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Rural schools: Leveraging resources through school district collaboration

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**PURDUE UNIVERSITY
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Thesis/Dissertation Acceptance**

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By Amy Marie Rauch

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RURAL SCHOOLS: LEVERAGING RESOURCES THROUGH SCHOOL DISTRICT COLLABORATION

For the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Date

RURAL SCHOOLS: LEVERAGING RESOURCES
THROUGH SCHOOL DISTRICT COLLABORATION

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Faculty

of

Purdue University

by

Amy Marie Rauch

In Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
of
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This dissertation is dedicated to my mom, Lorie, who has been with me and has pushed me and has nurtured me through this entire dissertation journey! I could not have done this without you Mom- I love you! I also dedicate this to my nieces Cassie and Katie and to my brother Eric all of whom have pushed me to finish this dissertation. And last, I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my cousin Deron.

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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the process of school district collaboration that ensued in four mostly rural school districts in Indiana, following a study conducted by an external university group. The purpose of the study was to explore and present ways that the school districts could work together to share resources. The superintendent and school board members for each participating school district commissioned the study and led the subsequent collaboration process. The university study investigated ways that the four districts could cooperate to better serve students, including considering consolidation if compelling reasons were found indicating that the four school districts should consolidate. This study examines the collaboration efforts between these four school districts, which have been continuing from the time when the study was completed by the external group. Since the time that the study was conducted two new superintendents have been appointed. They have embraced this collaboration, so that even though some of the actors have changed, the collaboration process continues.

The questions that guided this research were: 1) What are some of the positive results of the collaboration efforts occurring today? 2) What are some of the negative

results of the collaboration efforts occurring today? 3) How has each school district since the original study encouraged collaboration efforts with the other districts? 4) How has each school board encouraged or discouraged collaboration efforts from the original study? 5) How has the community encouraged or discouraged collaboration efforts stemming from the original study? 6) Is collaboration across small school districts a solution to the issues of declining enrollments and budget reductions?

The questions were addressed by interviewing the current superintendents to understand how the original study and the ensuing collaboration process have impacted their school districts. The interviews indicate that the superintendents like working together and meet regularly to discuss and find ways to better share services and enhance student success and save money within their school budget. They have extended the collaboration process to include opportunities for principals to meet on their own to discuss how to share resources. Further, the process has been extended so that teachers are involved in collaborating as well. The findings from this study suggest that while school district collaboration is unlikely to save enough money to offset steep enrollment declines, there are numerous benefits that accrue from working together on issues of common concern. Other school districts will gain from the collaboration efforts and will help better serve their students while saving some money for their districts.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

As Indiana school districts face new challenges that include school competition, a growing charter school segment, vouchers, open enrollments across district lines, new evaluations for teachers and administrators tied to compensation based on student performance, reduced tax revenues due to tax caps, and decreasing enrollments in small school districts, it seems prudent for school districts to find ways to collaborate to enhance curriculum choices and to find ways to save in their school budget. School districts need to collaborate to survive financially and retain students. One answer to this dilemma of increased educational expectations in a time of decreased educational resources is the consolidation of school districts into a single larger district, but many school districts do not want to consolidate their districts with a nearby district, which inevitably leads to closing schools. Theobald states that:

...consolidation has been a defining characteristic of educational history throughout the twentieth century. This characteristic was driven by a powerful assumption, albeit an unsubstantiated one, concerning the best way to go about the business of public schooling. And that assumption is that “bigger is better.” (Bard, Gardener, & Wieland, 2006, p. 41)

The financial justification for closing or reorganizing rural schools is still prevalent in the minds of policy-makers and educational professionals today, and is a major concern for many rural communities.

One such policy maker group in Indiana put together a report from the Indiana Government Efficiency Commission's report (2006) and gave it to Governor Mitch Daniels from a subcommittee formed from the Indiana General Assembly which stated there was potential for cost savings through privatizing some services, streamlining competitive bid processes, cutting administrative costs, and structural realignment. The report stated that it would be appropriate for school corporations with low pupil counts to consider consolidation (Spradlin, Fatima, Hess & Plucker, 2010). This report led to the Indiana Department of Education offering a series of one year grants of \$25,000 to help offset the cost of a school consolidation study for school corporations interested in the feasibility of merging or consolidating services with another school corporation (Spradlin et al., 2010). Seven such grants were awarded in seven counties throughout Indiana. Four school districts within the same county examined in this study applied for and received such a grant, resulting in a report to the Our (pseudonym) County Steering Committee from the university- an external group producing information on: Demographic Projections; Student Programs; Facilities; and, Personnel and Administrative/Business Functions . The Our County study showed areas in which the four school districts could collaborate to save money and enhance curricular offerings, an important consideration since the four school districts were facing economic pressures due to declining enrollments and changes in the state funding patterns. The four school

districts within Our County developed a collaboration process following receipt of the university report in order to work on recommendations in the report and develop new areas for collaboration.

While state level policy makers in many states have touted the benefits of consolidation of small school districts, the picture in the districts is often somewhat different. School administrators, teachers, and community members view consolidation of school districts as something that the legislature wants to happen, but communities and their school boards do not necessarily want to consolidate with nearby school districts. School districts oppose consolidation because they want to maintain their identity. The four school districts in the Our County study are looking to keep their identity by looking for areas in which they can collaborate to help cope with budget pressures and extend curricular programs without sacrificing their autonomy.

“Rural areas have a strong tradition of working together to accomplish large projects. Collaboration within and between communities may provide one of the most immediate and feasible strategies for districts that wish to reduce costs and increase educational services while retaining independence” (Broton, Mueller, Schultz, and Goana, 2009, p.14). The four school districts all work well together and have accomplished various collaboration efforts because they have come together to do what is best for their district and students.

One of the most common approaches to collaboration between nearby school districts is shared services. School districts have similar needs for equipment and resources, and run similar programming. Shared services are a way to stretch resources

across districts by cooperating on common problems and needs. According to Broton et al. (2009), some of the most common shared resources include the following:

- Staff including teachers, therapists, counselors, nurses, technology coordinators, curriculum coordinators, business managers, custodians, bus drivers, and other support staff.
- Supplies and equipment including paper and other office supplies, curriculum including textbooks, computers and other technology, food, fuel, and machinery including snow plows and lawn mowers.
- Professional development and other opportunities to reduce professional isolation.
- Classes including foreign language, vocational, advanced-level, and special education, or an entire grade level is combined.
- Early childhood, adult basic, and continuing education services.
- Extracurricular activities.
- Grant applications written and applied for together (p. 15).

Our County Study

As schools work to collaborate in many of the above areas, communication to the community is vital. Because consolidation has negative undertones, it is important for the four districts in this study to share what they do with the public/community, emphasizing that they are collaborating, not preparing to consolidate into a single school district. The four school districts in this study have made a concerted effort to share publicly the areas

in which they are collaborating with each other, in an effort to forestall misunderstandings and secure community support for their collaboration efforts.

Statement of the Problem

Across the nation schools are experiencing increasing expectations for academic excellence. This is true in Indiana as well. At the same time, however, many Indiana schools are experiencing serious budgetary constraints due to the Indiana educational reforms that hold school accountable with higher standards and new laws that affect the way a school budget receives monies from the state. With greater calls for accountability and limited resources, rural schools must maximize educational outcomes while maintaining economic stability. The purpose of this study is to explore efforts by four school districts to collaborate in various ways to leverage their resources and better serve their constituents while maintaining their autonomy and community identity in a time of increased expectations for performance and declining financial stability. This study describes the collaboration processes the four districts developed and their accomplishments, identifies issues they encountered, and delineates the steps they took to ameliorate these issues. The study ends with some reflections on the utility of collaboration as a strategy for meeting educational needs while pooling resources to try and avoid consolidation.

Significance of the Study

The demand for resources has been rising in rural school districts, but the resource supply has been falling. Population shifts throughout the state of Indiana are changing the demographics of many rural areas: many now have increasing percentages of poor, minority, and special education students who are more expensive to educate based on their needs. At the same time, new legislation passed by the state of Indiana has changed how money is allocated. The general fund of a school budget is now based solely on student enrollment. If student enrollment declines, the school district loses money in their general fund budget from the state. Districts are looking to find ways to cut spending costs and to save money while not affecting the school curriculum for students.

By examining the current collaboration efforts of District A, District B, District C and District D—four school districts in close proximity within Our County—this study can help other school districts learn how to similarly improve student services while reducing school budgets. The collaboration process that has occurred within the four school districts is a potential model for other districts that are looking for ways to reduce costs in their budget while maintaining and in some cases expanding their programming. School districts facing similar circumstances to the four districts in this study may find collaboration to be a viable alternative to consolidation.

This study also evaluates the impacts of the recent educational reforms in Indiana on the collaboration efforts for the four school districts. The state budget cuts that are occurring across the state of Indiana have created difficulties for each school system wishing to stay financially afloat without having to reduce the number of teachers and

personnel- commonly known as reductions in force (RIF). School districts are facing higher demands due to the No Child Left Behind Act. Testing, accountability and school improvement are areas that are addressed in NCLB and thus affect school districts across the country because they have to address these requirements.

The passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (U.S. Department of Education) highlights the continuing problems associated with funding quality primary and secondary public education in the United States. In large part, this new legislation places greater responsibilities on state and local governments in terms of funding and standards. (Dodson and Garrett, 2004, p. 270)

These four school districts are well situated to share their curriculum and programs and other resources to reduce costs in their budgets and meet NCLB requirements. They are geographically close to one another, and many of the personnel of the districts have worked in the county for many years, and they know each other well. Most importantly, they have the will to collaborate. They have put into place a collaboration process that has enabled them to accomplish much. Sharing resources and collaborating is a strategy that can be used by districts to look at ways to reduce costs in their budget while maintaining and hopefully expanding their educational programming.

Research Questions

Interviews conducted with current superintendents from the four county school districts and the service center director (during the time of the study) supplies the data sources for this study. The superintendents shared their current experiences with what is happening since the collaboration process was put into place. All of the superintendents

are knowledgeable about the university report that was produced for the Our County Steering Committee, the current Indiana education reforms that have taken effect since 2011, and how these reforms have affected their school district financially. The following research questions guided the collection and analysis of data in this study.

1. What are some of the positive results of the collaboration efforts occurring today?
2. What are some of the negative results of the collaboration efforts occurring today?
3. How has each school district encouraged collaboration efforts with the other districts?
4. How has each school board encouraged or discouraged collaboration efforts?
5. How has the community encouraged or discouraged collaboration efforts?
6. Is collaboration across small school districts a solution to the issue of budget reductions?

Limitations of the Study

Interviews were conducted with the current superintendents of each school district of which two have assumed their positions subsequent to the initiation of the collaboration process, and the service center director at the time. The two superintendents who were part of the original founding of the collaboration process were not interviewed because they have retired. However, the two current superintendents are well versed in how the collaboration process has affected their districts. They understand why the four

school districts need to collaborate and they are actively participating in the ongoing collaboration process.

There are numerous limitations to this study. Because case studies like this one involve a one on one interview, some bias could result from the interviewer. To limit the bias the interviewer looked at the data as is and did not add personal experience to the statements given. The small size of this study (only four school districts) also limits its findings; the findings are therefore necessarily more suggestive than definitive. While the findings of this study suggest actions that could be taken in other school districts, they are definitive only for the districts examined in this study.

Operational Definitions of Terms

Collaboration. Simply defined, collaboration takes place when members of an inclusive learning community work together as equals to assist students to succeed in the classroom. (Powell, n. d., para. 10)

Consolidation. School consolidation is the practice of combining two or more schools for educational or economic benefits. A consolidated school can offer an expanded curriculum and a more prominent identity in the community while reducing costs through economy of scale. On the other hand, consolidation can incur numerous liabilities, especially if the schools to be closed are the sole providers of community services. (Nelson, 1985, para. 1)

Rural and Town school. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the urban-centric locale codes used to describe a school's location- for rural are the following:

41 - Rural, Fringe:

Census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster.

42 - Rural, Distant:

Census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster.

43 - Rural, Remote:

Census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster.

32 - Town, Distant:

Territory inside an urban cluster that is more than 10 miles and less than or equal to 35 miles from an urbanized area. (National Center for Education Statistics)

Superintendent. “a person who oversees or directs some work, enterprise, establishment, organization, or district; supervisor” (dictionary.com, 2007, para. 1).

Summary

Many small districts do not leverage their resources with nearby school districts to enhance curriculum opportunities or save money in their budget. By collaborating with each other, districts will be able to share resources, potentially enhance learning opportunities for students, and maintain both their autonomy and identity within each of their respective communities.

This study may encourage other school districts to consider collaboration efforts with nearby school districts as a strategy to avoid consolidation while increasing curricular success and financial savings. The demographic, economic, and political pressures that school districts in Indiana are facing are similar to those in many other states, so this study could help districts in other states look at ways to collaborate. The lessons of the four school districts show that these forces need not devastate school

districts if they are willing to collaborate in leveraging their combined resources to better achieve their educational missions.

CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

This chapter reviews the literature of school districts and how they have collaborated to enjoy some of the proposed benefits of consolidation while continuing to maintain their separate identities. Many school districts face some combination of declining enrollments and consequent declining financial resources. At the same time, they are under pressure to offer high quality educational programming. The literature review provides models for how such cross-district collaboration may be carried out, and the benefits that may reasonably be expected. It also provides a way to understand the collaboration process in Our County against a more national backdrop. In order to understand some of the issues that small rural schools face, it is useful to revisit what is known about the characteristics of rural school districts and communities.

