Leadership in School District Consolidation and the Impact on Student Outcomes

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Faculty

of

Drexel University

by

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in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

of

Doctor of Education

December 2013

Abstract

Leadership in School District Consolidation and the Impact on Student Outcomes

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Drexel University, December 2013

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In November 2007, area voters approved the consolidating of four districts into the Twin Rivers Unified School District (TRUSD) intending to create an articulated pre-K-adult urban district of 27,000 students. Since the creation of TRUSD no studies have been conducted to measure the impact of the consolidation on student achievement and related student outcomes.

The important and compelling question regarding the consolidation is: *Did the students of the newly formed Twin Rivers Unified School District (TRUSD) benefit from the consolidation?* This research explored key areas of student outcomes and compared the available achievement, discipline, and truancy data before and after the consolidation. Student outcome data before the consolidation indicated some significant concerns, particularly in achievement.

This mixed-method case study examined the impact of school district consolidation on student achievement and related student outcomes since the formation of the TRUSD. The study provided the opportunity for triangulation of multiple data sources and evidence sources, as it utilized staff interviews to drive the direction of study as well as solutions to the problem. Additionally, the research reviewed district pre and post consolidation data in the areas of student outcomes including achievement, truancy, and discipline.

This Ed.D. Dissertation Committee from The School of Education at Drexel University
certifies that this is the approved version of the following dissertation:

Leadership in School District Consolidation and the Impact on Student Outcomes

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Dedication

First and foremost to my husband, Fred:
Without your support and encouragement this would not have been possible.

To my family, Eric, Molly, and Brynn:
You kept me grounded.

To my grandchildren, Ryan and Madison:
The breaks in the work to spend time with you were well worth it.

And of course to my mom and dad, Bill and Eva:
Thank you for your faith in my ability and for instilling a passion for learning.

Acknowledgements

This has been a most interesting journey to fill my bucket list. The decision to enter the EdD program some 28 years after completing the Masters degree was not without stress but it was clear from the first meeting with Dr. Bureau that he was there to guide, encourage, and support and without a doubt, Dr. B provided that. The first few courses on leadership truly drew me in and the journey continued. My sincere thanks to Dr. B for sharing his passion and leading me to find mine.

I want to also thank the members of Cohort 3 who encouraged and pushed each other to be the best we could be.

I appreciate the ongoing efforts of my family as I declined events, skirted my chores, and bought too much take-out. For your tolerance and encouragement, I am grateful.

Finally, I wish to thank the participants in this study, who willfully gave their time and their voice to this research. It is through your experiences that brought life into this study.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Research

Introduction to the Problem

School district consolidation is a complex and oftentimes controversial area of study. The data on the number of school districts as far back as 1940 indicated 117,108 districts in the United States. By 2007 that number had dropped to 13,862 (Duncombe & Yinger, 2010). This is a reduction in school districts over a 67-year span of 88%. The number of consolidations has slowed over time but at least a few school districts consolidate each year across the country.

Most previous research focused on small, rural school district consolidation and the impact on their fiscal and organizational aspects (Nelson, 1985). The primary reason cited for school districts to consolidate has generally been to cut costs. The premise was that small districts lack fiscal efficiency and professional leadership (Strang, 1987), thus small districts merge with other small districts to provide more opportunities for the limited resources to be spread across a broader base. Duncombe and Yinger (2010) explain that cost savings occurs when the cost of education, characterized by economies of size, results in the cost of education per student declining as the number of students increases; however, they point out that some aspects of consolidation may negatively impact a district financially.

Literature refocused on student outcomes in consolidations presents very mixed findings and conclusions (Nelson, 1985). The range of movement from small to large schools or districts has at times positively and at other times negatively impacted student achievement. Consolidation advocates have argued that consolidation provides a diverse,

comprehensive curriculum, better facilities, better trained teachers, a broader range of extracurricular activities, and more diverse social opportunities for students (Howley, Johnson, & Petrie, 2011); opponents have argued that smaller schools provide better activities and student support, reduced disciplinary actions, improved attendance and improved student outcomes (Driscoll, Halcoussis, & Svorny, 2003). The opponents also cite increased teacher stress, potentially long bus rides for students, less parent participation, and damage to rural communities (Nitta, Holley, & Wrobel, 2008).

In November 2007, area voters approved the merging of the three elementary districts and one secondary district into the Twin Rivers Unified School District (TRUSD). This voter effort was intended to consolidate the districts and bring an articulated pre-K-adult district to the broader community. The July 2008 consolidation into TRUSD created an urban district with a combined enrollment of approximately 27,000 students that is still coalescing.

The focus of the consolidation was not based primarily on fiscal impact but on creating a unified district to better serve the students of the community. The consolidated districts included Del Paso (pre-K-6), Grant (7-12), North Sacramento (pre-K-8), and Rio Linda (pre-K-8). The period from the election in November 2007 to the launch of the new district in July 2008 allowed only a very short time frame to implement the consolidation for these four unique and independent districts.

During the four years since the consolidation, there have been significant efforts to develop the new district infrastructure, strengthen student outcomes, and develop a culture for the new district. The challenges have been tremendous in all of the areas and although the district appears to have made great strides, obstacles continue. The recent

budget crisis in California has added additional challenges to this new district. District

leadership under the direction of the superintendent and the newly elected school board

were charged with creating California's newest school district. Blending and aligning the

stakeholders through this change was a monumental effort for district leaders.

Statement of the Problem to Be Researched

The effect of school district consolidation on student learning is unknown and has

not been thoroughly examined. Given the continuing consolidation of school districts

and the national focus on student learning, knowing the impact that consolidation has on

student learning is critical.

Purpose and Significance of the Problem

The important and compelling question regarding the consolidation of these four

districts was*: What, if any, impact did the TRUSD consolidation have on student

learning and related student outcomes?* This mixed-method case study explored this

question by identifying key areas of student learning and related student outcomes,

including discipline, enrollment, and truancy, and comparing the available data before

and after the consolidation. Student learning and related outcome data before the

consolidation indicated some significant concerns, particularly in achievement.

Additionally, related student outcome data on discipline, enrollment, and truancy

indicated room for improvement in three of the four districts.

Framing this research included review of the data on student learning and related

student outcomes as a result of the consolidation. Leading through the change as a factor

of the consolidation and its impact on student outcomes was yet another key focus of this

study. Finally, a discussion of school district consolidation helped to frame the research.

This study of the consolidation of the four districts and the creation of TRUSD offered an opportunity to look at aspects of consolidation that have had little or no attention. As mentioned previously, most consolidation research focused on the fiscal implications of the merging or consolidating of districts. The handbook on *District Organization* published by the California Department of Education (CDE; 2010) focuses on the procedures, legal requirements, and the role of the county office of education in the process. The handbook does not address impact on students, particularly student learning and related student outcomes, nor does it provide guidance on leadership, staff perceptions or impact of the consolidation on the district staff.

Research Questions

1. How has the consolidation of four school districts into Twin Rivers Unified School District impacted student learning?
2. How has the consolidation impacted related outcome rates of student suspension, expulsion, enrollment, and truancy?
3. How did district administrators lead the four merging districts and the resulting Twin Rivers Unified School District through organizational change?

The Conceptual Framework

Researcher Stances and Experiential Base

The researcher's philosophical assumption addressed the relationship between the researcher and the study. This interrelated approach was epistemological and was manifested in collaboration with the research (Creswell, 2007). The five years that transpired since the consolidation of TRUSD provided a context for the researcher to truly understand the participants in the study and what they were saying. The researcher

lived it and worked it during this period of consolidation and thus had a connection to the field and first-hand knowledge. This experience impacted the researcher providing that strong relationship between the study of the TRUSD consolidation and the researcher herself.

Focusing on the impact of the consolidation on the students of TRUSD allowed the researcher to utilize multiple methods of data collection and the practical implications of such an approach. Thus the paradigm of the researcher was pragmatism. The researcher focused on the outcomes of the research, including the actions, situations, and the consequences related to the consolidation of TRUSD. This varied approach to the collection and analysis of the data supported the importance of this study and the relationship of the researcher to the research (Creswell, 2007). In this study, the researcher's pragmatic approach allowed for multiple methods of data collection and provided a useful view of the TRUSD consolidation. The belief in "whatever it takes" fits within the context and the connection of the researcher to this study.

Additionally, this study was influenced and informed by the researcher's experiences as a long time educator and current educational administrator in the district. The researcher mindfully bracketed these factors and was continually conscious of their potential effect on the research. The researcher acknowledged she could not totally disengage from the study participants because of their common backgrounds and similar experiences.

District leadership played an important role in moving the consolidation forward. The researcher's role within the newly formed district provided an opportunity for leadership. As a member of the district cabinet team, the researcher had opportunities to

participate in the critical decisions made that influenced the students, families, and staff. Additionally, many of the key leaders in the new district were also leaders in one of the former districts and were instrumental in the early planning for the consolidation efforts. This effort was powerful in creating the culture of high expectations, supportive environments, and a passion for learning. As one of the district leaders, it became clear that, over time, we would see the full benefit of this consolidation for the students of TRUSD. Trust, transparency, and communication were critical aspects in leading change to create a high functioning district. Those key concepts take time to build and refine but were important to the success of the newly formed district and its students.

Conceptual Framework

This study considered the three major streams of research within the literature that formed the basis for the framework. The research focus areas addressed the overarching theme of school district consolidation. In addition, research on student learning and related student outcomes provided background and described the impact of consolidation and district size on student's learning and related behaviors. Finally, the importance of leadership through change during the process of school district consolidation was highlighted. These streams provided a range for the discussion of this research, as well as a depth of knowledge as it related to each of these critical areas of consideration.

School district consolidation occurs when two or more districts join for the purposes of economic, student, or community benefit, resulting in fewer districts (Bard, Gardner, & Wieland, 2006). The consolidations have typically been justified based on the belief that bigger is better regarding economic efficiency (Nelson, 1985). With declining enrollments and budgetary concerns, the economic impacts of consolidation

have been powerful. Consolidated districts may provide increased course offerings, additional sports and other activities, and a larger presence in the community. Expenditures for facilities may decrease as outdated and duplicate facilities are no longer needed. This belief was evidenced between 1940 and 1990 as the number of school district in the United States dropped through consolidation. Research indicated that this was primarily due to consolidation of small, rural school districts under the premise that small districts lacked fiscal efficiency and professional leadership (Strang, 1987).

