran Consolidated School became the first consolidated public school district in the state of Minnesota.

Along with other states, Minnesota public school district consolidations continued to occur at an increasing rate between 1912 and 1917 as a solution to achieve economies of scale, enhanced educational outcomes and to overcome small public school district problems of recruiting and hiring highly qualified teachers and addressing troubled finances (Illinois State University, 2009). By 1917 the focus of public school district consolidation remained as

originally framed, “a means of solving the rural school problem and giving the boys and girls of the countryside equality of educational opportunity” (MDE, 1917). More specifically stated, Bolken (2013) quotes Marty Strange, who offered, “Especially at the beginning of the public school district consolidation era, which would be about 1920, it was about improving schools by quite literally taking the schools out of the hands of non-professional bumpkins who were on the school boards and ran them and putting professional educators in charge.”

### **Consolidation Research**

Foster (1975) cited several researchers in his 1975 study of Minnesota public school district consolidation (e.g., Briton, 193; Mansfield, 1963; Mohr, 1969; Scott, 1968; Thompson, 1965; and Walker, 1969) who had provided empirical evidence that limited resources furnished the impetus for public school district consolidation.

A major influence in the trend toward the creation of larger schools and, hence, school district consolidation occurred in the 1950s–1960s when the USSR launched Sputnik, the first satellite sent into Earth’s orbit on October 4, 1957. Related to that historical event, James Conant wrote in *The American High School Today* in November of 1958 (Lawrence et. al., 2002). “Among its many impacts, Sputnik galvanized a movement to modernize and enlarge America’s schools” (Mitchell, 2000). Both Sputnik and the Cold War further increased concerns that small high schools, most of which were rural, were not developing the kind of human capital needed to promote national security (Ravitch, 1983). Foster’s (1975) study stated, “School district consolidations were stimulated by the concern America was faltering in maintaining its edge in global competition.”

Foster (1975) added that school district consolidations were also impacted by the trend in America toward industrial urbanization. Foster's analysis, (1975) noted a significant association between the decrease in farm population (consolidating farms) and public school district consolidation in Minnesota. One of the continuing themes of American agriculture in the 20th century was a decline in the number of farms, farmers and rural residents coupled with an increase in the farm size (Ganzel, 2007).

In addition to the issues of size and economies of scale, concerns were expressed about program quality in America's small public schools. James Conant (1967) stated, "Rural instructional programs were neither sufficiently broad nor sufficiently challenging." Guthrie (1979) concurred with Conant, citing that financial necessity, improved academic programming and program choice were the primary causes of public school district consolidation. Howley, Johnson, and Petrie (2011) stated, "It is important to note, the originators of public school district consolidation warned that its purpose was not to save money, but to improve schools."

Believing that professionals knew better about educating children, experts were more interested in centralizing control rather than leaving decisions to members of a local community (Bard et al., 2005). Martellaro, as cited in Gilliland (2008), reinforced this sentiment when stating, "The two primary reasons for modern day public school district consolidation focus on financial and quality academic programs for students." In addition to financial consideration, many researchers determined that improved program choice and expanded curriculum almost always accompany public school district consolidation (Hall et al., 2006).

More recently, a 2009 study by Rooney and Augenblick affirmed support of public school district consolidation due to financial necessity and belief in improved academic programming and expanded program choice. They stated, “One of the primary motivations for public school district consolidation, particularly in rural areas, is declining community population. As local populations shrink over time, public school districts often experience lost tax revenue.” They concluded that a decreasing tax base and shrinking student enrollment make it difficult to realize economies of scale. “Therefore, public school district administrators may find it increasingly difficult to provide high quality education with limited revenues to the students who remain.” Depew (2013, as cited in Bolkan, 2013) agreed in stating, “Certainly there are public school districts that reach a size that is too small to practically operate, and in those cases [cost savings] may be a more legitimate argument.”

As affirmed for a myriad of reasons or motivations—small school district size (economy of scale), teacher shortages, equal educational opportunity, expanded course offerings, global competition, urbanization, and others—school districts have consolidated in the past and will continue to do so. Indeed, that is the case nationally and in Minnesota.

Bolken (2013) reported that the school consolidation trends which occurred in Minnesota are consistent with such trends nationally. He stated, “Over the course of the last century the number of public school districts in the United States dropped from 117,108 in 1939 to just 13,629 in 2009, a decrease of nearly 90 percent, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.”

Historically, the State of Minnesota achieved its largest number of public school districts in 1919 when 8,086 districts were in operation. Over the 32-year span of time from

1919 through 1951, the number of Minnesota school districts declined—as a result of consolidations—by 607 from 8,086 to 7,479 school districts. Thereafter, the rate of public school district consolidations in Minnesota rapidly accelerated. By 1973 an additional 7,033 school districts no longer existed. Only 446 school districts remained in Minnesota.

An examination of Minnesota public school district consolidations over the 40-year time span from 1974 to 2013 illustrates that public school district consolidations continued—though at a much slower pace—resulting in a total of 328 operating school districts by 2013.

### **Summary of Consolidation Research Proponents**

Since its historical inception, those education leaders supporting the reorganization of two or more school districts into a single, consolidated school district have cited a few—but highly compelling—reasons for supporting such mergers, including achieving economies of scale (creating larger organizations), enhanced programming curricula, efficiency or cost effectiveness, cost reduction, and the like (Conant, 1959; Cubberley, 1914; Potter, 1987).

The Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) has been a historical supporter of public school district consolidation as evidenced in the content of its 1902 report entitled *Consolidation of Rural Schools and Transportation of Pupils at Public Expense*. The MDE report stated, “The most pressing educational problem in this country and in Minnesota is the problem of the rural school, especially the small school.” The 1902 report further noted that Minnesota County Superintendents were proponents of consolidation, citing public school district consolidation as the reorganization solution for the “country school problem” (MDE 1902). The presumably inefficient rural school problems were claimed to consist of inexperienced teachers, poorly trained and underpaid, unsupervised, short tenure and dated

teaching methods (Reynolds, 2001). Reynolds (2001) stated, “Schools were too small and un-standardized, and so different from urban schools they must be inferior in terms of quality.” Bard et al. (2005) claimed that, “Even today, public school district consolidation may be inevitable, as in situations where the population has declined to the point that a quality education cannot be provided to all students.”

State policy makers and reformers continued to debate and even promote issues of school consolidation (Bard et al., 2005). They concluded that viewed on a cost-per-student basis, small schools and school districts are somewhat more expensive to operate.

In addition to state and educational administrators, business leaders and school teachers were early proponents of public school district consolidation as cited in an undated letter (circa early 1900s) titled “The Consolidated School” by Edward P. Shurick of the firm Shurick and Hansen in Duluth, Minnesota. Shurick wrote that, “Most Rural Teachers see clearly what is coming.” Superintendent J. Q. McIntosh during his appointment to the Minnesota Legislative Committee in 1891 stated that, “attendance [in consolidated schools] has averaged much higher than the old way” and concluded “We can see no reason why the consolidated school plan may not become as popular in Minnesota as in other states in which it has been tried” (MDE, 1902).

Nationally, one of the earliest proponents of larger schools in the “Bigger is Better” Industrial Age, was Ellwood P. Cubberley. Cubberley (1914) stated, “Our schools are, in a sense, factories in which the raw products (children) are to be shaped and fashioned into products to meet the various demands of life.” The prevailing philosophy was that the



organizational structure working for growing industries, “economies of scale” was also the best structure for schools (Orr, 1992, as cited in Gilliland, 2008).

Proponents of public school district consolidation received additional support in 1967 with enactment of Minnesota Statute 122 sections 42-51 which established the mandatory closing of all public school districts that were not offering academic programming for students in grades 1-12. Those districts that failed to fulfill that statutory requirement were granted 3 years in which to consolidate or be faced with involuntary dissolution imposed by the State. The 1967 law forced Minnesota public school district consolidations, eliminated all remaining one-room schools, and reduced the total number of public school districts from 7,500 to less than 500 by 1973.

Finances have been among the most frequently cited reasons prompting the consolidation of public school districts. Several authors cited the belief that because of economy of scale, per pupil expenditures will decrease when public school districts are consolidated (Cotton, 1996a; Gong, 2005; Hall et al., 2006; Howley, 1996; ISBE, 2007; Walberg, 1992). Many studies concluded per pupil operating expenditures are generally higher in small schools compared to large schools (Fairman et al., 2003; Gardner, 2001; Trostel, 2002).

Other proponents of school consolidation have emphasized the importance of school district merger as a means of ensuring educational equity and resource efficiency (Duncombe & Yinger, 2007). They cited economies of scale and broader curricula as evidence supporting public school district consolidation. Research conducted between 1930 and 1970 tended to confirm the positive results of larger school size due to public school consolidation (Howley

et al., 2011). They cited specific outcomes such as a longer school year, the ability to teach students sorted by age, better qualified teachers and teacher leaders, and more students attended high schools. Most of the aforementioned gains resulting from public school district consolidation were “major historical achievements” (Howley et al., 2011).

In the early 21st century, public school district consolidation is still promoted as a viable restructuring option for reducing costs through economies of scale and improving teaching and learning (Howley et al., 2011). Preston (2012) related that, “If education is suffering in the current system, consolidation is a good option.” Preston (2012) added, “School consolidation does lead to broader curricula and more electives.” As well, Nitta, Holley, and Wrobel, (2010) asserted, “Along with more classes, an important supposed benefit of school district consolidation, is that larger schools provide a broader curriculum.” A broader curriculum offers students a wider variety of educational options and the opportunity to take advanced classes to better prepare them for success in college (Benton, 1992; Duncombe & Yinger, 2007; Self, 2001).

Haller, Monk, and Tien (1993) found that larger schools offered more classes than smaller schools. Following consolidation, schools were also able to offer broader curricula including more elective and advanced placement classes (Benton, 1992; Self, 2001). Nitta et al. (2010) found students, teachers and administrators believed that public school district consolidation increased academic opportunities for students primarily through increased course offerings.

In addition to economies of scale and broader curriculum offerings, Sell, Leistriz, and Thompson (1996) noted that larger, consolidated schools provided improved social

opportunities for students. They argued that, “Students benefit because they have access to a broader and more diverse network of friends” (Sell et al., 1996). Furthermore, “It has been suggested that the relative anonymity of larger schools is beneficial to students’ social wellbeing” (Alfred-Liro, Brown, Lee, & Smerdon, 2000; McClelland, 1997). They added that,

Individual and family reputations are more difficult to shed in smaller environments. Because members of small school communities must interact consistently and over time, conflicts between students, between students and teachers, and among staff in smaller schools are more difficult to avoid or ignore. (Lee et al., 2000; McClelland, 1997)

Nitta et al. (2010) concluded that from the perception of students and educators,

Students and educators generally experienced academic and professional benefits after consolidation. Teachers experienced improved working conditions and professional development opportunities after consolidation, and both moving and receiving students received broader course offerings, with more advanced placement and vocational courses.

One significant public school district factor impacting school consolidation from the earliest days to the present time remains persistent declining student enrollment because low enrollment creates a financial burden (Jimerson, 2006). Jimerson (2006) added, “When the enrollment decline is chronic, it generates serious financial distress because of the loss of per-pupil state revenue. The resulting negative financial impact eventually results in deep cuts in programs, staff, and resources.” Eventually, declining student enrollments has led to public school district or school building closure (Lawrence et al., 2002). Therefore, depopulation, regardless of the cause, moves public school district consolidation beyond ideological differences between proponents and opponents because the corresponding state aid revenues simply drop to the level requiring public school district or school building closure (Lawrence et al., 2002).

Bard et al. (2005) agreed that declining enrollments and the resultant budget constraints force remaining rural school districts and communities to face the possibility of consolidation. The National Rural Education Association (NREA) realizes that in some situations, consolidation may be inevitable, as in situations where the population has declined to the point that a quality education cannot be provided to all students (Bard et al., 2005).

