Sustaining schools in a rural Montana community

Martha Cheney

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Sustaining Schools in a Rural Montana Community

by

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Over 20 percent of America’s children attend school in a rural community or small town with a population under 2,500. In some areas of the country, including Montana and other northern plains states, schools in these rural communities and small towns are experiencing a variety of threats to their sustainability: declining student populations, pressures to consolidate, and economic distress in the communities. Schools play important roles in these communities, providing a social center and a sense of identity to communities that are geographically isolated.

This study seeks to understand the perspectives of members of one such community toward the challenges faced by its school and the kinds of solutions and strategies they envision to confront these challenges. The intent of this study is to provide opportunities for the voices of individuals to express in their own words their concerns, their aspirations, and their beliefs regarding their schools.

This qualitative study is a richly detailed description of the experiences and attitudes of a single community. It illuminates the phenomenon of rural school sustainability in a Montana community, a community which shares many features in common with similar communities throughout the state. The exploration of the experiences in one community may serve as a starting point for identifying these common features and clarifying the nature of the challenges facing rural Montana communities as they struggle to sustain their schools and their communities.

Findings suggest that community members have a cohesive and consistent view of the challenges facing their schools; that they share a strong commitment to sustaining their schools; that they feel somewhat disempowered by external influences on their schools; and that, in spite of these difficulties, they have confidence that their schools will survive.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Problem

Montana is a thinly populated state. Though it stretches across vast reaches of the northern plains and Rocky Mountains, its entire population is smaller than that of many American cities. And Montana is a rural state; historically, Montanans have made their living from the land itself—ranching, mining, farming, timbering. Even today, most Montanans live in tiny hamlets of a few hundred or small towns of a few thousand. Like their counterparts throughout the United States, these towns and hamlets are confronting demographic and economic changes that threaten their traditional ways of life and sometimes, their very existence.

Schools in these struggling rural Montana communities face serious threats to sustainability, their ability to survive and to thrive (Lawrence, 1998). Previously identified threats include: declining populations in the communities they serve and concomitant declines in student enrollment; pressures to consolidate with schools in other communities; and difficulty recruiting and retaining sufficient numbers of highly qualified teachers to staff their classrooms (Fanning, 1995; Collins, 1999; Tompkins, 2003).
Historically, many rural communities came into existence to support extraction-based industries, such as logging, mining, and agriculture (Carter, 1999). Changes in these industries have led, in many cases, to economic decline in small towns and rural areas. As mills, mines, and farms perform the same work with fewer employees due to application of advanced technology or cease operations altogether because of environmental regulation or depletion, jobs are lost to the community. Young people leave the community in search of work. This out-migration impacts the local schools; young workers will establish their families in locations where they can find economic opportunity (Collins, 2001; Schwartzbeck, 2003 Tompkins, 2003).

As the schools shrink, pressures to consolidate are often brought to bear, based on the notion, borrowed from industry, that increasing the size of the school facility would reduce the cost of educating each student (Fanning, 1995). The guiding principle of rural education policy in recent decades has therefore been to combine schools and make them bigger. The notion was that economy of scale could somehow solve every problem facing rural schools:

- If facilities were dilapidated and outdated, the solution was to build a new and bigger building. That, it was thought, would cost less per student. If you were worried about bus rides to the bigger school, you built it on cheap land outside of town, next to the Interstate. If you could not recruit high-quality educators, you argued that bigger schools with newer facilities would attract better
teachers. If the rural school curriculum was limited, you promised that bigger schools would allow for a richer curriculum. (Tompkins, 2003, pp.7-8)

In spite of this policy of consolidation, a shortage of teachers remains a serious problem for many rural districts (Chaika, 2000; Collins, 1999; Richard, 2002). Here in Montana, schools are suffering from real shortages of qualified teachers (Davis, 2002; Nielson, 2002). To make matters worse, many of Montana’s teachers are eligible for retirement (Nielson, 2002). And while Montana’s teacher education programs graduate enough newly-licensed teachers each year to fill the state’s demand, fewer than one in three remain in the state to teach (Nielson, 2002).

Difficulty in recruiting new teachers is only one part of the problem. Districts struggle to retain the teachers they have. Salaries are low, near the bottom in national rankings (Beeson & Strange, 2003). The poorest districts, which tend to be small and rural, pay even less than the more urban districts (Davis, 2002). Rural schools are therefore poorly placed to compete with more affluent urban districts in the hiring of new teachers. Efforts to attract new teachers from outside these communities generally have met with little success because of low pay and the social isolation often associated with rural life (Nielson, 2002).
Statement of the Problem

Four out of every ten Montana schoolchildren attend school in rural communities and small towns. In order for these students to be well-educated, they must have schools that meet their needs. Threats to the survival of these schools impact the prospects for quality education for these children and the well-being of the community as a whole. In order to understand the experience of a community that fears for the long-term survival of its schools and to work toward the development of strategies that may meet the community’s needs, it is necessary to obtain information about how the people who live, work, and raise families in the community perceive and respond to the problems relating to the sustainability of their schools.

The interdependence of rural schools and the communities they serve is frequently noted and yet may not be well understood. Research on rural schools is skimpy (A Microscopic Drop in the Research Bucket, 2003). Research programs and educational policies designed to meet the needs of urban schools may have little applicability for rural schools and in fact may even exacerbate difficulties in rural schools (Carter, 1999). Qualitative research on the issue of rural school sustainability is sorely needed; case studies and interviews with community members have been explicitly recommended as a means of exploring this topic (Carter, 1999; Howley & Harmon, 1997).

As previously stated, the most common approach to problems of rural schools in recent decades has been the closing and consolidation of rural schools. In 1930,
there were over 260,000 public schools in the US; today, in spite of massive increases in population, there are about 90,000 (Tompkins, 2003). The trend toward closing community schools and busing children to distant (and larger) schools is being questioned, especially in light of research that suggests that small schools may be fundamentally superior to large schools in a number of ways, including safety, student participation, and achievement (Bailey, 2000). Coles (1977) argues that consolidation has a detrimental impact on students and on communities, implying that material and technical resources are of paramount importance. But other factors are in play. “There is no dollar value that can be easily assigned to the personal interactions between teachers and students, schools and communities or the individualized instruction and family-like atmosphere that were traditionally seen as strengths of rural schools” (Casey, 1998, p.13).

Small rural schools may be more efficient at meeting the needs of students in a particular community because they more accurately reflect the values and desires of that community. This strong interdependence between school and community can provide a foundation for the development of successful schools (Collins, 2001). Howley and Eckman (1997) set forth some assumptions that guide their own study of rural school interaction and sustainability:

- Everyone has a stake in a community’s school. Parents want their children to be well prepared for life. Community members want young
people to grow into responsible neighbors capable of contributing to the community. Educators want to share knowledge and do it well.

- Everyone has a rightful place in making decisions about schooling and education. Schooling is one of the largest undertakings of our government (often the largest single venture at the state level), and our government is founded on the principle of citizen participation. Public education is paid for by the taxes everyone pays. What happens in schools affects society as a whole.

- Schools and communities are part of one another; they should be seen as such. Closing a school is like removing an essential organ from a community: There had better be a pretty good reason behind such an action. This means that the more schools and communities recognize, celebrate, and develop their inherent connection, the better off they will be. (p. 3)

The relationship between school and community is difficult to unravel (Tompkins, 2003). To understand the issues facing a rural school, it seems likely that the entire community must be examined as a matrix from which the school itself is inextricable. It is important to uncover the perspectives of community members toward their schools; to understand the threats community members perceive to be impacting their schools; and to obtain the insights community members have regarding the actions that might best be taken in response to the threats they perceive.
Importance of the Problem

A sizeable portion of Montana’s student population hails from rural schools. In fact, nearly 40% of Montana students attended rural schools in the year 2000 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000b). An exploration of the needs of these students—and their home communities—is critical to the meaningful examination of any issue relating to public education in Montana. This exploration is more vital in light of the fact that the well-being of rural schools and the communities in which they reside are deeply intertwined; rural schools serve important economic, cultural, recreational, and leadership functions for their communities (Tompkins, 2003).

This symbiotic relationship is a source of strength for rural communities and defies many of the negative stereotypes applied to rural residents. Collins (2001) notes that rural communities abound with the ideals of “personal relationships, small-scale organization, high quality of life, and democratic...practices” (p. 16). These ideals enable rural schools and their communities to engage as partners in personal and empowering ways that might be more difficult in urban settings, where numbers and bureaucracy make involvement more difficult (Miller, 1995). The economic and demographic pressures bearing down on rural communities inevitably impact the children and schools of these communities. Schools and communities must work together to ensure their mutual survival (Lyson, 2002).
Added urgency devolves from the fact that in spite of the reality and severity of teacher shortages in many rural schools, recent changes to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) mandate that, by 2006, all teachers be highly qualified (Reeves, 2003). However, the federal law permits states to interpret the guidelines set by No Child Left Behind (NCLB). The Montana Office of Public Instruction defines a highly qualified teacher as one who has obtained at least a bachelor’s degree, full certification, and has demonstrated content knowledge in his or her teaching area (Montana OPI, 2003). These changes in state and federal law may impact the recruitment and retention of teachers in Montana’s rural communities and heighten the importance of investigating the needs and concerns of these communities.

**General Research Questions**

This study represents an effort to discover and understand the perspectives of members of a rural Montana community about the threats to sustainability of the schools in their community. A central research question and several sub-questions were developed to address this effort. The central question was:

*What solutions do members of a rural Montana community envision to address the threats to the sustainability of their local schools?* More specifically:

1. *The literature on sustainability of rural schools identifies several threats to the survival of these schools. These threats include:*
difficulty in recruiting and retaining highly qualified teachers

decreasing population in the community and out-migration of youth

pressures to consolidate with other districts

How do community members perceive these threats? What other threats might they identify?

2. What solutions, if any, might they envision for their schools?

3. How do community members perceive the roles of institutions such as state and federal government and schools of education in helping to sustain their schools?

4. How do community members perceive their own roles in helping to sustain their schools?

Definition of Terms

Sustainability: The ability to survive and prosper (Lawrence, 1998).

Rural: According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), a district is designated rural if it has a population of less than 2,500 (2000a, ¶ 14).

Community member: Any individual who resides within the school community, that is anyone whose address would qualify a resident child to attend the community school, and self-identifies as a community member.
**Consolidation:** The practice of combining one or more small schools within another school, resulting in the closure of one school and the transfer of its students to another school.

**Summary**

Rural communities tend to view their schools as the heart of their communities. In a small community, the school serves as the social, political, and emotional hub around which the life of the community revolves. Threats to the survival of rural schools have implications for the well-being of the community as a whole.

In chapter two, a survey of related literature will describe some threats to school sustainability. This review will provide a conceptual framework which will facilitate analysis of the experiences of one community as it struggles to cope with these threats.
CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Introduction

This literature review explores the theoretical foundations of issues relating to rural school sustainability and provides a conceptual base for the analysis of data collected in the study. This survey encompasses literature describing the traditional role of rural schools in their communities; the contemporary and historically identified approaches to dealing with rural school problems; the importance of rural schooling in Montana; and some suggested strategies for sustaining rural schools in communities where their existence is challenged.