Student learning and related student outcomes should be one of the most important considerations of school district consolidation. In the review of the literature, there were no studies focused on a constituents' led effort to consolidate districts and the impact of that consolidation on the achievement of the students. In fact, much of the literature on consolidation stressed the impact of school and/or district size as the factor in student achievement. Much of the literature on student learning and related student outcomes focused on school and district size as a key factor.

Reilly (2004) considered school size, costs, and academic achievement and found that the results on academic achievement were mixed. Reilly concluded that no study presented conclusive evidence of the "best" size for a school or district. Hypothesizing that school district size is an important determinant of program quality, Driscoll et al. (2003) explored school district size and student performance and found that increased district size has a negative impact on student performance, as measured by standardized test scores. They reported that, in 1999 in California, students in large districts did not perform as well on standardized tests as those in smaller districts. Additionally, Pennsylvania School Boards Association (PSBA; 2009) cited several studies which all

supported the concept that smaller schools have a positive effect on achievement and graduation rates.

Specifics of consolidation were highlighted by the National School Boards Association (NSBA; 2008) in a study entitled *Twin Rivers USD Consolidation Project*. The project showcases interviews with key stakeholders and recognized their leadership consolidating operations of complex organizations, specifically the need to the equalize salaries, resources, and other disparities and the leadership necessary to manage that effort.

Heifetz and Linsky (2002) described some techniques that are helpful in leading major organizational change. One of those techniques is the ability to "operate in and above the fray." This is the critical ability of stepping back and seeing the big picture necessary in managing the resistance to change. Systems thinking is another key aspect of leading through change. Leaders at all levels who want to help others thrive need to be aware of the larger systemic problems. System learning means the entire global system. It is complex and critical and requires leaders to think beyond their own organizations (Fullan, 2008). Senge, Smith, Kruschwitz, Laur, and Schley (2008) further broke down systems thinking into the four factors that influence any situation – events, patterns/trends, deeper systemic structures/forces, and mental models/assumptions that shape these structures and forces. Leaders must have the ability to step back from their mental models, expand boundaries, and build a stewardship ethic.

Considering the leadership of change elements in the process of consolidating each of these four districts brought a perspective and insight unique to the situation. This study centered on school district consolidation and the research surrounding that process;

the impact of consolidation and district size on the student learning and related student outcomes; and finally the leadership involved in consolidation, particularly as it affects TRUSD.

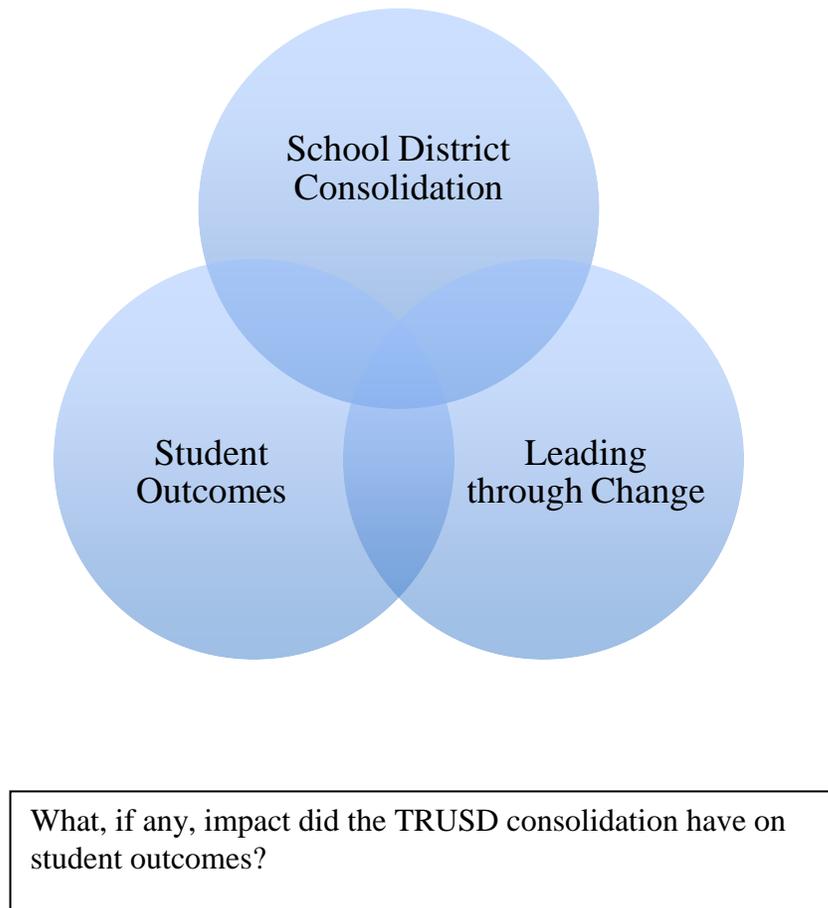What, if any, impact did the TRUSD consolidation have on student outcomes?

Figure 1. TRUSD consolidation, leadership, and student outcomes.

Definition of Terms

Academic Performance Index (API)

State legislation, the Public Schools Accountability Act (PSAA) of 1999 (Chapter 3, Statutes of 1999), established the Academic Performance Index which

summarizes a school's or a local educational agency's (LEA's) academic

performance and progress on statewide assessments.

Consolidated Application (ConApp)

The ConApp is used by the California Department of Education (CDE) to

distribute categorical funds from various state and federal programs to county

offices, school districts, and direct-funded charter schools throughout California.

Information from school districts is collected through the ConApp including the

truancy data used in this study.

Consolidation

The wholesale reduction in the number of districts and closure of buildings

including elimination of duplicate programs and elimination of staff (Bard et al.,

2006)

DataQuest

The publicly reported data site maintained and shared electronically through the

CDE (2011) website

Expulsion Data

The data provided a count of students involved in one or more incidents during

the academic year who were subsequently expelled from school as reported in

DataQuest (CDE, 2011). An incident is defined as one or more students

committing one or more offenses on the same date at the same time. Expulsion

counts include all expulsions, even those expulsions where the term of the

expulsion has been shortened or the enforcement of the expulsion has been

suspended.

Local Education agency (LEA)

A LEA is a school district or county office of education.

Merger

The combining of two or more districts with the intent of eliminating an administrative group and/or duplicate programs (Bard et al., 2006)

Staff

The twelve TRUSD certificated staff interviewed for the study that included both teachers and administrators. The staff are further described in Chapter 3.

Student Achievement

District performance measures from Academic Performance Index (API)

Student Discipline

This included data on both student suspensions and expulsions.

Student learning and related student outcomes

The term that includes achievement, enrollment, truancy, and discipline data

Suspension Data

The data provided a count of students involved in one or more incidents during the academic year who were subsequently suspended from school as reported in DataQuest (CDE, 2011). An incident is defined as one or more students committing one or more offenses on the same date at the same time.

Truancy Data

The data provided a count of students who were reported as being truant at least one time during the academic year as reported through the ConApp and reported to DataQuest (CDE, 2011).

Twin Rivers Unified School District (TRUSD)

The district that was formed in July 2008 with the consolidation of Del Paso, Grant, North Sacramento, and Rio Linda school districts

Assumptions and Limitations

Clarifying the impact on student outcomes since the consolidation of the TRUSD was an important story to tell; however, that story was surrounded by several assumptions. The fundamental premise in the consolidation was that students were better off in the newly consolidated district because of increased learning opportunities, building a culture of responsiveness, and a focus on students and families. While this research assumed the fundamental premise to be true, its purpose was to establish precisely what impact the consolidation had on student learning and related student outcomes.

While the obstacles in consolidation were challenging for all involved, the underlying assumptions were that the certificated staff could work through the barriers and that they agreed with the district leaders' approach to leading the consolidation. Articulated by the Superintendent and Cabinet was a high expectations and a no excuses approach to moving the new district forward. Central to this research was investigating how certificated administrators led the districts through organizational change.

This mixed-method study of quantitative and qualitative methods was bound by limitations. Quantitatively, the challenge was access to reliable data, particularly the data available prior to the consolidation into TRUSD. All data were accessed from the California Department of Education (CDE; 2011) DataQuest site to ensure transparency and reliability with the publically accessible data. There was question as to the reliability

of the truancy data accessed for the years prior to the consolidation. This was further explained in Chapter 4.

As well, there were limitations in the qualitative aspects of the research. The case study consisted of direct observations and systematic interviews with district certificated staff. While participation in the study was voluntary and arranged with informed consent, it was limited to the interviews of TRUSD certificated staff that elected to participate. Findings of the research were limited by the willingness of certificated staff to candidly reveal their views of how the consolidation impacted students and how leaders moved the organization through change processes.

As a bounded case study, this research investigated deeply the student impacts of and leadership processes in consolidating public school districts. Because of its focus on one consolidated district, this research may be limited in its ability to be generalized to other districts contemplating or involved in consolidations.

Summary

For the past four years the Twin Rivers Unified School District (TRUSD) has been coalescing as the result of the consolidation of four districts that occurred in July, 2008. The voters approved the consolidation of the three elementary districts and one secondary district in November 2007, creating a large, urban district with a rich ethnic and socio-economic diversity. The important and compelling question regarding the consolidation of these four districts was: *What, if any, impact did the TRUSD consolidation have on student learning and related student outcomes?* This study of the consolidation of the four districts and the creation of TRUSD offered an opportunity to look at aspects of consolidation that have had little or no attention.

School district consolidation was primarily promoted as improving fiscal conditions by eliminating redundancy and creating greater economies of scale. When the four separate districts consolidated to form one district in July 2008, three of the districts primarily served students pre-K through 6 and the fourth district was a secondary district only. There were many previous attempts to consolidate the districts but the area voters rejected those prior efforts. The most recent effort to consolidate the districts focused on the general premise that the consolidation of the four districts would be beneficial for the students.

Students are the key consideration in any district. The stakeholders expressed ongoing concerns regarding the outcomes for students in the various districts. One measures how students are doing by looking at the achievement data for the school district. The achievement data in three of the four districts indicated they were below the statewide average on Academic Performance Index (API). There was little articulation for the transition of students from the elementary districts into the secondary district, and as a result many families were seeking alternatives for their children after grade 6 rather than transitioning into the secondary district. The consolidation of the four districts should, in fact, support the notion that it is better for the students; that notion is examined by reviewing the achievement data and related student outcomes prior to the merge from the four previous districts and then comparing that data to the student achievement and related student outcomes in TRUSD.

