

**SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES:
A CASE STUDY OF TWO RURAL COMMUNITIES SURVIVING AN
INTERDISTRICT AGREEMENT**

A Dissertation by

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A CASE STUDY OF RURAL COMMUNITIES SURVIVING AN INTERDISTRICT
CONSOLIDATION**

The following faculty members have examined the final copy of this dissertation for form and content, and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Education with a major in Educational Leadership.

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DEDICATION

My parents have always been supporters of education and encouraged me to fulfill my dreams through education. This degree is acquired in honor of a request by my beloved father. Growing up I usually did everything my father requested with the exception of one of his final requests, for me to receive my doctorate degree. I have now finished his last request. To my husband and family, I appreciate your patience, encouragement, and support during the three year process of completing this degree.

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ABSTRACT

In rural southwest Kansas, there exists two schools connected by an interdistrict agreement in which two towns 11 miles apart have agreed to allow the junior high (grades 6-8) to remain in one town and the high school (grades 9-12) to remain in the other town. Each community keeps a school entity which is one of the largest employers in town, helps maintain community cohesiveness, and provides the social hub for both communities. The agreement has been in existence for over 20 years, an alternate approach to school consolidation, and promotes a foundation for the sustainability of both communities.

Thirty-two semi-structured interviews were involved in this qualitative study conducted in the communities of Chester and Mason. The interview questions probed into the symbiotic relationship between the community and the school districts in each of the respective towns and investigate the perception of social capital within each community before and after the agreement. The focus of the interview questions was to understand the effect this type of agreement has on the relationship between the schools and the communities.

The two school boards designed a six-page document that outlined the interdistrict agreement which was implemented approximately eight months after initial discussions. Total change of school colors and mascot combined with the financial savings, community support, and positive leadership contribute to the success of interdistrict agreement. The bond between the two communities and the students in South County gets stronger as time passes. This study reveals a type of agreement that maintains the symbiotic relationship between school and community while strengthening social capital within surviving communities of two rural schools which were facing possible closure and searching for alternative to traditional consolidation.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Several policies throughout the history of U.S. public education have been created in response to changing social and economic conditions. Notable among these has been district consolidation. Policymakers and school officials have utilized consolidation in urban and rural settings to address an array of issues including financial constraints, retaining highly qualified teachers, boundary disputes, declining enrollment, student diversity, and poor building facilities. (Post & Stambach, 1999; Spradlin, Carson, Hess, & Plucker, 2010) Consolidation may be the avenue most often used by local boards of education to solve extreme financial problems. However, consolidation is not a trouble-free solution to fiscal insufficiency because of its potential for creating ancillary, non-monetary challenges within the surrounding communities.

A consolidation movement for individual schools and school districts has persisted for 150 years, beginning with the one-room school houses of the early 1900s and continuing through to the rural schools of the 20th century (Spradlin et al., 2010). Hu and Yinger (2007) observed how “school district consolidation has been one of the most dramatic changes in education governance and management in the United States during the last century” (p. 1). Thousands of small rural districts, including one-room school districts, have been forced to centralize their operations through consolidation (DeYoung & Howley, 1990). Even today, rural school consolidations generate interest because of the potential positive and negative effects they may exert on students, staff, families, and communities. The negative consequences associated with the loss of a school or district are especially pronounced in rural areas where consolidation can mean the loss of an essential part of the community’s economic and social infrastructure and the likelihood of an uncertain future (Kenny & Schmidt, 1994).

A National Drive for School Consolidation

In the early 1900s, schools rarely had electricity or running water and were typically heated by a wood-burning stove (Young & Green, 2005). Although the teachers in these schools were highly respected, they received little pay. In the 1920s after World War I, soldiers returned home and family populations grew, increasing the number of students attending one room school houses. Later on in the 1930s, rural populations declined due to droughts and the Great Depression (Strang, 1987). Smaller farms sold out to larger farms because of the farming economy. As farms gradually increased in size, the rural families who had sold out migrated to the cities for industrial jobs. The population increased in urban areas and it became necessary to educate children in centralized locations. The actual number of school districts nationwide decreased from approximately 130,000 to 15,000 during this period (Gordon & Knight, 2008). Larger schools housed larger numbers of students with better facilities and more curriculum offerings, mostly within the cities (Young & Green, 2005). The migrated rural families initially worried about the quality of education due to larger class sizes, transportation time for students sent to a centralized school, and less personal attention from a teacher who may not live in the local community. These concerns were soon overlooked because the larger consolidated school offered broader curricula with access to small libraries, facilities with indoor plumbing and electricity, and a daily hot lunch served cafeteria style (Young & Green, 2005). School buses and better roads meant the eventual end of most one-room schools (Nitta, Holley, & Wrobel, 2008). Between 1930 and 1970, school consolidations raised the average number of students in a school from 87 to 440 and the average size of a school district from 170 to 2,300 students (Berry & West, 2010). Haller (1992) judged the school consolidation movement of the 1950s a success if measured by the significant decrease in the number of schools.

School Consolidation in Kansas

In the early 1900s, the population of Kansas was approximately 80% rural. As a consequence, Kansas had many one-room buildings scattered across the landscape. These schools served a dual purpose: as a school for students of all ages and home for teachers. The schools were usually located every three to four miles so students within the area would not have to walk more than an hour to or from school (Fuller, 1975). Rural populations continued to follow the national trends, pooling together to form small communities and establishing one larger school district. In 1963, Kansas had 1,840 school districts. The School Unification Act mandated unified school district consolidation in 1969, reducing the number of districts to 339 (School Unification Acts, 1969). By 2006, the number had dropped to 300 school districts. As of 2013, there were 283 districts in the state and state officials have not lost interest in shrinking this number even further (Kansas Department of Education, 2012c; Kansas State Department of Education, 2005). School closures since the 1969 legislation, especially in rural areas, have come about because of one or a combination of issues: declining enrollment, dilapidated facilities, high cost of education per pupil, economic misfortunes within the community, state funding budget cuts, or mandatory consolidation due to court decisions (Strange, 2011).

Research Problem

Policy makers in Kansas are putting rural school districts under increasing pressure to consolidate because of decreasing enrollments, reductions in state funding, additional academic requirements (i.e., required assessments for meeting a state standard, second language students, rising diversity, and added graduation requirements), and limited resources (Bard, Gardener, & Wieland, 2006; Cook, 2008). These pressures threaten their existence as independent Local Education Agencies (LEAs). Historically, consolidation of two or more school districts has been

considered a viable option (Cook, 2008; Duncombe & Yinger, 2010). Many states including Kansas have provisions within the educational statutes for guidance, financial incentives, and regulation of consolidation of schools and school boards (School District Finance and Quality Performance, 2009). The educational and budgetary advantages of consolidation may lessen the financial difficulties of rural school districts to some degree but not without precipitating other problems having to do with community identity and viability.

The effects of consolidation on communities should not be overlooked or ignored because consolidation can lead to a dying or ghost town effect within a community (Ward & Rink, 1992). Loss of a school as the focal point of the community can be a devastating experience for individual members or the community as a whole. “The notion that the community has a role to play in the education of youth is long standing in the United States” (Sanders, 2003, p. 161). School districts in rural communities are often the largest employer and the main social gathering place (Bard et al., 2006). Although consolidation is seen by many as an inevitable choice in order to maintain schooling for children living in rural areas, the loss of a school is occasionally associated with the breakdown of community cohesiveness, a situation which can lead to the waning of a town’s vitality (Cox & Cox, 2010).

Boards of education are elected to 4-year terms with only two requirements for obtaining a board position: each candidate must be a resident within the school district and win a majority of the public votes (School District Elections, 1968). Knowledge of educational issues or legal procedures such as consolidation is not a requirement for membership although instruction in the tasks a board should perform to provide the vision, structure, accountability, advocacy, and unity necessary for the effective governance of school districts may be a process that the board of education elects to act upon during a particular term. Lack of understanding of consolidation by

local board members can create an environment within a community characterized by resistance from students, school personnel, and community members toward consolidation. Although in many situations the economic advantages of consolidation may be strong, beliefs and feelings about the loss of local control may prompt residents to support keeping schools within the community (Cronin, 2010). Rural communities are so intertwined that pulling out one of the main components of the community (i.e., the school or school district) can have profound implications for community identity and community events such as concerts, banquets, plays, and extracurricular activities typically hosted by the school (Theobald & Nachtigal, 1995). The loss of identity is a real and vibrant issue which can hinder and eventually halt consolidation efforts especially if the high school, considered the social hub of the community, is relocated to a neighboring town or someplace between towns where it is less accessible to community members.

Theoretical Framework

The provision of education not only involves the delivery of learning technologies and academic programming but the social and economic stability of communities, school and community identity, and ownership among community members. Sustaining a rural school district that is struggling because of declining enrollments, inadequate facilities, or budget cuts may require some type of consolidation or resource sharing option. Although consolidation can be a partial solution for rural schools in economic distress, educators and community stakeholders may be hesitant to relinquish the powerful connection binding the school to the local community, especially the social benefits and sense of identity that come with school ownership (Mathis, 2003). Ornstein (1992) stated that consolidation “has proved to be a serious and emotional matter, especially in small and rural school districts where the local school may be

a focal point of the community's identity," (p. 322). Much like traditions within a family setting, the community surrounds, supports, and builds traditions with local entities such as churches, libraries, hospitals, small businesses, and the school district.

The theoretical framework provided a lens through which to view interdistrict agreements (Crotty, 1998). Utilizing social capital with emphasis on the symbiotic relationships support the purpose of this study which was to examine an interdistrict agreement for understanding and probing into what remains of the mutual ties between rural schools and their communities several years after an interdistrict agreement has been implemented. Simply stated, the theoretical framework for this case study was used to examine the current status and functionality of a rural school interdistrict agreement on the school environment, surrounding communities, and the people that occupy those communities.

Active involvement and leadership roles by students are enhanced when schools and communities are linked. Schools produce leaders for the community and communities form the school culture (Johns, Kilpatrick, Falk, & Mulford, 2000). Johns et al explained how networks between schools and communities helped to ensure the sustainability of the community. Failure to include businesses and patrons as partners with a rural school can reduce a community's sense of ownership in a school, reducing the capacity for contributions from school to community (Bishop & Mulford, 1996). Ward and Rink (1992) stated that "few public policy issues touch the heart of a community more than the loss of the local public school through reorganization or consolidation of school districts" (p. 11). Consolidation may resolve some issues but there is a tendency for communities that close their schools to degenerate over time. The losses, gains, and compromises derived from a symbiotic relationship between a rural school district and the

surrounding community was the lens I used to examine the effects of an interdistrict agreement between two Kansas communities that took place over 20 years ago.

Social Capital between Two Rural Communities

Rural schools have been and are the gathering place or the social hub for many school and community events. Facilities are utilized as the social center for local programs which provided entertainment for townspeople through sports, plays, music programs, and other events either preformed by students or outside entities (Lyson, 2002). Rural communities are impacted by school consolidations from a social standpoint because the hub for events is no longer at the local school; it has been moved to the neighboring town that has the consolidated school. Blauwkamp, Longo, and Anderson (2011) stated traditional school consolidation “deprives rural communities of a vital site of community life, and it also fragments and destroys relationships which are vital to the maintenance of community life” (p. 3). Economically, the communities affected are in danger of becoming ghost towns. With the neighboring town becoming the event host, the town with the closed school no longer has a reason to exist creating a hardship for local businesses and community as a whole.

This study drew upon the importance of the intrinsic, human connections between rural schools and communities and the role of the school as a social gathering place for extra-curricular activities, music concerts, and other events within a community also known as social capital (Ornstein, 1992). Shifting the educational locus of a community and relocating it to a neighboring town disrupts students, school employees, parents, business owners, and patrons accustomed to the school being a focal point of the community (Blauwkamp et al., 2011). Sell, Leistritz, and Thompson (1996) stated, “the impact of school consolidation on students is immediate, or nearly so; however, the impacts of consolidation on respective communities,

social and economic, may take place over several years” (p. 188). Community solidarity can be severed after consolidation and relocation of a school to a neighboring town. Although the bricks and mortar may still exist, the empty building is no longer a social hub and stands as a scar that reminds residents of what things were like when the school operated as a potent force in the town.

Social capital as defined by Putnam (2000) referred to strengthening networks and trust among communities which enables them to act together in a more cohesive and effective manner. This study attempted to capture the depth of social capital expressed by the perceptions of the people in both communities. Questions probing citizens’ engagement, attendance at school events before and after the interdistrict agreement, and the perception of trust between the community environments which helped determine the level of social capital after the interdistrict agreement. The possibility of social capital restrictions whether by geographical distance or within generations was also questioned within the rural communities (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987). Community and educational benefits gained and group memberships or participation were key factors in social capital (Putnam, 1995).

Symbiotic Relationship between School and Community

Embedded within the social capital framework, the mutually beneficial relationship or linkage between school and community, which can be described as a symbiotic relationship (Johns et al., 2000). As stated by Stauber (2001), “Rural schools require a symbiotic relationship with a place” (p. 37). Symbiotism is a term originally coined by Albert Bernhard Frank in the 1870s to describe the concept of coexistence between two species in the world of botany (Martin & Schwab, 2012). Another person credited with the early uses of the term in the 1870s was German botanist, Anton de Bary (Sapp, 2010). De Bary utilized the word to describe two unlike

organisms living in a close relationship (Lhotsky, 2011). The term continued to be used in the scientific world until it evolved into the accepted concept of symbiosis wherein members of different communities share a symbiotic relationship that requires the mutual dependence of individuals and their respective roles in the maintenance of community (Sapp, 2010). Theobald and Nachtigal (1995) observed how, “Rural schools have traditionally been tightly linked to their communities.” (p. 132). Healthy schools require community support and community viability can be strengthened by the presence of a school. The alternative is something too frequently observed in rural locations across the nation: a loss of community vitality and an eventual ghost town existence.

This study investigated the relationship between two communities prior to an interdistrict agreement and as of today, 23 years after the implementation of the agreement. Further probing questions were asked to understand the relationship between the Chester Junior High School and the surrounding community and the Mason High School and the surrounding community which is 11 miles east of Chester. The study not only describes and helps readers understand the interdistrict agreement and the difference between it and traditional consolidation; but also the community investment, the connection between school and community and the elements needed for an interdistrict agreement to be successful for 22 years within two communities.

Purpose of Study

According to Medley and Akan (2008), efficiency of district funding measured by the average amount spent to educate a child within a school district was one of two main reasons to consolidate. The second reason was described as educational benefits which would include expanded resources and better facilities for students and teachers combined with better benefits and salaries for teachers. Although numerous studies have examined the economic efficiencies

and educational improvements that consolidation is said to bring, there has been little research on local effects of consolidation on the surrounding community. “The experience of district consolidation from community and teacher perspectives are rare,” stated Howley, Johnson, and Petrie (2011, p.7). Research beyond the financial or economic reasons for consolidation is needed to affirm the extent to which consolidation can be detrimental for the relationship between the identity structures, local traditions, school personnel, patrons, taxpayers, and local business owners of the rural communities involved in the consolidation of schools.

The purpose of this study was to understand the process and examine the effects of an interdistrict agreement on individuals in two small Kansas communities approximately 22 years after they engaged in this kind of consolidation referred to as an interdistrict agreement. The interdistrict agreement that was studied obviously is successful due to it being in existence for more than 20 years; however, this study probed two areas: the social capital which surrounds the symbiotic relationship between the communities and the school district and the total understanding of the implementation, process, and sustainability of this type of consolidation. Inclusive portrayals of two schools’ and communities’ experiences during and after an interdistrict agreement formed the basis of this research.

Rural residents are usually rooted to place through connections to the local environs and the schools (Bauch, 2001). In rural schools, the communities and schools are a part of one another and mutually dependent upon each other. When community members get involved in the school and its events, a bond is formed between the school and the community (Howley, 1997). Interdistrict agreements contain provisions made between two or more districts allowing for a mutually agreed upon consolidation by the respective boards of education (Organization,

Powers and Finances of Boards of Educations, 1984). Community identity is partially forged from a school's identity, activities, and events.

The origins and specifics of the interdistrict agreement of South County school districts were examined for this study. My research includes understanding the losses or gains felt by community and school members during reconfiguration of the schools, characteristics of and implementation of the agreement, reaction and connection of stakeholders during and after the application of the interdistrict agreement, and the effects of adapting to various things such as new school building arrangements, new mascots, and new school colors. Questions were asked as to why and how the components of this interdistrict agreement came about and the process used for the two schools to enter the interdistrict agreement. Other questions included whether the interdistrict agreement has served the reasons for consolidation, whether the agreement has been difficult to sustain and their perceptions around the future of the agreement, and the community relations with regards to the school and the neighboring community. To date, most research on traditional consolidation focuses on the logistical aspects of the process, the increase or decrease of test scores, availability and increase in selection of courses, financial stability, building configurations, or transportation issues (Nitta et al., 2008; Spradlin et al., 2010; Strange, 2011; Wallace, 1996). These same logistical aspects have not been studied as a result of an interdistrict agreement. The effects of an interdistrict agreement on surrounding businesses, patrons, or community have not been included in most studies because decisions about school consolidation are not contingent on community survival but on school size, economic conditions, or demographic factors (Cotton, 1996). It is hoped that the study will provide insights into the perceptions of community members about interdistrict agreements and the dynamics of an alternate agreement which is notably different from the traditional or regional consolidation

processes now officially advocated and financially supported in Kansas, by the state legislature (Consolidation of School Districts, 1969).

Research Questions

This qualitative case study sought to explore the following questions about a rural interdistrict consolidation agreement involving the South County Schools (Unified School District #M-Mason and Unified School District #C-Chester), 22 years after the original consolidation agreement. In order to better understand the connection between rural schools and their surrounding community, the following questions were asked:

1. How do community members in a rural consolidated district describe or recall their experience with the more than 20 year-old interdistrict agreement?
2. How do community members in each of the two rural consolidated towns describe the effects of this interdistrict agreement on the relationship between the school and community?
3. What do community members believe they have lost or gained from the interdistrict consolidation agreement within their school, community, or local businesses?

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Rural school districts continue to face issues which cause communities to consider consolidation, reorganization, or some type of resource sharing. This literature review provides documentation surrounding different factors which may lead a school district to weigh the benefits of consolidation. Factors that may encourage or push communities to consolidate include declining enrollment, educational quality, and economic gains or funding efficiency (Howley et al., 2011). The literature review will delve into the emotional connections and community identities of rural areas and rural schools. Lack of research and complexity of consolidation combined with human interest and community connection make the idea of considering an alternative to traditional or regionalized school consolidation a topic worth researching.