Characteristics of Rural Schools

Educators know that rural schools are distinct from suburban and urban school districts. Typically, but not always, rural schools are smaller, but the largest set of differences stems from their rural locations. Reeves (2003) stated:

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), in 1999/2000 there were 89,594 public schools and in the U.S., of which 37,548 were located in rural areas or small towns. Schools in rural areas or small towns account for about 42 percent of all schools in the nation and 30 percent of all students. Characteristics unique to rural areas include geographic isolation, small populations, and declining enrollments. (p.5)

That statistic reveals that just under half of the school districts in the U.S. are rural school districts so the study of collaboration of rural schools is crucial to our educational future. Rural school districts are trying to stay afloat in a time of budget cuts, and wanting to avoid consolidation so as to keep their school identity and community together. A serious problem rural school districts are facing is loss in enrollment, which means a loss in money for their school budget. The other issue dealing with rural America is the isolation of the rural area, coupled with population outflow, means that the rural area may be characterized by large amounts of poverty, and many rural citizens are unable to meet the challenges of the new economy. The older rural community members are not as educated and the younger members that are educated seek employment in larger cities due to better wages and job availability. (Stern, 1994, p. 3)

Many rural communities are losing jobs such as factories closing, and many rural communities are left with decreased farming opportunities due to the rise of factory farms. Students graduating from high school venture to larger towns and cities in hopes to find a decent paying job. Rural factors are different in various areas of the country as well. In Indiana many of the factories and auto industry have left, and that makes it

difficult for rural areas to keep families from moving unless they farm. The national consolidation of rural schools and small schools has been taking effect “[a]s early as 1874, smaller schools were merging into larger ones. In the 1930’s there were 128,000 school districts and over 238,000 schools in America. By 1980, the number of school districts had dropped to 16,000 and schools to 61,000. The number reported between March 1980 and March 1988, the number of rural farm children decreased by 25 percent from 1.6 million to 1.2 million” (Cummins, Chance, & Steinhoff, 1997, p.1).

Indiana is also facing state budget cuts for school districts and with declining enrollment comes a declining school budget. Nicole Goodson has reported that Indiana Governor Mitch Daniels issued a statement on December 28, 2009 that he would cut educational funding K-12 that would begin January 2010. She goes on to state that, “...the Board of Education is recommending that schools join the State employee health plan, ensure that school employees contribute equally to insurance plans, limit school board members’ benefits, share services between school corporations, close and sell unnecessary buildings, reduce employee travel and association fee expenses, institute an administrative staff hiring freeze and freeze salaries for all school corporation employees.” (Goodson, 2010, para. 3) These budget cuts create pressure that would necessitate school districts in Indiana finding ways to cut their own school budgets to continue to function.

Rural schools have stresses that urban school districts may not have, which would lead rural schools down the path to consolidation in order to prevent financial collapse. These stresses in Indiana are partly the stresses that many rural areas face, of declining

enrollment, and partly a result of policy changes in Indiana that have worsened the financial position of small, rural school districts.

Policy Changes in Indiana

In Indiana new legislative laws have been passed which has changed the way schools do business. The following are a summary of the Indiana laws that have been enacted since 2011. The Indiana Senate Democrats list a brief synopsis of the laws that go in to effect, and beginning July 1, 2011 the following education laws are described:

“School Vouchers: A plan to redirect state funds from public schools to pay for tuition and fees at private schools through a state voucher program has been sent to the governor for his signature. Under House Enrolled Act 1003 (2011), families who qualify for the federal free and reduced lunch program (annual income less than \$40,800 for a family of four), will be eligible to receive a voucher equal to 90% of the public school corporation’s per-pupil funding. With a household income of about \$61,000, a student could receive a voucher in the amount of 50% of the school corporation’s per-pupil funding. The maximum voucher amount for students in grades 1 through 8 will be limited to \$4,500 per school year. The act includes a short phase-in period allowing up to 7,500 available for the 2011-2012 school year, 15,000 available for the 2012-2013 school year and no cap after that.” (“Indiana Senate Democrats: The Briefing Room”, 2011, para. 1)

“Charter Schools: House Enrolled Act 1002 (2011) is the state’s plan for the expansion of charter schools and virtual charter schools in Indiana. HEA 1002

would expand charter school sponsors to include universities and private colleges with 4-year education programs, the mayor of Indianapolis, education service centers and a newly created statewide charter board. For any group other than a mayor to sponsor a charter, a public hearing would be required within the district. The act would allow conversion from a traditional public school to a charter school if the school board votes in favor of conversion or if 51% of the parents in a school sign a petition requesting conversion to a charter school. It would also make unused public school buildings available for rent or purchase to charter schools. The act has been amended to require 90% of charter school teachers be licensed or in the process of obtaining a teaching license. Public funding available to virtual charter schools would be expanded and the current limit on the number of students statewide that can be enrolled in those schools at state expense would be eliminated.” (“Indiana Senate Democrats: The Briefing Room”, 2011, para. 2)

“Teachers: Controversial legislation limiting teacher collective bargaining rights was signed into law April 20. Senate enrolled Act 575 (2011) will limit what may be collectively bargained by teachers to salary, wages, hours, paid time off and wage-related benefits including retirement. Two immediate changes will limit contract terms to end with the state’s two-year budget cycle and stop negotiations on teacher evaluation procedures and criteria. Among other provisions, the new law will terminate current terms of the members of the Indiana Education Relations Board effective upon passage. New members will be

replaced with appointments made by the governor.” (“Indiana Senate Democrats: The Briefing Room”, 2011, para. 3)

“Legislation tying teacher evaluations to student performance and test scores has been approved by the General Assembly and now awaits the governor’s final approval. Senate enrolled Act I (2011) establishes an annual staff performance evaluation that categorizes teachers as highly effective, effective, improvement necessary or ineffective. Although the act will not cut teachers’ pay, it will allow schools to withhold salary increases due to poor performance ratings. Salary raises based upon completion of additional college degrees or graduate credit hours will not be permitted under the act. A teacher’s seniority must not account for more than 33 percent of the basis for salary increases. However, the local salary structure may still be collectively bargained. The act exempts charter schools from due process requirements for educators.” (“Indiana Senate Democrats”, 2011, para. 4)

“Senate Enrolled Act I (2011) also provides that a student may not be instructed for two consecutive years by two different teachers who have been rated as “ineffective,” if avoidable. If not avoidable, parents must be notified prior to the start of the second consecutive school year. A teacher who receives a rating of ineffective, under the act, will be considered a probationary teacher. If that teacher receives a rating of ineffective in the year immediately following their original rating, their contract may be terminated. On the other hand, a teacher who enters into a contract after receiving 3 “effective” ratings in a row during a 5-year

period will be considered “established,” and their contract will then be considered “indefinite” until they receive a rating of “ineffective” two or more years in a row or a new contract is established. If a school corporation plans to modify its staff evaluation plan, it must submit the plan to the Department of Education for approval in order to qualify for any grant funding.” (“Indiana Senate Democrats: The Briefing Room”, 2011, para. 5)

“Education Funding: The new state budget House Enrolled Act I (2011) for fiscal years 2011-2013 establishes a new funding base for K-12 education, the largest appropriation in the state budget. The new funding base incorporates the governor’s 2010 \$300 million cut as a permanent base reduction. The budget includes a new \$1,000 tax deduction that will be provided to families with children in private schools and an “early graduation scholarship” of \$4,000 to a student who graduates from high school before grade 12. The early graduation funds will be deducted from the student’s high school’s funding. Another new K-12 provision contained in the budget will allow the Indiana Department of Education to bring private companies to take over public schools after 5 years of poor performance. Referred to as *turnaround academies*, the schools will be managed by private companies.” (“Indiana Senate Democrats: The Briefing Room”, 2011, para. 6)

The cumulative effect that these laws have on small rural districts, such as the four in Our County, is decreased revenues in their General Fund budget, which is the fund that pays for salaries and benefits of employees. With loss of school funding, district

superintendents along with their school board members need to look closely at their budget and see how to save money. The implementation of the Common Core Standards has put an expense on school districts to train their teachers in the standards and buy resources aligned to the Common Core Standards. Funds now need to be spent on the recently adopted Indiana Standards because Indiana is no longer going to use the Common Core Standards; however, the new Indiana Standards are remarkably similar to the Common Core Standards.

If districts close schools they risk a charter school coming in their community and students attending the charter school, which means a loss in funding to their school budget because the money tied to a student follows the student to the school they attend. The NCLB waiver has put an increased need on schools to maintain a school letter grade C or higher. If Indiana were to lose the waiver, school districts would lose funding. When families look to move to a community they want to make sure their student(s) are attending a school with the letter grade of an A or B. Teachers and administrators are held now to a higher accountability with their test scores for their school to receive a school letter grade of an A or B. Money needs to be spent on resources to help teachers and administrators ensure the success of a strong curriculum and professional development to attain a school letter grade of an A or B. All of these new policies have affected how a school district educates, and it costs money to educate correctly.

School districts in Indiana are funded by the state (Indiana) based on their ADM (Average Daily Membership) that is calculated twice during the school year to determine

their general fund funding for the school year. Many rural districts including the four school districts in this study have seen enrollment decrease year to year.

Table 1

Our County School Corporation Enrollment by Grade

Enrollment	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14
School District A	979	897	884	894	852
School District B	816	772	765	751	719
School District C	746	760	758	762	758
School District D	2,596	2,549	2,482	2,473	2,449
County Total	5,137	4,978	4,889	4,880	4,778

Note. From “School Corporation Enrollment” by Indiana Department of Education, 2014. Copyright 2014 by Author

The mix of policy changes, population shifts, increased educational expectations, and funding shortages have generated within the four districts in this study a desire to work together for the common good of them all.

Rationale for Collaboration

Schools across the state are looking for ways to cut their budget without affecting personnel— especially teachers—so they must look to other areas and programs to cut their budget expenses. Sharing resources with nearby school districts to reduce costs makes sense. However, schools need to put their competitive sides to rest and do what is

best not only for students, but for the district. Some of the research on ways in which school districts can cope with declining financial resources has been focused on the consolidation process, but it is an open question whether consolidation of districts will necessarily be what is best for students. Many rural schools, such as the four in Our County, are afraid of losing the identity that makes them different than the other school districts, and they fear other negative effects of closing local schools. Dodson and Garrett stated that,

Opponents of consolidation, especially those in rural areas, fear a loss of representation and the closeness of the school districts to the general public because the social fabric of many rural communities is centered on the local school district. Consolidation may increase travel times and reduce student safety as the distance between a school and home increases. Opponents argue that the forgone saving from consolidation reflect the value the individual school districts place on autonomy. (2004, p. 11)

School districts will need to work together so as not to consolidate, but instead share their curriculum and programs to reduce costs in their budgets. Sharing AP (Advanced Placement) teachers when a school may average about 10 or less students in each AP class would cut costs in teacher personnel and thus only one teacher would need to be utilized while the students would either connect via the TV or internet, or they could drive to the school where the course is being taught by the teacher. Clubs and after/before school programs could also be shared to reduce the travel to tournaments/competitions and only one coach needed for the schools. Additional

collaboration would come from "...the development and use of distance learning and other technologies in isolated settings is increasing and can be expected to further ameliorate curriculum inequalities" (Cotton, 1996, p. 4). Some studies that have occurred in other states will describe how collaboration amongst school districts has been positive.

Benefits of Collaboration

School district identity is important for a community because it defines them; people in a community identify with the school district that they all attended. Graduates can make statements such as, "We beat our rival school a few miles away my senior year, or we got a better education from X high school than from our rival Y high school."

Rural school educators believe that "...small schools are able to perform functions that are impossible in larger schools. Small schools usually provide closer relations between faculty and administration, a smaller teacher-pupil ratio, and an enhanced potential for individualized instruction" (Nelson, 1985, para. 8). These characteristics are what attract families to rural school districts. Parents want their children to get individual attention and they like the small class sizes, so that makes wanting to consolidate difficult in rural school districts (Berliner, 1990).

While supporters have argued that consolidation of districts can save money, it also generates new expenses. Students would spend a longer time on the bus if consolidation occurs, and this would mean more cost to a district. Howley and Howley (2001) stated that, "Not only do long bus rides extend the length of the school day for many rural children, so too do long wait times at school (i.e., before the start of and after the conclusion of the instructional day)." (para. 14) If rural districts consolidated and

students had to be on a bus longer, parents who rely on their children to help around the house or possibly on the farm might not be pleased. The long bus rides also have an effect on the student's achievement in school and their participation in extracurricular activities. Another factor is that it increases the transportation budget. (Howley and Howley, 2001). For school districts it would be a longer route to and from school and more gas and wear and tear on a bus, and longer hours for the bus drivers to be compensated.

Consolidation of districts almost always means the closure of schools, since this is where the big savings would be found. Parents are leery of school closings and the aggregation of students into larger more remote schools, for several reasons. One is the loss of the local school, with its smaller student body, ease of curriculum articulation, high levels of parent and community involvement and support, and lack of serious discipline issues. Another is the impact of closing a school on a community. School closings mean layoffs of teachers and staff, and the likelihood that parents may begin to shop for goods and services in the larger communities where their children now attend school (Berliner, 1990). In an effort to secure some of the financial savings of consolidation and yet maintain the independence of the local school, many districts have turned to collaborating on shared services.

