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AN INVESTIGATION INTO FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO EFFECTIVE  
BOARD BEHAVIORS WITHIN CONSOLIDATED RURAL DISTRICTS

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of two rural consolidated districts through the consolidation process, as well as board effectiveness (post consolidation), in actions using relevant behaviors taken from elements in Smoley's survey. The six behavior categories of Smoley's survey include: Making Decisions, Connecting with the community, Functioning as a Group, Working Toward Board Improvement, Exercising Authority and Strategic Planning. The goal of this study was to determine what factors may have contributed to effective behaviors of board members within each of the six categories of Smoley's model within consolidated rural school districts.

Two consolidated rural school districts scoring the highest overall effective score using Smoley's Board Member Self-Assessment Survey were selected. The results of the survey, observations of board meetings, review of records and intensive interviews revealed the two districts experienced consolidation in very different ways. However, even with these differences the data showed the emergence of four consistent themes which may have contributed to effective behaviors in Smoley's behavioral categories. These factors included building relationships, establishing communication, heightening accountability, and leadership of the superintendent.

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **Overview**

Since the beginning of the one-room school houses, a governance system has existed. Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin believed that schools should be governed by the community and observe their values and beliefs, so they developed a system whereby education would consist of citizens from the community surrounding the school, and all decisions would be determined by this governing body. Rules and regulations were established by the parents to reveal the desires and belief systems of the community (Sell, 2006). This governing body was recognized as the local board of education, which is considered by researchers and School Board Associations as an “American institution” of representative governance (NSBA, 2006).

The Industrial Revolution brought about a more centralized education system, promoting the belief that larger schools and districts were more efficient and economical, while smaller rural school districts were seen as deficient or inefficient (Bard, Gardener & Wieland, 2006; Kay, Hargood & Russell, 1982; Orr, 1992). The Industrial Revolution, coupled with the ending of World War II, coincided with the development of urban and suburban communities; the population explosion and the employment opportunities increased the consolidation movement (Davis, 1990; Morikis, 2010). The United States competes to secure the position of superpower, and concern grows for national security, the federal government has become more involved in educational interests, creating more centralized control of local school districts (Bard et al., 2006; Tyack, 1974).

This first chapter of the study begins with the historical backdrop of school governance; then moves on to discuss an example of what is happening in our nation within rural school districts. Next, the chapter presents the background for this study, outlining the history, the development of school board governance and the consolidation of rural school districts. Then, a statement of the problem is provided concerning the need to understand how to ensure effective educational governance within consolidated rural school boards, followed by the significance of this study. Finally, this chapter will outline the research questions and conclude with a definition of terms.

Local U.S. school boards have long played, and continue to play a prominent role in educational governance (Bascia, Cumming, Datnow, Leithwood, & Livingstone, 2005; Carol, Cunningham, Danzberger, Kirst, McCloud, & Usdan, 1986; Hess, 2002; Johnson, 2007). However, during the past 30 years, local school districts have gradually yielded policy-making discretion to federal and state legislatures and bureaucracies, creating an array of financial and academic concerns for local school districts. Locally, (in the Oklahoma area), as many as eleven school districts have reconciled with the reality that this is their last year to operate as an independent district in the state. The following example of school district consolidation in Arkansas illustrates what is currently occurring locally, as well as in rural school districts around the nation. Holsted (2011) depicts the destiny of a small rural school district in northern Arkansas, Lead Hill. In order for The Lead Hill district to survive state mandates they have to consolidate with the neighboring district Ozark Mountain Public Schools. While Ozark Mountain is not new to consolidation, as it was created in 2003 from the consolidation of three separate districts, the Harrison Daily Times illuminates some of the concerns through its

reporting of the consolidation effort. These concerns include: 1) Lead Hill keeping its school open so students do not have to travel to other schools, 2) Lead Hill retaining the identity of their school, 3) Lead Hill having adequate representation of their district.

As the Ozark Mountain system attempts consolidating yet another district, an agreement is constructed which addressed the second concern: the retention of identity. The contract clearly called for “each of the four campuses to keep its own identity, both in name and mascot” (Holsted, 2011, p. 1). This issue of identity is a major concern felt throughout the Lead Hill District. School officials and community members met in the school gymnasium surrounded by pictures of each graduating class dating back to the 1930s hanging on the walls. The symbolism of the class photo spoke to the hearts of the people and the plea to not let the latest class photo be the last came out during the discussion of consolidation. One of the board members, Mr. Burlison, expressed mixed feelings of fear and support of consolidation as he spoke of the multi-generational ties to his district, then stated; “You think things are secure forever. Then reality sets in” (Lair, 2011, p. 1).

The issue of board representation was another concern from the beginning of the process as those serving on each of the separate district’s boards had concern over losing their seats on the board. The consolidation contract revealed the new consolidated board would include five members from the current Ozark Mountain Board and two members for the Lead Hill Board (Lair, 2011, p.1). While serving on the board of education is a non-paid service position, it is evident through the concern of losing a seat that personal capacity to influence the outcome of a school district is of great personal value to those who serve. This is most likely due to the power and prestige associated with being

seated as a school board member. The issues highlighted in this consolidation, especially those concerning identity and adequate representation exemplify district's key concerns as consolidations take place across the nation.

### **Background of Study**

School district consolidation has become an attractive option because of the potential to increase efficiency in district operations especially in rural districts. Benefits of district consolidation include: an increase a school district's capacity to meet increasing demands as rural school districts' boards of education face financial deficits, higher student accountability standards set by the state and federal government, increased need for highly qualified teachers, and a need for more rigorous course offerings in order for students to compete in college or the workforce. (Duncombe & Yinger, 2007; Nitta, Holley & Worbel, 2010). School district consolidation consists of the combining of at least two districts in an effort to improve overall efficiency, to promote economies of scale, and to improve student academic and social experiences. However, this combining of districts means compromising the system of governance of one or both of the districts.

In accordance with state law, public school districts are governed by a local school board of education, which is an institution established at the formation of our country as a symbol of democracy (National School Board Association, 2006). Throughout the history of the United States, the events and growth of our nation have molded and developed school districts and the system of educational governance. Issues such as the accountability of student achievement and schools' financial deficits have increased; likewise, the responsibilities of the school board have increased (Brewer,

2006). These issues have become more problematic for districts that have consolidated. The members of consolidated rural school boards have members who were once a part of separate boards, who are then mandated to operate as one team for one district. Consolidated board members seek to address the issues that arise when districts consolidate, understanding their decisions may have very different effects on school governance, school board dynamics, and student outcomes. To this point, there is scant data that illustrates the experiences of members of consolidated school boards. This study seeks to make this contribution to the literature.

In the state of Oklahoma, 541 public school boards of education churn out decisions regarding student achievement as well as fiscal management (Oklahoma State Department of Education). Local boards of education in the state can consist of three, five, or seven members depending on the size and type of district (Oklahoma State Department of Education). According to the State School Board Association, the majority of the rural districts in Oklahoma consist of five member boards serving five-year terms with a rotation of the open board seat each year. School board members are elected representatives of the citizens within the school district boundaries. Members are selected through the election process; however, members may be appointed if a seat becomes vacant between election cycles. Do they act as trustees of the school district or act as representatives of what group? As board members are elected by constituents, does the responsibility of the board members lie in the needs and interest of these constituents? Are board members a representation of the community or representative of the community? How board members view their function is essential in defining how they work together in an effective manner.

This case study of a rural consolidated school board seeks to explore the experiences of members of consolidated boards, and the factors that influence how boards of consolidated school districts act in an effective manner as a group.

### **Problem Statement**

Locally elected school boards are a unique governance structure made up of volunteers charged with overseeing the local school districts, generally without significant training or leadership experience (Conley, 2002; Morton, 2009). This governance structure dictates how accountability is administered, how schools operate, how teachers work, and how students learn within school districts (Brewer & Killeen, 2009). As educational governance literature has started to focus on implications of board decisions on student achievement and accountability, the urgency to ensure effectiveness of actions within the local boards of education has been created. The difficulty and challenges of effective board actions seem to be compounded in consolidated school districts.

An abundance of literature on the consolidation of rural school districts raises arguments explaining the benefits and draw backs to consolidation (Berry, 2004; Duncombe & Yinger, 2007; Nitta, Holley & Wrobel, 2010). One pro consolidation argument states that combining school districts adds more diverse comprehensive curriculum; broader, more diverse social experiences; better facilities; more highly qualified teachers; a broader array of extracurricular activities; and financial stability (Berry, 2004; Nitta et al., 2010). However, the opposing arguments for consolidation center on connectedness to community, the advantageous element of the smaller school environment, concern for long transportation time, and reduced parental involvement

(Berry, 2004, Conley, 2003; Nitta et al., 2010). The most compelling argument centers on the studies of the effects of consolidation on rural communities and the destruction of the community and identity of the residents in the consolidation movement (Nitta et al., 2010). Embedded in these arguments both for and against consolidation is the concern of district governance after consolidation; however, this element is missing from the literature.

Examining pros and cons of consolidation along with the various social and strong identity issues that rural communities have with their schools, raises several questions, including: *Can neighboring districts coexist and the board members of the district act effectively when the members come from communities with mixed beliefs, traditions, social identities, and values? How do the different district school board members merge to a point of unity? How do their behaviors foster actions so that facilitate effective functioning as a group?* These concerns beg an examination of rural consolidated school districts' governance using the themes of effective actions. A suitable tool to facilitate this type of investigation is presented in a survey created by Eugene R. Smoley (Smoley, 1999). The need for districts to be efficient in both academic and financial areas creates the need for efficient and effective governance, which begins by determining how board members from separate and independent districts come together and act effectively as one board in a new consolidated district.



## **Purpose of the Study**

Studies have been used to measure effectiveness of board actions in traditional public school districts, charter schools, and private schools, including district characteristics such as the gender of the superintendent, the economic wealth of a district, and the focus of the district. However, none of the studies distinguish consolidated districts boards from non-consolidated boards.

The purpose of this study is to contribute to the literature by thoroughly examining the experiences of a rural consolidated district with the consolidation process, as well as board effectiveness (post consolidation), in actions using relevant behaviors taken from Eugene Smoley's survey. Specifically, this study will focus on the themes identified by the researcher as essential: Making Decisions, Functioning as a Group, Exercising Authority, Working Toward Board Improvement, Connecting to the Community and Acting Strategically (1999). Most researchers found in school board literature study the importance for effective school board governance through the use of the Smoley survey to measure board behaviors (Carol et al., 1986; Carver, 2000; Goodman, Fulbright & Zimmerman, 1997; Morton, 2009; Skrla, 2000). Though previous studies have examined board effectiveness from the perspective of the chief executive officer, or the superintendent (Morton, 2009; Woodward, 2006), this study will examine the actions of consolidated rural school districts' boards of education from the perspective of board members' to provide new insights into what may help consolidated school board members act effectively.

## **Significance of the Study**

The timeliness and relevance of studying school consolidation and effectiveness of consolidated school board actions is crucial due to the heightened focus on local control, educational accountability, financial concerns, and general educational effectiveness; which has all lead to an upsurge in the occurrence of school district consolidation (Conley, 2002, 2003; Crawford, 2004; Fusarelli, 2001). By deeply studying the experiences of one consolidated school district, this study will contribute to the literature by providing a look into what happens within governing body of the school district as two districts unite as well as providing insight into how the newly consolidated board members work together as a board using the framework of Smoley's effective school board actions. The information gathered in this study is based on the perceptions of school board members. It should provide information useful in assisting members of the local boards starting the process of consolidation examine factors that may lead to their board acting effectively. This study will also provide superintendents of school districts transitioning into a consolidated rural district valuable insights to how assist board members to understand how to act effectively as a board.

## **Research Questions**

1. How did the board members of a consolidated rural district experience consolidation?
2. How do board members within a consolidated rural school district view their functions as a board member? Did consolidation change their views of their responsibilities?

3. What factors influence board members of consolidated rural schools' ability to act effectively focusing on the behaviors of Smoley's Model of Effective Board Actions?

Sub-questions:

- a. From the perspective of board members, what factors influence how consolidated board members make decisions effectively?
- b. From the perspective of board members, what factors influence how rural consolidated board members connect to the community effectively?
- c. From the perspective of board members, what factors influence how rural consolidated board members exercise their authority?
- d. From the perspective of board members, what factors influence how rural consolidated board members function as a group effectively?
- e. From the perspective of board members, what factors influence how rural consolidated board members work toward board improvement?
- f. From the perspective of board members, what factors influence how rural consolidated board members act strategically?

### **Definition of Terms**

*Board of Education* – The Board of Education is a legislative body of five to seven members elected by a vote of the district. The board of education derives its authority from the state legislature. The board's power is judicial and legislative, and the superintendent elected by the board serves as its executive officer. The legislative function of the board is to make plans and policies, select the superintendent, and

delegate to him or her, the placing of plans and policies into operation, and provide the financial means for their achievement (Oklahoma State School Board Association).

*Consolidated School District* – “Broad term applied to describe the combining of schools or districts in an effort to create administrative efficiencies and provide improved academic and social experiences for students in sparsely –populated areas” (Nitta, et. al., 2010).

*Governance* – one who is empowered to make school management decisions and what is the process for making those decisions

*Rural* – For the purpose of this study the term rural will not focus on the quantitative definition rather on the qualitative definition which includes the following characteristics: centers around simple life, agriculture, smallness, homogeneity, poverty, focus of control, and priorities for schools

*Rural school district* – Described by the following characteristics: smaller schools, geographically isolated, community connectedness, high number of poverty students, and limited financial resources

*Superintendent* – The executive function of the superintendent is to place into operation the plans and policies developed by the board of education; to keep the board informed, and to furnish educational leadership to the school district (State School Board Association). Superintendent acts as Chief Executive Officer (Carver, 2000).

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Introduction**

This chapter reviews the literature, of three primary areas of study in order to gain an understanding of effective school board actions within consolidated school districts. Educational governance in the context of the local boards of education will be defined. Next, consolidation of districts and the concerns consolidation brings to the effectiveness of school governance will be explored. A definition of school board effective actions by Smoley (1999), presents the conceptual framework, outlining six behaviors for effective actions: making rational decisions, working as a group, connecting to the community, exercising authority, working toward board improvement, and acting strategically.

Extensive literature on the authority and composition of school boards exists, and researchers have asserted that there are fundamental roles of board members (Freeman, 2007; Johnson, 2007; Solomon 2006). The literature maintains that school boards have the responsibility of creating a vision and establishing procedures and policies for the administration of educational services in the district to support the vision, implement the federal and state education laws and programs, monitor the operation of the school district and its programs fiscally and procedurally, hire and evaluate the district superintendent, and oversee the annual budget preparation and resource deployment (Campbell & Green, 1994; Freeman, 2007; Johnson, 2007; Solomon, 2006; Smoley, 1999). There is also body of research which supports the current model of volunteer governance in addition to the literature noted above; Conley, 2003, Johnson, 2007, Resnick & Bryant, 2010. This system is embedded in the history and culture of our

nation and sustains the founding concept of community ownership of children's education (Conley, 2003; Morton, 2009). For example Resnick & Bryant (2010), have cited this representative form of governance as the link between the community and the school. Resnick and Bryant argue that "boards of education were invented to link community to the school, ensure oversight, and translate state and federal mandates" (p.11). The literature illustrates the increasing erosion of local school board authority, making the importance of school board effectiveness imperative to regain public support and confidence in the governance system (Conley, 2003; Resnick & Bryant, 2010). In addition, the commonly cited Institution of Educational Leadership report (1986) states that community members support the governance of the local school boards as the steward of their children's education.

Another body of literature questions the local school board governance system's effectiveness (Conley, 2002, 2003; Educational Policy and Leadership Center, 2004). Doyle (2009), Johnson (2007), Van Clay and Soldwedel (2009) all suggest that the local boards are elected with low voter turnout, special or personal interests, little educational background knowledge, and with little training for the position. In addition, the ever-increasing state and federal mandates continue to strip local boards of control (Doyle, 2009; Johnson, 2007; Woodward, 2006). In dealing with these issues, coupled with budget and accountability concerns, school boards must be able to work together in an effective manner to provide oversight of the district.

## **Educational Governance**

Districts across the nation are striving to provide students the best educational opportunities. When asked what are the most essential elements of an effective educational system, answers range from teacher quality (Rochoff, 2003), class size (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Wright, Horn & Sanders, 1997), professional development (Guskey, 2009; Harris & Sass, 2008), and school vision (Rueter, 2009). According to Darling-Hammond (2000), governance is seldom mentioned as an essential element even though it is governance that determines much of what goes on in classrooms.

The decline in the U.S. economy along with the increase in accountability requirements has initiated reform in educational governance. Historically, the focus of school governance was on community values and beliefs and how to provide quality in education; however, concerns about quality have been overshadowed by a new focus on “excellence, accountability, and choice” (Fowler, 2004, p.5). Because of this shift, reforms required to meet this new focus of education also require the governance system for local school districts to act effectively in order to compete in this new age of excellence, accountability, and choice (Fowler, 2004).

In the United States, the educational governance system has evolved from a seemingly simple structure to a complex multi-level system (Brewer 2006). The founding fathers and the authors of the United States Constitution decided schools should be managed locally, thus omitting education from the Constitution (Land, 2002; Sell, 2006). Later, the Tenth Amendment to the Constitution was ratified, providing that powers not granted to the federal government are reserved to the states or the people,

giving the states power to form and organize a governance system for education (Land 2002).

The federal and state roles in education and the organizational structure governance has expanded and transformed local boards to fit a national political culture (Brewer & Killeen, 2009; Brewer 2006). The bureaucracy of the educational system has increased as priorities have been established nationally. As top-down reforms fail to specify the mechanisms by which they will transform education, their effects vary widely on local conditions and implementation, allowing local districts to retain considerable power within an increasingly bureaucratic system (Mintrop & Sunderman, 2014). The power of the local school boards to determine the operational and academic direction of the school in this time of increased demand for academic excellence, accountability, and choice reveals the need for effective governance at the local level.