Summarized views of proponents favoring Minnesota public school consolidation over the past 150 years include greater economies of scale, enhanced programming curricula, operational efficiency and progress toward student equity. Arguably, consolidations have resulted in more experienced teachers, better trained staff, improved teacher pay, and better educational supervision. Student enrollment declines directly impact school finance and consolidation consideration.

### **Research Opposed to Consolidation**

Opposition to school district consolidation is pervasive and diverse. Educational authors have written extensively about a myriad of reasons for opposing and refuting the values of merging school districts including—but not limited to—the negative impacts on communities, loss of community identity, erosion of tax base, disbelief in the proposed outcomes, and adverse impacts on student achievement, busing, discipline, graduation rates, and others.

Numerous researchers—opponents of school consolidations—focused on community impact of such mergers (Nitta et al., 2010). They cited studies which provided evidence that public school districts make a significant contribution to the local economy and to the social well-being of individuals living within their geographic boundaries (De Young, 1995; Lyson,

2002; Peshkin, 1982; Sell et al., 1996). Opponents of public school district consolidation contended that a school district goes well beyond the role of student education and serves as a significant community symbol (Nitta et al., 2010).

Rooney and Augenblick (2009) affirmed that, “Considering that public school district consolidation often precedes school closings, it is helpful to assess the potential effects of school closure on communities.” For example, in the Sederberg (1987) study, *Economic Role of School Districts in Rural Communities* six rural Minnesota counties’ public school district payrolls were found to range from four percent to nine percent of total county payroll, and public school district expenditures ranged from one percent to three percent of total county retail sales. In such counties, school closure and consolidation would clearly have an impact on both employment and business volume (Sederberg, 1987).

Graves (2010) found during his research “school leaders in Montana, Michigan, Minnesota, Texas, Oregon and Arkansas consistently reported the most difficult, emotional and contentious challenge in consolidating small public school districts is dealing with the fears of rural towns have of losing their identities, which are inextricably entangled with athletic teams.”

Many community members are fearful public school district consolidation will translate directly into the loss of a town’s identity and possibly its existence. As such, parents and other rural community members especially see their schools as essential parts of their community (Post & Stambach, 1999; Ward & Rink, 1992).

In some communities, the school building serves as the place for voting, community meetings, athletics, physical fitness classes, senior citizen meal programs, community dinners,

and other social gatherings (Driscoll, 2008). In addition to the school serving as a meeting place, opponents of public school district consolidation contended that consolidations result in decreased parent involvement and civic participation (Rooney & Augenbrick, 2009). They cited a study of North Dakota communities that “lost their community school after public school district consolidation and find that these communities experienced a decline in community involvement with local organizations” (Post & Stambach, 1999). Opponents also stated, small schools often provide a family atmosphere within the building they fear will be lost as the result of public school district consolidation (Mohr, 2000).

Opponents argued that beyond the non-tangible factors of fear and negative perception lay important facts regarding negative impacts associated with public school district consolidation that “econometric studies” of public school district consolidation tend not to include or value in their studies (Howley et al., 2011). The authors cited, for example, educational contingencies such as extracurricular participation rates, parental involvement, and community support. Each one of those factors, while important to the parents and community members, are what economists consider “externalities” without weight (Howley et al., 2011).

Lyson (2002) provided a more concrete and measurable example in support of consolidation opponents’ positions saying:

Public school district consolidation produces less fiscal benefit and greater fiscal cost than it promises. While some costs, particularly administrative costs may decline in the short run, they are replaced by other expenditures, especially transportation and more specialized staff. The loss of a school also negatively affects the tax base and fiscal capacity of the public school district. These costs are often borne disproportionately by low-income and minority communities.

The Lyson's (2002) study further identified the issue of equity as a negative factor in public school district consolidation. This was further affirmed by Howley in his 1990 West Virginia study which was subsequently replicated in Georgia, Ohio, Texas and Montana by Spence (2000). Spence (2000) stated, "the results are the same: small schools and small school systems offer low income students the best opportunity to achieve."

More important than school and district size as an isolated variable is a literature study completed by Howley (2001) which determined, "public school district size and school performance rest almost entirely on an indirect relationship in which socioeconomic status and size work jointly to influence school performance." Howley (2001) concluded, students from less affluent communities appear to have better achievement in small schools. Also, Lawrence et al. (2002) postulated that as schools become larger, the negative effect of poverty on student achievement increases. Howley and Howley (2004) concurred with Lawrence et al. (2002) asserting that small schools are better for low income children.

Citing available research, Bard et al. (2005) stipulated that students from low income areas have greater achievement in small schools. Rural Policy Matters (2006) offered that "impoverished places, in particular, often benefit from smaller schools and districts, and can suffer irreversible damage if public school district consolidation occurs." Also, Howley et al. (2011) stated, "The impact of poverty is significantly reduced when kids attend small schools." In fact, the larger the school, the more likely poor students are to fail; the smaller the school, the more likely they are to succeed (Preston, 2012).

Busing students is an additional factor cited by opponents of public school district consolidation (Bard et al., 2005). It is frequently the case that consolidations create

geographically large school districts and greater distances for students from homes to schools. Indeed, Howley (2001) cited that features of the rural school bus ride may actually risk the well-being of elementary children. Lawrence et al. (2002) stated, the effects on high school students in West Virginia in the fall of 1999 were apparent as students described “the long bus rides that left them so tired they weren’t able to take the advanced classes that were to be their reward [once school districts were consolidated].” The students added, “loss of family time, the inability to participate in extracurricular activities and hours of their lives were wasted on buses.”

Duncombe and Yinger (2010) found that public school district consolidation implies that average transportation distance must increase and, as a result, public school district consolidation might well increase a public school district’s transportation spending per pupil (Duncombe & Yinger, 2010). In addition to the measurable increased transportation costs when transporting more students over longer distances or adding cost to provide additional bus routes are the lost opportunity costs resulting from extending student transportation time (Depew, 2013, as cited by Bolkan, 2013).

Opponents claim crime is another public school district consolidation factor.

According to a U.S. Department of Education report,

Violence and Discipline Problems in U.S. Public Schools: 1996-97, ... more than half of small school principals report either no discipline or minor discipline problems, compared to only 14 percent of big school principals. Furthermore, compared to schools with fewer than 300 students, big schools (1,000 or more) have 825 percent more violent crime, 270 percent more vandalism, 394 percent more fights and assaults and 1000 percent more weapons incidents. (Mitchell, 2000)

Similarly, Rural Policy Matters (2006) concluded that small schools have lower rates of crime and violence.



A 1999 U.S. Department of Education study cited in The Rural School and Community Trust (2003) concluded that schools with more than 1000 students had far higher rates of violent student behavior than schools with fewer than 300 students, and teachers and students in small schools were far less likely to be victims of crime. Lawrence et al. (2002) reported from a U.S. Department of Education study the following statistics in schools that had undergone consolidation: 1,000 percent more weapons incidents, 270% more vandalism, 3,200% more robberies, 378% more theft and larceny, 394% more physical fights or attacks, and 825% more violent crime.

Declining graduation rates is another variable that public school district consolidation opponents assert research has shown—measuring the cost of education by the number of graduating students rather than the number of students who merely pass through the system—that small schools are a wise investment (Lawrence et al., 2002). Additionally, the Rural School and Community Trust (2010) published a portion of a West Virginia legislative audit report which provided evidence that public school district size and school size had greater influences on graduation rates than did socioeconomic status or academic performance.

Funk and Bailey (1999) stated,

The additional input costs of supporting students in smaller schools needs to be weighed against their more positive educational outcomes. The so-called ‘inefficiencies’ of small schools are greatly reduced when calculated on the basis of cost-per-graduate, and virtually disappear when the substantial social costs of non-graduates and the positive societal impact of college-educated citizens are considered. Mitchell (2000) concurred with the Funk and Bailey (1999) report that conceded

smaller schools have higher per pupil costs, yet much higher graduation rates and lower dropout rates. Therefore, the positive outcomes of smaller high schools include the lowest

cost per graduate in New York City. In sum, “small schools have higher graduation rates and, on a per graduate basis, they cost about the same or less than large schools” (Preston, 2012).

Opponents of school consolidation claim that distance learning is a mechanism for addressing consolidation proponents’ assertions of enrichment of curricula as a consolidation outcome. Distance learning technologies offer the opportunity for curriculum enhancement, advanced classes, and the ability for students to participate in classes that do not have a locally available certified teacher (Hobbs, 2004). Technology has eliminated the proponent position on increased programming, participation and high quality instruction (Hobbs, 2004). Hobbs (2004) added, “especially through I-TV, small schools can have access to low-demand, high-cost courses by sharing teachers across public school district and consortium boundaries.” “Across hundreds of studies conducted in largely non-K-12 environments, ‘no significant difference’ accurately describes the comparison between the achievements of distance learning verses traditional students” (Hobbs, 2004).

When asked, “Can a small high school offer a full curriculum?” The Rural School and Community Trust (2003) asserted that technology now affords small schools the ability to focus on core curriculum and respond to individual student interests and needs. The Rural School and Community Trust (2003) concluded “students and community members can access a wide curriculum through interactive distance learning”

In this era of decreasing dollars for education, increased cries for economic efficiency through consolidation, and increased academic standards to which all students are held accountable, distance learning—especially I-TV—offers a measure of considerable hope for small, rural schools. Adopting distance learning via I-TV can mean the difference between closing the small, community-based schools on which much of rural America was built and busing students miles away to generic, reorganized districts having little or no connection to any community. It can mean the difference

between students anchored to a community that they care for deeply and students who grow up without any sense of community identity. It can mean the difference between a viable future for rural America or its continued demise. The promise and the power of distance learning is its role in re-establishing the prominence of rural schools in the 21st century as academically excellent and economically viable sites of student learning. (Hobbs, 2004)

Mitchell (2000) stated that collaboration along with advances in technology continue to broaden curriculum in small schools. Mitchell (2002) cites an example of three rural schools which hired one language teacher and, by broadcasting classes through fiber optic connections, enabled their students to choose among three languages. Collaboration is even more feasible in urban areas, where schools can share course materials and even teachers. Even before the advances in technology, Hirsch (1960) reviewed costs in 29 public school districts near St. Louis and concluded that “sharing academic programs would be a more cost-effective way than public school district consolidation to deal with the fiscal problems of public school districts.” Bard et al. (2005) recommended that rural schools and communities should work together to form strong partnerships, examine all possible variables, and make well-informed decisions based on all possible data before embarking on the path toward public school district consolidation.

Howley et al. (2011) found that some states encourage cooperation as an alternative to public school district consolidation. They added, Iowa promotes whole-grade sharing, and North Dakota offers a wide range of financial incentives to public school districts that enter inter-local sharing agreements that cut per pupil costs (Howley et al., 2011). Specific to Minnesota, Dr. R. Cavanna added that Minnesota established regional service cooperatives throughout the state to provide infrastructure, goods, and services to small and large Minnesota school districts (personal communication, March 10, 2014).

Howley et al. (2011) said,

Assume nothing and analyze much when considering [public school district consolidation] proposals. Purported benefits of larger organizational units do not materialize automatically. Context is important, and issues of efficiency, cost, student performance, educational climate, and community relations must be addressed.

The researchers added, “public school district consolidation decisions are best made on a case-by-case basis.” While state-level public school district consolidation proposals may serve a public relations purpose in times of crisis, they are unlikely to be a reliable way to obtain substantive fiscal or educational improvement (Howley et al., 2011).

Nitta et al. (2010) stated, “Research on the experiences of those directly affected by public school district consolidation is not only limited, it is often contradictory.”

Consolidation of rural public school districts in the United States remains a controversial topic for policy-makers, school administrators, and rural communities since the 1800s due to ongoing concerns of efficiency, economics, student achievement, school size, and community identity (Bard et al., 2005). However, a thorough review of related literature provided only a few answers to the many questions related to public school district consolidation.