There have been obstacles for all involved, but if the underlying belief was that the students are benefitting from this consolidation, district leadership could work through the barriers. The high expectations and no excuses approach to moving the new

district forward articulated by the Superintendent, Cabinet, and the School Board were powerful elements of leadership through change. The leadership emphasis on increasing learning opportunities for students, building a culture of responsiveness, and focusing on students and families was building the premise that students were better off in the newly consolidated district

      Clarifying the impact on student learning and related student outcomes since the consolidation of the TRUSD was an important story to tell. This bounded case study of the TRUSD consolidation aimed to answer the important question, *What, if any, impact did the TRUSD consolidation have on student learning and related student outcomes?*

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction to Chapter 2

Although it is ultimately a local concern, school district consolidation has been the subject of continuous debate across numerous states in the United States (Duncombe & Yinger, 2007; Fleming & Hutton, 1997; Heinz, 2005; Howley et al., 2011). The number of school districts in the United States has dramatically declined by nearly 90% over the past 70 years, decreasing from approximately 100,000 districts in 1938 to 14,166 districts in 2006 (Duncombe & Yinger, 2007; National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2007).

Key aspects of school reorganization, or district consolidation, have been studied across the nation over the past 20 years. The majority of this research relates to projected improvements in the financial efficiencies of school systems, typically based on economies of scale. However, consolidation often is marketed to the public under the promotion of enhanced benefits for students (Howley et al., 2011; Nitta et al., 2008).

This research explored this promotion of enhanced benefits for students by identifying key areas of student learning and related student outcomes and comparing the available data before and after the consolidation. Student outcome data before the consolidation indicated some significant concerns, particularly in achievement. Additionally, data on discipline, enrollment, and truancy indicated room for improvement in at least three of the four districts.

Literature Review

Framing this research included a general discussion of school district consolidation. A review of student learning and related student outcomes data as a result of the consolidation provided another focal point of the study. Finally, leadership through the consolidation and the impact on student learning and related student outcomes helped frame the research.

School District Consolidation

Most consolidation research has focused on the fiscal implications of the merging or consolidating of districts. The handbook on *District Organization* published by the California Department of Education (CDE; 2010) focused on such areas as the procedures, legal requirements, and the role of the county office of education in the process. The handbook's operational approach does not address impact on students, particularly as it relates to student learning and the related student outcomes.

Another aspect of school district realignments often is focused on the necessity of consolidating schools and school systems to improve the quality of educational programming or to increase fiscal efficiency in educating children in rural communities. Given the economic crisis experienced in many states and the U.S. government in recent years, the critical need for fiscal efficiency likely will only intensify these efforts, thus requiring a more operational focus.

Although the resistance to consolidation is tangible, relevant, and important, overall support for consolidation efforts also has been documented (Nitta et al., 2008). Alsbury and Thomas (2008) cited findings from a national superintendent survey indicating that 86% of respondents favored school district consolidation. This finding

was interesting since consolidation issues are complex and polarizing, and the responsibility for garnering community support often is assigned to the local district superintendent. However, consolidation initiatives also present significant challenges for other district staff too. School principals, who arguably are the school officials at the front line of this debate, as parents and community patrons passionately argue the merits and disadvantages of this issue. Principals must carefully negotiate this challenging terrain, as students, parents, teachers, staff members, and community residents each present different personal perspectives and concerns.

Furthermore, numerous problems have developed from the dual issues of declining school enrollments and the decrease in assessed valuation of farmland, which have caused many rural school district Boards of Education to consider school district consolidation. State and national governments (Fleming & Hutton, 1997; Nitta et al., 2008) have used financial incentives to entice districts to voluntarily consolidate or to explicitly mandate school districts to consolidate.

While mandates are one approach, research conducted on school consolidation as a means to exploit economies of scale and reduce educational costs has an extensive history (Duncombe, Miner, & Ruggiero,1994; Duncombe & Yinger, 2007; Heinz, 2005; Jonjak, 2003; St. Cyr Davis, 2005; Verstegen & Grider, 2000; Zimmer, DeBoer, & Hirth, 2009). Although local school district consolidation efforts have begun to diminish over the past two decades, numerous state-level funding incentives have been put in place to encourage school districts to consider consolidating (Zimmer et al., 2009).

In the state of California, the California Legislative Analyst's Office (LAO) (Taylor, 2011) recently released a report analyzing the state's efforts to consolidate

districts primarily to reduce the number of small districts. Of the nearly 1,000 school districts in California, almost three-quarters of them have an enrollment of fewer than 5,000 students. The districts included in the consolidation into TRUSD were of varying sizes. They ranged from approximately 2,500 students to 10,000. While the decision to consolidate is primarily a local one, the process does involve various levels of government including the county and state which the LAO further outlines in its report recommendations and are also discussed later in this chapter.

Further discussion of the material related to school district consolidation requires clarification of the terms merger and consolidation. In school terms, merger implies the combining of two or more districts with the intent of eliminating an administrative group and/or duplicate programs. Consolidation implies wholesale reduction in the number of districts and closure of buildings including elimination of duplicate programs and elimination of staff. These definitions help structure this research and clarify that what TRUSD experienced would be defined as a consolidation.

Additionally, most of the previous research has focused on the impact of consolidation on the fiscal and organizational aspects of the consolidated districts. Much of the research has discussed rural districts' consolidations and mergers. The TRUSD consolidation resulted from combining four districts to form a large urban district with a combined enrollment of approximately 27,000 students.

In addition to economies of scale and fiscal incentives, further benefits may be categorized around improvements to infrastructure. Perceived fiscal and physical benefits are very common in the political arena of consolidation, as consultants typically explain how school district consolidation will spare taxpayers from additional property

tax increases to maintain their existing schools (Hall & Arnold, 1993). Nitta et al. (2008) suggested that larger consolidated schools can also provide better facilities for students.

The literature often focused on school and/or district consolidation. Howley et al. (2011) reviewed research evidence on school and district consolidation, making distinctions between them. School consolidation research focused on school size and addressed primarily effectiveness, while district consolidation research generally addressed efficiency. However, many of the studies combined school and district aspects. Their review indicated that claims for educational benefits on academic and social performance from systematic statewide school and district consolidation had already been maximized. They further pointed out that schools and maybe even districts that are too big result in lowered academic performance.

Specifically, Howley et al. (2011) found that in many places, schools and districts are too large for improvements in fiscal efficiency or educational quality resulting from additional consolidation and that many should be deconsolidated. While consolidation may result in reducing a superintendent, there may actually be a need for more mid-level administrators resulting in little or no cost savings. Further, research does not support the contention that financial benefits or improved learning accrue to districts or schools that consolidate. Statewide efforts to drive for consolidation of districts are based on claims that cannot be supported solely by data. These decisions, rather than being made on a statewide level, are best made on a case-by-case basis at the local level. The authors' conclusion that consolidation proposals are designed to serve a public relations purpose during times of fiscal crisis, is a theme that runs through much of the additional literature.

Beyond the fiscal discussion, the Center for the Study of Education Policy (CEP; 2009) reviewed research and policy considerations related to school and district consolidations. One of the findings that emerged in its review was that students in smaller schools showed lower rates of negative social behaviors. CEP (2009) asserted that in larger schools, students tend to become polarized with regard to extracurricular activities; larger numbers of students are not engaged in such activities, while in smaller schools greater percentages of students are engaged. Student engagement in extracurricular activities is positively related to decreases in discipline issues.

Additionally, CEP (2009) noted that its review of studies showed dropout rates are lower and graduation rates are higher in smaller schools. There is large overlap in the dropout rate and graduation rate research findings. The CEP (2009) review indicated that the social behaviors of students and the dropout and graduation rates are a function of school and district size.

A longitudinal study by Cox (2010) examined a decade of results in one county in Tennessee as it related to the school district consolidation considering a variety of factors by comparing pre-consolidation data to post-consolidation data including district and student characteristics, academic performance outcomes, and expenditures.

The Cox (2010) study found consolidation may be related to this district's change in ethnic representation over time: there was a 5% decline in Caucasian students, the African American population increased by 1.4%, and the Hispanic population percentage increased six fold. The change was coupled with the quadrupling of the number of students with limited English proficiency. The findings conclude that there was also a decrease in overall enrollment in the district with respect to the student population,

similar to findings in other Tennessee districts following consolidation. Loss in enrollment also equates to loss of revenue, which could have other negative impacts on the consolidation. This was the only study that discussed the possible effects of the change in ethnic makeup of the district and schools resulting from consolidation; changes that would likely have an impact on performance, attendance, and discipline. Cox (2010) does not say that the ethnic change caused the results presented, only that the changes predate the results.

Another look at consolidation was conducted by Nitta, Holley, and Wrobel (2010) as a phenomenological study of school consolidation which examined the experiences of students and teachers that had gone through school consolidation. They presented arguments for and against consolidation arising from those interviews. An argument against consolidation was an initial belief that smaller schools provide a healthy community and serve as a hub for activities. Contrary to this belief, students reported that the larger schools offered more social opportunities and a broader diversity of people. While the study did not specifically address school safety, the students in larger schools reported more social groups to join and no lingering problems among those groups. The authors also found that the experiences of teachers were less positive than that of the students.

Determining the optimal factors for a district has found its way into the research of Zimmer et al. (2009) studied per pupil costs and optimal enrollment by first determining the optimal enrollment for a district. These researchers examined the potential for reducing costs through school district consolidation in Indiana by employing economies of scale. This was calculated to be between 1,300 and 2,903 students and

significant efficiencies could be realized by consolidating districts with enrollments below 2,000 students.

Further discussion by Zimmer et al. (2009) that potential cost savings of consolidation and its impact on student performance and identity, especially in rural communities, had statewide political implications. A balance between costs, achievement, social, and political considerations must be maintained as communities and local officials explore the impact of consolidations.

The studies have shown many aspects related to consolidations and research suggests there is evidence of negative community impact as a result of the merging of districts. Studies have also indicated that consolidating districts reduces the sense of community and has negative impacts on students' social interactions and behavior (CEP, 2009).

School consolidation opponents have noted a decrease in involvement with community organizations and the loss of local businesses as primary arguments against consolidation in rural communities. Local citizens consider a school closure to be detrimental to the social and economic capital of the community (DeYoung & Howley, 1990; Duncombe & Yinger, 2010; Nitta et al., 2008; Post & Stambach, 1999).