Role of rural schools in America

Rural schools often play powerful roles within their communities, roles that may be quite different from their more urban counterparts. Rural schools serve as the hub around which community activity whirls. In large towns and cities, individuals and families have many options for entertainment and recreation: parks, movie theaters, shopping centers, restaurants, and museums abound. In small towns and rural communities, these options are far more limited. The entertainment provided by
a basketball game or high school play becomes very important to the social life of a community (Bailey, 2000).

The level of participation in these extracurricular activities is higher in small schools than in large schools. Not only are more students involved, but these students participate in a wider variety of activities. Parents and community members also tend to participate more, further reinforcing the connections between the school and the community (Bailey, 2000).

Rural communities and their schools are closely linked in ways that urban and suburban schools cannot be. The local school system is one of the largest employers in a small community; it may even be one of the largest landholders in a small town. Through its payroll, schedule, politics, and students, the school system affects virtually every family in the community, regardless of whether they have children attending school (Howley & Eckman, 1997, p. 4).

This enhanced role of the school within the community often leads to a special affection and connection for the rural school, often seen as the heart of the rural community. A healthy and positive relationship between the community and the school, therefore, is critical to the effectiveness of the school and to the well-being and development of the community (Collins, 2001; Miller, 1995). Teachers and administrators are often viewed as leaders within the community. Students—the youth and energy of the community—provide a vital sense of purpose. When schools
close, communities tend to experience an acceleration in the decline of their populations, and local businesses and organizations often disintegrate (Tompkins, 2003).

Close ties between community and school have powerful benefits for students. Small schools graduate a higher percentage of their students than do their large, urban counterparts. Small schools experience less violence and fewer discipline problems. Students and their families in these schools are personally known by teachers and administrators, increasing their sense of belonging (Bailey, 2000). Indeed, Tompkins (2003) describes the research related to the advantages of small schools as robust, noting that small schools show better attendance rates, higher academic achievement, and lower dropout rates. Further, small schools have smaller and more flexible power structures that enable them to respond to needs as they arise. Teachers in small schools can work together to plan units or share duties, can group students across grade levels, and can adopt flexible schedules that might be impossible within the rigid framework needed to keep order in a very large school (Tompkins, 2003).

It may be that small schools can provide a pattern that will help to improve education across the nation:

The U.S. needs more public schools, and that position means that smaller schools need to be established and supported. Sustainability is a construct that has the potential to capture such commitments as conservation, stewardship,
and long-term vitality that will be required for such an undertaking to succeed. (Howley & Harmon, 1997, p. 21)

Related research on small class size supports the notion that smallness has inherent benefits for students. The results of one well-known effort, Tennessee’s Project STAR, suggested that students achieve better and behave better in smaller classrooms. A follow-up study suggested that these positive effects lasted beyond the term of the study, impacting student achievement as students progressed into higher grades (Gilman & Kiger, 2003).

Consolidation of Rural Schools

This interdependence of school and community has historically been a hallmark of rural education. But sweeping social and economic changes in America’s rural communities present a challenge to this tradition (Collins, 2001). These changes include the loss of jobs in the agricultural and resource-extraction industries. As a result, many small towns and rural communities are losing population as residents are forced to relocate in search of jobs. The population in these communities is getting older. The children of these older adults have left the community in search of work. There are few young families remaining. Those that do stay tend to have fewer children than in previous generations. The reality of fewer children in the community translates to fewer students in the schools, and fewer dollars in school budgets as per-pupil funding declines. Shrinking budgets must be stretched to provide teacher and
administrator salaries, instructional materials, and upkeep of facilities that are often far too large for the existing student body (Schwartzbeck, 2003). This problem is particularly acute in the Northern Plains region where some states (including Montana and North Dakota) report that more than half their rural districts are experiencing enrollment losses (Beeson & Strange, 2003; Bryant, 1999).

Over recent decades, consolidation has been the primary solution proposed to remedy declining student enrollments. Schools have been closed and students have been sent to neighboring communities to attend classes. The rationale behind this policy is that grouping students together provides an economy of scale, and makes the process of education more efficient. Moreover, proponents of consolidation assert that larger schools and districts are able to offer students a greater breadth of course offerings, improved facilities, and a larger slate of extracurricular activities (Howley & Eckman, 1997). The truth of these assertions has been challenged, and many small communities reject out of hand the notion that consolidation is in their best interests. They recognize that the consequences of consolidation may be negative, contributing to increased social problems and a loss of connection between a community and its children (Fanning, 1995). Often, the issue of consolidation is a contentious one, and some communities fight hard to prevent the closure of their local schools (Howley & Eckman, 1997).

The loss of a school can have profound effects on the entire community. Communities with schools are more socially stable and more economically
prosperous than communities without schools. Small rural communities that lose their schools are more likely to lose population. Housing values in these communities tend to be lower and the stock of houses is usually older. Moreover, these communities are less likely to have municipal water and sewer services. Rural communities without schools have higher rates of general and child poverty and lower per capita income (Lyson, 2002).

The loss of a community’s school amounts to much more than the closure of a public building. The economic security, continuance of culture, and quality of life for that community may all be at stake (Lawrence, 1998). Further, important opportunities for the community to come together to build shared values, participate in the social life of the community, and to exercise decision-making powers over community issues diminish with the loss of a school (Bushrod, 1999).

The small community of Lily, Wisconsin experienced such a loss in 2002. Two teachers from the school assess the cost to the community:

What does the closure of Lily School mean to the community? As with so many small towns, the school is the defining feature. Over the years the town's businesses have closed, but the school has always remained. It has provided not only education for the children but a sense of community for all. Christmas plays written by teachers were the highlight of the season. Awards day picnics were attended by all, young and old. Whenever there was a need at the school, there was always someone to come to the rescue. The local
people, many of whom attended the school themselves, were proud of their school. It is so hard to describe the responsibility the local people felt towards this school. When someone coined the phrase, "it takes a village to raise a child," they could have truly been describing Lily, Wisconsin. It is evident that the level of commitment will be difficult to maintain with the students being bused throughout the district. (Gallagher & Thuestad, 2002, ¶ 9)

Bus rides are themselves an often overlooked aspect of consolidation. Most rural elementary students—85%—have bus rides of over 30 minutes each way and 25% ride for over 60 minutes each way. High school students face even longer rides. And these times are calculated based on the bus ride only, not the actual door-to-door transportation time. In some remote areas, parents drive children long distances over poor roads in order to reach the bus stop, effectively doubling the transportation time. The effects of these long rides may well be detrimental to students' health and academic performance (Schwartzbeck, 2003). Furthermore, the additional transportation costs associated with consolidation may largely or entirely offset the savings that accrue from this strategy (Killeen & Sipple, 2000).

The rationales put forth in favor of consolidation—that allows for a greater variety of course offerings, that it promotes a more standardized framework for education, and that it uses education dollars more efficiently—are now being called into question (Fanning, 1995).
The mantra that bigger is better has been recited so often that people have forgotten to look at the evidence. And the evidence is mounting that there are significant costs to children and families, to learning, and to communities that result from creating larger schools and transporting students long distances to attend them. (Tompkins, 2003, p. 8)

Rural School Funding

These consolidation policies are based on the theoretical notion that economies of scale will increase school efficiency and facilitate the provision of services for the largest number of students at the smallest cost. However, some recent research tends to support the contention that small schools actually may be cost effective because they produce better outcomes for students (Bailey, 2000; Howley & Bickel, 2000).

Small schools are faced with some special funding challenges. A community that is committed to its school must keep the building open and operating, whether there are 100 children or 300 in attendance. Buses cost the same amount to operate whether they carry five children or 50. According to Verstegen (1991), small districts must find additional funds from local sources which are often strained to the limits, or cut back on educational offerings. Even though some states attempt to assist rural schools, this aid is limited. Rural districts, with their small budgets, often are disproportionately impacted by state and federal mandates; these districts sometimes
find themselves simply unable to allocate the necessary funds to meet government standards (Pankratz, 1991; Rosswurm, 2001).

Social Stresses on the Rural Family

Strained budgets are problematic not only for rural schools, but also for the families they serve. The economic decline in many rural communities leads to declining enrollments. It may also foster a higher rate of family instability, as money problems lead to marital stress or reliance on drugs and alcohol (Rogers, 1991). Child abuse and neglect may result. Certainly, these stresses will manifest themselves in children's school behavior.

In many rural counties, this poverty is deep and persistent (Carter, 1999). In small isolated communities, the school may be the primary or only source for social or psychological services in the community (Flynn, 2003). School programs which serve to reinforce school/community alliances and to increase the engagement of at-risk families in school activities show promise for improving the prospects of rural families, children, and schools (Schwab, 1997). Schools in small communities have the potential to bring together the stakeholders in a meaningful collaboration that serves to empower the community as a whole. As these stakeholders work together to provide quality education to the youth of the community, they also develop useful tools to bring about social change and community improvement (Duncan, 1999).
Recruiting and Retaining Teachers for Rural Schools

Declining enrollments and threats of consolidation are not the only problems faced by America's rural schools. Changes in state and federal regulations add new challenges (Howley & Eckman, 1997). For example, ESEA 2001 requires that each state receiving funds under Title 1 develop a plan to ensure that all teachers employed in its classrooms are highly qualified by the end of the 2005-06 school year. This means that elementary classroom teachers must be fully licensed by the state in which they teach. In order to meet the definition of "highly qualified" elementary educators must possess at least a bachelor's degree and pass a test of general knowledge and teaching skills (Reeves, 2003).

The new law, a revised version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, will likely do little to solve key problems in rural schools, such as difficulties in teacher hiring and training, rural experts say. Rural educators...say a majority of America's outpost schools won't ever be able to meet what the law requires—not without significantly more money and completely new approaches to their problems. (Richard, 2002, p. 17)

Many rural educators acknowledge that the effort to ensure that all teachers are knowledgeable and competent is a worthy one (Richard, 2002). However, they assert that compliance with the law may be impossible, since qualified candidates may not be readily available within the community (Jimerson, 2003). This new
requirement places a special burden on rural schools because—unlike their urban counterparts—rural schools must draw from a very limited population when seeking qualified teachers.

**Urgency of Rural School Problems**

The problems of rural schools affect many children across America. Beeson and Strange (2003) found that 31% of all students nationwide attend school in rural areas and small towns with populations of 25,000 or less, and 21% live and attend school in communities where the population is 2,500 or less. In some regions—the south, Appalachia, and the Great Plains—that number rises to 30%. A national education policy that focuses exclusively on the needs of urban districts cannot, therefore, effectively meet the needs of all American school children (Tompkins, 2003).

America’s roots are deeply rural; though most of today’s Americans—about 75%—live in cities, just 150 years ago about 90 percent of our population was rural. Our rural past is ingrained in the national memory and has given rise to conflicting stereotypes about rural life; it is alternately envisioned as romantic and ideal or harsh and drab (Casey, 1998). But whether they left gratefully or regretfully, for most of the 20th century, people did leave rural areas in search of greater economic opportunity in the cities. Successive waves of out-migration from rural communities have dramatically altered our settlement patterns and kept the eyes of the country turned...
toward the cities with their opportunities and attendant problems. Rural communities were almost forgotten as public attention shifted to a new, more urban way of life (Casey, 1998).