Description of Consolidation

The combining of smaller schools or school districts into one school or district is referred to as reorganization or consolidation. In a qualitative study by Nitta et al. (2008), consolidation was defined as two or more schools or buildings joining together to create a new entity. Usually a larger school or district is formed by combining two or more, smaller schools or districts through one or more of the following processes: centralizing administration, closing buildings, reorganizing buildings, or sharing resources and personnel. Cox and Cox (2010) referred to consolidation as a merger, with a possibility of closure of one or more buildings, depending upon the circumstances of the consolidation. As noted by Howley et al. (2011), consolidation allowed several schools or districts to have fewer superintendents and managers which resulted in state education agencies having fewer districts to manage and finance. Economic efficiency,

geographical proximity, poverty, and student outcomes seemed to be the driving issues for consolidation during the consolidation movement of the 1950s and 60s (Guthrie, 1979). Consolidation was thought to resolve some of those topics without much concern for the community culture and identity.

Kansas Statutes for Combining Schools

Although consolidation has taken on many forms since the mid 1800s, Kansas statutes allow for two categories of agreements for school consolidation. The two categories listed under Chapter 72 of the Kansas statutes are consolidation and interdistrict agreements (Consolidation of School Districts, 1969; Organization, Powers and Finances of Boards of Educations, 1984).

The following describes each category by summarizing the state statute description:

- Consolidation agreements are authorized by the 87th article and give the right to boards of education for two or more school districts to enter consolidation agreements to form one unified school district (Consolidation of School Districts, 1969).
- Interdistrict agreements are authorized by the 82nd article of Chapter 72 in the Kansas Statutes and give rights to boards of education for two or more districts to enter into agreements for pupils in attendance at one school district which is maintained by another school district. (Organization, Powers and Finances of Boards of Educations, 1984).

The next few sections describe each type of agreement in detail and some of the combinations that have occurred in Kansas under each of these consolidation categories.

Consolidation Agreements

The combination of two or more districts into one district is the most common consolidation scenario utilized in Kansas and is usually referred to as traditional consolidation

(Bard et al., 2006). The main goal of traditional consolidation is to consolidate into one unified district with the school building(s) located in one of the consolidating school facilities while closing the remaining building(s). One community keeps its school intact while the school in the neighboring community is closed and completely disorganized in order to receive the financial incentives listed under the statute (Consolidation of School Districts, 1969). Sometimes the elementary school may remain in each town but not always. In some cases, the consolidating schools may be close in proximity but in other cases the schools and communities may be several miles apart. The statutes do not require the consolidating schools to reside within the same county. However, it does require the establishment of new district boundaries along with the legal transference of territory from the closing school district to the new (School District Finance and Quality Performance, 2009).

Another type of consolidation is referred to as regionalized consolidation and it began in the early to mid 1900s as transportation improved and one- or two-room school districts needed to be replaced with new facilities (Ornstein, 1992). Several communities would combine resources and build one school in a central location, usually referred to as a community center or social building that was utilized for gatherings when school was not in session (Fuller, 1984). Regionalized consolidation has been described as the combination of two or more schools where the existing school buildings were not utilized but rather a new centrally located facility was built between the existing school districts (National Conference of State Legislature, 2011). In some cases, the elementary buildings remained functional in each town. The creation of regionalized school districts involved territory transfer, the combination of assessed valuations to comply with the statute, and usually a bond issue to build the new facility (School District Finance and Quality Performance, 2009). When the existing schools of the consolidating

districts needed to be renovated and updated, new constructions were found to be cost effective when compared to remodeling (Andrews, Duncombe, & Yinger, 2002).

Regardless of the type of consolidation, the closure or disorganization of schools may leave a community without a local school. Statute 72-6445a requires the disorganization of at least one of the consolidating schools as part of the funding requirements (School District Finance and Quality Performance, 2009). This would leave some communities without a focal point or gathering place because they have lost their school, usually the junior high or high school, which provided activities and social events for the community (Blauwkamp et al., 2011).

Interdistrict Agreements

In another type of consolidation, instead of disorganizing or closing any school building(s) and combining into a single district, the interdistrict agreement process keeps both unified districts intact and operating under two independent boards, one in each community (Organization, Powers and Finances of Boards of Educations, 1984). Each town has the option of keeping its elementary building while the two high schools consolidate and locate in one town and the junior highs consolidate and reside in the other town. Both communities keep a social event building but become fiscally responsible for the reconfigured school located in their community. This consolidation is a different combination containing unique characteristics within the interdistrict agreement (Kansas Department of Education, 1991a). The configuration of interdistrict agreement used by schools depends upon the decisions made by the local boards of education in conjunction with the needs of the districts and communities such as student numbers, facilities, and financial support (Organization, Powers and Finances of Boards of Educations, 1984).

Reasons for Rural Consolidation

Rural school consolidations have continued to generate interest around the effects pertaining to educational opportunities, financial decisions, and academic achievement and outcomes within the context of a school community. Consolidation is promoted by advocates who emphasize its benefits such as broader course selection, financial efficiency, and improvement of physical facilities (Howley & Eckman, 1997). The economic decline coupled with the reality of declining population in rural areas encourages school consolidation without regard for community survival.

Funding Efficiency

State and local governments are the primary financers of public education. State school budgets have come under attack and discussions of consolidation within school districts have surfaced as a state's budget and revenue decline (Johnson, Oliff, & Koulish, 2008; Schwartzbeck, 2003). The two most influential components in consolidation are the assessed valuation of properties within the district and school size (Brasington, 2003). Often state financial incentives are made available for consolidation to entice rural schools to consolidate (Gordon & Knight, 2008). The results of a study by Dodson and Garrett (2008) suggested approximately 34% cost savings were possible by consolidating rural districts. For example, the consolidation of four rural schools into one school saved approximately \$40 million. Savings from rural school consolidations came from several educational areas including: teacher and administrator salaries, cost per student expenditures, and transportation expenses. The combination of smaller districts into larger ones allowed for savings that were directed towards instructional expenses. Some of the savings were attributed to sharing of services and resources

(Dodson & Garrett, 2008). The idea was for smaller districts close in proximity to reduce costs by sharing an administrator, instructor, or extracurricular activities.

At the state levels, the decrease in number of schools or districts provided several optional financial opportunities for districts choosing to consolidate. In Iowa, Gordon and Knight (2008) studied districts that capitalized on a five-year state incentive program. Smaller rural districts were financially encouraged to utilize whole-grade sharing, defined as combining two districts into one existing building and closing the other facility. Although Gordon and Knight concluded the expense was large for the state during the five-year duration of the incentive program, the state benefited in the long run by having fewer districts to fund annually. Further results showed a slight increase in local expenditures for the newly consolidated district; however, the increase in local revenue created a surplus of funds. Transition costs, which are the extra costs associated with the consolidation of curriculum and facilities, must be considered as part of the total expenditures although these extra costs eventually level off after a ten year period (Duncombe & Yinger, 2010). Streifel, Foldes, and Holman (1991) studied consolidated districts which met specific criteria from state departments of education. Surveys conducted three years after consolidation concluded that financial savings were not necessarily an outcome of consolidation and increased revenues were not always generated (Streifel et al., 1991). Financial gains or losses after consolidation need to be considered in combination with other critical factors such as school size, administrative savings, and long term effects to school and community.

Several states offer financial incentives to encourage consolidation. Grider and Versteegen (2000) ran a survey which included 24 states, Kansas being one of them, with educational finance rulings during 1989-1999. The results showed a direct correlation between

school finance litigation for small rural schools and the increased number of district consolidations (Grider & Verstegen, 2000). Financial incentives for consolidation continue to reduce the number of districts in Kansas. Kansas currently has 283 school districts, a decrease of 17 since 2005-06. Kansas has more school districts than other states with similar population densities (Grider & Verstegen, 2000; Kansas Department of Education, 2012c; Kansas State Department of Education, 2005). LaPlante (2010) found that Kansas has an average of 321 students per school compared to the national median of 445 students per school.

Kansas and Nebraska have not recently experienced state mandated consolidations. In 2012, both states were challenged by legislation that attempted to force rural school consolidation; however, neither bill received much credibility (Buchanan, 2004). Buchanan compared the two states and found that 3% of the students in Nebraska were serviced by 50% of the school districts with several of them having fewer than 400 students. Approximately one-sixth of the school districts in Kansas had fewer than 250 students. Rural communities struggle to provide quality educational opportunities for smaller and smaller numbers of students within their communities.

The finance formula in Kansas allows for financial compensation for the consolidation of small schools if approved by the local board of education and a public vote. The financial incentive is contingent upon the size of the schools being consolidated (School District Finance and Quality Performance, 2009). Generally, for smaller schools, the amount of state compensation is equal to the amount previously received by all the former schools combined and is provided for three years. After the three-year period, the newly consolidated school district is expected to have made financial and educational adjustments that enable the district to be self-sustaining. Traditional consolidation was established and promoted as a cost-cutting measure for

rural districts (Theobald, 2005). The economic advantage for consolidation does make initial adjustments possible but does not provide for or mention the community or reorganization of the consolidated communities.

Management of fewer districts and schools has been another argument in favor of consolidation. Strange (2011) found state school finances dominated local monies, thus forcing consolidation by encouraging larger bureaucratic jurisdictions. Management of fewer districts and schools allowed for regionalized administrators, standardized teacher training, and common statewide policy initiatives (Strang, 1987). Consolidating services under one district created a lower per pupil cost because purchased services for students were lower when distributed across large populations (Hu & Yinger, 2007). Streifel et al. (1991) further supported this concept stating the cost per pupil for high schools under 260 students in size were slightly higher. Dodson and Garrett (2008) concluded that per pupil expenditures can be reduced through consolidation by avoiding high administrative costs.

Indiana schools fall under the scrutiny of Senate Bill 521, which forced schools with fewer than 500 students to consolidate (Spradlin et al., 2010). Financial savings were achieved through a variety of methods including sharing of joint education services, such as food service and technology; joint purchasing; and reduction of administration and faculty (Spradlin et al., 2010). Districts achieved other cost savings by enlarging class sizes through the consolidation of special education and early childhood personnel. Hu and Yinger (2007) concurred that shared resources in administration and the reduction of specialized personnel such as counselors or librarians in larger environments resulted in cost savings to the district.

Consolidation affects other budgetary areas supported within the school finance formula outside of personnel and per pupil cost. Transportation, virtual learning, collaboration of health

insurance, grant proposals, and shared in-service activities were among the list of potential cost savings (Spradlin et al., 2010). In a study involving diseconomies of size, Hu and Yinger (2007) found transportation costs were usually higher in small districts. Even though more students were transported in urban districts, per student cost was still lower than in a rural district. Buses in small rural districts picked up fewer students and covered more square miles per student. Consolidated districts tended to group students into centrally located buildings to reduce mileage and create more efficient commutes (Hu & Yinger, 2007). Grider and Verstegen (2000) discovered that among the states providing incentives for consolidation, little supplemental funding was offered for transportation, facility upgrades, or resource sharing. State financing was focused around total consolidation and there was limited support for sharing resources or facilities.

In contrast, another study presented information stating transportation was not an area for financial savings as a result of consolidation, especially with the continued rise of transportation costs (Holland & Baritelle, 1975). After utilizing a model that analyzed a road grid system with three types of bus routes--very short run, short run, and long run—Holland and Baritelle concluded that “Consolidation cannot be counted on to provide large cost savings in sparsely populated rural areas” (p. 574). Strang (1987) agreed that consolidated districts with more square mileage per district required longer bus routes and additional buses and drivers that increased overall expenses for the district. Another factor considered by Guthrie (1979) was the hardship on students who rode for longer periods of time. “Farm children’s time” (Holland & Baritelle, 1975, p. 574) on a bus is not negligible but should be considered a commodity with value.

Other research has shown that district revenues do not increase after state financial incentive is depleted. Streifel et al. (1991) studied different components of consolidation and concluded there were no reasons to expect a significant financial advantage when merging districts. According to Spradlin et al. (2010), mid-level administrators were hired to offset responsibilities of having fewer administrative staff, thus negating the cost of reducing upper-level administration. Along with the potential for increasing the efficiency of administration and lowering per pupil costs, an additional issue revolving around consolidation was the effect on students of the educational environment.

Educational Quality

Creating more educational opportunities by combining smaller schools or districts was considered an enhancement to the learning process. It was thought the capacity of larger schools to offer more class sections and increase course offerings provided a more rounded educational experience (Nitta et al., 2008). Spradlin et al. (2010) agreed with increased scheduling and curriculum offerings as an educational enhancement resulting from consolidation. Other provisions of larger schools included half-day scheduling, open enrollment, online instruction, and dual college credit courses. The consolidation of six small Arkansas schools aimed at the improvement of education quality and the more efficient utilization of tax dollars entailed the expansion of course offerings and extracurricular programs (Benton, 1992). Berry and West (2010) found larger schools superior to smaller rural schools with more depth in course offerings, improved facilities, a broader range of extra-curricular activities, and more accomplished teachers and administrators. Perlinson (1991) claimed rural children had the same right to a quality education as urban children. In Pennsylvania, regionalized consolidation provided an opportunity to replace three dying high schools with a newer school offering the

latest technology, newer facilities, and an expanded more flexible schedule (Post & Stambach, 1999). Education reformers and advocates for consolidation primarily believe that larger schools offer greater opportunities for learning with better facilities in a more effective educational environment.

Larger facilities and the maintenance or upgrading of those facilities has also proved to be a disadvantage to consolidation (Streifel et al., 1991). Consolidation often required expansion of an existing facility or an entirely new facility to accommodate the increase in students and student activities. Throughout the interviews conducted by Nitta et al. (2008), students and teachers expressed the belief that facilities were not necessarily better in a larger consolidated school. Although some financial savings were achieved, the cost effectiveness of small schools offset some of the budgetary savings accrued from consolidation and school closure.

Some rural schools continue to utilize technology enhancements to offset the limited availability of teacher resources. Use of distance learning and the sharing of a teacher among two or more schools (usually in an upper level course utilizing interactive distance television), has become an option to replace limited teacher availability or scheduling conflicts (Bourdeau & Bates, 1996). Online advanced placement or dual credit courses offered by qualified instructors are utilized to enhance opportunities within rural districts.

The relationship between student achievement and school size has also been the object of much research. Expenditure data revealed that although smaller schools spent more money on per pupil student instruction, they were also more successful in meeting Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) standards (Spradlin et al., 2010). According to Berry and West (2010), measurements of student outcomes in the 1980s showed smaller schools had higher standardized test scores than larger schools. Berry and West further observed that students who graduated

from smaller schools completed more years of education and were better able to apply their educations for career advancement. Lower drop-out rates, better attendance, and a greater opportunity for participation in extra-curricular events also were contributing factors in support of value of smaller school districts (Blauwkamp et al., 2011). Another study by Guthrie (1979) found that larger schools with more course selection and teachers did not necessarily translate into a higher quality education. The possibility existed that although course selection increased, students may not have received the necessary individual or small group instruction to improve student outcomes.

The conclusions of other qualitative studies conducted in the 1980s and 1990s suggested that smaller schools were better for student learning (Raywid, 1999). Lee and Smith (1997) identified several factors to consider when searching for the optimal or ideal size of a school. Items included cost of materials, efficiency of educational delivery, achievement scores, program specialization, student achievement gaps, and school climate. Results of the study by Lee and Smith revealed smaller schools were more equitable with regard to students' achievement at grade level and the achievement within low socioeconomic groups. Closing achievement gaps in school districts was more difficult in larger schools due to the extent of the educational gap and the amount of individualization needed to identify level and instruction necessary to improve achievement. Social relations and resources among students, teachers, and other faculty members were more likely to be stronger in small schools (Lee & Smith, 1997). Program specialization proved easier to achieve in larger districts after consolidation because of the increased number of instructors available to teach the different subjects and levels within different curricular areas. However, small schools had community resources which provided local opportunities for specialized programs and access to interactive or online programs which

proved to be just as valuable to student's education in rural settings. Friedkin and Necochea (1988) stated having more instructors in a school promoted a decrease in personalization and educational responsibility for individual students. Increased size after consolidation fostered an environment rife with inconsistencies, poor communication, and managerial controversies. Other results from Lee and Smith (1997) concluded academic programs were limited if the school got too small and small schools performed higher academically with minority students, migrant students, or students classified as at risk because of the personalization provided within the smaller individualized environment.

Community Experiences with Consolidation

Communities have unique characteristics created over time by history, events, circumstances, and people. Characteristics that define a rural community revolve around the school district, school activities, personnel, and linkage to the community. According to Blauwkamp et al. (2011), "Without their local schools, rural communities find it difficult to remain sustainable" (p. 2). Schools not only educate, they perform several functions that strengthen and connect young to old and school to industry to form a rural community.

Strained Community Relations

School consolidation can rupture the community connection to the local school and create a void within community life. Post and Stambach (1999) found a strained relationship will likely exist when two school communities merge because each community tries to retain its identity. Communities developed a sense of a school neighborhood with strong trust relationships and support groups that were not conducive to consolidation. Post and Stambach interviewed and surveyed several parents, board members, patrons, and alumni of rural Pennsylvania high schools and concluded the heart and soul of a school was as important as finances and fiscal

efficiency. The authors observed that the issues surrounding community identity outweighed any advantage gained through consolidation. Haller (1992) noted that the emotional connection between school and community was contingent on residents having the opportunity to publicly express their thoughts and feeling about consolidation prior to consolidation decisions. Local control within local school boards of small communities would allow opinions to be heard. Blauwkamp et al. (2011) found the most common reason for opposing consolidation was the loss of local control over the school district. Consolidation created unresolved social tension which hindered development of a positive community and educational environment.

The preservation of school and community identities are difficult to maintain when combining districts and communities that have functioned separately. Citizens from rural areas usually understand the financial reasons for promoting school consolidation. However, those same patrons also believe the school belongs to the community. Therefore, consolidation can precipitate a crisis capable of dividing the respective communities (Howley & Eckman, 1997).

Warner and Lindle (2009) invited a mediator and small task force to help facilitate two communities undergoing a consolidation process. The mediator encouraged representatives of the two communities to view regional consolidation as the blending of communities that would be better for their children while maintaining the identity of each individual community. Although the configuration of the consolidated district had been thoroughly explained to residents, both communities experienced difficulty with the consolidation process and grieved over the loss of high schools and community identity. Issues arose over power struggles, contrasting views of what constitutes a good education, and the loss of school as the social center because of regional consolidation (Howley & Eckman, 1997). Identities built on community

history and the emotions of residents were not easily dissolved, changed, or recombined to forge a new identity.