The power and control of the local school board have weakened because of federal and state mandates on education. Also, the fear of foreign economic competition which has taken its toll on local control. Just as these factors have illuminated a tangled web of authority from the federal government, state government, and local school boards, they have likewise influenced the consolidation of rural school districts across the nation. The purpose of this review is to focus on how the local school boards within consolidated school districts act in an effective manner.

Researchers have examined the importance of educational governance at the local level as well as the roles of those who govern. According to Polacheck (2006), “Governance is not a neutral variable with regard to educational reform. The quality of governance and leadership becomes central to achieving vastly improved educational



reforms” (p.3). The new accountability standards require difficult decisions to be made and implemented at the local level. As educational governance has evolved throughout the last two centuries, the needs and the structures of school districts have changed through decisions made by local boards (Bascia et al., 2005; Carol et al., 1986; Hess, 2002).

Educational governance has been defined in many ways. Williams (2003) stated that governance is simply “the decision making authority for curriculum, finance, personnel, and evaluation in policies” (p. 1). Carver (2003) defined governance as “the process by which a small group, usually on behalf of others, exercises authority over the educational system and dictates the way the system organizes itself to make and implement decisions” (p. 26). McAdams (2006) defined governance in conjunction with management:

Governance is the trusteeship of power on behalf of the owners of power. Management is the exercise of power under the oversight of governance. Governance means making the rules; management is playing the game. Governance is steering; management is rowing. Governance is deciding what is to be done; management is doing it (p. 14).

The Educational Commission of the States (1999) has noted that “Governance arrangements establish the rules of the game. They determine through statutes, collective bargaining, legal agreements, regulations and court rulings who is responsible and accountable for what in a system” (p. 9).

These definitions all portray the act of making rules, setting procedures and/or exercising authority. The variation in the definitions is in how the local board is viewed and acts—as a trustee of an organization which is a representation of the community, or as a representative of a community acting on behalf of a group or entity (Conley, 2002; Education Policy and Leadership Center, 2004; Mountford & Brunner, 1999). School boards that govern as trustees act and make decisions in the interest of the school as a whole while school boards that govern as community representatives often act and make decisions in the best interest of the group or groups that elect them (Foust, 2009; Mauntford & Brunner, 1999). The examination of whether or not local boards are viewed as representatives or trustees may provide a contrasting lens in the discovery of how boards act effectively. This study defines educational governance as small group acting as trustees of an organization, exercising authority over the educational system and determining how the system is organized through policy to make and implement decisions over curriculum, finances, and personnel (Carver, 2003).

In the United States today, school boards are accountable and responsible for the education of all children within their communities. These responsibilities are imposed by state but federal statutes (Calvert, 2003; Frankenberg & Siegel, 2009). Local boards are influenced by many groups such as unions, special interest groups, government agencies and officials, teachers, parents and individuals within communities; in addition, individual board members can exercise power over other board members (Feltman, 2003; Frankenberg, et al., 2009).

## **Concerns and Criticisms of Boards**

The literature on local school governance is abundant (Carver, 2003; Frankenberg, et al., 2009; Hawkins; 2003; Johnson, 2007; Smoley, 1999; Solomon, 2006; Van Clay et al., 2009). Because local school boards are in the position to govern, lead, and make decisions affecting all students, how they arrive at those decisions is a major concern. Effective governing requires board members to understand governance and be disciplined (Carver, 2000). Some of the concerns and criticism for effective actions from boards radiates from skewed perceptions of both board members and communities. When school board members see themselves primarily as representatives of the electorate (Campbell & Green, 1994; Land, 2002; Solomon, 2006), their ability to act in best interest of the children may be hindered.

Criticisms of board members include from micro-management, political or personal interests, response to community discontent without data or process, conduct of biased polling, disregard for district policies, lack of knowledge on educational issues, neglect of self-assessment and ongoing training, and their non-professional relationship to the superintendent (Smoley, 1999; Solomon, 2006; Van Clay et al., 2009). Despite criticisms, there are positive outcomes attributable to boards as community advocates. They often have the support of their communities (Elmore, 1993; Kirst, 2000; Land, 2002; Woodward, 2006); they relay policies and provide oversight information to the community. The board acts as a mouthpiece of the community (Hess, 2010).

The concern for board effectiveness has been present for decades (Morton, 2009; Woodward, 2006; Van Clay et al., 2009). In 1934, Judd wrote:

Boards of education frequently disregard the technical advice of their expert appointees ... substituting lay judgment ... new members are inspired by a zeal for reform born of the profoundest ignorance and conceit ...boards of education are survivors, inherited from an (earlier) age (p. 14).

Then, in 1990, a study by Chubb and Moe noted that “schools’ most fundamental problems are rooted in the institutions of democratic control by which they are governed” (p. 216). The majority of researchers have identified significant concerns and believe they expose the ineffectiveness of boards (Conley, 2002, 2003; Educational Policy and Leadership Center, 2004; Thompson, 2010). While all these concerns exist, one of the added challenges of local board effectiveness, especially in rural areas, comes from consolidating school districts.

### **Consolidation of Districts**

Educational governance in school districts is performed by the local boards. They are the entity controlling the effort to be economically efficient and meet state and federal mandates. As a result of these conditions any rural boards are being forced to consider consolidation. To recognize the importance of school governance within consolidated rural districts, an understanding of consolidation is essential. There is little literature that investigates local board governance within consolidated districts. However, there is a great deal of literature which defines and explores the elements of consolidation. *Consolidation* can be discussed in terms of either merged schools or districts. Researchers have distinguished the difference in merged schools and districts in recent studies of consolidation where the discussion of “schools” centers around the

school size with a focus on educational effectiveness; in contrast, the “district” consolidation’s focus is on economic efficiency (Howley, Johnson, Petrie, 2011).

There are some key terms important to understanding this literature. These terms include *consolidation*, “district restructuring” (Howley et al., 2011) and *annexation* (Johnson, 2006). Consolidation, district restructuring, and annexation all deal with the merging of districts. Johnson (2006) argues that the difference between annexation and consolidation is in the manner in which school governance is re-organized.

This study has a district focus. Therefore, consolidation is the “broad term applied to describe the combining of districts in an effort to create administrative efficiencies and provide improved academic and social experiences for students in sparsely –populated areas” (Nitta et al., 2010, p.1). Since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, there has been a push for larger public schools to reduce costs, to provide more services, and to improve efficiency (Coulson, 2007). Coulson (2007) assembled a report on the consolidation of school districts showing that, in 1932, there were 127,531 school districts in existence in the United States, but that number dropped sharply through the early 1970s when it plummeted to 20,000 school districts. Since the late 1970s, the consolidation movement has continued at a modest pace with the number of public school districts dropping to 14,559 by 2003 (Coulson, 2007). The task of combining districts cannot really be understood without examining the characteristics of the rural districts being consolidated.

### **Rural School Districts**

To gain an understanding of how rural community characteristics influence the governance of schools, the term *rural* will be defined. The Institute of Education

Sciences (IES) has stated that the word *rural* has many meanings (Arnold, Biscue, Farmer, Robertson & Shapely, 2007). Rural has been defined in reference to population density, geographic features, and level of economic and industrial development (Haas, 1990). Rural has been defined both quantitatively and qualitatively. Quantitatively, The U.S. Census Bureau defines rural areas as open country and settlements with fewer than 2,500 people—rural areas are what remains after all of the urbanized areas have been identified (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006).

Qualitatively, the definitions of rural center around characteristics of a simple life, agriculture, smallness, homogeneity, poverty, and priorities for schools (Rios, 1988; Blakely, 1984; Horn, 1985). The definition of “rural” using population and geographic distance from urban communities, as well as the values and needs of those living a rural lifestyle, helps to distinguish rural communities. Researchers have indicated that common characteristics include long-term relationships with inhabitants that result in specific knowledge of each other in family, social, and historical contexts; decisively established community norms and values; and a greater likelihood of long-term residents and a general distrust of outsiders (Campbell & Gordon, 2003; Coyle, 1999; Erickson, 2001; Harowski, Turner, Levine, Shank, Leichter, 2006).

The concept of rural represents more than the area in which one lives; it refers also to how one lives (Howley et al., 2005; Urban, 1996). Eppley’s research (2009) on rural schools, for example, focuses on the connection of schools to the community. Not only is parent involvement high, but the school serves as the hub for activities in the community. Many times, the community uses the school for functions after school hours (Eppley, 2009; Lewis, 2003). Research carried out by Theobald and Niachtgal (1995)

and Theobald and Cutiss (2000) on rural school districts also stressed the importance between rural schools and their relationships to the local community; the identity of the community stems from the school. As Eppley stated, “Rurality’ is a social and cultural construct which implies deep connection to place – more than a backdrop in one’s life” (2009, p. 31). Orr (1992) describes this distinction as the difference between residency and inhabitation.

Researchers define rural school districts through distinct characteristics: 1) smaller schools, 2) geographically isolated, 3) community connectedness, 4) high number of poverty students, and 5) limited financial resources (Eppley, 2009; Trustscott & Truscott, 2005). With 75% of school districts being considered rural across the United States, the issues of declining enrollment and financial support have focused lawmakers’ attention on consolidation. However, the consolidation of rural schools has raised concerns of efficiency, economics, student achievement, and community identity.

As change in the governance of schools is inevitable in order to meet the demands faced by local school districts, Rooney and Augenblick (2009) have observed that “Change in the ways that schools are organized and governed goes on constantly as districts modify the services they provide, respond to constituent interests, and control expenditures” (p.1). These changes can occur within an existing district structure or can propel a district toward consolidation. This review focuses on the consolidation of rural school districts. Examining the literature concerning consolidation through the lens of rural school district characteristics provides insight into the potential advantages and disadvantages consolidation.

## **Advantages and Disadvantages of Consolidation**

Proponents of consolidation concern themselves with the size of a school as it relates to efficiency. Economies of scale, meaning the fixed costs of a district such as physical plant operation, are spread among a larger student population (Duncombe et al., 2007; Nitta et al., 2008). Greater economies of scale can be realized in larger school settings. Economies achieved through consolidation can alleviate concerns for advanced or specialized curricula, social benefits for students, qualified teachers for instruction, and extra-curricular activities. Advocates contend that districts are able to provide better facilities and curricula and employ teachers who are better trained with greater economies of scale (Nitta et al., 2008; Sell, Leistritz & Thompson, 1996). Research by Self (2001) has revealed that students benefited from more advanced and specialized curricula.

While researchers have found that consolidation may be more economical for districts, several studies have shown an inverse relationship between school or district size and academic performance (Plucker, Spradlin, Magaro, Chien, & Zapf, 2007; Rooney & Augenblick, 2009). Johnson (2006) demonstrated that smaller school districts out-performed larger districts in Nebraska. A study in Maine revealed high graduation rates in smaller schools (Bowen, 2007; Driscoll, 2008). Driscoll (2008) showed lower dropout rates, higher attendance, and more participation in extra-curricular activities in smaller districts in Massachusetts. However, Rooney and Augenblick (2009) reported smaller districts' data may be skewed due to the limited data available. The entire picture is not presented in the data because, in small schools, there are lower numbers of



poverty-level or minority students who are not adequately reported in the disaggregated data as a sub-group (2009).

Staffing rural schools with highly qualified teachers is difficult. The supporters of consolidation note that larger school districts offer higher teacher salaries and more benefits. Rooney and Augenblick (2009) also reported that teachers were reluctant relocate to small, isolated areas.

Proponents of consolidation also make the argument that consolidation increases the opportunity for extra-curricular activities as the larger schools have more resources (Self, 2001). Consolidation opponents argue that in smaller schools more students participate in more activities (Nitta et al., 2008). There is also the issue of students having to travel a farther distance to participate in activities; the travel time and cost make it difficult for some students to participate. While there may be an opportunity for more activities, the increased competition and the transportation issues are two reasons why this does not mean more participation or improved extra-curricular activities in consolidated districts (Lewis, 2003; Bard et al., 2005; Nitta et al., 2008).

According to advocates, consolidation provides positive social benefits for students. Sell, Leistriz and Thompson (1996) found that community residents believed students of consolidated districts were more enhanced socially due to the diverse network of friends; therefore, students would have more friends. However, as stated earlier, rural community researchers suggest that residents have specific knowledge of family, social, and historical contexts (Campbell & Gordon, 2003; Coyle, 1999; Erickson, 2001; Harowski et al., 2006) and have a very strong connection with the community (Orr, 1992). The concept of the rural district assumes that school and

community cannot be separated (Mahan, 2010). The understanding of the closeness of the rural community and schools makes an argument that more diversity is not necessarily better.

In the rural school environment, participation in activities is paramount. Because the school is the hub of the community, parents and patrons participate in school activities. The high levels of poverty in the rural school settings often makes it more difficult for families to maintain participation when they have to travel a distance to school. Thus, opponents to consolidation argue that consolidation leads to reduced parent participation in school and reduced participation of students in school activities (Nitta et al., 2008).

Table 1: Summary of Arguments for and against School Consolidation

<i>Arguments for Consolidation</i>	<i>Arguments Against Consolidation</i>
Diverse, comprehensive curriculum Broader, more diverse social experience for students Better facilities Better trained and prepared teachers Broader array of extra-curricular activities for students Efficient Economical	Smaller schools provide students with better support Smaller schools provide more accessible extra-curricular activities Causes teacher stress Hurts vacated communities (eliminates the hub of the community) Hurts students by requiring them to ride buses for long periods of time Leads to reduce parent participation in schools

Note: Adapted from Nitta, Holley, & Wrobel, 2008.

Whether positive or negative, researchers acknowledge that consolidation involves changes for students, parents, school staff and community. Individuals elected to the consolidated board bring with them potentially biased perceptions from these changes. While the research on consolidation focuses on the changes for the school

district and community, there is minimal research on the consolidated governance system. Recognizing that school boards, in general, have personal biases and micro manage the day-to-day operation of the school district, the combining of district governance systems now adds power struggles, identity issues, and more diversity for the consolidated board. Coupling these issues with financial deficits, state and federal mandates, board members must address emotion and changes in their district while making decisions to create an environment conducive to learning for all students.

### **Defining Effective Board Behaviors**

How local boards of education act to govern schools in the educational interests of the children is of the utmost importance. To define how school boards can function in an effective manner and what behaviors align with effective action. This study starts by examining the research of Thomas Holland, Richard Chait and Barbara Taylor. They created a tool that enable non-profit boards to understand the way they function and to become more effective. Through a three-year study, Holland, Chait and Taylor (1986) developed a framework for effective trusteeship that was systematic and empirically tested. These researchers found that there are six specific characteristics and behaviors that distinguish strong boards from weak ones:

- (1) Contextual Dimension: The board understands and takes into account the norms of the organization it governs.
- (2) Educational Dimension: The board takes the necessary steps to ensure that trustees are well-informed about the institution, the profession, and the board's roles, responsibilities, and performance.

- (3) Interpersonal Dimension: The board nurtures the development of trustees as a group, attends to the board's collective welfare, and fosters a sense of cohesiveness.
- (4) Analytical Dimension: The board recognizes complexities and subtleties in the issues it faces and draws upon multiple perspectives to dissect complex problems and to synthesize appropriate responses.
- (5) Political Dimension: The board accepts as one of its primary responsibilities the need to develop and maintain healthy relationships among key constituencies.
- (6) Strategic Dimension: The board helps envision and shape institutional direction and helps ensure a strategic approach to the organization's future.

(Holland, et al., 1986)

Through an additional five-year study, Holland, Chait, and Taylor explored if boards of trustees could improve and be more competent. They concluded that their model works as a means to diagnose and analyze board behavior, to define and evaluate a board's performance, and the process was replicable in other organizations. Another researcher, Smoley (1999) applied this model to schools.