Shared Services

The broad area of shared services is one of the primary ways that school districts attempt to save money through collaboration. "Districts use various approaches when they choose to share services- some central to the district mission and others more

tangential” (Howley, Howley, Hendrickson, Belcher, & Howley, 2012, p. 2). Shared services in facilities or equipment are less central to the operations between school districts as would be the decision to share personnel, courses, or programs (Howley, et al., 2012).

With less extensive shared services, each community retains its schools and school board, some or all of its administration, and often its athletic programs and other extra-curricular activities. More extensive arrangements involve the sharing of staff- often administrators and teachers of specialized subjects (e.g., music, industrial technology). The practices of course and grade sharing tighten the connections between districts to an even greater extent.(Howley, et al., 2012, p. 2)

The four school districts in the current study are doing more sharing of operational services than curricular collaboration, but curricular collaboration is nevertheless part of the mix. For example, they have a procedure in place to potentially share a teacher when the need arises. A reason the four school districts are collaborating on a monthly basis is to look at their resources and see what they can share. “Although the reasons for considering shared services and consolidation are often the same, districts that implement shared services tend to receive more community support than those that close schools or merge with other districts” (Howley, et al., 2012, p.2-3). This is important with the four school districts because there was talk in one of the districts of wanting to consolidate, but the other districts were not interested in consolidation, nor did their communities support it. The school boards are in favor of working together and support and attend the collaboration meetings. Are shared services a route to

consolidation? Is this study going to eventually end with consolidation of school districts in Indiana and other rural schools across America? Perhaps, but until consolidation actually happens, school districts can use this strategy of collaboration and sharing their services to show the community, students, and staff that the districts can maintain their independence and successfully educate their students through supporting and working with each other.

Shared services are a way to avoid consolidation, and numerous examples of shared services can be found across the country. The Fairfield County school district in Ohio has decided to share a superintendent to cut costs in two districts (Lane, 2011). The school districts in Niagara and Orleans New York have determined that they could save millions by sharing payroll, purchasing and business offices. With New York's dismal budget, school consolidation is becoming more of a reality. In New York regionally, school populations are shrinking while at the same time costs are going up by nearly six percent each year, much of which is coming from unfunded mandates, pension or health care costs. These realities are what are driving the need to do things differently. Sharing services will allow more money to be available for the classroom and academics (Mattera, 2011).

Another positive example of shared services can be found in Ohio in the three rural school districts of Newton, Ansonia, and Mississinawa Valley. They will save a combined \$157,000 by sharing a treasurer. It's more palatable to the public to leave districts intact, but share the kinds of support services that do not directly affect

classroom instruction and extracurriculars. Nick Hamilton, the traveling treasurer, is an example of such cooperation (Kissell, 2011).

Greene County, Ohio was singled out for praise in the KnowledgeWorks study for its new Shared Service Delivery Initiative, a multidistrict effort that is studying the possibility of shared systems for various functions such as banking, payroll, vacation and substitute teacher scheduling, health care, accounts payable and receivable, financial reporting and travel expenses (Dockery, 2009).

Quality of the Curriculum

Rural schools tend to be small, which would suggest that the breadth of curriculum would have to be less than what would be offered by a large school. In most cases that assumption is true, but rural schools still offer a decent curriculum with what they have in teachers and resources. Cotton (1996) agreed:

Many educators past and present have argued for large schools on grounds of curriculum quality. They argue that larger schools can offer more numerous and more varied curricular offerings than small schools can. Therefore, operating small schools with more limited curricula is unfair to the students who attend them. (p.3)

In a 1986 study of how curricular offerings of large secondary school compared with the offerings of small secondary schools, Monk (1986) explained:

...an expanded, more specialized, more diversified curriculum is not guaranteed by large enrollment levels alone...it is possible to offer at the 400 pupil level a

curriculum that compares quite favorably in terms of breadth and depth with curriculums in much larger settings. (p. 25)

The present study will show how other small rural districts can work together to leverage resources through school district collaboration. Through the use of collaboration the school districts in Our County are able to increase curriculum choices for students while saving costs in their budget through the use of collaboration for teacher professional development. To put the current study in context examples of some state-level initiatives promoted to encourage schools to collaborate and share resources are shared in the sections that follow.

Massachusetts

The state of Massachusetts was facing the problem of educational budget cuts K-12 and the MOEC (Massachusetts Organization of Educational Collaboratives) has put in place resources for school districts in Massachusetts. Collaboratives and School Committees are dedicated to the idea that cooperative efforts to solve problems and create capacity stretch the value of limited dollars. Today's Educational Collaboratives provide not only high quality, cost effective programming for the Commonwealth's most disabled students but have expanded their services to include:

- high quality professional development programs for teachers and administrators in the latest regular and special education pedagogy and practice;
- cooperative purchasing of paper and office supplies; software and hardware technology; and fuel oil, electricity and natural gas;
- the management of Medicaid billing services that yields the return of more than

21 million dollars to participating school districts and municipalities;

- a statewide special education transportation network saving participating school districts several million dollars annually in special education transportation costs.

(Enerson, 2009, Introduction Letter)

According to Enerson (2009) it is imperative that school district leaders keep the integrity of educational services while increasing the efficiency and cost effectiveness of the school district. She indicates that the majority of the Massachusetts public school districts (88%) are small, 5,000 students or less, and over half (175) have enrollments of 2,000 or less (Enerson, 2009, p. 2). In addition, the Educational Service Agencies or Educational Collaboratives are a resource for those districts to utilize for their high level of quality services and expertise in technology and professional development. The ESA's allow for school districts to save money and keep local control of their schools and is a way to avoid consolidation of smaller, neighborhood schools. Enerson states that, "Cost savings realized by the use of collaborative educational and support services are sizeable and well documented. If ESAs were utilized to their full potential in the Commonwealth, it is estimated that districts would see substantial savings" (p.2). The ESA strategy for a school district would be helpful as they look to collaboration as long as they utilize this valuable resource.

Michigan

Another example of school collaboration is happening in Michigan. The State of Michigan has Intermediate School Districts with a consortium of schools that collaborate

with one another and use the Intermediate School District as a resource. The Genesee Intermediate School District is one of 56 ISD's according to the Michigan Department of Education (2013-2014). What the Genesee ISD is about: "As a premier regional service agency, Genesee Intermediate School District (GISD) provides leadership that links learners to public schools, the community, the private sector, and public agencies in order to improve education and enhance lifelong learning for all citizens. GISD's educational leadership impacts instruction, learning, student achievement, productivity, and efficiency. Strong relationships and partnerships help form the foundation of many GISD services. GISD's operational funding comes from federal, state, and local sources, plus numerous grants" (Genesee Intermediate School District, 2015). The schools belong to one of the 56 ISD's to help with sharing of resources to save money for their district while enhancing curriculum and connections with their community. The ISD provides services for the consortium of schools in the areas of energy savings, educational resources, distance learning, research, and business connections.

Another initiative in collaboration with school districts in Michigan is the Institute for Local Government and the Municipal – School District Collaboration. The growing financial constraints placed on municipalities and school districts to find ways to save monies while improving service has led to shared services between the two entities whose boundaries overlap (Municipal - School District Collaboration, 2015). The targeted groups are municipal governments and school districts that overlap in Southeast Michigan. The initiative is taking place here first because they are the most likely to collaborate, then with their research from this initiative they will take it to communities

that have not collaborated (Municipal - School District Collaboration, 2015). The Institute for Local Government will convene teams from municipalities and school districts, facilitate the collaboration agreements, gather practical knowledge to help the units develop successful strategies, and will track the outcomes to report to future units for collaboration (Municipal - School District Collaboration, 2015). The initiative will have a team of four members that are comprised of city/village/township council, CVT administration, school board and superintendent's office. It's crucial that each area is represented for the collaboration to work in the four sessions that must be attended by members. Session 1 is where the team will build collaboration amongst one another. Session 2 is where they will chart their course for collaboration. Session 3 they will tackle tough issues, and formalize collaborative agreements. Session 4 they will assess the progress and effectiveness of what has been done (Municipal - School District Collaboration, 2015). School districts interested in being part of the initiative will then sign up to begin. Holding both units to a plan for collaboration is a great way to accomplish it so that no one quits and it does not get accomplished. The Our County collaboration process was led by a service center director that kept them on target and meeting regularly to accomplish their collaboration goals.

Ohio

The Ohio Appalachian Collaborative is another example of how school districts are collaborating with one another, and this collaborative is centered around rural schools. It began in 2010 to transform rural education to help students' graduate high school and prepare them for college or a career (Ohio Appalachian Collaborative, 2015).

Twenty one districts in the Appalachian region of Ohio came together to collaborate as a key strategy for educational reform (Ohio Appalachian Collaborative, 2015). Because they are working together they have accomplished:

- Staying ahead of the curve with the ever-shifting education landscape;
- Learned from each other and shared strategies for implementing key practices;
- Joined forces to generate resources to support district initiatives;
- Influenced state and national education policy with a unified voice;
- Built a strong community of practice for administrators and teachers through in-person meetings and virtual communications (Municipal - School District Collaboration, 2015).

They then take these rural education strategies and connect each other through collaboration, communication, technology and training (Municipal - School District Collaboration, 2015). They want for their rural students to have the same opportunities that students have coming from larger districts. The change they are making happen is encouraging collaboration and continuous professional development while they follow a shared vision (Municipal - School District Collaboration, 2015). They engage all community stakeholders through constant communication and feedback. They work with business groups and other organizations for economic development (Municipal - School District Collaboration, 2015). They want students to have rigorous courses such as AP, dual credit, Pre-AP, 8th grade Algebra, STEM exposure, and academic and career counseling (Municipal - School District Collaboration, 2015). The data they look to should measure student growth and those teachers that show high growth to share their

practices (Municipal - School District Collaboration, 2015). The strategies and model that the Ohio Appalachian Collaborative uses is comprehensive and is working for their rural school districts.

New Jersey and New York

Small school districts face challenges of offering the same services that large districts offer, but they must accomplish the challenge with smaller staffs. The use of shared services or collaboration in states such as New Jersey and New York will share valuable lessons with other states to help in a time of financial crisis. Services being shared in some New Jersey district are: pupil transportation, library resources, food services, curriculum development, teacher training, child study teams, special education, snow and trash removal, custodial services, and purchasing (Peed, 2007, p. 2). They are also looking at sharing administrator services. In New York they have Boards of Cooperative Education (BOCES):

New York has set up 37 BOCES to work with all school districts across the state except for the five largest districts (Rochester, Syracuse, Buffalo, Yonkers and New York City). The stated mission of the BOCES is to provide:

- 1) Shared cost-saving services to school districts;
- 2) Instruction in special subjects, e.g. math and environmental science;
- 3) Vocational training and internships in alternative education and gifted and talented education;
- 4) Forceful leadership in the implementation of state standards;
- 5) Resources to bring about school improvement (Enerson, 2009, p. 4).

In New York "...it is often more efficient and less costly to operate one central service than it is to have separate programs in each school district" (Peed, 2007, p. 3). Services provided from a central service in New York is not mandatory for school districts to be a part of, but they do offer instructional services, such as vocational programs and occupational therapy, and support services, including staff development, business services, and maintenance (Peed, 2007).

The four districts in Our County have started to collaborate in many of the same areas as New Jersey and New York, thus hoping to avoid consolidation and hoping to save monies in their budgets while enhancing curricular offerings.

Illinois Case Study

A case study was conducted in 1994 that focused on a four-district collaborative in Illinois that shared services for fifteen years to help keep their rural schools and community identity (Howley et al., 2012). The four districts were losing population so they used distance education, along with traveling teachers and they shared administrators (Howley, et al., 2012). The findings from the study found that the unavoidable next step was sharing of buildings through consolidation and that shared services in rural locations often lead to consolidation (Howley, et al., 2012). In the present study in Our County the four school districts are still in the first years of collaboration with one another, but as the state of Indiana continues to cut school budgets, the four school districts could in the end consolidate.

The findings of the Howley case study shows is that suburbanization, resistance to consolidation, and the choice to share services across the four school districts helped

them set goals for collaboration across their districts (Howley, et al., 2012). The findings revealed that only some resources could be shared. They focused a large amount of resources into sharing instructional and leadership resources (Howley, et al., 2012). Distance learning, relocation of some teachers, and some teachers divide time between schools were strategies that were used. They shared a superintendent, and they shared principals (Howley, et al., 2012). However teachers resented that they had to travel to provide support to students who received instruction via video conferencing, and it reduced morale of teachers that chose to stay because some left due to these strategies. The teachers that stayed saw the efforts as a heroic battle to keep all the districts functioning, while the students saw it as a losing battle (Howley, et al., 2012). Distance education was a strategy to be able to offer curricular offerings that larger school districts offer to students. Sharing teachers within the schools was another strategy used while some teachers traveled to two or more schools. Teachers felt the traveling had limited their creativity and diverted their energy from instructing students. Suburbanization results in families moving out of the rural districts and this leads to a lower tax base and loss of enrollment which schools depend upon for their budget. The shared services in this case study was a slow transformation into consolidation because students felt short changed in the strategies implemented and teachers felt they were stretched too thin, but parents and administrators felt they had kept the rural school districts sustainable (Howley, et al., 2012). It remains to be seen whether the four districts in Our County will follow the example of these Illinois districts and find eventually that collaboration cannot save them from consolidation over the long run.