Interestingly, there has been little public school district consolidation research formally conducted in the state of Minnesota and none which identifies those factors considered when school boards render public school district consolidation decisions. Even so, public school district consolidation does require a majority vote by board members within consolidating public school districts (Duncombe, & Yinger, 2010). They added, “Public school district consolidation will not take place unless a majority of voters perceive the net benefits outweigh the cost and the net benefits of public school district consolidation to voters

still could be far below the cost savings to the public school districts themselves (Duncombe & Yinger, 2010).

Many public school districts today are faced with declining enrollments and financial cutbacks and communities continue to deal with challenges associated with the prospect of possible public school district consolidation (Bard et al., 2005). Even so, Howley et al. (2011) concluded that, “the industrial benefits of larger scale were likely fully achieved during the 20th century. Remaining efficiencies from public school district consolidation are very likely not systemic, but spotty and marginal: the cost-benefit ratio is at best doubtful.”

Duncombe and Yinger (2010) added, “the 20th century’s extensive public school district consolidation has likely gone too far and has likely violated efficiency requirements, thereby producing widespread diseconomies of scale. Moreover, during this expansion, public school district consolidation reforms were driven by a different set of circumstances with a state policy focus on inputs.”

The researchers said however, “the reform agenda is focused on outputs like equity in education, higher test scores, increasing graduation rates, ensuring college and career readiness and public school district consolidation appears to be a very unlikely contributor (and more probably an impediment) to positive and continuously improving outcomes” (Duncombe & Yinger, 2010).

As stewards of citizens’ rights and resources, state governments often find arguments for public school district consolidation compelling (Peshkin, 1982). Peshkin (1982) stated, at the same time, it is not difficult to see why rural citizens and school administrators are more

concerned with how public school district consolidation will harm their communities. It is clear that this is not just a debate over the evidence, but one of perspective (Peshkin, 1982).

Bard et al. (2005) concluded, after a thorough study of the history and research on public school district consolidation, it was the conclusion of the Consolidation Task Force Committee that NREA continue to support the local decision making process of rural public school districts and oppose arbitrary public school district consolidation efforts at the state and local levels. NREA will not support decisions made at the state level that mandate public school district consolidation because that violates local control.

Rural communities should make every possible effort to maintain a physical school presence, and rural community and school leaders should take into account every possible variable to decide if “two are better than one.” Each public school district and each school is unique because of location, culture or size. Before public school district consolidation is considered, public school districts should look in depth at the implications of fiscal, educational, and community advantages and disadvantages (Peshkin, 1982).

Public school district consolidation should be a decision by the local public school districts as Sher (1986) wrote, “Still, there is no evidence suggesting a compelling reason for the state to intervene by encouraging—let alone mandating—such mergers” (Bard et al., 2005).

Therefore, whether a proponent or opponent of public school district consolidation, it was assessed as significant and timely to undertake a study of school board members involved in making the decision to consolidate their public school district with one or more public school districts. A phenomenological approach is well-suited to studying public school district consolidation because it is important to understand how individuals with different roles and

perspectives share common experiences in order to develop a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of public school district consolidation (Nitta et al., 2010). Within the scope of this study, it is important to understand the public school district consolidation factors considered by board members and the weight of importance assigned to each factor by those individuals responsible for casting a public school district consolidation vote (for or against). A phenomenological research approach is most appropriate to understand a lived experience (Nitta et al., 2010). In the present study, the lived experience of board members facing the critical moment within the public school district consolidation process; the voting factors from their perspective, the weight assigned to each factor, their vote and whether or not (given the now known outcomes) they would vote the same way today.

### **Major Research Related to Factors of Consolidation**

Considered on a case-by-case basis, the need for Minnesota public school district consolidation will not diminish as tight budgets, population movements and shifting economic conditions continue to influence and shape decisions surrounding possible public school district consolidation (National Conference of State Legislators, 2012). Given competing demands for public agency funding, MDE emphasizes reorganization as an alternative select public school districts should explore—including the feasibility of school consolidation.

Despite difficulties and ongoing opposition, Minnesota public school districts continue to consolidate. They do so, according to Dr. Roger Worner, (personal communication, March 14, 2014) because of “A number of conditions recurring which threaten the long-term survival of the organization.” “These [factors] are mostly cited by

research and despite school board directors' general opposition to the idea of public school district consolidation, they do so anyway.”

Because of the absence of Minnesota studies that identified those factors which prompted public school districts to consolidate, this study intends to ascertain those factors which were identified and weighed most heavily by school board members who voted to support school consolidation.

This study's research instruments described in detail in Chapter III model the factors identified in “Twelve Criteria for Gauging the Need for Organizational Restructuring,” formulated by Dr. Roger Worner and Associates (Worner & Worner, 2005). Worner and Associates' public school district consolidation factors encompass the aggregate of those factors cited throughout the related literature studies.

### **Summary**

Chapter II provided a history of Minnesota public school district consolidation and described public school district consolidation trends for the past 150 years. Also, a review of related literature provided studies by proponents and opponents of public school district consolidation. Evidence supports ongoing Minnesota public school district consolidation studies on a district-by-district basis due to individual district context, recurring factors and a Minnesota Department of Education emphasis on reorganization as an alternative all public school districts should explore. Few Minnesota studies regarding public school district consolidation have been conducted, yet there remain many common considerations cited in available studies as factors to be addressed regarding public school district consolidation.



Chapter III will describe the study research methodology using the list of common factors as combined by Worner and Associates (Worner & Worner, 2005).

### **Chapter III: Methodology**

An examination of Chapter II literature reveals that there are strongly held positions in support of and opposition to the consolidation of school districts. Despite the logic expressed historically by proponents and opponents, school districts continue to consolidate to address primarily, demographic, financial, and accountability factors. These factors precipitated school consolidations a century and a half ago, as they do today. The likelihood of these same factors prompting school restructuring in the future is great.

Consolidation of school districts nationally and in Minnesota has occurred over the past 150 years (School Law, 1849). Despite this fact, this is a reform choice that has rarely been examined through the formalized study of Minnesota school districts which have undertaken consolidation. Given existing fiscal constraints at the state level, increasing expectations for accountability and changing demographics—largely evidenced by declining enrollment—among a large majority of Minnesota school districts, consolidation likely will remain a viable option for consideration by Minnesota school districts in the foreseeable future and, thus, merits comprehensive study.

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to ascertain and rate the importance of factors which were perceived by school board members as pivotal in their decisions to consolidate their school districts with one or more other school districts. Additionally, this study intended to determine whether or not school board members—serving at the time of a school district's consolidation—continued to agree with the value of that consolidation decision and if so, the comparative strength of their perceptions of the outcomes of consolidation of the school

district at the time of consolidation and the degree to which those outcomes continue to hold true at the time of the conduct of this study.

### **Research Design**

Quantitative survey data were collected using a survey designed to gather school board members responses related to the survey questions. Qualitative survey data were collected from a sample of individual school board members who completed the quantitative portion of the study. Two separate reviews of the respective qualitative data and the quantitative data were completed. After an analysis of each discrete data set, both data sets were converted into a single mixed data set for the purpose of a final analysis.

Quantitative survey data provided general demographic information, a list of consolidation factors, weighting of consolidation factors, and the degree to which respondents would, given reflection and consolidation outcomes, vote in the same manner as they had in the past if given the same opportunity to vote again in the future. Qualitative interview data provided individual perceptions and experiences related to the process of and eventual vote in favor of consolidation.

### **Procedures and Timeline**

Given the purpose of the study, the research design to include both quantitative data and qualitative data were gathered and, then, combined to address the research questions.

### **Research Questions**

1. What factors will school board members of select Minnesota school districts identify as influential in their votes in favor of consolidating their school district with one or more other school districts?

2. How strongly will school board members of select Minnesota school districts rate factors that influenced their decision to support consolidation of their school district with one or more other school districts?
3. How strongly will school board members of select Minnesota school districts agree with the consolidation of the school district at the time of the consolidation decision?
4. How strongly will school board members of select Minnesota school districts continue to agree with their consolidation decision?
5. What advice will school board members of select Minnesota school districts have to offer school board members facing a present or future consolidation vote?

### **Rationale for Mixed Methods**

Mixing the quantitative and qualitative methods produces a synergistic result of more useful findings than either method alone or a sum of their parts (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). A growing ideology within research methodology support both quantitative and qualitative approaches within a single study to investigate research questions in greater depth (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2010).

To gather the qualitative data for the study, the researcher followed a phenomenological research approach. According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2006), “the basic purpose of phenomenology is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence.”

A phenomenological approach to collect the qualitative data for the study is determined to be most appropriate in understanding the lived experience of those affected by

consolidation (Nitta et al., 2010). Nitta et al. added, “A phenomenological approach is well-suited to studying consolidation because it is important to understand how individuals with different roles and perspectives share common experiences in order to develop a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of consolidation.” Within the scope of this study, it is critical to gather first-hand experience data from school board members who participated in school consolidation decisions.

While Creswell and Plano Clark (2006) stated, the first step in phenomenological research is to collect qualitative data from individuals who have experienced the phenomenon, Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) stated, “In quantitative studies, understandings arise after analyzing a large number of people then assessing responses to a few variables increasing the probability for generalizing research findings to a larger group.” They concluded however, it is easier to understand the context for the quantitative data when coupled with qualitative data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

Therefore, the researcher employed a mixed method approach to offset respective limitations of either approach used in isolation of one another by incorporating their respective strengths into a mixed research method (Jick, 1979).

### **Identification and Selection of Study Participants**

Subjects of this study were select Minnesota school board members serving on governing Boards at the time of a school district consolidation vote. The sample included school board members from among the 11 different school districts which voted to consolidate into five school districts between the years 2000 and 2006 (Appendix A).

School board member names and contact information were gathered from the four respective consolidated school district offices. The present Superintendents and their Administrative Assistants were instrumental in facilitating the gathering and sharing of contact information. Contact information could not be retrieved from one consolidated district, so the company that conducted the district's annual audit was contacted, and the voting members' names—listed on the district's annual audit for the year preceding the consolidation—were provided. School board members' names from that one district were researched on the internet to obtain current contact information.

### **Human Subject Approval—Institutional Review Board (IRB)**

The researcher completed the certification requirements (Appendix B) of the Institutional Review Board (IRB). To ensure proper treatment of human subjects in research methodology, IRB certification is required for research involving humans. The IRB reviewed the application to conduct the study which was subsequently approved in full accordance with federal regulations.

### **Instrumentation for Data Collection and Analysis**

**Data were gathered from two sample groups.** Quantitative data were gathered from the aggregate sample of school board members. Qualitative data were gathered from a subset of the aggregate sample to provide a more detailed examination of the experiences and perceptions related to the research questions. Four individuals within the subset were determined through a random selection from the 11 original (pre-consolidation) school districts. Respondent participation was voluntary in each one of the aforementioned study groups.

A request was made to all available school board members who governed 11 Minnesota school districts which underwent consolidation between 2000 and 2006 to secure their participation in the quantitative survey. Based on the request of the participant, the researcher either attached the survey and the informed consent in an email communication or mailed the survey through the United States Postal Service along with a prepaid self-addressed stamped envelope. A follow-up request was made by telephone two weeks after the initial request to encourage participation of individuals who did not respond to the initial request.

Prospective study participants were called and based upon their stated preference, surveys were sent to those respondents along with an informed consent (Appendix C) by email or United States Postal Service with a stamped, self-addressed envelope. The informed consent stated the purpose of the study interview and questionnaire along with the researcher's provision of an assurance of confidentiality.

The study questionnaire included a section to be completed by the respondent only if the respondent was willing to volunteer for the opportunity to be selected for the interview portion of the study. Of the study respondents volunteering to participate in interviews, four were selected at random and subsequently called to gather qualitative data (Appendix D).

**Instrumentation.** The study's research instrument was designed to explore the research questions. The study instrument was modeled after those factors identified in "Twelve Criteria for Gauging the Need for Organizational Restructuring," formulated by Worner and Associates in the North Dakota Restructuring Program Consolidation Studies (Worner & Worner, 2005), Wisconsin's Chetek and Weyerhaeuser Consolidated Feasibility

Study (Worner & Worner, 2008), and other consolidation studies. Replicating the Worner and Associates factors was a sound strategy given a limited number of Minnesota consolidation studies from which to identify more contemporary factors prompting public school district consolidation and the fact Worner and Associates' public school district consolidation factors encompass the aggregate of those factors cited throughout the related literature studies.