Perhaps the most detrimental consequence of school consolidation reported in the empirical research is an overall loss of community identity. Citizens may find decisions to elect school board members to the newly merged school district based solely on state congressional districts or at-large representation to be confusing, further adding to a perception of loss of local control. Anxiety may increase during board elections, as constituents simultaneously vote for or against the consolidation petition and for

representation on the newly reconstituted school boards. Local citizens may be concerned that an imbalance in representation across the geographic confines of the previous school districts may occur on the new school board. All important considerations for districts and communities as consolidation decisions present themselves.

In summarizing the literature focused on school district consolidation, it is clear that there are positives and negatives to the merger of districts. One of the cited benefits to the consolidating of school districts is the economy of scale. It is more cost effective to consolidate small districts and reduce the need more duplication in administration, transportation, and other service (Nelson, 1985; Strang, 1987). The literature also supports the notion that there are various reasons for consolidations to occur, but the primary reason cited is fiscal. The idea is that merging small districts together provides for more opportunities for students and an economy of scale (Nitta et al., 2010; Zimmer et al., 2009).

Student Learning and Related student outcomes

Consolidation proponents suggest a number of reasons for the merger of two or more existing school districts. Perhaps the most compelling reason relates to improved or expanded curricular and extracurricular opportunities for students, particularly those at the high school level (Nitta et al., 2008). Such opportunities may involve increasing the number of vocational course offerings, adding or expanding a foreign language program, and/or developing other academic or technological electives. Also some school district enrollments may be too small to sustain enrollments in Advanced Placement (AP) courses.

Additionally, in some cases scheduling flexibility and increased student choice is attained from merely increasing the number of course sections, particularly in core academic areas. These improvements hinge primarily on an expansion in the breadth and depth of curricular offerings.

While these areas suggest some positive opportunities for students, negative perceptions of consolidation initiatives can exist with staff members as well. Hottovy (2003) recorded staff frustration, as one teacher observed the political positioning and negotiating that were occurring and felt a need to emphasize teaching and learning as more important than politics. Additional concerns reported by Alsbury and Shaw (2005) included the elimination of administrative positions, a lingering sense of animosity within the community, and fear of the marginalization of local values or identity as a result of the consolidation. All increase the impact on staff in the affected districts.

As discussed in the previous section, size is a factor often explored in school and district discussion. Driscoll et al. (2003) explored school district size and student performance, hypothesizing that school district size was an important determinant of program quality. They reported that, in 1999 in California, increased district size had a negative effect on students' performance as measured by the Academic Performance Index (API). Comparing districts of all sizes and using district size as the key variable in the regression, their study showed that students in the larger school districts did not perform as well as students in smaller school districts. With one-sixth of all California students attending districts with more than 40,000 students, their premise that some districts are actually too large and perhaps should be broken into smaller districts was supported. This finding was true when controlling for population density and removing

the inordinately large Los Angeles Unified School District from the study. The study further reported that reducing district, school, and class size is potentially important to educational reform.

This research of Driscoll et al. (2003) differed from other approaches in that it applied a regression analysis to the data to attempt to quantify the point of diminishing returns rather than just reporting the changes. Their results, however, are in line with other work that consolidation of districts and schools may actually have negative effects.

Rural education has been at the forefront of the consolidation research. Bard et al. (2006) reported on the conclusions of the National Rural Education Association (NREA) review which included a wide range of previous studies and literature indicating district size and school performance had an indirect relationship in which socioeconomic status and size work jointly to influence school performance. The reviewed studies addressed issues of forced district consolidation and focused on the correlation between district size and socioeconomic status of the community. Bard et al. (2006) concluded that "there is no ideal size for schools or districts and that size does not guarantee success – good schools come in all sizes" (p. 5). Bard et al. further noted that there continues to be discussion indicating a strong relationship between school size and student achievement and that "smaller districts have better achievement, affective and social outcomes" (p. 5).

These authors also noted that high poverty schools benefit more from consolidation than more affluent schools. They do not propose the reasons for the benefit. It is possible that consolidation in high poverty schools may have some beneficial spillover into the communities surrounding the school.

Student impact in the research of Plucker, Spradlin, Magaro, Chien, and Zapf (2007) cautioned school districts in merging with the goal of improving performance. In their review of studies on consolidation, they assert that there are no significant effects on school performance after consolidation. School performance in their review was based on student achievement. They further suggest that about half of the research indicates no difference between achievement of students in large and small schools while the other half of the research indicates student achievement to be better in small schools. Some of the considerations regarding why student achievement may not be as strong in larger schools are that the school size impacts teacher participation in decision making, there is more tension between students and teachers, more issues related to discipline, less parent involvement, and generally less human contact. They further suggested, in part, that school tension between students and teachers in consolidated schools and districts may play a role in the lack of improved performance after consolidation.

The Pennsylvania School Boards Association (PSBA; 2009) researched the *Merger/Consolidation of School Districts: Does it save money and improve student achievement*. The PSBA cited several studies which all supported the concept that smaller schools have a positive effect on achievement and graduation rates. Their review of the research, similar to Bard et al. (2006), also tied together size and poverty. They found in the studies reviewed that small schools in high-poverty communities produced higher achievement than the larger consolidated sites. Their review also noted the gap between students from affluent and poor communities narrowed in small schools. Additionally, PSBA concluded that decreasing the size of the school district had a

substantial positive effect on graduation rates. Conversely, larger consolidated districts had more students dropping out of school.

More research on size by Reilly (2004), in a review of several school and district consolidation investigations, provided a clear set of definitions and explored the areas of student behavior and dropout rates. She noted in her review of research that larger schools with student enrollment of more than 2,000 had significantly higher dropout rates at 13.9% compared to 10.2% in smaller schools with 200-600 students.

In other studies reviewed, Reilly (2004) found no correlation between school size and dropout rates. Harrison's (2003) review of student discipline cited a New Jersey study (as cited in Reilly, 2004) that found that larger schools experienced more school violence and school crime although the study did not investigate causation. Welsh, Stokes, and Greene (2000) supported by a Philadelphia school study (as cited in Reilly, 2004) finding that larger school sizes could increase the number of student incidents and disciplinary actions even after taking into account community crime and poverty rates.

Reilly (2004) clearly restated the definitions used by most authors of district and school consolidation research. This was helpful to have multiple definitions in one place as an organizational feature. While not specifically focused on district consolidation, the relationships Reilly found paralleled other authors in terms of approximating effective school size, with examples of the effect of school consolidation.

In studies by Howley et al. (2011), the findings suggested that claims for educational benefits in school and district consolidation are vastly overestimated. They cited that schools or districts that are too large result in diminished social performance for

students. They further noted that larger schools are associated with more dangerous

school environments.

This factor of student discipline as it relates to school safety is an important

variable in school district consolidation. School safety issues at schools may impact

attendance and enrollment as well as student achievement district wide. Research

addressed healthy communities, social performance, and school violence as areas related

to schools and school size. When the topic is more specific, such as discipline, the

research tended to address how it relates to the size of the school not the district.

Although this current study addressed district consolidation, enrollment, discipline, and

truancy related discussion points and other areas for consideration can be drawn from the

research on school consolidation.

In addition to safety, research was found on instructional benefits to

consolidation. Increased course offerings were also cited by Hall, Kelley, Melhus, and

Closen (2007) as beneficial instructional improvements. A survey of 36 superintendents

also confirmed that consolidation generally improved program quality and expanded the

curriculum (Alsbury & Thomas, 2008). Alsbury and Shaw (2005) cited increased

extracurricular offerings with greater student competition within these activities,

enhanced diversity and citizenship among students, and expanded support resources (e.g.,

counseling, at-risk programs, flexible services for special education). These

superintendents also cited improved funding and a perception of a higher quality of

education. However, DeYoung and Howley (1990) described an intentional concealment

of the benefits of small schools and the presence of other alternatives to the local schools,

due to innovations in distance learning and communication technologies.

Further the consolidation research does provide documentation (Alsbury & Thomas, 2008; Nitta et al., 2008) that consolidation can create the conditions for a broader, more diverse social experience for students. Superintendents in one study were convinced that the increase in student diversity had improved and enriched (Alsbury & Thomas, 2008) the school culture.

Additionally, in their phenomenological study, Nitta et al. (2008) found students perceived broader and more diverse experiences primarily through social integration in their newly merged schools. Evidence also suggested that students in consolidated school districts have an expanded array of extracurricular activities available to them, primarily in interscholastic sports, although, Nitta et al. (2008) documented that the effects were greater for moving students than receiving students. These moving students were defined as those going into the culture and buildings of the receiving school in the merger.

Finding equity in the education system was yet another problem that Duncombe and Yinger (2010) argued, indicating that sometimes consolidation makes sense on equity grounds, such as when determining how to improve the fairness of a state's education finance system. Other benefits for students include the ability to specialize in academic disciplines or concentrate on fields of interest (Hall & Arnold, 1993). Researchers (Hall & Arnold, 1993; Hall et al., 2007) have suggested increased teacher salary and benefits that come through consolidation as influential in improving student achievement.

Salary factors were described by Knoeppel, Verstegen, and Rinehart (2007) to include teacher quality as related to salary as the most important factor influencing student achievement. The researchers further suggested that the quality of teaching

experiences improved as a result of the consolidation process including greater disciplinary specialization, better articulation in expansion of the curriculum, increased collaboration, better equipped classrooms, fewer teaching preparations, and increased support services for students (Alsbury & Thomas, 2008; Hall et al., 2007; Knoeppel et al., 2007; Nitta et al., 2008).

In summary of the student learning and related student outcomes, it was clearly mixed. The data presented in the various studies indicated that the range of small to large schools and/or districts could positively or negatively impact student achievement. Additionally, the literature review offered other possible conflicting areas to consider such as socioeconomic status of the students or an increase in diversity of the student population. The current study helped to clarify and provide further insight into some of these areas.

Leading through Change

School district leadership plays an important role in moving any consolidation forward to create a culture of high expectations, supportive environments, and a passion for learning. The emphasis on student learning and related student outcomes was critical in this juncture and key to moving the new district forward.

Leading through change often creates opportunities to achieve strategic objectives as an organization. Leaders must examine their own values and practices as they consider the impacts of such a significant change on the organization. Mulford and Silins (2003) suggested that reforms in schools, no matter how well conceptualized, powerfully sponsored, brilliantly structured, or closely audited are likely to fail in the face of cultural resistance. Resistance can come either from those working within the districts or

stakeholders outside the organization. It is imperative that district leaders respond to their stakeholders, especially when it impacts issues of diversity and equity.