Summary

School districts that are looking to collaborate need strategies to look to for support when they begin the process of collaboration with nearby school districts. The literature review provides these and shows what areas to look to for collaboration, but ultimately every school district and collaboration effort is unique to their area. What worked in Massachusetts, Michigan, Ohio, New York, New Jersey and the Illinois case study of four school districts may not work entirely for the Our County study. Will these strategies be enough for school districts to avoid the inevitable consolidation? That can only be answered after collaboration has been tried and based on the budget of each school district. The Our County Collaboration Study was designed to show the benefits of working together without consolidating even with the strains of being small rural schools. Policymakers urge consolidation so that school districts will save money like the report given to Governor Mitch Daniels in 2006. Rural school districts fear consolidation because they will lose their community identity and it will be difficult to maintain their autonomy if they have to consolidate. Sharing services like the ones mentioned in New Jersey and New York should combat consolidation for the time being in Indiana.

CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

Purpose of the Study

The current study explores efforts by four school districts to collaborate in various ways to leverage their resources and better serve their constituents while maintaining their autonomy and community identity as a strategy to avoid consolidation. This study examines each superintendent's assessment of current collaborations between the four school districts, how they viewed the collaboration process, and their thoughts on future collaboration.

With the new Indiana education reforms falling on school districts across the state of Indiana, small rural schools have struggled to maintain a high-level curriculum with a shrinking budget. They have fought against forces that are pushing them to consolidate because they believe that the districts would lose their community identity in the process.

Historically, schools have played a major role in the life of rural communities, transmitting important knowledge and values, serving as the locus for community events, and supporting economic and civic development... [H]owever, ... business and government interests often push them toward other purposes. Contributing to the breakdown between schooling and community are several prominent modernization efforts- standardization of rural curricula and educational performances; consolidation of smaller schools into conglomerates

serving several communities, and enticement of talented students to leave their home communities for high-paying jobs elsewhere. (Howley, et al., 2012, p.1)

The factors are stacked against the rural student and family due to economic impacts to their rural area. The four school districts in the current study are trying to help combat the departure of students to other counties by working together. There is little they can do in the near term to slow the population decline in the county, which has negative implications for their state funding. In the meantime, they believe that they can make their dollars go further and enhance their educational programming by working together. This study describes the collaboration processes they developed, identifies issues they encountered, and sets out the steps they took to ameliorate these issues. The study ends with some reflections on the utility of collaboration as a strategy for meeting educational needs while pooling resources.

Instrumentation

Superintendents and school board members have an important role in a school district: to ensure that the school budget is adhered to and payroll is met and that students graduate from their district. Consolidation is not a path they would like to take; instead through collaboration they hope to gain some of the economies of scale that are often the motivation for school district consolidation.

Commonly, rural schools and communities find themselves with little power to offset the consequences of changes they confront. Demographers continue to report population declines in many rural communities, as well as some rebounds associated with resettlement choices of retirees. Both dynamics contribute to

lower school-age enrollments, and the push for school and district consolidation continues. (Howley, et al., 2012, pp. 1-2)

To improve their declining enrollment issues the four school districts began to collaborate monthly in areas of academics, transportation, business, and budget. What are the features of the collaboration process developed between the four school districts? What has the process accomplished? What problems and issues emerged during the process of collaboration? How have the participants attempted to engage with these issues and problems? The answer to these questions will allow for stakeholders to understand the importance of collaboration between districts to meet their financial and enrollment challenges without having to consolidate.

The following research questions guided the collection and analysis of data in this study.

1. What are some of the positive results of the collaboration efforts occurring today?
2. What are some of the negative results of the collaboration efforts occurring today?
3. How has each school district encouraged collaboration efforts with the other districts?
4. How has each school board encouraged or discouraged collaboration efforts?
5. How has the community encouraged or discouraged collaboration efforts?
6. Is collaboration across small school districts a solution to the issue of budget reductions?

Population, Sampling, and Data Acquisition

The data for this study came from the current school district superintendents of the four school districts and the service center director who facilitated the collaboration process. The lived experiences of each superintendent and service center director were the basis for the data analysis because they were able to interpret the collaboration efforts. Each superintendent had the opportunity to explain in detail the collaboration efforts that have and are taking place among the school districts currently. Questions were developed and asked of each of the four superintendents and service center director. Minutes from meetings and press releases developed in the collaboration process were also collected and analyzed. The researcher looked through the minutes and press releases to analyze and categorize the areas in which the four school districts were collaborating.

Research Design

The study focused on four Indiana school districts that came together to collaborate after they received a grant to explore consolidation from the Indiana Department of Education. The collaboration process they initiated continues today. This study presents this collaboration process as a case study. “Case studies are a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher explores in depth a program, event, activity, process, of one or more individuals” (Creswell, 2009, p. 13). This study examined the perceptions and experiences of the four current superintendents and the retired service center director on the collaboration efforts and the collaboration process.

The researcher selected a qualitative research design because... “Qualitative research focuses on the process that is occurring as well as the product or outcome. Researchers are particularly interested in understanding how things occur” (Creswell, 2009, p. 195). The researcher interviewed the superintendents and the service center director using an interview schedule based on the research questions guiding the study.

Data Collection

The Institutional Review Board of Purdue University granted approval for the study. Participants signed a Research Participant Consent Form. The data collection process for this study began with semi-structured, face-to-face interviews during which each superintendent told me from their personal experiences of what is occurring with the collaboration and the effects it is having on their district. The transcription led to the use of open coding to analyze the data from the interviewers

Interviews with four superintendents and the area service center director are the primary data sources used to gather insights on how the four school districts are collaborating after the study. Creswell (2009) also stated that “[i]n qualitative interviews, the researcher conducts face-to-face interviews with participants, ...these interviews involve unstructured and generally open-ended questions that are few in number and intended to elicit views and opinions from the participants” (p. 181).

“The research interview is a tool or an instrument which provides the researcher with descriptions, narratives, and texts of the life world of the interviewee which the researcher interprets and reports according to his or her research interests” (Anyan, 2013, pp. 5-6).

The researcher had to be intentional about the questions and stay with the guided interview questions, which kept consistency with the interviews. The researcher wanted enough information and data to answer the research questions, the interview questions were open ended. Below are the guided interview questions for this qualitative research study:

1. What are some of the positive results of the collaboration efforts occurring today?
2. What are some of the negative results of the collaboration efforts occurring today?
3. How has your school district since the study encouraged collaboration efforts with the other districts in the county?
4. How has your school board encouraged or discouraged collaboration efforts?
5. How has the community encouraged or discouraged collaboration efforts?
6. Is collaboration across small school districts a solution to the issue of budget reductions?

These open-ended questions allowed the four superintendents and service center director to openly explain and describe the collaboration process that followed from the original study. The researcher used the IRB-approved set of guided interview questions to keep the interviews consistent, but probing follow-up questions were added when needed.

Each interview lasted about an hour.

Data Analysis and Strategies

The interviews were recorded, and personal notes were taken during the interviews. Transcriptions were read a number of times. Each transcript was coded openly, a process that Creswell (2009) describes as “develop[ing] codes only on the basis of the emerging information collected from participants” (p. 187). That approach, “allow[ing] the codes to emerge during the data analysis” is “traditional...in the social sciences” (Creswell, 2009, p.187). Accordingly, the researcher let the information emerge from the superintendents and service center director. During the open coding of the interviews, many themes or assertions emerged from each superintendent and from the service center director. Assertions were then determined to establish the importance of collaboration versus consolidation. Examination of archival documents, such as press releases, was useful in documenting the collaboration process. The researcher examined five press releases while listing where the school districts were collaborating with each other.

Participants

The participants were the superintendents of the four school districts that were in that county where the study was conducted and one service center director. These were the persons in the best position to understand and explain the collaboration process, since they initiated it and directed it. The researcher did one-on-one interviews with the current superintendent of each school district and the service center director at the time the study was conducted, who acted as the facilitator for the steering committee. Two superintendents have retired, but the current superintendents were fully vested with the

collaboration and knew and understood the study that was conducted. To preserve the anonymity of the districts, each school district and superintendent will be given a letter of A, B, C, and D.

Superintendent A is from a rural school district that has 762 students, approximately 58 teachers, and three school buildings: a primary school, an intermediate school, and a middle-senior high school (Indiana Department of Education, 2014). Superintendent B is from a rural school district with 751 students and two school buildings, an elementary and a Jr-Sr. high school, with approximately 58 teachers. Superintendent C is from a rural school district with 894 students and three school buildings, primary, intermediate, and a Jr.-Sr. high school, with approximately 60 teachers. Superintendent D is from a rural school district with 2,473 students and five school buildings, three elementary schools, a middle school and a high school, with approximately 164 teachers (Indiana Department of Education, 2014). The service center director who was interviewed, is no longer working at the service center due to retirement. The service center director was part of the Our County Study because he acted as the facilitator for the steering committee that began the collaboration process.

Interview Protocol

The purpose of this study is to discern from the four superintendents and the service center director whether and in what ways collaboration is beneficial to their school district. Individual interviews were conducted in the office of each superintendent and at a restaurant with the former service center director (due to his retirement.) The qualitative framework of phenomenological research was used for this study. The

researcher went to conduct the interviews at each of the respective superintendent's school district and in their office, and the service center director at a nearby restaurant to where he lives. This offered a relaxed atmosphere for the researcher to ask questions. The researcher sensed they each felt ownership of the collaboration process because they want what is best for students and their school district. Creswell (2009) stated:

Natural setting- qualitative researchers tend to collect data in the field at the site where participants experience the issue or problem under study. This up close information gathered by actually talking directly to people and seeing them behave and act within their context is a major characteristic of qualitative research. In the natural setting, the researchers have face-to-face interaction over time. (p. 175)

Due to the professional education experience of the researcher being a rural school administrator at the time of the current study, it was imperative to ensure that personal experience did not affect the data. According to Creswell (2009) the participants describes to the researcher a phenomenon through the essence of human experiences with a small number of subjects (p. 13). The phenomenological research was conducted through the use of an interview with the current superintendents and the service center director at the time of the study (five total). Prior to meeting with each superintendent and service center director they were sent the list of interview questions (See Appendix A). The researcher then set a time to meet with them in their office. Interviews were conducted to understand how beneficial or negative the collaboration process has been viewed since the Our Study. Gained insights from each superintendent interviewed will help other districts see the benefits of collaboration. The service center director also

contributed his reflections from the study and the benefits from that study to the four school districts. These first-hand experiences from the superintendents and service center director show the value of this study to other school districts and their stakeholders as a strategy to help circumvent the need to consolidate.

Conclusion

The methodology for this study is qualitative-research and consisted of interviews with four superintendents and a service center director that were either a part of the Our Study or have knowledge of the Our Study. It consisted of interviews that were based on the methodology of phenomenology, which uses their lived experiences. The participants lived experiences are their current collaboration efforts with the other school districts in the county, and the results of Indiana educational reform on the school budgets.

Qualitative and quantitative research methods have several differences such as the means of collecting data and the interpretation of collected data. While qualitative research prioritizes depth and quality of data collected, quantitative research maintains premium in the number and volume of data collected. (Anyan, 2013, p. 1).

To reiterate, this study is more suggestive than prescriptive; it explores the benefits of collaboration in one rural Indiana county; the findings are definitive only for those districts. The next chapter presents the results from using these methods.

CHAPTER 4 RESULTS OF THE STUDY

Qualitative Analysis

The purpose of this study was to investigate how four school districts collaborated to leverage their financial and educational resources to withstand financial pressures and better serve their students and communities. The data presented in this chapter reports the qualitative results from the interviews of each superintendent from the four school districts and the service center director. A letter of the alphabet (A, B, C, D) has labeled the superintendents and service center director will be just the service center director to remain anonymous. Two of the superintendents have 15+ years of experience and the other two superintendents have fewer than five years of experience. All four superintendents and the service center director are committed to the collaboration process.

Role of Steering Committee

The data analysis from this study focused on the collaborative process they developed, what came from the process, and the continuation of collaboration. The first step in the collaboration process was to form a steering committee that commissioned the university study. With the university study in hand from 2008, the steering committee began a series of monthly meetings that continue to the current day where each district works out the logistics of the collaboration. The goal of the steering committee and its

subcommittees has been to enhance opportunities for each school district to collaborate in the areas of academics, transportation, business, and budget. Accomplishing the collaboration goals helps each school district keep its curriculum at a high level and possibly save in their budget.

Steering Committee Participants

The steering committee initially contained superintendents; administrators and school board members who were eager to talk about their needs and how they could collaborate to share resources they have or need with their school district. As the process has moved along, it has been expanded to include principals, teachers, and other support staff in the meetings. The service center director facilitated the meetings. He ran the meetings using an agenda to keep the committee on target: focusing on specific goals. He managed their public relations writing communications so that each district was sending out the same information and the news and media received consistent information.