The study's research instrument was field tested by a class of doctoral students. Feedback was gathered from the students and one modification was made to improve the study instrument. Specifically, during the conduct of the study, respondents were asked to rank order three factors respectively which most, second most, and third most influenced their votes to consolidate their school district with one or more school districts. Prior to the modification as a result of the field test, respondents would have been directed to select those factors which influenced their votes to consolidate their school district with one or more school districts.

**Instrumentation summary.** Both quantitative and qualitative data were gathered using the same survey instrument. Survey data were imported by the researcher into a Microsoft® Excel® spreadsheet for statistical analysis. Surveys were received by the researcher in self-addressed stamped envelopes included in the mailed surveys or returned as an email attachment from respondents receiving their survey and informed consent by email. Raw data were entered into Excel tables with formatted cells to calculate response counts, percentages and averages. Data were analyzed and interpretations formulated relating to each of the five research questions.



**Methods of data analysis.** The study used a mixed methods design wherein all research questions were analyzed utilizing a convergence of quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative data received through completion of the survey were analyzed in association with the study questions. Qualitative data were received by telephone interview. Qualitative data were analyzed to determine specific words, phrases, themes or recurring trends within the data set. Both the quantitative data set and the respective qualitative data set were converged and analyzed for contextual understanding of the combined data sets.

Specific factors that possibly influenced votes to consolidate—as listed in the study questionnaire—were also listed in an Excel spreadsheet. Included in the spreadsheet were counts of number of years’ of school board member experience and whether or not study respondents were still active school members.

The counts, percentages and averages for selected factors provided quantitative evidence of those that factors most influenced school board member to vote to consolidate their school district with one or more school districts. The qualitative data provided answers for why specific factors were determined by study respondents as influential in their votes to consolidate.

**Interview data analysis.** Qualitative data were gathered from a subset of the aggregate sample to provide a more detailed examination of the experiences and perceptions related to the research questions. Four individuals within the subset were determined through a random selection from the 11 original (pre-consolidation) school districts. Respondents voluntarily participated in either one or both of the aforementioned groups.

Utilizing completed surveys received from respondents who volunteered to participate in the qualitative portion of the study, the qualitative interview data aligned thoughts, feelings, perceptions and experiences of respondents to the list of factors and consolidation questions which appear in the survey document. Telephonic interviews were conducted and the duration of the interviews ranged from 10 to 15 minutes. Upon completion of all interviews, the researcher analyzed and clustered data into key words, phrases and themes.

Prior to beginning interviews, respondents read and signed an informed consent form (Appendix D). The researcher administered the interview questions to ascertain respondent thoughts, feelings and perceptions related to the quantitative survey responses. Each respondent was interviewed in identical fashion. While there were no time limits placed on the interviews, respondents were informed by the researcher that the length of the interview was estimated at 20 minutes.

Following the procedure recommended by Creswell and Plano Clark (2006), the researcher analyzed the interview data by isolating noteworthy words and phrases that provide a cluster of common meaning or specific themes. Descriptions were written of school board member experiences and compared with respect to the consolidation context within which their respective experiences occurred. Given the meaningful words, individual experiences and related contexts, a summary description was formulated to communicate the overarching phenomenon of school district consolidation as perceived by the sample group.

**Mixed data analysis.** Following the procedure recommended by Creswell and Clark (2011), the researcher merged both the quantitative and qualitative data sets together to

compare and contrast individual data set analysis. The mixed method provided for a more comprehensive examination of the research questions (Creswell & Clark, 2011).

### **Summary**

The purpose of this study was to ascertain and rate the importance of factors which are perceived by school board members as pivotal in their decisions to consolidate their school districts with one or more other school districts. Additionally, this study intended to determine whether or not school board members—serving at the time of a school district’s consolidation—continued to agree with the value of that consolidation decision and if so, the comparative strength of their perceptions of the outcomes of consolidation of the school district at the time of consolidation and the degree to which those outcomes continue to hold true at the time of the conduct of this study.

Chapter III provided a brief overview of public school consolidation and described the survey and interview instrument implemented to conduct the study. Methods for data collection were defined. The mixed method research design employed in analyzing data and examining the research questions was delineated.

Chapter IV, Data Collection, Separate Data Analysis and Merged Analysis, presents quantitative data findings, qualitative data findings and mixed methods outcomes. Chapter V, Conclusions, addresses the study questions and provides recommendations for further study.

## Chapter IV: Results

For this study, school board members serving on Minnesota school boards between 2000 and 2006—who cast consolidation votes combining their respective districts with one or more other school districts—were mailed surveys through electronic mail (email) or the United States Postal Service (USPS). Survey instruments were mailed to 67 potential respondents who had served on the governing boards of 11 school districts which currently operate as five consolidated school districts.

Twenty-six survey instruments were completed and returned by respondents yielding a response rate of 38.8%. Each survey instrument included a section in which respondents could express their willingness to participate in a 30 minute interview as a part of the study. Those interested in such further participation in this facet of the study were requested to provide contact information in order to be considered for an interview. Subsequently, four respondents were randomly selected for an interview. Interviews were conducted with the randomly selected respondents through telephone or email. The interviews provided qualitative data associated with the quantitative data gathered from the study's survey instrument. In combination, the quantitative and qualitative data provided the opportunity for a mixed-data analysis.

Given a desire to achieve practical application of the study's findings, advanced statistical measures for the purpose of determining statistical significance within selected confidence intervals were believed to exceed the usefulness required to assist future school board members facing consolidation votes. Thus, analysis focused on the use of counts, percentages and weighted rank order—easily understandable by any school board member—that

were believed to be most clearly comprehensible and supportive of the operationalization of the study's findings.

**Purpose of the study.** The purpose of the study was to ascertain and rate the importance of factors which were perceived by school board members as pivotal in their decisions to consolidate their school districts with one or more other school districts. Additionally, this study intended to determine whether or not school board members—serving at the time of a school district's consolidation—continued to agree with the value of that consolidation decision and if so, the comparative strength of their perceptions of the outcomes of consolidation of the school district at the time of consolidation and the degree to which those perceptions continued to hold true at the time of the conduct of this study.

This chapter reports the findings of the study. The findings are organized by research question.

**Research questions.**

1. What factors will school board members of select Minnesota school districts identify as influential in their votes in favor of consolidating their school district with one or more other school districts?
2. How strongly will school board members of select Minnesota school districts rate factors that influenced their decision to support consolidation of their school district with one or more other school districts?
3. How strongly will school board members of select Minnesota school districts agree with the consolidation of the school district at the time of the consolidation decision?

4. How strongly will school board members of select Minnesota school districts continue to agree with their consolidation decision?
5. What advice will school board members of select Minnesota school districts have to offer school board members facing a present or future consolidation vote?

**Description of the sample.**

Table 1

*Respondents Support/Non-Support of Consolidation*

	Voted Yes		Voted No	
	n	%	n	%
At the time of the vote to consolidate your school district, did you vote in support of the consolidation?	22	84.6	4	15.4

Initially, respondents from school boards which were involved in consolidation of their school districts between 2000 and 2006 were asked whether or not they had cast a vote in favor of or in opposition to consolidation. Table 1 illustrates that 22 or 84.6% of the survey respondents voted to support consolidation. Four survey respondents or 15.4% voted in opposition to consolidation.

Respondents who opposed the consolidation of their school districts were determined to be outside the scope of the study.

Table 2

*Current Membership on School Board*

	(n = 22)			
	Yes		No	
	n	%	n	%
Are you currently a member of the school board in the consolidated school district?	7	31.8	15	68.1

In order to disaggregate data for deeper analysis, the study respondents who served on school boards involved in consolidation between 2000 and 2006 were asked to identify whether or not they were currently an active member of a school board. Table 2 reveals that seven of the respondents or 31.8% served on school boards at the time of the study while 15 respondents or 68.1% were no longer serving on a school board.

Table 3

*Years of School Board Experience at the Time of the Consolidation Vote*

(n = 22)								
	0-4 Years		5-8 Years		9-12 Years		13 or More Years	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
At the time of the vote to consolidate your school district, how many years had you served on the school board?	8	36.4	5	22.7	4	18.2	5	22.7

Table 3 illustrates the number of years study respondents reported they had served as members of their respective school boards at the time of the consolidation votes in their school districts. Of the 22 responding former or current school board members, eight or 36.4% indicated they had served four or fewer years on their school boards at the time of their schools districts' votes to consolidate. Five respondents or 22.7% had served on their school boards 5-8 years, while four respondents or 18.2% and five respondents or 22.7%, respectively, reported service on their school boards as 9-12 years or 13 or more years at the time of their districts' consolidation votes.

With the term of office of school board members established by Minnesota statute at 4 years, it was noted that 14 of the 22 study respondents or 63.6% had served as members of

their school boards for a minimum of two terms at the time their school districts voted to consolidate with one or more other school districts.

### Results for Each Research Question

**Research question one.** The study's first question was undertaken to ascertain those factors which influenced school board members of select Minnesota school districts to vote in favor of consolidating their school district with one or more other school districts.

Respondents were requested to rank order those factors which most influenced their vote in favor of consolidation. Highest ranked factors were accorded a numerical "1" by respondents, while second and third highest ranked factors were rated, respectively, as "2" and "3" by respondents. Respondents were provided a selection labeled "Other" in the event one of their three most influential factors was not listed.

Table 4

#### *Influential Factors Regarding a Consolidation Vote*

(n=22)

Rank order the top three factors which influenced your vote regarding the consolidation vote.	Most Influential		2 <sup>nd</sup> Most Influential		3 <sup>rd</sup> Most Influential		Combined	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Declining student enrollment.	7	31.8	4	18.2	2	9.1	13	59.1
Imbalanced or declining general fund.	4	18.2	2	9.1	5	22.7	11	50.0
Declining programs, services, staffing and/or courses.	4	18.2	3	13.6	3	13.6	10	45.4
Cost inefficient high facility square footage per pupil.	0	0.0	4	18.2	3	13.6	7	31.8
Cost inefficient small class size.	2	9.1	2	9.1	1	4.5	5	22.7
Community opinion.	1	4.5	2	9.1	2	9.1	5	22.7
Unable to pass operating referendum.	0	0.0	3	13.6	0	0.0	3	13.6
Other factors (combined).	4	18.2	1	4.5	2	9.1	7	31.8



Table 4 data report that declining student enrollment was selected by respondent school board members as the factor that most influenced them when they cast their consolidation votes. Seven of the 22 study respondents or 31.8% selected declining student enrollment as their most influential factor. Four of the study respondents or 18.2% selected declining student enrollment as their second most influential factor. Two of the study respondents or 9.1% selected declining student enrollment as their third most influential factor. Combined, declining student enrollment was selected by 13 study respondents or 59.1% as one of the three factors that most influenced their votes to consolidate their school districts with one or more other school districts.

An imbalanced or declining general fund budget was selected by respondent school board members as the second most influential factor when casting their votes in favor of school district consolidation. Four of the 22 study respondents or 18.2% selected imbalanced or declining general fund as their most influential factor. Two of the study respondents or 9.1% selected imbalanced or declining general fund as their second most influential factor. Five of the study respondents or 22.7% selected imbalanced or declining general fund as their third most influential factor. Combined, imbalanced or declining general fund was selected by 11 study respondents or 50.0% as one of the top three factors that influenced their votes to consolidate their school districts with one or more other school districts.

Declining programs, services, staffing and/or courses was selected by respondent school board members as the factor that was third most influential when casting their votes in favor of school district consolidation. Four of the 22 study respondents or 18.2% selected declining programs, services, staffing and/or courses as their most influential factor. Three of

the study respondents or 13.6% selected declining programs, services, staffing and/or courses as their second most influential factor, while similarly, three of the study respondents or 13.6% selected declining programs, services, staffing and/or courses as their third most influential factor. Combined, declining programs, services, staffing and/or courses was selected by 10 study respondents or 45.4% as one of the top three factors that influenced votes to consolidate their school districts with one or more other school districts.