### **Somley's Model of Board Effectiveness**

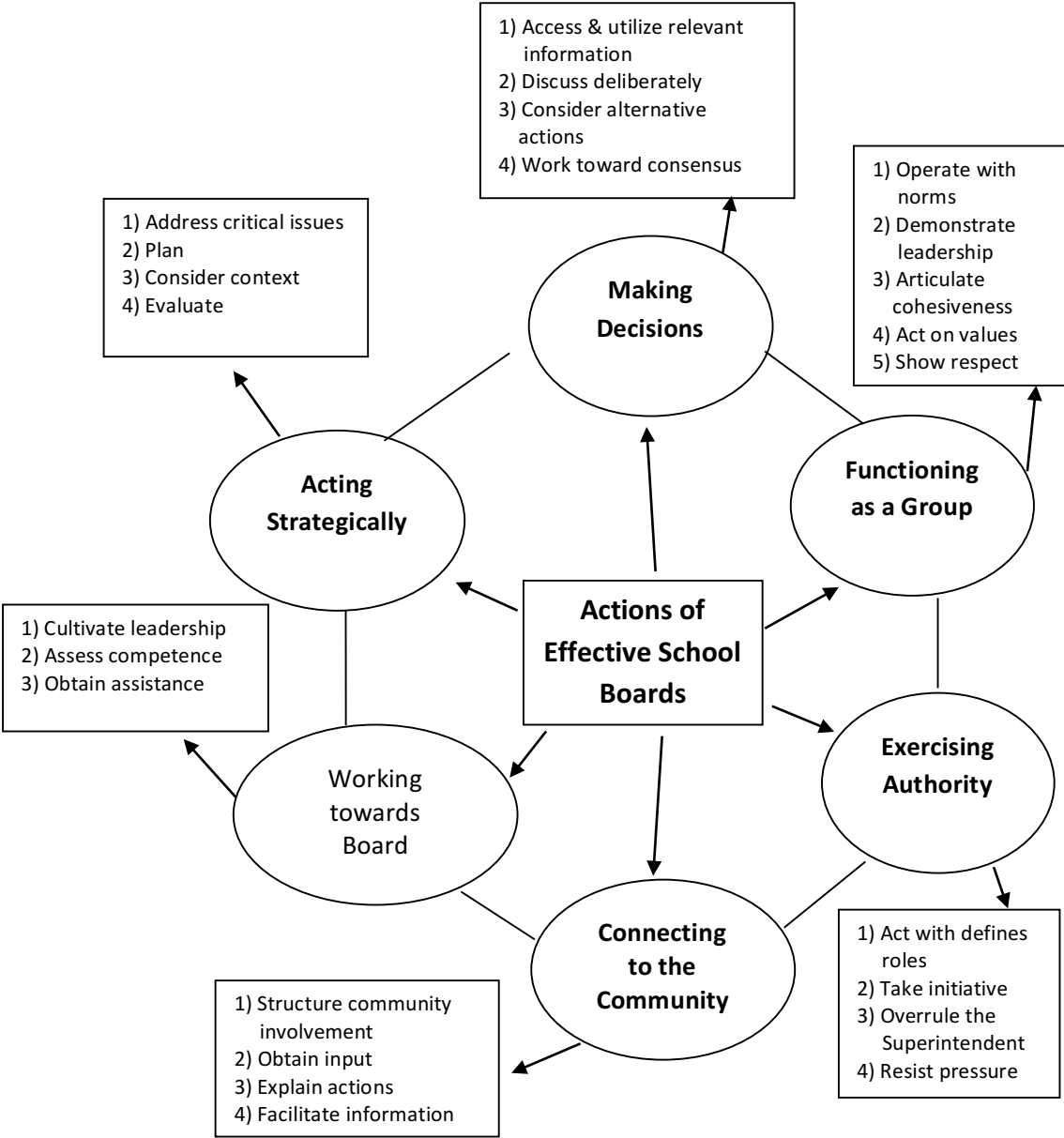
Extending the concept of non-profit board effectiveness to K-12 school boards was a natural product of discussions from the Chait, Holland and Taylor study. In 1993, Smoley began the School Board Effectiveness Project funded by the Good Samaritan Foundation. Smoley conducted a study which included extensive interviews with 40% of board members across the state of Delaware. In the interviews, the board members described how their actions accomplished their responsibilities effectively; then, using

the critical incident technique, Smoley found several themes (Morton, 2009; Smoley, 1999; Woodward, 2006). Smoley's study provides a definition for school board effectiveness. He found that effective boards of education are characterized by six behaviors directly related to Holland, Chait and Taylor's work with non-profit boards which include:

- (1) Making Decisions: Board decisions are rational, informed by data and full discussion.
  - (2) Functioning as a Group: Board exhibits the characteristics of well-functioning groups demonstrated by a feeling of cohesiveness and of sharing goals and values.
  - (3) Exercising Authority: Board members exercise their authority discreetly and stand firm when they must.
  - (4) Connecting to the Community: Boards connect with the community informally, as well as by an established formal process.
  - (5) Working toward Board Improvement: Boards work toward self-improvement, assist new members, reflect on their responsibilities, and seek assistance when they need it.
  - (6) Acting Strategically: Board actions are strategic, matching long-term plans with immediate actions, focusing on results, and adjusting to new situations.
- (Smoley, 1999)

The six behaviors of effective school board actions are outlined in detail in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Smoley’s Model of Effective Actions



Through his 111 interviews, Smoley found specific activities that identified characteristics of each of the behaviors in the model. These activities specify behaviors by board members defining effective board actions. While Smoley (1999) adjusted his model to relate more specifically to school boards the behaviors are consistent with the dimensions in the Holland, Chait, and Taylor model. Table 2 depicts the parallel of the areas of behaviors in Holland, Chait, and Taylor’s model for non-profit boards and Smoley’s model for education boards.

Table 2: The Parallel between Smoley and Holland, Chait & Taylor's Models of Board Effectiveness

<b>Smoley’s Areas of Board Effectiveness</b>	<b>Holland, Chait &amp; Taylor’s Areas of Board Effectiveness</b>
Making Decisions	Analytical Dimension
Functioning as a Group	Interpersonal Dimension
Exercising Authority	Contextual Dimension
Connecting with the Community	Political Dimension
Working Toward Board Improvement	Educational Dimension
Acting Strategically	Strategic Dimension

(Woodward, 2006, p.70)

The study by Smoley provides a definition of effective board actions used across the United States. The National School Board Association and the State School Board Association along with many other state associations recommend the book *Effective School Boards: Strategies for Improving Board Performance* by Smoley, (1999) as a tool for board self-assessment as it defines behaviors that result in effective board

actions. The board behaviors have been examined in several recent studies (Zonnefeld, 2009; Foust, 2009; and Woodward, 2006).

Zonnefeld, (2009) examined Christian Schools in Iowa, Minnesota, South Dakota, and Wisconsin using a sample of 217 school board members and administrators. Next, Foust, (2009) compared four types of school districts in Pennsylvania (urban, suburban, rural, and charter schools) to determine differences in effectiveness of board actions among district types and to determine if board effectiveness played a part in AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress) scores in these districts. Lastly, Woodward, (2006) explored statistical differences in effectiveness of board governance activities of traditional public school boards and charter school boards in Ohio. These studies provide evidence about effective school board behaviors in Smoley's model.

### **Specific Finding of Smoley's Six Behaviors**

#### **Making decisions**

The first area in consideration of effective actions contends with making rational decisions. "Decision making" as Smoley noted, "Is the lifeblood of the school board" (1999, p. 17). The ability of the board to make decisions through rational and informed data and discussion is accomplished through: 1) accessing and using relevant information; 2) deliberate discussions; 3) considering alternative actions; and/or 4) working toward consensus (Smoley, 1999). Other researchers agree that in order for school boards to make legitimate decisions, they must focus on policy development (Goodman & Zimmerman, 2000). The integrated concepts and principles that describe expectations and governs boards are policies. It is through policies that effective decisions are made. The role of the school board is to develop, adopt, and/or amend



policies in order to promote effective management of the school (Carver, 2000; Van Clay et al., 2009). The fact is “boards act when they vote” (McAdams, 2006, p. 99), and policy decisions are one of many aspects of a district’s work acted on by the voting procedure of the board. As boards vote, they strive to find common ground and tolerate uncertainty in reaching an agreement because the priority is effective action and this may require compromise (Ruck, 2003).

State budget deficits require local boards of education to make decisions on fiscal management—one of the most difficult and discerning roles for boards. The adoption of the annual budget and other financial responsibilities are critical roles (Woodward, 2009). According to Smoley (1999), the planning and decisions on the deployment of resources and funds require board members to work collaboratively with the superintendent. In both policy and fiscal decisions, boards should be systematic, objective and based on member framed issues. In addition, considering facts, contexts, or information, and long-term goals is essential (Ruck, 2003).

Several recent studies have examined decision making based on Smoley’s model. Zonnefeld (2009) found 99 percent of board members within the Christian school districts he surveyed agreed that their board worked to reach consensus when making decisions. They seldom had split votes and the hallmark of the Christian schools was being able to reach consensus. He also found that 90 percent of the members felt a unity in their decisions and believed they considered alternatives. The members reported that their efforts to discuss issues and reach consensus made it easy for them to support publicly their decisions. One reason for this is the 84 percent agreement among board members that they requested input from stakeholders who would be affected by the

decisions. Zonnerfeld (2009) also reported that the board members felt they worked collaboratively, as a homogenous group, which made them effective.

Foust (2009) reported that charter school boards and rural school boards scored as effective in the area of making rational decisions with charter school scoring highest. The suburban and urban school boards scored in the somewhat effective range. Foust discussed the diversity within the suburban and urban district boards as opposed to rural and charter boards. Overall, board members from all four school types indicated they used objective data but they did not feel they were unduly influenced by public pressure. Woodward (2009) found there to be a significant difference between traditional and charter schools in the area of decision making. Charter schools were most effective. While both traditional and charter schools scored high on reaching consensus and using objective information, traditional school board's tended not to postpone decisions to gathering further information. Woodward also reported even though board members are elected nonpartisan political advocates, traditional public school boards are different from charter school board members in that they are about representing their constituents and not acting as a trustee of the school district (Woodward, 2009).

### **Functioning as a Group**

There are five activities in this area of Smoley's model: 1) Operating with norms; 2) demonstrating leadership; 3) articulating cohesiveness; 4) acting on values; and/or 5) showing respect. Group dynamics are described as the "shared respect and trust that recognizes the contributions of each individual, a feeling of cohesiveness, shared goals for the board, able leadership within the board, shared values, and agreement on the board's operating rules" (Smoley, 1999, p.29). This trust and cohesiveness is important

to board effectiveness as board member must work together as one team or group. The understanding that the board is one entity and only has legal authority as a group, makes this area of Smoley's model stand out. Caver (2003, p.6) concurred with Smoley, describing what he called the 'one voice principle'. The board speaks as one voice through its vote as the members sit together at a board meeting not as individuals.

Smoley identified several actions that reflected functioning as a group. He suggested that the board members understand or have a common agreement about how they will operate as a group. They show support for board decisions once a decision is reached. Board members maintain confidentiality and protect open disclosure (1999). The second activity involves demonstrating leadership. The board president will facilitate (encouraging and enabling board action); represent (act on behalf of the board in maintaining board-superintendent relationship), inform (insure each member has equal access to information), and direct (provide vision and strategies to meet district goals) (Ruck, 2003). The third activity includes articulating cohesiveness. In effective boards clarity of purpose is evident to staff and community (Smoley, 1999). The fourth activity of effective boards includes sharing certain values and using these values in their decision making. The fifth activity is showing respect to other board members. Smoley stated that effective boards have members recognize valuing the importance of individual contributions, being truthful in conversations, listening to others, and trusting their abilities (1999).

Christian school boards scored high in functioning as a group; they see themselves as highly effective (Zonnefled, 2009). Zonnefled reported 93 percent of board members felt they acted in conjunction with their personal values; 91 percent said

that the core values of the school are what drove their decisions. Another effectiveness indicator was that 90.3 percent felt they could speak their minds without repercussions. Reflecting their unity, Christian board members “referenced the foundation of the school was rooted in prayer and devotion to God along with a firm faith, serving the same Master and Lord” (Zonnefled, 2009, p. 63). Foust (2009) found that rural school boards scored highest in functioning as a group, although rural school districts and charter school were effective. The urban schools scored barely effective, with the suburban schools districts scoring somewhat effective. Foust attributed the results to closeness and connectedness of the rural communities.

Woodward (2009) reported there was a significant difference between traditional and charter school boards in group function. The International Educational Leadership (1990) explain the obstacles to school board effectiveness included the difficulty in getting elected individuals to act as a group and perform as a board. Campbell (2003) and Land (2002) support the claim that homogenous groups are better be able to work together. Low scoring boards lacked of established rules and disagreed about procedures with low trust and respect among members (Woodward, 2009).

### **Exercising Authority**

The next focal behavior is the exercising authority. This refers to the board’s “need to negotiate and delineate the delicate balance between exercising authority and supporting the school district’s chief executive” (1999, p. 43). There are four activities included this area: 1) board members performing their roles; 2) taking initiative; 3) overruling the superintendent; and/or 4) resisting pressure. Smoley, (1999, p.50) stated

effective boards establish practices that enable them to “make decisions in the face of strong counter pressure from community, staff, the state, or others.”

The most crucial role of the board is the selection of the superintendent (Carver, 2000). Until the establishment of the superintendent’s position in 1837, school board members dealt with all facets of setting up a school and hiring a teacher. “As schools grew, boards realized they needed someone to oversee the day-to-day operations of the school,” (Johnson, 2007, p. 21). Traditionally, the roles and responsibilities of the superintendent are those of a manager, while the board makes policy. The superintendent uses the policy to make operating decisions. The superintendents are the chief executive officers of districts. They are hired by the board; in fact, superintendents are the only employees of the schools who the board evaluate, hire, and fire (Carver, 2000; Education and Policy Leadership Center, 2004; Foust, 2009; Smoley, 1999).

With respect to exercising authority, Christian board members reported that 47 percent never spoke out on issues and 58 percent accepted the recommendations of the superintendent without question (Zonnerfeld, 2009). Even though the board scored below average, Zonnefeld noted that board members felt they had open communication during meetings. Board members also reported a strong sense of trust and respect for the administration resulting in leaving day-to-day operations to the administration (2009).

Woodward (2006) discovered that with respect to exercising authority, traditional and charter school board members were low a direct contradiction to Foust (2009) who declared that rural and charter school boards were effective, while suburban and urban were not. These contradictory findings can be reconciled by noting the high level of trust in administration held by rural charter board members or the fact that 54% of the

board members never discuss their roles and may not understand what constitutes their true role. Rural board members were found to have the highest effective score because of their strong community ties, which empowered them to questions decisions not in the best interest if students (Foust, 2009).

### **Connecting with the community**

Board members represent the community; thus, it is important for them to maintain a close relationship with community. As Smoley (1999, p. xvi) stated: “Community control of schools is central to the vitality of our democratic way of life. School boards, both elected and appointed, remain the best vehicle for community control.” Smoley outlined four activities that showed community connection; 1) structured community involvement; 2) obtaining input from the community; 3) explaining actions of the board; and/or 4) facilitating information flow. Effective boards are “proactive in explaining proposed and current positions and sections, as well as district programs to the public” (Smoley, 1999, p.58).

Smoley (1999) described this board advocacy role as,

...serving as a bridge between the district and community, both in reflecting community desires and in promoting understanding and support. Connectedness with the local community leads to the coalescing of disparate community views and builds and maintains partnerships and collaborative relationships with other organizations (p. 4).

Once again, the issue of whether boards are acting as representatives of the community or as trustees of the organization surfaces. No matter the answer, it is vital that the board

has a mechanism in place to gauge public opinion and to relay decisions of policy to the community.

Zonnefeld, (2009) reported that Christian school boards were not effective in relating information to the community; however, these boards do not meet in public or have open meetings. The low scores of Christian boards were due primarily to the absence of open meetings. However, board members meet with constituents at church, at school, and at community functions and approximately 80% have children or grandchildren, establishing their connection to the community.

Foust (2009) found that rural boards most effective. Rural schools he explained are the hubs of their communities with patrons, parents, and students gathering for events at the school often. Using a different categorical system, Woodward (2009) found traditional boards had the highest effectiveness scores in this area even though their boards received criticism concerning their ability to communicate with the community. Woodward found that participation and communication were more likely to occur in smaller settings of culturally homogenous members.

### **Working toward Board Improvement**

Board members must understand their roles and responsibilities. Therefore, training and support from entities such as School Board Associations are important for effective boards and boards must be interested in improving as a group (Smoley, 1999). Smoley found that 40% of board members had fewer than three years of tenure. He also reported that board members did not feel comfortable in their roles until they had several years of experience. Smoley proposed three board improvement activities: 1) cultivating leadership; 2) assessing competence; and/or 3) obtaining assistance.

Zonnefield (2009) found Christian boards did not cultivate leadership from within their board; they relied on natural emergence of leaders. He reported that Christian board members rarely attended workshops due to the lack of interest (2009). Woodward (2006) and Foust (2009) had similar findings with boards scoring slightly effective in working toward board improvement. Woodward (2006) found boards provided training for new members but few assessed their board's performance as a whole or sought further training for veteran members.

### **Acting Strategically**

Board actions should be strategically linked to the school district's vision (Smoley, 1999). Board members discuss and resolve many critical issues. They must confront issues with purpose and that supports long term goals. Smoley identified five activities associated with strategic planning: 1) addressing critical issues; 2) planning; 3) organizing; 4) considering context; and 5) evaluating.

Long term planning is the nucleus of the school board's role in setting the purpose and vision for the school district. The vision is "focused on the education of the district's children; it guides fundamental change in goals, programs, and structures," (Smoley, 1999, p.4). "The board has the responsibility to establish core beliefs, create the vision, and set the goals" (McAdams, 2006, p.8). Van Clay and Soldwedel (2009) state that boards should be visionary and act as a strategic change agent. They also note the board is expected to see and maintain the big picture the district.

Waters and Marzano (2006) suggested school districts need a clear vision including non-negotiable goals and a plan to reach those goals. Dunn (2009, p.27) stated, "Those who govern schools must share a vision, clear expectations, and the ability to



encourage and lead.” Smoley (1999) found that the board is responsible for supporting key projects identified to improve operations. Districts with clear and focused missions are more likely to accomplish goals.

Cornforth (2001) found developing a common vision is statistically the best predictor of organizational effectiveness. Boards use vision to monitor and evaluate the operations, curriculum, programs, and superintendent. Smoley (1999) states the evaluation of the superintendent is solely the responsibility of the board and as a part of this evaluation, the board monitors how the district is progressing toward its vision. Zonnefield, (2009) found that Christian schools were ineffective due to a role reversal of the board and superintendent. The Christian board spent more time on management of the school than planning. Foust (2009) reported both charter and rural school were relatively effective. Each of these boards indicated that it constantly addressed long and short term goals for the district. Foust noted this ability to plan was due to the homogenous nature of the board (2009). Woodward (2006) found that charter schools boards spent more time on planning, while traditional school boards spent more time on day-to day operations.