Further research suggested that school district leaders must fulfill a management function, not just a leadership role, when communities are considering consolidation (Nitta et al., 2008; Self, 2001; Strang, 1987), including the responsibilities of enrollment coordination, facilities, staffing, a plethora of financial decisions, and transportation concerns (Zimmer et al., 2009). As a result, essential functions such as leadership and learning often are relegated to the back seat of the reform vehicle. The level of complexity with this type of systemic reform required a clearly defined and effective leadership theory. In addition, helping other members of the organization assume and exercise leadership was another means of garnering support. Finally, leaders must mobilize support for an activity along multiple pathways (Knapp et al., 2003).

In considering consolidation, Nitta et al. (2010) looked at more than just the data. They actually interviewed students and staff to try to understand what happens "on the ground" when a district is consolidated. Their finding suggested that the students adapted better than the adults in the new system.

School district consolidation can be viewed as a reform effort when considering the leadership impact. In a monograph of the Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL; 2000), the McREL Board of Directors, gathered educators and policymakers to discuss the role of school leaders in reform. Themes of school renewal have been a part of the public school conversation for many years. One issue related to this kind of district change was that it is not all the same. School districts face change processes that are different because there are different kinds of change. McREL (2000)

described the types of change as incremental or fundamental. Incremental change would be considered more step-by-step routine adjustments rather than a shift in the districts' fundamental way of operating.

The skills required of leaders to facilitate incremental change versus fundamental change differ greatly. Because school districts are unique organizations, it is important to consider the differences in leading change in districts versus businesses. Leading change in a school system requires leaders to question deeply held assumptions and long term practices. It is important that leaders support, inspire, and leverage the system. This shift in thinking allowed for sustainable leadership and a more lasting transformation.

As noted, school district leaders have multiple roles to provide when considering consolidation. In addition to their leadership role, they also must fulfill a management function with important issues such as transportation, facilities, staffing, enrollment, and budgets (Alsbury & Thomas, 2008; Nitta et al., 2008; Self, 2001; Strang, 1987). The level of complexity with this type of systemic reform requires a clearly defined and effective leadership theory.

Consolidation is complex and the numerous organizational and systemic changes that can occur during consolidation may include modification in the instructional day, such as introducing a block format for the daily schedule, moving from a behavioral to constructivist instructional approach, promoting effective working relationships within the newly merged school, enhancing the physical characteristics of buildings or technology, and developing positive relationships between the school and community. These factors created the differences in degree expressed by Elmore (2000). The literature suggested that through the improvement of leadership practice the organization

can promote improved student engagement and achievement (Darling-Hammond & Friedlander, 2008; Elmore, 2000; Fullan, 2001; Knapp et al., 2003).

Beyond these previously discussed factors, the accountability based pressure for improvements in student achievement based on standardized assessments, drove leaders to seek evidence-based instructional leadership practices to implement. Those leaders who made significant, not incremental changes to improve student learning to the extent it is measureable are making second order change. These kinds of innovations required thinking differently about the work, taking different actions, and are a departure from the typical behavior made by leaders.

Taylor (2010) sought evidence of successful leaders of second order change and improvement in student achievement. She interviewed 62 leaders in 10 states who possessed those identified leadership qualities and whose student achievement data supported positive results. In addition, each leader was recommended from a university colleague or practicing school administrator and then each leader participated in a structured interview using questions based on the work of Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005); Waters and Marzano (2007); Taylor and Collins (2003); Bolman and Deal (2003); and Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004).

Taylor (2010) found seven consistent leader action themes regardless of any unique demographics variables. All respondents attributed positive improvement when focusing the culture on learning. Other themes were also supportive of the first in making positive improvements.

Heifetz and Linsky (2002) described significant organizational transformation as "adaptive change" (p. 13). Adaptive problems required individuals throughout the

organization to the change their ways. Leading major change in an organization involves radical reconfigurations and it is critical to maintain perspective while in the middle of the action.

Further, the authors offered some techniques that are helpful in leading major organizational change. One of those techniques was the ability to operate in and above the fray – in other words the dance floor and balcony metaphor. The critical ability to step back and see the big picture is necessary to seek input and manage the potential resistance to change that likely occurs in this type of change effect.

Continuing the change leadership focus, Fullan (2007) asserted that the improvement of relationships must be a core strategy for change: as positive relationships develop, trust typically will increase, along with other measures of social capital and social cohesion. Fullan (2008) further articulated the role of leaders in change in *The Six Secrets of Change*, where he helped guide the theory that learning is the work and what leaders must consider was that learning must be in balance and in concert with the setting in which they work.

This idea associated with learning on the job brought to mind true opportunities for a personal and focused approach that enabled leaders to integrate the work and the learning. In this way, working and learning to work are seen as one and the same. When learning is built into the work, it becomes continuous and integrated. The integration of consistent performance with new learning is required for improvement. The learning is the work concept allows for relentless consistency and continuous learning.

One of the concerns sometimes associated with this theory of change is that the leader may not have the opportunity for innovation. While the leader is participating in

the work, the skills of consistency and innovation can and must go together. This ability to have organized learning in context is the basis for solid leadership.

The literature on leadership assists in guiding this research as it clearly outlines the critical nature of leading through change. The role of the leader through fundamental change such as the consolidation of multiple school districts required that intricate balance of leading through the work (Fullan, 2008). Also, the literature suggested that through the improvement of leadership practice the organization can promote improved student engagement and achievement (Darling-Hammond & Friedlander, 2008; Elmore, 2000; Fullan, 2001; Knapp et al., 2003).

A leader must maintain a balanced approach while working through the steps of a monumental change to successfully fulfill the mission of the consolidation. Nitta, Wrobel, Howard, and Jimmerson-Eddings (2009) clearly described Kotter's (1996) process for change and the potential pitfalls for leaders when they are not clearly aligning the necessary steps.

Leading through change necessitates a clear understanding of the types of change and how the approach to leading differs based on that change. McREL (2000) related this to a fundamental change which is more significant and required the newly formed district to completely alter the way it functioned. Heifetz and Linsky (2002) would describe this type of change as adaptive change. It required a radical reconfiguration and impacted the individuals involved in a very personal way. It changed the institutional processes of the organization and the stakeholders involved.

Summary

Chapter 2 provided an outline of the literature that guides this study. The literature included studies on school district consolidation as well as the impact of consolidation on student achievement which is at the forefront of this study. Leading through the change brought on by the consolidation and the impact on student learning and related student outcomes were yet another key focus of this study. All three of these streams helped frame the research.

This research study considered three areas within the literature which formed the basis for the framework. The areas of focus included factors in school district consolidation, student learning and related student outcomes, and leading through change.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

Introduction

The focus of this research was to explore student learning and related student outcomes as a result of the consolidation of the four districts into TRUSD. The important and compelling question regarding the consolidation of these four districts was: *What, if any, impact did the TRUSD consolidation have on student learning and related student outcomes?* This bounded case study used an explanatory mixed-method design to quantify the benefit of the TRUSD consolidation: first by comparing the data from key areas of student learning and related student outcomes before and after the district consolidation. Secondly, the study explored the question further by seeking to define the impact of the TRUSD consolidation on the students through qualitative interviews with district staff. The rich data sets followed by the corresponding qualitative narratives provided for more analysis of the data (Creswell & Clark, 2011).

This chapter defines the population studied and the description of the site. The research design and methods, as well as ethical considerations, were formulated and described in the remainder of the chapter.

Research Design and Rationale

This case study research used an explanatory mixed-method design. The bounded case study method allowed us to understand the real-life phenomenon that occurred in the consolidation of the four districts resulting in TRUSD. Yin (2009) described case study research as an all-encompassing method. It allowed for the design, the data collection, and the data analysis of this important study of consolidation. In Creswell (2007), it was

reported that a case study of a bounded system can either be focused on the case or the issue that is illustrated by the case. Merriam (1988) further discussed the bounded case study as an issue or concern that might be selected for research. Case studies provide a comprehensive understanding of the group under study through a combination of direct observation and systematic interviewing. The true strength of this case study was the variety of evidence including the student achievement data, documents, interviews, observations, and artifacts.

This case study guided the process in the collection of the pre and post consolidation quantitative data which was followed by interviews to clarify the data collected and provide perspective on the leadership of the district through the consolidation. The district data was collected through the California Department of Education (CDE) and included academic achievement, suspension and expulsion, enrollment and truancy data representing the four pre-cursor districts and the newly formed TRUSD.

The research was conducted with an explanatory mixed methods design of quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative approach reviewed and analyzed student and district data, comparing key areas of student learning and related student outcomes before and after the district consolidation. The student achievement data included the Academic Performance Index (API) from each of the four precursor districts from the 2004-05 through 2007-08 school years, then the subsequent four school years following the consolidation that occurred in July 2008. Similarly, the discipline, truancy, and enrollment data reviewed was from the precursor districts and the newly formed TRUSD for those same school years.

The qualitative component of the research was a case study approach that primarily entailed interviews with district staff. This multiple subject case study provided a holistic inquiry into the phenomenon of the consolidation of four districts to form TRUSD. The case study occurred within the natural setting of the TRUSD and was critical in order to consider the many factors that occurred in the district consolidation. The case study allowed in-depth research and detailed data to be collected in a bound system. Interviews with key district staff provided strong sources of information to assist in the overall picture of the consolidation of the four districts and the formation of TRUSD. In addition to interviews, field notes were kept as a log of potential interpretative details to be used in the data analysis.

The explanatory mixed-methods design of this research gathered both quantitative and qualitative data seeking answers to the study's research questions. As such, the design balanced an in-depth exploration of a range of quantitative with qualitative exploration of perceptions of teachers and administrators on the front lines of school district consolidation. Results emerging from this design amplified the impacts of the TRUSD consolidation and, potentially, informed district consolidation efforts in other settings.

Site and Population

Population Description

District staff consisted of teachers and administrators having been employed by each of the four precursor districts. The four teachers included one from each of the precursor districts and the administrators included four principals and four central office administrators who also worked in one of the four previous districts and continued to

work in TRUSD. The selection of four staff in each of the three categories of interviewees was determined to provide a balanced representation from each of the four precursor districts with all interviewees having experience both before and after the consolidation.