The following factors received less than one in three individuals identifying the factors as one of the top three factors that influenced their votes to consolidate their school districts with one or more other school districts; cost inefficient high facility square footage per pupil was selected by seven study respondents or 31.8%, cost inefficient small class sizes was selected by five study respondents or 22.7%, community opinion was selected by five study respondents or 22.7%, and unable to pass an operating referendum was selected by three study respondents or 13.6%. Two of the four aforementioned factors received no vote for most influential, cost inefficient high facility square footage per pupil and unable to pass an operating referendum.

Study respondents were invited to “write-in” factor(s) which influenced their consolidation vote and was/were not present on the list of factors to be selected and ranked. Specific write-in factors were “Reduce my drop off pick up routine at multiple schools,” “Made sense after long-term pairing agreement,” “Busing,” “School name,” “Communitywide vote,” “Save the taxpayer money,” and “Timing was right.” When combined as a group of influencing factors, “Other factors (write-in)” were added to the list of factors by present and former school board members as the fourth most influential factor

when casting their respective school district consolidation votes. Four of the 22 study respondents or 18.2% selected other as their most influential factor. One of the study respondents or 4.5% selected other as their second most influential factor. Two of the study respondents or 9.1% selected other as their third most influential factor. Combined, other factors was selected by seven study respondents or 31.8% as one of the top three factors that influenced their votes to consolidate their school districts with one or more other school districts.

Table 5

*Weighted Influential Factors Regarding a Consolidation Vote*

(n=22)

Rank order the top three factors which influenced your vote regarding the consolidation vote.	Most Influential		2 <sup>nd</sup> Most Influential		3 <sup>rd</sup> Most Influential		Total Weight
	Weight n	(n)3	Weight n	(n)2	Weight n	(n)1	
Declining student enrollment.	7	21	4	8	2	2	31
Imbalanced or declining general fund.	4	12	2	4	5	5	21
Declining programs, services, staffing and/or courses.	4	12	3	6	3	3	21
Cost inefficient high facility square footage per pupil.	0	0	4	8	3	3	11
Cost inefficient small class size.	2	6	2	4	1	1	11
Community opinion.	1	3	2	4	2	2	9
Unable to pass operating referendum.	0	0	3	6	0	0	6
Other factors (combined).	4	12	1	2	2	2	16

Table 5 reports the results of the weighting of factors that respondents cited as most influential, second most influential, and third most influential in causing them to vote in favor

of consolidation of their school district with one or more other Minnesota school districts between 2000 and 2006.

For purposes of analysis, factors impacting the consolidation vote were weighted as follows: most influential factor = 3; second most influential factor = 2; third most influential factor = 1.

Table 5 data reveal that, when weighting and totaling each factor, declining student enrollment was identified by respondent school board members as the factor that most influenced their vote in favor of consolidation of their district with one or more other Minnesota school districts. The declining student enrollment factors received a weighted value of 31 from 13 responding school board members.

Declining programs, services, staffing and/or courses and imbalanced or declining general fund factors were rated by respondent school board members as numerically equal in their influence on board members' votes in favor of consolidation of their school districts with one or more other school districts. Both factors received weighted values of 21 from, respectively, 10 and 11 responding school board members.

Cost inefficient or small class sizes and cost inefficient or high facility square footage per pupil factors received weighted values of eleven from responding school board members, ranking them fifth and sixth as specific factors influencing votes in favor of school consolidation by respondents.

Community opinion and the inability to pass an operating referendum were the two factors which received the lowest weighted values as specific factors influencing votes in favor of school district consolidation.

Most notable were the consistent results in Table 5 with those findings in Table 4. In both tables, the top three factors remained consistent with declining student enrollment ranked the highest by responding school board members as the specific factor most influencing their votes in favor of school district consolidation with one or more other school districts.

**Research question two.** The study's second question was undertaken to ascertain how strongly school board members of select Minnesota school districts rated factors that influenced their decision to vote in favor of consolidating the school district with one or more other school districts. Respondents were requested to select—for each of the listed factors—either strongly agree (SA), agree (A), disagree (D), or strongly disagree (SD).

Table 6

*Level of Agreement or Disagreement with Influential Factors Regarding a Consolidation Vote*

n (22)

How strongly do you agree or disagree that each of the following factors influenced your decision regarding the consolidation of your school district?								
Factors	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Declining student enrollment	10	45.5	8	36.4	4	18.2	0	0.0
Imbalance or declining general fund	6	27.3	12	54.5	4	18.2	0	0.0
Declining programs, services, staffing, and/or courses	4	18.2	10	45.5	7	31.8	1	4.5
Community opinion	3	13.6	12	54.5	5	22.7	2	9.1
Cost inefficient small class sizes	3	13.6	11	50.0	8	36.4	0	0.0
Cost inefficient high facility square footage per pupil	3	13.6	10	45.5	8	36.4	1	4.5
Unable to pass operating referendum	1	4.5	5	22.7	11	50.0	5	22.7
Other factors (write-ins)	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	5	22.7

Table 6 results delineate that declining student enrollment was selected by respondent school board members as the factor which they most strongly agreed was influential in their having voted in favor of school district consolidation. Ten of the 22 study respondents or 45.5% strongly agreed that declining student enrollment influenced their decisions regarding consolidation of their school districts. Eight of the study respondents or 36.4% agreed declining student enrollment influenced their decisions regarding consolidation of their school districts. Thus, 18 of 22 responding school board members or 81.9% strongly agreed or agreed that declining student enrollment influenced them to vote in favor of their school districts' consolidations. Only four responding school board members disagreed this factor influenced their consolidation vote.

An imbalanced or declining general fund was the factor which respondent school board members rated as second most influential in casting their vote in favor of school district consolidation. Six of the 22 study respondents or 27.3% strongly agreed and twelve of the study respondents or 54.5% agreed imbalanced or declining general fund influenced their decisions regarding consolidation of their school districts. Thus, 18 of 22 responding school board members or 81.9% strongly agreed or agreed that an imbalanced or declining general fund influenced them to vote in favor of their school districts' consolidations. Only four responding school board members disagreed this factor influenced their consolidation vote.

Declining programs, services, staffing and/or courses was the factor which respondent school board members rated as third most influential in casting their vote in favor of school district consolidation. Four of the 22 study respondents or 18.2% strongly agreed that declining programs, services, staffing and/or courses influenced their decisions regarding

consolidation of their school districts. Ten of the study respondents or 45.5% agreed declining programs, services, staffing and/or courses influenced their decisions. Thus, 14 of 22 responding school board members or 63.7% strongly agreed or agreed that declining programs, services, staffing and/or courses influenced them to vote in favor of their school districts' consolidations.

Community opinion, cost inefficient high facility square footage per pupil, and cost inefficient high facility square footage per pupil received three or 13.6% strongly agree selections as the factor which influenced respondent votes to consolidate their school districts with one or more other school districts. Twelve or 54.5% of the study respondents agree community opinion influenced their decisions. Eleven or 50% agree cost inefficient high facility square footage per pupil influenced their decisions, and 10 or 45.5% agree cost inefficient high facility square footage per pupil influenced their consolidation decisions.

Incidentally, unable to pass an operating referendum and other factors were the least likely factors to influence respondents when casting their vote in favor of school district consolidation.

Table 7

*Weighted Level of Agreement or Disagreement with Influential Factors Regarding a Consolidation Vote*

How strongly do you agree or disagree that each of the following factors influenced your decision regarding the consolidation of your school district?									
Factors	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	Total Weight	
	Weight n	(n)2	Weight n	(n)1	Weight n	(n)-1			Weight n
Declining student enrollment	10	20	8	8	4	-4	0	0	24
Imbalance or declining general fund	6	12	12	12	4	-4	0	0	20
Declining programs, services, staffing, and/or courses	4	8	10	10	7	-7	1	-2	9
Community opinion	3	6	12	12	5	-5	2	-4	9
Cost inefficient small class sizes	3	6	11	11	8	-8	0	0	9
Cost inefficient high facility square footage per pupil	3	6	10	10	8	-8	1	-2	6
Unable to pass operating referendum	1	2	5	5	11	-11	5	-10	-14
Other factors (write-ins)	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	-10	-10

The survey asked respondents to rate their level of agreement with factors that influenced their decision to support consolidation of their school district with one or more other school districts. Rank order in Table 7 was established by weighting respondents' responses as follows: strongly agree (SA) = +2; agree (A) = +1; disagree (D) = -1; and strongly disagree (SD) = -2.

Table 7 results illustrate that declining student enrollment was selected by responding school board members as the most influential factor in casting their respective school district consolidation vote. Eighteen respondents with a weighted value of 28 strongly agree and



agree that declining student enrollment influenced their decisions regarding consolidation of their school districts. Four of the study respondents or the weighted value of -4 disagreed that declining student enrollment influenced their decisions regarding consolidation of their school districts.

An imbalanced or declining general fund was selected by 18 respondents or a weighted value of 24 while the factor declining programs, services, staffing and/or courses factor was selected by fourteen or a weighted value of 18. Therefore—as evidenced in previous data tables—when rank ordering factors that influenced respondents in their votes in favor of consolidation, the highest three factors were declining student enrollment, imbalanced or declining general fund, and declining programs, services, staffing and/or courses.

Interestingly, other factors and unable to pass an operating referendum each received more disagreement than agreement as factors which influenced school board members' votes in favor of consolidation. The level of respondent disagreement resulted in weighted values of -10 and -14, respectively.

When these data were analyzed on the basis of respondents' current or previous service on a school board at the time of the survey, the data show the following:

Table 8

*Highest Three Influential Factors Selected by Current and Former School Board Members*

What percentage of respondents selected a factor as one of the highest three factors influencing the decision to consolidate a school district with one or more school districts?				
Factors	Current school board member at the time of survey n = 7		No longer on the school board at the time of the survey n = 15	
	n	%	n	%
Declining student enrollment	4	57.1	9	60.0
Declining programs, services, staffing, and/or courses	3	28.6	8	53.3
Imbalanced or declining general fund	3	42.9	8	53.3
Cost inefficient small class sizes	3	42.9	2	13.3
Cost inefficient high facility square footage per pupil	3	42.9	4	26.7
Community opinion	2	28.6	3	20.0
Unable to pass operating referendum	0	0.0	3	20.0
Other factors (write-ins)	3	42.9	4	26.7

Table 8 details the manner in which respondent school board members who continue to serve on the consolidated school districts' governing board and those school board members who no longer serve on their respective governing boards rated factors which caused them to vote in favor of consolidation.

Four respondents or 57.1% serving on the school board at the time of the survey selected declining student enrollment as the first, second, or third most influential factor causing them to vote in favor of consolidating their school district with one or more other school districts, while nine respondents or 60% no longer serving on the school board at the time of the survey also selected declining student enrollment as the most influential factors.

These data support declining student enrollment as the respondents' most influential factor when they voted on the matter of consolidating their school districts.

Table data further reveal that three of the seven respondents or 42.9% who continue to serve as school board members in their respective consolidated school districts rated four factors as most, second most, or third most influential in causing them to vote in favor of the consolidation of their school districts. Those four factors were as follows: imbalanced or declining general fund, cost inefficient small class size, cost inefficient high facility square footage per pupil, and other factors.

Among the 15 responding school board members no longer serving on the governing boards of their respective consolidated school districts, the second and third most influential factors causing them to vote in favor of consolidation were declining programs, services, staffing and/or courses and imbalanced or declining general fund. Eight former school board members or 53.3% rated both of those two factors as most, second most, or third most influential in impact on their pro-consolidation votes.

When analyzing survey responses of current and former school board members, it was noted that both groups rated declining student enrollment, respectively, 57% and 60.0%, as either the most, second most, or third most influential factor, resulting in votes favorable to consolidation.