Considering this dramatic demographic trend, it may not be surprising that until very recently, the plight of urban schools has held center stage in the education policy debate; little attention has been given to the problems of rural schools. This is beginning to change, as policy makers recognize that a significant fraction of American children live and study in rural places (Beeson & Strange, 2003). There is, however, an urgent need for further research (Carter, 1999). At the 2003 annual conference of the American Educational Research Association, only 16 out of the 7000 papers presented addressed rural education issues (A Microscopic Drop in the Research Bucket, 2003). Considering the fact that rural and small-town schools provide education to about one-third of American children, this is woefully inadequate. The assumption that policies designed for urban and suburban schools will necessarily apply equally well to rural schools is unscientific. More research on rural-specific issues is vital (A Microscopic Drop in the Research Bucket, 2003).

A number of areas related to rural education issues need to be explored. These include the disparities of government spending on rural schools compared to urban schools; the relationship of the cultural make-up of a community to its available educational opportunities; and successful means of developing social and political capital within a community. Research about the impacts of telecommunications
technology on rural communities could help inform future policy (Carter, 1999).
Possibilities for expanding the pool of teacher candidates for rural areas also need to be investigated more fully (Jimerson, 2003).

*Rural Schools in Montana*

The problems that exist in America’s rural schools are manifestly obvious in the state of Montana. Montana’s rural schools are among the most severely challenged in the nation. Of the 50 US states, Montana ranks:

- 2nd in percentage of schools in rural areas
- 3rd in percentage of rural schools with declining enrollments of at least 10%
- 6th in percentage of all students attending small rural schools
- 7th in percentage of state’s population that is rural
- 11th in percentage of children in rural poverty
- 11th in rural per capita income
- 12th in terms of overall need for attention to rural education (Beeson & Strange, 2003).

According to the NCES, about 40% of all Montana’s students attend rural schools (2000b). Beeson and Strange (2003) describe rural education in Montana as crucially important, ranking it in the top quartile of all US states on their Rural Education Priority Gauge. They report that over 70% of all Montana’s public schools are located in rural areas. Over half of Montana’s schools are experiencing significant population
declines. This phenomenon is generally coincident with economic distress in the community. Additionally, rural teacher salaries in Montana are extremely low (Beeson & Strange, 2003; Nielson, 2002).

Between the years of 1993-1997, 32.4 percent of Montana’s rural schools experienced declines in enrollment of at least 10 percent (Schwartzbeck, 2003). This decline in enrollment is often concomitant with declining population in the counties where the schools are located. The least populated counties are located in the plains states and include most of eastern Montana’s counties. These are the counties “most likely to face the harshest consequences of declining enrollment: consolidation, loss of funding, community decline, lower teacher and administrator quality, lower-quality school facilities and fewer resources (Schwartzbeck, 2003, p. 4).

In 2001, the Montana legislature approved a small increase in per-pupil funding to public schools. But because this state aid is calculated based on the number of students, enrollment declines mean that most schools actually received less assistance from the state (Dennison, 2001). Some costs may be reduced when delivering services to fewer students. But some costs—maintenance, utilities and the like—are more static. To make up the shortfall, districts often turn to property tax increases. From 1991-2001, “school district property taxes statewide nearly tripled, from $75 million in 1991 to $205 million [in 2001]. At the same time, state aid to public schools increased only 25 percent” (Dennison, 2001, p. 1).
Perhaps it is not surprising then, that Montana’s rural districts struggle to recruit and retain a sufficient number of teachers to staff their K-8 schools. The most severe shortages are found in math and science classrooms and in special subject areas such as music, art, and special education. Regular elementary classroom teacher positions are easier for districts to fill. However, these teachers comprise about a quarter of all teaching positions in the state so a much greater number is needed. Many of the elementary teachers currently working in Montana classrooms are eligible to retire. Should a sizeable minority of these teachers opt for retirement, districts may find themselves scrambling for replacements (Nielson, 2002).

Many Montana districts experience chronic difficulty in attracting and retaining the teachers they need. Though Montana’s teacher education programs produce enough graduates to meet the state’s annual need for new teachers, only 29% remain in the state, while others seek employment elsewhere. District representatives from such far-flung places as Alaska, Texas, and Florida actively recruit these graduates at job fairs. They can often offer attractive salaries, signing bonuses, and help with relocation expenses. And new graduates are not the only ones being lured to higher-paying districts; experienced teachers and administrators retire from the Montana system and take jobs out of state, bolstered by their Montana retirement monies (Nielson, 2002).

The isolation and remoteness of rural communities is another obstacle in recruiting and retaining teachers for Montana’s rural schools (Davis, 2002; Nielson,
2002). Some teachers like the rural lifestyle and tend to remain in their positions for a
long time. As a result, some small schools and districts experience little turnover
(Nielson, 2002). However, when openings occur there are often few applicants. Many
new teachers are reluctant to move to tiny and remote communities (Davis, 2002).

In spite of these obstacles, there are attractions inherent to teaching in rural
Montana. Some teachers in Montana's rural districts cite enjoyment of a rural
lifestyle and good relationships with students as most important factors influencing
their decisions to remain in their positions. They cite small class size, community
involvement in the schools, safety, and recreational opportunities as advantages
(Davis, 2002). Some positive characteristics of rural schools in Montana include
closeness and mutual respect among staff members, a sense of school ownership on
the parts of school employees and community members, a community-wide sense of
pride in the schools, and a genuine concern for students (Jakupcak, 1996).

Strategies for Sustaining Rural Schools

Several strategies for sustaining rural schools emerge from the literature.
These include greater use of technology to provide enhanced opportunities for
distance learning (Schwartzbeck, 2003; Virden, 2003); place-based education that
envisions the community as a rich educational resource (Collins, 1999; Howley &
Eckman, 1997); improved school-community linkages (Collins, 1999; Miller, 1995);
creative arrangements such as the four-day school week and regional sharing of
institutional services such as purchasing, staff development, and payroll (Schwartzbeck, 2003). Small schools and districts may be more flexible than their larger counterparts, and therefore find a greater ability to adopt new models that permit sharing of specialists between districts, utilization of block scheduling, or use of the surrounding natural environment as a learning laboratory (Nachtigal, 1982).

If these or other strategies are to succeed in helping rural schools sustain themselves, they must be tailored to fit the needs of an individual community (Howley & Eckman, 1997). According to Theobald and Nachtigal (1995), this process must be organic, evolving, and specific to a particular place:

Focusing on place, using the community as a curricular lens, not only contributes to re-creating community, but it will also help realize true school renewal by making learning more experiential and therefore more powerful, and also by providing youth with an ability to understand who they are and how they might be in the world. The more students understand their community and its environs—its social structure, its economy, its history, its music, its ecology—the more they become invested in that community. Such investment increases the likelihood that they will find ways to either stay or return to the community. The significance here is not just that one small place is saved, but that the character of our national culture is transformed in the process. Indeed, the promise of rural educational renewal is that it can start us all on the road to a more sustainable future. (p. 9)
Summary

Rural schools serve about 40% of Montana’s schoolchildren. Many of these schools suffer a variety of stresses; these include rural poverty and related social problems, declining enrollment and related threats of consolidation, inadequate funding, and difficulty recruiting and retaining high quality teachers.

The next chapter will present the methodology for this research project which will examine the ways in which members of one Montana community respond to these challenges to the sustainability of their schools.
CHAPTER III
METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the phenomenon of a rural Montana community that is working to maintain the viability and vitality of its local schools. This chapter describes the research methodologies employed in the study’s design, data collection, and data analysis.

Research Methods

I used two research paradigms in the completion of this project. In the initial phase of the study I utilized analytic induction to refine my research hypothesis and identify a community for study. I then applied a phenomenological lens as I sought to understand the relationship of that particular community with its schools.

Analytic induction.

This method of data analysis allows for the modification and evolution of concepts that may naturally occur during the process of conducting qualitative, social research (Znaniecki, 1934). The goal of analytic induction is to develop the hypothesis that will best serve to represent the reality of a given situation. In this
process a phenomenon is tentatively described, a hypothesis about the phenomenon is outlined, the hypothesis is tested against an actual instance so that it may be either confirmed or revised. Additional cases are examined against the hypothesis and the hypothesis revised until it fits well against the reality under observation (Robinson, 1951).

Analytic induction is exceptionally well-suited to the initial stages of qualitative research because it can lead to a more focused and refined hypothesis or research question (Goetz & LeCompte, 1981). According to Smelser and Baltes (2001), analytic induction (AI) requires that the phenomenon under study (the explanadum) and the related factors (the explanans) be successively refined until a consistent relationship can be observed. Cases are examined to determine whether or not they fit the initial hypothesis. When the hypothesis is contradicted by evidence in these cases, the researcher may redefine the explanadum and/or revise the explanans until they achieve alignment.

In terms of this particular research project, the original explanadum may be defined as the phenomenon of elementary teacher shortage in rural Montana schools. The explanans, extrapolated from existing research, included factors of poor teacher pay and social isolation of rural communities. However, as the initial stages of the research unfolded, it became apparent that this narrow focus did not adequately explicate the challenges facing these schools. As I surveyed administrators in small, rural schools around the state, it became clear that the issue of teacher shortage at the
elementary level was merely one of a constellation of issues confronting them. While they acknowledged that they do indeed have difficulty finding teachers to fill secondary subject areas and K-12 specialties such as special education and music, the staffing of elementary classrooms was far less troubling. They admitted that they did not always have the number or quality of applicants that they would like and that they once enjoyed but, they asserted that they generally were able to satisfactorily fill classroom positions. Further, they seemed to want to talk about the larger problem they perceived: how to sustain their schools in the face of their declining enrollments and distressed local economies. As a result of this early feedback, the focus of my study evolved to comprehend this larger constellation of problems. I learned that the phenomenon of elementary teacher shortage was embedded in a cluster of other phenomena from which it could not sensibly be separated.

In order to examine the reality of the challenges confronting rural schools, I needed to rework my explanadum to incorporate this reality. As a result of these initial surveys and interviews, I revised the focus of my study to encompass the wider and more compelling phenomenon of rural school sustainability and its challenges.

By utilizing early interviews to refine research questions, the focus of the study becomes at once more encompassing and more refined (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). The phenomenon in question—rural school sustainability—is therefore a more pertinent and powerful topic for study because it represents more accurately the reality of the challenges facing rural schools.
Phenomenology.

Once the research questions had been refined and strengthened through the process of analytic induction and a community had been selected for study, I employed phenomenology as a research paradigm. Phenomenology is utilized to reduce complex descriptions of human experience in the attempt to expose common themes. Moustakas (1994) delineates four steps of phenomenological processes: epoche, reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis.