### **Summary**

The literature review focused on the context of rural consolidated districts and the effectiveness of board behaviors. The first section discussed the meaning of educational governance. The second focused on consolidation, the understanding of rural communities, and characteristics of rural districts. The next section focused on the six behaviors of an effective board as outlined by Smoley (1999): Making Rational Decisions, Working as a Group, Connecting with the Community, Exercising Authority,

Working toward Board Improvement and Strategic Planning. After examining each of the behaviors and relevant studies, the lack of information on consolidated districts is noticeable. This phenomenon of combining rural districts and governing them through a consolidated board needs to be examined to explore what factors contribute to effective board behaviors.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODS**

### **Research Design**

This chapter presents the method of study and describes the research design, the selection of participants, a description of the cases, an explanation of the data collection methods, and analysis process. The selection of a sequential explanatory study was used to examine perceptions of consolidated rural school board members as they pertain to the behaviors of an effective school board. This researcher used on a quantitative inquiry to identify the rural consolidated boards in this study. After identifying the two boards with the highest effective scores, this researcher used qualitative inquiry to help explain what factors influence effective behaviors within those boards. In addition, this researcher examined the effects of consolidation on the board's ability to behave effectively.

The first portion of the study used a survey to determine the effectiveness of behaviors of the board members in consolidated districts. The instrument used was from the Board Self-Assessment Questionnaire developed by Smoley (1999) (Appendix A). This survey consists of 73 Likert statements were respondents registered their responses. The statements are grouped according to the six behaviors in Smoley's model of board effectiveness: 1) Making Decisions, 2) Functioning as a Group, 3) Exercising Authority, 4) Connecting with the Community, 5) Working toward Board Improvement, 6) Acting Strategically. Space for a short answer response was provided for board members to identify their role and to include additional comments.

The majority of the study relied on qualitative data and analysis. Observations, review of records, interviews were used to examine how districts experienced

consolidation, the affect consolidation had on their perception of their roles as board members, and the factors that lead to behaviors of boards with high effective scores.

First, approval for this study was obtained through the Internal Review Board at the University of Oklahoma (Appendix B). Next, this researcher gained access to the names of districts through the state department website, then communicated by mail, phone, and in person with participants. The data were collected using open-ended interview questions, observations and document analysis, including board policies, minutes, and district agreements. Triangulation of the data collected from interviews, observations and document analysis added to the validity of the study.

### **Participant Selection**

The researcher used purposeful sampling in this study. Patton (2002, p. 230) has stated that “the logic and power of purposeful sampling lie in the selecting information-rich cases for study.” The selection of the participating boards was determined by the boards’ average score in the survey. The State Department Education provided a list of consolidated districts which using a seven year window. A parameter of one to seven years was used to ensure the majority of members were on the board at the time of consolidation. There were several criteria considered to make a purposeful selection of the participants. The criteria included: 1) Board members had to serve a district that had been consolidated between two and seven years, 2) A majority of the board members from the district had to participate in the survey, 3) The board must include individuals who were members at the time of the merger currently on the board.

The recruitment of participants was accomplished by of mailing letters to board members of consolidated districts informing them of the study and asking for their

participation. The letter (Appendix C), a consent form (Appendix D), and a copy of the Effectiveness Survey (Appendix A) were included. There were several questions at the beginning of the survey designed to obtain this researcher general information such as:

- 1) Gender of the participant,
- 2) If the board member had children attending school in the district,
- 3) Number of years on the board,
- 4) Position on the board,
- and 5) Age of participant.

Surveys were distributed to school board members from all twenty four consolidated districts. Board members of seventeen of the districts (71%) chose to participate. Upon receipt of the surveys, board members responses were charted by criteria for participation. (Appendix E). After reviewing these data, eleven (48%) districts remained eligible for the study.

The surveys of individual board members were scored and each district board’s overall score was determined. The survey consisted of 73 Likert statements. Table 3 lists the question numbers corresponding to Smoley’s behaviors.

Table 3: Scoring Chart for Smoley’s Model

Behaviors From Smoley’s Model	Survey Questions Numbers
Making Decisions	1, <u>5</u> , 6, <u>13</u> , 24, <u>26</u> , 27, <u>33</u> , 38, 54, <u>60</u> , 65, 69
Functioning as a Group	3, 17, <u>30</u> , 32, 36, 49, 53, 59, <u>64</u> , 68, <u>72</u>
Exercising Authority	7, 14, 15, <u>35</u> , 43, 45, <u>48</u> , 51, 57, 63, 67, <u>71</u>
Connecting With the Community	4, 10, 11, 16, 18, 22, 29, 39, 47, <u>55</u> , <u>61</u>
Board Improvement	2, 12, 20, <u>21</u> , <u>25</u> , 28, 31, 34, 40, <u>44</u> , <u>52</u> , 58
Acting Strategically	<u>8</u> , 9, <u>19</u> , <u>41</u> , 42, <u>46</u> , 50, 56, 62, 66, 70, 73

Smoley (1999, p. 137)

Responses were averaged to produce an effectiveness score for each of the behaviors and a total board effectiveness score. Each item was scored with a range from zero to three, with the underlined questions reverse scored. The range of scores on the survey extends from zero as the lowest effectiveness score to three as the highest effectiveness score. The scores were charted and the districts with the highest overall scores were identified as participants for the study. Table 4 depicts the scores for each of the districts determined to have the necessary requirements to be viable subjects in this study.

Table 4: Scores of Boards in Each of Smoley’s Areas and Total Effectiveness Score

District	Making Decisions	Functioning As A Group	Exercising Authority	Connecting Community	Working Board Improvement	Acting Strategically	Total Score
C	1.72	1.39	1.58	1.08	1.33	1.66	1.46
D	1.56	1.69	1.69	1.65	1.81	1.67	1.68
F	2.12	2.21	1.67	2.03	1.88	2.15	2.01
G	2.36	2.33	1.88	2.15	1.85	2.19	2.12
H	2.27	2.32	2.00	2.40	2.00	2.40	2.23•
I	2.00	2.05	1.86	1.72	1.83	1.55	1.84
J	2.43	2.25	2.35	2.20	2.05	2.51	2.30•
L	2.21	2.43	2.00	2.21	1.77	2.33	2.15
N	2.31	2.00	1.77	1.88	1.83	1.79	1.93
P	2.20	2.05	1.83	2.03	2.05	1.97	2.02
R	1.65	1.88	1.79	2.02	1.81	1.88	1.84

The scores represent an average of each of the districts’ individual board members perspective in all six of the behaviors of effective action. According to Smoley (1999), a score of 2.00 or higher represents an effective score. Woodward (2006) and Foust (2009), define “effective” as a score of 2.0 or higher. A score of less than 2.00 but above 1.50 is defined as “somewhat effective.” This researcher calculated the effectiveness score for each of the six behaviors including an overall score for each of the participating boards. Using the highest overall effectiveness scores, two districts

were identified for this multiple case study Hughes Public Schools (pseudonym) and Mulberry Public Schools (pseudonym).

### **Data Collection**

The second portion of the study was qualitative. Multiple sources of data were collected to permit for triangulation. These sources included interviews with board members, observations of board meetings, board meeting minutes, meeting agendas, Comprehensive Local Education Plan for the districts, board policies and any agreements made during the merger of the districts. The superintendents of both districts were contacted and mailed a formal request for access to records (Appendix F). The records requested included board minutes, board agendas, Comprehensive Local Education Plan, and board policies including board protocol.

According to Yin (2003), field visits create an opportunity for observation whether formal or casual in nature and may be made while other data are being collected. The researcher conducted observations through field visits to each of the districts. The observations were conducted at regularly scheduled board meetings. The observations also included descriptions of participants at the meetings, observations of the meetings, descriptions of the meeting area, as well as the climate of the meetings.

Creswell (2003) urges researchers to collect qualitative data from participants whose relevance and views explain quantitative findings. Three board members from both of the participating districts were interviewed; the interviews each lasting approximately 60 minutes. The researcher provided semi-structured, open-ended conversational questions in a structured format as recommended by Creswell (2007). Each board member interviewed was given an interview protocol form (Appendix G)

consisting of procedures and possible questions. This researcher then acquired signed a consent form (Appendix H) before interviews. Four of the interviews were conducted at the individual homes of the board members. Two of the interviews were conducted by phone. All the interviews were recorded and later transcribed.

The transcriptions were identified by the first letter of the district and a number to protect the anonymity of each board member interviewed. The interviews were essentially transcribed verbatim only omitting pauses and non-verbal text. The transcriptions were sent to board members to check for accuracy and to ensure their thoughts were accurately transcribed. After the completion of the interviews, this researcher followed up on all additional questions through email or phone interviews. Informed consent was obtained from the participants. Assurances of confidentiality, lack of risk, and other ethical issues and concerns were relayed to the participants through a consent form. Table 5 charts the research activities in this study.

Table 5: Research Activities

Observations	View participants in the board meetings - open sessions Interactions with spectators at the meetings
Interviews	Board members in each of the consolidated districts
Review of Records	Analysis of board minutes of previous, meetings, local education plan, agreements and contracts from the consolidation of the districts

**Data Analysis**

To explore the participant perceptions within a consolidated district the participant responses were taped and transcribed. Careful analysis documented



differences in the cases as well as important shared patterns, consistent with Patton (2003) recommendations. The researcher transcribed the interviews, observations, and notes essentially verbatim. The interviews and other data collected were coded and analyzed to expose themes that develop according to the perceptions of the board members.

A theme analysis approach was used following steps for analysis as delineated by Zhang and Wildmuth (2009). These steps created a manageable exploration of the phenomenon as depicted in Table 6.

Table 6: Zhang and Wildmuth’s Steps Analyzing Research

Steps to Explore Phenomenon	Activities Researcher Takes
Prepare Data	Interview -Transcribe interviews of board members - Inserting identifiers in order to cross reference
Define Units of Analysis	Identify themes – common words of phrases used by each board member
Develop Coding Scheme	Code text within the interviews by organizing text into categories
Test Coding Scheme	Review each theme and define it in context to the information from each board member to evaluate its current meaning
Code All Text	Go through the text of each interview and code text
Assess Coding Consistency	Examine the text for relevant incidents of data for each category and identify any contradictory data from text of interviews
Draw Conclusions	Construct the final definition for each theme— name, provide definition, make final determination using all related material
Report Methods and Findings	Finalize description and illustrate with quotations from the interviews of board members—this will help communicate its meaning.

### Trustworthiness of the Study

Trustworthiness of the study was attained through two distinct methods. The first method was triangulation of data sources. Multiple data sources included; interviews, observation notes, and archived data. According to Patton (2003, p. 544), “triangulation is the consistency of the findings across methods and data sources.” The second method was member checking. The board members had the opportunity to check the transcripts

of their interviews to confirm the information. Stake (1995) has stated that participants contribute to the trustworthiness of a study through member checks.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study used a survey to collect perceptions of board members. The survey was used to measure behaviors of board members. The reliability of the survey depends on the honesty of responses. The interviews of board members allowed for detailed responses. However, interviews were subject to the honesty and openness of those interviewed. Without honesty, the districts may not fit the criteria and the triangulation of the survey results and interview responses would not be accurate. Another concern in this research is the limited number of participants, which restricts the ability to generalize the results.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS**

### **Analysis of Data**

This study examines consolidation experiences and identifies factors contributing to effective board behaviors within two consolidated districts. This chapter describes how each district experienced consolidation and how board members view their roles. Next, this chapter addresses each of Smoley's behaviors to identify common factors that lead to these behaviors. The districts are identified using pseudonyms and the board members from each district will be identified by the first letter of the district name and a number; H1, H2, H3, M1, M2, and M3 for reporting purposes.

This chapter is organized by first examining how both boards experienced consolidation through historical data and interviews. Second, it will examine how board members viewed their roles before consolidation and how their views changed after consolidation. Third, this researcher will evaluate the effectiveness of current board behaviors using Smoley's survey results and notes from observations. Then using information from board minutes, interviews, and observations this researcher will identify recurring themes to identify the factors that may influence boards to behave in an effective manner.

### **How Districts Experienced Consolidation**

#### **Hughes District**

The Hughes District board has a five member board. Members are elected to serve five year staggered terms. They are elected at large and represent all the district patrons. The age range is 34 – 61 years; there are three female and two male members. Two of the board members currently have children in the school system. Four members served on the board during the time of the district merger.

Three members of the Hughes board participated in interviews giving an account of the consolidation process. Members noted the financial trouble and declining enrollment of the neighboring district, Lake City Public Schools (pseudonym). According to H3, “Many of the families in the small district attended church and other activities in our district and the rumors of over \$200,000 of debt fueled the talk of possibly closing the school.” H1 stated, “The local newspaper reported the district attorney’s office was considering charging the superintendent of Lake City with embezzlement.” In the fall of 2007, the Hughes district superintendent began individual conversations with his board about the possibility of consolidating the districts as these rumors spread. In December, the Lake City school board sent a letter to the Hughes superintendent requesting a resolution to combine the districts through annexation. H2 explained:

Our superintendent shared the letter from the Lake City board asking us to vote on a resolution to annex their district with ours. The superintendent explained that it was in our best interest to vote for the resolution. The state offered funds to help districts in trouble and having to consolidate their district if they consolidate willingly. Without our board agreeing to the resolution we were told the state could still close the school and move the students to our school but if that were the case there would be no state funds to help our district. Our board voted unanimously on the resolution.

Resolution called for an election in February 2008. The board president and superintendent started informing the public of the vote to merge the districts. The superintendent of Hughes set up three community meetings to present the patrons of both

districts details of the process as well as to answer questions surrounding the merger. All three members noted how strong the community ties were in the Lake City school district. Lake City citizens held fundraisers including bingo games, garage sales, and personal donations of patrons.

The Hughes board members remembered the meeting being full of emotion and tears. H3 recalled comments like, “The school is more than a building. It is history and a part of our lives.” H2 recounted hearing, “Let our children have the experiences they deserve in their school. This will destroy our town, our community.” H2 noted a community member saying, “Stop trying to take us over. This school had survived over 100 years and now you are expecting this community to give up on it.”

The determination of the Lake City community to save its school district was felt by the Hughes board. However, money would not eliminate the mismanagement and declining enrollment issues and the annexation was the only way to get relief for both districts (Snell, 2008). Hearing all the pleas of the community created feelings of frustration among the members of Hughes board. They believed they were working to provide a solution allowing the Hughes district to survive financially.

After community meetings, distribution of flyers, and board meeting discussions about the need for a “yes” vote, the day of the election arrived (February 5, 2008). The results of the election was a “no” vote of the community. The minutes of the February Hughes board meeting noted a report by the superintendent that the annexation was voted down by a three to one margin. He described the vote as the community speaking strongly they wanted to keep their school open. The local paper stated, “Lake City

District patrons voted 188 to 61 against becoming part of the Hughes School District during Tuesday's election (Indian Country News, 2008).

In late February, the school was closed by the State Board of Education. This was due to lack of funds and numerous accreditation deficiencies (Lyles, 2008). The board minutes and records reviewed revealed safety issues in addition to financial and accreditation issues. The Department of Health was investigating storage and preparation of food in the cafeteria and DEQ was investigating mold in classrooms from leaky roofs (Snell, 2008). In March just a month after the vote, the Hughes superintendent received a letter from the State Board of Education informing him that the Lake City School would not be a public school July 31, 2008. Hughes board members reflected on their reaction decision of the State Board. H1 stated:

I remember being at the meeting in March and the annexation election was over. We all thought the issue was dead. Our superintendent then read us a letter from the State Superintendent. I don't remember all the words but essentially the State Board was closing the school and we were getting all the students and all the debts. I remember thinking we spent a lot of money to call for an election for it to be voted down and then to be told no one cares what you think--it's done, the schools are one.

H3 stated,

This made, us as board members, upset about the vote of the community. Our district was going to be put into financial difficulty due to another district's superintendent misusing money and lying on

paperwork not to mention not turning in paperwork for monies. I was not in favor of taking on another school's debts we had enough of our own. I was looking out for my tax dollars and our school financially.

H2 expressed,

Looks like the vote of the people does not mean much. Our tax money was going to go to fixing someone else's mess. Too bad no one would listen to reason. Just shows how much a small town school means to the folks in the town.

According to board members, the superintendent of Hughes district worked to contain the frustration and anger surrounding the consolidation. H3 and H2 remembered the superintendent refocusing the board's attention on the students in the district. H2 stated, "He (superintendent) reminded the board that we were about the education of children and now that the State Board had officially closed Lake City Schools, these children were Hughes' responsibility and the commitment to children must remain our board's focus."

After the initial reaction of the annexation, all three board members said the business of the board returned to normal. H2 commented:

You have to remember the process to us was formality that our superintendent took care of and nothing else changed. The other school is the one that was losing something. We were all still serving on the board of education, our children were still attending the same school they always attended, and not much changed for us



personally. They lost their school. They lost the center of their community. Board members were no longer board members. Their children were traveling by busses to school when they once walked...Our anger came from the debt we took on.

The board members reported the burden of the issues of dealing with the merger fell on the superintendent. He had to assess the property, inventory assets, and records of students. According to board records, the superintendent reported each month to the board events and circumstances surrounding the annexation, but there were very few action items dealing with the merger. The only noted board actions were those dealing with two lawsuits filed against Lake City Schools, the hiring of personnel from Lake City, and the decisions on what to do with the buildings and land at Lake City. H3 stated,

We were not involved until it came to approving financial transactions and legal issues from a couple of lawsuits. As a board we had to meet with attorneys to agree on settlements but really our superintendent took care of all the details. Our superintendent spent a lot of time on this. Our board remained the same.....There was not an agreement to reorganize the board and their board was dissolved along with their school.

H2 stated, "A big concern to the patrons of Lake City was having use of the facilities for the community. Our board had to make decisions on how to accommodate requests for the facilities." The local paper reported, Lake City Community Building and Fitness Center are situated there on a half-acre. Also on the site is a portion of a canopy, which

provides shelter during inclement weather for funerals at the nearby cemetery. The community held Thanksgiving dinners, people held reunions; it's a place they gather together. This was also the community county polling place. The buildings were furnished with a grant from the Cherokee Nation, and they had another grant in the works for cultural education to be housed there (Coleman, 2009).