The four teachers included also represented each of the four precursor districts and continued to work in that capacity in the newly formed district. The group of teachers included representation from both the elementary and the secondary levels providing the balanced representation of each of the previous districts.

Site Description

TRUSD was developed in 2008 from four precursor districts with the goal of enhancing service to approximately 27,000 preschool through adult education students in northern Sacramento County (CDE, 2011). This relatively new district is an ethnically diverse district with a mix of urban and suburban areas, encompassing 120 square miles. The newly organized district employed 74 school site administrators and 1,525 teachers, with 2,952 total staff in TRUSD.

This study incorporated available student data from the four precursor districts and the subsequent data from the newly formed TRUSD and qualitative data from district staff. The student data of TRUSD was included within the broad collection of existing data available through the California Department of Education (CDE; 2011) DataQuest site. Students were not part of any further data collection or interview process. The students included in the achievement data were those that participated and were publicly reported through the Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) and represented approximately 18,000 students in the district.

Site Access

Access to TRUSD data or staff did not present with any specific issues. The student data was not personally identifiable and was public information accessible through the CDE website. Because the researcher was an employee of the TRUSD, general access to the certificated staff and data was available. To specifically access the four teachers, four principals, and four central office administrators in the TRUSD, a review of the request and questions to be asked were discussed with the district interim superintendent. Upon receiving approval from the interim superintendent, the district certificated staff were accessible through email and/or direct contact in the district.

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Research Methods

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Description of Methods

This bounded case study investigated in depth the consolidation of TRUSD using multiple sources of evidence. These sources together formed the basis of the rich explanatory mixed method design and in fact, helped to describe the phenomenon that resulted in the consolidation of four districts resulting TRUSD. The three key methods that formed this design included the quantitative data collection, the qualitative interview process, and the descriptive field notes which are described in detail in the following sections.

Quantitative data. The quantitative data collection involved gathering numeric data that included a review of district level data compiled and maintained by the CDE. The data included the base district API for each of the four precursor districts for the 2004-05 through 2007-08 school years and the TRUSD base API for the four years following the consolidation. Those years include 2008-09, 2009-10, 2010-11, and 2011-

12. Additional data reviewed included the district overall enrollment for the precursor districts and the TRUSD for the same years outlined above. The discipline data, which was specifically suspension and expulsion data, also followed this collection review available through the CDE. Additionally, the truancy data was collected through DataQuest (CDE, 2011) for the same four years prior and four years following the consolidation of TRUSD.

The number of participants included the number of students participating in the API for each of the district in each of the years reviewed. During the 2007-08 school year, the following number of students participated and were used for the calculation of the API in each of the districts. Del Paso district had 1,061 students included in the data set; Rio Linda district had 6,717; North Sacramento district had 3,190; and Grant High School district had 8,000 students included in the data set. In the subsequent years of 2008-09, 2009-10, 2010-11, and 2011-12, the newly formed TRUSD had approximately 18,000 students included in the data sets.

Qualitative data. Interviews were conducted with a total 12 participants including four teachers, four principals, and four central office administrators representing the four precursor districts in each interviewee category. This group of certificated staff had a range of teaching and administrative experience. The number of years in education varied, but minimally the staff had five years in the instructional field and represented a wide range of backgrounds and a cross-section of TRUSD. In each of the participant groups, there was one representative from each of the four precursor districts and the participants continued in that position in the newly formed district. The participants were invited to participate by an email from the researcher. After agreeing to

participate, a follow-up email was provided with descriptions of the process, location for the interview, and any other clarifying details. The participants were interviewed using a set of semi-structured interview questions designed to correspond and further explain the data collected through the quantitative research (see Appendix A).

The interviews were conducted with each of the participants individually by the researcher in a private setting at the district office or at a school site. The participants were assured full confidentiality. Prior to beginning the interview process, participants were informed more about the study being conducted on the TRUSD consolidation. They reviewed the participation statement and were allowed an opportunity to make an informed decision on their willingness to participate in the study. At this point in the process, the participants agreed to consent to participate in the interview and signed the consent form (see Appendix B).

Field notes. An important component of the data collection was the collection of field notes during the research phase of the study. The in-depth and detailed data collection from multiple sources provided for a wide-array of information to be analyzed. Field notes were kept throughout the process and analyzed as one of the artifacts collected in the qualitative portion of the study. According to Groenewald (2004), memos record what the researcher hears, sees, experiences, and thinks in the course of collecting and reflecting on the process. The researcher's notes included observational data as well as impressions and reflections specific to each participant interviewed.

Data Analysis Procedures

Quantitative data were analyzed to seek answers to the primary question: *What, if any, impact did the TRUSD consolidation have on student learning and related student*

outcomes? Additionally the research questions to be answered during this data

analysis include: How has the consolidation of four school districts into Twin Rivers

Unified School District impacted student learning? How has the consolidation impacted

related outcome rates of student attendance, suspension, expulsion, and enrollment? How

did district administrators lead the four merging districts and the resulting Twin Rivers

Unified School District through organizational change?

The data were analyzed to compare the precursor districts from the four school

years prior to the consolidation and the subsequent four years after the TRUSD was

formed. The years prior included 2004-05, 2005-06, 2006-07, and 2007-08 while the

subsequent years were 2008-09, 2009-10, 2010-11, and 2011-12. Analysis compared

student achievement data results from the base district API for each of the previous

districts. Trends in enrollment over the course of the consolidation were examined to

determine if the student enrollment remained consistent with the totals prior to the

consolidation or if the total enrollment increased or decreased in the years following the

consolidation of the district. Discipline data were analyzed over time as well, with

particular emphasis on the incidents of suspensions and expulsions reported prior to the

consolidation and in the following years of TRUSD. The truancy data were also reported

and represented students who were reported to be truant at least one time during the

academic year reviewed.

The quantitative data were all collected from the California Department of

Education (CDE). This descriptive study addressed the impact of the district

consolidation on the student learning and related student outcomes. In analyzing the

quantitative data, descriptive level statistics were utilized. The short time frame of the

data being collected lends itself to a descriptive study. The data collected and the changes noted in the data were represented in graphs.

Qualitative data analysis began with transcription of the semi-structured interviews and followed with coding of the participants' responses to the eight questions. Coding followed Creswell's (2007) spiral model that offered a good representation of the dynamic process that this study did undergo. It highlighted an iterative and systematic approach to data analysis that helped to ensure credible findings. The questions and their subsequent responses were organized by topic area to allow for further comparisons of themes and patterns. Themes were identified across the participant's responses. In addition to the analysis of themes within the participants' responses, the researcher analyzed the text for any further explanations of the responses or clarification of the themes.

Additionally, the field notes collected during the research study were a secondary data source in the qualitative analysis. The field notes allowed for a narrative analysis of the data collected. This narrative data was considered as a part of the themes and patterns that arose through the coding of the interviews. Considering the field notes furthered the richness of the qualitative data sets.

The qualitative interpretations situated the findings within the larger meaning and were compared and contrasted with the results of the quantitative analysis. The compelling question was answered after a thorough analysis of the interview responses. The themes and emerging structures of the qualitative reporting were contrasted with the fixed structures of the quantitative reporting to provide an overall analysis of the

information. The data collection followed by the participant interviews allowed for the

explanations to be fully analyzed yielding a comprehensive approach to the research.

Stages of Data Collection

This explanatory mixed method design involved two distinct phases of data

collection. The initial stage of data collection included a review of the CDE data

indicated in the introduction above. The availability of the data to be reviewed in their

entirety occurred by the spring of 2013. The second phase of the data collection involved

interviews with key staff members as described previously. The interviews were

conducted in late spring of 2013 over the course of a three week period to accommodate

for scheduling.

Table 1

Study Timeline

Dates	Data to be Collected
Spring 2013	Collected CDE data – API, suspension, expulsion, enrollment, and truancy data
Spring 2013	Interviewed district participants; collected field notes
Summer 2013	Transcribed interviews; began coding data
Summer 2013	Compiled and analyzed data

Ethical Considerations

This was an explanatory mixed-method study that quantified the benefit of the

TRUSD consolidation. Because this included both quantitative and qualitative data, it

required different considerations in the process. The quantitative data was accessed from the California Department of Education (CDE; 2011) DataQuest website. This was transparent and public data and presented no ethical concerns.

The qualitative component involved interviewing 12 school district staff. The researcher was cognizant of the importance of her role and position in the district as a member of the district cabinet. All efforts were made to assure the participants that there was no risk in participating in this study. The researcher did not include any direct line staff in the interviews. Consent forms were developed for the staff interviewed and all appropriate measures were taken to ensure the anonymity of the staff interviewed so as not to release any material of a confidential nature. All interviews were conducted confidentially and anonymity was provided for the interviewees and their responses.

Application to the Drexel IRB and subsequent approval from the IRB was completed prior to research being started. A letter of access was secured from the TRUSD's interim superintendent after approval from the district's administrative cabinet.

The study's purpose and the research methods used were of minimal risk to participants across the domains of social, psychological, economic, dignitary, legal, or physical wellbeing. The study's recruitment and consent process provided complete disclosure of the study purpose with specific details about participant privacy protection and anonymity for themselves and their position in the organization. Researcher contact information was provided to all study participants. Participants had the opportunity to provide feedback during the data collection.

Chapter 4: Findings, Results, and Interpretations

Introduction

The purpose of this mixed-method study was to explore student learning and related student outcomes as a result of the consolidation of the four districts into TRUSD. This bounded case study used an explanatory mixed-method design to quantify the benefit of the TRUSD consolidation: first by initially comparing the data from key areas of student learning and related student outcomes before and after the district consolidation. Secondly, the study explored the question further by seeking to define the impact of the TRUSD consolidation on the students through qualitative interviews with district staff. This multiple subject case study provided a holistic inquiry into the phenomenon of the consolidation of four districts to form TRUSD.

The qualitative process allowed for an in-depth understanding of the interview participants' perspectives and what brought them to their beliefs about the TRUSD consolidation. This approach furthered the understanding of the why and how the participants came to those beliefs. The interviews with key district staff provided strong sources of information to assist in the overall picture of the consolidation of the four districts and the formation of TRUSD. In addition to interviews, field notes were kept as interpretative details to be used in the data analysis.