While a majority of former school board members rated declining programs, services, staffing and/or courses (53.3%) and imbalanced or declining general fund (53.3%) as either the most, second most, or third most influential factor in causing them to vote in favor of

school consolidation, a majority of current school board members (57.1%) only rated declining student enrollment as either the most, second most, or third most influential factor.

Less than one-third of current school board members identified declining programs, services, staffing and/or course (28.6%) community opinion (28.6%), or inability to pass an operating referendum (0%) as major factors (either most, second, or third) which caused them to vote in favor of school consolidation. Former school board members divulged that cost inefficient small class size (13.3%), community opinion (20.0%), inability to pass an operating referendum (20.0%), cost inefficient high facility square footage per pupil (26.7%), and other factors (26.7%) were not viewed as major factors in their votes to consolidate their school districts.

Table 9

*Influential Factors on the Basis of School Board Service Experience*

Was the amount of respondent school board experience—measured in years of service—a differentiating variable when selecting factors as most influential, second most influential or third most influential?								
Years	0-4 Years		5-8 Years		9-12 Years		13 or More	
Factors	Experience n = 8		Experience n = 5		Experience n = 4		Experience n = 5	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Student enrollment	3	37.5	2	40.0	3	75.0	5	100.0
Declining programs, services, staffing, and/or courses	3	37.5	2	40.0	2	50.0	3	60.0
Imbalance or declining general fund	3	37.5	1	20.0	4	100.0	3	60.0
Cost inefficient small class sizes	3	37.5	1	20.0	0	0.0	1	20.0
Cost inefficient high facility square footage per pupil	4	50.0	1	20.0	1	25.0	1	20.0
Community opinion	3	37.5	2	40.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Unable to pass operating referendum	2	25.0	0	0.0	1	25.0	0	0.0
Other factors (write-ins)	2	25.0	3	60.0	1	25.0	1	20.0

Table 9 delineates the manner in which responding school board members rated factors which influenced their votes in favor of school district consolidation as a function of their tenure on their respective school boards at the time of the consolidation votes. Data were reported by service tenure on respondents' respective school boards as follows: 0-4 years; 5-8 years; 9-12 years; 13 or more years of experience.

Responding school board members—throughout all four experience categories—identified only a small number of factors that received 50.0% or more selections as either the most, second most, or third most influential variable that impacted their vote in favor of consolidation.

For school board members with 13 or more years of experience at the time of consolidation, respondents identified declining student enrollment (100%), declining programs services staffing and/or courses (60%), and imbalanced or declining general fund (60%) as either the most, second most, or third most influential in impacting their decisions to vote in favor of consolidation.

Respondents with 9-12 years of experience identified imbalanced or declining general fund (100%), declining student enrollment (75%), and declining programs services staffing and/or courses (50%) as either the most, second most, or third most influential in impacting their decisions to vote in favor of consolidation.

For school board members having 5-8 years of experience at the time of consolidation, no factors were identified by a majority of respondents as either the most, second most, or third most influential in impacting their decisions to vote in favor of consolidation.

Respondents with 0-4 years of experience identified the factor cost inefficient high facility square footage per pupil (50%) as either the most, second most, or third most influential in impacting their decisions to vote in favor of consolidation.

Other factors, cost inefficient small class sizes, community opinion, and unable to pass an operating referendum were not identified by a majority of the respondents in any experience category as a highly influential factor. Seven school board members identified other factors, yet these data represent a grouping of seven, non-replicative, factors.

In an examination of Table 9 data, school board members with successively more years of experience reported to a greater degree the factors declining student enrollment and declining programs, services, staffing and/or courses as most, second most, or third most influential in impacting their decisions to vote in favor of consolidation.

Based on the data, there appears to be evidence that respondents with 9 or more years of school board experience at the time they voted in favor of consolidating their school districts were influenced most by declining student enrollment, declining programs, staffing and/or programs, and imbalanced or declining general fund factors. Such a pattern was not true of survey respondents with 8 or fewer years of school board experience at the time their votes were cast in favor of consolidation.

**Research question three.** The study's third question was undertaken to ascertain how strongly school board members of select Minnesota school districts agreed with the consolidation of the school district at the time of the consolidation decision. Respondents were requested to select either strongly agree (SA), agree (A), disagree (D), or strongly disagree (SD).

Table 10

*Level of Agreement on the Consolidation Decision*

	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
How strongly did respondents agree at the time of consolidation? (n = 22)	20	90.9	2	9.1	0	0.0	0	0.0
Respondents on the board at the time of the study (n = 7)	7	100.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Respondents no longer serving at the time of the study (n = 15)	13	86.7	2	13.3	0	0.0	0	0.0
Respondents with 0 to 4 years of experience (n = 8)	8	100.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Respondents with 5 to 8 years of experience (n = 5)	4	80.0	1	20.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Respondents with 9 to 12 years of experience (n = 4)	4	100.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Respondents with 13 or more years of experience (n = 5)	4	80.0	1	20.0	0	0.0	0	0.0

As reported in Table 10, all survey respondents either strongly agreed (90.9%) strongly agreed and or agreed (9.1%) with the decision to consolidate their school districts at the time of the consolidation vote.

All seven respondents or 100% still serving on boards strongly agreed with their votes while thirteen respondents or 86.7% and two respondents or 13.3%, who no longer serve on their respective governing boards, continued to support their consolidation votes.

During the course of interviews with selected school board members, respondents were prompted to express themselves about their level of agreement to consolidate their school district. One interviewee shared, “I agreed because it meant that we could offer more/diverse classes in the middle/high school.” Another stated, “Our schools were already

paired in some sports, so it was a natural progression.” Yet another related, “I agreed with the decision to consolidate because we had been paired with the other district for 10 years. It had been a good relationship, and we had always held joint board meetings that went very well.” Another interviewee shared, “In the beginning there was monetary incentive from the state to pair and share with another district. That had dried up and gone away, but some extra money was still available for consolidation.” In a final interview, one respondent stated, “We were close to the same size so that neither town would dominate or swallow up the other.”

**Research question four.** The study’s fourth question was undertaken to ascertain how strongly school board members of select Minnesota school districts continued to agree with their consolidation decision.

Table 11

*Level of Current Agreement Regarding the Consolidation Decision*

	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
How strongly do you currently agree with the decision to have consolidated the school district (n = 22)	19	96.4	1	4.5	1	4.5	1	4.5
Respondents on the board at the time of the study (n = 7)	7	100.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Respondents no longer serving at the time of the study (n = 15)	12	80.0	1	6.7	1	6.7	1	6.7
Respondents with 0 to 4 years of experience (n = 8)	7	87.5	1	12.5	0	0.0	0	0.0
Respondents with 5 to 8 years of experience (n = 5)	4	80.0	1	20.0	0	0.0	1	20.0
Respondents with 9 to 12 years of experience (n = 4)	4	100.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Respondents with 13 or more years of experience (n = 5)	4	80.0	0	0.0	1	20.0	0	0.0



As reported in Table 11, respondents were requested to report how strongly they continued to agree with the decision to consolidate their school district with one or more school districts.

Twenty respondents or 90.9% continued to agree with their decision to vote in favor of consolidating their school district. Nineteen respondents or 86.4% strongly agreed and one or 4.5% agreed. One responding school board member or 4.5% currently disagreed and one respondent currently strongly disagreed with the decision to consolidate their school districts.

As many as 15 years after respondents cast their respective votes in favor of public school district consolidations, respondents still serving on boards continued to strongly agree (100.0%) with their votes, while 86.7% of respondents no longer serving on their school board continued to strongly agree or agree with their decisions to vote in favor of consolidation. Regardless of respondents' years of school board experience, strong agreement remained with their votes in favor of consolidating their school districts with one or more other school districts.

During the conduct of interviews with select study participants, those respondents were prompted to relate more about their level of current agreement with their decisions to have consolidated their respective school districts. One interviewee shared, "The marriage continues to work very well." Another stated, "This [consolidation] has worked out very well in that the board mix has always been four from one town and three from the other and not always the same way." Yet another related, "The consolidation meant relocation of many teachers' classrooms and that impact has not been a problem whatsoever."

**Research question five.** The study's fifth question was undertaken to ascertain what advice school board members of select Minnesota school districts would provide for school board members in school districts facing a future consolidation vote. During the course of interviews with selected school board members, respondents were prompted to answer the question, "What advice do you have for school board members facing a present or future consolidation vote?"

One interviewee shared, "Take time to have conversations with all stakeholders, be transparent at all times, and talk with district personnel who have gone through consolidation." Another stated, "Try to find a partner [district] of similar size and interests as yours [your district]. By that I mean a school with a priority on athletics going with a school with a strong arts program will have some initial conflicts. By the same rationale a school with strong academic standards will struggle pairing with someone that doesn't have them. I believe these latter two examples can be worked out but that similar size is the most important." Yet another related, "Parents, especially in the smaller town, were afraid we'd close the school in their town. Take time to talk about the fears people have." Another interviewee said, "I believe that a trial period of pairing some things whether it be athletics or classes is definitely an advantage. It surely worked for us. Before pairing we had been exploring options in both of the other directions from town. I believe that for a consolidation to truly work well there has to be some give and take from both sides." In a final interview, one respondent stated, "In some cases where one very small school consolidates with a much larger one, it is almost a forced issue and while it may last, the feelings are not very good."

## **Synthesis**

Declining student enrollment was selected by respondent school board members as the factor that most influenced them when they cast their consolidation votes. An imbalanced or declining general fund budget and the factor declining programs, services, staffing and/or courses were selected respectively, as second and third most influential.

As many as fifteen years after respondents cast their respective votes in favor of public school district consolidations, respondents—overall—continued to strongly agree with their votes.

Respondents' provided the advice for school board members in school districts facing a future consolidation vote to identify all stakeholders, communicate the process, try to partner with a district of similar size and interests, address feelings, consider a trial period of pairing, and collaboratively plan the transition and consolidation implementation.

Further areas of investigation include the replication of the study within a larger geographic context and/or covering a longer period of time. Also, further investigation into the most effective and efficient ways to operationalize the respondent advise in the study.

## **Summary**

Chapter IV gathered quantitative and qualitative data as evidence supporting answers to each one of the five research questions. Data provided evidence that respondents clearly determined declining student enrollment was the most influential factor regarding their vote in favor of consolidation. Second and third factors related to student enrollment were imbalanced or declining general fund and declining programs, services, staffing and/or courses.

Chapter IV also presented evidence that as many as 15 years after respondents' consolidation votes, school board members maintained strong levels of agreement with their decisions to vote in favor of consolidating their district with one or more other school districts. The interview portion of the study provided advice to school board members considering consolidation. Chapter V will summarize salient study data, draw conclusions, and tender recommendations for future related research opportunities.

## **Chapter V: Discussion**

### **Introduction**

This study examined those factors which were perceived by select Minnesota school board members as pivotal to their decisions to consolidate their school districts with one or more other school districts. Additionally, the study intended to determine whether or not school board members—serving at the time of their school districts' consolidation—continued to agree with the importance of those consolidation decisions and if so, the comparative strengths of their perceptions of the outcomes of consolidation of the school districts at the time of consolidation and the degree to which those perceptions continued to hold true at the time of the conduct of this study.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

Chapter I described the United States history impacting public school district consolidation and Minnesota public school district consolidation trends for the past 150 years. Chapter I provided the problem of the study regarding public school district consolidation, an introduction to the study, the study purpose, and the significance of the study. Chapter I also delineated five guiding research questions, operational definitions, study assumptions, study delimitations, and a conceptual framework for the study.

Chapter II presented a review of literature related to public school consolidation and provided studies from proponent and opponent viewpoints. A review of related literature identified the fact that few Minnesota studies have been conducted regarding public school district consolidation.

Chapter III described the study methodology including an overview of methods, research design, setting, instrumentation, participant process, data collection and data analysis. Chapter III described the list of selected common factors as compiled by Worner and Associates (Worner & Worner, 2005).