In the first of these steps, epoche, researchers must set aside all personal presuppositions in order to genuinely observe phenomena without prejudice. Phenomena are, therefore, taken on their own terms and may serve to provide insights not previously considered. The second step, reduction, seeks to condense lived experience into thick description. In other words, perceptions are rendered in complex, meaningful language. Viewed as a whole, these perceptions add to the understanding of the phenomenon at hand. The third step, imaginative variation, suggests an array of possible meanings that may be derived from the multiple perspectives obtained through observations, interviews, and reflection. Finally, the researcher must synthesize the structural and textural descriptions into an interpretive statement which explicates the essence or heart of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).
I employed this approach as I obtained insights from members of several rural communities regarding issues surrounding the sustainability of their rural schools. I sought input from a variety of stakeholders from all segments of the community. These stakeholders were individuals who identified themselves as community members. They live and work within the subject community; they are "insiders." It is assumed that these stakeholders are capable of contributing valuable insights into issues relating to sustainability of the schools in their community by virtue of their membership in said community. It is the very fact of belonging to the community that imbues these individuals with the perspectives, ideas, and understandings that will elucidate the phenomenon under study. Howley and Eckman (1997) perhaps say it best with their assertion that "ordinary people from the community need to be involved in public schooling. That involvement is part of what makes public schools public" (p. 4).

All stakeholders were listened to carefully and without evaluation. Opinions from a wide range of community members—business people, administrators, teachers and other school employees, ranchers, homemakers, and retirees—were sought. I took careful notes of each conversation, and immediately following each conversation extended my notes while my memory was fresh. I then used these notes to analyze and synthesize the material.

Because education is affected by myriad variables, I believed that qualitative research methods would best serve my purpose in this study. The hopes, dreams, and
ideas of a community may not easily be quantified; on the other hand, such intangibles may indeed be described and explored in an effort to understand more about a community and its schools.

Population and Setting

To identify potential communities for study, a survey (Appendix A) was distributed to principals in Montana districts that: serve communities of 2,500 or fewer people, have a student population greater than 50, and are located more than 50 miles from the nearest college or university offering a teacher education program. This survey was distributed by email and by telephone. This survey was initially envisioned as nothing more than a vehicle for collecting descriptive information in order to facilitate the choice of an appropriate community for study. However, the information gathered during this initial process served to refocus and refine the phenomenon under study.

Principals in communities that met the criteria were contacted by telephone for follow-up interviews. Each principal was asked about his/her estimation of the receptivity of the community to serving as a site for my study and his/her willingness to introduce me to community members who would be likely to have an interest in expressing their views.

Based on these conversations with administrators, I chose a community where the administrator was, in my estimation, the most confident that the community
would be highly receptive to my study and responsive to my questions. In addition, this administrator was most expressive regarding the constellation of problems that comprise the school sustainability challenge. His eagerness to meet and talk with me was palpable. I perceived his extraordinary enthusiasm about the project and assurance of a warm welcome in the community to be conditions which would help to ensure the success of the project, which was entirely contingent upon open cooperation from the subject community.

Research Design

Once the community was selected, I began my study. Data were collected through extensive interviews with principals, school board members, parents, and other interested community members over the age of 18. No minors were permitted to participate in the study. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, the names of all participants were changed in the transcripts. In addition, identifying features of individuals and physical features of the community were changed to provide further protection, but care was taken to ensure that these changes would not compromise any information that is pertinent to the phenomenon under study or make any material difference to the meaning of the study. The large number of small, rural communities in the state will further help to mask the identity of any single community; in fact, there are nearly 300 communities with populations of 2500 or less. These
communities have much in common, both in terms of their social and geographic features.

I began by interviewing the principal in the community’s elementary school, and sought his assistance in reaching other administrators, teachers and other community members who might be interested in the project. I contacted these community members named by the principal and faculty and requested permission to conduct interviews. To make sure that a wide spectrum of community members was included in the study, I spent time in a variety of public locations in the community. For example, I browsed in local shops, stopped for coffee in the local diner, and visited public buildings and private businesses. In each of these locations, I introduced myself to community members and requested their participation. In not a single case was my request for an interview denied. Participants were eager to talk and to share their views about their community and its schools.

I remained in contact with the community throughout a period beginning approximately February 1, 2004 and ending in early March 2004. During this time, I interacted with community members in person and via phone; I made myself available to community members for questions and additional interviews at their request. All adult community members who expressed interest were welcomed, and there were indeed some volunteers. In one instance, I was visiting with a waitress in a coffee shop when a young woman seated nearby interjected a comment or two. I
immediately invited her to join the conversation, and she added her insights as a mother of a kindergartner and frequent classroom volunteer.

Data were collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis. Some interviews were tape-recorded, but in some cases the presence of the tape recorder seemed disadvantageous and I relied on field notes. In addition to talking with community members, I picked up local newspapers, flyers, and the like to gain additional insight into the life of the community. I utilized a semi-standardized format for the interviews. A small set of relatively standard questions were asked of each interviewee. Probes and follow-up questions were utilized. Interviewees were encouraged to respond freely, but I refocused the interview if the conversation wandered too far off-topic.

I spoke with 30 individuals from all walks of the community. I continued to visit the community and collect interviews until I found that the emerging themes were well-established and the conversations no longer were providing new insights.

Nine of the interviews lasted from 30 to 60 minutes; and the remaining 21 interviews ranged from 5 to 30 minutes because, at times, interviewees did not have time for such a lengthy interview. However, in each case, I strove to ensure that interviewees responded to as many of the essential questions as possible. Berg (2001) defines essential questions as those most central to the focus of the study.
Instruments

Two simple instruments were utilized in the commission of this study.

Survey of school principals.

I utilized a survey (Appendix A) to identify a suitable community for study. Those communities which fell within the parameters established in the research design section of this proposal were considered as possible settings for the study.

Semi-standardized interview questions.

I utilized semi-standardized interview questions (Appendix B) to determine the perspectives of members of a rural community on the issues surrounding teacher shortage and local schools. The interview questions were constructed to elicit personal insights, perceptions, and ideas.

This type of interview involves the implementation of a number of predetermined questions and/or special topics. These questions are typically asked of each interviewee in a systematic and consistent order, but the interviewer is allowed freedom to digress; that is, the interviewer is permitted (in fact expected) to probe far beyond the answers to their prepared and standardized questions (Berg, 2001, p. 70).
**Data Analysis**

I transcribed tape-recorded interviews and wrote up field notes within a few hours of each interview. With all the data at hand, I read and reviewed all material making general notes and defining initial categories and themes within the data. The data were then reviewed again, and codes were developed for emerging themes.

In this type of study, the analysis does not extend to building a substantive theory nor does it extend to generalization. Rather, the analysis explains and systematizes the complexities of human experience.

**Limitations of Study**

The most serious limitation of this design was the potential for bias on the part of the researcher; I recognized that my own passion and zeal for the topic could inadvertently impact the findings. Because I was acutely aware of this limitation, I made every effort to be nonbiased, especially in my questioning. The purpose of this research was to uncover the thoughts, beliefs, and opinions of all interviewees; I was not seeking any particular outcome or data set.

It is important to note, however, that this limitation does not undercut the value of the research. Qualitative researchers, especially those interested in social change, often approach subjects passionately, and the insights of even a few individuals contribute to the understanding of social phenomena. In this case, giving
voice to rural community members may help to empower them in exploring community-based solutions to problems of rural school sustainability.

Summary

Analytic induction (AI) was chosen as the preferred method to refine my research question and select a community for study; I utilized phenomenology to collect, analyze, and synthesize data. In the next chapter, the data obtained through these methodologies is explored.
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Introduction to Smallwood

Smallwood, Montana has a population—depending on who you ask—of somewhere between 600 and 800. Of course, when asking, one must clarify whether one means “in town” (within the town boundaries) or “everybody” which includes those whose residences are on the fringes of town and down the bumpy dirt roads that lead out into the surrounding hills and valleys.

Smallwood is a welcoming little place. True, it has the dingy and down-at-the-heels look that is common to so many of Montana’s small towns; an old rusty car sits on blocks in a driveway; a broken banister careens lopsidedly down a front porch. But in the same glance, an interested observer can also see signs of pride and charm: the snug houses painted in cheery colors; the neatly shoveled sidewalks; a bright, unfrayed American flag snapping in the breeze above the Post Office.

A short walk around town reveals that this place, though perhaps struggling, is very much alive. There’s a little grocery store, and a well-stocked drygoods store reminiscent of the old-style dime store. Strolling through, it was hard to imagine something you might really need that they couldn’t supply: toys, school supplies,
make-up, reading glasses, embroidery yarn, birthday cards and balloons are displayed in colorful profusion. It’s difficult to believe they can fit this extraordinary array in their neat and compact aisles. The hardware store is busy on the day I visit, with several Carhartt-clad men buying nails, saw blades, and sandpaper and taking plenty of time for conversation in the process.

Bars feature rather prominently on the main streets—there are at least three watering holes within view from the town’s main intersection. In counterbalance, small rustic churches raise their spires and welcome signs. There’s a gas station, a diner or two, an insurance office, and a tidy and prosperous looking little bank, squat and solid in the center of town.

The school district in Smallwood boasts a student population of almost exactly 400 students in grades Kindergarten through twelve. The school buildings that house these students have a comfortable appearance. They consist of an old high school of warm brick, a plain box of middle school, and a newish elementary school building boasting a bright creamy-yellow facade. All look neat and well-kept and invite the visitor inside, with reminders not to smoke on the premises. At the elementary school, rosy-faced, sweating children run and chase balls around the unfenced school yard as the teacher on recess duty huddles deep inside her coat and watches over their boisterous play.

Inside, a quieter buzz prevails. A few students move through the hallways, chatting quietly with adults or with each other. A low hum emits from nearby
classrooms. There’s a sense of orderly energy in the building. Children and adults make friendly eye contact with visitors, and strike up conversation readily. It’s a comfortable place, a place where folks clearly feel at home.

That sense of being “at home” can be found other places in town, as well. There’s a regular morning get-together at a local coffee shop, where a regular crowd that is mostly male and mostly retired gets together to swap fishing stories. On the day I visit, one of the fellows has brought in the results of some Internet research about the dental structure of the Northern Pike, and they are passing around the printed pages and discussing their latest ice-fishing escapades. When I lead the conversation toward Smallwood’s schools, they are more than willing to follow me, segueing easily and enthusiastically to the new topic.

In fact, though a hearty range of opinions are freely tendered to me during this and every visit to Smallwood, one aspect of my interactions remains constant. Each and every Smallwood resident responds to me with unfailing courtesy and a remarkable sense of openness. I suppose I had expected a bit more wariness upon introducing myself as a student doing research related to their school and community. But while some appear a little cautious at the beginning of our encounters, most are frank, outspoken, and easy to talk to. They seem to be perfectly comfortable with my questions. And they have answers aplenty.
Challenges to School Sustainability in Smallwood

I asked community members to identify challenges to the sustainability of Smallwood’s schools, and to describe solutions to these challenges. Several themes quickly emerged. These themes are in many ways interrelated; their overlapping aspects make them somewhat difficult to isolate and refine. Threads of one challenge may easily be discerned within the patterns of another. Each challenge is more meaningful when considered as part of the larger fabric of school/community relationship of which it is an integral part.