Interviews were conducted with a total of 12 participants including four female teachers, four male principals, and four central office administrators – three female and one male. All 12 participants had worked in education not less than five years and worked in one of the precursor districts prior to the consolidation from as little as one

year to as many as 27 years. In each of the groups, there was a representative from each of the four precursor districts that continued in that position in the newly formed district. The participants were invited to participate by both a personal phone call from the researcher as well as a follow up email with further descriptions of the process, location for the interview, and any other clarifying details. The participants were interviewed using a set of semi-structured interview questions designed to correspond and further explain the data collected through the quantitative research. Each of the 12 interviews lasted from 20 to 50 minutes in length. Fictitious names were assigned to each participant to protect their identity. The pseudonyms used were as follows: teachers were Gina, Nancy, Delia, and Rita; principals were Rick, Nate, Dave, and Gary; and the central office administrators were Donna, Gilbert, Nadia, and Rhonda. These pseudonyms were completely fictitious so as to keep participant anonymity and subsequently were used to report the findings in the study.

The interviews were transcribed and coded following a process which required each interview to be deeply examined. The coding technique organized the data and provided a means to introduce the interpretations into segments. The word or short phrase suggested how to inform the research objectives. Themes emerged from the coding to generate findings that were analyzed and compared to the research questions.

Adding to the richness of the qualitative data, the quantitative data provided measurable information about changes that took place. Quantitative data was obtained including the base district API for each of the four precursor districts for the four years prior to the consolidation and the four years following the consolidation. Additional data reviewed included the district overall enrollment, suspension, expulsion, and truancy data

for the precursor districts and the TRUSD for the same years outlined above. All data sets accessed for this quantitative study were available through the CDE website within the publicly accessible DataQuest database. The data obtained were converted into Excel format to allow for further review and analysis.

Findings

Significant information was found in the experiences of the 12 TRUSD employees interviewed in the study. The impact of the consolidation of these four districts on student achievement through the eyes of the district staff provided a wealth of thoughtful discussion and the findings were rich with descriptive views of the consolidation. The unique experiences of the participants from before, during, and after the consolidation of TRUSD contributed to the reliability of the findings.

The researcher's shared background with the district consolidation engendered an engaging conversation between the researcher and the participants and was enhanced by the shared experiences. The researcher's knowledge, understanding, and experience in the consolidation contributed to the collection of rich descriptive data and to the reliability of the findings. However, the researcher consciously bracketed her experiences and biases during the data analysis in order to objectively analyze the experiences of the interview participants and have those experiences brought forward.

A number of significant themes emerged from the data collected. These are reported here as the study findings. Further discussion and conclusions of these themes is presented in Chapter 5. The themes of significance described here are: Focus on Data and Achievement, Creating a Seamless PreK-12 System, and Building Culture and Community.
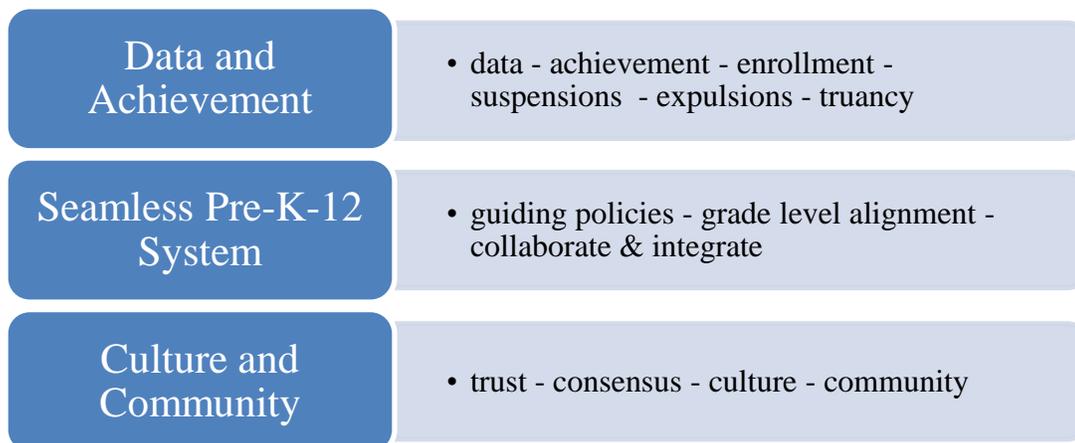
Data and Achievement	• data - achievement - enrollment - suspensions - expulsions - truancy
Seamless Pre-K-12 System	• guiding policies - grade level alignment - collaborate & integrate
Culture and Community	• trust - consensus - culture - community

Figure 2: Themes.

Theme One: Focus on Data and Achievement

A focus on data and instruction emerged as a theme across the participants interviewed. Teachers and administrators considered this focus one of the primary areas of emphasis in the newly formed district. The respective components of data and achievement were, in the minds of those interviewed, the primary goal of the district and the vehicle to improved student achievement.

Focus on data. Clearly, the participants felt there was a focus on data related to achievement in the newly formed TRUSD. The interviewees from all groups indicated data related to achievement was tracked and reviewed in a more organized manner than they had experienced in their precursor districts.

Teacher Nancy commented that "I like the way we are tracking student achievement and how we are analyzing data and applying it to instruction in ways we had not done previously. "It's much more organized and easier to get at" was a response from Principal Dave's interview. Prior to the consolidation, Dave said, "Basically we

kept track of our own data." The data system and staff to assist were a positive

outcome of the consolidation for Dave.

Principal Rick commented that "having a more refined data department that is

doing data is good and has led to getting a better look and more helpful data. The dialog

is beginning between grade levels about the data and high school folks are starting to

understand the work of elementary and vice versa." This ability to converse across grade

spans was a result of the consolidation of this pre-K-12 system.

Central office administrator Donna said, "Prior to the consolidation the district

was focused on student engagement and data driven." An emphasis on data analysis, the

development of goals, and a push with interventions was on its way a year prior to the

consolidation. Donna went on to share that TRUSD continued that focus on student data

and data analysis at the school sites.

Learning data were "a direct and laser-like focus" the first few years of Twin

Rivers Unified School District was the reflection of central office administrator Gilbert.

He further shared that "student learning through the transition period was the utmost

focus when we first became Twin Rivers and there was a laser-like focus in student

learning and that went all the way down the support staff, administrators, teachers and I

think our student learning the first few years of our Twin Rivers district was very thought

out and we did a very good job in improving student learning."

Focus on achievement. Beyond the discussion and learning to understand and

focus on the actual data, using the new data knowledge to focus on student achievement

was a guiding question in the interview process. A strong instructional emphasis on

student achievement was certainly evident in the interviews from teachers, principals, and

central office administrators. Words like "high expectations," "laser focus" and "rigor" were used throughout the discussions related to student achievement.

The interviewees identified the importance of data and achievement in the consolidation of TRUSD. To further explore the impact of the consolidation on student achievement, the research included the data sets gathered from the CDE (2011). These data sets added objective measures to the rich qualitative data gathered from the participants.

Achievement data. This additional aspect of the focus on data and achievement was to explore the data for the district representing achievement from before and after the consolidation. The data extracted from the CDE (2011) DataQuest site outlined the Academic Performance Indicator (API) data for the four years prior to the consolidation and the four years after the consolidation. The years noted on the charts in Appendix C represent the end of any given school year, so the year 2008-09 is shown as 2009.

As evident by the data gathered, the high school students have shown improved achievement as indicated with the API data from 643 to 665 prior to consolidation. There was a slight drop to 660 the first year of the consolidation which represents the 2008-09 school year but, then, there was a steady upwards increase in the achievement data for the TRUSD high schools with an API of 691 in the final year.

The middle school data shows a steady trend upward from the first year of the consolidation in 2008-09. They were making small gains in the years prior to the consolidation from 671 to 688 and did not experience a drop in the 2008-09 year, as the districts came together to form TRUSD. The most significant increase for the middle

schools was the 2011-12 school year. That year shows a solid gain of 22 points on the API from 705 in the 2010-11 school year to727 in the 2011-12 school year.

The third subset of data gathered through DataQuest represented the elementary schools in TRUSD. The elementary schools showed a significant increase from 735 between the 2007-08 school year to 751 the first year of the consolidation in 2008-09. Those gains continued in the 2009-10 school year at an API of 777 with an increase of 26 points. There was a slight decline in the two subsequent years, 771 in 2010-11 and 762 in 2011-12, but overall the gains are still well ahead of the pre-consolidation API scores.

When asked how the district maintained a focus on student achievement during the first four years of TRUSD, the interviewees discussed an overall district awareness of the data that was supported at all levels of the district. As central office administrator Gilbert said it, "the focus has always been on student achievement since the unification of Twin Rivers." Gilbert further clarified, "I think there were some assumptions that came in that each school district, all four school districts had their own issues and so the baseline was we were going to focus on student achievement regardless of the issues that were brought into the unification. So every time that we met, our mission and vision was stated in every meeting for the first couple of years."

Contrasting comments were shared by central office administrator Nadia who stated, "I think there was a focus on staying out of program improvement." Upon additional discussion with Nadia, it was shared that there was a "focus on student achievement in specific departments but not an overall leadership focus." Nadia clarified, "It is pockets, not a concentrated focus at the district level."

Adding to the discussion around student achievement was the viewpoint of central office administrator Donna. Donna discussed, "The first two years we were focused on student achievement, the use of data to drive instruction, decision making, and professional learning communities." Donna confirmed this with the following comments during the interview, "You know the focus on student achievement, closing the achievement gap, and data was certainly evident the first two years when we had the accelerated student achievement department." Following the first two years, Donna said "I don't know if there was a big push as looking at data as there was the first two years. It started to become spotty and there were too many initiatives."

A focus on students and closing the achievement gap was one of the guiding principles outlined by central office administrator Rhonda. "There were two things really guiding and that was closing the achievement gap and continued focus on closing the achievement gap and getting everyone on the same page so all our kids can." Rhonda further shared that "I think there was an expectation, at least I felt, that we were no longer divided and that they were all ours." Further noted by Rhonda was the policy to focus on middle schools, as this work was rolling out.

Site level administrators saw a focus on student achievement and the achievement gap. "I think that's what at the beginning was the commonality that we all shared, student achievement, test scores, and all that stuff so an easy way to bring us together" was clearly articulated by Principal Dave's interview, but similar comments were heard from others. Principal Rick commented that the district was "making sure we had up-to-date curriculum, standards based, and found a way to finance…" This theme of student achievement as a common focus and a shared target was echoed by the interviewees.