Both Hughes patrons and Lake City patrons felt the forced annexation was unfair to them. The Hughes superintendent was quoted as saying, "patrons feel this is grossly unfair to them" (Snell, 2008). The Hughes patrons stated they felt it was unfair to raise their taxes to pay for Lake City District's debts when they were not a part of the district at the time the debts were incurred (2008). H1 noted, "Feelings of frustration were strong at first but have gone away for the most part as time has passed."

### **Mulberry District**

The Mulberry district has a five member board. Members serve five year staggered terms with members elected from the total population and not in sections or wards of the community. The age range is from 42 – 59 years old; there are four men and one woman members. Three members have children currently in the district. Four members served on the board at the time of the annexation.

Members reported they were a part of the process annexing the neighboring district of Lincoln. The merger began with the Mulberry board receiving a letter from the Lincoln board requesting they consider the annexation of their district. M3 stated, "It was not a surprise to us they were wanting to annex. Their enrollment was dwindling." According to records, the letter was received in December 2007. In January 2008, the Mulberry board voted unanimously on a resolution to call for an election for annexation.

All members interviewed reported that the superintendent detailed the process including the positives and negatives of annexation. The negatives included: the debt the district would incur, the increased costs for transportation, and the accountability for student achievement. The positives included: the increase in enrollment and the acquisition of property, materials and equipment. The superintendent explained the importance of community acceptance of the merger. He explained that with a “yes” vote, there would be state monies from a fund established for district consolidation to assist with the merger. The Mulberry district would receive approximately \$1,000 per student. M2 stated, “This money would go a long way in settling debts and moving school furnishings to our district.”

The Mulberry board members noted they had a good understanding of the consolidation process and the importance of a “yes” vote. The job of the board and superintendent was to get that message out to the community. This was accomplished through public notification in local newspapers and community meetings. M1 explained:

The superintendent had several community meetings where he and the board president along with the Lincoln superintendent presented their case for annexation. The Lincoln board and their superintendent were in support of the annexation. The Lincoln superintendent and our superintendent made up a survey for all stakeholders in the merger to find areas of concern and what were the needs to be addressed.

The board members noted their superintendent had three goals: 1) to define the needs of the students 2) to define the needs of the teachers and school staff and 3) to define the needs of the community. There were surveys sent out before the community meetings to establish a list of needs and concerns. The survey responses were tabulated and were the talking points to ensure the majority of the issues surrounding the consolidation were addressed in public discussions. M2 stated, “Our district worked to find out and address all the concerns we could. The community loved their school and wanted their school, so we had to make the case for, as our superintendent said, doing the right thing for kids, teachers and community.”

The community meetings brought out concerns including: would staff have jobs, where would community events take place, what would be done to increase test scores. The Mulberry superintendent addressed these concerns. First, the district planned to allow for early retirement option or healthy severance packages for all Lincoln teachers not employed by the Mulberry District. Secondly, the Mulberry district agreed to retain current buildings, as well as, commit to the maintenance on buildings and grounds until an alternative solution could be found for community events. Thirdly, the concerns for student achievement (reading and math scores) prompted the Mulberry district to present a plan for the Lincoln students which included after school tutoring and summer programs.

The annexation passed with 90% in favor of the merger. Favor towards the merger was confirmed by News Oklahoma election results which reported the proposal to cease operation of the Lincoln School District and annex with the Mulberry School District effective July 1. Yes, 73 (90.12%); No, 8 (9.88%); passed (2008). The board

members felt the vote showed the support of the districts combining and the belief the district could meet the needs of the students, teachers, and community. According to M2, “This was not just the beginning but a good beginning.”

The process seemed smooth; however, there was some opposition to the merger. The community ties to the Lincoln School were strong especially from those families in which several generations had attended the school. M2 stated:

The Lincoln district had been around for almost 100 years and the school provided a place for the community to gather...The students in the school had a better chance to play on teams and be the center of attention.....Some parents were upset not really at our school but with the situation. They tried to find another small school around to be able to stay in the small school environment. Our superintendent granted transfers to the families who requested them. The idea was to support the families in any way we could.

To alleviate the sense of loss, an auction was held to allow the Lincoln patrons the opportunity to possess a piece of their school. The Mulberry board rented out the facilities to the volunteer fire department, which further allowed for a place for the community events. The Mulberry board reported they took their time in deciding what to do with the buildings and land. M2 stated, “This allowed time for patrons to get used to their new district. It also showed we understood their feelings and wanted to help.”

The board members credited the superintendent for making the process go smoothly. The members mentioned several times that the superintendent’s focus on students remained constant. He was described as being understanding and

compassionate to patrons but kept the goals of the merger focused on student achievement and education.

The merger of these districts had similarities and differences. The similarities include: 1) Both districts merged with a district with declining enrollment and financial difficulties. 2) Both districts adding a new district had superintendents who were positive and proactive toward annexation. 3) Both districts conducted community meetings to explain the annexation.

Differences in experiences included: 1) The Lincoln superintendent was in full support of the annexation with the Mulberry district and communicated this support to the community. The Lake City superintendent worked with the patrons of the community to save their school and did not assist in convincing the community to support annexation with the Hughes district. 2) The discussion at the community meetings with the Mulberry superintendent were centered on meeting the needs of those involved. The discussions at the community meetings with the Hughes superintendent were focused on feelings and how they could save their school. 3) The Lincoln district passed the annexation with 90% of the vote in support and the district received funds to support the change for both districts. The Lake City district voted three to one against the merger and then were forced to annex knowing it was not wanted and they received no assistance in funding the merger.

### **How Board Members View Their Roles**

These districts had different experiences through their mergers; this researcher set out to discover how board members viewed their role and to understand changes after consolidation. First, board members were interviewed and asked to define their roles as

board members. Next, they were asked if their view changed after their experiences through the merger. Lastly, they were asked what if anything changed their views.

Table 7 lists the comments of the board members depicting their views of their roles.

Table 8 list comments of board members explaining the change in their view and why.

Table 7: Board Members’ Views of their Roles

<b>District /Member</b>	<b>View of Role after Consolidation</b>
<b>H1 Hughes District</b>	The reason I serve on the board is to ensure all students have a chance to receive a good education so they will be able to take care of themselves after they leave school.
<b>H2 Hughes District</b>	I see my role on the board as a volunteer providing a service to families in the community..... Making sure the children in the district are given everything they need to get a good education.
<b>H3 Hughes District</b>	Providing the chance for students to learn and providing the means for students to learn are what I see as our primary functions.
<b>M1 Mulberry District</b>	Understanding the responsibility to enable students to be good citizens and then to help find ways to make sure this happens is our responsibility.
<b>M2 Mulberry District</b>	Building a good school from the inside out giving students the opportunity to become responsible citizens and successful after high school. This is our job as a board member.
<b>M3 Mulberry District</b>	My being on the board is a service to the community and a responsibility to the students and teachers in the district to oversee how the school operates.

Table 8: Changes in Board Members View of their Roles after Consolidation

<b>District/Member</b>	<b>View of Role after Consolidation</b>
<b>H1</b>	I was very concerned about my role as a board member after going through the annexation of our district.....I saw the importance of being able to believe your superintendent. I think this whole experience made me more cautious maybe even contentious about the work I did on the board.
<b>H2</b>	I do not feel my view of my role or responsibilities have changed ... maybe I do stop and think about those responsibilities more now.
<b>H3</b>	Knowing there are challenges facing our district as state funding is cut, I don't want to be like the Lake City board thinking I wish I would have been more informed or would have been more aware of solutions to the challenges. So I find myself looking for more information and looking for other explanations to make sure I as a board member make the best decision I can for my district.
<b>M1</b>	I have always seen my job as a board member as important and that did not change. The only change I felt is in the believing in our superintendent and his ability to oversee our district.
<b>M2</b>	I did not think my view changed. I think my responsibilities are the same before and after
<b>M3</b>	Knowing there are challenges facing our district, I don't want to be like the Lincoln board and find our district in trouble. I feel I increased my awareness of my role on the board to be sure our district is providing every possible opportunity for kids and that our administration is working toward the goals of the district.

The board members had a common view of their role. They described their role as service to the community. They believed they had responsibility to students to provide a quality education and prepare them for their future. Most members felt consolidation had some effect on how they view their responsibilities. They reported a heightened sensed of accountability after seeing the loss of a district.



## Current Effectiveness of Boards

The initial results of the survey of board members, notes from observations, and documents were used to examine the current effectiveness of both boards. Notes were taken by the researcher during multiple observations and behaviors were charted using Smoley’s categories. There were two observations of the Hughes board and two observations of the Mulberry board. Following the observations, transcriptions of extensive interviews were used to determine the emergence of themes that may have led to the effective behaviors of board members. Table 9 shows scores of both boards on Smoley’s behavior categories as well as a total effectiveness score.

Table 9: Hughes and Mulberry Effective Behavior Scores

District	Making Decisions	Functioning As A Group	Exercising Authority	Connecting Community	Working Board Improvement	Acting Strategically	Average Score
Hughes	2.43	2.25	2.35	2.20	2.05	2.51	2.30
Mulberry	2.27	2.32	2.00	2.40	2.00	2.40	2.23

### Hughes Board Observations

The Hughes board scored effective in each behavior. This researcher conducted two observations of the board meetings. The observations of the meetings revealed business-like environment. The meetings were held in the district event building across from the superintendent’s office. The arrangement of the room was the same at each board meeting—three tables in a u-shape with approximately 40 chairs in rows in front of the tables. The u-shape arrangement had seven chairs around the outside of the tables. There was a chair for the superintendent, board minute’s clerk, and each of the five board members. There were spectators at each of the meetings observed. Table10 depicts the information gathered from these board meetings.

Table 10: Observation Data from Hughes Board

<b>Traits observed at Hughes Board Meetings</b>			
<b>Making Decisions</b>	<b>Ob 1</b>	<b>Ob 2</b>	<b>Observation Notes</b>
<i>Access &amp; Utilize Relevant Information</i>	√	√	All votes were unanimous. All board members had the opportunity to voice concerns and reasons for options. Superintendent provided great deal of information.
<i>Discuss deliberately</i>		√	
<i>Consider Alternatives</i>		√	
<i>Work Toward Consensus</i>	√	√	
<b>Functioning as a Group</b>			Followed Roberts Rules of Order. Board president controlled the pace of the meeting – superintendent guided. Board members appeared to be active listeners as they asked questions and responded to comments made.
<i>Operate in Norms</i>	√	√	
<i>Demonstrate Leadership</i>	√	√	
<i>Articulate Cohesiveness</i>	√	√	
<i>Act on Values</i>		√	
<i>Show Respect</i>	√	√	
<b>Exercising Authority</b>			Board President led the meeting. Several spectators at the meeting board reviewed issues and voted as to the issues not the emotion of the audience. All votes went with superintendent recommendations.
<i>Act with Defined Roles</i>	√	√	
<i>Take Initiative</i>		√	
<i>Overrule the Superintendent</i>			
<i>Resist Pressure</i>	√	√	
<b>Connecting with the Community</b>			Agenda contained item for public comment. Directive to give written explanation of board decision.
<i>Structure Community Involvement</i>	√	√	
<i>Obtain Input</i>		√	
<i>Explain Actions</i>	√	√	
<i>Facilitate Information Flow</i>	√	√	
<b>Working Toward Board Improvement</b>			Information and assistance sought from OSSBA, school attorney, school auditor. Expressed accountability concerns.
<i>Cultivate Leadership</i>			
<i>Access Competence</i>		√	
<i>Obtain Assistance</i>	√	√	
<b>Strategic Planning</b>			Superintendent provided a written assessment of the progress toward goals.
<i>Address Critical Issues</i>	√	√	
<i>Plan</i>		√	
<i>Consider Context</i>		√	
<i>Evaluate</i>		√	

The interactions were collaborative with the board president leading the meeting and the superintendent acting as a moderator filling in gaps in information. The board members were attentive to the superintendent and appeared to have trust in his ability to

lead their district. Several times the board deferred to the superintendent for explanations. The board supported his recommendations with unanimous votes. The board members appeared to feel comfortable to voice their opinions and to ask questions. The review of board minutes for the last several years revealed the Hughes board did reach consensus on agenda items by unanimous votes over 90% of the time. The few agenda items revealed a member abstained from voting but further investigation found his/her abstention was due to absence from discussions.

The superintendent asked leading questions and brought all members into the conversation. He appeared to have a knowledge of his board's strengths and priorities as he openly asked for opinions and advice in their areas of expertise. The board members operated according to their policy and rules of order. They had procedures set up for community involvement at meetings although no one took advantage of this at the meetings observed. From the review of board minutes, it is clear community members sometimes addressed the board. It should be noted there is currently one member of the board serving from the annexed area. Overall the board appeared to be a cohesive group.

### **Mulberry Board Observations**

Mulberry board meetings presented a professional and inviting climate. The meetings were held in a room located off of the superintendent's office. The room contained a large conference table with ten chairs around the table. There were chairs located around the perimeter of the room for guests and spectators. The room had a buffet table located at one end covered with food. This provided a wonderful aroma in the room.

The board meetings were started on time and the board president called the meeting to order, moved through the first half of the agenda, and recessed the meeting. Then board ate a meal together. The superintendent took this opportunity to personally welcome those in attendance inviting them to join in dinner. During the meal, the board spent time talking and laughing together. Their conversations were not about school business rather centered on their families, work and ballgame scores. After a thirty to forty minute dinner break, the board meeting was called back to order and they moved through the second half of the agenda. Table 11 depicts a chart of the behaviors observed at each meeting and notes.

Table 11: Traits Observed at Mulberry Board Meetings

<b>Traits observed at Mulberry Board Meetings</b>			
<b>Making Decisions</b>	<b>Ob 1</b>	<b>Ob 2</b>	<b>Observation Notes</b>
<i>Access &amp; Utilize Relevant Information</i>	√	√	Superintendent provided notebook of information to board members – copy for public view. Discussed opinions. Worked through conflict and reached decisions.
<i>Discuss deliberately</i>		√	
<i>Consider Alternatives</i>	√		
<i>Work Toward Consensus (unanimous vote )</i>	√	√	
<b>Functioning as a Group</b>			Board president led the meeting. Board members very pleasant to each other – courteous. Board members supportive of each other’s opinions.
<i>Operate in Norms</i>	√	√	
<i>Demonstrate Leadership</i>	√	√	
<i>Articulate Cohesiveness</i>	√	√	
<i>Act on Values</i>		√	
<i>Show Respect</i>	√	√	
<b>Exercising Authority</b>			Seem to understand their roles. Followed superintendent recommendations – asked questions – brought out concerns.
<i>Act with Defined Roles</i>	√	√	
<i>Take Initiative</i>	√	√	
<i>Overrule the Superintendent</i>			
<i>Resist Pressure</i>		√	
<b>Connecting with the Community</b>			Board agenda had item for public comment. Did take time to go over the decision made for newspaper to report.
<i>Structure Community Involvement</i>	√	√	
<i>Obtain Input</i>	√	√	
<i>Explain Actions</i>	√		
<i>Facilitate Information Flow</i>	√	√	
<b>Working Toward Board Improvement</b>			Information on leadership workshop – superintendent encouraged all board members to attend.
<i>Cultivate Leadership</i>	√	√	
<i>Access Competence</i>		√	
<i>Obtain Assistance</i>	√	√	
<b>Strategic Planning</b>			Looked at budget concerns and staffing for upcoming year – compared recommendations to goals for district.
<i>Address Critical Issues</i>	√	√	
<i>Plan</i>	√	√	
<i>Consider Context</i>	√		
<i>Evaluate</i>	√	√	

The board observed correct procedure and followed Roberts Rules of Order at all times. The board president, with occasional assistance from the superintendent, conducted the meetings and provided information. They moved quickly through their

agenda addressing concerns and listening to ideas. The members were respectful of each other even when their opinions differed. This board reached consensus on all action items. This board listened to other qualified persons and sought outside assistance when needed including the school auditor and a representative of the school district's attorney's office.

The superintendent appeared to engage board members in discussion. It was obvious he had communicated with the board on the items due to the amount of background information board members had and the amount of research members had done individually. The respect for each other was noticeable in their interactions. The superintendent's dinners provided the board time to talk casually. This provided an opportunity for the members and the patrons to interact. It should also be noted that currently all the members of the board are from the original Mulberry district area. Although, previously, members have served on this board that were elected from the annexed area.

### **Interview Data Analysis by Smoley's Behavior Categories**

The two boards had different experiences as they merged their school districts. However, their scores on effective behaviors were similar with both boards scoring effective in each behavior. Analysis of the interview transcripts allowed this researcher to explore each of Smoley's categories, seeking commonalities in the response. Four themes emerged that related to effective board behaviors.

### **Making Decisions**

Board members from both Hughes and Mulberry districts disclosed their willingness to discuss openly and consider other options if needed to reach consensus.

Five of the six board members talked at length about gaining access to relevant information and credited the superintendent with providing it. All the board members noted that they discussed what to consider as reliable information and relevant to making good decisions. Members of both boards also made mention of the importance of understanding others' points of views and how building relationships with board members was needed for candid conversation. Table 12 reflects comments of board members in the area of making decisions.