With that caveat, it is possible to separate these themes adequately to allow for analysis. However, the solutions proposed for each challenge prove inextricable from the discussion. Indeed the challenges and the solutions appear to be two sides of the same coin; what one community member might see as part of the challenge, another might view as part of the solution. Therefore, the discussion of each challenge incorporates community perspectives on solutions.

The challenge of consolidation.

The issue of consolidation sparks a great deal of commentary among community members. Clearly, this is an issue that Smallwood residents have thought about for quite some time. This is perhaps unsurprising, since consolidation has historically been the primary solution to declining rural school enrollments. Less than 100 years ago, there were over 3,000 school districts in Montana; today there are
fewer than 500 (Bryant, 1999). Smallwood residents, though not conversant with these specific numbers, nonetheless are aware of the trends they describe. Many of them are long time Montana residents and have witnessed the combination of small schools into larger ones in communities where they grew up, or in communities where friends and family members reside. The concept of consolidation is a familiar one.

However, while community members all speak knowledgeably about consolidation, their views differ widely; and no one with whom I spoke holds the view that consolidation is a choice to be eagerly embraced. Even those who argue in favor of the notion do so with caveats and acknowledgement of the potential negative impacts. However, the people in Smallwood are nothing if not pragmatic, and the consensus seems to be that consolidation could and should not be ruled out of the discussion simply because it may be unpalatable.

Among those who find some aspects of consolidation to be desirable, especially at the secondary level, is Roger Stample, a retired Smallwood educator:

I don’t think we’ve really looked at all the options yet. I mean, we have all these administrators in the county. I don’t see why we couldn’t at least share those, even if we kept the schools the way they are.

Tom Burris, a retired postal worker, supported this proposal but explained why it would be difficult to implement:
Nobody wants to give up their turf...It reminds me of when I was in the post office, and we tried to get some of these little country routes to consolidate. Instead of going out and back from each post office on all these different routes, we could’ve had a guy start in one place and make a loop and cover several routes. But, oh boy, that was a fight because nobody wanted to give up their routes. It’s just the same with these superintendents.

While the administrators in Smallwood’s schools certainly do not seem eager to give up their positions to consolidation, they acknowledge that more sharing between districts can be valuable. In one example of such sharing, administrator Jim Hudson worked hard to join a nearby curriculum consortium. At first thwarted in his efforts to join (the consortium was not interested in expanding) Hudson had begun investigating the possibility of developing his own, bringing together a number of independent districts throughout his county and a neighboring county. Just as this plan was beginning to gel, Smallwood was invited to join the existing consortium. Hudson explains:

This is a very good thing for our district, to share resources...Every district has its own independence, kind of like the confederacy of the US. They wanted to have their independence but still have the advantages of numbers. [Each of us] can pick and choose how much ...to participate in any initiative...[We’re able
to] pull off the shelf products that the consortium had made and use them or not use them as we wished, and that seemed to work pretty well.

Clearly, the idea of pooling limited resources to accomplish school goals is welcomed, at least up to a point. Administrator Jan Reynolds prefers to talk about cooperation as an alternative to consolidation:

You’ve got two “C” words in education: consolidation and cooperation. If you start talking about consolidation you conjure up that we’re losing our school, our community identity, our team and those kinds of things. Parents that have lived there for awhile, they’re not going to let that happen. I do think we’re going to have to do more cooperation kinds of things to keep our doors open. As demands on our budget increase...we’re going to have to do more with less.

The super in Walton [a community less than 20 miles south] is a good friend, and we see the benefits in working together to share an instructor or incorporate some of their kids. I mean, how do you have a band with five or six students? So we can share on some things like that, but then we have the logistical issues. Do we send an instructor over there? Bus students out here?
There are some possibilities there, but they have more to do with maximizing what we offer the kids. They won’t save a dime because of transportation costs. It’s more about maximizing facilities in both communities.

There are, however, differing opinions about where to draw the line between cooperation and consolidation. Some community members think it makes sense to combine the middle school and high school with those in Walton. They propose keeping the middle school in Smallwood and busing high school students to Walton, or vice-versa. Even Jan Reynolds is willing to consider this eventuality, should enrollments continue to drop. As Jack Ruston, a shopkeeper, explains:

We’re pretty close together. Heck, some kids from here go to school up there now, and some kids from there come down here. I think the towns would get used to it. They could have some sports games here and some there since both towns have facilities. I think people would drive, and come out to support the kids just as much. It would take some time to get used to, but it might be worth considering.

Tom Burris agrees, noting that good roads and better cars have changed the realities of getting around Montana:

When I was a kid, it was hard to go anywhere, especially in the winter time. I mean, just going ten or 20 miles was tough. The roads were bad, sometimes
not even paved. But now, we’ve got these good highways, we don’t think anything of driving. We used to think of Walton as being far away, but now it’s close.

Stample, the retired educator, also concurs:

It wasn’t that long ago that when our basketball team had to play in Goldsburg, we’d have to spend the night. And that’s what, 120 miles away? Now the kids hop on the bus and do that trip, play the game, come home—nothing to it.

Other community members point out some complicating factors. Many of Smallwood’s students do not live in town. They already face lengthy bus rides to school. Bus rides for these students would be upwards of 30 miles each way, over roads that, while good, are still icy and treacherous on many winter days. And it’s clear that saving money is the major objective of those willing to lend their cautious support to consolidation plans of any stripe. Should it become apparent, as Reynolds contends, that such a plan would not result in substantial savings, this tentative support would almost certainly evaporate.

Many community members are adamantly opposed to any form of consolidation that would have students of any age leaving Smallwood. These are willing to consider consolidation only if the students from Walton all came to
Smallwood. Several community members made the argument that Smallwood, as the larger and more central town with more amenities, should be location for any consolidated schools. Agnes Johnson, a healthcare worker makes the case:

We have room for them. We could take them in and still not even be close to full. I don't think our kids should go there. They're smaller and our facilities are newer, bigger too. That doesn't make sense, for our kids to go there.

No one with whom I spoke was in favor of any arrangement that would take the elementary students out of the community. Even those who were supportive of some configuration combining Smallwood and Walton at the middle and high school levels instantly rejected the notion of closing either elementary school. "No way," said Jack Ruston, in a typical commentary on the matter. "Those little ones has got to stay close to home."

Rosie Malcolm, a smoky-voiced and straight-talking business woman, goes farther:

No consolidation. No, I'm against that. I think it would just take too much away from the community if our kids were to leave here. It's not just the social part, but the jobs, too. The school is one of the bigger employers around here. We shouldn't let go of those jobs, or that idea—of having our own school. And Walton shouldn't have to give up their schools, either. That's too
important to any community. It would just be too depressing without the schools.

Angela, a cheerful young woman holding down the teller counter at the town’s bank, agrees:

The school is very important. We get together at the games, it’s our whole social life here. It’s too far to Walton and they want to keep their own schools, too. No, it’s not a good idea at all to even consider consolidation. The community revolves around the school!

*The challenge of economic distress.*

The economic distress of the community is widely understood to be a major challenge to the health and vitality of the schools in Smallwood. Like many other small communities in Montana—indeed like much of the whole state—Smallwood lacks major employers. Previously dependent upon extraction industries, Smallwood struggles to stay afloat in today’s new economic reality.

When asked to identify the primary challenge facing Smallwood schools, Frank Burke, a former rancher and small business owner, responds with a laugh:

It’s the economy. We don’t have one. I don’t think we’ll ever get another saw mill in here, or anything like that. So there’s just no jobs, no money. No young families cause they can’t make a living.
This assessment is ubiquitous in the community and is a source of frustration. Many view the restrictions against the responsible use of natural resources with resentment that verges into anger. They note with some passion that everybody in the country utilizes products made from the raw materials of the earth and forest. Indeed, the extraction of these essential materials historically provided this community with good jobs, jobs which were a source of pride as well as paychecks. Without the ability to utilize these resources, the community feels somewhat helpless. Administrator Jan Reynolds describes it this way:

I was sickened [recently] when a federal judge with all the power of a king ruled that we can’t use our resources. We can’t employ our people. What do we do? Do we move away? Is that what we would be asked to do? Just pack up and move away? I don’t think that’s practical. It’s not a realistic solution, and it’s not right.

While everyone seems to agree that jobs are needed, few have constructive ideas for how to bring these jobs to the community. Some community members report that some of the community’s small businesses enjoy stability and provide employment for a few locals. However, they note that the town has lost several stores in recent years, as people have become more comfortable commuting an hour to a
larger town or two hours in the opposite direction to a small city where more choice is available.

Other community members report the existence of a few home-based Internet businesses or suggest that service occupations, especially those related to the increasing need for elder care, might provide some additional employment. But these suggestions are acknowledged to be somewhat piecemeal or stopgap measures that will not provide the kind of stability and security craved by this community.

Rosie Malcolm issues a challenge to the county commissioners, noting that, in her estimation, they fail to take action needed to attract jobs:

Those commissioners, they just don’t want to see anything change. Like, there was a fast food place that wanted to come in here, and some of the younger people were in favor of it. It would mean some jobs, and also the families with kids would’ve liked it. But no, the commissioners turned that down. And we had a company that made some kind of computer chips or something looking to maybe put a little plant in here, and they shot that down, too.

At this point, Rosie makes a disgusted face and shakes her head before continuing:

They’re old, and they need to get out of the way. They just want to keep everything the same, but that is ridiculous because we need jobs. We need a way to make a living.
The challenge of declining enrollment.

Roger Stample notes that the decline in Smallwood’s economy is related to a change in demographics. With few young families in residence, the population is aging; children are scarce:

I remember, when my kids were going to school here, you could look all up and down the road and in every house there were three or four kids going to school. Now, I bet there’s hardly three or four on the whole street.

Administrator Jan Reynolds explains that there are several factors that contribute to the lack of children in the community:

It’s not just that we have too few young families. The ones we do have are having fewer kids. Not long ago we’d see families with five or six or even ten kids. Not any more. Now a family of five is a real big family. You’re just not seeing the population in the primary grades. And that’s not all. We see that young couples are waiting longer to have children. There’s this uncertainty with the economy, so they’re waiting.

These trends toward smaller families later in life have obvious impacts on the number of students in Smallwood’s schools.

Teacher Ann Wells reports that some of Smallwood’s students do stay in the community after graduating and that some return after college, drawn by the attractiveness of the lifestyle. But she agrees, if Smallwood wants to keep more of its
young people, jobs are imperative. Rosie Malcolm sums up the importance to the community of increasing the number of families with children:

Our community has a lot to offer, and there are some people who want to try new things. We need to get some jobs, keep some families, get some families to move here. It would help the tax base. That would be the best thing for the schools, too.

*The challenge of recruiting and retaining teachers.*

The community members interviewed did not identify recruiting and retaining teachers as a challenge facing Smallwood schools. They generally agreed that the teachers at the schools are caring, competent individuals who work hard and do a good job. Many, they pointed out, are long-time residents of Smallwood who have taught for many years, sometimes for decades.