Document Review

As part of the data analysis the researcher looked at numerous agendas from the steering committee and subcommittees to determine the areas and topics for collaboration. A feature of the collaboration process is that each committee and subcommittee creates action items and a timeline to keep them focused on their goals. Below are goals for each subcommittee. These goals show that the process was focused both on saving money and on enhancing curriculum and other programming.

Academic Subcommittee

1. By *April 1, 2010*, have a common school calendar for 2010 – 2011 and 2011 – 2012 for all 4 districts approved and advertised.
2. By *March 1, 2010*, have a common summer school leadership meeting scheduled, an advertising plan in place, and financial terms in place. *Summer school needs advertised by 3/1/09.*
3. By *November 1, 2009*, report to the OCSC the committee's consideration of current elementary and secondary courses and subjects as well as make recommendations for additional subjects that may be offered thru collaboration.
4. By *May 1, 2010*, the committee will present to the OCSC the challenges required to adopt the same math textbooks/materials in all 4 districts. *Leaders will meet to identify challenges and look for same adoptions.*
5. By *March 15, 2010*, OCSC will have either submitted a RUS grant or adopted an alternative plan to provide video conferencing technology to each district. *No changes.*
6. By *December 21, 2009*, the academic subcommittee will present to the OCSC a comparison of the School Improvement Plans from each of the district's schools and determine benefits of working together on similar goals. *The Plans have been approved, this goal will compare the plans.*

Transportation Subcommittee

1. Report by December 30, 2009, to the OCSC if the plan for providing county wide training for bus drivers and maintenance/custodial workers and if so, how and when.

Business Subcommittee

1. By June 30, 2010, the Business Committee will present to OCSC a report outlining the possible benefits and problems that may be encountered if more than one corporation share back office functions. *Two superintendents to chair this committee and agreed.*

Budget Subcommittee

1. The Budget committee will review each districts employment contracts and identify similarities and differences. The report will be presented to the OCSC by *March 30, 2012*.
2. By February 28, 2010, the budget committee will review substitute teacher employment practices and costs in all 4 districts. The committee will prepare a report to the OSCS that outlines any efficiency that can be gained if the districts collaborate.
3. The Budget Committee will investigate the costs and benefits to the adult education program currently provided school district C. The focus of the investigation will include sharing costs and gaining efficiencies through collaboration. *This goal will not be included with this collaboration group.*

Overall (from Service Center Director not from notes)

1. At least once per quarter the OCSC will distribute a news release to the media, interested patrons, and school staff about the work of the committee. *Service Center Director and board member will put the news release together and submit to committee via email prior to releasing.*
2. By October 30, 2009, each district will have tested and have operational the one-to-many video conferencing system provided by service center. *Committee has agreed this is doable.*

To meet the goals outlined in the timelines of each subcommittee, stakeholders have had to attend meetings faithfully; absences would have impeded the collaboration.

The service center director has advertised accomplishments from the collaboration efforts in press releases to the community. The committee is very transparent with the items they are exploring. These press releases served to keep everyone in the community informed, and they also serve as a written record of the goals and actions undertaken in the collaboration process.

Ultimately, they collaborated by creating a common calendar, opportunities for elementary and secondary courses, a common textbook sharing program, countywide training for bus drivers and custodial workers, opportunities for contract review and teacher sharing, summer school, the Crossings alternative program, and substitute teachers. High school courses that could be offered through collaboration amongst the teachers and administrator of the four districts were considered. Secondary schedules were evaluated for sharing students; if class numbers are low at a school, then they could consider how to consolidate classes.

When the districts evaluated the contracts together, they decided to share teachers, but so far they have not come to an agreement because the teacher contract is different at each school district. They could not agree on a salary for such a teacher. A new teacher contract law has gone in to effect in the state of Indiana. After teacher contract negotiations at each school district the teacher contract will be similar in each district, so it will possibly be feasible to accomplish sharing a teacher. The salary will still be a barrier that they will all need to work through together with each district union.

A common calendar, for example, for all for school districts would help the districts align to each other to share resources for academics, which has both academic and financial implications. Going to a common calendar would enhance curricular opportunities for students. Superintendent A stated:

We will all have a common calendar which -- it's been a positive for the most part, but it takes a lot of give and take and every school has their own reasons for wanting to do certain things their way. Next year, all four schools will almost have the exact same calendar. We may start a day earlier because we have two days professional development and they don't. But the student days are the same because we have a lot of vocational classes and stuff like that that we share anyway.

Data Analysis

1. Each interview was transcribed word for word to reduce bias and to obtain each perception of current collaboration efforts.

2. Themes and key points were discovered from the interviews through analyzing their responses and open coding.
3. Questions and responses (coded data) from each superintendent and the service center director were put in a matrix to enable a disaggregation of the experiences to develop into themes and assertions.
4. Based on themes the assertions were developed.

The following research matrix represents the open coding for the superintendent and service center director interviews. Each interview question is represented in the research matrix along with the response from each superintendent and the service center director.

Table 2

Open Coding chart for Question 1

Question 1	Superintendent A	Superintendent B	Superintendent C	Superintendent D	Service Center Director
What are some of the positive results of the collaboration efforts occurring today?	I mean we meet on a nearly monthly basis looking at ways that we can collaborate and work together, bid shared services. One thing that's grown from that we're in the process of going with the Crossings Alternative School and that's probably a direct result of this collaboration effort. It's just starting up and all four schools that are going to give it a try. We've tried to do some combined distance summer school classes.	This past spring, we did a collective <i>paving</i> bid ... We've also cooperatively purchased an infrared detector, it's like a device that will be able to tell if ballast is out, it detects hot spots. Alone, it's like \$2,000, but we split the cost four ways, so it's only 500 each, so then we can borrow that when we need it. We've also talked about sharing resources like buses, lifts, and paint stripers. So we've created a	I think the biggest results from that study have been the four county schools and superintendents communicate a lot more on many fronts, dealing with a lot of different aspects of the school: budgets, CPF projects, curriculum, and technology. We hold monthly meetings where we discuss many different aspects, like I've discussed already, of education, of really working on trying to share services if we can that have	We've been together now for a long time, and the four superintendents have always been close, or over the years, and the expectation is that we need each other. And so, the expectation is superintendent's work together. We don't always agree, but the expectation is started we're going to do this because we owe it to our area to work together. So I think that's probably one of	They were sharing some things with buses and that was very positive. One district had this mechanic that was just a wizard with brakes and chassis. They were taking their buses to him. If they had a brake issue they would take it to that district. So that was neat. Another district had a lift in the gym to get clear up to the lights, and they shared that. In the summertime they did new driver training. During the school year

Question 1	Superintendent A	Superintendent B	Superintendent C	Superintendent D	Service Center Director
	<p>Another collaboration was with the service center where we wrote a grant. It's a rural education grant and it was funded in a big way. And then the county helped it so every building in all four school corporations got a very nice distance learning lab, in some cases actually got more than one in some of the buildings. And having the skies the limit on that as far as field trips around the world.</p>	<p>master list of those things that we're willing to donate if someone calls up and says, hey, I need a trailer, can I borrow your trailer. So collectively we're doing some shared equipment type things. We've talked this spring about having a pool of substitute bus drivers from which we could guarantee them, hey, if you're willing to work with our little pool of corporations that you will be guaranteed to be a driver at least once a week, twice a week, whatever it is.</p>	<p>not been shared, really look at the overall well-being of the school and seeing how we can save money, provide different opportunities to our students.</p>	<p>the reasons for success, is because we all expect to do that. We had parents turn in surveys, and did some online stuff for surveys, something new that we'd never done before, and then we had our joint meeting, and the School Board Members went in knowing that we wanted to collaborate. The expectation wasn't necessarily to consolidate, but the expectation is the superintendents want to work together so Board Members, let's</p>	<p>they shared subs and that was kind of a good thing and a failure too. Teachers talked a lot. Our district had one algebra teacher who also taught geometry. So she was ecstatic to be able to talk to the other algebra teachers. Science was another one. So we had teachers talking to each other in the districts. The tech guy at the service center was getting the elementary schools to talk over the system. It was really good for the school boards to talk to each other. They</p>

Question 1	Superintendent A	Superintendent B	Superintendent C	Superintendent D	Service Center Director
		<p>The service center has been the one who's been coordinating our distance learning meetings through our Steering Committee. And through the service center, what we've been able to ask them to do last summer was coordinate professional development for all four corporations, so that we had a person who did in-service on the Common Core Standards. So she could be in her office, but passed on handouts through email and then reviewed those</p>		<p>follow along. And I know the Board Members from the other schools, which is unusual. We meet monthly and it's been a very positive thing. We get to know each other. We're building relationships among the four schools that are in the collaboration. And because of that collaboration together, we were able to get teleconferencing equipment... And we collaborated together with the service center to help us through that too. Yes. And, the latest</p>	<p>do the ISBA stuff but this was different. This was planning and the board presidents got to know the other superintendents.</p>

Question 1	Superintendent A	Superintendent B	Superintendent C	Superintendent D	Service Cent Director
		<p>through the distance learning equipment, and then we would have teachers who knew they would go to a classroom on the equipment and they could watch her, they could watch the interaction with the other teachers at the other districts too. So that went well.</p>		<p>collaboration is the Crossing Alternative School. We've come to an agreement, and side contracts, for the Crossing.</p>	

Table 3

Open Coding chart for Question 2

Question 2	Superintendent A	Superintendent B	Superintendent C	Superintendent D	Service Center Director
What are some of the negative results of the collaboration efforts occurring today?	It's always a challenge to coordinate four different boards, four different -- we will have a common calendar which -- it's been positive for the most part, but it takes a lot of give and take and every school has their own reasons for wanting to do certain things their way. But I think next year all four schools will almost be the exact same calendar. We may start a day earlier because we have two days professional development and they don't. But the student days are same because we	I don't think there's anything negative. The only thing I can think of is with the distance learning equipment, only one person can talk at once. Finding time to make sure that we all sit down and do it. I'd say most of the time all four of us were there, but it would be nice to try and find more time for our School Board Members to attend or other district personnel. We talked about having our Maintenance Directors involved. I'm not sure that we followed through on that one. But time is always our worst enemy.	I wouldn't necessarily say negative, but I believe that it's gotten to the point where we continue to discuss the same things. but the other schools are not interested in that. So I think that has been a deterrent. My school corporation has been looked upon negatively because of their push to try to consolidate, or wanting consolidation, with the other school corporations really are not in the mindset of doing that at this time.	I wouldn't call them negative. But I do think that we appreciate our Board Members knowing that some of the Board Members in other places we wouldn't want to have as Board Members, and I'm sure they feel that way about my Board Members too. But we do appreciate each other's Board Members.	No consolidat came from the study

Question 2

Superintendent A

Superintendent B

Superintendent C

Superintendent D

Service Center
Director

have a lot of
vocational classes
and stuff like that
that we share.

Table 4

Open coding chart for Question 3

Question 3	Superintendent A	Superintendent B	Superintendent C	Superintendent D	Service Center Director
How has your school district since the study encouraged collaboration efforts with the other districts in the county?	We have increased opportunities for students and that's our main goal. We have several students that have come from another district to take vocational classes, but while they're here, they also go ahead and take an English class or something like that, so it's worth their while for the bus to bring them over here. And we've had several students do that and so, academically, has been a plus. And I'd say the collaboration has	Administrators in the county meet once a month, elementary teachers do, but then also the high school teachers do, or they at least try to. I'm so encouraged by that fact. We've had teachers collaborate, that's still through the distance learning equipment, but that's still part of that collaboration. Teachers have used the distance learning equipment for virtual field trips. One participated at a school corporation	We hold monthly meetings where we discuss many different aspects, like I've discussed already, of education, of really working on trying to share services if we can that have not been shared, really look at the overall well-being of the school and seeing how we can save money, and provide different opportunities to our students.	We meet monthly. And we're committed to do that in the long term. And it is also an expectation that our administrators are meeting. So the high school administrators are getting together. Some of the things that we're working on really do include the principals working things out. And here's another example. We have high school summer school, and any county kid in any of the four school	That was what our role was too was to make sure that, they'd give us little jobs every time the superintendents didn't want to do something. For instance, they did a study to see if it was going to be worthwhile to consolidate business operations, payroll, primarily payroll. Actually, they looked at everything. So they put together a report and the four school districts talked about it and

Question 3

Superintendent A

brought two corporations much closer together working on a variety of issues in academics and so forth.

Superintendent B

where she participated with a, I think it's a song writer in Nashville, so he was actually on the equipment, kids would write songs, and then he would listen to their songs, give them feedback, and kids were really energized by that.

Superintendent C

Superintendent D

corporations has permission to attend each other's summer school. So we'll have kids, and we're the largest so we're usually the one that offers the most summer school classes. And that helps us as well because we can offer more classes. And the principals basically put that together, and they communicate. And I think the high school, especially the high schools they're able to build a relationship.

Service Center
Director

they found out that if they were going to have somebody in their office during the day all day long it didn't make sense. But that was a huge project for us because we were really interested in that at the service center.

I think now though with all the new legislation and rules and stuff people have look at ways to collaborate and realize that we all have to work together. We can't keep working apart.