Table 12: Statements from Board Members on Making Decisions

Board Member	Statements
H1	<p><i>Building relationships</i> with board members makes it where you feel free to tell your opinions and question others until you reach a decision. You feel more comfortable the better you know someone.</p> <p><i>Learning about those around you makes all the difference.</i></p>
H2	<p>We spend lots of <i>time talking and listening</i> to different opinions and views of issues and we always find a common ground.</p> <p>We understand each other much better after <i>getting to know each other</i>.</p> <p>Our <b>superintendent</b> went out of his way to provide all the information possible for us to be able to consider different options.</p>
M1	<p>We <i>respect</i> the work experience of our board members.</p> <p>Our <b>superintendent</b> supports the board and presents us with all the information good and bad.</p> <p><b>Superintendent</b> makes time in our duties <i>to socialize and to get to know each other</i>.</p>
M3	<p>It seems the more we <i>get to know one another</i> the more you hear what is being said. I seem to listen with a better understanding of another view. Our <b>superintendent</b> provides us time to <i>get to know each other</i> and opportunities to really <i>work together</i>.</p> <p>Our <b>superintendent</b> <i>brings us information</i> usually with advantages and disadvantages of the situation.</p> <p>He (<b>superintendent</b>) <i>informs</i> us of what is going on</p>
M2	<p>The problem is in education or maybe I should say when dealing with other people, ‘kids’, there is no one size fits all. And our <b>superintendent</b> <i>relates</i> to us the many different views.</p> <p>As a board member you have to be <i>willing to share</i> your opinion.</p> <p><i>...knowing the other board members</i> priorities and values helps open discussions.</p>

It should be noted that four members reported the addition of a board member from the newly merged district came about nine months sequent to the merger. The board of the district being annexed was dismantled and the other district’s board members retained



their positions until the next election. Members agreed this delay gave their patrons the needed time for families to adjust to the newly merged district.

### **Functioning as a Group**

Both boards appeared to operate as cohesive bodies. Members showed respect for each other. Both the Hughes and Mulberry superintendent provided time for members to talk casually and learn about each other. Members viewed this as a great way to build relationships. Many of the board members used the word “team” to describe the board. All the members discussed working as a group and collaboration within their board to reach decisions. Table 13 reveals comments by the board members that reflect factors leading to their functioning as a group.

Table 13: Statements of Board Members on Functioning As a Group

Board Member	Statements
H1	I feel our board has respect for confidentiality and that our members respect each other enough to listen to other opinions.... I have not felt my confidence had ever been compromised by other members talking outside of the executive session. We always vote as a group and show support of our decisions through unanimous votes....Our board president does a good job of keeping us on topic and guiding our discussions he is like the <b>team leader</b> . He is very respectful of each member and allowing them a chance to speak.
H3	Our board has built a <b>good relationship</b> . We work as a <b>team</b> and we really do listen to each other. We do represent a good cross section of the community and by considering each member’s thoughts on issues I think assures us we are doing what we were elected to do... We do present a united front on issues this shows confidence in our board decisions.
M1	I really don’t know the other board members outside being on the board. But we spend a lot of time talking and getting to know each other. We have <b>developed a relationship</b> where we respect each other’s opinions and we listen to everyone’s views on the board. We have developed a relationship where we can trust board members to not reveal conversations held in executive session. No one on the board holds a grudge when comments don’t agree with their way of thinking and even if conversation gets heated I have never felt it was personal. I think this is because no one on our board seems to have a personal agenda. We can come to a decision and trust everyone to leave the room on the same page. I see us as individuals acting as <b>one group or one body</b> .
M3	When our board is in a meeting we are attentive and goal driven. Our superintendent and board president facilitate the meeting. I have grown to feel that I can speak my mind without fear of consequences or other board members getting mad at me. Our board has a strong feeling of support and respect for each other and this makes things easier on us as a board. We have a <b>good working relationship</b> .

Interviews revealed a common theme about building relationships. All the board members talked about their relationships with other board members. They felt that in order to function together, they needed to have some understanding of each other's perspectives. One word repeated over and over in the interviews was "respect": respect for opinions, respect for values, and respect for members as a person.

Five out of the six board members felt functioning as a group was affected after the election of a new board member from the annexed school district. All agreed it took time to build a relationship of trust and support, but this was accomplished with the assistance of the superintendent especially through the provision of opportunities for the board to learn about each other.

### **Exercising Authority**

The interviews exposed the overall consistency in which the board followed the recommendations of the superintendent in both districts. Board members from both districts had positive relationships with their superintendent. The common theme from both boards was a great deal of respect and admiration for the leadership of the superintendent. Table 14 includes the terms used by board member to describe their superintendent.

Table 14: Description of Superintendents by District

<b>Superintendent of Hughes District</b>	<b>Superintendent of Mulberry District</b>
Very knowledgeable	Very knowledgeable
Loves education	Very organized
Good at finance	Meticulous in reporting
Lots of experiences through his career	Very good with financial security of the
Provides information	district
Great sense of Humor	Building and construction expertise
Well spoken	Good communicator
Good Listener	Always business oriented

Board members reported their relationship with their superintendent as supportive. They also noted the time the superintendent spent with them. Statements about their relationship to the superintendent are included in table 15.

Table 15: Statements of Board Members on Relationship to the Superintendent

Board Member	Statements
H2	<p>He is open and honest. Sometimes we don't like what he is saying but he <i>tells us like it is</i> and works with us to find ways to make things work. He is <i>always willing to help or explain</i> things.  <i>Constant communication...</i></p>
H1	<p>I really like and respect our superintendent. I think what helped <b>me build my relationship with him</b> is I went in weekly on my day off and asked questions. I learned so much and he helped my see the differences between the business world and the education world.</p>
M3	<p>It took me some time to understand why we did things like we did. I am self-employed and I could not see why we seem to have to jump through so many hoops when the answer seemed obvious. Our <b>superintendent</b> spent a <i>lot of time</i> with me and taught me how things were done. He also <i>shared different educational philosophies with me which really opened my mind</i> to all kinds of new ideas. I would <b>say our relationship</b> grew into one of respect.</p>
H3	<p>I felt very strongly that the evaluation was a time to discuss the expectations we had for our superintendent and to discuss how he met those expectations or what we thought he needed to work on. <i>I felt honesty from us as a board and from him as the superintendent only increased our trust in each other.</i></p>

The importance of building relationships in this category of Smoley's model was expressed by board members. It was evident that trust was not freely given but earned through the actions of the superintendent.

All three of the board members from Hughes said their view of the evaluation of the superintendent and their questionings of procedures changed after experiencing consolidation. Board members experienced what happened as a result of a board simply believing their superintendent was doing his job. H2 explained:

What happened in the Lake City district could happen anywhere and it may not result in the closing of the school but could put a terrible burden on the taxpayers of the district. It is the role of the board to oversee the business of the school and this means asking questions, being good stewards of the taxpayers' monies, and being aware of how schools work. Knowing the board at Lake City trusted their superintendent to do their job only makes me as a board member know we have to check out what we are told and not go on blind trust. I think my trust in our superintendent is built on the fact our board can see his commitment to the district.

All of the board members agreed that it is their responsibility to evaluate the superintendent. They reported they usually evaluate in December or January each year. Several of the board members described the evaluation as their time to discuss how he was meeting the needs of the district, the community, the teachers, and the students. Table 16 outlines comments from both boards depicting their views on its exercise of authority.

Table 16: Statements of Board Members on Exercising Authority

Board Member	Statements
H3	<p><b>The superintendent</b> is the number one responsibility of the board, we hired him. It is crucial that the board let the superintendent do his job. We are there for oversight not to dictate. I only say this because our board has been guilty of micromanaging from time to time this is what causes problems between superintendent and board not to mention between board members. Trying to micromanage gives a strong appearance of looking out for personal interest and not the interest of the school as a whole. The board is for oversight not management.</p>
H1	<p>We allow the <b>superintendent</b> to run the school but we also know it is our responsibility to ask questions and look out for our school. We are now a consolidated district because of a superintendent who could not be trusted and stole from the school. So yes we have to <b>trust our superintendent</b> but as a board member it is our responsibility to verify what is going on at the school and to question. We owe that to our parents and our students....that is our job.</p>
M2	<p><b>He (the superintendent)</b> is responsible for everything. He is trusted to make decisions in the best interest of the students in our school. We as a board have to have trust in <b>our CEO</b> or else find a new one. Sounds hardnosed but in reality we are not the ones here day to day and we only meet about once or maybe twice a month. That is not much when you think about how many decisions are to be made and what is at stake, our children's futures.</p>

Board member express the view their primary exercise of authority was in the selection of the “right” superintendent. Overall each of the board members felt the superintendent was key to the success of the consolidation. The leadership of the superintendent was vital to instill trust, to provide the board with accurate information, to oversee the management of the school, to keep the school financially solvent, to ensure mandates are followed, and to relate information to the patrons.

The board members had positive feelings about their superintendent. After examining the responses from the survey questions it was determined that these boards exercise authority in a non-confrontational way seeking alternatives. These boards consistently voted in agreement with their superintendent's recommendations which may have made them look like "yes men" when really they functioned in a generally positive operating style building consensus rather bureaucratic votes and posturing. Board members reiterated how they felt it was not their place to manage or know more than the superintendent and they did not over-rule their superintendents but worked with them in the best interest of the district.

According to five members, exercising authority is another behavior affected by the circumstances surrounding consolidation. They reported an increased sense of responsibility; the other board member reported that he had always felt a heavy sense of responsibility. All the board members agreed that the leadership of the superintendent was key in this area.

### **Connection to the Community**

Board members agreed that their connection to the community was the most immediate concern as the districts merged. While the boards themselves had a delay before adding a new member, the community entering the district was immediately affected. The interests of patrons from the annexed district needed to be represented from the first day of the merger. The Mulberry board scored higher than the Hughes board in this category of Smoley's behaviors. The interviews supported this finding as the Mulberry members repeatedly said "we are one district and the kids are our kids." M2 explained,



I do not even think of the students from another community. It is like one community and we added a new neighborhood. Every student that comes to our school we (board) work to give that student the best education and we reach out to the families in our district all in the same way.

All members commented on their board's diversity with each member having different interests: athletics, band, fine arts, Ag program, and academics. The board members discussed the importance of reaching out to both communities. Members discussed how they made themselves available to the community by attending events at the school. Table 17 charts the statements of board members concerning their connection to the community.

Table 17: Statements of Board Members on Connecting to the Community

Board member	Statements
H3	I am at every event the school has. I am retired and I make it a point to be at every event possible whether it's athletics, academics or Ag. The community sees me there and I try <i>to talk to as many people</i> as I can. I try and make it a point to talk to those I have not met before as well as those I now consider old friends.
M2	All our board members are active in their community and the school. This helps make our board members be accessible to parents and makes parents feel more <i>comfortable talking to board</i> members. The more parents see you involved in what their child is involved the better they think you understand their concerns and the more take them seriously.
M3	It is important that policies be presented in a manner that is uniform or the information maybe misspoke and cause confusion or unfair results. It also gives everyone the same <i>person to ask questions</i> to which would be the people or person enforcing the policy our <b>superintendent or administration</b> .
M1	As a board we never addressed the issue in a meeting the superintendent took the heat from that issue and addressed it. Our <b>superintendent</b> went to great lengths <i>to communicate</i> with the Lincoln community and show what our district had to offer their children. Conscious efforts to <i>seek understanding and information</i> by our administration makes all the difference in dealing with the community.

All members made mention of being at events to show support for students, teachers, coaches and administration. Four of the six board members discussed being involved in different organizations at the school: booster clubs, volunteer groups, and parent organizations. Both boards discussed obtaining formal input from the community through open meetings. In review of past board minutes and agendas, public comment was an agenda item during regular scheduled meetings in both districts. The opportunity from patrons to comment was a formal process for voicing concerns or

providing input on policies being considered by the board. H3 and H2 both noted that giving patrons a time to talk to the board had a positive effect on community relations.

Overall the board members said that the responsibility to disseminate the decisions and policies of the board depended on the school administration. The members said that administration, mainly the superintendent, was their united voice to the community. The Hughes and Mulberry superintendent's role was to ensure everyone knows the decisions made by the board. Three board members discussed issue of avoiding outside pressure from patrons of the newly annexed area. They deemed it important to direct the community members back to the superintendent for answers to ensure the community received accurate and consistent information. The board members discussed that this was the only way to gain community trust.

The members agreed this is the behavioral category that was most affected by consolidation. They discussed the importance of communication with the community. It seemed key in the process of consolidation as well. In the review of board minutes, several times the superintendent is directed by the board to disseminate information to the public. Records reviewed included flyers and newsletters where the superintendent or other administrative personnel had provided proof information was disseminated. Both school websites were established with parent portals for district policy and information as well as surveys to gather the opinion of the community on current issues and policy. Communication was mentioned repeatedly throughout interviews.

### **Working toward Board Improvement**

Most members reported that the training provided board members by the State and the State Board Association as "good." However, they noted they were not sure if it

really prepares board members for the “nuts and bolts of the board” commented H3.

Although, all members said the State Board Association was always available to assist them when they have questions or need to understand laws or regulations.

H3 and M1 both discussed concerns with understanding the differences between the language and concepts of school business and private business operations. H3 said,

The training did provide a base knowledge but I spent lots of time with the superintendent to really understand how things worked. The information on open meeting act, employee issues, chain of command in the school and budgeting information was very helpful but really did just touch on the all the information needed.

Only one board member said that he had ever received feedback from anyone to discuss his personal performance as a board member. H2 remembered,

At our regular scheduled meeting I was shocked at the comments I read made by a teacher. I made several comments and just as I started to say one more thing I looked across the table and the look the superintendent was giving me told me to stop talking. He (the superintendent) was very kind to me but the day after a meeting he called me and discussed my performance as a board member and assured me everything would be fine but we have to be careful of open meeting violations. He told me I really should not voice my personal feelings when dealing with personnel.

All board respondents stated they were assisted by other board members and by the superintendent when they joined on the board. “I felt our board president worked as a

mentor to me and took away the fear that I would mess up or look stupid,” commented H1. Several other members used the term “mentor” and they felt their mentor was a big part of their feeling comfortable on the board.

This category is one that board members said was a challenge before consolidation and it remains a challenge. The only change in this category after consolidation was that all members said they felt more accountable for their understanding of school business and they felt the need for more training. M2 said, “Our community expects us to be working in the best interest of our school. If we don’t know how things work we cannot possibly be acting in the best interest of our school.”

### **Acting Strategically**

The Hughes board described its five and ten year plans and that how these plans are updated yearly by the superintendent. H3 explained:

Our long range plans set the vision for our district. Upon consolidating our district our plan for educating students did not change but we had to get the message to our new students and families what our school vision was. Our superintendent was the person who put out our vision by newsletters and reporting on surveys he sent out to check on how patrons view our district...Knowing our vision makes decisions easier to make.

Neither of the districts’ board members reported any significant change in their plans caused by the consolidation. However, both boards reported adjusting their long range plans as needed and upon the recommendation of the superintendent. The Mulberry board reported that it makes a five, a ten and a twenty year plan in order to set direction

for the district. Board members stated that they did not believe strategic planning changed after the annexation—the boards believe their visions for the future just included the new members of the school district. A review of both districts’ mission statements and vision statements over the years reveal little or no change after consolidation.

### **Emerging Themes**

An analysis of the data collected through the observations, interviews and review of existing documents revealed some emerging themes. The themes that emerged centered on building relationships, establishing communication, heightening accountability, and superintendent leadership.

#### **Theme I: Building Relationships**

In five of the six behavior categories board members discussed building relationships. They viewed the building of relationships as the factor that enabled them to work together and to respect each other. The process of building relationships was accomplished over time and in the process of learning about each other. In both districts the superintendents provided the opportunity for members to grow as a group. Table 18 groups data collected relating to building relationships according to each of Smoley’s behavioral categories.

Table 18: Data on Building Relationships

**Building Relationships**

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Making Decisions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Board member appear comfortable together.</li> <li>▪ Respectful of each other.</li> <li>▪ “Time sharing views and opinions.”</li> <li>▪ “Getting to know each other.”</li> <li>▪ “Learning about those around you makes all the difference.”</li> <li>▪ “Socialize and get acquainted.”</li> <li>▪ “You trust those you know.”</li> </ul>
Functioning as a Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Interactions displayed that of trust and respect.</li> <li>▪ Describe each other as a “team.”</li> <li>▪ “...work as on group or team.”</li> <li>▪ “...gained understanding of each other’s values, interests and perspectives.”</li> </ul>
Exercising Authority	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Mutual respect seen in meeting.</li> <li>▪ “Spent time with me to build relationship.”</li> <li>▪ “willing to help”</li> <li>▪ Worked to build relationship among board members.</li> <li>▪ “Built relationship of trust and respect.”</li> </ul>
Connecting with the Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ “Talked to people at events.”</li> <li>▪ Board had a formal process to hear from the community.</li> <li>▪ “Always available to the patrons at school events.”</li> </ul>
Working towards Board Improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ “The president acted as a mentor to give me support.”</li> <li>▪ “Made me comfortable to speak my mind.”</li> <li>▪ “Spent time getting to know each other as a board.”</li> </ul>
Acting Strategically	

## **Theme II: Establishing Communication**

It was clear that establishing communication was a focal area of importance as board members focused on transition. Creating and nurturing communication between the superintendent, the board members, and the community was important. In discussions of how districts experienced consolidation flyers, surveys, and community meetings served as tools to open communication between patrons and the school district. After consolidation communication became key in connecting the new patrons to the school district. Among board members the opportunities for candid discussion became what one member described as “the number one factor in working as a team.” Board members described learning to listen and creating opportunity for expression as important to connecting with other members of the board, the superintendent and the community. In five of the six behavior categories by Smoley, communication was mentioned. Table 19 groups data from interviews, observations, and documents supporting establishing communication as a factor in the behaviors affecting boards.