Chapter IV detailed the findings of the study. Chapter IV presented the quantitative and qualitative data to answer five research questions. Study respondents clearly determined declining student enrollment was the most influential factor regarding school board member votes in favor of consolidating their school district with one or more other school districts. Second and third most influential factors were an imbalanced or declining general fund and declining programs, services, staffing and/or courses.

Chapter IV also presented evidence that as many as 15 years after respondents' consolidation votes, school board members maintained strong levels of agreement with their decisions to vote in favor of consolidating their district with one or more other school districts. Qualitative data gathered from interviews provided respondent advice to current and future school board members considering consolidation. Analysis of interviews resulted in three themes to be considered by school board members facing consolidation of their respective school districts with one or more school districts: planning, pairing, and communication.

Chapter V reports the following conclusions and recommendations of the study organized by research question:

**Research question one.** The study's first question was undertaken to ascertain those factors which influenced school board members of select Minnesota school districts to vote in favor of consolidating their school district with one or more other school districts.

Respondents were requested to rank order those factors which most influenced their vote in favor of consolidation in order to answer the following research question:

*What factors will school board members of select Minnesota school districts identify as influential in their votes in favor of consolidating their school district with one or more other school districts?*

To answer research question one, each respondent was provided a list of seven common influential factors as compiled by Worner and Associates (Worner & Worner, 2005) school board members consider when contemplating a school district consolidation vote. Each respondent was requested to rank order the factors which most, second most, and third most influenced their votes in favor of consolidation (see Table 4). In addition, respondents were provided the opportunity to identify other influential factors (other factors) not represented in the list provided. Data were analyzed using the seven selected common factors and respondents' other factors.

**Analysis of selected factors.** Respondents selected declining student enrollment as the factor that most influenced their vote in favor of consolidation (see Table 4). Declining student enrollment was selected by 13 of 22 study respondents or 59.1% as one of the three factors that most influenced their votes to consolidate their school districts with one or more other school districts. The selection of the factor, declining student enrollment, by a majority of respondents was consistent with the literature which cited declining student enrollment as a

major issue prompting school district consolidation (Jimerson, 2006; Lawrence et al., 2002; Reynolds, 2001; Warner et al., 2010). Depew (2013, as cited by Bolkan, 2013) agreed that declining student enrollment is a significant factor stating, “Certainly there are public school districts that reach a size that is too small to practically operate, and in those cases [consolidation] may be a more legitimate argument.”

An imbalanced or declining general fund budget was selected by respondent school board members as the second most influential factor causing them to vote in favor of school district consolidation. Imbalanced or declining general fund was selected by 11 of 22 study respondents or 50.0% as one of the top three factors that influenced their votes to consolidate their school districts with one or more other school districts. Bard et al. (2005) agreed that budget constraints force school districts and communities to face the possibility of consolidation. This finding was further supported by Jimerson (2006) when she stated, “Where the enrollment decline is chronic, it generates serious financial distress because of the loss of per-pupil state revenue.”

Declining programs, services, staffing and/or courses was identified by respondent school board members as the third most influential factor that resulted in votes favorable to school district consolidation. Declining programs, services, staffing and/or courses was selected by 10 of 22 or 45.4% of study respondents. A 2009 study by Rooney and Augenblick affirmed support of public school district consolidation, in part, to improve academic programming and expand program choice.

The following factors were acknowledged less frequently by respondents as influential in causing them to vote in favor of consolidation: cost inefficient high facility square footage



per pupil, cost inefficient small class sizes, community opinion, and an inability to pass an operating referendum. Bard et al. (2005) supported the existence of the lesser identified factors in the study when they discussed desired outcomes that school district consolidation would improve, including inefficiencies, economy, teacher quality, and provide a more equitable education among student groups.

**Analysis of weighted factors.** The researcher weighted the factors selected by each respondent school board member of select Minnesota school districts as follows: most influential factor = 3; second most influential factor = 2; third most influential factor = 1. The purpose of the weighting was to determine the relative strength respondents ascribed to the factors in making decisions to vote in favor of consolidation (see Table 5).

Declining student enrollment received the highest weighted value of 31 from among 13 respondents. Therefore, declining student enrollment—whether analyzed on respondent selection alone or with a calculated weighted value—was the most influential factor causing the respondents to vote in favor of consolidating their school districts with one or more other school districts.

Declining programs, services, staffing and/or courses received a weighted value of 21 from ten respondents, ranking it as the second most influential factor impacting school board members to vote in favor of school district consolidation.

An imbalanced or declining general fund received a weighted value of 21 from 11 responding school board members, ranking it as the third most influential factor impacting school board members' votes in favor of school district consolidation.

Whether data were analyzed on respondent selection alone or with a calculated weighted value, the highest three factors remained consistent: declining student enrollment, declining programs, services, staffing and/or courses, and an imbalanced or declining general fund.

**Research question two.** The study's second question was undertaken to ascertain how strongly school board members of select Minnesota school districts rated factors that influenced their decision to vote in favor of consolidating the school district with one or more other school districts. Respondents answered the following question:

*How strongly will school board members of select Minnesota school districts rate factors that influenced their decision to support consolidation of their school district with one or more other school districts?*

Respondents were requested to rate factors that influenced their votes on consolidation employing the following options and values: strongly agree (SA) = +2; agree (A) = +1; disagree (D) = -1; and strongly disagree (SD) = -2. The purpose of the respondents' ratings was to ascertain the strength of the factors that resulted in their votes to support consolidation (see Table 7).

The higher the weighted value the greater the level of respondent agreement that a given factor was influential in their vote to consolidate their school district with one or more school districts. The lower the weighted value the lesser the level of respondent agreement that a given factor was influential in their vote to consolidate their school district. Negative weighted outcomes indicated the level of disagreement that the factor influenced their vote to consolidate their school district.

**Selected and weighted factors.** Declining student enrollment was selected by responding school board members as the most influential factor when they cast their respective school district consolidation votes. Eighteen of 22 respondents or 81.8% with a weighted value of +28 strongly agreed and agreed that declining student enrollment influenced their decisions regarding consolidation of their school districts.

An imbalanced or declining general fund was selected by 18 of 22 respondents or 81.8% respondents or a weighted value of +24 while the factor declining programs, services, staffing and/or courses factor was selected by fourteen of 22 respondents or 63.6% or a weighted value of +18.

**Disaggregated data.** Respondent school board members' data were disaggregated according to whether or not respondents served on their respective governing boards at the time of the study (see Table 8) and, further, the number of years of each school board respondents' experience on their districts' governing board (see Table 9). Such an analysis was undertaken in order to ascertain whether or not there were relationships between years of experience and factors impacting their voting patterns. Data in Table 9 were categorized by service tenure on respondents' respective school boards as follows: 0-4 years; 5-8 years; 9-12 years; 13 or more years of experience.

Current school board members selected declining student enrollment 57.1% as either the most, second most, or third most influential factor, resulting in votes favorable to school district consolidation (see Table 8). Former school board members selected declining student enrollment 60.0% as either the most, second most, or third most influential factor, resulting in votes favorable to school district consolidation.

Such a pattern was not true of survey respondents with 8 or fewer years of school board experience at the time their votes were cast in favor of consolidation. Respondents with 9 or more years of school board experience at the time they voted in favor of consolidating their school districts were influenced most by declining student enrollment, declining programs, staffing and/or programs, and imbalanced or declining general fund factors (see Table 9).

Table 9 delineates that school board members with successively more years of experience reported that declining student enrollment, an imbalanced or declining general fund, and declining programs, services, staffing and/or courses were, respectively, the most, second most, and third most influential factors impacting their decisions to vote in favor of consolidation.

**Research question three.** The study's third question was undertaken to ascertain how strongly school board members of select Minnesota school districts agreed with the consolidation of the school district at the time of the consolidation decision. Respondents answered the following question:

*How strongly did school board members of select Minnesota school districts agree with the consolidation of the school district at the time of the consolidation decision?*

Study respondents were requested to provide responses to Question three employing one of the following options: strongly agree (SA), agree (A), disagree (D), or strongly disagree (SD). All 22 study respondents or 100.0% agreed or strongly agreed—at the time of the consolidation decision—with the votes they had cast in favor of consolidation (see Table 10).

During the course of interviews with selected school board members, respondents were prompted to express themselves about their level of agreement to consolidate their school district. One interviewee shared, “I agreed because it meant that we could offer more/diverse classes in the middle/high school.” Another stated, “Our schools were already paired in some sports, so it was a natural progression.” Yet another related, “I agreed with the decision to consolidate because we had been paired with the other district for 10 years. It had been a good relationship, and we had always held joint board meetings that went very well.” Another interviewee shared, “In the beginning there was monetary incentive from the state to pair and share with another district. That had dried up and gone away, but some extra money was still available for consolidation.” In a final interview, one respondent stated, “We were close to the same size so that neither town would dominate or swallow up the other.”

**Research question four.** The study’s fourth question was undertaken to ascertain how strongly school board members of select Minnesota school districts continued to agree with their consolidation decision. Respondents answered the following question:

*How strongly do school board members of select Minnesota school districts continue to agree with their consolidation decision?*

Study respondents were requested to respond to the question, “How strongly do you currently agree with the decision to have consolidated you or school district?” with one of the following options: strongly agree (SA), agree (A), disagree (D), or strongly disagree (SD).

As many as 15 years after respondents cast their respective votes, all seven study respondents or 100% who currently serve on school boards, continued to strongly agree with their consolidation votes. Of the 15 respondents who no longer serve on school boards, 13

respondents or 86.7% continued to strongly agree or agree with their consolidation decision (see Table 11).

During the conduct of interviews with select study participants, those respondents were prompted to relate more about their level of current agreement with their decisions to have consolidated their respective school districts. One interviewee shared, “The marriage continues to work very well.” Another stated, “This [consolidation] has worked out very well in that the board mix has always been four from one town and three from the other and not always the same way.” Yet another respondent related, “The consolidation meant relocation of many teachers’ classrooms and that impact has not been a problem whatsoever.”

**Research question five.** The study’s fifth question was undertaken to ascertain what advice school board members of select Minnesota school districts would provide for school board members in school districts facing a future consolidation vote. During the course of interviews with selected school board members, respondents were prompted to answer the following question:

*What advice do school board members of select Minnesota school districts have to offer school board members facing a present or future consolidation vote?*

During the course of interviews with selected school board members, respondents were prompted to answer the question, “What advice do you have for school board members facing a present or future consolidation vote?” One interviewee shared, “Take time to have conversations with all stakeholders, be transparent at all times, and talk with district personnel who have gone through consolidation.” Another stated, “Try to find a partner [district] of similar size and interests as yours [your district].” Yet another respondent related, “Parents,

especially in the smaller town, were afraid we'd close the school in their town. Take time to talk about the fears people have.” Another interviewee said, “I believe that a trial period of pairing some things whether it be athletics or classes is definitely an advantage.” Another stated, “I believe that for a consolidation to truly work well there has to be some give and take from both sides.”

Three themes that emerged during the analysis of the aforementioned respondent interviews were planning, pairing, and communicating. Following are paraphrased interviewee responses grouped within those three themes.

**Planning.** One respondent advised school board members facing a future consolidation vote to understand that every situation is different. Another respondent stated, “Each consolidation is unique, so consider advantages and disadvantages based upon context and not based upon what other school districts have done or are doing.” Yet another interviewee directed school board members to consider the advantages and disadvantages of both precinct voting and at-large voting to determine what voting option may be best given your circumstance. A final interviewee provided guidance that school board members collaboratively plan and jointly communicate, to the public, all previously unforeseen issues surfacing during consolidation exploration, consolidation installation activities, and during the consolidation implementation.

**Pairing.** One respondent advised school board members to—as much as possible—make sure districts can get along prior to consolidating by paring and sharing portions of operations. Another respondent stated, “Be willing to compromise, because in an equal partnership there has to be give and take.” Yet another interviewee directed school board members to partner

with a district of similar size and interests. A final interviewee provided guidance that school board members explicitly ask and answer—throughout all stages of consolidation deliberation and implementation—“Does what we’re doing make sense for students?”