Community/School Identity and Social Hub

Given proper support, community attitude, and time to allow for the development of new identities and relationships, consolidation has the potential to enhance the identity of a school. Benton (1992) reported on six community schools uniting to form one school district. The consolidated district was successful because of cost efficiencies in the areas of transportation, utilities, and staffing. Nitta et al. (2008) identified several potential benefits for students and teachers in curricular areas. The study described the difficulties experienced by students and teachers when their small rural community merged with a larger community. Identities were embedded into both the smaller and larger communities and prior to consolidation, parents, families, teachers, and students experienced anxiety over the impending union. At the end of three years, participants in the study concluded the overall effects of the regional consolidation had promoted social and academic opportunities. The integrity of and commitment to consolidation in rural communities is contingent upon the willingness of community members to take on a new school identity and form relationships with community outsiders.

In most rural communities, the school is the primary or one of the few community services available. Resources for community programs and public identity must therefore be weighed in the process of consolidation (Streifel et al., 1991). Simply stated, “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). DeYoung, Howley, and Theobald (1995) believed community involvement and school participation needed encouragement above any school

reform movement such as consolidation. Social placement and a sense of identity were the key ingredients of school involvement. The combination of two or more school communities, whether similar or unique, created ongoing hardships for some students, staff, and community members (Nitta et al., 2008). Individual school identities were combined and exchanged for a new identity that both communities were expected to embrace. Just as people recognized the school as the center for community events and activities, the reverse statement may be overlooked; the role community plays in education and the upbringing of tomorrow's youth. In Fanning's (1995) research, rural people had many of the qualities which were utilized to maintain and sustain a healthy community. The culture of a community and the experiences surrounding everyday life added to the educational process through community wisdom, values, common sense, and beliefs (Fanning, 1995).

Local Schools and Community as Business Partnerships

Partnerships formed between the local schools and community businesses create a key ingredient in the form of social capital within a rural community. Johns et al. (2000) stated this was not a new concept for rural communities as their revitalization depended upon maintaining or strengthening a multigenerational commitment to the community. Vocation and work-study programs provided through the schools, link school and business together. Sanders (2003) found the partnerships established between community businesses and local schools were the most common and successful in developing future leaders within a small community.

These interdependent relationships cannot be built if the school has been moved or consolidated out of existence. The reciprocal process linking students to leadership roles within local organizations and an economic infrastructure contributing to community would be broken (Sanders, 2003). In a similar manner, teachers have a place in community that is larger than their

roles as educators. Teachers would no longer become involved in local community organizations or asked to help organize events. The community does not possess the ownership which comes with contributing to a tax base or volunteering at the school while the school is no longer providing teachers who are often called upon to help with community events, fund raisers, or help the community with a service project (Miller, 1993). The local school and businesses rely on all of these factors for sustainability and when the school is not located in town, the community loses focus and eventually disseminates becoming nonexistent.

Chapter 3

Methodology

A qualitative case study using the South County interdistrict consolidation agreement as the specific site was the methodology for this research. Merriam (1998) stated that case studies usually focus on a single setting and the dynamics within a particular phenomenon. The phenomenon explored in this study was the interdistrict consolidation agreement between two schools originally belonging to different districts and the setting encompassed the two surrounding communities created by the South County school consolidation. Collaboration with the participants through individual and group interviews coupled with examination of school documents and other artifacts helped inform the research process (Creswell, 2009).

Creswell (2009) has referred to qualitative research as a worldview through which the researcher applies a theoretical lens that adds clarity to the research problem. The theoretical framework used to shape this study inquired into the dynamic social capital which involves the symbiotic relationship formed between two rural school districts and their respective communities 22 years after an interdistrict consolidation (Johns et al., 2000). Miller's (1993) research in the rural mining communities of Idaho led him to conclude that "the survival of small rural communities can be greatly enhanced when the community and the local school system work together for their mutual benefit" (p. 101). Since consolidation often has a negative effect on rural communities, I explored how both communities survived, in form if not in substance, for more than 20 years after the interdistrict consolidation took place.

The research methodology section outlined the details and provided a rationale for the qualitative case study. Topics included are research design, setting, participants, data collection, and the researcher's positionality (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Additional information on

trustworthiness, researcher positionality, and the integrity of the research process were discussed. This study provided an insightful analysis of an under-researched and promising form of school district consolidation with applied validity for similar rural communities and schools faced with comparable school closure or consolidation decisions.

Description of the Two Communities

This case study involves two rural towns, Chester and Mason (pseudonyms), and the farming communities surrounding the towns. The two towns are 11 miles apart, located on a major highway in southwest Kansas. Both towns are located in the same county, which has a population of about 5,900 people and contains approximately 870 square miles (United States Census Bureau, 2010). There are five towns in the county and neither Chester nor Mason is the county seat. Excluding Mason and Chester, two of the three remaining towns have PK-12 school districts and the third town closed its K-8 school in 1979. (Chester - local information, 2013; United States Census Bureau, 2010). Students from this closed district consolidated with the district located in the county seat; however some students have dispersed to several schools in the area. Within the last 50 years, the people in this county have lost two high schools, one of which was located in Chester and the other consolidated with the county seat.

Mason's population is about 970 people. The town contains three churches, a grocery store, two restaurants, two gas stations, a public library, a Subway sandwich shop within the local convenience store, and a newly added RV park located on the west side of town ("Mason Kansas; clean and safe and friendly", 2013). Mason School District (USD M) encompasses 200 square miles and has an enrollment of 245 students (Kansas Department of Education, 2012b, 2012d). South County high school is located at the south end of six-block long Main Street. A swimming pool and tennis courts separate the 9-12 building from the PK-6 building. Behind the

elementary school is a playground and concession stand for the athletic fields used by South County high school and the local recreation commission for football, baseball, and track ("Mason Kansas; clean and safe and friendly", 2013).

Industries include a wind farm with 170 towers powering 30,000 homes, a concentrated animal feed lot containing 28,000 head of cattle (located west of town), two grain elevators, a John Deere dealership, local farm operations, and other agriculture related industries. For recreation, Mason has a nine-hole golf course along with other community organizations including Lions Club, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, a ladies social group called the Red Hat Society, a recreation commission, and an active senior citizens site. A locally owned museum is located on Main Street and hosts traveling exhibits ("Mason Kansas; clean and safe and friendly", 2013).

Chester is a smaller community located 11 miles west of Mason. Its total population is approximately 310. The business district is spread out along the highway and includes a car wash, grain elevator, and two used car dealerships (Chester - local information, 2013; United States Census Bureau, 2010). The four-block long Main Street runs north and south with the elementary (PK-6) building and the junior high (7-8) building located at the south end of the street. Other businesses scattered around town include a small restaurant, a grocery store, and a popular local bar that serves fajitas on Friday nights. The American Legion, city library, Methodist Church, and senior citizen site are non-profit community organizations which have their own buildings (Chester - local information, 2013).

The two communities were not strangers prior to the interdistrict agreement of 1991-92. In fact they were "pretty fierce rivals," stated one board member that was a Chester student at the time the interdistrict agreement was being formed. Although some of the townspeople did business in the neighboring towns, the relationships prior to the interdistrict agreement were not

developed relationships. According to several of the interviewees, most Mason people went further east to shop and most of the Chester people went west to shop; therefore, the people in Mason and Chester very rarely socialized.

Research Participants

School personnel including the superintendent, teachers, students, and classified staff provided descriptions and explanations of the consolidation process and gave accounts of known community involvement. I inquired into participants' perceptions of the effects of the consolidation as experienced from within the different school settings. The interviewees were asked for recollections which pertained to consolidation events, community responses, emotional or attitudinal changes, shifts in social events, and any other information describing the years prior to and after the consolidation. All individual school interviews included members who were a part of USD #M or USD #C school systems and their respective communities during or after the 1990-1992 consolidation process. To enhance the findings, I expanded the pool of interviewees by asking interviewees for suggestions of possible participants who may have something valuable to contribute to the study (Riemer, 2011). I conducted 32 interviews: one Kansas State High School Association (KSHSAA) employee; two KSDE staff members; and 29 South County school personnel, parents, and patrons. Fourteen interviewees were from the Chester community and 15 were from the Mason community.

Business owners, community members of varying ages, parents, and patrons were identified using the same purposeful method, followed by snowball sampling methods used for the South County school community (Morrow, 2005). The participants of each community were interviewed individually with the exception of one group of four graduates who were interviewed as a group. The goal of the focus group was to have a mix of graduates from both

communities to get a varied dynamic of comments. The interviews for this research focused on perceptions from stakeholders within the consolidated school communities of both towns (Eisenhardt, 1989). The individual interviewees were asked to recall or describe the interdistrict consolidation agreement and how--if at all--it personally affected them, their business, the community, or the community's connection to the school.

Inquiry into is the dynamics of the social capital and investigation of a symbiotic relationship between community and school and how it relates to the interdistrict agreement was the core theme of the interviews and follow-up questions. Through interview questions, I probed the townpeople's current-day perceptions of the consolidation agreement after 20 years. Questions asked included: Is the interdistrict agreement a current topic of conversation? Does the consolidation still affect the community or school? Does a connection exist between school and community even though the interdistrict agreement requires renewal at least every four years? What was the connection prior to the interdistrict agreement and how did it change? Did the social capital change within the community? Do the two communities have a stronger relationship after the agreement had been established? Through the investigation, I acquired a fuller understanding of this type of interdistrict agreement and the emotions, tensions, disputes, negotiations, compromises, collaboration, and relationships created between members of the schools and local communities and the two communities themselves as a result of the South County interdistrict agreement.

Data Collection

Document and artifact reviews, semi-structured interviews, and a focus group were used to collect data for this case study (Merriam, 2009). Documents collected were analyzed for information and added to the information gathered from the interviews. All interviews lasted

approximately one hour and were audio-recorded. Individual interviews and the focus group were transcribed and analyzed for common themes. Dependability and consistency of data was monitored by journaling throughout the case study. According to Merriam (2009), journaling is an accurate written description of the process utilized to categorize data including all decisions made and notes taken throughout the course of the study.

Public and Historical Documents

Analysis of historical and public documents such as legislative documents, school board documents, newspaper articles, or yearbooks provided a glimpse into the recorded history and perceptions of individuals at the time of the consolidation (Hines, 2011). Data from the Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE), local newspaper articles, and records from the school board offices helped illustrate and describe the school and community connections prior to and after the consolidation process. The historical museum in Mason and city libraries did not prove to be a resource for local documents. However, the local newspaper office in Mason which serves both Mason and Chester did provide articles and pictures addressing school and community changes that occurred between 1990 and 1992, the transition years for the South County consolidation agreement. I also observed one of the two joint board meetings held annually between the boards of the two school districts involved in the agreement.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Person-to-person interviews are the most common form of data collection for a qualitative case study (Merriam, 1998). Responses from 32, individual semi-structured interviews provided recollections about the event and facts surrounding the years of the initial interdistrict agreement and the years since the agreement until the present (Yin, 2003). The individuals to be interviewed were school personnel, graduates, or community stakeholders who

were part of the Mason or Chester populations during the consolidation years of 1990-1992 or currently a part of and involved in the consolidated communities to date, and KSDE personnel. The consolidation happened after the 1990-91 school year, so 1991-92 was the first year of South County's existence as a consolidated junior high and high school in the towns of Chester and Mason, respectively (Kansas Department of Education, 1991b).

The Mason school personnel and graduate interviews were held at the South County High School or at a location convenient to the interviewee. Chester school personnel and graduates were interviewed in an available room of the South County Junior High School. One of the two KSDE people interviewed was by use of technology for convenience. A conference room was utilized after a mutually attended meeting for the second KSDE interview. The number of community interview participants, totaling 29 of the 32 people interviewed, represents one out of every 50 people relative to the combined population of both towns. The data reached saturation and interviews ceased to provide new findings, after the 32 individual interviews. (Morse, Swanson, & Kuzel, 2001).

Sample Selection

Purposeful sampling was the method utilized to select the initial participants for the interviews in this study. The basic requirement for the interview candidates was to have been a part of the South County interdistrict agreement of 1991-92 or party to the ongoing interdistrict agreement. Yearbooks and artifacts provided information about potential interview candidates who were currently living in the community. Snowball sampling was utilized beyond the purposeful sampling because specific names and locations of interviewees were not known; however information was acquired from interviewees found through the purposeful sampling process. Morrow (2005) suggested utilizing snowball sampling in conjunction with purposeful

sampling by asking individual interviewees to suggest someone who might be a willing and potential participant.

Data Analysis

Data analysis consisted of a plan to review, examine, tabulate, categorize, and otherwise organize the data collected during the case study. The process of analyzing and making sense of the data is ongoing, continually reflective, and simultaneously done in conjunction with the collection of data (Creswell, 2009; Maxwell, 2013; Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2003). Authors such as Creswell, Maxwell, Merriam, and Yin stressed the importance of continually analyzing the data throughout the data collection process so as to not allow data to pile up and become a volume of overwhelming, unprocessed data.

After research and discovery, data from documents were replicated, read, and categorized and information coded and organized. Maxwell (2013) described the process of coding as chunking or segmenting information as the study progresses while keeping in mind the coded themes should reflect the purpose of the study. Interview data were coded as I gathered information throughout the study. I began with broader categories, basically the research questions, and as themes emerged which answered the research questions, the process of coding was completed.

All themes from documents and individual interviews were merged together and continually analyzed for connecting themes. Constant reviewing of data occurred throughout the interview process until the major themes became apparent or it was necessary to collect more data. The interdistrict process was recorded chronologically and the coded themes continued to be analyzed into unified interpretations which were reported in written form as part of the final findings in the fourth chapter.

Research Quality

It is my responsibility to be the primary collector, analyzer, and reporter of data in a qualitative case study. According to Merriam (2009), dilemmas with ethics in case studies are usually based on the data collection or the reporting of the findings. Care was taken to describe and understand any bias to avoid influencing the data during collection and analysis. I was conscious of ethical guidelines described in the methodology section and aware of my own views or assumptions when working with the data. Some of these personal aspects which could have led to assumptions include: (a) my position as superintendent of a rural school district with declining enrollment; (b) knowledge of other Kansas consolidations and the outcome of communities involved in these consolidations; and (c) deep rooted ties to my own rural community and the passion felt for the relationship between school and community.

Research Permission

Prior to the collection of data, permission was obtained from the superintendent, principal, and boards of education of Chester Junior High School and Mason High School, both members of South County school districts. A description of the study stating the research problem, theoretical framework, purpose, and the research questions was presented to the administration of both districts. Questions or concerns were answered so the South County administration understood the purpose of the study, the research process, and my accountability to both districts of South County. Written permission in the form of a signed document has been acquired from the administration on behalf of the consolidated South County School Districts USD #M and USD #C.

Ethics and Confidentiality

Consent forms (see Appendix A for consent form) were required for all participants involved in either the group or individual interviews prior to each interview session (Maxwell, 2013). All participants were provided full disclosure of the purpose of the study and my intention to use the data in a document. Voluntary participation was explained to each participant prior to the data collection procedure of each interview (see Appendix B for interview protocol). Analysis and presentation of findings have been reported in a manner that provides confidentiality for the participants. Ethical principles of qualitative research were followed to provide confidentiality while reporting the results of the study accurately. All recorded documents were put on a flash drive and stored with other research documents and materials in a secure location. Precautions were taken to provide anonymity for the interview participants; however the possibility of identification due to the size of the study was discussed with each interview candidate. Location anonymity may be difficult because of the uniqueness of the case and the dates discussed throughout the study but precautions have been taken to mask the identity of both communities and the two school districts. Complete anonymity of location or identification cannot be fully guaranteed.

Dependability and Trustworthiness

The integrity of the study was dependent on the trustworthiness and dependability of the researcher. Trustworthiness consists of the responsibility of the researcher to carry out specific tasks as outlined within the research design and methodology sections. Responsibilities for the researcher include collection of enough data for reliable results, informal membership checks during interviews for clarification of meaning, credibility through triangulation and journaling, researcher's reflexivity or positionality, and making sure the results are a reflection of the data

(Castagno, 2011; Merriam, 2009; Stake, 2010). Moore, Lapan, and Quartaroli (2011) suggested triangulation of findings from the individual interviews, legal documents, and historical documents and artifacts add to the trustworthiness and integrity of the case study. Patton (2002) suggested triangulation of data strengthens deepens the research information because of the use of multiple resources. Data from at least three types of participants-- certified school personnel (administrators and teachers), KSDE personnel, and community stakeholders, which may include graduates and parents provided a cross-section of information that presented perspectives from different angles and strengthened the validity of the process so the study findings have greater meaning (Thurmond, 2004). It is the responsibility of the researcher to detail the research design in such a way the report can be used by other researchers (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984, p. 216).

Researcher Positionality

I am very passionate about rural education and the value of rural schools. Currently, I am superintendent of schools at Satanta (USD 507), a rural school in the southwest corner of Kansas. I was born and raised in Satanta, and with the exception of about 11 years of my life, I have attended, taught, or been an administrator at USD 507 which defines me as a life-long resident of the Satanta community. My husband, a local farmer, and I have raised three sons in the Satanta schools and community. Two of our sons have returned to Satanta with their spouses to farm and raise their families. My lifelong investment in the community and as Superintendent of USD 507 has the potential to create an internal conflict when considering the potential negative effects of consolidation on the community and town survival.

I recognized that I had to be extremely cautious not to transfer my experience, assumptions, or opinions about rural consolidations to this study. As a professional in a rural area, I have strong beliefs about the connection between the people of rural communities and

schools within a rural area. To minimize the influence of my biases during the data collection or analysis, triangulation of data and membership checking during the interview process combined with journaling during analysis provided assurance to the validity of my study results.

My position with USD #507 created an innate curiosity to know if this interdistrict agreement is a feasible method for avoiding the pitfalls associated with traditional or regional consolidation. I was aware of the likeness between the subject matter of this case study and the school district of which I am superintendent. I monitored myself, continually evaluated my process, and was neutral in inquisitions so as not to influence any outcomes during interviews, while analyzing data, or reporting findings.

Chapter 4

South County's Interdistrict Agreement

This chapter describes how an unconventional type of consolidation known as an interdistrict agreement was utilized by two rural communities in Kansas rather than a traditional consolidation. The interdistrict agreement for the Mason and Chester communities has been in effect for more than 20 years. I conducted 32 interviews: one Kansas State High School Association (KSHSAA) employee; two KSDE staff members; and 29 South County school personnel, parents, and patrons. Fourteen interviewees were from the Chester community and 15 were from the Mason community.