Table 19: Data on Establishing Communication

**Establishing Communication**

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Making Decisions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Open to talk to each other.</li> <li>▪ Respectful of each other.</li> <li>▪ Appeared to be able to voice concerns.</li> <li>▪ Listened to members.</li> <li>▪ “willing to share”</li> </ul>
Functioning as a Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Showed support for others opinions.</li> <li>▪ “Hearing what others said.”</li> <li>▪ “Can make comment without fear of grudges.”</li> <li>▪ “Can speak my mind with no fear of consequences or someone getting mad at me.”</li> </ul>
Exercising Authority	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Superintendent good communicator.</li> <li>▪ “well spoken”</li> <li>▪ “good listener”</li> <li>▪ Use of community meetings and community surveys.</li> <li>▪ “Explains things to me.”</li> <li>▪ “Shares philosophies on education.”</li> <li>▪ “Teaches us about school.”</li> </ul>
Connecting with the Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ “Talked to people at events.”</li> <li>▪ “I make it a point to get to know someone new.”</li> <li>▪ School surveys, website, newsletters, newspaper.</li> <li>▪ “Make people comfortable interacting with the board.”</li> </ul>
Working towards Board Improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Mentoring board members.</li> <li>▪ “...discussing board expectations.”</li> </ul>
Acting Strategically	

### **Theme III: Heightening Accountability**

Both boards reported they always recognized they were accountable for their school district. They noted that their accountability became more focused after consolidation. The experience of consolidation including all of the questions on how school districts could get to the point where they could no longer support themselves, made board members more conscientious. The board members believed it was their responsibility to provide oversight to ensure their district did not end up financially or educationally deficient. In every interview the heightened awareness of accountability to patrons of the community was mentioned. Heightening accountability was mentioned in all six behavior categories of Smoley's model. Table 20 groups the comments made in each of the behavior areas heightening communication.

Table 20: Data on Heightening Accountability

**Heightening Accountability**

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Making Decisions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Access to information.</li> <li>▪ Deliberate discussions.</li> <li>▪ “I was more cautious or maybe contentious about serving.”</li> <li>▪ “...think more about my responsibility.”</li> <li>▪ “I find myself looking for more information and other explanations.”</li> </ul>
Functioning as a Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ “We stand united as a board.”</li> <li>▪ “We support board decisions.”</li> <li>▪ “...confidence in the decisions made.”</li> </ul>
Exercising Authority	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ At meetings board asked very detailed informed questions.</li> <li>▪ “It is our responsibility to hire the right Superintendent.”</li> <li>▪ “...trust in the decisions by the superintendent.”</li> <li>▪ The board is accountable for superintendents actions through evaluation.</li> <li>▪ “Superintendent is the CEO.”</li> </ul>
Connecting with the Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ “We are responsible for informing the public.”</li> <li>▪ “...give uniform information.”</li> <li>▪ “The community expects us to provide a quality education for their children.”</li> </ul>
Working Board Improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ “Training is “good” but not all that is needed.”</li> <li>▪ “Need a better understanding of how school Functions.”</li> <li>▪ “...expectation of the community that we know what’s going on.”</li> </ul>
Acting Strategically	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Board addressed upcoming concern facing the district.</li> <li>▪ Compared needs to the goals set for the district</li> </ul>

#### **Theme IV: Superintendent Leadership**

Repeatedly, members of both boards stated that the superintendent was the person who was influential, who stressed cohesiveness, and who provided opportunity for success.

The superintendent in both districts focused the discussions concerning the closing of a school district on the needs of the students, community, and teachers affected. They also presented an attitude of understanding and compassion for the strong feelings of the community, parents, teachers, and students while continuing to put the focus on students success and student needs. Under each behavior category of Smoley's model, the board members mentioned how their superintendents guided them and supported them in their actions as they fulfilled their responsibilities. Both superintendents were seen as strong leaders. They took the time to guide their boards and to provide understanding of school processes and finances. Table 21 groups the data under each of the behavior categories and show the influence of superintendent leadership.

Table 21: Data on Superintendent Leadership

**Superintendent Leadership**

<p>Making Decisions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Superintendent provided board information.</li> <li>▪ Supported recommendations of superintendent.</li> <li>▪ “Superintendent went out of his way to provide all the information possible for us to be able to consider options.”</li> <li>▪ “Our superintendent supports the board.”</li> <li>▪ “Superintendent make time for us as a board to socialize and get to know each other.”</li> </ul>
<p>Functioning as a Group</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Superintendent provided the avenue at meetings for board members to feel comfortable with each other.</li> </ul>
<p>Exercising Authority</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Superintendent very knowledgeable.</li> <li>▪ Positive comments about the superintendent.</li> <li>▪ “He kept us focused.”</li> <li>▪ “Superintendent is the board’s number one job.”</li> <li>▪ “Allow the superintendent to run the school.”</li> <li>▪ “Superintendent is responsible for everything.”</li> <li>▪ Superintendent is “CEO of the district.”</li> </ul>
<p>Connecting with the Community</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ “The superintendent is the spokesperson for the District.”</li> <li>▪ “The enforcement of policy lies in the hands of the superintendent.”</li> <li>▪ “Our superintendent goes to great lengths to communicate with the community.”</li> </ul>
<p>Working Board Improvement</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ “The superintendent brings in people to help us.”</li> <li>▪ “Superintendent provides information on trainings and attends with us.”</li> <li>▪ Board members report they can go to the superintendent for help.</li> </ul>
<p>Acting Strategically</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Superintendent was the person who informed public of mission statement and vision.</li> <li>▪ Superintendent directs us back to our vision statement in decisions we make.</li> <li>▪ Superintendent is responsible for presenting a plan to the board.</li> </ul>

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **Purpose of Research and Major Research Questions**

This study examined two boards in consolidated districts by looking at their experiences, determining how they viewed their role, and defining what factors lead to boards behaving effectively. Smoley (1999) constructed a model to conceptualize and measure the effectiveness of the board behaviors. A review of literature, the surveys, the interviews, the observations of board meetings and review of district documents were used to answer the following questions:

How did the board members of a consolidated rural district experience consolidation?

How do board members within a consolidated rural school district view their role as a board member? Did consolidation change their views of their responsibilities?

What factors influence board members of consolidated rural schools' ability to act effectively focusing on the behaviors of Smoley's Model of Effective Board Actions?

The goal of this research was to identify factors leading to effective board function, in order to assist districts facing consolidation in the future. A summary of the findings from the literature review, interviews and observations along with a discussion of the conclusions of those findings follow.

## **Discussion of Findings**

Each of the two districts in this study experienced the merger of its district in a different way, however, the elimination of a school district elicited strong emotional reactions from all four of the communities involved in the annexations. The literature review pointed out the strong emotional ties communities have to their local schools. Eppley (2009, p.31) claimed the rural district is more than “the backdrop of one’s life” implied by the strong ties between the school and the community. The interviews and documents reviewed support Eppley’s claim. The board members described reactions from the community members as very emotional, tearful, and angry over the closing of their school. The participants said the school was the center of their community and losing their school left a void for the community.

Both districts’ superintendents played key roles in the presentation of the merger to patrons. The Mulberry superintendent and the Lincoln administration (the district to be merged) were in support of the merger. These superintendents worked together to gain the support of the community. While the community loved its school and hated to see it dismantled, the interest was in meeting the needs of children. The districts and the community worked together to gain support for annexation. The Hughes district superintendent was in full support of the merger, but the Lake City administration (district being annexed) was opposed to it. The Lake City board, superintendent, and community were still working to save their district. The community voted down the merger and eventually the State moved to force consolidation.

The decisions of these districts to consolidate through annexation were due to financial distress. The consolidation of these districts was precipitated by concerns pointed to in the literature mainly, reducing the administrative costs and the cost of services for students, and efficiencies (Coulson, 2007; Nitta et al., 2010). Beyond the reduction in overhead costs, the Mulberry district, which voted to annex the Lincoln district, also received funds from the State to support the merger. The additional moneys funded the merger.

In the literature review, governing the school district with the educational interests of the students and the concern for the community is of utmost importance. The interviews and observations defined how board members viewed their roles as school board members. All the members stated that their primary responsibility was to make decisions that would provide their communities with a school that would create the opportunity for the children to become productive citizens and to develop to their full potential. The members of both boards felt their consolidation experiences made them more aware of the seriousness of their role as board members. Accountability to the community and the children became real to them partly in response to the overwhelming emotions expressed in the community meetings.

The conceptual framework guiding this research is based on the behavior categories of Smoley's Model of Effective Board Actions: making decisions, functioning as a group, exercising authority, connecting to the community, working toward board improvement, and acting strategically (Smoley, 1999). Each of Smoley's behavior categories includes traits of effective boards. Both of the consolidated boards in this study demonstrated many of the traits in observations of board meetings or through



interviews of board members. The interviews, observations and review of existing documents such as board policies and board minutes supported the findings of the initial survey completed by the board members. The traits identified in both of these boards through this study clarified why these boards were seen to behave in an effective manner.

Utilizing the constructs created by Smoley (1999) the data indicated the participating boards operated in a similar fashion and viewed Smoley's behaviors in a similar fashion. They agreed that the three behaviors most affected by consolidation were connecting to the community, making decisions, and functioning as a group. Smoley (1999) stated, "Community control of schools is central to the vitality of our democratic way of life" (p. xvi). Interviews revealed these boards believed connecting to the community was not only a matter of public relations but a matter of affirming to the citizens their democratic rights as well as the future of those rights. Several of the board members interviewed pointed out that the community being annexed went without elected representation for about ten months. The board members viewed this as the most immediate concern.

Carver (2003) noted that the board is responsible for adopting policy that determines how the school functions. Smoley stated "Decision making is the lifeblood of the school board" (1999, p. 17). The data gathered presented findings that the participants believed making decisions and functioning as a group were essential to their roles as a board. They believed these two behavior categories went together as both required them to develop trust and cultivate respect. Trust was vital to board effectiveness as board members must work together with the understanding that the

board is one entity and only has authority as a group. Caver (2006) and Smoley (1999) state the board is heard as one voice. The information in this study revealed deliberate actions by the superintendents and board members to build trust and respect. Both the Hughes and Mulberry boards confirmed it took a lot of time to develop the trust and respect needed to function as one.

This researcher explored the statements from interviews and actions seen in observations to discover any recurring themes identified with effective board behavior. After examining the notes, transcripts, and documents gathered from each district, this researcher found that four themes emerged repeatedly: building relationships, establishing communication, heightening accountability, and superintendent leadership.

The first theme of building relationships within the board, was viewed by every board member as an important part of building trust. Board members stated that in order for them to work together as a team they needed to have respect for the opinions and values of other board members. The time and effort to get to know and understand each other on a personal level was achieved in both districts through social and professional interactions. Both the Zonnefeld (2009) and Woodward (2006) studies supported this theme; they found that more homogenous boards had taken the time to get to know each other.

Second, this study found that establishing communication was paramount in the success of the Mulberry district's board gaining the support of the patrons for the consolidation process. Exploration of the boards' behavior revealed the vital importance of communication theme in all six categories of Smoley's behavioral categories. Being able to speak candidly and listen to others was how boards were able to oversee the

interests of the district. Board members were open to new ideas and hearing concerns of others. This evidence suggests that being able to establish communication builds trust and confidence.

Third, consolidation brought about a heightened accountability in the role of a board member dealing with the community, curriculum, and finances. There was an increase in the accountability awareness board members felt emerging from the knowledge that their actions could lead to the closing of their schools. This realization made them more mindful of issues coming before the board. The board members expressed their need to have a better understanding of school business and their need for training. This heightened sense of accountability was a factor in all six of the Smoley's categories of effectiveness.

The final factor emerging from this study was the leadership of the superintendent. Throughout this study the board members constantly discussed the actions of the superintendent. Board members described decisions and actions of their superintendents as they worked to bring these communities and schools together. In each of the areas within Smoley's model, the superintendent was viewed by board members as the person providing them leadership and direction. This study highlighted crucial actions of the superintendent such as providing the board with relevant information, providing guidance, and support of their actions as a board. While these actions are important to any school district, after the consolidation, the strong emotional toll of losing a school can compromise the trust in the administration and the board. The board members in this study saw the superintendent as the spokesperson for the board.

## **Conclusion**

The current study revealed growing changes in education along with financial hardships forced school districts to consolidate. While consolidation assisted districts in meeting mandates and financial obligations, it also created challenges. Several studies illuminated the advantages and disadvantages of consolidation concerning the students, the schools, and the community. However, limited studies have examined the effects on the districts' governance.

The school board is the governing entity of a school district and is central to the success of the school as an organization (Foust, 2009). The ability for the school boards to act in an effective manner is even more critical in consolidated school districts where not only two districts have merged but two communities. Through the analysis of Smoley's behavioral categories, this study revealed that deliberate behaviors of board members can influence the effective actions.

This study concluded that there were common factors in these two districts that made board members effective. This became apparent through the literature review, intensive interviews and observations of these consolidated boards. It is the hope of this researcher that boards and superintendents will be informed by the findings in this study. The information can be utilized to help guide the merger of boards and foster the relationships of board members as they work together to provide an environment which meets the needs of students and community members in a newly consolidated district.

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## APPENDICES



APPENDIX A: School Board Survey

SCHOOL BOARD SURVEY

Directions: Please complete and return the questionnaire in the pre-addressed stamped envelope enclosed with this survey by November 25, 2012.

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

**Part 1 – Demographics**

Please check, X, or fill in the appropriate information, in the parentheses, that best describes you.

- A. Gender? ( ) ( )  
Male      Female
- B. Are your children presently attending school in the district? ( ) ( )  
Yes      No
- C. Years on the board? ( )
- D. Position on the board? ( ) ( ) ( ) ( )  
President      Vice- Pres      Clerk      Member
- E. Age? \_\_\_\_\_

**Thank you!**

**PLEASE CONTINUE TO THE NEXT PAGE**

APPENDIX A (continued)

Directions: Using the key below please circle your response to the following statements.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4

1. Our board works to reach consensus on important matters. 1 2 3 4
2. I have participated in board discussions about what we should do differently as a result of a mistake the board made. 1 2 3 4
3. There have been occasions where the board itself has acted in ways inconsistent with the district's deepest values. 1 2 3 4
4. This board has formal structures and procedures for involving the the community. 1 2 3 4
5. I have been in board meetings where it seemed that the subtleties of the Issues we dealt with escaped the awareness of a number of members. 1 2 3 4
6. Our board explicitly examines the "downside" or possible pit falls of any important decision it is about to make. 1 2 3 4
7. Our board and superintendent advocate the same actions. 1 2 3 4
8. This board is more involved in trying to put out fires that in preparing for the future. 1 2 3 4
9. This board sets clear organizational priorities for the year ahead. 1 2 3 4
10. A written report including the board's activities is periodically prepared and distributed publicly. 1 2 3 4
11. This board communicates it decisions to all those who are affected by them. 1 2 3 4
12. At least once every two years, our board has a retreat or special session to examine our performance, how well we are doing as a board. 1 2 3 4
13. Many of the issues that this board deals with seem to be separate tasks, unrelated to one another. 1 2 3 4
14. The board will sharply question certain administrative proposals, requiring the superintendent to reconsider the recommendations. 1 2 3 4
15. The board is always involved in decisions that are important to the future of the education in our district. 1 2 3 4
16. If our board thinks that an important group of constituents is likely to disagree with an action we are considering, we will make sure we learn how they feel before we actually make a decision. 1 2 3 4

APPENDIX A (continued)

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4

- 17. Our board members don't say one thing in private and another in public. 1 2 3 4
- 18. This board and its members maintain channels of communication with specific key community leaders. 1 2 3 4
- 19. This board delays action until an issue becomes urgent or critical. 1 2 3 4
- 20. This board periodically sets time to learn more about important issues facing school districts like the one we govern. 1 2 3 4
- 21. This board relies on the natural emergence of leaders rather than trying to explicitly to cultivate future leaders for the board. 1 2 3 4
- 22. This board has formed ad hoc committees or task forces that include staff and community representatives as well as board members. 1 2 3 4
- 23. This board is attentive how it reaches conclusions as it is to what is decided. 1 2 3 4
- 24. The decisions of this board on one issue tend to influence what we do about other issues that come before us. 1 2 3 4
- 25. Most people on this board tend to rely on observation and informal discussions to learn about their roles and responsibilities. 1 2 3 4
- 26. This board's decisions usually result in a split vote. 1 2 3 4
- 27. When faced with an important issue, the board often "brainstorms" 1 2 3 4
- 28. When a new member joins this board, we make sure that someone serves as a mentor to help this person learn the ropes. 1 2 3 4
- 29. I have been in board meetings where explicit attention was given to the concerns of the community. 1 2 3 4
- 30. I rarely disagree openly with other members in board meetings. 1 2 3 4
- 31. I have participated in board discussions about the effectiveness of our performance as a board. 1 2 3 4
- 32. At our board meetings, there is at least as much dialogue among members as there is between members and administrators. 1 2 3 4
- 33. A certain group of board members will usually vote together for or against particular issues. 1 2 3 4
- 34. I have participated in discussions with new members about the roles and responsibilities of a board member. 1 2 3 4

APPENDIX A (continued)

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4

- 35. The board will often persuade the superintendent to change his mind about recommendations. 1 2 3 4
- 36. The leadership of this board typically goes out of its way to make sure that all members have the same information on important issues. 1 2 3 4
- 37. The board has adopted some explicit goals for itself, distinct from goals it has for the total school district. 1 2 3 4
- 38. The board often requests that a decision be postponed until further information can be obtained. 1 2 3 4
- 39. The board periodically obtains information on the perspective of staff and the community. 1 2 3 4
- 40. This board seeks outside assistance in considering its work. 1 2 3 4
- 41. Our board meetings tend to focus more on current concerns than on preparing for the future. 1 2 3 4
- 42. At least once a year, this board asks that the superintendent articulate his/her vision for the school district's future and strategies to realize the vision. 1 2 3 4
- 43. The board often requests additional information before making a decision. 1 2 3 4
- 44. I have never received feedback on my performance as a member of of this board. 1 2 3 4
- 45. The board often discusses its role in the district management. 1 2 3 4
- 46. This board has on occasion evaded responsibility for some important issue facing the school district. 1 2 3 4
- 47. Before reaching a decision on important issues, this board usually requests input from persons likely to be affected by the decision. 1 2 3 4
- 48. Recommendations from the administration are usually accepted with little questioning. 1 2 3 4
- 49. Board members are consistently able to hold confidential items in confidence. 1 2 3 4
- 50. This board often discusses where the school district should be headed five or more years into the future. 1 2 3 4
- 51. The board president and superintendent confer so that differences of opinion are identified. 1 2 3 4