Table 5

Open Coding Chart for Question 4

Question 4	Superintendent A	Superintendent B	Superintendent C	Superintendent D	Service Center Director
How has your school board encouraged or discouraged collaboration efforts?	Our school board is very open to most any collaboration that can be done. They are not really interested in consolidation. But another thing that has happened as a result of this, a corporation had asked another corporation to seriously consider some joint superintendent work. That didn't happen it wasn't really well received, but as a result of that conversation, I am providing	They've encouraged it. I don't know if there's been any instances where they've discouraged. I've had School Board Members attend them before. Especially, we had a district that wanted to push the efforts to consolidate and went so far as to say, hey, we're willing to consolidate if you'll go with us. So that kind of encouraged the rest of us to	I believe my School Board wanted the study and everything to show that consolidation was the way to go, and that hasn't developed between the four school corporations. They'd like to go and be consolidated. They think there can be savings that way, financially, and they think that it could make sense to do that. Interviewer: How has the community encouraged or discouraged	It's very encouraging because the School Board Member from each corporation meets along with us monthly. And it's encouraging that they know the value of working together as well. And they've met two or three times as a joint meeting for School Boards, two I guess. One was in the beginning of this thing, is to review the outcome of the survey and their	We had four boards. Superintendent A is an excellent superintendent, also had an excellent principal, high school principal. He's just strong all the way. So they were fine. They came into it with no interest in a pure consolidation but they knew a superintendent was going to retire. Another corporation was poor to middle and not good test

Question 4

Superintendent A

financial advice through me for that corporation. And I'd say the collaboration has brought a corporation and another corporation much closer together working on a variety of issues in academics and so forth. We've actually put in place a procedure to have shared teachers. We were all ready to go with one and then the way some openings came about that fell through, but School District A does have an agreement put together, so if we want to share a teacher how we can

Superintendent B

have Board Members there to speak for or against that. But I guess it's provided, and we've had one opportunity, when I first came, it was December of '11, where we had all of the School Boards come, and all of the administrators, and all of those people, came to one central location to have a group county-wide School Board Meeting, which was kind of interesting too. I don't know that there was a lot accomplished but it was more of here's some things that we're doing in our district, here's how we could help work

Superintendent C

collaboration efforts from this study? I don't think there's been a whole lot of discouragement. I think we've benefitted through the courses being offered. I think it's been a plus for all of the communities. I know that we even have some kids that go to other schools and take some of their classes because they can't do it through the video conferencing. And it's been good. You can see that the communication between the staffs have been very good too, administrators.

Superintendent D

direction of the plan, and the other one was just recently when one was kind of pushing to consolidate. And they needed to meet to lay those things to rest, that nobody really wanted to do that. So they've had two joint meetings. And you know what, when we go to ISBA meetings, they sit together, they know each other. They've also built that relationship. So, I do think it's really the benefit is all about building relationships in the area, and then you can come up with

Service Center
Director

scores, small, very small district. There was some thought about either consolidating or sharing a superintendent. So that was going on. It had just started when we wrote the grant. There was a lot of interest in sharing other resources from the other district. The one corporation knew the superintendent was leaving, and they were interested in talking about sharing a superintendent or I think more sharing than consolidating. That corporation they were having a

Question 4

Superintendent A

financially make it work.

Superintendent B

together, and I think we've thought about having another one of those but we don't want to have another one if we don't have any agenda or purpose for doing it.

Superintendent C

Superintendent D

good things, and if that happens. Even if somebody decided not to delay school and the rest of us did, they're still saying that's okay; you don't always have to do everything together.

Service Center Director

lot of trouble with specialty stuff like they were spending a lot of money on hiring people to come in to help with technology. Another corporation their interest was being a good citizen more than anything else and that's the way the superintendent is too. That's just him. Then the other corporation, their interest was consolidation.

Table 6

Open Coding Chart for Question 5

Question 5	Superintendent A	Superintendent B	Superintendent C	Superintendent D	Service Center Director
How has the community encouraged or discouraged collaboration efforts?	They seem to be kind of indifferent to it. They're very clear the initial idea they're not interested in consolidation. The community is not very interested in working with the other schools on what's possible, but there was very little interest in giving up their local identity.	I don't know if they've encouraged or discouraged. We've tried to keep them informed by putting in newsletter articles in the newspapers periodically, at least quarterly, just to provide a little update about what we've been doing so that they know that we're doing these meetings, that there are outcomes that are coming out of it, what our goals are. Every meeting, we have an agenda and then we talk about establishing two or three	I don't think there's been a whole lot of discouragement. I think we've benefitted through the courses being offered. I think it's been a plus for all of the communities. I know that we even have some kids that go to other schools and take some of their classes because they can't do it through the video conferencing. And it's been good. You can see that the communication between the staffs have been very good too, administrators.	I think that they appreciate that we are meeting, and that we put something in the newspaper every once in a while to let the communities know what we are doing. I think it opened the doors for more sharing in students. Not only sharing for summer school, but vocational-wise, and also for transfer tuition. We have an open door policy on transfer tuition here.	We had on the committee was the economic development. Ivy Tech they weren't really on the committee but they got everything and they would always respond and they would respond back to me. PR, the newspapers all went through me. Superintendent D ended up writing some of the releases just because he's such a good writer but the board president from one of the districts also wrote

Question 5	Superintendent A	Superintendent B	Superintendent C	Superintendent D	Service Center Director
		different goals, what are our goals for this year, whether it's more professional development, or collective purchase, or whatever that might be.			some. But that all flowed through me. So I was the media person.

Table 7

Open Coding Chart for Question 6

Question 6	Superintendent A	Superintendent B	Superintendent C	Superintendent D	Service Center Director
Is collaboration across small school districts a solution to the issue of budget reductions?	I don't know. I think it's a solution to address certain academic issues. And small rural is expensive. And it's going to stay expensive unless we're going to	I would say it's a contributing factor to helping reduce the budget, however I don't know that it's a huge amount. We save in professional development	I think to some degree it can help. Like I said, I would say that we're able to obtain a Grant, which paid for video conferencing. We're using that for collaboration, our	We organized a collaborative paving bid of the three corporations that had to have some paving done. We saved some money by doing that.	They were sharing some things with buses and that was very positive. One corporation had this mechanic that was just a wizard with brakes and chassis. They were

Question 6

Superintendent A

eliminate small rural, it's not going to be the most cost-effective, but those children still deserve an education. But now with the distance opportunities and the online opportunities, that's opened up a lot of things small schools can offer most any academic class the large schools can offer. Our Physics teacher relocated and she taught Physics through the distance learning lab while she was in another city and then we had an aide here.

Superintendent B

because we can do it with others. Like the camera, we wouldn't have purchased a \$2,000 infrared camera ourselves. That's the only way we're going to be able to do it as a small school is by contributing a little bit and then borrowing and sharing those things. The same thing with like a man-lift or something, if we don't have one, the only way to purchase one is to do it collectively. The same thing with paving, it's kind of far for someone to bring their equipment out,

Superintendent C

collaboration meetings, we do through that. We also are utilizing that equipment for students taking classes at other school corporations that have the equipment. It's really good. We've also done some staff development through the service center with our school personnel like on Core Curriculum and those types of issues. So it's been very advantageous I think.

Superintendent D

Class offerings...Most of it is vocational. But the main thing is the door is open if somebody needs it. We were able to put together a double-up program. Interviewer: Double up is when you take Ivy Tech classes and receive high school credit. It's the foundation classes that will transfer to other colleges. So we were able to collaborate that together. So they all know each other, and there are no common adoptions, but the

Service Center Director

taking their buses to him. If they had a brake issue they would take it to that corporation. So that was neat. Another corporation had a lift in the gym to get clear up to the lights. They shared that. In the summertime they did new driver training. During the school year they shared subs and that was kind of a good thing. They were sharing ECA drivers.

Question 6

Superintendent A

Superintendent B

Superintendent C

Superintendent D

Service Center
Director

so if I can get a better deal because they're in our neighboring school corporations then that's a great savings too. We haven't really shared teachers necessarily, but that's an option that we could definitely discuss. So it's been more in the capital projects realm, I guess we would say, for professional development, equipment.

schools that do have similar textbooks, I think it's open; they can call and borrow textbooks if they need. Again, we are the bigger players so we've got, we usually have extra.

Themes

The themes below emerged from the analysis:

1. Collaboration – Administrators and Teachers
2. Communication
3. Technology
4. Curriculum
5. Professional Development – Teachers
6. Cost Savings

The following descriptions of each theme were constructed from the superintendent and service center director interviews.

Collaboration- Administrators and Teachers

Teachers from the four school districts have collaborated with certain classes to improve opportunities for students. Teachers have also personally benefited from the collaboration. The service center now offers distance learning for professional development; it is held in one school district while the others watch in their own district. Those joint professional development programs are enabling teachers to talk to each other more, according to Superintendent B;

Teachers talked a lot. A corporation had one Algebra teacher who also taught Geometry. She was so ecstatic to be able to talk to other Algebra teachers.

Science is another one. So we have teachers talking to each other in the districts.

This increased communication with other colleagues in the same discipline is a huge asset for a teacher's personal professional development. According to Superintendent A inter-district collaboration efforts are encouraging teachers and administrators not only to share more often but also to share in new ways;

They've (teachers) discussed having some meetings virtually and they've had just a few grade-level teacher meetings and things like that where I think the potential is there. They have a lot to think and learn by meeting with the other schools. And our Math department has done that so I'm meeting with schools and talking about what works and what didn't work and so forth.

Administrators are also reaping the benefits of collaborating with one another according to Superintendent C;

I think its good communication amongst districts. You're not working in isolation. A lot of times, I think the communication, you have problems that some of the other people are also dealing with and sometimes putting more heads together can help solve some of those problems quicker. I don't see a reason for it to go away. It's good communication and it really helps I think the administration in making decisions to help the schools as a whole.

Superintendent D stated, "Some of the things that we're working on really do include the principals working things out."

This collaboration is important because such conversations had never occurred before this collaboration process was instituted. The process is causing collaboration to happen at all levels: school board members with school board members, superintendents

with superintendents, building administrators with building administrators, teachers with teachers, staff personnel (such as maintenance and transportation staff) with staff personnel. This type of cross district collaboration is quite rare amongst school districts.

Communication

The four school districts of Our County agreed to write articles for their local newspaper. When the steering committee first formed they had the service center director lead the public relations for this collaboration so that each district was releasing consistent information. According to the service center director,

All the public relations and anything to the newspapers all went through me.

Superintendent D ended up writing some of the releases because he's such a good writer and a board president also wrote some. But that all flowed through me. So I was the media person.

The superintendents also wanted to inform their staff of the collaboration happenings so according to Superintendent C;

The Collaboration Committee actually does a quarterly update, and they send it through the newspaper on what's going on. I send out weekly or most of the time weekly memos to our staff on things that are happening. If there's something developing through the collaboration, it is on there as well.

It is essential that the reporting to the staff come from the superintendent so the teachers/staff know that their leader is in support of the collaboration efforts that are happening. The community too needs to be informed that all the educators are in agreement to the collaboration process. The collaboration process is producing many new

arenas for each school district and to remain transparent to all stakeholders, consistent communication from each district will continue to show the importance of the process.

Technology

Every district received video conferencing devices to be able to connect with one another and the service center to hold meetings and professional development opportunities for teachers and administrators. The devices also helped with online learning opportunities for students. For instance, they allowed teachers to take students on a field trip without leaving the school, according to Superintendent A;

And having the sky's the limit on that as far as field trips around the world. I know early on we had the same equipment, and our choir went on a field trip to Nashville, Tennessee. Well, they didn't actually go, but for little money, there are fabulous field trip experiences available.

This is a great way for schools to share their virtual field trip experiences with the other districts teachers. Superintendent B also commented on the benefits of the devices not only for virtual field trips but also for creative educational collaborations.

We've had teachers, that's still through the distance learning equipment, but that's still part of that collaboration, teachers have used the distance learning equipment for virtual field trips. One participated at a corporation where she participated with a, I think it's a song writer in Nashville, so he was actually on the equipment, kids would write songs, and then he would listen to their songs, give them feedback, and the kids were really energized by that.

Collaboration is enriching the learning opportunities for students in all four school districts. The equipment was obtained through grant money, and the opportunity to write the grant grew out of the collaboration process, so collaboration was an essential prerequisite as well as a key product. This process brought about- and is continuing to bring about- items that would not have happened without collaboration being in place.

Curriculum

The discussions for this area have included the sharing of summer school classes, sharing of teachers, and sharing of courses during the school year. According to Superintendent A, “We’ve tried to do some combined distance summer school classes.” Superintendent D added to the summer school curriculum offerings by stating,

We have high school summer school and any county kid in any of the four districts has permission to attend each other’s summer school. We’re the largest so we’re usually the one that offers the most summer school classes. And that helps us as well because we can offer more classes.

Some summer school classes have come to fruition, but other areas need to still be worked out to comply with teacher contracts. Textbooks can be borrowed from each district. In 2013, the districts collectively invited The Crossing, an alternative school, into the county and work with their high-risk students. The four districts have worked together to create online learning for their students and distance learning. A class was taught using distance learning which Superintendent A stated that, “Our Physics teacher relocated and she taught Physics through the distance learning lab while she was in another city and then we had an aide here.”