The South County people interviewed crossed over into more than one category: teacher, student (non-graduate), administrator, board member, parent, graduate, classified, and KSDE staff. The candidates interviewed fell into more than one of the following categories. For example, a teacher in Chester might also be a parent and a business owner and would be tallied in all three of those areas. Table 1 depicts the backgrounds of the 29 South County people interviewed. Again, one person may be counted in more than one category:

TABLE 1
INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT ROLES

Categories	Chester	Mason
Teachers	8	5
Students	4	4
Administrators	2	3
Board Members	4	3
Parents	12	13
Graduates	4	4
Classified Staff	2	2
Business Owners	1	3
Farmers	3	1
Employees of Local Business	8	9
Employees of Non-Local Business	1	2
Lives Outside of Communities	1	0

School board members' consideration towards traditional consolidation and the history behind the origination of the inter-district agreement are described. The implementation process is outlined in detail and includes a timeline, physical changes, and the perceptions of community members. Community members' perceptions of the effects of the 1991-92 inter-district agreement are presented. The final part of this chapter describes some of the challenges surrounding the implementation and the importance placed by both communities on keeping an independently functioning school in each town.

History of the Interdistrict Agreement

After a steady decline in enrollments in both the Chester and Mason school districts, the two communities, initially without the other's knowledge, contemplated a range of ideas and approaches about sustaining their school and community environments. Chester had regressed in student count and was having problems fielding sports teams in extra-curricular activities. "Our school [Chester] was going downhill. We had school longer than we should have because the community supports their school and builds around the school. They do not want to lose their school and they want to keep having school," expressed a board member and parent from Chester. Mason, considered by its townspeople to be larger and more stable in student count than Chester, was also experiencing low participation in extra-curricular sports events. Chester knew there was need for some type of intervention or the school would not be able to exist and they wanted to begin whatever intervention prior to the stage of desperation, closing the school. At the same time, Mason needed help to continue offering vocational and elective classes. A teacher who was also a parent and long standing community member said it this way,

We had people who didn't really understand what was happening, the economics involved and the fact that we, even if one school district maybe had a little bit more to start with, if it was almost the need, that if we did it right then we were going to be able to build something that was better.

Possibly Chester was closer to desperate measures than Mason; however, Chester began looking for solutions while they still had choices and options at the local level. Chester was experiencing a decline in enrollment, limited course selections, and financial difficulty in meeting educational needs for students. One teacher said, "Dwindling numbers, we can't do it

unless we do something and you can't just sit back and wait and say, oh, maybe something will happen and people will come in.”

Finances for both school districts were declining as well as affecting the ability to offer a variety of courses outside the core curriculum. The following chart shows the enrollment for Chester and Mason in the year prior to implementation of the interdistrict agreement.

TABLE 2

SEPTEMBER 20, 1990: STUDENT COUNTS (1990-1991 SCHOOL YEAR)

Grade Level	Chester School District	Mason School District
07	6	18
08	10	12
09	9	14
10	12	18
11	2	13
12	8	19
Total	47	94

Note. Kansas Department of Education. (2014). K-12 Reports, Retrieved March 3, 2014, 2014, from <http://svapp15586.ksde.org/k12/k12.aspx#counties>.

Chester’s school board members began considering consolidation options which included Mason to the east and Sam, a town 14 miles west that was larger than either Chester or Mason. The Chester school board members interviewed agreed that the first thought of consolidation was not with Mason but with Sam, the larger school district. Preliminary discussions focused on combining with Sam because of the town’s larger size. They felt it was better to rule out combining with Mason because of the established rivalry in athletics. After one meeting with the Sam school board, Chester board members expressed no further interest in a consolidating with Sam. Chester’s board was informed they would lose everything through a traditional

consolidation format if they partnered with Sam. A board member said that Sam was nice about it but recalled a statement made in the original meeting with Sam: “If you want to send your kids over that’s fine.” He continued, “They really didn’t need us,” and from Sam’s viewpoint, the only option was a traditional consolidation. It was decided there would be no further discussions with Sam.

A second event involving two students encouraged the Chester Board of Education to continue discussions about consolidation with neighboring districts. The 1991-1992 junior class of Chester consisted of only two girls. These two girls would be seniors in 1992-93. One board member described an interesting presentation made by the two girls in which one favored some type of combination while the other girl was equally opposed to consolidation of any sort, especially if Mason students were involved. He recalled the girl in favor of consolidating describing a daily scenario of, either being first or last, “when she comes to school every day she is either first or last in everything and will never be anything else.” He went on to describe the girls knowing they would either be valedictorian or salutatorian. Because of the school rules, the football and basketball queens had to be seniors and you were only eligible for one queen, one girl would be football queen and one basketball queen. Their entire high school career was somewhat predictable because they were the only two students in their grade level. The girl against consolidation understood the concerns about losing the Chester school. She said,

We weren’t very far from that part [not having a school at all]. They [the school board members] explained the numbers and the financing and basically said we have to do something or we will have to shut down and then you will have to go there [Sam or Mason] anyway and then we will lose our community.

Even though there was opposition to the idea of exploring consolidation with Mason, the Chester board members decided it was in the best interest of their students and knew that decisions were going to have to be made in the near future.

A third event that helped to inform the Chester Board of Education involved a presentation at a Schools for Quality Education (SQE) meeting in Manhattan. Several Chester board members were in attendance when a presenter from the Corwith-Wesley and LuVerne Community School Districts in Iowa described their interdistrict agreement. The Iowa schools had an agreement in which academics were shared but not athletics. The superintendent from Chester suggested they explore the inverse of the Iowa agreement and share athletics but not academics. Cooperative agreements for sports programs were legal according to KSHSAA regulations so this option was a viable solution so long as one of the neighboring towns was willing to partner with Chester.

The Story Behind the South County Interdistrict Agreement

The possibility of combining sports programs involved both superintendents and board members from Mason and Chester. They attended a KSHSAA meeting in Topeka at which they explained their desire to combine athletics because of low participation numbers, declines in overall enrollment, and financial strains. KSHSAA board members suggested consolidating the school districts, a solution that would avoid having to combine each of the different sports teams throughout the year. Another advantage of consolidation was that the paperwork would not have to be repeated every year. “That’s just how it started. Driving home in the Suburban, there were six or eight of us,” remembered a Mason board member. He continued, “First it was just combining football, then why not all sports. And then somebody said well, if we are going to do that, why don’t we combine schools and have the benefit of classes.” Another board member

knew how to write the legal document to stipulate that the rules governing an interdistrict agreement would not combine the Chester and Mason districts in a traditional consolidation. The board members from both towns recalled the story in the same manner. That was how it got started and it was less than a year later when the South County Interdistrict Agreement was developed and implemented.

In December 1990, the Mason and Chester boards of education approved a multi-year shared sports program for the junior and senior high slated to begin in the 1991-92 school year (unknown, 1991c). The timing of the shared sports program clashed with KSHSAA rules because it was occurred in mid-cycle of the two-year scheduling process. Combining mid-cycle would disqualify the combined Chester and Mason teams from any post-season competitions. At the time, the Mason superintendent was quoted as saying,

The board is looking into the future. The shared sports program has come about because of several factors such as student population, boards attempting to promote an effective viable competitive sports program, and dollars that could be saved through cost sharing. (unknown, 1991c)

At the same special board meetings, each board president appointed two local board members to discuss the feasibility of a shared arrangement that would accommodate the sharing of academic and sports programs. The advantage of this type of agreement was it would eliminate the barrier posed by the KSHSAA scheduling cycle. The specifics of combining sports programs and academics had not been created at this point but the committee of four--two board members from each district--met several times over the next few months to draft such an agreement (unknown, 1990).

According to *The Mason Press*, the newspaper responsible for covering events in Chester and Mason, the board appointed fact-finding committee toured both school facilities and visited other Kansas schools that were sharing sports or academic programs. One of the committee members reported, “We are discussing total sharing with the high school in one town and the junior high in the other,” (unknown, 1991a). The committee felt they had plenty of time to implement the program in the upcoming 1991-92 school year. One of the tallest hurdles prior to composing the interdistrict agreement was the question of which town would get the high school (approximately 100 students) and which would get the junior high (approximately 45 students). After touring the facilities and discussing the relative advantages and disadvantages of each school environment, one board member on the committee thought it might be difficult to sell the agreement to the Mason community if the high school were not located in Mason, which was the larger facility and more populated community. The board members from Chester conceded and agreed the Chester building would serve as the junior high. One of the board appointed committee members interviewed recalled,

There were some differences of opinion, of course, to start with and there probably was at the end. This is the way I remember it, we had lots of discussions, lots of give and take, but when it came right down to it I think basically we were all unanimous in what we agreed upon. Whether that could ever happen again or not, I don't think so.

Many questions were asked by other board members and the six guests in attendance at the regular January board meeting in Mason. The questions included: “Would Chester or Mason be on the diploma? What are the financial gains? How would the districts manage student counts? What happens with administration? Are finances separate or like a traditional consolidation

where they are completely combined? How will teacher contracts be handled?” Chester’s January regular board meeting had 40 guests with some of the same concerned questions .

On January 30, 1991, Chester and Mason held separate, special board meetings. Approximately 40 guests were present at Mason and 29 guests were present at Chester . Motions were unanimously passed in both districts to enter into a 5-year interdistrict agreement beginning in the 1991-92 school year. The junior high (grades 6-8) was to be located in Chester and the high school (grades 9-12) was to be located in Mason (see Appendix C for original interdistrict agreement). The details of the agreement were finalized and received board approval within two-months. “It was like, it happened very quickly,” commented one of the patrons. The amount of integrity, vision, and time spent working in a four-member committee seemed destined to pay off. One board member who put in many hours on the committee said with a tear in his eye and a grin on his face:

That is when I knew it was going to happen, because both boards had approved it.

We had gone that far. I remember getting in my car, I was so pumped. I remember driving around for a while, turned on some music and thinking this is going to happen.

Another committee member remembered, “It went fast. It was something that we needed. It was something that both school boards realized we needed.” A third board member recalled how most of the positive comments like “You guys are on the right track,” or “We support you,” came soon after the decision and were voiced downtown, at the coffee shop, or while visiting at a school event. The agreement was approved in January and implemented the next school year, 1991-92.

Changes to the Original Interdistrict Agreement of 1991-1996

When comparing the original agreement (see Appendix C for original interdistrict agreement) with the current agreement for 2013-2017 (Appendix D for current interdistrict agreement), there were few differences. One sentence had been added under Section III (Terms of Agreement), requiring the boards of education to review the interdistrict agreement at least one year prior to the expiration date. In Section VI (Costs and Expenses of Education), in addition to the fees for students, a waiver statement that complies with Kansas law was added for students who cannot afford the fees. Under Section VII (Authority and Responsibility), a portion was added to further define transportation from the host district to the home district. Also included under this section, an article on shared superintendent evaluation was added because the two districts went from individual superintendents to one superintendent for both districts. Section VIII (Curriculum), has been modified to reflect the current trends in education and the accreditation process required by the state of Kansas. Section X (Indemnification and hold Harmless Agreement) of the original agreement has been removed from the current inter-district agreement document. A final addition to the current agreement is a page with the history of the approval dates for the interdistrict agreement.

Implementation of the Interdistrict Agreement

The 1991-92 South County interdistrict education agreement has definitions and guidelines within a six-page document. The interdistrict agreement has been renewed six times since the initial implementation; every four years with the exception of the first renewal being completed after year five (see Appendix D for current interdistrict agreement). The original agreement renewal was purposely set at five years because the fourth year would have been an election year. Extending the initial agreement to five years helped prevent the interdistrict

renewal and school board elections from becoming intersecting topics that could undermine the agreement. One board member stated, “We wanted it so it was not in an election year, so you could keep that aspect out of it.” School board members from both districts agreed to run for another term to help with the continuity during the implementation of the interdistrict agreement.

Timeline

The timeline for implementation was very short, approximately nine months. The agreement was written during December 1990 and January 1991. By the end of January, the first interdistrict agreement for 1991-96 was unanimously approved by the Chester and Mason boards of education. South County Junior High School and South County High School were passed through legislation and the interdistrict agreement became official.

The Chester and Mason superintendents worked together in presenting policy changes at the February board meetings to support the interdistrict agreement. At these meetings, a common school calendar for the 1991-92 school year was presented along with possible names for the consolidated schools, a list of capital improvements needed in both districts, and the procedures to be followed for enacting other changes such as school colors, choice of district mascot, and miscellaneous issues related to the consolidation arrangement.

After a discussion at the March board meeting, members voted on adopting new school names for the junior high and high school buildings. The elementary buildings in each town were to remain Chester Elementary and Mason Elementary. Student Councils had met jointly several times and South County school colors and a mascot had been voted on by the student body. By April, most decisions had been finalized and the boards began to work with teacher contracts and staff rotations. Employees had their contracts and teaching assignments while administration distributed South County student handbooks by May, 1991. In August 1991,

visuals in the gymnasium including freshly painted walls in school colors, new spirit signs with the new mascot, and newly finished basketball courts with the new school name, South County, were completed. Students were anxious to begin school in August 1991, at the newly christened South County Junior High School and South County High School.

Community Communications

The original discussion launched in the fall of 1990 to combine only the sports program had, by January 1992, ended up as an educational agreement combining the junior and senior high schools. This shift in priorities was misleading to stakeholders in both communities. An interviewee who was a student in 1991-92 said a group of students went to the December board meeting to inquire about the change. As she listened to the board answer questions from community members, she remembered thinking, “You say we are consolidating sports and not schools but explain what that [combining schools] would be or what that would look like. And [they] again told us we are not going to be consolidating schools.” After some discussion between the Chester school board members and local stakeholders, it became apparent to this student that the board was further into a consolidation state than maybe even they realized. She explained,

To their [school board members] credit, maybe they weren’t planning on it [consolidation] until after they got far into it and then they discovered it doesn’t make much sense to just do the sports, we should just do the schools. But I do remember feeling that anger that they lied to us.

After the board approved the interdistrict agreement, two community meetings were held, one in Mason and one in Chester. The purpose of the meetings was to explain how the interdistrict agreement came about, hear complaints and comments, and answer questions that

would clarify any lingering misunderstandings about the nature of the agreement. All 14 board members from Mason and Chester attended both meetings. A patron who attended the community meeting in Mason observed, “It seemed to me there were a lot of people there. And people had some positive things to say and some negative things to say about it [interdistrict agreement].” One teacher remembered the meetings this way:

I thought they [the community meetings] were pretty well attended. I can remember the one at Chester; there were probably 100 people anyway, something like that. And really nobody got really upset, but if they didn’t agree...they were the ones that wanted to go with Sam.

The board members understood the importance of holding community meetings even though there were moments when the meetings turned difficult, somewhat confrontational, and stressful. Disgruntled residents usually had no problem expressing themselves while supporters who viewed the agreement in a positive light often chose to sit quietly, listening and gathering information. One board member stated,

There were some pretty negative things at that point. One lady said, “There are 14 people sitting here; do any of you idiots realize what you are doing?” It was stone silent, fidgeting, and somebody had to say something. I finally answered her: “Yeah, 14 people have thought about this a long time and we think it is best. We’ve thought about it a lot.” That was just an isolated incident; there was a lot of support.

Another patron who worked in Mason but lived in Chester remembered the community meetings being contentious:

A few [patrons] from each community were extremely angry and vocal. It's the same people who were always angry about any change within the districts. The parents had graduated from Chester and they now had kids in Chester. The grandparents of the students were silently angry. They were all behind the scenes picking at the agreement.

Out of the 29 community members interviewed for the study, only 13 had attended the community meetings in the capacity of a student, parent, or patron. Of the remaining 16, eight would have been adults and old enough to participate in the community sessions or were living in the area at the time and chose not to attend. The community meetings were well received by the majority of the people and were considered an effective way of disseminating information to both communities quickly and efficiently.

Parent meetings convened by school administrators from Mason and Chester were held in both communities in April and May. Topics included academic schedules, school closure during the noon hour, extra-curricular activities and clubs, and enrollment considerations.

Administrators were prepared to answer questions, field complaints, resolve any issues, and keep parents and students informed. These meetings were attended by a mix of parents, students, and faculty although the general consensus of the study participants was the meetings were attended mostly by students and parents. One of the principals commented,

As a principal it was kind of a challenge, so I always looked at it [parent-student meetings] as a positive step towards a good thing. I always looked at it positive and tried to make it as positive as I could.

The reality of a new environment was evident to students, parents, and patrons, South County would begin in August, 1991.

Infrastructure Changes to the Mason and Chester Districts

Change can be difficult for people but especially when the changes pertain to school names, colors, and mascots that have been established for decades within a community. Both boards of education decided it would be beneficial to include both the Chester and Mason student bodies in selecting the mascot and school colors. Under the interdistrict agreement, board members would be responsible for selecting the new name for the combined schools. The elementary schools (PK-5) would still be Chester Elementary and Mason Elementary, but the junior and senior highs were to have a new name.

In March, a special joint meeting of the boards of education from Mason and Chester determined two things: meeting times for the board of education in each district and the school name. Mason board meetings were to be held on the second Monday of the month and Chester on the third Monday of the month. Board members suggested names for the new school and the consolidated names were narrowed down to three. Board members voted with their first choice getting 3 points and their least favorite getting 1 point. The vote resulted in a tie and the board broke the tie utilizing the same method but with only two selections.

Beginning in late February and continuing through March, the student councils and sponsors of Mason and Chester met to begin the process of selecting a new school mascot and colors. With the exception of black, the board would not permit either of the current mascots or colors to be used. One board member explained it was about keeping things fair so one school did not feel like the other school was getting an advantage. He put it this way: “We wanted to do away with all ties [to the past colors and mascot]. That’s the only way. You don’t want to give one side or the other a leg up.” Black was a common color used by both Mason and Chester schools. One administrator stated, “I like that they kept the black because both schools could

relate to that.” All interviewees thought that one of the best things the board did was allow the students to have buy-in with mascot and color selections. One board member said,

The best thing that we did, it may sound over simplified, but we allowed the kids that were in school at that time to gain some ownership of the idea through the decisions they got to make. I think it solidified the thing and it may sound like an over simplification. The kids ran with it and they were proud of it. I think that was the best thing we did.

Another board member whose child was in high school at the time said, “And the other thing is that we put the kids in charge. They owned it.” From an educator’s standpoint, choosing new schools colors and a mascot was looked at as a community decision, not an educational matter. This same board member went on to say, “It didn’t change the way we did education, it changed the way we felt about what we were doing. I think that is one thing [changing the colors and mascot] they did really well.” However, not everyone was initially pleased at the prospect of getting a new identity. For instance, a longstanding coach expressed strong opposition to the mascot and color change. He argued to leave Mason’s colors and mascot intact in the high school and Chester’s colors and mascot intact in the junior high. His comments were:

At first I disagreed [with the board] and I’ve got a very good friend that was on the school board and he and I had discussions about that [completely changing mascot and colors]. He was absolutely right. Their idea was that if this is going to work we were going to have to buy into it and go whole hog. And I’ll be honest; I think that’s really what made it work.