Administrator Jan Reynolds agrees that maintaining a high quality teaching staff is not one of her larger concerns, but recognizes the potential for recruitment and retention of highly qualified teachers to become problematic, particularly in light of changing rules and methods for certification of teachers. She notes that, currently, turnover is rare among her faculty:

We have people who came here a long time ago, and they stayed, as husband and wife teams. Once you put down roots like that, you become geographically bound. You’re going to be here for awhile.
Reynolds believes that teachers make this commitment largely because of the perceived high quality of life in Smallwood, a condition that includes strong support for teachers and education in general. Administrator Jim Hudson adds that Smallwood schools offer educators opportunities to practice their craft in an environment that encourages professional growth and responsibility. There is a high level of confidence and energy that seems to permeate the school culture in this town; this can hardly be lost on prospective teacher candidates. Smallwood is without question an attractive place to teach, and this no doubt helps with the recruiting process. As Reynolds explains:

The people that want to teach here are not chasing the big bucks...They’re looking for the intrinsic value of working with kids, working with parents, being active in the community.

However, Reynolds does acknowledge that this comfortable condition may soon be challenged. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) requires that all teachers be certified in all subjects they teach by school year 2005-2006. Currently, Reynolds is confident that all Smallwood teachers meet these requirements. But she is keenly aware that this compliance is fragile. Should these requirements be extended to teachers of subject areas in grades six, seven, and eight where general elementary licensure is currently acceptable, Reynolds knows she will have difficulty finding the teachers she needs:
We have one area that we haven’t totally resolved for next year. We have a teacher who is retired who is helping us out by coming back part time. We’re going to have to resolve that [by finding a qualified teacher]. We’re going to have a problem in the middle school if they ratchet up the requirements for NCLB and they have to be specialists in those areas for junior high, that will hurt.

Similarly, should several secondary teachers decide to retire at the same time, or decide to move in pursuit of better pay, Reynolds knows she could find herself in a jam. But she has one other ace up her sleeve:

The other thing we benefit from is students that grow up here, go...get an education and then want to return here because of the quality of life. So we’ve been pretty successful at growing our own teachers in a number of instances.

Overall, Reynolds views the recruiting and retention of high quality teachers as a potential challenge, but not one that currently sits at the top of her list of priorities.

*The challenge of disintegrating social fabric.*

Several community members—including all of the school personnel interviewed—identified the disintegration of the family as one of the important challenges facing Smallwood schools. Some community members reported serious
difficulties with behavior problems, drug and alcohol abuse, and eroding social mores. They note that a growing number of children live in single-parent households.

Administrator Jim Hudson has a lot to say about this topic:

[A challenge that is almost] overwhelming for us is the degeneration of the family unit. The fact is that families oftentimes don’t know how to raise kids anymore. The parents themselves don’t have the social skills incorporated in themselves to be role models for their kids. Then we deal with these problems when they come to school. We don’t have any grace period, we can have problems right down to the very beginning of kindergarten. It’s not just academics, that the kids haven’t been read to and don’t even know how to open a book. They don’t have social skills, know how to treat each other, how to say thank you, how to apologize. We’re still coaching junior high kids on how to do those things. We’ve always had a segment of our population like that, but it’s growing through my 24 years as an educator. [W]e’re not protected from those changes in society.

Will Turner, proprietor of a local restaurant and spouse of an elementary school teacher, agrees:

The families don’t know how to act, how to raise the kids. You just can’t believe what my wife has to deal with. She had to take a knife from a little kid one day, a five year old! Really. The problems are bad. We have to deal with
fetal alcohol [syndrome], crack babies, all that stuff. You would think we wouldn’t have that out here, but we do. And it’s a big, big problem....

These sentiments are echoed throughout the community. No one has a clear idea about the source of these problems; some feel that they are a byproduct of the difficult socioeconomic conditions in the community, others that they are a reflection of larger cultural breakdowns. But all agree that the problems are serious and persistent.

The school takes an active role in trying to assuage some of the hurt. Jim Hudson described a committee at his school, the “Human Responsibility” committee, which takes a leadership role in directing school efforts to help students learn socially appropriate ways of interacting. This committee is made up of teachers and community members (one of whom is a certified counselor) who meet regularly to develop goals and plans for teaching students about such matters as conflict resolution, resistance to drug and alcohol abuse, and the rules of simple courtesy. Hudson is quick to point out that many students in the school do have appropriate home support and instruction, but that the percentage needing help with the basic tenets of civil behavior is growing. He is equally quick to note that school personnel are gratified with the difference they make in the lives of some students:

We think because we’re smaller, and our class sizes are smaller we think we’re able to work with those kids and have many of them become successful
citizens. We don’t lose as many through the cracks. It’s not just Montana, you’ll see similar statistics in other rural areas such as North and South Dakota and Wyoming. We have higher graduation rates and higher test scores, however you want to test our kids. I think its because, being smaller, we just don’t lose as many through the cracks.

Hudson gazes into space for a moment, then adds quietly:

Though there are some kids here that are kicking and screaming, wanting to be dropped through the cracks. We really have some like that. It’s a struggle. It’s really sad.

Julie Ripplefield, a retiree and long-time community member thinks changing societal norms are to blame:

There are so many problems with divorce and not raising kids right. The parents drink and act up and so it’s not a wonder when the kids act up too. It just seems like there’s not a standard anymore. When I was in school, we just all did what we were supposed to do. I mean there wasn’t any choice. If you acted up, you got paddled at school and then you’d get paddled worse at home. All the adults were united about what they expected and they didn’t put up with any guff. Now those kids get in trouble and the parents come running and get mad at the school. That does not make any sense to me.
Jan Reynolds concurs that the family institution is eroding, and that the results are evident in her student population. But she strikes a more optimistic note:

We do have those problems, yes. But I think because we are a more conservative community we tend to tolerate less. [People here] are more inclined, if they see kids or sometimes even parents doing something [wrong], they’ll say, “What you’re doing is not right.” They’ll take a stand. Not that we want to force values on someone, but because the rural nature of the community seems to provide a forum to try to introduce some of those values of hard work, and ethics, and honesty.... We’re blessed with a large number of students that really understand the difference between right and wrong, and that helps because it gives a model for the other kids. They kind of show the way.

The challenge of funding.

Of course, no discussion of school sustainability can very well escape a discussion of funding. And while money is a thread that runs through the conversations about all the challenges described, it deserves consideration on its own merits.

Budgeting is difficult for all schools, but several factors conspire to exacerbate budget woes for small schools. Most obviously, budgets are small. Traditional
funding approaches that rely on per pupil formulas are problematic for districts where a shift of even a few students can wreak havoc on staffing decisions. For example, in a school where there is only one teacher for each grade level, a loss of a few students may seem to justify a staff reduction. But in order to eliminate a teacher, grade level configurations may have to be radically redesigned. Further, there are many fixed costs associated with simply keeping the facilities open. Closing one classroom would not represent a substantial savings on maintenance or energy costs. Jan Reynolds gives an analogy:

You watch enrollment go down, and this is what drives me crazy, because if you lose 20 kids people say, “Why can’t you cut a teacher?” The best analogy that I ever heard is this. Suppose you had a family of ten kids, and one goes out to college, does that mean you’ll automatically have ten per cent less in electricity costs, ten per cent less in food bills? No, you don’t even notice it. Reynolds identifies funding as perhaps the primary challenge facing Smallwood schools:

We need stable, sustainable funding. If you can’t count on the dollars that you’re going to have to operate within some reasonable expectation it makes it very difficult to plan. I see that as a big challenge: some way of having a more even approach to school funding so there isn’t so much fluctuation.
Elizabeth Martin, a parent and school board member agrees that stable funding is important to the future of Smallwood schools. She reports that the board has just voted to lay off a teacher for next year, due to the declining enrollment in the lower grades:

I hate the fact that we are going to have to lay off [Miss Fletcher] next year. She’s really good. I was really happy when we got her to come here. Now we’re going to lose her and she’s one of our best teachers. We really need to have funding we can count on.

In terms of local funding, Reynolds, Hudson, and Martin agree that the community is extremely generous and supportive toward the schools. Over the years, the community has consistently supported school bonds and mil levies. Most recently, voters approved a mil levy to support technology needs at the schools, a development that Hudson describes as “cool.” But, he cautions, the community cannot be expected to dig much deeper:

The board is considering another levy this year, a general fund of $25,000-$35,000. That number sounds so piddly to everybody else, but being that the tax base is small and the tax burden is so big... It will be the talk of the town, whether that will be something we should support or not.
Teacher Ann Wells echoes the sentiment that the community is generous in its support of the schools. She notes that businesses in the community donate goods and services:

They support things all the time. They donate food for the wrestling team, for visiting teams. They sponsor the yearbook and student of the month. I think it would be hard to ask them to do more.

Likewise, she notes that individual community members give a great deal:

The community supports our levies. And the kids go out and sell things, you know, and people help that way. But our community is a lot of retired people. They can’t afford for us to keep raising their taxes.

Members of the community agree. While they are very vocal in their support of Smallwood schools, they also feel the pinch of high taxes. The county assessor reports that the Smallwood school district mil levies fall in the middle of the pack when compared to other districts in the county; the burden borne by this community is similar to others nearby and across the state. Statewide, per capita income is about three quarters of the national average. And since Montana has no general sales tax, property and income taxes form the primary sources of revenue. As a result, the direct tax burden on individuals in Montana exceeds that in neighboring states (Montana Tax Structure is Like a Stool Missing a Leg, 2003). As one community member put
it, “Most people in Montana feel like they are taxed enough and then some.” Another said it more succinctly: “We’re maxed out.”

The challenge of federal mandates.

Community members are quite aware of the interplay between federal rules and regulations and local school policies. Several reference the No Child Left Behind legislation specifically, as an example of a federal mandate that they find unrealistic and unfair. Teacher Ann Wells voices her frustration about the mismatch between the federal requirements embodied in NCLB and the realities she sees in her classroom every day:

They tell us that each child should have the same outcome. But how can that be? They don’t come to us with the same starting point. Some of them have very serious needs, they haven’t been read to or exposed to opportunities to learn. They end up low enough to be in special ed. I don’t know if it’s from drugs or whatever. But saying “no child left behind” and we’re going to make them all normal, that isn’t smart. If they don’t have an adequate ability we can’t just automatically catch them up, no matter how well we teach.

This dedicated teacher does believe that the school could take a more effective role in addressing these problems. She advocates full-day kindergarten as a place to begin. She would also like to see a preschool program in place. She believes that early intervention is the key to making a difference:
I think a full day kindergarten and/or preschool, would help those families. The children from families that aren’t getting enough books at home, going to kindergarten all day would help. They need parenting classes from birth, to get off on the right track. Those things make the most sense to me, because the younger you can help a child the better.

But, she quickly adds, the district cannot afford to provide these programs from its already-strained budget, and the state only provides for half-day kindergarten programs. The community, she notes, provides tremendous support to the school financially and also through volunteer efforts. She believes that community members cannot be reasonably expected to provide more, even for early intervention programs that she passionately believes in.

And Jan Reynolds points out a related difficulty. She notes that the turnover among Smallwood students is very high, in the vicinity of 30 percent per year. If Smallwood chose to make it a priority to fund full day kindergarten or a preschool class, it would almost certainly help the affected children. But in another twist of No Child Left Behind legislation, these efforts might not be evident in the results achieved by Smallwood students in their tests of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), tests which are part of the accountability built into NCLB. Reynolds wonders if devoting resources to early intervention makes sense when the students who will be tested down the line are not the students who had these opportunities:
Does it make any sense to do [early intervention] and then those kids leave you and [you’re then] held accountable for still another set of kids that come in that may not have had the same benefits and the same educational program.