Professional Development- Teachers

According to Superintendent B, the technology for distance learning opportunities enables teachers to connect with the local service center to participate in professional development programs without leaving their district. For instance, teachers from all four districts learned about the Common Core Standards simultaneously through an online in-service hosted by the service center. Teachers who do not have anyone else in their department are now able to collaborate and talk with the teachers in the other districts for their own personal professional development. Teachers indicate that they prefer professional development opportunities that are held in their own school because they feel more comfortable there and not having to travel makes the professional development worth doing during their own time.

Cost Savings

Budgetary savings occurred in 2013 in many domains, including building and grounds, textbooks, teacher reimbursement for travel, utilities, transportation, and food service. The districts saved money by buying in bulk together, getting a collective contract for common services, sharing resources, having countywide programs instead of identical programs replicated in each district, and using technology to reduce the many costs associated with enrichment trips and programs for teachers and students alike.

The districts have saved money by placing bulk orders for a variety of goods and by negotiating common services together. The three districts collaborated on a bid for paving, which saved each district a substantial amount of money. The maintenance and transportation subcommittees agreed to purchase paper together in volume and share

warehousing expenses to reduce costs. Superintendent C stated that he still has a surplus of paper stored in his district because they got such a good deal by buying in bulk. Those committees also agreed to countywide bus driver recruitment and training. One district now provides mechanic services to two districts for their bus fleet.

The districts now share a variety of goods and services. All the districts made a list of maintenance items they have in their district so they can borrow items from one another instead of buying them. The districts share bus drivers for extra-curricular activities and events, and they pay them a common wage. According to Superintendent D, the districts tried to collaborate to adopt the same textbook so that the districts could share if needed, but instead they opted for an open share of current textbooks, an approach that makes the most of the resources available:

[T]here are no common adoptions, but the schools that do have similar textbooks, I think it's open; they can call and borrow textbooks if they need. Again, we are the bigger players so we've got, we usually have extra.

By collaborating in this way, districts may not need to buy extra books in case enrollment increases because they can just ask one another if they have extra textbooks. This approach should save the textbook account money in the General Fund account.

The districts now collaborate to offer countywide programs, including summer school and alternative school. Superintendent D stated that "opening up summer school in the largest district for any student in the county to attend saves on the budget because the other districts do not have to pay teachers, utilities, transportation and food service to run a summer school program." Another area for cost savings emerged when all four

districts agreed to bring in The Crossing- Alternative School to the county to serve students who are not making it in the traditional classroom. Each student sent to the program costs money, and there are some additional expenses that they each are willing to pay for all four school districts to use this alternative school program.

Having the video conferencing in each district saves money in several ways. Because meetings take place remotely, teachers and administrators travel less and require fewer travel reimbursements. Using the video conferencing system to do virtual field trips has also saved on costs. Teachers can take students on a field trip without leaving the school.

The collaboration seems to make the group of districts stronger than any one of them would be alone.

Assertions

The major assertions that developed from the themes of the open coding from the lived experiences of each superintendent were mostly consistent throughout the interviews.

The overarching assertion from the data analyzed is that all four superintendents and the service center director agree that collaboration between the four school districts helps them to achieve a common goal: avoiding consolidation. “Although the reasons for considering shared services and consolidation are often the same, districts that implement shared services tend to receive more community support than those that close school or merge with other districts. School boards may, therefore, agree to such arrangements in order to diminish the threat of consolidation” (Howley, et al., 2012, pp. 2-3. The four

superintendents want to avoid consolidation so they meet monthly to look at ways to share services.

Another assertion is that the declining enrollment is detrimental to a school district's budget; the four superintendents and service center director were quite aware of their financial situation. The new formula for figuring ADM (Average Daily Membership) enacted by legislation began July 1, 2013 reduces funding when school district enrollments in the county decline, and the following ADM and enrollment charts from the Indiana Department of Education website show that enrollment in all four school districts has decreased since 2005.

Table 8

September 2012 ADM Count

Corporation number	School District Name	ADM
A	A	830.5
B	B	741
C	C	716.5
D	D	2373.5

Note. From Indiana Department of Education

Table 9

September 2013 ADM Count

Corporation number	School District Name	ADM
A	A	806.00
B	B	698.00
C	C	723.18

D	D	2,369.50
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Note. From Indiana Department of Education

Table 10

February 2014 ADM Count

Corporation Number	Corporation Name	ADM
A	A	804.00
B	B	705.00
C	C	721.68
D	D	2,349.00

Note. From Indiana Department of Education

Table 11

Tuition Support for ADM for FY 2014

<u>Corporation Number</u>	<u>Corporation Name</u>	<u>Tuition Support</u>
A	A	\$4,822.47
B	B	\$4,569.00
C	C	\$5,122.16
D	D	\$4,569.00

Note: From Indiana Department of Education

Table 12

FY13 Tuition Support per ADM

<u>School District</u>	<u>Tuition Support</u>
A	\$6554.41
B	\$5,165.97
C	\$6,067.54
D	\$5,564.69

Note. From Indiana Department of Education

Table 13

FY12 Tuition Support per ADM

School District	Tuition Support
A	\$6,617.05
B	\$5,130.22
C	\$6,193.67
D	\$5,409.35

Note. From Indiana Department of Education

The decrease has an effect on the district financially because the General Fund Account in a school district budget for the 2013-2014 school year is funded solely on the enrollment number of students or ADM (Average Daily Membership). The following information comes from the Indiana Association of School Business Officials website;

SECTION 263. IC 20-43-1-10, AS AMENDED BY P.L.144-2012, SECTION 3, IS AMENDED TO READ AS FOLLOWS [EFFECTIVE JULY 1, 2013]: Sec. 10. "Current ADM" means: (1) for distributions made under this article before July 1, 2013, the fall count of ADM for the school year ending in the calendar year; and (2) for distributions made under this article after June 30, 2013, the: (A) spring count of ADM for distributions in the months of January through June of the calendar year in which the spring count is taken; and (B) fall count of ADM for distributions in the months of July through December of the calendar year in which the fall count is taken.

SECTION 264. IC 20-43-1-11.5 IS ADDED TO THE INDIANA CODE AS A NEW SECTION TO READ AS FOLLOWS [EFFECTIVE JULY 1, 2013]: Sec. 11.5. "Enrolled" means to be: (1) registered with a school corporation to attend educational programs offered by or through the school corporation; and (2) attending these educational programs or receiving educational services. (<http://www.indiana-asbo.org>)

The new formula for funding schools for 2013-2014 requires an enrollment count twice during the school year (in September and February), so if student enrollment drops on the second count day in February, so does funding. It is becoming critical for small rural

districts such as the four school districts to collaborate. With student enrollment on the decline, districts need to offer more curricular options for students to stay, and to help maintain their school budget. The four superintendents play a critical role in the collaboration process because they must ensure that it happens by attending the monthly meetings and expressing their school district needs. However, shared services generates a limited amount of savings and that amount of savings may not be sufficient from saving the small school districts from inevitable consolidation due to the budget cuts and financial pressures from the state level. At this point it simply is too early to tell.

A final assertion is that collaborating would increase curriculum needs in each district. With three of the districts having fewer than 900 students, and one district with an enrollment of nearly 2500 it is essential for sharing of curricular resources to increase opportunities for students in rural school districts as having similar curricular choices in a larger district. All four districts want to increase learning opportunities for students, so they are considering ways to share classes, teachers, and programs:

School officials are under increased pressure to demonstrate that adequate learning opportunities are available to children and that these opportunities are provided in a cost-effective manner. Addressing these concerns is particularly troublesome for administrators of small and rural schools. Often geographically isolated and with low student enrollments, many small schools struggle to provide the breadth of course offerings available to students in larger systems. Limited course offerings can result from a variety of factors including staffing shortages, lack of certified teachers, and the cost-prohibitive nature of very small class sizes. Distance education promises to overcome these constraints and expand

educational opportunities for students of small and rural schools” (Brent, 1999, pp. 229-254).

Summary

Analysis of the data from the one-on-one interview with each superintendent and the service center director revealed themes and assertions that help to answer the research questions that formed around the collaboration process instead of consolidation. It is evident that collaboration is important for small rural districts to maintain their identity and autonomy while better serving their constituents.

The research in this study resulted in the following findings:

1. The stakeholders in a school district see the need to collaborate and so that students will achieve success, monies will be saved in the budget, and consolidation will not have to occur.
2. Collaborations between administrators, teachers, non-certified staff, and school board members with the four districts enhanced programming and contributed to the success of the students and districts.
3. Leveraging each other’s resources has offset costs in their school budget, savings that help to offset the loss of tuition support due to decreases in enrollment.
4. Meeting monthly with various stakeholders that are continuing today are valued because they sustain resource sharing between the four school districts.

Essentially, the collaboration process works across all levels and across many areas of concerns for each school district.

CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

This research has examined the collaboration process put into place by four rural school districts in an effort to leverage their resources and better serve their constituents while maintaining their autonomy and community identity. The study describes the collaboration processes they developed, describes their accomplishments, identifies problems and issues they encountered, and sets out the steps they took to ameliorate these issues.

This study is important because other rural school districts not only across the state of Indiana, but also across the country need to see the value of working together in a collaborative effort as a strategy to keep their school district from losing their identity and keep their autonomy. This study suggests that this would hold true for large school districts as well as small districts. All schools need to leverage their resources to reduce their budget, but larger schools can offer various and numerous curricular choices. Large districts could follow the example of these four small districts and leverage their resources in the arena of transportation, material objects such as lawn mowers, plows, lifts, etc., and educational programs where resources could be shared. The Indiana State Board of Accounts could use the findings from this research to inform other school districts the benefits and potential cost savings at the workshops they host throughout the

school year. The superintendents stated some cost savings to their budget, but they are hoping with further collaboration in other areas that more savings will ensue. At the curriculum council meetings held at each service center in the state of Indiana, this topic of curriculum collaboration within the four school districts can be presented to show how curricular resources can be shared.

The following research questions were used as the premise of this research study:

1. What are some of the positive results of the collaboration efforts occurring today?
2. What are some of the negative results of the collaboration efforts occurring today?
3. How has each school district encouraged collaboration efforts with the other districts?
4. How has each school board encouraged or discouraged collaboration efforts?
5. How has the community encouraged or discouraged collaboration efforts?
6. Is collaboration across small school districts a solution to the issue of budget reductions?

Discussion of the Findings

“Case studies are stories. They present realistic, complex, and contextually rich situations and often involve a dilemma, conflict, or problem that one or more of the characters in the case must negotiate” (“Case Studies”, n.d.). This study examined the perceptions and experiences of the four current superintendents and the retired service

center director on the collaboration efforts and the collaboration process that they instituted.

An important factor of collaboration is setting up the framework for the collaboration process. The superintendents and presidents of the four school boards formed a committee to apply for the consolidation grant from the State of Indiana. They received the grant and used it to fund a university study amassing data on the four districts. The steering committee then hired the director of the local service center to facilitate a process of meetings which could identify and work on collaborative goals. Then subcommittees sprouted from areas of need for collaboration. The stakeholders formed academic, transportation, business, and budget subcommittees. Action items with a timeline were created to keep the collaboration efforts on task. These meetings are continuing today, and they have found numerous areas in which they could work together. Superintendent B:

That's the only way we're going to be able to do it as a small school is by contributing a little bit and then borrowing or sharing those things. The same thing with like a man-lift or something, if we don't have one, the only way to purchase one is to do it collectively. The same thing with paving, it's kind of far for someone to bring their equipment out, so if I can get a better deal because they're in our neighboring school corporations then that's a great savings too.

Another factor is having good communication and trust by building relationships with all stakeholders involved. Superintendent C stated, "I think the biggest results from that study have been the four county schools and superintendents communicate a lot more

on many fronts, dealing with a lot of different aspects of the school.” It is noteworthy to state that they were looking to work together from the beginning, so the desire to collaborate was always there and as they proceeded they steadily expanded the scope of the collaboration, by bringing new areas on which to work together and by bringing in new players such as teachers, principals, maintenance staff, etc.

The process has to date accomplished many things, but the most important is that it has built a viable, effective collaboration where none existed before. Administrators, teachers and school board members are now collaborating. This has been the greatest accomplishment that has come out of the collaboration effort and all four school district superintendents spoke highly about this during the interviews. This level of collaboration is very rare in education, and these four school districts have shown it can be done, and that great benefits will accrue to the districts that can collaborate. This process has shown that there can be some budget savings by sharing maintenance resources, transportation, and academic programs. Collaboration may not be the answer if a school district is heading seriously toward the red. However, any area where taxpayer dollars can be saved is a positive for a school budget and a positive for the constituents to know their money is being spent wisely.

Savings aside, the superintendents see their efforts bearing fruit in the academic arena. Superintendent A: “We have increased opportunities for students and that’s our main goal.” The collaboration process has increased the learning opportunities for students in all four school districts to take classes that may not be offered in a smaller school due to low enrollment numbers. School districts cannot deny educational opportunities for students because they are a small district. The collaboration for offering

classes to all students gives them the same opportunities and class courses that a large school offers.

The process has helped with sharing of ideas or creating ideas such as the virtual field trips. Teachers are sharing their ideas with one another during their meetings. This brings a new energy to their teaching. Administrators are receiving solutions from one another when issues arise. They have built relationships with one another due to collaborating; they can rely on each other to call and bounce ideas off each other and share their needs.