A Chester graduate, whose family has lived in the area for a couple of generations, had reservations about taking on a new identity because she had two children who would eventually

be involved in the South County Schools. It was difficult to grasp that certain traditions relating to the Chester junior and senior high school would not be passed on to her children. Yet, when she reflected back on the process, she revealed how time had softened her disappointment:

I honestly thought that was one of their smartest moves, changing colors and changing mascots. I think if they would have kept, even if the junior high would have kept the mascot and kept the colors and they had to switch in high school, I don't think we would have had the success. I think those changes were critical, personally.

The majority of those interviewed agreed that changing the names, colors, and mascot contributed to the success of the interdistrict agreement. One patron I interviewed who was a high school student at the time remembered the process like this:

One of the things I remember more than anything was they let us pick our own mascot and our own colors. Everybody got to vote and I remember the high school kids wanted one set of colors and the junior high kids wanted another and the junior high kids voted us out.

For the 1991-92 school year, the students of South County received all new uniforms, complete color changes in the gymnasium paint, wall pads, school logos, and the option of having their diplomas inscribed with the name of Chester, Mason, or South County High School. One patron remembered, "My son graduated that year, if I can remember when he graduated. They had a choice of either a Chester diploma, a Mason diploma, or a South County diploma. They all picked South County and after that they didn't have a choice; they didn't need it." A study participant who was a student at the time summed up the experience of replacing the old

colors and mascots when he commented, “I think the whole idea of deciding that if we were going to do this, buy into it completely.”

Of the three--color, mascot, and name--the mascot got the most publicity. After the student body selected the mascot by unified vote from both schools, the final decision was sent back to the board committee for approval and to elicit help designing the logo that would represent the mascot. Involving the students was a smart move because it united the students and got them working cohesively as one body instead of two. One of the sponsors who was instrumental in working with the students to select the colors and mascot described the experience:

It was fun, it was kind of neat, it was a new concept, and at that age, we are all a little bit more flexible with and not so tied into our little comfort zone and we don't want to get out. And these kids were just like, I don't know, having a good time with it.

There were many opinions and some were voiced in public meetings or in *The Mason Press*, considered the local newspaper. One patron's opinion stated several people in both communities were upset by the removal of the original mascots and the money being spent to replace the old with a new mascot logo. She stated, “The money being spent is excessive. You guys are going overboard about the amount. Are you going to get rid of everything to do with Mason,” (unknown, 1990). After the mascot was announced, a letter to the editor appeared the following week in the local newspaper from a parent who complained that the definition of the mascot had negative connotations and ultimately “would give their teams, the students, and the schools a bad name” (Powell, 1991). The letter writer urged parents to speak out and voice an opinion against the mascot selected by the students of Chester and Mason.

A response to the original letter defended the student mascot selection. In the article, a patron listed several rebel leaders with a positive influence like Einstein, Pasteur, and Martin Luther King, Jr. who could also be used to describe the selected mascot. Another parent responded to the mascot attack with an editorial letter stating that the mascot “works to change something. What better name for our students when so many things can be changed for the better” (Williams, 1991). She went on to state this transition provided an opportunity for a positive change and expressed support for the students’ choice. By the end of March, the board committee had approved the mascot name and character logo with the official location of the South County High School in Mason and the South County Junior High School in Chester (unknown, 1991d). To further emphasize the transition, the jewelry company that sold junior class rings designed a new emblem to represent the new South County High School. “The ring company put together the new school emblem. It’s got two hands shaking and things. I was real impressed with it. The two hands, it was like two people cooperating together,” said an administrator. Everything was set for the junior and senior high for South County.

Teacher Placement and Negotiations

Topics of conversation at the original board committee meetings excluded what would happen to the teachers or how their jobs might shift as a result of the interdistrict agreement. One of the board members stated, “We knew there would be job description changes; that the high school jobs at Mason might become a junior high at Chester.” Beyond the changes to job descriptions, overseeing the relocation of instructors with proper certifications and negotiating with the teacher’s union was left to the administration in both districts.

One goal of the interdistrict agreement was for teachers to retain their jobs. In fact, board members hoped that a stronger financial position would enable them to offer a broader

curriculum. Sharing teachers between the districts was a factor that might allow this to become a possibility. An administrator stated,

I just know for us financially without sharing we wouldn't have programs at Chester if we weren't in this sharing agreement. We wouldn't have art, we would have very limited music, and we have some things because we share so many teachers. It not only helps Chester to have those programs but it helps Mason to afford them also. So as far as sharing teachers, I wouldn't do anything different.

Currently, the two districts share the following teachers: vocal music, band, art, librarian, pre-kindergarten, and industrial arts. "We [Mason] pay mileage one way [for shared teachers going back and forth] and Chester pay it one way," stated one of district clerks.

Sharing teachers affected community members in a positive ways. Students realized that curriculum offerings had been expanded to include more vocational classes and a foreign language. Parents were also pleased with the extended curriculum. An adult patron looking back on the teacher shift had this to say:

So it is just bringing in good people and if we hadn't have joined I don't think you would keep those people [teachers] around. Our school would be too small and you would have to cut this, and cut that. Then you have this really good teacher who would want to come in and they would be like, well how long is my job going to be good there.

Today, teacher pay scales are different in the two districts and each district has its own teacher negotiation document. One teacher reported, "It's totally different contracts, totally different pay scales. There are a lot of differences." With respect to teacher negotiations, Chester and Mason operate as separate school districts. The Chester board of education clerk

went on to explain that whichever district hires the teacher becomes the home district. The non-home district that arranges to share the teacher is billed according to the percentage of time spent in that school. Probably the biggest obstacle encountered in setting up this system was moving instructors from the Mason school district to the Chester school district and vice versa. An experienced teacher risked losing tenure status because the move created a change in their school district. Most of the teacher issues were resolved without undue difficulty. Although a few non-tenured teachers chose to leave, only one teacher chose to retire, prompting speculation the retirement was due to the interdistrict agreement. The remaining instructors supported the agreement and made adjustments as requested by the administration. Today, faculty assignments whether in one district or shared between Chester and Mason, are hired and the new faculty is welcomed by both communities. A comment made during an interview in reference to the faculty and staff of South County was, “Everybody feels comfortable; it is like a big family now.”

Unexpected Challenges During and After Implementation

There were several issues the board committee chose not to address, granting de facto authorization to each district to decide matters on their own. The situations that arose were usually context specific to each community and better handled by local administrators. At this stage in the interdistrict agreement, some of the smaller problems being dealt with had the potential of becoming areas of contention. However, because enough people supported the interdistrict agreement, most issues were resolved in a fitting manner that prevented potential barriers from destabilizing the agreement.

Chester-Mason Paraphernalia

Several of the people interviewed reminisced about trophies, old uniforms, Mason and Chester t-shirts, yearbooks, etc. What should the schools and individuals do with all the paraphernalia that would no longer be relevant because of the new school name, colors, and mascot? Community members were not ready to discard everything and completely forget the history of Chester and Mason. The items in question were important to the community and alumni of each school. Personnel in each school district independently handled the relocation, removal, or dissemination of these articles as they saw fit. Most of the people I interviewed had some of the articles on display in their homes, articles they purchased or acquired in some manner. These articles were rarely seen in public. One 1991 Mason graduate said,

We still have his [my husband's] basketball uniform and I think I have a cheerleading uniform from Mason; it's probably in a box or whatever. But I have nothing you would never see me at a ballgame with. No, no, no, or a license tag. I'm 100% South County.

Chester had several items on display in the entryway of the gymnasium and in a common area. Mason chose to display their items in a designated place in the high school.

The bigger issue in Mason was the mascot painted on the gymnasium floor. At one point in the past, a petition was circulated to cut the mascot out of the center of the gymnasium floor and put it on display in the community building (unknown, 1991b). It had been painted by a graduate and had sentimental value for many residents. To resolve this issue, the superintendent suggested hiring a professional photographer to photograph the mascot and frame the picture as a keepsake. This photograph now resides in the board office at Mason.

Alumni Weekend

Prior to the interdistrict agreement, both Chester and Mason communities held alumni weekends every five years. These events occurred one week apart in late May and early June. After the interdistrict agreement, some of the South County graduates wanted to combine the two weekends into one by having activities in both towns but alternating the banquet location. One patron expressed her opinion about combining the reunions:

I tell you what; I had to fight tooth and nail for that [combining the weekends].

That was 17 years ago people and I was a graduate of South County and you are telling me I can't celebrate with the people I went to school with. There was a lot of resistance. Finally how we got people to agree, one of the big deciding factors was Chester wanted to keep their weekend.

A South County graduate observed, "The resistance is from the Chester and Mason generation of graduates." And yet, one of the Chester graduates who served on the alumni committee of 2005 stated, "We made a committee decision based on community input. We put them [the two weekends] together." The alumni weekend is currently held the weekend after Memorial Day. The two communities have separate daytime events, the banquet is alternated between the two towns, the parade is in Mason, and the street dance is in Chester. One patron put it this way:

It's like anything community wise that Chester will have their Chester Days and Mason will have their Mason Days; but anything school related it is all mashed together. But they still have their own separate identities as far as traditions for the community.

The resolution to the alumni situation has improved with the passage of time and as the number of South County graduates grows steadily larger.

Student Count

Although the method for counting students was specified in the original interdistrict agreement, it has remained a confusing issue. Computing student count can be difficult for one unified district. Student count in two districts governed by an interdistrict agreement creates another layer of difficulty. To summarize the interdistrict agreement, grades 9-12 students are in attendance in Mason and grades 6-8 in Chester. Student count for budget purposes would remain with the student's district of residence. In other words, a junior high student whose residence was in Mason but attended junior high in Chester would be included in Mason's student count. The same would be true for a senior high student residing in Chester; he would be counted in Chester's student count.

The guidelines of the interdistrict agreement were being applied differently in exceptional situations. One situation which involved bending the interdistrict agreement was made for working parents who resided in one community but working in the other. Another situation involved students at the adult learning center located in Mason being claimed by Mason because the center is funded by Mason. Counting out of district students created a third situation. The discrepancy in student count came as these exceptions were being made or situations not explicitly covered in the agreement arose. An administrator stated, "I can tell you when I interviewed out here, the boards were at odds on counting kids." According to the agreement, students that reside in Chester must be counted in Chester regardless of where their attendance center is located and students residing in Mason must be counted in Mason, no exceptions.

A state count auditor said that for the first couple of years, the audit was difficult and at times extremely confusing. The districts were easier to audit when audited together even though two separate documents were required by the state. An employee from the state department of education commented, "Because of the attendance issues, Mason's junior high attendance is checked at Chester and Chester's senior high attendance is checked at Mason." The state auditing laws solved some of the count discrepancies of the interdistrict agreement. The state program used for individual data on students has helped with the auditing process because a student can be identified at one district as the attendance center but in another district for funding. This was not possible to track electronically prior to the implementation of the software for the student count system. Although the interdistrict agreement reads the same as it did upon implementation in 1991-92, working with the state auditors has given both districts a clearer understanding of how to address student count.

Counting the weighted portions of student count for budget purposes is a challenge because of standards set by the state budget formulas. The first type of weighting is based on free and reduced lunch status. Chester high school student count which stays with Chester because of residency, eat breakfast in Chester and lunch in Mason. The question becomes which district does the free and reduce lunch application, which determines where funding should be distributed. "It's an auditing nightmare from my point of view," remarked the state department auditor for South County.

The same type of situation happens with vocational classes, which involves vocational funding. The vocational instructor is usually based in Mason but travels to Chester to teach one or two hours of funded vocational classes at the junior high. The class contains both Mason and Chester students which qualify for vocational weighting resulting in vocational funds. Counting

weighting can be complicated because the funding is based on classroom minutes tied to a student and his or her place of residency not the location of the class being taught. The auditor gave this scenario for an example,

So let's just say, you've got the computer class at Mason and you have 12 Mason kids and 4 Chester kids. I split the class and I count the Mason kids the number of minutes in the course for Mason and the Chester kids' minutes for Chester audit. So basically I have to go through every roster and label the M or C and so I'm doing two reports with one set of rosters.

To help resolve some of the issues that are really complicated one of the auditors said, "There are some things that are listed a little different on the state level because of that [interdistrict agreement]." The difference in this process and a traditional consolidation is the two district's funding remains separate and must be kept separate while counting students. Traditional consolidation would combine the counts and funding with no regard to student residency and the funding resulting from the weighting formula for vocational funds would go into one district budget.

Transportation

Transportation was addressed early in the community meetings and again in the May administrative-parent meetings. Each district maintained its own fleet of buses and committed to transporting students as needed between the two districts. Junior high students living in the Mason school district rode a Mason bus to the South County High School and then boarded a Chester shuttle bus and rode to the South County Junior High School. High school students in Chester school district rode the Chester bus to the South County Junior High School and boarded a Mason shuttle bus to South County High School. This part of the transportation had a few

glitches in the beginning, mostly due to the starting time and ending time of school. Adjustments were easily made to resolve the bus issues and today, regular bus routes are not an issue.

Auditing transportation for budget purposes is less ambiguous than auditing student counts. The reimbursement follows the residence of the child. Since the two districts have a collaborative rule within the interdistrict agreement, the 10-mile rule which is a state law governing district transportation of non-residential students living over 2.5 miles but under 10 miles from the closest attendance center, never affected them as far as reimbursement (Transportation of pupils, 1968). An auditor explained, “Basically all your Mason houses that go to junior high in Chester count for over 2.5 miles because they attend in Chester and the same with the Chester kids because they attend in Mason.” The two districts actually make a little bit of money by transporting students to the neighboring district.

Extra-curricular activities presented another type of transportation problem. After school practices did not lead to a smooth or easy transformation for working parents. Junior high practices and games were played in Chester and high school practices and games were played in Mason. After some parents complained, it was decided to implement activity transportation after practices to take students to their district of residence at which time parents assumed responsibility for transporting their child from the district of residence. In this way, parents were no longer inconvenienced at a level beyond what they would typically be if their child attended school in their home town.

In my conversations with parents, a couple of them talked about the distance between Chester and Mason. One patron commented on the expense of transporting students back and forth. One mother commented when asked if she and her son dreaded next year because he would have to catch the shuttle to Chester:

I don't know if it fazes him as much as the parents; it's a pain in the butt. I've already done it through two kids and I'm getting ready to do it next year. I hate the thought of that already. It's everything you do. Its appointments adding 30 more minutes by the time you drive over, drive back, drop them off, whatever.

I'm not looking forward to that, but it's only for three years.

This compromise was a small but manageable side-effect of the interdistrict agreement and only indirectly related to the town of Chester or South County Junior High. However, some parents were put out by transportation logistics even though the inconvenience it caused was too inconsequential to threaten long-term support for the agreement.

Student Adjustments and Equal Representation

The board members who wrote the interdistrict agreement could not envision these changes through the eyes of students. Board members and administration trusted the teachers and staff to make the transition for students as smooth as possible, especially during the rocky first year. A high school teacher from Mason commented:

I'll tell you the first year was tough. And the first year was tough because you have kids giving up their turf and having to share it with others, and that's just not natural. And then you had kids coming in saying, this is my junior and senior year too—I deserve.

Administrators and teachers knew they needed to model what the meshing of two districts should look like but they too had no experience with an interdistrict agreement. One patron who was a 6th grader that first year recalled: "It was a commitment that they [board, administration, and teachers] wanted everyone to take on and then lead by example too." Teachers reached out and helped kids from the adjacent town with transportation issues and adjustments to a new school

environment. Coaches treated players without knowing whether they were from Chester or Mason. According to one coach,

Any good coach that's worth anything at all is going to put the best kids out on the floor or field if they want to win. And if they're going to your school, then they're your kids. And that's the way I approached it.

There is no way to establish cause and effect, of course, but the consolidated high school teams have a long history of being successful. In fact, the first year they ranked second in the state in basketball and made it to the playoffs for several consecutive years.

Several cliques formed in the new school environment, especially among the high school girls. One girl who had a difficult time adjusting to the high school shared,

We just felt like we were going from being our own little school to being thrown in with these other kids that we really didn't like very well and they didn't like us and expected to get along and expected to jive.

One of the Mason girls, a 1992 graduate, now regretted some of her actions back then but said, "They [the Mason girls] considered themselves superior to Chester girls but mainly because they outnumbered them." She further explained, "There were a lot of hurt feelings. But it seemed like as the year went on, everyone just became one. It was rough, though, I remember." An administrator who worked mostly at the junior high but participated in athletics and extracurricular activities at the high school confirmed that some students drifted into cliques: "I didn't see cliques in junior high, but I did see cliques in the high school." Another Mason teacher thought that some of the cliques were just the personalities of the students at that time, but admitted that possibly some things could have been put in place to help with transition and alleviate the attraction of student cliques. One of the teachers who divided her time between the

Chester and Mason districts alluded to the presence of underlying tensions: “There was some animosity in the high school. I saw that first hand.” This teacher had not noticed the same type of behavior in the junior high students during the first two years of the agreement, mostly in the juniors and seniors at the high school.

There were times over the years when administrators purposefully launched initiatives that attempted to balance the opportunities between the Chester and Mason students. For example, cheerleader elections were designed so equal numbers of Chester and Mason girls got picked for the cheerleader squad. That exception is no longer in place; it was discontinued after a couple of years. One teacher admitted contacting the newspaper editor to make sure Chester and Mason students received comparable mention each week in the section on school events. To avoid any hint of favoritism, yearbook pages were monitored to ensure the pictures featured equal numbers of students from each community. For a few years after the interdistrict agreement went into effect, one teacher said, “If Mason elementary got five pages, so did Chester elementary.” If the student council president was an original Chester student, the vice-president had to be an original Mason student. Another teacher remembered, “Junior high and high school concerts would rotate locations. They [administration] always tried to make sure that they kept things balanced and that was to help with both communities.” To this day, the kindergarten students selected for homecoming crown-bearer and flower-girl must hail from Chester and Mason.

Some teachers felt they were purposely moved to the other town so that students would see familiar faces in a strange building. One experienced teacher remarked,

I have a lot of parents, when we did put the two schools together and I came over here [from Mason to Chester], they were really glad that I was coming with the

junior high kids because they were really nervous about sending their kids somewhere. But they liked it that there was a teacher coming with them, someone that had been there.

An administrator who moved from South County Junior High to South County High School described how parents from Chester were glad to know there was someone they could trust to look out for their kids when attending high school in Mason. This administrator went on to say, “I think that was a perception. The perception of having a Chester person in the Mason building was huge.” I am not sure the administrative move was intentional, but it was viewed as a positive initiative that spurred good relations between the two communities.