This is not simply a rhetorical matter. Administrators understand that they face penalties should their students fail to meet the established AYP goals. They must think hard about how best to allocate scarce resources in order to meet expectations. They worry, also, about the growing population of special education students and how their performance may impact assessments of Adequate Yearly Progress. Reynolds muses:

I have a large enough population of special education students that did not make AYP in some area. Is it fair to further stigmatize special education students by saying that Smallwood schools didn’t make AYP because those special needs kids didn’t do well on the tests? I don’t think so.

Even though Montana students—including most of Smallwood’s students—historically perform well on all standardized measures, the pressure of these mandates is intense, Jim Hudson reports:

Our students do well, but now that we have the NCLB initiative, even being on the top isn’t going to be good enough. We really want to leave NO child behind, that’s another thing that’s been pushed onto us.
Will Turner agrees, noting that teachers are expected to help all students achieve while finding a limited array of strategies at their disposal:

We have these federal mandates being shoved down our throats, that say every child has to have the exact same thing, so the teachers are spending all their time with the low ones and they're having all these behavior problems and they don’t have time to teach. It didn’t used to be like that. If there was kids misbehaving you could throw them out of school. But now there’s nothing the teachers can do. They’re hands are tied. They’re not allowed to discipline the kids at all.

It is evident that this community really believes in the traditional value of local control of their schools. They resent the imposition of regulations devised by distant bureaucrats. Community members commonly described these mandates as being “pushed” and “shoved” onto their community. Jim Hudson explains:

Montana in a lot of ways resents the mandates that are coming down from the federal government. If we wanted to relieve ourselves of their funding, they would leave us alone. It’s left up to the states—sort of. But the federal government has figured out a way to get the states to do what it wants. They say, “You can have this money, but you are going to have to do things our
way.” So Montana grudgingly, very grudgingly, is moving along in the way the feds want us to go.

Jan Reynolds sums up the feelings of the community about this issue:

With No Child Left Behind, when those mandates were sent down, they were really thinking about the typical urban situation. It’s a very different situation. That’s where the feds don’t understand rural Montana.

It’s exactly the opposite of local control when you mandate from the federal government and the funding that comes via the feds is tied to requirements and then it comes through the state and there are state requirements and then it comes down to the local folks who really have no say. And we’re the ones who know the kids.

*The challenge of maintaining high quality educational programs.*

This challenge, like that of recruiting and retaining highly qualified teachers, is identified primarily by school personnel. Community members at large seem confident in the quality of the school and commitment of educators to maintain this high quality. The school staff is adamant in its assertions that the school must maintain its high standing within the community, and that this can best be accomplished by continually striving to improve the quality of education provided.
This proactive stance has resulted in a comprehensive school improvement effort in recent years.

One element of this effort involved a grant-funded curriculum overhaul. Hudson and others in the school wrote and obtained the grant as part of the Goals 2000 initiative. With the help of consultants, the faculty reviewed and revised numerous areas of the curriculum. This was a completely new process for those involved. As Jim Hudson, one of the administrators, explained:

For the first time, we really did write curriculum...In the past curriculum work for us was shopping around for a textbook series and that’s basically what it meant. When I was asked to write down the curriculum for my biology class...so that we could have some kind of a handbook, a community handbook, I kind of went through the chapters of the textbook.

Recognizing that they needed help, the faculty reached out for funding and for expert assistance:

Even though we had lots of experience as educators, we really needed some guidance from outside to even know what to do. We employed a [consultant] who acts in just such a role. [She helped us] to get started the right way doing the school improvement process, writing curriculum, connecting to standards, setting up assessments. For the first time we had some resources to pay teachers to do some work in the summer for a couple of weeks to do some soul searching about what were the important, we called them essential
learnings, things that we wanted students to know and be able to do when they come out of a particular grade level.

Mr. Hudson’s pride in this process was evident. There could be no doubting his conviction that these efforts had made a substantial contribution to the improvement of Smallwood’s schools. He was genuinely enthusiastic about the changes and optimistic that improvement would continue:

At the beginning some of the teachers were saying this [school improvement effort] is a fad that will pass...and the whole thing will go away and we’ll go back to our old routines. I don’t think that’s happened. I think now most people really believe this is a good thing to do. And we’re still moving forward at a sustainable pace.

For Jim Hudson, sustaining his school means improving his school; there can be no resting on laurels. He articulates his belief that maintaining and extending the high quality of Smallwood’s schools is critical to their survival for two primary reasons. First and foremost, he knows that the continued support of the community is essential. The willingness of the small, poor community to shoulder a large tax burden in support of its schools is impressive and humbling to Hudson. As a result, he takes to heart his responsibility to make sure that the school is the best it can be. And
he believes that this mission is never accomplished; rather he believes that the goal of his leadership is to continually seek ways to improve.

This dedication, he hopes, enhances the community's positive vision of the school. And he believes that this vision further serves the community by helping to attract new residents:

When newcomers come to this town, the first thing they want to know is,

"What the schools are like?" [We are] attracting people because of what we have here.

Community members play an important role in maintaining the quality of the schools. Community members serve on the "Human Responsibility" committee and many times contribute time and energy directly to students. Retirees come in to tutor students who need one-on-one instruction. Parents devote tremendous amounts of time and energy to extracurricular activities, helping to extend the range of experiences available to students. Jim Hudson gives two examples:

Just in the last couple of months, our upper grade girls formed a dance team. Anybody who wanted could join. And that's being coached by two parents who are active in the community but they're not employed by the school and a teacher is also helping. It's kind of like pre-cheerleading and the girls are having a ball. They did their first performance at the halftime of the boys last basketball home game, and the gym was packed! This kind of thing is so
important, because we are too far from any city for most kids to be able to access this kind of thing.

Then we have a fifth and sixth grade boys’ basketball team. We had a parent couple volunteer. They took the whole thing into their hands, ran the whole program.

School administrators are profoundly grateful for this kind of assistance. They frequently reiterated their understanding of the importance of the school to the community and their awareness that many students rely on the school to provide more than academic instruction. For many students and families the school is the center of social life, the primary provider of recreation opportunities, and a source of stability and emotional support.

Teacher Ann Wells describes some of the ways the community and school interact to make this possible:

We have after school programs, adult ed classes. We’re real open to community members using the gym. The more of that the better.

These educators welcome a vital relationship with the community. They realize that if they are to be successful in their complex endeavors they will need the continued help and support of community members. They constantly strive to
improve and strengthen their institution in the effort to meet the needs of students and families in their community.

Summary

The Smallwood community overwhelmingly identifies six important challenges to the sustainability of their schools: consolidation, declining enrollment, economic distress, disintegrating social fabric, unrealistic federal mandates, and inadequate funding. Two additional challenges, maintaining high educational quality and, to a lesser extent, recruiting and retaining qualified teachers were identified primarily by school personnel.

The consensus among community members is that Smallwood’s schools are central to the identity of the community and that the community, overall, supports and respects the schools, administrators, and teachers. Further, the community views itself as active in this support, providing resources of time and money to the schools. In most cases, where dissatisfaction exists, it is identified as lying outside the realm of the school, with other institutions such as an out-of-touch federal bureaucracy or a dysfunctional family structure.

Community members acknowledged a strong sense of responsibility for their schools and described their ongoing efforts to meet the challenges facing their schools. The meanings and implications of their experiences are examined in Chapter Five.
CHAPTER V
INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION

Introduction

The intent of this study was to obtain an understanding of the challenges to rural school sustainability from the perspective of one small Montana community. Some of the challenges that community members identified aligned with the extant literature on the topic of rural school sustainability: consolidation, declining enrollment, inadequate funding, distressed economic conditions, and unrealistic federal mandates. Others were less predictable: disintegration of rural families, and the powerful awareness of the need to maintain high quality school programs. One challenge outlined in the literature—the difficulty recruiting and retaining teachers in rural Montana schools—was of peripheral concern.

The generous responses of community members regarding these various challenges provided me with a rich palette of detail from which to construct a comprehensible if not comprehensive explanation of the phenomenon of perceived threats to school sustainability in Smallwood, Montana. I assert that the study is not comprehensive in the sense that no such undertaking can ever be complete. Because we are dealing with a human endeavor, the phenomenon is always evolving and
dynamic. There is no place at which the study can empirically be said to be finished. After all, one could always find new community members to interview, or obtain new insights from past participants. This effort does not yield a hard-edged, brightly delineated, photographic rendition of reality. Rather, a study such as this one more closely resembles a mosaic than a photograph. When you step back from a mosaic, even if there are a few missing tesserae, it is easy to discern the content of the picture; the meaning is clear. This is surely a case where the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

As I examined and synthesized the myriad perspectives of community members toward these various challenges, several important interpretations emerged from the mosaic of opinion, perception, emotion, and observation they provided. These findings supply answers to the research questions posed at the outset of this study:

What solutions do members of a rural Montana community envision to address the threats to the sustainability of their local schools? More specifically:

1. The literature on sustainability of rural schools identifies several threats to the survival of these schools. These threats include:
   - difficulty in recruiting and retaining highly qualified teachers
   - declining population in the community and out-migration of youth
   - pressures to consolidate with other districts
How do community members perceive these threats? What other threats might they identify?

2. What solutions, if any, might they envision for their schools?

3. How do community members perceive the roles of institutions such as state and federal government and schools of education in helping to sustain their schools?

4. How do community members perceive their own roles in helping to sustain their schools?

Hopefully, the answers embodied in these essential understandings also serve to draw attention to and promote conversation about the problems facing rural Montana communities as they struggle to keep their schools alive and thriving.

Essential Understandings

The purpose of this study was to uncover the attitudes and visions of one rural Montana community as it confronts challenges to the sustainability of its schools. It is in such communities that the actual, ongoing effort of supporting and sustaining small schools takes place. It is in such communities that 4 in 10 Montana children are nurtured and educated. The experiences and perceptions of community members may provide critical illumination on the problem of school sustainability and the process of coping effectively with this problem. These experiences and perceptions coalesce into the following understandings.
The community identifies a consistent and cohesive set of challenges related to sustainability of their schools. There is widespread agreement throughout the community on six of the eight challenges identified. These are consolidation, declining enrollment, distressed economic conditions, disintegrating social fabric, unrealistic federal mandates, and inadequate funding. The remaining two challenges—difficulty recruiting and retaining qualified teachers and maintaining high quality educational programs—relate more specifically to the internal workings of the school as an institution than to its interaction with the community and were identified by educators but not by the community at large.

Not only are these six challenges consistently identified by community members from all walks of life, but relationships between these challenges seem well understood. For example, community members draw parallels between the distressed economy in their community and related strains on healthy family function. They recognize the connections between federal mandates and funding that never quite seems to materialize to support those mandates. They know that their decline in student population is related to the economic difficulties their community is facing, and realize that consolidation is a consequence that may evolve from these associated conditions. They are keenly aware of the constellation of issues confronting their schools and comprehend the complex relationships between them. While many of them may not have been familiar with the term “rural school sustainability” prior to
this study, they are intimately and intuitively familiar with the concepts encompassed by the term.