The collaboration process in the four school districts has impacted how they do business, because they are continuing to collaborate and they meet regularly. The superintendents get feedback from administrators and teachers about the certain areas of collaboration so they can help improve or take away barriers if they are able to do so. The benefits of collaboration according to Superintendent B,

I think it's just the monthly time to sit down and talk about those things that we all experience, whether it's what are you doing for this or that, and it's being forced to meet. I mean it's kind of nice to be forced to collaborate on something whether it's joint paving or professional development. And it kind of plants the seed as I wonder what else we could share that we all could partake in that we don't have to pay those expenses. And for a small district, that's helpful to kind of pool our resources.

As needs arise they share out with one another what they need and see how they can collaborate to help one another. Once the process gets rolling and the relationships

and communication channels are established it starts to take off and they find other arenas to partake in.

The new education laws enacted July 1, 2011 have impacted school districts across the state of Indiana, and this study shows how the four school districts have handled the new changes through their collaboration process. The new funding formula is a hard hit to the four school districts, so they really rely as much as they can on any collaboration areas that will help save in their budget. The new law stating that ADM is now the sole means to fund the General Fund, and the tuition support follows the student, has helped the four school districts look at their academic programs to keep students in their school district and hopefully not lose them to a larger school district or to a charter school. They need to be able to offer the same curriculum that a larger school district or a charter school offers so students and tuition support stay in their school district.

These school districts and other small school districts in Indiana are in need of help from declining resources. If school districts continue to lose money in their general fund, more cuts will occur and in a small district that can only go so far. The economic development director on the steering committee helps with the community piece of collaboration amongst the four school districts because of the understanding of what the school needs are and then the schools find out what the community needs are. Working together to improve both the community and the schools creates community support for the collaboration process.

School accountability is at the forefront of every school district in the state of Indiana because of the letter grade ratings they receive from the Indiana Department of Education. Stakeholders know the importance of having a good letter grade; when a

family moves in to the district they look at the school district and school letter grade. They also know if the letter grade is low that some families move to a school district with a higher letter grade. The accountability puts pressure on a school budget to ensure they have the resources for teachers to enhance their curriculum.

The collaboration process did come with some problems and issues that they had to work to ameliorate. Getting four school boards to work together was a challenge in the beginning. According to Superintendent A, "It's always a challenge to coordinate four different boards..." Superintendent A went on to state about the collaboration efforts is that, "They [school boards] seem to be kind of indifferent to it. They're very clear the initial idea they're not interested in consolidation." Consolidation right now is not the answer for these school districts because by collaborating they are able to still maintain their school district. Superintendent B stated another problem with collaboration is, "... time is always our worst enemy." That is a hard one to combat, and they are all just making it work to meet monthly. They keep the scheduled meetings whether someone can attend or not. It must be a priority in everyone's schedule otherwise people would not meet and the process would come to a halt.

Another issue that occurred is the sharing of teachers and sharing of students. The sharing of a teacher is an issue because of the different teacher contracts in each school district and the union has to agree on the conditions. Superintendent A stated;

We've actually put in place a procedure to have shared teachers. We were all ready to go with one and then the way some openings came about that fell through, but School District A does have an agreement put together, so if we want to share a teacher how we can financially make it work.

The collaboration process has brought to the table talks of sharing a teacher to fruition.

Sharing of students can be an issue because according to Superintendent A the “Biggest challenge is students do not want to travel. They want to be at their school.” They do not want to travel to another school to take a class or classes at another school because of the time and cost in gasoline. With low class numbers in some of the schools, the largest of the districts offer a specialized class and some students take advantage and do travel there to take the course.

The stakeholders engage with the issues by trying to resolve them through a process of sub-committees, action items, and timelines which is part of the collaboration process. As with the shared teacher, they have put procedures in place to allow for this to now happen. Superintendent B specified, “Every meeting, we have an agenda and then we talk about establishing two or three different goals, what are our goals for this year, whether it’s more professional development, or collective purchase, or whatever that might be.” By keeping on task with an agenda, the participants at the meeting engage with the issues or problems.

The experience of collaboration in Our County suggests that the collaboration process can be a viable strategy for other school districts. This research study shows that four county schools are collaborating and it is working, and other school districts can learn from their trials and tribulations. As Superintendent A explained;

I think it's a solution to address certain academic issues. And small rural is expensive. And it's going to stay expensive unless we're going to eliminate small rural, it's not going to be the most cost-effective, but those children still deserve an education. But with the distance opportunities and the online opportunities,

that's opened up a lot of things small schools can offer most any academic classes that the large schools can offer.

Other rural districts have struggles and will want to look at collaborating in areas such as the four school districts have done and are doing. They are leveraging their resources in transportation with bus drivers, academically with course offerings, in the professional development arena for teachers and administrators, and with facilities and grounds and maintenance. They do this while being transparent with their community and with the support of their school board members. Meeting monthly and keeping everyone informed is the key to the continuation of collaboration.

With all of these areas of collaboration will it be enough to stop consolidation in Indiana? This study has shown that only small amounts of money are being saved in the budgets of the four school districts, so collaboration is not the sole strategy to stop consolidation. The collaboration efforts are a positive within the county for the districts to show that they can work together to do what is best for students. Collaboration is a “feel-good” strategy that has united and brought together the four districts and the superintendents are all in agreement that it will continue. Other school districts want to look at collaboration as a strategy that may potentially be one strategy that could be used to combat the need to consolidate. Another reason to collaborate is a way to build relationships with nearby districts and share resources that can benefit students academically or the district by saving some money to the budget.

Data clips from each superintendent and the service center director that participated in this study support the assertions.

Utility of Collaboration

In Indiana school budgets decrease or will have little increase over the coming years, and rural districts student numbers are less due to the decline of enrollment.

“Due to changes in the way education funds are now distributed, more than 40 percent of school districts in Indiana will see either no increase or a decrease in money coming from the state. Some urban school districts will get fewer dollars because they’re projected to have fewer students, but some suburban districts with growing enrollments will also get less money due, in part, to the lack of low-income students in their schools. Meanwhile, some rural school districts with little change in their enrollment will see more money coming their way while neighboring rural districts will see less. The reason: Changes in the school funding formula made by the Republican-controlled legislature two years ago will determine how the increased education dollars approved for the next two years will be divvied up.” (Hayden, 2013, para. 2-5)

This study shows other school districts and stakeholders the usefulness of collaborating with nearby school districts. The results of the study will positively affect the way school districts collaborate now and in the future. The research from this study resulted with the following:

1. The four school districts are seeing the benefits of collaboration and continue to meet monthly to ensure they continue with their collaboration efforts.
2. Each school district has been able to keep their own local identity and the community is aware of their collaboration.

3. All four school districts have a similar school calendar so they are able to collaborate.
4. Increased curriculum opportunities for students have been put in place in all four school districts.
5. The use of distance-learning labs means that students do not have to travel and can remain in their school to gain those increased curriculum opportunities.
6. Some money has been saved, but these collaboration efforts are not meant to be a “cure all” for savings large amounts of money. Instead, while collaboration helps save some money, its principal outcome is to increase student opportunities.
7. Increased professional development has occurred for teachers and administrators through the help of the service center and the distance-learning lab in each school district.
8. Other areas such as faculty, transportation, and equipment have been shared between the four school districts of Our County.

Implications

The themes that developed from the interviews of the superintendent and the service center director did match to the literature findings of Chapter 2 that the cost savings of collaborating with other school districts is not enormous. The superintendents shared their lived experiences and how the collaboration efforts have made some impact on savings in the budget, but not a huge amount. They stated the most impact comes from the collaboration between teachers and administrators. This is significant because to have

buy-in from teachers and administrators is very helpful to maintain the success of students.

Collaboration among the county school board members is crucial to collaboration efforts because the school board has to vote in favor of any bidding on services to be done for a district. If the school boards are aware that the districts are collaborating to ensure students success or to save monies in the budget, then the approval vote will happen.

Consolidation may be in the answer for some small rural school districts, but the research literature states that, “Still, there is no evidence suggesting a compelling reason for the state to intervene by encouraging-let alone mandating- such mergers” (Bard, et al., 2006, pg. 45). Bard, et al. (2006) continued to list reasons that consolidation is NOT the best answer:

- The educational and financial results of state mandated school district consolidation do not meet legislated expectations.
- There is no “ideal” size for schools or districts.
- “Size” does not guarantee success- effective schools come in all sizes.
- Smaller districts have higher achievement, affective and social outcomes.
- The larger a district becomes, the more resources are devoted to secondary or non-essential activities.
- Local school officials should be wary of merging several smaller elementary schools, at least if the goal is improved performance.
- After a school closure, out migration, population decline, and neighborhood deterioration are set in motion, and support for public education diminishes.
- There is no solid foundation for the belief that eliminating school districts will improve education, enhance cost-effectiveness, or promote equality. Students from low-income areas have better achievement in small schools (p. 45).

The following is the letter grade from the four Our County school districts and their accountability measures from state testing. Information was obtained from the Indiana Department of Education website.

Table 14

Letter grades from Indiana Department of Education

School Corporation	2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013
A	A	A	B
B	D	A	C
C	A	C	C
D	C	B	A

When looking at how the research relates to the questions of this study it is obvious that the current superintendents and their respective school boards would like to continue with collaborating because they are experiencing the benefits from the cross county collaboration. They have worked through problems during the process and participants have engaged in the problems to help solve so collaboration would be smooth.

Limitations

One limitation to this study is that two of the four superintendents were not the superintendents at the time of the Our Study. The one superintendent was told about the study but was not part of the initial committee meetings. The other superintendent came in at the tail end of the committee meetings that were run by the service center director.

The other two superintendents have been through the entire process so their interview responses would have more background knowledge than the other two superintendents.

Another limitation would be the new Indiana legislation on a school budget; students fully fund the general fund so districts want to gain as many students as they can, and collaborating with nearby districts would not seem to be a good plan. However, the current superintendents know they have to collaborate to be able to offer the best curriculum to keep students in their district. The current superintendents see collaboration as a way to keep their students, and cut costs in their school budget. Many districts in Indiana are trying to find ways to get students from nearby districts to come to their school district due to the new funding formula. Collaboration is not a topic of conversation with most Indiana school districts. To see these four school districts collaborate with each other is important for other school districts to experience.

Recommendations for Further Research

The four school districts are still collaborating today, because they have four strong superintendents and school boards that believe in the collaboration process. In order to further this research, going into another rural county with school districts in close proximity would be beneficial to see if what has been learned from Our County can be applied to other small rural districts. It would be useful to consider adding urban or suburban school districts to a collaboration. Their needs may be different, but could urban districts help smaller nearby districts? It would be useful to explore the sorts of synergies that such a collaboration might develop.

The strength of the collaboration process in Our County came from two seasoned superintendents that quickly bonded with the two new superintendents to express the importance of the collaboration process. The two seasoned superintendents have been close colleagues for a long time, and this shared history gives them a strong sense of community and a high level of respect from all stakeholders. Further research into school district collaborations could explore whether a collaboration process would work in another community that was less cohesive.

In researching the four school districts in Our County with their collaboration process, the researcher determined that the stakeholders in every school district must be active participants in the collaboration process. Leveraging each other's resources has offset costs in their budget, which helps with the decrease in enrollment and loss of tuition support. Meeting monthly to keep the collaboration process continuing throughout the four school districts is a necessity for the success of the collaboration process. Further research of other school districts would reveal other resources that could be shared and other possible structural organization, such as additional subcommittees that could be formed to enhance the collaboration process.

Conclusions

As school districts continue to look at ways to reduce their school budgets and find ways to keep students in their school district, it is important for superintendents, school board members and other stakeholders to consider looking at collaboration with nearby school districts. This is at the very least an option that can be exercised and explored prior to any move to consolidate smaller districts into one larger district. "The

influence of school and district consolidations on the vitality and well-being of communities may be the most dramatic result, if the one least often discussed by politicians or education leaders. Put simply, the loss of a school erodes a community's social and economic base- its sense of community, identity and democracy-and the loss permanently diminishes the community itself, sometimes to the verge of abandonment” (Howley, et al., 2011, p.9). The impact of consolidation on a community is not an avenue many superintendents or school board members want to move towards. As legislation continues to add new laws and change the playing field of accountability for school districts, having a collaboration process in place will benefit small school districts so they can work together to forestall a possible consolidation.

The current superintendents are a vital component to maintaining the monthly collaboration meetings and momentum between the school districts, thus keeping the collaboration process intact. Even though each district may have a different need, the leveraging of their resources to help each other is essential for their school budget and for student success, which is ultimately why the collaboration process is in place. The districts in Our County have definitely shown that collaboration can work and work well.

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX

After the interviews were transcribed, themes emerged from the data analysis of each interview. Assertions were then determined to establish the importance of collaboration. Below are the guided interview questions for this qualitative research study.

Interview Questions

1. What are some of the positive results of the collaboration efforts occurring today?
2. What are some of the negative results of the collaboration efforts occurring today?
3. How has your school district since the study encouraged collaboration efforts with the other districts in the county?
4. How has your school board encouraged or discouraged collaboration efforts?
5. How has the community encouraged or discouraged collaboration efforts?
6. Is collaboration across small school districts a solution to the issue of budget reductions?

VITA

VITA

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Marion Community Schools, Marion, IN December 2009-July 2011

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Superintendent

Charles A. Beard Memorial School Corporation, Knightstown, IN June 2012-June 2013

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