Other initiatives that were simple to put into practice made a lasting impression on some of the interviewees at the time of the original interdistrict agreement. Several school personnel talked about being cautious not to wear any of the old school colors on game days; it communicated an important public message to be seen wearing the new colors. A school staff member who is still cautious said, “Yes, we are very careful with some things. You have to be mindful and stay mindful of each other’s feelings.” One teacher mentioned that for the first year after the interdistrict agreement, she went out of her way to appear neutral by not wearing colors associated with either school. Instead, she intentionally looked for clothes containing the new school colors. The schools purchased t-shirts and made sure students had t-shirts with the new mascot and in the new colors. The recreation commission helped with some of the transition by supplying t-shirts for the summer programs in the new colors. Most everything that involved children was about promoting the new image of South County.

Funding

When board members began exploring options, additional funding from the state for schools combining using traditional consolidation reconfigured the adjustment factors. Beginning in 1992-93, one year after the origination of the interdistrict agreement, the new funding formula began and what was adjustment factors became known as weighted enrollment factors (Kansas Legislative Research Department, 1991). It was not in the best interest of Chester to enter into a traditional consolidation with Mason; both school districts would lose approximately \$360,000 and forfeit local control in both communities. Although equalization which is the amount of state aid paid to districts with lower than the average state valuation, was figured differently in 1991-92; the financial advantage of the two remaining separate districts was proportionally the same then as it is today (Kansas Legislative Research Department, 1991). Weightings, the amount paid to equalize the estimated cost to educate students with different needs, for school budgets began in 1992-93. Table 3 depicts the amount Chester receives as an individual district, the amount Mason receives as an individual district, and the amount of budget authority if the two districts combined by traditional consolidation.

TABLE 3

2012-13 BUDGET FIGURES BASED ON LOW ENROLLMENT WEIGHTINGS

	0.884445695	3443	149	\$453,726.83
	0.608770316	3443	253	\$530,287.04
			402	\$984,013.87
	0.449531902	3443	402	\$622,190.81
				-\$361,823.06

Note. Kansas Department of Education (2012-13a, 2012-13b). Profile Information for USD C-Chester and USD M-Mason, Retrieved March 18, 2013, from <http://www.ksde.org/Agency/FiscalandAdministrativeServices/SchoolFinance/BudgetInformation/USDBudget/2012-2013BudgetSummary.aspx>.

If two schools combine utilizing traditional consolidation, the state allows the gaining district to keep both general fund budgets and both supplemental fund budgets. The combining

of budgets continues for two to five years depending on the size of the consolidated district (Consolidation of School Districts, 1969). After the time frame has lapsed, the consolidated districts will then lose the advantage of receiving both budgets, which may or may not include weightings. In the Mason and Chester case, if the two districts traditionally consolidated the low enrollment rating would be reconfigured. Because of the consolidation, enrollment would increase which would lower the multiplier used to figure money paid out to districts qualifying for low enrollment. This would ultimately decrease the general fund budget by approximately \$360,000. Although operating two separate buildings and transportation between districts may have some additional expense, Mason and Chester are still ahead financially to utilize an interdistrict agreement and continue collecting low enrollment weighting as two separate districts (Kansas Department of Education, 2012a).

Boards of Education

The interdistrict agreement allows for local control in each community with individual school boards. Further evidence of local control exists within each community as each passed a bond for new facilities since the birth of the interdistrict agreement. Combined board meetings are held at least twice a year for collaboration but individual meetings are held monthly the remainder of the year. A board member is assigned to attend the other school board's monthly meeting. Trust and communication between the two boards was observed during a joint meeting. The trust and respect between the board members of the two communities was evident. The continued guarding of the interdistrict by both communities was continually expressed by the interviewees. The two communities respect each board's decisions and work together to keep schools located in both communities which in turn serves each community individually and brings the two communities together.

Changes in District Leadership

During the 20 plus years the interdistrict agreement has been in force, both districts have experienced turnover in the superintendency. The lone exception is the current superintendent who, for the past 6 years, has been employed as the dual superintendent for Mason and Chester. In 1991-92, Mason and Chester had separate superintendents. Mason's superintendent had been there for some time and was trusted among the stakeholders. Chester's superintendent had not been at Chester for as long but was well liked and trusted by the board and Chester patrons. The two superintendents worked well together and were determined to make things work for both schools and communities.

When the original superintendents left after the implementation of the interdistrict agreement, Mason had an interim for a couple of years. During this same time frame, Chester lost its superintendent and utilized Southwest Plains Service Center's superintendent services for a year before hiring a couple of superintendents who stayed only one- or two-years each. When Mason and Chester had concurrent vacancies in 2004, the two boards decided to hire one superintendent by converting the leadership position into a shared responsibility. However, they retained separate clerks for both districts. The first joint superintendent lasted three years after which each district employed an interim for a year. Finally, in 2008, the two boards hired the second joint superintendent who was still employed at the time I conducted my research in 2014. One patron was very pleased with a dual superintendent and wondered, "If it is just that I like the current superintendent or if it wouldn't have been better to be one superintendent from the very beginning. I know it is usually the person, not the position." The consensus of the board members is that one superintendent for both districts is better than two. A board member remarked as he reminisced about working with two different superintendents, "I would think it

would help keep the bumps to a minimum. You don't have two different points of view on how things ought to be done." Another board member who was a teacher when the interdistrict agreement was formed stated, "I think having that joint superintendent has spearheaded things, having that joint person at the top. You never knew who was telling what or if it was getting communicated with two."

The viability of this shared arrangement appeared to hinge on joint respect and trust to do an admirable job in both districts. Moreover, by eliminating a top administrator's salary, it is financially a good way for both districts to save money. One current administrator remarked, "I don't know that I have ever been in a better place because it's just imperative that in an interdistrict agreement where you are sharing a superintendent or sharing administrators, there has to be a lot of trust." The current superintendent contract is run through Chester; however, extra expenses are split by the two districts. Mason is annually billed for its share of the superintendent salary.

Community and Parental Support

The interview candidates were asked to stretch their memory banks over twenty years and revisit community perceptions of the initial creation and implementation of the interdistrict agreement between Chester and Mason school districts and communities. It was an amazing experience for me to witness the compassion and emotion of the interviewees. "My thoughts were that we needed to keep the schools in each community. I didn't want it to happen that if the school leaves, the community leaves," said a business member in the Mason community as he remembered long ago discussions. The older community members involved in the agreement's creation were excited to share their thoughts and recollections of what they considered a turning point for their school districts and the progress of both communities. Former students of South

County retained vivid memories of the transformation and a continuing vision of making the interdistrict agreement work for their children in the future.

The community support in the beginning was described as generational by several of the people interviewed. One adult with two high school children of his own put it this way: “The kids did not have any trouble. There was a huge discomfort and that turned out to be amongst the adults and not the kids.” Individual emotions towards the interdistrict agreement depended on whether the study participant was a student (third generation), parent (second generation), or grandparent (first generation) in 1991.

The third generation (i.e., students) eagerly endorsed the idea of interdistrict collaboration and enjoyed claiming a new school. The benefits of new friends, new uniforms and equipment, and eventually new facilities were huge enticements for the students. The meshing of the two student bodies from two towns was a success. One teacher remarked, “I would say after the first two or three months, the students, you couldn’t tell a difference,” whether students were from Chester or from Mason. The second generation (i.e., parents) was more hesitant and protective of their alma mater. Although they recognized that something needed to be done because of decreasing student enrollments and budgets, they were not ready to lose their school and behaved guardedly after learning about the interdistrict agreement. A second generation parent explained, “It took the parents probably a little longer to adjust.” This statement came from the same parent who encouraged her daughter to build a float for the 2001 Homecoming celebration incorporating the original Chester High School mascot prior to the interdistrict agreement, incorporated into the float theme. The float did not go over well with some people in the Mason community even though it had been 10 years since the original agreement was implemented. Another patron who would have been in elementary school at Chester in 1991-92 stated, “The

kids had absolutely no problem making the transition, it was the adults. The parents had a hard time letting go of that, you know my community versus your community and making those comparisons.” One of the members of the board committee that helped write the interdistrict agreement remembered the same generational split surfacing at community meetings. He said,

The people who stood up from each community and voiced their opinions against the agreement--they were adults, parents. They had grown up here in either community and they did not want to release that identity. It was harder for them to transition than the kids.

This second generation of parents made comments that referred to their own children such as “There’s always gonna be Chester pride,” “There’s always going to be Mason pride,” or “They will always have that in their heart.” Even though the second generation secretly hoped to keep a K-12 school in both towns, they knew it was time to do something. If the three generations of the two small communities did not act soon, both towns could lose their schools through a traditional consolidation, possibly to the larger school located in the county seat approximately 20 miles north of Mason.

The first generation (i.e., grandparents) were not especially verbal but were unhappy about the agreement. Some of the second generation thought the grandparents’ discontent was a matter of not understanding or not being involved enough to realize the implications of a declining student population and the dire situation faced by the Chester school. Others thought negativity toward the interdistrict agreement would get stirred up at reunion time because the reunions were well attended by the older generations. A Chester elder who belonged to the first generation didn’t think their generation would have much of a say because “they’re [Chester graduates] getting fewer and fewer and pretty soon people aren’t going to remember it was ever

anything but South County.” Even though the elders in the community were not sure it was the correct thing to do at the time they were not going to verbally oppose the interdistrict agreement, especially since a school would remain in each town.

All the educators I interviewed said parental support for the dual-district configuration remained strong, from the time of the initial interdistrict agreement to date. An administrator observed, “The one mindset that should be admired between the Chester and Mason people was their mindset about what was good for the kids.” South County has always had a crowd at extra-curricular activities and the student fund raising projects are usually successful. Teachers mentioned the strong attendance at parent-teacher conferences, music concerts, and sporting events. One person who has lived in the community most of her life commented:

Mason’s gym is just packed or the gym over at Chester is just packed. And I don’t see that has diminished at all over time. That says something about parents supporting their children at school or grandparents or community people.

Although support continues to be strong, there have been a few scars from the interdistrict agreement. Some people mourned the loss of the two schools, Chester Junior-Senior High School and Mason Junior-Senior High School. One of the original board members who helped write the interdistrict agreement made this statement:

There were several members on this committee that really did not want to do this [interdistrict agreement] down deep, because they were Chester and they were Mason [graduates], but they knew that it was the best for the communities and for the kids and they put those feelings aside.

A mother reminisced with a sad look in her eye, “I just know that when the last class [1990-1991] graduated from Mason it was kind of sad and I’m sure it was for Chester too. My son was

in that class.” Apparently, the sadness was short lived because right after saying this she smiled and said, “She [mother of Mason graduate] wouldn’t have it any different today.”

Successful Strategies and Community Characteristics

There were some key players on the school boards of both districts at the time decisions needed to be made. Longstanding, cornerstone members of the community were on the board and in position to influence or sway community members to take action. This was evident at the community meetings that were held after the decision was made to accept the interdistrict agreement. Very few community members expressed discontent and the community meetings were well attended by both Chester and Mason patrons. The school board was a respected group and their decision to enter this agreement for a five year period, which was an intended strategy, was supported by both communities without any major conflicts or criticism. One of the board members who is currently retiring a 30-year business attributed the success of the agreement to,

There’s enough flexibility in that agreement that nobody really got their feelings hurt so bad that it couldn’t recover. We went for years; basically the Mason school board had absolutely nothing to do with what went on at Chester, at first, and vice versa. I think both boards, when they first started, said great. This is a good deal for us. It’s a good deal for Chester. It’s a good deal for Mason. And hopefully everybody kind of stayed in the guidelines and got along, and I think that’s kind of how it worked out.

The elected board members were trusted representatives of the community and their decisions were accepted by residents in the two communities.

Some of the strategies paid off for the two school boards during implementation of the interdistrict agreement. The short time frame, which was somewhat accidental, did not allow for

opposition to fester or grow. Beginning with the board committee assignments in December, 1990 until the opening of South County Junior High and South County High School in August, 1991, there were only eight months to complete teacher assignments, school building face lifts, and mental and physical adjustments in teaching and work assignments. The urgency of getting everything in place did not allow for criticism to grow or groups of angry patrons to congregate. Money was readily spent to paint, print logos on t-shirts, and buy new uniforms to market the interdistrict agreement. During this time, board members stepped back to let the students promote the idea to family and community members.

The forced changes in school name, colors, and mascot created a buy-in atmosphere from community members while creating a connection between the two communities now known collectively as South County. Today, as other communities and schools refer to South County, it is understood that title refers to the junior high at Chester or the high school located at Mason. For the majority of students, the enthusiasm generated by creating a new environment with new school components outweighed the prior rival status between the two communities. The commitment was total because the 5-year term of the initial interdistrict agreement did not allow for the communities to back out or reverse the agreement. Instead, the majority of the people decided to invest in the agreement and make the best of the changes within the districts. The first renewal of the interdistrict agreement was unprotected and South County schools were established for another four-year term. They are currently on their sixth renewal of the interdistrict agreement.

The distance between the towns was initially considered a barrier but eventually became an inconsequential feature. Over the course of time, transportation issues have been addressed and strategies implemented to facilitate transportation between the two towns.

Guidelines for transportation have been implemented for budgetary reasons. The teachers traveling between districts are compensated for mileage. Most of the teachers described the 11 miles between the two towns as minimal compared to the distance students drive daily to attend school. Teachers travel during part of their planning time and a student seminar period has also been added to student schedules to help facilitate teacher travel. There is an alternate plan built in at each district in the event a teacher is running late going from one town to the other. One shared teacher explained,

For me, 11 miles, I'm used to it. So the sharing teacher deal, those of us that share, it is an issue as far as you have to be organized, you have to know what you're doing. You just have to plan ahead.

Coordination between the two districts has been beneficial. As time has passed, several factors have increased cooperation between the two communities and allowed the two school districts to operate as one even though they are financially independent. The first factor was the separate boards coming together as a comprehensive body of 14 members and continuing to meet three times a year. The continued community support for extra-curricular activities at both the junior high and high school has also bonded the two communities. One parent commented, "We've seen more working together and I think it's something that as the communities continue to spend time together we're gonna see more." Instead of two communities with two social hubs, the majority of residents consider South County one community with two social hubs. Expressing the importance of attending events in both towns, a business owner and parent remarked,

We had a parent rivalry and it was embarrassing. But now, the booster club has a tailgate party and everybody goes. You're friends with those people. You know all the people and enjoy them, and it's helped the community that way.

Other factors contributing to the meshing of communities are combining the two superintendent positions into one and merging the reunion dates and activities. The single superintendent is favored by both boards and school communities. A Chester teacher commented, "I think it's better for the fact that one person knows what's going on." Several study participants suggested that other districts entering into a similar agreement consider one superintendent for consistency and trust between the two districts. Another factor was the unexpected pressure triggered by having newly minted South County graduates to consolidate the Chester and Mason individual reunions into one South County reunion attended by both Chester and Mason graduates. All of these factors have contributed to the success of the interdistrict agreement. One teacher that came the year after the interdistrict agreement stated,

I just think it's been a great sharing agreement from the get go. Like I said, my wife and I have been here 20+ years and we just think it's a great place to be. A small, rural environment and I think kids get a quality education. I don't know, I'm just going to say plus, plus, and plus again.

The longer the districts sustain the agreement, the stronger the bond between school and community and between the two communities themselves.

Improvements or Lessons Learned

Looking back on the interdistrict agreement, there were only a couple of things patrons would have done differently. Most people did not identify anything they would change because

they were extremely pleased with the current state of the interdistrict agreement. The few changes that came up in our discussions were either after thoughts or had already been resolved.

The most mentioned lesson learned was the need for boards and administration to include the faculty and staff earlier in the process, possibly prior to the community meetings. Whether it was the short time frame for implementation or just an oversight, the faculty did not learn about the details of the interdistrict agreement until the community meetings. One of the board members who helped draft the original agreement voiced his concern,

I think when I look back now, I had some teachers express concerns to me back then because I was a teacher before the board, and it scared the heck out of them job wise. I don't think we handled that very well. Although, if I remember right, nobody lost their job and we were cognizant that it wouldn't happen. I don't think we communicated very well with them. We were so concerned about the kids that the staff, we didn't handle that very well. We were more worried about community affects.

This concern was voiced by every teacher I interviewed who was present at the time of the original agreement. Two board members also shared this concern. Several faculty members expressed the fact that the support from faculty could have enhanced the process and made the transition for students easier. They had specific ideas on how the implementation process could have been smoother and unnecessary anxieties avoided.

Another prevalent concern was the ongoing superintendent conflict. Although not everyone interviewed had inside information about the trust issues or difference in opinions occurring after the original superintendents left the districts, it was an issue that could have been devastating to the agreement. The two districts transfer money or make payments to each other

for salaries, incidentals, and transportation. Over time, the districts agreed to funnel to one superintendent the payments from both districts. This eliminated any trust issues or conflicts because both boards were being handled by the same superintendent and that superintendent had access to both budgets. Having only one superintendent bridged a gap between the two boards of education, especially as board member terms-of-office expired and new members were added who did not have the same level of experience with the interdistrict agreement. Relying on a single superintendent has been well received by board members, faculty, and patrons.

Other factors which might have worked against the success of an interdistrict agreement in other communities and school circumstances included the distance between towns for students, the short time span to implement the agreement and make appropriate arrangements, and the difference between teacher contracts in each district. Although the eight month implementation time was reported in the findings section as a positive, I believe it worked in this environment, with this interdistrict agreement. There is skepticism that a short intervention time could be devastating and kill any chance of an interdistrict agreement in other situations. One person stated, “There were a few meetings but it wasn’t near discussed enough. And in the end, that’s why you appoint them [school board members] and I understand that. I think just a little more information for everyone.”

Travel for faculty was not an issue but several mothers were concerned about the added mileage for students, especially in bad weather. The two districts combined cover 400 square miles. This potentially doubles the distance students travel to get to South County High School, especially from the most distant locations in the northwest. Parents were not concerned about going to the other town for ballgames but the extra travel when students needed to be picked up for appointments were a voiced inconvenience. It was not enough of a problem to dissolve the

agreement; nevertheless, one parent described her frustration with the inconvenience:

“Everything you do is added -- take them over, bring them back, pick them up, go back, come back.”

A final factor involved teacher contracts and negotiated agreements. One of the board clerks who did not want the system changed said, “We don’t have the same salary schedule. We don’t have the same negotiated agreement. I’m used to what we have.” The two districts operate separately in this area. Pay scales, fringe benefits, and handbooks are different. Teachers know which of the two districts was their home district and the pay scale and fringe benefits they followed. As far as everyday rules or policies, whatever school they were teaching in determined which handbook was followed. Newer teachers who did not live through the interdistrict agreement tended to want one pay scale and set of benefits.