**Communicating.** One respondent advised school board members to collaboratively identify all the people who will be impacted by the consolidation, and take the time to create a communication plan. Another respondent stated, “Communicate the stages of consolidation in the local paper to keep the public informed and focus the communication on the benefits of consolidation to students.” Yet another interviewee suggested school board members deliver regularly scheduled informational meetings with allotted time for questions and comments. That interviewee added, “Be sure to address peoples’ feelings regarding consolidation.” A final interviewee provided guidance that school board members survey the public in order to secure individual input about their respective thoughts and feelings associated with the consolidation. That respondent also advised school board members to “Respond to comments and answer questions to keep the public informed.”

### **Limitations**

According to Roberts (2010) study limitations are “conditions or influences” beyond researcher control which place constraints on study methods and deductions.

One limitation that influenced the results of this study was the researcher’s inability to locate ten school board members who served on the governing boards of the study’s sample school districts at the time those school districts consolidated.

A second limitation was the small number of school districts which had undertaken consolidation between 2000 and 2006.



A third limitation was that these school districts which completed consolidation in Minnesota between 2000 and 2006 were all rural school districts.

A fourth limitation was the response rate of prospective respondents who participated in the study (22 of 67 or 32.8%).

A fifth limitation included the possible bias of respondents.

### **Recommendations for the Field**

Given the study outcome that three of seven factors; declining student enrollment, an imbalanced or declining general fund budget, and declining programs, services, staffing and/or courses compiled by Worner and Associates (Worner & Worner, 2005) ranked consistently as the most significant factors influencing study respondents to vote in favor of consolidation, it is recommended that these three factors—at a minimum—be considered by school board members during school district consolidation planning, pairing, and communications.

Additionally, given that each one of the seven factors were selected by respondents as having varying degrees of influence on their votes to consolidate their school district, it is recommended that each one of the seven factors be considered by school board members and included during school district consolidation planning, pairing, and communications.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The limitations of this study suggest numerous recommendations for future research.

One recommendation for future research is to extend the date range within which Minnesota public school district consolidation votes occurred. For example, future research could begin where this study concluded, including Minnesota school district consolidations

between 2006 and 5 years from the time the future study is conducted (e.g., through 2011 for a 2016 replication study).

A second recommendation for future research is the conduct of a study that expands the geographic parameter of the study regionally to the Midwest region or the entire United States.

A third recommendation for future research is to conduct a study that increases the breadth of study respondents impacted by school district consolidation beyond school board members to superintendents, students, teachers, parents, community leaders, and community business owners to accomplish a more comprehensive phenomenological study.

A fourth recommendation for future research is a study that would gather and analyze respondent data from school board members, who voted against consolidation, in order to reflect opposing opinions on school consolidation.

A fifth recommendation is to undertake research on numerous consolidation topics that surfaced during a review of related literature that were determined by the researcher to be beyond the scope of the study. Future research topics related to public school consolidation may include the improved ratio of administrators to teachers, creation of a more efficient system of administration, more specialized instruction, better facilities, lower cost (per pupil) facilities, and impacts on community, student achievement, busing, student discipline, student attendance, graduation rates, extra-curricular participation, parent participation, and student equity.

## Summary

The study of factors influencing votes in favor of Minnesota public school consolidation is important because consolidation of school districts nationally and in Minnesota has occurred over the past 150 years (School Law, 1849). Consolidation is a reform choice that has rarely been studied in Minnesota public school districts.

Given existing fiscal constraints at the state level, increasing expectations for accountability and changing demographics—largely evidenced by declining student enrollment—among a large majority of Minnesota school districts, consolidation likely will remain a viable option for consideration by Minnesota school districts in the foreseeable future and, thus, merits comprehensive study.

The purpose of this study was to ascertain and rate the importance of factors which were perceived by school board members as pivotal in their decisions to consolidate their school district with one or more other school districts. This study intended to determine whether or not school board members—serving at the time of a school district’s consolidation—continued to agree with the value of that consolidation decision and if so, the comparative strength of their perceptions of the outcomes of consolidation of the school district at the time of consolidation and the degree to which those perceptions continued to hold true at the time of the conduct of this study.

The study found that those respondents who voted in favor of consolidation of their school districts with one or more other school districts cited the highest rated factors influencing their decisions were declining student enrollment, an imbalanced or declining general fund, and declining programs, services, staffing and/or courses.

Regardless of analysis type, respondent selection or weighting the respondent selections, the highest three factors remained consistent. Declining student enrollment ranked the highest factor by responding school board members as the specific factor most influencing their votes in favor of school district consolidation with one or more other school districts. The factors declining programs, services, staffing and/or courses and an imbalanced or declining general fund were second or third most influential depending upon the type of analysis—selection alone or a weighted value.

School board members with successively more years of experience reported the factors declining student enrollment, an imbalanced or declining general fund, and declining programs, services, staffing and/or courses as the most, second most, or third most influential factors impacting their decisions to vote in favor of consolidation.

All respondents who were currently serving on their respective school boards strongly agreed with their consolidation vote after as many as 15 years of reflection on outcomes associated with the consolidation. Thus, every study respondent currently serving on their respective school boards would cast the same consolidation vote today if given the opportunity.

Advice from school board members of select Minnesota school districts to school board members facing a future consolidation vote were to plan, pair, and communicate.

The findings of this study provide usable information to school board members facing a school district consolidation consideration and eventual vote. Beyond board members, some of the findings may be found useful by the Minnesota School Board Association, the

Minnesota State Legislature and community members as stakeholders in Minnesota school district consolidation.

Limitations of the study were the researcher having no control relative to participation rates, sample size within the sample population, geographical representation within Minnesota, school/district size representation, and threats to respondents' biases.

Recommendations were to expand the geographic scope of the study throughout the United States, and to additional participant populations; Superintendents, students, teachers, parents, community leaders, community business owners, and/or include respondents who voted against the consolidation of their school district with one or more other school districts.

Future research in the area of school district consolidation may seek to answer the direction and/or degree to which public school district consolidation has impacted the ratio of administrators to teachers, systems of administration, specialized instruction, facilities, cost (per pupil) facilities, community, student achievement, busing, student discipline, graduation rates, extra-curricular student participation, parent participation, and student equity–access and opportunity.

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## Appendix A: Participants

### Research Survey Sample Population:

#### Consolidated Minnesota public school districts between 2000 and 2006

<u>Year</u>	<u>District #</u>	<u>Consolidated District Name</u>	<u>Former District</u>
<b>2000</b>	2895	Jackson County Central	328 Sioux Valley 2862 Jackson County Central
<b>2001</b>	2897	Redwood Area	631 Belview 2758 Redwood Falls-Morton
	2898	Westbrook-Walnut Grove	175 Westbrook 641 Walnut Grove
<b>2006</b>	2899	Plainview-Elgin-Millville	806 Elgin-Millville 810 Plainview
	2902	Russell-Tyler-Ruthton	409 Tyler 418 Russell 584 Ruthton

## Appendix B: IRB Certification



OFFICE OF RESEARCH AND  
SPONSORED PROGRAMS  
ST. CLOUD STATE UNIVERSITY.

## Institutional Review Board (IRB)

**Administrative Services 210**  
**Website: [stcloudstate.edu/osp](http://stcloudstate.edu/osp) Email:**  
**[osp@stcloudstate.edu](mailto:osp@stcloudstate.edu)**  
**Phone: 320-308-4932**

**Name:** Lowell Haagenson  
**Address:** 814 Allison's Mead  
Sauk Rapids, MN 56379  
**Email:** [cindyandlowell@gmail.com](mailto:cindyandlowell@gmail.com)  
[halo0501@stcloudstate.edu](mailto:halo0501@stcloudstate.edu)

USA

### IRB Application Determination

Exempt

7/16/2014

### Co-Investigators

**Project Title:** Minnesota Public School Consolidation

**Advisor:** Roger Worner

The Institutional Review Board has reviewed your application to conduct research involving human subjects. We are pleased to inform you that your project has been APPROVED in full accordance with federal regulations. Please note the following important information concerning IRB projects:

- The principal investigator assumes the responsibilities for the protection of human subjects in this project. Any adverse events must be reported to the IRB as soon as possible (ex. research related injuries, harmful outcomes, significant withdrawal of subject population, etc.).
- For expedited or full board review, the principal investigator must submit a Continuing Review/Final Report form in advance of the expiration date indicated on this letter to report conclusion of the research or request an extension.
- Exempt reviews only require the submission of a Continuing Review/Final Report form in advance of the expiration date indicated in this letter if an extension of time is needed.

- Approved consent forms display the official IRB stamp which documents approval and expiration dates. If a renewal is requested and approved, new consent forms will be officially stamped and reflect the new approval and expiration dates.
- The principal investigator must seek approval for any changes to the study (ex. research design, consent process, survey/interview instruments, funding source, etc.). The IRB reserves the right to review the research at any time.

Good luck on your research. If you require further assistance, please contact the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at 320-308-4932 or email lidonnay@stcloudstate.edu. All correspondence should include your SCSU IRB number as indicated on this letter.

**For the Institutional Review Board:**

(original signed) \_\_\_\_\_  
 signed) \_\_\_\_\_  
 Linda Donnay  
 IRB Administrator  
 Office of Research and Sponsored Programs

**For St. Cloud State University:**

(original  
 Patricia Hughes  
 Interim Associate Provost for Research  
 Dean of Graduate Studies

**OFFICE USE ONLY**

SCSUIRB#: 1329 – 1619 Approval Date: 7/16/2014  
 Type of Review: Expiration Date: 7/15/2015

## Appendix C: Survey with Informed Consent

### Survey of Minnesota School District Consolidation

1. Are you currently a member of the school board in the consolidated school district?  
 Yes  No
  
2. At the time of the vote to consolidate your school district, how many years had you served on the school district's school board?  0-4 years  5-8 years  9-12 years  13 or more years
  
3. At the time of the vote to consolidate your school district, did you vote in support of the consolidation?  Yes  No
  
4. Rank order the top three factors which influenced your vote regarding the consolidation of your school district?  
 1 = Strongest influence 2= Second strongest influence 3 = Third strongest influence  
 Declining student enrollment  
 Imbalanced or declining General Fund budget and/or recent budget reductions  
 Unable to pass operating referendum  
 Cost inefficient (small class sizes and/or low pupil/teacher ratios)  
 Declining programs, services, staffing and/or courses  
 Cost inefficient (high facility square footage per pupil and/or excess space/excess buildings)  
 Community opinion  
 Other factors (specific write-in response): \_\_\_\_\_
  
5. How strongly do you agree or disagree that each of the following factors influenced your decision regarding the consolidation of your school district? SD = Strongly Disagree; D = Disagree; A = Agree; SA = Strongly Agree  
 Declining student enrollment  
 SD    D    A    SA  
  
 Imbalanced or declining General Fund budget and/or past budget reductions  
 SD    D    A    SA  
  
 Unable to pass operating referendum  
 SD    D    A    SA  
  
 Cost inefficient (small class sizes and/or low pupil/teacher ratios)  
 SD    D    A    SA  
  
 Declining programs, services, staffing, and/or courses  
 SD    D    A    SA

Cost inefficient (high facility square footage per pupil/excess space/excess buildings)

SD D A SA

Community opinion

SD D A SA

Other factors (specific write-in response): \_\_\_\_\_

SD D A SA

6. How strongly did you agree with the decision to consolidate your school district at the time of the consolidation vote?

SD D A SA

7. How strongly do you currently agree with the decision to have consolidated your school district?

SD D A SA

8. How strongly do you currently agree that the consolidated school district's quality was improved as a result of consolidation?

SD D A SA

Thank you for completing and submitting this survey.

Please provide your preferred contact information if you are willing to participate in a brief (less than 30 minute) telephone interview regarding your survey responses – contact information:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Mailing Address: Street: \_\_\_\_\_

City: \_\_\_\_\_ State: MN

Zip Code: \_\_\_\_\_