*The community takes seriously its perceived responsibilities toward the schools.* Community members' attitudes toward Smallwood schools are overwhelmingly positive. Many community members cite the consistency with which school tax levies pass in this community. It seems to be a point of pride with several community members that a community with such a small tax base should willingly shoulder additional tax burdens on behalf of the schools. This is not to suggest that high taxes are of no concern, but rather that community members believe that support for their community's children is an item of overriding importance. While they are conscious of the need to expand the tax base and to be cost-effective in meeting the needs of the schools, they also manifest visible satisfaction in their history of positive response to the schools' requests for financial support.

Community members describe additional avenues of community support for the schools. Many community members contribute to student fundraising efforts for extracurricular activities or sponsor such activities with donations of time and money. The elementary school enjoys a volunteer tutoring program which is extensive enough to warrant the services of a part-time, paid coordinator.

Community members acknowledge the centrality of the schools to the social life of the community. They assert the value of sports and school activities for the
community as well as for the students. They acknowledge, for example, that basketball games represent a chance for friends and neighbors to get together and discuss the issues of the day or share personal news. At the same time, they describe their attendance at these events as "coming out to support the kids." They easily recognize the mutual benefits that accrue from this relationship between community and school, and seem to embrace with pleasure their obligations toward the continuance of that relationship.

The community demonstrates a limited sense of empowerment regarding their ability to find solutions to perceived challenges. Community members, especially those most closely involved with the schools, express confidence in their abilities to meet the educational needs of students in their community. These educators describe their ongoing efforts to improve curricular offerings, enhance professional growth and development opportunities, and maximize physical, technological, and human resources in the effort to provide optimal learning experiences and environments for students. They express a more cautious confidence in their ability to meet the social and emotional needs of their students.

While they acknowledge the real constraints of limited budgets, they view themselves as competent to work effectively to serve students within these fiscal limitations. This sense of competence is most evident in areas where educators and involved community members have a clear sense of empowerment, areas which
encompass the internal workings of the schools. For example, they proactively obtain
grants to fund specific school improvement efforts, form committees to achieve goals
of enhancing social skills and competencies among students, and look for multiple
ways to expand the pool of available resources, such as joining in a curriculum
cooperative with nearby districts.

However, this group appears to feel significantly less empowered when faced
with more external or structural issues related to schooling. Their vision of schooling
is based on traditional features such as age-normed elementary grade levels and a
departmentalized secondary program. Where numbers are too small to support these
structures, suggested solutions tend to cluster around combining with nearby schools
to increase numbers of students, thereby sustaining the structures rather than creating
innovative structures.

In one example, it was noted that a school cannot sponsor a band with only
five interested students. The solution proffered for that hypothetical case was to
combine band programs with another school. Certainly, a traditional school band
program would not be appropriate for a handful of students. However, alternative
approaches to music education for such a small group might include creating a jazz
combo instead of a marching band, or asking local residents with musical abilities to
offer piano or guitar lessons to students.

In another instance, community members were asked to offer ideas for
working with students to develop the kinds of entrepreneurial skills they would need
to create their own jobs within the community. Community members seemed somewhat at a loss, describing an existing job shadowing program as the only model they could imagine. Possibly because entrepreneurship is not a traditional subject in high school, the notion lacks an experiential foundation for community members. Ideas for coping with many challenges seem to be limited to conventional solutions, as if community members somehow do not feel comfortable advocating—or perhaps even considering—novel responses to these challenges. Educators in this community note constant concerns with meeting state and federal regulations and maintaining accreditation standards, concerns which no doubt contribute to the tendency to conform to traditional notions of schooling imposed by outside institutions as well as longstanding tradition.

Community members, on the whole, are uncertain about the potential for governmental and other institutions to better serve the needs of their schools. They are keenly aware of their dependence upon these institutions and welcome any assistance that is forthcoming; they have successfully sought grants and used the monies to address past problems, and have partnered with the University of Montana on occasion. Those community members most actively involved in the schools—administrators and school board members—ably articulate their desires for additional help from these institutions, but seem to have little hope that their voices will be heard or their requests granted.
In spite of the challenges they face, the community is optimistic about the future of their schools. When asked to envision the state of their schools in five to ten years, all community members expressed confidence that their schools would “still be here.” The idea that this community might someday be without a school is obviously unimaginable to this community. Community members acknowledge that their schools might be smaller in the future, but they have a view of their community as tenacious and important, and seem assured about its continued survival. Although they emphatically acknowledge their concerns about the community’s economic health and future, there is a consensus that the community has a small but vital core of businesses and services that will see it through.

This optimism may be based on one part fact and three parts determination, but even so it bodes well for the community and its schools. These individuals demonstrate a high level of commitment to their community and to their schools. They are pragmatic about the challenges they face, but they refuse to be overwhelmed or cowed by them. It is evident that they cherish their community and the lives they live within it. The positive attitude they bring to the task of sustaining their schools may be the most important factor in their success.
Implications for further research

The information that emerges from this study points to several areas where additional research might be helpful in strengthening understanding of the problems facing rural schools.

Teacher shortage in Montana.

Existing literature tells us that teacher shortage is a problem for Montana’s schools, particularly in light of NCLB requirements for secondary teachers and K-12 specialists. However, my own limited and admittedly unscientific survey of elementary administrators conducted at the outset of this project as a vehicle for identifying a suitable community for study, indicates that many administrators around the state do not experience difficulty recruiting and retaining qualified teachers for their elementary classrooms. In fact, anecdotal evidence suggests that declining enrollments in many districts will force staff reductions. The Montana Office of Public Instruction Personnel Recruitment and Retention Report for 2003-2004 (2004) supports this understanding. Additionally, expansion of the definition of highly qualified teachers to encompass broadfield science majors (U.S. Department of Education, 2004) should ease the stress on small districts who typically rely on one science teacher to cover all science classes. A closer and more descriptive investigation of the need for teachers in Montana’s rural classrooms would help to clarify this situation.
Funding for rural schools.

Current funding strategies which rely heavily on per pupil formulae may not be appropriate for rural schools. Consolidation, which has long been the preferred solution to declining enrollments in rural schools, may not be cost effective when transportation is factored in (Killeen & Sipple, 2000). Explorations of innovative funding strategies which take into account the minimal fixed operating costs of a district, regardless of whether that district serves 100 or 300 children, need to be undertaken.

Effective education models for rural education.

Rural schools with small student populations may not be able to effectively utilize traditional models of education. Traditional organizational structures such as age-normed grade levels in elementary schools or specialized and rigidly delineated subject areas in secondary schools may not be feasible for schools where student populations are small. Additional explorations of innovative structures such as multiage classrooms and holistic and community-based high school programs are desirable.

These explorations should include possibilities for the development of school-community partnerships aimed at fostering the economic well-being of community. Communities cannot thrive unless young people are able to remain in the community.
to raise their own families. This means that they must have the means to earn a living. What roles might schools play in helping to identify needs within a community and providing specialized education and training to students in order to fill those needs? How might schools help students to develop entrepreneurial skills that would enable them to create their own jobs within a community? Answers to these questions might prove valuable in sustaining the vitality of small communities.

Because of Smallwood's enthusiastic support of its schools and willingness to work with research institutions, this community might provide an excellent site for development and implementation of one or more models of rural school reform aimed at sustaining the schools within the community.

*Roles for rural schools in meeting social needs in community.*

Stresses on the social fabric in a rural community threaten school sustainability in several ways: children who consistently violate social norms, exhibit disruptive behavior, and come to school with a variety of special emotional and educational needs place a high demand on scarce school resources; dysfunctional families are unlikely to place a high priority on providing schools with valuable community support; families that lack stability and a grounding in commonly held community values such as a strong work ethic, belief in personal responsibility, and honesty are unlikely to produce children who will contribute to the well-being of the community.
In a rural community, the school may be the only institution with an ongoing connection to these families. Therefore, the rural school may have the potential to mitigate some of the problems associated with the disintegrating social fabric. Research on the cost effectiveness of early intervention programs, parent education or family counseling programs, and other support services that might be located in rural schools would be informative.

Summary

This study generated several understandings about the experiences of members of one rural Montana community and its efforts to maintain the vitality of its schools. The findings reinforce the notion that the relationships between a rural community and its schools are intricately interwoven and that schools provide a sense of identity and cohesion for the community.

The findings also demonstrate that, in this community, community members are knowledgeable about the challenges facing their schools, generally agree on the nature of these challenges, and feel responsible for supporting and assisting the schools. Community members recognize the problems confronting the schools, but are determined that together their school and community can find ways to overcome the difficulties they face.

Community members’ perspectives on these problems reveal that they feel more empowered in some areas than in others; they are conscious of the intimidating
influences of external bureaucracies and institutions. It seems likely that the community could provide more solutions and leadership if it were less inclined to defer to external authorities and experts and more willing to assert its autonomy and authentic power.
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Appendix A

Administrator Survey
Administrator Survey

Dear Administrator:

I am a doctoral student in the School of Education at the University of Montana. I am researching teacher shortage in rural Montana elementary schools. The data from this survey will be used to identify a community in which to study this important problem. My goal is to locate a community with a population of 2500 or less in which there is a shortage of elementary school teachers. I will then conduct a qualitative research study to learn how members of this rural Montana community perceive the issue of teacher shortage and what solutions they might envision for their schools. Your responses will be strictly confidential and will be used only for research purposes. All data from this survey will be kept confidential.

Simply reply to this message and type in your responses. Thank you for your time.

1. How many teachers—including librarians, media center specialists, and counselors—are employed in your school?  
   ____ Comments:

2. Do you currently have unfilled teaching positions in your school?  
   Y N  If yes, how many and in what grades and/or fields? Comments:

3. Do you currently have teachers in your school who are working under provisional licenses?  
   Y N  If yes, how many and in what grades and/or fields? Comments:

4. Do you currently have teachers in your school who are certified but who are teaching out of field (in areas for which they are not certified)?  
   Y N  If yes, how many and in what grades and/or fields? Comments:

5. Out of the past five years, in how many years has your school had difficulty filling teaching positions with fully licensed teachers?  
   0 1 2 3 4 5 Comments:

6. Would you be willing to participate in a follow-up interview?  
   Y N  Comments:

7. In your opinion, would your community as a whole be receptive to serving as the study site?  
   Y N  Comments

Thank you for your participation. If you have questions or would like to discuss any facet of this study, please feel free to contact me.

Martha Cheney  
Email: marthacheney@hotmail.com  
Phone: (406) 243-2291
Appendix B

Interview Questions
Interview Questions

1. What do you view as the most serious challenge(s) to the sustainability of Smallwood’s Schools?

2. What solutions do you envision to address these challenges?

3. What roles might institutions such as state and federal government and schools of education play in helping to sustain your schools?

4. How do you perceive your own role as a community member in helping to sustain your schools?

5. How would you describe the relationship between the community of Smallwood and its schools?

6. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your community and your schools?