Future of the Interdistrict Agreement

Support for the interdistrict agreement goes beyond current-day functions. All the interviewees concurred that the agreement will probably still be in existence in 10 years from now in 2024. “I can think of no negatives. I honestly can’t,” said a patron in response to the agreement remaining for years to come. Reasons given for the continuation of the interdistrict agreement varied according to the person’s position in the community but support for the agreement was unanimous. One of the long-standing business owners in Chester responded to questions about the future of the agreement with, “I hope so, because the main thing is that both of our communities are thriving.” Business people from both communities felt the agreement had not only brought the communities somewhat closer but businesses in both communities were on solid financial ground. As stated by a businessman in the Mason community,

I don't think anybody would say; let's go back the way we were. I don't think anybody would say that. That would be impossible. I think everybody would say that would be impossible. There would be a revolt in the community.

Another supporter of the agreement who lived in Mason but worked in a neighboring town expressed his opinion in support of the agreement and believed it would continue. He said in retrospect, "People didn't want to lose their identity that they had. I honestly think it went better than anybody thought. It's normal now." A current school board member stated, "I don't see a problem with it. If there is a problem in the community, I haven't heard it. And maybe if we have to consolidate, my personal opinion is we should consolidate, maybe county-wide."

Another board member also assessed the agreement from a school board member's perspective, "You know I wouldn't have a problem now with consolidation because I feel like we understand each other well enough, and we could get along and make that work. But financially, we're better off to do it this way." The extent of community support for the arrangement was evident in both the Chester and Mason communities, from each generation of people.

A newspaper editorial written in April 1991, by a longstanding and respected patron and parent of the Chester community summed up the inclination of the two communities to do right by their children when he implored the people of the soon-to-be South County communities to take a long-view in support of the interdistrict agreement. He wrote,

I could be jumping into the fire again, but I'm bothered by all of the editorials I've read and the gossip I've heard lately. It seems that the more some people think about this school decision, the more people are getting cold feet. I still have some mixed feelings about it, especially concerning our teachers, but I've seen some very progressive changes in our students. (Trickey, 1991)

The letter writer talked about his memories of the two schools and how those memories do not have to change who he is. But by the same token, he also saw the need to support the new identity of the South County graduates and future students. He concluded his editorial with these words:

The first year will be a difficult year for all of the students involved. So, they are going to need our support. The towns are not losing their mascots, colors, and school names, they are just changing them. It has taken me the last couple of months to see that we don't have to forget the [Chester mascot] and the [Mason mascot], but we don't have to despise the [South County mascot] either. The kids are trying, now it's time for the people of both towns to try, not let go, but add to their pride.

Several people in the community referred to this article while being interviewed. It contained some powerful words that evidently hit home with the people of the two communities.

The interdistrict agreement is a sacred artifact that people hold dear. Residents who have been in the area since 1991 described the extent to which they revere the official document and would fight for its survival. An administrator laughed as he said, "They [Chester and Mason board members] are very guarded of their interdistrict agreement; they don't want to mess with it. My role in the interdistrict agreement has been to renew it." One Mason resident went so far to say, "I think it is ingrained." A resident from Chester conveyed this sentiment: "My gut feeling would be right off the top of my head that it would get better with time." Only three people from the Chester community were worried about the shrinking student population in Chester. They expressed concerns about whether the Chester community could continue to be a viable contributing partner in the interdistrict agreement and remain financially able to keep their

elementary and junior high schools open. A couple of other people expressed concern about the lackluster economy and the diminishing funding available for education. Both of these issues could eventually become a factor that changes or eliminates the interdistrict agreement. But at this point in time, the South County Interdistrict Agreement has been renewed for another 4-year period, from 2013 through 2017.

Chapter 5

Analysis and Implications

This study was fun, insightful, and generated a great deal of information about two communities bonded by an interdistrict agreement between their school districts. The support I felt during the interviews while spending time in both communities was tremendous. The people of each community wanted to share stories and opinions about their connection to the South County schools and communities. The community members who lived through the development and implementation of the interdistrict agreement are still very protective and supportive of the South County Interdistrict Agreement.

It was a unique and rewarding situation to be in my position, that is, an outsider interviewing people about a piece of legislation adopted in the early 1900s of which they are extremely proud. I asked questions to obtain knowledge, learn the history, and get perceptions from community members in regard to the depth of their connectivity prior to and after the implementation of the interdistrict agreement. The excitement of the interview candidates while telling their stories depicted the intense investment each person had within their community. The more questions I asked, the more the commitment to the interdistrict agreement, South County, and investment into community surfaced. This chapter focuses on how the analysis and implications of the data inform an understanding of how an interdistrict agreement affected the educational and social relationships in the schools and communities of Chester and Mason.

Examination of an Interdistrict Agreement

My analysis compares and contrasts the components of an interdistrict agreement to the elements of traditional or regional consolidation. This information includes reasons why I believe the interdistrict agreement of South County provided a positive, lasting bond for the

school districts and the surrounding communities rather than the negative outcomes often associated with a traditional consolidation. The analysis offers insights which help to answer the question of why two or more districts would choose to enter an interdistrict agreement as opposed to a traditional consolidation. Alternatively, my analysis also sheds light on why two or more districts might choose to enter into an interdistrict agreement as an intermediary step prior to completely consolidating and closing a school in a rural town.

The South County Interdistrict Agreement has been successful for these two communities with limited glitches for the past 23 years. All indications from my study lead me to believe it will remain intact for many more years. The existence of a legacy from the original schools will remain in existence because of the grandparents and parents in both communities. However, there is definitely a South County fan club that is supportive of the junior high and high schools. In addition to the bond established over the years between the communities and the schools, there exists an expanded social capital between the two towns. They are uniquely linked through the interdistrict agreement and because of this connection the social capital has turned inward to support each other instead of being rival towns as was in 1991.

Reflecting on the entire study, I'm not sure this type of agreement will always work for two rural school districts as an alternative to traditional consolidation because situations vary within school districts and communities. When comparing the South County Interdistrict Agreement to the traditional or regional consolidations discussed in the literature review, I discovered some similarities but also several differences in the over-arching goals that could be contributing factors to the longevity and success of the South County school districts.

Contrasting Goals

Traditional consolidation's main goal is to combine two or more districts into a single unit located in one of the consolidating communities. The intent is to close facilities deemed superfluous (Consolidation of School Districts, 1969). Other goals for consolidation include resolving issues such as low student enrollment, decreased curriculum offerings, funding efficiency, and elimination of dilapidated facilities. The interdistrict agreement for the school communities forming South County had similar goals to traditional consolidation in the areas of enhancing curriculum offerings and increasing enrollment, but the primary goal was for the "purpose of allowing pupils residing in one district to attend school in the other district," (Kansas Department of Education, 1991a). Whereas traditional consolidation will close at least one facility, an interdistrict agreement aims to share students. In South County, the interdistrict agreement focuses on each community maintaining an elementary school and one of the upper graded schools. The advantage of this arrangement is so each rural community will continue to exist while maintaining a local school as a social hub in each community. This concept of schools remaining in both districts is in direct contrast to a traditional or regional consolidation that can have devastating consequences on the surrounding communities.

Traditional consolidation does not take into account community cohesiveness or the survival or death of the community which loses a school. The Chester and Mason communities are proud of their accomplishments and proud of the two school districts which make up South County. The protective and respectful manner in which Chester spoke about the Mason High School district and the same way in which Mason spoke about the Chester Junior High School expressed a desire to see the continued success of the interdistrict agreement. From the accounts of study participants involved with the original agreement, the 11-mile gap between the two

communities was not a hindrance and as the years passed, it became even less of a concern. The long-standing friendships that developed between both communities achieved the goal of putting together an agreement that would promote the survival of both communities.

Traditional consolidation allows a structure which combines into one jurisdiction boards of education, the power of decision making, and budgets and spending. Ultimately, separate districts are collapsed into a single school or school system located in one of the towns. In contrast, an interdistrict agreement has flexible guidelines within the legislative process for more than one local board of education to create the parameters for the interdistrict agreement. South County wanted local districts with local boards of education maintaining separate budgets and local control while operating as two separate districts--USD C (Chester Elementary and South County Junior High School) and USD M (Mason Elementary and South County High School). Communities are able to keep a school with activities in each town and financially maintain the buildings, which is the opposite outcome of a traditional consolidation.

Limited Interdistrict Agreement History

Unlike traditional consolidation which has been a part of school history since the early 1900's and a part of the legislative process in Kansas since 1969, interdistrict agreements originated in legislation in 1984 (Consolidation of School Districts, 1969; Organization, Powers and Finances of Boards of Educations, 1984). The interdistrict agreement is utilized primarily for combining athletic programs between two school districts and is not a common procedure used to avoid consolidation. After conducting this study, I believe the interdistrict agreement could be considered as an option prior to rural districts traditionally or regionally consolidating.

We, They, and Us

An interesting use of pronouns was a theme running through all interviews and conversations. When interviewing someone from Mason or Chester, especially a graduate of one district or the other prior to the interdistrict agreement, the pronouns used to discuss the different communities and school districts were possessive. For example, a Mason person would refer to Chester as they, Mason as we, and only used us when discussing sports or school activities involving South County. The same use of pronouns in reverse occurred when visiting with Chester individuals. The interdistrict agreement is over 23 years old and although the communities have worked together, grown together, and share the educational responsibilities of both community's children, there is still a noticeable disconnect or a sense of allegiance to the town in which they reside.

The bond developed between the two communities is somewhat evident within the recreation commissions, local churches, and families. However, I detected an undercurrent of separation, that is, a need for each community to hold on to a piece of the past as if Chester and Mason's old schools might not be remembered. There was not resentment of the South County combination, just a fear of the old schools being forgotten and their heritage lost and totally replaced by South County. Some of the displayed trophies, sports jerseys, and treasured paraphernalia supported my original thoughts of why the pronouns were so widely used.

The interdistrict agreement contributed to both aspects of the theoretical framework. The social capital between the two communities prior to the interdistrict agreement was non-existent, described as a rivalry. After the implementation of the interdistrict agreement, the gap in the social capital created by the rivalry between the two communities began to shrink. A third pronoun, us, was created that seemed to bridge the two communities and bring them together.

Every year the agreement is in existence, the stronger the bridge between Chester and Mason. The they and we pronouns are still used to express the connection between each of the two communities and their local districts; however, there is an over arching connection between the two communities that constitutes the use of the pronoun us in conversations between parents and patrons of both towns.

South County Got It Right!

The final part of my analysis involves a description of factors which I believe South County corrected in a timely manner during implementation. Although there were things that could have been done differently to avoid some mishaps, the primary focus is on the many things that South County did right. Several elements of the interdistrict agreement reported in the findings contributed to the success and longevity of the South County interdistrict school agreement.

My analysis has yielded additional factors that I consider instrumental in the initial and continued success of the interdistrict agreement but were not necessarily articulated by an interview participant. These factors originated from the already established symbiotic relationship, as referred to in the theoretic framework, between the local schools and the surrounding communities of Chester and Mason: (a) board members were established, respected community leaders of the early 1990s; (b) undeniable trust between school and community was firmly established prior to any type of consolidation considerations; (c) schools were not in crisis mode, just in need of assistance; and (d) people supported the agreement not just to save both school district but to keep a intermediate or secondary school within both Chester and Mason communities.

The board members in this study had an unbelievable vision for their communities that included a school in both Chester and Mason. The connection between the schools in each town and the community was undeniably present. Even though this vision did not follow the format or pattern of traditional consolidation, it appealed to each community because of the promise to alleviate some of the common problems associated with small rural schools without stripping a community of its school. An unwritten trust was apparent between the superintendents of Chester and Mason, the board of education members, and the patrons who were counting on direction for community survival. Whether it had something to do with an era when deals were still made on a handshake or the uniqueness of constituents within each community, the majority of the people trusted the school leaders as community “elders” or people of wisdom, trust that permitted an unheard of interdistrict agreement to be implemented within a short time frame of nine months.

A protective bond continues to surround Chester and Mason’s schools and communities. This protective barrier is not only evident between the schools and their local communities but also between the two communities. It is not talked about, but it is present among the “elders” who originally wrote the agreement, the descendants of those elders, the patrons who embraced and supported the original agreement, and the graduating students who claimed ownership of the agreement beginning with the class of 1992. Unlike traditional consolidation that creates a void within the community that loses their local school, the South County interdistrict agreement kept the symbiotic bond within each local school and community while building social capital between the two towns over time.

People in the study were guarded and carefully selected words so as not to offend the other community when asked about the agreement. Neither community nor school district was

required to allow me to probe into the history of the agreement, an uninvited inquiry into past events that had caused an upheaval of their lives in the early 1990s. I believe the boards were confident that the interdistrict agreement would stand on its own merits and the people would continue to support and protect the South County Interdistrict Agreement. As one “elder” board member put it, “It would take a lot of effort to screw it [interdistrict agreement] up because I’m pretty sure that both communities would come together and fight for it [interdistrict agreement]; I’m pretty sure.”

Neither Chester nor Mason was desperate to consolidate but knew the time was coming when action of some sort would be required to maintain a school in at least one community. Both schools could have continued to function separately, although keeping the doors open would have required certain sacrifices to be made. I believe the leaders of each school community saw early signs of sacrifices such as losing vocational or fine arts programs along with some extracurricular programs. The one component that was not negotiable was Chester’s unwillingness to forfeit their school entirely. Both Chester and Mason communities stood staunchly against consolidation because of detrimental community consequences they witnessed in a neighboring town. A continual search for a solution to maintain both communities and schools was the prime focus. Amazingly enough, the amount of intuition by individuals, a search for an alternative solution, and personal community investment continued to surface. The interdistrict agreement was written with little or no knowledge of what an interdistrict agreement should contain and yet, it is still in existence with few changes or modifications. The “elders” of both communities got it right!

Implications of an Interdistrict Agreement

The final section of this chapter addresses the implications of an interdistrict agreement. Certain elements of the South County Interdistrict Agreement may not occur in every interdistrict agreement written for other rural communities facing different circumstances and different contingencies. My interpretations of the unique aspects and success of this agreement provides information for districts weighing the pros and cons of consolidation but looking for an alternative that would enable them to maintain an active school in each local community.

Will an Interdistrict Agreement Work for All Rural Districts?

The South County Interdistrict Agreement was written specifically for and by the communities of Chester and Mason. Some of the components dealing with transportation and student count are expressly written to avoid funding pitfalls relevant only to these two communities and their student populations. Because the details contained in an interdistrict agreement are tailored to local needs and conditions, they will not generalize to other communities without making substantial changes to the content of the agreement. However, because interdistrict agreements are written by knowledgeable community board members and approved by the patrons in each community, the potential of such agreements proving successful over the short- and long-term is significantly improved.

Any towns wishing to avoid traditional consolidation could choose to write an interdistrict agreement. It is available for anyone and everyone. The legislative process is designed with the flexibility for a custom designed document for any two districts. From a technical standpoint, composing an interdistrict agreement is actually a pretty straightforward procedure. The bigger question that is not fully answered by my research is whether the document itself is the contributing factor for the success of the interdistrict agreement or if there

is something more at work, something less tangible than the actual document but just as important. I believe the communities of South County made the document successful. The townspeople embraced the district challenges and the guidelines of the document, caught the vision painted by the board members, put all rival talk aside, and decided to survive with an alternative to traditional consolidation.

Perhaps the deciding factor of whether an interdistrict agreement will work or not lies not within the specifications described in the legal agreement but instead is some immeasurable quality that abides in the people living within the communities who collaborated in writing the document. The components of the document have to fit the school districts that are being combined but the document may not work without the vision of the people, the guidance of trustworthy leaders, and the commitment of two communities determined to make the agreement successful. An explanation of why the agreement worked for South County might have something to do with the fortuity of having had all these things present at the time the original agreement was created and in the 23 years since. But the extent to which an interdistrict agreement will be feasible in other districts and communities that do not share a comparable set of characteristics cannot be determined in advance. It appeared there was an element of luck in the South County agreement that may not be replicable just anywhere no matter how earnestly people want an interdistrict agreement to work.

Throughout the entire study, there seemed to be more than the agreement driving the success for the school districts. Not only did the board members have a vision and lead the community through momentous change, but the communities had the right people in the right positions of authority at the right time. For lack of a better description, there seemed to be an unknown element of luck working on behalf of Chester and Mason. The local people had

established a symbiotic relationship with their local schools and were not willing to forfeit that connection through consolidation. The interdistrict agreement allowed them to maintain the school to community connection and over time added a community to community connection through different organizations, activities, and the need for survival.

Both communities were on the verge of needing to take serious action but neither one had reached a point of desperation. I'm not sure the people in Chester or Mason realize what they have going for them compared to towns that have lost everything to traditional consolidation. For Chester and Mason, all elements lined up: the right people were in place, very few people opposed the agreement, and everything fell into place in a short eight or nine months. As eager as I am for the findings to point to some concrete set of factors that explain the durability of the South County agreement, I am hard pressed to reach such a conclusion. I do believe an interdistrict agreement could serve as a solution to avoid traditional consolidation and as a superintendent of a rural district would try an agreement prior to consolidation for the sake of the rural communities involved. In the case of South County interdistrict agreement, the whole appears greater than the sum of its parts.

Interdistrict Agreement is an Evolving Document

The agreement for South County has evolved throughout its span of 23 years and will probably continue to change as time passes. The document is a living document, edited by the Chester and Mason school boards every four years at a joint board meeting. Very few changes have been made to the original agreement and most community members are unaware of exactly when the renewals occur. The board members have addressed the problems over the years as issues arose. They weren't afraid of change while at the same time protecting the contents of the agreement. The 14 current board members of Chester and Mason have worked together,

consulted the board members of the original (1991-92) boards of education members when questions arise, and continue to do what they believe is best for the two communities and the children in the school districts.

One area that has improved over the years as the document has evolved is in the area of leadership. The original interdistrict agreement was written with two superintendents heading two separate districts. Two superintendents created several problem areas. For example, miscommunication between the two leaders evolved into a trust issue. There were occasions when one board would get information and the other board wouldn't get the same information or would get the information a week later. Over time, the document was altered to the point where both districts shared one superintendent. This superintendent managed both budgets, made sure both schools had hired the necessary individual and pooled teachers, and shared critical information with each board of education within the same timeframe. This stifled a lot of speculation or miscommunication before it had a chance to happen and harm the interdistrict relationship. Trust was easier to establish when there was only one person in charge. Both districts are very pleased with the current superintendent, evidenced by his having been with the districts for six years.

There are areas that have remained under local control within each separate district that at some point may be revisited and changed to conform more to the structure of a traditional consolidation. Teacher negotiations, salary schedules, and benefits continue to be separated by the two districts. Salary schedules are different and when visiting with either the Chester or Mason central-office clerks, neither knows how salaries vary or which district has the higher base salary. It would make the teacher negotiation process easier for the shared superintendent if salary scales were the same. Other areas that may be considered for further consolidation in the

future are transportation, bulk purchasing, and some of the classified positions. Transportation might be more efficient if the bus routes were reconfigured by attendance centers rather than their current status of residency. Today, buses pick up students living in each of the two districts and are transported to their home district building. From their district of residence, the junior high students of Mason are then transported to the Chester Junior High and the high school students living in Chester are transported to the Mason High School. Chester buses could transport all junior high students and Mason all high school students regardless of district residence. Classified positions such as food service or director of grounds or maintenance might be areas in which one person could effectively serve both districts. There may be some complications with the budget in regard to bulk purchasing or transportation costs, but these two areas could eventually be added to the interdistrict agreement.