APPENDIX A (continued)

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4

52. This board does not allocate organizational funds for the purpose of board education and development. 1 2 3 4
53. I have been present in board meetings where discussions of the values of the district were key factors in reaching a conclusion on a problem. 1 2 3 4
54. The board usually receives a full rationale for the recommendations it is asked to act upon. 1 2 3 4
55. At times this board has appeared unaware of the impact its decisions will have within our service community. 1 2 3 4
56. Within the past year, this board has reviewed the school district's strategies for attaining long-term goals. 1 2 3 4
57. We are not a "rubber stamp" board. 1 2 3 4
58. This board has conducted an explicit examination of its roles and responsibilities. 1 2 3 4
59. I am able to speak my mind on key issues without fear that I will be ostracized by some members of this board. 1 2 3 4
60. This board tries to avoid issues that are ambiguous and complicated. 1 2 3 4
61. The administration rarely reports to the board on the concerns of those the school district services. 1 2 3 4
62. I have been in board meetings where the discussion focused on identifying or overcoming the school district's weakness. 1 2 3 4
63. This board often acts independent of the superintendent's recommendation. 1 2 3 4
64. Values are seldom discussed explicitly at our board meetings. 1 2 3 4
65. This board spends a lot of time listening to different points of view before it votes on an important issue. 1 2 3 4
66. The board discusses events and trends in the larger environment that may present specific opportunities for this school district. 1 2 3 4
67. The board is outspoken in its views about programs. 1 2 3 4
68. Once a decision is made, all board members work together to see that it is accepted and carried out. 1 2 3 4
69. All board members support majority decisions. 1 2 3 4

APPENDIX A (continued)

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4

70. This board makes explicit use of the long-range priorities of this school district in dealing with current issues. 1 2 3 4
71. The board will reverse its position based on pressure from the community. 1 2 3 4
72. Members of this board are sometimes disrespectful in their comments to other board members. 1 2 3 4
73. More than half of this board's time is spent on discussions of issues of importance to the school district's long-range future. 1 2 3 4

Any additional comments:

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APPENDIX B: IRB Approval



**Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects**  
**Continuing Review with Proposed Modification – Expedited Review – AP0**

**Date:** November 01, 2013 **IRB#:** 1277

**Principal Investigator:** Deborah Ann Tennison **Approval Date:** 11/01/2013  
**Expiration Date:** 10/31/2014

**Expedited Category:** 6 & 7 **Reference Number:** 571137

**Study Title:** FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO EFFECTIVE BOARD ACTIONS: WITHIN CONSOLIDATED RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS IN OKLAHOMA

Based on the information submitted, your study is currently: Active, open to enrollment. On behalf the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I have reviewed and approved your continuing review application. To view the documents approved for this submission, open this study from the *My Studies* option, go to *Submission History*, go to *Completed Submissions* tab and then click the *Details* icon.

**Modification Summary:**

Revising application to note that Dr. Patrick Forsyth is now the Faculty Sponsor for the study.

As principal investigator of this research study, you are responsible to:

- Conduct the research study in a manner consistent with the requirements of the IRB and federal regulations 45 CFR 46.
- Obtain informed consent and research privacy authorization using the currently approved, stamped forms and retain all original, signed forms, if applicable.
- Request approval from the IRB prior to implementing any/all modifications.
- Promptly report to the IRB any harm experienced by a participant that is both unanticipated and related per IRB policy.
- Maintain accurate and complete study records for evaluation by the HRPP Quality Improvement Program and, if applicable, inspection by regulatory agencies and/or the study sponsor.
- Promptly submit continuing review documents to the IRB upon notification approximately 60 days prior to the expiration date indicated above.
- Submit a final closure report at the completion of the project.

You will receive notification approximately 60 days prior to the expiration date noted above. You are responsible for submitting continuing review documents in a timely fashion in order to maintain continued IRB approval. If you have questions about this notification or using iRIS, contact the IRB @ 405-325-8110 or [irb@ou.edu](mailto:irb@ou.edu). Cordially,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Lara Mayeux'.

Lara Mayeux, Ph.D.  
Chair, Institutional Review Board

## APPENDIX C: Initial Board Member Letter

Dear Board Member;

My name is Deborah Tennison a doctoral student at the University of Oklahoma. I am requesting your participation in completing a board governance survey for my dissertation. It is enclosed. This survey includes 73 statements with which you may strongly agree, agree, slightly agree, disagree, or strongly disagree. The survey takes about 30 minutes to complete. After gathering all the surveys across Oklahoma I am choosing two districts to follow up on the surveys by conducting interviews with board members and observing board meetings in order to gather more detailed and specific information. All participants will be kept anonymous as I will use a numbering system to identify all participants.

The purpose of my study is to assess the current functioning of public school boards in consolidated/annexed school districts as interpreted by *school board members*. The results of the study will be used to provide boards with recommendations of areas of concentration for board development, as well as to assist newly consolidated board members with recommendations to assist in their transition and to assist boards in providing the best opportunity for all students in their districts.

**Each and every response is important for the study to be complete.** Respondents and school districts will not be identified in my dissertation. Only aggregated data and made up names will be used in reporting information.

Your participation in this study is voluntary and you are free to discontinue your participation at any time. Your decision to participate, or not participate, will have no impact on your relationship to your school district or The University of Oklahoma in anyway. The completion of the survey constitutes you consent to participate.

**In order to ensure the anonymity of all responses, please do not put your name on the survey. After you have completed the survey, please return it in the provided envelope on or before December 5, 2012.**

If you have any questions about this study, please contact me at 918-519-9910 or by email at Deborah.a.tennison-1@ou.edu or you may contact my advisor Dr. Lisa Bass at 918-660-3014 or email dr.bass@ou.edu. If you have any questions about the conduct of this study or your rights as a participant you may contact \_\_\_\_\_.

Thank you very much for your participation and willingness to assist others in their mission to provide the best leadership for the students in their school districts.

Sincerely,

Deborah Tennison

*The University of Oklahoma is an Equal Opportunity Institution.*



**University of Oklahoma**  
**Institutional Review Board**  
**Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study**

**Project Title:** Factors Influencing Effective Actions in Consolidated Rural School Boards: A Study of Oklahoma School Districts

**Principal Investigator:** Deborah Tennison

**Department:** Educational Supervision and Administration

You are being asked to volunteer for this research study. You were selected as a possible participant because you are currently a school board member serving in a consolidated district.

Please read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to take part in this study.

**Purpose of the Research Study**

The purpose of this study is to identify factors that influence effective actions within the board of education of rural consolidated districts.

**Number of Participants**

About 85 people will take part in this study.

**Procedures**

Complete a School Board Member survey to measure the effectiveness of board actions.

**Length of Participation**

The length of time required for this study is as follows:  
30 – 45 minute survey

**Benefits of being in the study are**

None - The only benefit is a personal realization that your input in this research may make our educational governance system more effective for school districts.

**Compensation**

You will not be reimbursed for your time and participation in this study.

**Confidentiality**

In published reports, there will be no information included that will make it possible to identify you. Research records will be stored securely and only approved researchers will have access to the records.

There are organizations that may inspect and/or copy your research records for quality assurance and data analysis. These organizations include the OU Institutional Review Board.

APPENDIX D (continued)

**Voluntary Nature of the Study**

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you withdraw or decline participation, you will not be penalized or lose benefits or services unrelated to the study. If you decide to participate, you may decline to answer any question and may choose to withdraw at any time.

**Future Communications**

The researcher would like to contact you again to recruit you into this study or to gather additional information.

\_\_\_\_\_ I give my permission for the researcher to contact me in the future.

\_\_\_\_\_ I do not wish to be contacted by the researcher again.

**Contacts and Questions**

If you have concerns or complaints about the research, the researcher(s) conducting this study can be contacted:

Deborah Tennison at (918) 519-9910 or email [Deborah.a.tennison-1@ou.edu](mailto:Deborah.a.tennison-1@ou.edu)

Or

Dr. Lisa Bass at (918) 660 – 3892 or email [dr.bass@ou.edu](mailto:dr.bass@ou.edu)

Contact the researcher(s) if you have questions, or if you have experienced a research-related injury.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, concerns, or complaints about the research and wish to talk to someone other than individuals on the research team or if you cannot reach the research team, you may contact the University of Oklahoma – Norman Campus Institutional Review Board (OU-NC IRB) at 405-325-8110 or [irb@ou.edu](mailto:irb@ou.edu).

***You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records. If you are not given a copy of this consent form, please request one.***

**Statement of Consent**

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received satisfactory answers. I consent to participate in the study.

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Participant Signature	Print Name	Date
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Signature of Person Obtaining Consent	Print Name	Date
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APPENDIX E: Table of Districts Responding to survey

District	Board Member 1	Board Member 2	Board Member 3	Board Member 4	Board Member 5
A	N	N	N	N	N
B	Y (√)	Y	Y	X	X
C	Y (√)	Y (√)	Y	Y (√)	Y (√)
D	N	N	Y (√)	Y (√)	Y (√)
E	N	N	N	N	N
F	Y (√)	Y	Y (√)	N	Y (√)
G	Y	Y (√)	Y (√)	Y (√)	N
H	Y (√)	Y	Y (√)	Y(√)	Y (√)
I	Y (√)	Y (√)	N	Y	Y (√)
J	Y (√)	Y(√)	Y	Y (√)	Y (√)
K	N	N	N	N	N
L	Y (√)	N	Y (√)	Y (√)	N
M	N	N	N	N	N
N	Y	Y (√)	Y (√)	Y (√)	Y (√)
O	N	N	N	N	N
P	Y (√)	N	N	Y (√)	Y (√)
Q	Y	Y (√)	N	X	X
R	Y (√)	Y (√)	Y (√)	Y (√)	Y
S	N	Y	Y	Y (√)	N
T	Y	N	Y(√)	X	X
U	Y (√)	N	N	Y	Y (√)
V	N	N	N	N	N
W	Y (√)	Y(√)	Y	N	N
X	N	N	N	N	N

X – No Board Seat

Y – Returned Survey

N – Did not Return Survey

√ - On Board during Merger

## APPENDIX F: Letter to Superintendent

Dear Superintendent;

My name is Deborah Tennison and I am a doctoral student from the University of Oklahoma. The topic of my dissertation is Effective Board Governance within Consolidated School Districts. The purpose of my study is to qualitatively from the perspective of board members describe how boards of consolidated or annexed school districts function together for the betterment of the students in their district.

I conducted a quantitative study through a survey of board members across Oklahoma and after receiving and scoring the surveys I have found your district to have one of the highest effective actions scores therefore I wish use your district to conduct the qualitative part of my study. I am requesting your permission to conduct research on board governance within your district. My research design consists of interviewing board members and observing board meetings. I would like your permission to use your facilities to conduct interviews. All participants will be asked a series of open-ended questions in a semi-structured interview and the interviews will audio-recorded to facilitate later transcription and data analysis. I have determined each of these questions and through the process of open-ended questions it is hoped that other questions will emerge to inform this research. All interview are voluntary and no board member is required to participate in the study.

It is expected that interviews will take about 60 minutes to complete. Each participant will receive an informed consent form. In addition I would like permission to view board minutes from the last twelve months and the board policies of your district. I assure you that anonymity and confidentiality will be maintained through all reasonable measures. Reporting of results will not identify your district, schools, or participating individuals.

If you have any questions or require any additional information please contact me at 918-519-9910 or by email at Deborah.a.tennison-1@ou.edu or my advisor, Dr. Lisa Bass at (918) 660 -3913 or email dr.bass@ou.edu.

Thank you for your consideration in providing permission to allow this study to proceed.

Sincerely,

Deborah Tennison

*The University of Oklahoma is an Equal Opportunity Institution.*

Appendix G: Interview Protocol

**Board Members of Consolidated School Boards  
A Multiple Case Study  
Interview Protocol**

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Title \_\_\_\_\_

School System \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Introduction:**

**Thank you for taking the time to talk to me about your perspective of the processes of school boards and the process of consolidation of your district. I will record and transcribe what we say. It is important that the transcription be verbatim so that I do not paraphrase something you have said and interpret it incorrectly. Afterward, I will ask you to review the narrative I will compose based on our interview. I want to ensure that I have accurately captured what you intended to say.**

**In this study I am exploring how consolidation affects school boards and what actions make school boards able to function in the best interest of the students in the district. I am providing the questions to you beforehand so that you will have time to think about them. I want to know your perspective so feel free to discuss your views. As the interview proceeds I may ask you some additional questions for clarification purposes. Are you ready to begin?**

**Interview Questions**

1. How do board members in rural consolidated districts describe experience of consolidating?
  - a. Describe your experiences through consolidation
  - b. What differences do you see in the board after consolidation?
  - c. Describe how the relationship among the community and board as well as between board members and describe how it is different now?
  
2. What factors affect board members of consolidated rural school boards ability to act effectively as a board?
  - a. From the perspective of board members, what factors influence how consolidated board members make decisions effectively?

APPENDIX G (continued)

- i. In your time on the board how did the board solve the most controversial issue you have faced?
- ii. How do you ensure all students in your district are being represented in decisions made by the board?
- iii. Do you feel there a difference felt between students in the home district and the district that was consolidated? What is the difference? Traditions?
- iv. How does the board gather necessary information for decisions?
- b. From the perspective of board members, what factors influence how consolidated board members connect to the community?
  - i. Describe how the communities associated with your district interact now that the schools are consolidated?
  - ii. How did the relationship within the community change during and after the merger?
  - iii. How do you communicate with those who elected you to the board?
  - iv. What steps does the board take to understand the needs of the district?
  - v. How did you address expectations after merger?
- c. From the perspective of board members, what factors influence how rural consolidated board members junction as a group?
  - i. Describe your relationship with other board members in meetings?  
Outside board meetings?
  - ii. How does your board show support of their decisions?

APPENDIX G (continued)

- iv. Within the board what hurdles were there to overcome due to merger?
  - v. What obstacles do you see in the relationship of the board members due to the merger?
- d. From the perspective of the board members, what factors influence how consolidated rural schools exercise authority?
  - i. Describe your relationship with the superintendent.
  - ii. Describe the consideration of how to deal with the administration from the district being merged.
- e. From the perspective of the board members, what factors influence how the board works toward improvement?
  - i. How do you get informed of the training available for board members?
  - ii. What or who do you feel provided you with the most information or training for your board position and how did that change after the merger?
- f. From the perspective of the board members, what factors influence how the board plans strategically for the district?
  - i. How does your board plan for the future and how did this process change after merger?
  - ii. Describe how the plan for your district addresses both communities in your district.

**University of Oklahoma**  
**Institutional Review Board**  
**Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study**

**Project Title:** Factors Influencing Effective Actions in Consolidated Rural School Boards: A Case Study of One Oklahoma District

**Principal Investigator:** Deborah Tennison

**Department:** Educational Supervision and Administration

You are being asked to volunteer for this research study. This study is being conducted at your school district. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a current board member within a rural consolidated school district.

Please read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to take part in this study.

**Purpose of the Research Study**

The purpose of this study is to identify factors that influence effective actions within the board of education in a rural consolidated district.

**Number of Participants**

About 10 people will take part in this study.

**Procedures**

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following:

1. Complete a School Board Member survey to measure the effectiveness your school board's actions.
2. Take part in a personal interview. The interview will last about 45 to 60 minutes. Any follow up information or questions may be asked via phone call or email.
3. Observation your district's monthly school board meeting.

**Length of Participation**

The length of time required for this study is as follows:

- 1 – Forty-five to sixty minute interview
- 1 – Survey to complete which should be able to complete within 45 minutes



## APPENDIX H (continued)

2 to 3 – Observations of school board meetings one to three hours depending on the length of the board meeting.

### **This study has the following risks:**

This research has a minimal risk. The only risk associated with this study would be the possibility would be the board members feeling their trust or confidence being violated. However with the use of pseudonyms should eliminate any threat of this.

### **Benefits of being in the study are**

There are not monetary benefits to being in this study. The only benefit is a personal realization that your input in this research may make our educational governance system more effective for school districts.

### **Confidentiality**

In published reports, there will be no information included that will make it possible to identify you without your permission. Research records will be stored securely and only approved researchers will have access to the records.

There are organizations that may inspect and/or copy your research records for quality assurance and data analysis. These organizations include the OU Institutional Review Board.

### **Compensation**

You will not be reimbursed for your time and participation in this study.

### **Voluntary Nature of the Study**

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you withdraw or decline participation, you will not be penalized or lose benefits or services unrelated to the study. If you decide to participate, you may decline to answer any question and may choose to withdraw at any time.

### **Audio Recording of Study Activities**

To assist with accurate recording of participant responses, interviews may be recorded on an audio recording device. You have the right to refuse to allow such recording without penalty. Please select one of the following options.

I consent to audio recording.      \_\_\_      Yes      \_\_\_      No.

### **Contacts and Questions**

If you have concerns or complaints about the research, the researcher(s) conducting this study can be contacted at:

Deborah Tennison (918) 519-9910 or email Deborah.a.tennison-1@ou.edu

Or

Lisa Bass (814) 571-3858 or email dr.bass@ou.edu

Contact the researcher(s) if you have questions or if you have experienced a research-related injury.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, concerns, or complaints about the research and wish to talk to someone other than individuals on the research team or if you cannot reach the research team, you may contact the University of Oklahoma – Norman Campus Institutional Review Board (OU-NC IRB) at 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu.

***You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records. If you are not given a copy of this consent form, please request one.***

### **Statement of Consent**

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received satisfactory answers. I consent to participate in the study.

---

Signature

Date