Further Research Needed

Every school and community situation has different factors surrounding the schools and their respective communities. This study is an examination of only one interdistrict agreement success story. It provides school boards with knowledge of the elements contained in Chester and Mason's interdistrict agreement and the process they followed that led to a successful and enduring interdistrict agreement. Nothing in this study should be construed as suggesting that an agreement of this sort can be successfully duplicated in every situation. Additional case studies in areas where agreements have failed or did not last more than a few years need to be conducted in tandem with research into other successful agreements and then analyzed as to why some agreements succeed while others fail. Comparisons could then be drawn to possibly determine whether certain schools and communities are good candidates for an interdistrict agreement.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Individual Interview Consent Form



*Department of Counseling, Educational Leadership, Educational and School Psychology
PO Box 142, Wichita, KS 67260-0142*

Purpose: You are invited to participate in a study to gain insight into the perception of a community and school's dependency on each and the relationship created between the two entities after an interdistrict agreement which has been in existence over 20 years.

Participant Selection: You were selected as a possible participant in this study because of your employment with South County schools, your status as a graduate of South County, and/or you are a resident of the surrounding communities in either Mason or Chester. An additional requirement of all participants is each person must have lived in the South County communities for at least five years during or after the implementation of the original interdistrict agreement of the 1991-92 school year.

Explanation of Procedures: As a participant you will be asked to be interactively involved in either an individual interview or a four to seven member focus group interview conducted by me. Both types of interviews will consist of 10 open-ended questions to seek the perception of the relationship between the South County schools and the Mason/Chester communities since the implementation of the interdistrict consolidation agreement. The individual interview or focus group interviews will last approximately 45-60 minutes and will take place at a time and place convenient for you. With your permission, I would like to audio record our interview so an accurate transcript can be created which will facilitate data analysis and assist me in reporting accurate findings. Approximately twelve individual interviews are planned with school personnel from South County High School and South County Junior High School and four focus groups consisting of stakeholders (graduates, parents, patrons, and business owners) from both communities.

Discomfort/Risks: There are no risks, discomforts, or inconveniences expected from any of the individuals participating in the individual interviews or focus group interviews conducted in this study.

Benefits: The purpose of this study is to understand the effects of a 22 year old interdistrict agreement on individuals in two small Kansas communities. The results of the study will provide insight into the perception of the community about the interdistrict agreement and the dependency between school and community for survival. This research will inform readers about a sustainable interdistrict agreement and the relationship between their consolidated schools and communities.

APPENDIX A (continued)

Confidentiality: Any information obtained in this study will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. Raw data will be maintained in a secure location, and no identifying information will be used in the final dissertation or subsequent publications. No one other than me and Wichita State University will have access to the raw data.

Refusal/Withdrawal: Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your future relations with Wichita State University or me. If you agree to participate in this study, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. You will be given a copy of this consent form for your records.

Contact: If you have any questions about this study, contact Ardith Dunn, 620.598.2231 (home phone) or 620.649.2234 (office phone) or Dr. Eric Freeman 316.978.5696 (office phone). If you have questions pertaining to your rights as a subject, or about research-related injury, you can contact the Office of Administration at Wichita State University, Wichita, KS 67260-0007 at 316.978.3285.

You are under no obligation to participate in this study. Your signature indicates that you have read the information provided above and have voluntarily decided to participate. Please keep a copy of this consent form for your records.

Signature of Subject

Date

Print Name

Title or Area of Representation

Signature of Witness

Date

APPENDIX B

Individual Interview Protocol

Hello, my name is Ardith Dunn and I represent Wichita State University as a doctoral student from the department of Educational Leadership. I appreciate your willingness to assist me in my research for my dissertation. This study is to gain insight into the perception of a community and school's dependency on each and the relationship created between the two entities after an interdistrict agreement. You have been selected because you are currently living in the Mason or Chester communities and because of your employment with South County, your status as a graduate of South County, and/or you are a stakeholder in one of the South County communities. Please keep in mind this study is seeking your perception of the relationship between the school and community.

Before we begin, I would like to share a few procedures for our conversation. Although we will be on a first name basis, no names will be used when I report the results of this session. You can be assured of complete confidentiality. I would like to audio record our conversation with two different devices for response clarity as I review our conversation and device assurance towards an accurate analysis of data when reporting the findings of this study. This interview session will last approximately 45-60 minutes. Again, thank you for your participation.

Individual Interview Questions:

1. Please tell me your name, title, number of years you have lived in Mason/Chester, and your specific qualifications that make you a candidate for participation in this survey.
2. What organizations do you participate in or how are you involved with the community/school environment?
3. Please describe your recollection or involvement in the original interdistrict agreement of 1991-92. If you were not in the area during the original agreement, what do you know about the characteristics, specifications or renewals of the interdistrict agreement?
4. Can you talk about some of the effects on the relationship between the school and community at the time of the original implementation or one of the earlier renewals versus the effects today of the interdistrict agreement?
5. Is there a connection between the South County schools and surrounding communities? Please describe...
6. From your perceptions, has the interdistrict agreement changed the relationship between the schools and communities? How so...

APPENDIX B (continued)

7. What was your initial reaction to the physical change of the school colors, mascot, student placement, etc.? Did these changes affect the relationship between school and community at the time of the initial agreement? What about today?
8. What parts of the interdistrict agreement have been difficult to sustain and what has contributed to the longevity of the consolidation.
9. Do you think the interdistrict agreement will continue to exist in ten years? Why or Why not?
10. Is there anyone in the school or community that you think I should interview to add information to my research?

APPENDIX C

Agreement for Interdistrict Education Program 1991-1996

This agreement is entered into by and between the Board of Education of USD M, South County, Kansas, and the Board of Education of USD C, South County, Kansas.

I. DEFINITIONS

As used in this agreement:

- A) "USD M" means Unified School district No. M, South County, Kansas.
- B) "USD C" means Unified School district No. C, South County, Kansas.
- C) "Pupil" or "student" means any person regularly enrolled and attending school in those grades maintained by either USD M or USD C.
- D) "District" or "School District" means either USD M or USD C.
- E) "Home District" means the school districts in which the pupil resides.
- F) "Board" or "Board of Education" means the board of education of either USD M or USD C.
- G) "Host District" means the school district in which the pupil attends classes.

II. PURPOSE

The Boards of Education of USD M and USD C desire to enter into an interdistrict agreement under the provisions of K.S.A. 72-8233 for the purpose of allowing pupils residing in one district to attend school in the other district.

III. TERMS OF AGREEMENT

The term of this agreement shall be for a period of five (5) years, commencing July 1, 1991 and ending June 30, 1996. Subsequent contracts will be for four (4) years. Provided, however, that this agreement shall be subject to change or termination by the Kansas Legislature. This agreement may be changed or terminated by mutual agreement of the participating Boards.

IV. PUPIL ATTENDANCE

The Boards agree that all pupils in grades 9 through 12 in both school districts shall attend classes at the Mason school attendance center and all pupils in grades 6, 7, and 8, shall attend classes at the Chester school attendance center.

APPENDIX C (continued)

V. PUPIL ENROLLMENT

The Boards agree that for the purpose of computations under the School District Equalizations Act, K.S.A. 72-7030 et seq., pupils shall be counted as regularly enrolled in the district of their residence.

VI. COSTS AND EXPENSES OF EDUCATION

The Boards agree that the costs and expenses of educating the pupils subject to this agreement shall be borne as follows:

- A. The expenses of educating the pupils shall be borne by the host school district.
- B. Pupils shall be required to pay ordinary fees, e.g., textbook rental, lab fees, shop fees, to the host school district.
- C. Both school districts shall provide the same or comparable student accident insurance coverage.
- D. The costs of transportation of pupils to and from their host school district, during the regular school day, shall be borne by the pupils' home district. The district sponsoring a pupil activity shall bear the costs of transporting the pupils to the activity and returning them to their home district.

VII. AUTHORITY AND RESPONSIBILITY

The Boards agree that their authority and responsibility under this agreement shall be as follows:

- A. Each district shall maintain autonomy in hiring personnel and terminating personnel; creating and terminating positions; and contracting for services and goods.
- B. The host district shall maintain autonomy in making final decisions, consistent with this agreement, on curriculum for those grades held in the host district's attendance center, so long as such final decisions are not in conflict with the terms of this agreement.
- C. The pupils' home district shall be responsible for transportation of pupils to and from their host district attendance center during the regular school day.
- D. The district sponsoring a student activity shall be responsible for transporting students to the activity and back to their home district.
- E. The Boards shall hold two (2) joint information meetings each year to discuss progress or problems involving the implementation of this agreement. Both Boards recognize and agree that any binding

APPENDIX C (continued)

action shall be taken by the individual Board only within its district boundaries.

- F. Each board shall encourage ex-officio representatives to attend the other Board's regular and special board meetings.
- G. The Boards agree to share existing materials and equipment, i.e., textbooks, audio-visual equipment, band instruments, uniforms, et cetera. Each district shall prepare and provide to the other district a written inventory of materials and equipment it owns and which are being shared with the other district. Such inventories shall be updated from time to time as additional materials and equipment are exchanged or returned.

VIII. CURRICULUM

The Boards agree that the following curriculum shall be adopted by the host school:

- A. Grades 6, 7, and 8, USD C
Required:
Math, Science, English, Reading, Social Studies (Kansas History), Computer Science, Physical Education (Human Sexuality, AIDS/STD and Drug Free Schools Education Programs)

Tentative Electives:
Instrumental Music, Vocal Music, Art Education, Photography, Home Economics, Speech/Drama, Industrial Arts, Mechanical Drawing, Principles of Technology, Career Exploration, and Foreign Language.
- B. Grades 9 through 12, USD M
Required:
The Kansas State Board of Education's basic required courses, with the additional requirements of one unit of speech-forensics.
- C. The Boards agree that every effort shall be made to insure that the junior high and the high school curriculum are compatible.

IX. STUDENT DISCIPLINE

Pupils shall be subject to the rules and regulations of the host district, including but not limited to the host district's rules and regulations for student conduct. The Boards agree that their respective administrators shall meet with parents and the pupils attending their respective attendance centers for the purpose of explaining and clarifying the host district's code of student conduct.

APPENDIX C (continued)

X. INDEMNIFICATION AND HOLD HARMLESS AGREEMENT

Each host district shall hold harmless, indemnify and defend the home district from all claims, demands, charges, complaints, investigation, suits, liability, or judgments of whatsoever kind or nature, arising from or connected with the operation, responsibilities, actions, determinations and conditions of the host district, including but not limited to, personnel matters, contract disputes, personal injury, property damage, civil rights, defamation, strict liability claims or any alleged violation of federal, state, county or municipal law.

The district responsible for transporting pupils under this agreement shall hold harmless, indemnify and defend the other district from all claims, demands, suits, liability or judgments arising from or connected with the transportation of pupils, including, but not limited to personal injury, property damage or wrongful death of pupils or other persons injured or damaged.

XI. EFFECTIVE DATE OF AGREEMENT

This agreement shall take effect only after Board of Education has adopted a resolution in conformity with K.S.A. 72-8233 (b). The parties acknowledge and agree that the Board of Education of USD M adopted such resolution on January 30, 1991, and that the Board of Education of USD C adopted such a resolution on January 30, 1991, with both such resolutions attached hereto and incorporated herein by reference as though set out in full. The parties stipulate that the effective date of this agreement is July 1, 1991.

Board of Education
USD M
South County, Kansas

Board of Education
USD C
South County, Kansas

APPENDIX D

Agreement for Interdistrict Education Program, 2013-2017

(Underlined & Italicized denotes changes from Appendix C)

This agreement is entered into by and between the Board of Education of USD M, South County, Kansas, and the Board of Education of USD C, South County, Kansas.

I. DEFINITIONS

As used in this agreement:

- A. "USD M" means Unified School district No. M, South County, Kansas.
- B. "USD C" means Unified School district No. C, South County, Kansas.
- C. "Pupil" or "student" means any person regularly enrolled and attending school in those grades maintained by either USD M or USD C.
- D. "District" or "School District" means either USD M or USD C.
- E. "Home District" means the school districts in which the pupil resides.
- F. "Board" or "Board of Education" means the board of education of either USD M or USD C.
- G. "Host District" means the school district in which the pupil attends classes.

II. PURPOSE

The Boards of Education of USD M and USD C desire to enter into an interdistrict agreement under the provisions of K.S.A. 72-8233 for the purpose of allowing pupils residing in one district to attend school in the other district.

III. TERMS OF AGREEMENT

The term of this agreement shall be for a period of four (4) years, commencing July 1, 2013 and ending June 30, 2017. Subsequent contracts will be for four (4) years. Provided, however, that this agreement shall be subject to change or termination by the Kansas Legislature. This agreement may be changed or terminated by mutual agreement of the participating Boards.

Subsequent agreements shall be reviewed by the participating boards at least one (1) year prior to the ending date of such agreements.

APPENDIX D (continued)

IV. PUPIL ATTENDANCE

The Boards agree that all pupils in grades 9 through 12 in both school districts shall attend classes at the Mason school attendance center and all pupils in grades 6, 7, and 8, shall attend classes at the Chester school attendance center.

V. PUPIL ENROLLMENT

The Boards agree that for the purpose of computations under the School District Equalizations Act, K.S.A. 72-7030 et seq., pupils shall be counted as regularly enrolled in the district of their residence.

VI. COSTS AND EXPENSES OF EDUCATION

The Boards agree that the costs and expenses of educating the pupils subject to this agreement shall be borne as follows:

- A. The expenses of educating the pupils shall be borne by the host school district.
- B. *Pupils shall be required to pay ordinary fees, e.g., textbook rental, lab fees, shop fees, to the host school district. Pursuant to K.S.A. 72-5391, 72-4107 (a) there are waivers to these fees if the student cannot afford them.*
- C. Both school districts shall provide the same or comparable student accident insurance coverage.
- D. The costs of transportation of pupils to and from their host school district, during the regular school day, shall be borne by the pupils' home district. The cost of transportation of pupils back to their home school at the conclusion of the regular school day shall be borne by the host district. The district sponsoring a pupil activity shall bear the costs of transporting the pupils to the activity and returning them to their home district.

VII. AUTHORITY AND RESPONSIBILITY

The Boards agree that their authority and responsibility under this agreement shall be as follows:

- A. Each district shall maintain autonomy in hiring personnel and terminating personnel; creating and terminating positions; and contracting for services and goods.

APPENDIX D (continued)

- B. The host district shall maintain autonomy in making final decisions, consistent with this agreement, on curriculum for those grades held in the host district's attendance center, so long as such final decisions are not in conflict with the terms of this agreement.
- C. The pupils' home district shall be responsible for transportation of pupils to and from their host district attendance center during the regular school day. The pupils' host district shall be responsible for transportation of pupils from the host district to the home district during the regular school days. Exceptions to the preceding may be made at the discretion of the administration. The district transporting a student shall be deemed to be the district responsible for that student.
- D. The district sponsoring a student activity shall be responsible for transporting students to the activity and back to their home district.
- E. The Boards shall hold two (2) joint information meetings each year to discuss progress or problems involving the implementation of this agreement. Both Boards recognize and agree that any binding action shall be taken by the individual Board only within its district boundaries.
- F. Each board shall encourage ex-officio representatives to attend the other Board's regular and special board meetings.
- G. The Boards agree to share existing materials and equipment, i.e., textbooks, audio-visual equipment, band instruments, uniforms, et cetera. Each district shall prepare and provide to the other district a written inventory of materials and equipment it owns and which are being shared with the other district. Such inventories shall be updated from time to time as additional materials and equipment are exchanged or returned.
- H. Evaluation of the Shared Superintendent
 - 1. To complete the formal evaluation of the Superintendent's position, both boards will meet independently prior to, or in, December to discuss the evaluation of the Superintendent.
 - 2. Following the December meeting(s), the two boards will meet in joint session in early January to finalize the evaluation form.
 - 3. After the January joint session, both boards will then meet independently back in their home district(s) to take action on the Superintendents contract.

VIII. CURRICULUM

The Boards agree that the following curriculum shall be adopted by the host school:

APPENDIX D (continued)

- A. Grades 6, 7, and 8, USD C
Required:
The Kansas State Board of Education's basic required courses and any further courses required by Kansas Statutes or Regulations.
- Tentative Electives:
- Courses that the host board may deem necessary for coordination of curriculum from Grades 6, 7, and 8 through grades 9, 10, 11, and 12.
- B. Grades 9 through 12, USD M
- Required:
The Kansas State Board of Education's basic required courses and any further courses required by Kansas Statutes or Regulations
- C. The Boards agree that every effort shall be made to insure that the junior high and the high school curriculum are compatible.

IX. STUDENT DISCIPLINE

Pupils shall be subject to the rules and regulations of the host district, including but not limited to the host district's rules and regulations for student conduct. The Boards agree that their respective administrators shall meet with parents and the pupils attending their respective attendance centers for the purpose of explaining and clarifying the host district's code of student conduct.

X. EFFECTIVE DATE OF AGREEMENT

This agreement shall take effect only after Board of Education has adopted a resolution in conformity with K.S.A. 72-8233 (b). The parties acknowledge and agree that the Board of Education of USD M adopted such resolution on November 12, 2012, and that the Board of Education of USD C adopted such a resolution on November 19, 2012, with both such resolutions attached hereto and incorporated herein by reference as though set out in full. The parties stipulate that the effective date of this agreement is July 1, 2013.

Board of Education
USD M
South County, Kansas

Board of Education
USD C
South County, Kansas

APPENDIX D (continued)

Attest:

Attest:

The original inter-district agreement was approved by both boards on January 30, 1991. The original inter-district agreement is extended for an initial five (5) years ending June 30, 1996. All subsequent inter-district agreements are to be approved for four (4) years. Prior year inter-district agreements were approved on the following dates:

USD M – February 13, 1995
USD C – February 20, 1995
Extended until June 30, 2000

USD M – March 08, 1999
USD C – March 22, 1999
Extended until June 30, 2004

USD M – April 14, 2003
USD C – April 21, 2003
Extended until June 30, 2008

USD M – June 27, 2008
USD C – June 25, 2008
Extended until June 30, 2009

USD M – March 09, 2009
USD C – March 10, 2009
Extended until June 30, 2013

USD M – November 12, 2012
USD C – November 19, 2012
Extended until June 30, 2017