Teachers' responses to the interviews provided additional comments regarding the focus on data and student achievement but perhaps not solely because of the consolidation of the districts. Teacher Rita shared that "a lot of the meetings are driven on student data and testing data." Rita commented that "with the professional development we did allow us to get together with other schools and were able to share ideas." Teacher Nancy added, "What I was seeing at the time was a common language, shared focus, and helped to bring teachers together."

Focus on related student outcome data. A further component of the overarching focus on achievement was to gather data representing other aspects of student outcomes that may directly or indirectly align with student achievement. These additional areas of study included discipline, enrollment, and truancy data sets as well as responses from the participants in their interviews.

Interviewees were questioned about the impact of the consolidation on related student outcomes such as enrollment, attendance, and suspensions/expulsions. Teachers had a limited school site view of these areas and their responses reflected that. Teacher Gina felt, "as far as enrollment goes, we have been on a decline." Teacher Rita attributed it to a variety of issues, "some of that are boundary changes." Daily attendance of students had similar mixed responses. Teacher Nancy shared, "I know what is in place to improve attendance but I don't know that I noticed a big change at this point." Although Teacher Delia cited a change in the schedule at the school had helped to improve attendance sharing "much better attendance since we start each day with language arts. I contact the parents to tell them they are missing out on language arts."

Enrollment data. Enrollment was a critical component to consider in the research on the TRUSD consolidation. A drop-off in enrollment was occurring after elementary school with families choosing other school districts for junior high and high school. District leaders suggested in the campaign for the consolidation that having a preK-12 district would provide an alignment and seamless education for students and therefore families would remain in the district after the elementary grades.

The enrollment chart in Appendix C reflects the overall district enrollment. The year noted on the chart represents the end of any given school year, so the 2008-09 year is shown as 2009. The years prior to the consolidation are a combination of the four separate districts. The enrollment was declining prior to the consolidation of TRUSD moving from 25,287 in 2004-05 to 24,519 in 2007-08 but made a tremendous drop in the first two years of the newly formed district to a low of 22,981. Although the enrollment increased in the school years 2010-11 and 2011-12, it was still below any of the combined districts prior to the consolidation with a final enrollment of 24,195.

The district enrollment received the most comments from the central office administrators. As a group they were very aware of the enrollment issues and cited reasons for a focus on district enrollment. "The district enrollment was hemorrhaging kind of at that fifth/sixth grade level and people would leave to avoid the junior highs and high schools, mainly the junior highs." That was the reflection of central office administrator Rhonda regarding the enrollment issues that were occurring prior to the consolidation. "I believe that continued through the first couple of years of Twin Rivers." In referring to one of the precursor districts and the practice related to

enrollment, central office administrator Gilbert shared that "there was not an effort to retain students or to put anything in place."

Principals interviewed had a variety of responses to the areas of enrollment, attendance, and discipline. Principal Nate thought attendance was up, "we're one of the highest attendance in the district." Principal Rick felt we had lost ground on attendance and cited, "we stretched our district level staff a little too much to have good tracking of it." Rick went on to share, "I think budget reductions in general have made it more difficult for school sites to focus on that piece."

Truancy data. A focus on truancy as a measure of attendance was considered important as a factor to research in the consolidation. Truancy had been discussed by administrators to be a critical issue prior to the consolidation and was impacting student achievement. Measuring the truancy rates prior to and after the consolidation were important data to discuss.

The truancy chart included in Appendix C indicates the rates of truancy in the combined districts prior to consolidation and then the TRUSD data. The years noted on the chart represent the end of any given school year, so 2008-09 is shown as 2009. Truancy rates overall have increased from 21.80% in 2004-05 to 36.36% in 2011/12 according to the data accessed. This data is collected and reported by districts through the Consolidated Application process. In reviewing the individual district data prior to the consolidation, it is likely that the data reported through this process was not accurate. It is not known why the data would be questionable but in an informal review of attendance rates during these same school years, there is not the variance that is seen in the truancy data.

Suspension and expulsion rates were up and down based on the feedback from the site level administrators. Principal Rick cited, "I don't know if it's as much of a focus." Some cited lack of staff to really focus on strategies and interventions. Overall, Principal Dave commented, "as far as impact as to whether the rates have gone up or down. I really haven't noticed any change." Principal Nate found "That's been kind of up and down but one of our goals this year is to lower our suspension rate." Additionally, Principal Gary reflected, "and our suspension and expulsion rates have gone down. I don't know if it is attributable to any additional help from the district."

Expulsion data. Another element for study in this research on consolidation was the tracking of expulsions in all of the precursor districts and the data following the consolidation. Concerns were noted by the community in discussion during the campaign to consolidate about the discipline issues in the secondary schools. This factor was also discussed by some as a reason families left after elementary to attend other districts rather than the local secondary district.

To further present the discipline data collected from the district, the chart in Appendix C is the student expulsion data as accessed through the CDE. As with the previous API charts, the year noted on the expulsion chart represents the end of any given school year, so 2008-09 is shown as 2009.

The data clearly shows a significant decrease in expulsions post-consolidation. The drop from 2007-08 at 76 expulsions to 50 expulsions in 2008-09 was indicative of the efforts of TRUSD to offer alternatives to expulsions. The 2010-11 school year saw an even more dramatic drop to only three expulsions with a slight increase from 2010-11 to 2011-12, ending with 13 expulsions. Overall, the data supports the decrease in

expulsion incidents as a result of the consolidation from a high of 126 expulsions to a low of 13 expulsions.

Suspension data. Much like the discussion about expulsions, suspensions were also considered to be a large part of the concern by families and district officials as it related to overall discipline. The data before and after the merge from the elementary and secondary precursor district shed light on the issues of suspensions and the changes that occurred.

The suspension data indicates an overall decrease in the student suspensions from pre-consolidation at an average of 6865.25 suspensions to an average of 5459 post-consolidation. The variability in the numbers of suspensions is minor between the 2008-09 school year and the 2009-10 and 2010-11. There was a more dramatic drop in the 2011-12 school year as evidenced by a decrease of 2849. The average decrease in suspensions was 1406 from pre-consolidation to post-consolidation. The dramatic reductions in both suspension and expulsion rates cannot be explained by the minimal drop in enrollment.

Discipline also reflected a limited site perspective by the teachers interviewed. Some saw little change, others felt there needed to be more emphasis on behavior, and another suggested a principal change at the site had increased suspensions. Teacher Gina responded, "To be perfectly honest, that is one of the issues the district really does need to work on." Probably one of the more profound comments came from teacher Delia, "There is just more structure and the students feel that."

Summary of data and achievement. Focusing on data and achievement was clearly the bond that united the district as it moved from four unique school systems into

the unified system of Twin Rivers. The availability of data, the expectations of data

driven instruction, and the focus on student achievement were but a few of the consistent

messages heard throughout the interviews that linked into the theme of data and

achievement. Certainly a subset of the achievement focus, driven by data, and instruction

was the related student outcomes presented in the study. These outcomes of discipline,

enrollment and truancy furthered the rich data sets provided in this study.

To further the understanding of the consolidation, the interview participants

provided rich data on the importance of creating a seamless system. This was considered

an important factor prior to the consolidation as well as after the consolidation occurred.

The following section discusses the theme that emerged related to creating a seamless

pre-K-12 system in TRUSD.

Theme Two: Creating a Seamless PreK-12 System

Emerging throughout the study from the participants interviewed was the theme

of alignment across the district. The importance of creating a comprehensive district with

a seamless system from preschool through grade twelve resonated from the interviewees.

This focus on an integrated and well-articulated preK-12 system was emphasized in each

of the distinct groups of interviewees. The teachers shared that the articulation across

grade level configurations was critical to the success of their students and an important

avenue to student achievement. Administrators stressed the dialog that occurred across

grade levels and between grade school sites that furthered the effort to blend and unify

TRUSD.

Guiding policies. When interview participants were asked about decisions or

policies that district leaders used to guide the consolidation, the responses varied widely.

It was unanswered by some and brought out emotions in others. Some were just unaware of the decisions being made at the district level and others had observations from their respective vantage point in the organization.

Principals interviewed also shared a mixed array of views of the policies and decisions guiding the consolidation of TRUSD. Principal Rick responded, "I don't know, one level above me," while Principal Dave reported, "much more seamless." Some of their responses mirrored the teachers' responses. Dave who viewed the consolidation decisions as "more seamless" also went on to say that "I do know that one of the reasons behind it, justification behind it, was having the curriculum more streamlined."

Principal Nate observed, "The new Twin Rivers was much more flexible at the site level." Nate reported an increase in the site level decisions and less "micromanagement" from the prior district. He also noted "we do a lot more collaboration, school-wide collaboration, and much more data analysis." Nate elaborated on this concept by suggesting that since the consolidation "I see a more defined autonomy. They would set the parameters and let us work within them."

In comments from Principal Gary, the reflection took a different turn. Gary observed the district "mired in internal conflicts and dealing with various lawsuits" and as a result did not feel support from the district. Gary went on to say that "we felt even more kind of isolation from the district. And when we became Twin Rivers we saw the distance from the district office and didn't feel supported as much as we were." The comments from Gary were quite emotional and he suggested that some principals were "bad mouthed in the principal meetings and district meetings, it did hurt." The perception from Gary included, "I saw more and more hesitation among principals,

especially secondary principals to bring up issues because some principals were becoming targets just because they brought up issues."

Grade level alignment. While classroom teacher Gina observed "I think there was an honest effort to try to make everyone feel like they were part of this new district." Gina went on to share that "the superintendent and the district really tried to make us feel like we were all one." Further reflections indicated that this feeling didn't last and over time, Gina cited, "But over time we kind of divided into our own little groups, elementary as one and secondary as one." Gina did share that one policy that rolled out of the consolidation was the move to K-8 campuses and away from the traditional junior high sites. "I thought it could have been better organized than that but overall that was a policy that I really was positive about."

The alignment between the grade levels was seen as one of the decisions guiding the consolidation. Teacher Nancy shared the importance of this, "Bringing together a unified district so there wouldn't be a disconnect from elementary to middle to high." Nancy observed, "I think the biggest thing that stuck in my head from before, during, and after the merger was the alignment between elementary, middle, and high."

Teacher Delia did offer that there appeared to be a change in the role of the principal since the consolidation. "It seems like too many guidelines on the principals now." Delia shared "before we saw the principal more and now she is more involved in district meetings. She is so busy with paperwork." Additionally Delia noticed changes in areas such as stricter policies on discipline and student retention. "It seems like her hands are really tied. Like some teachers who have wanted to suspend students weren't allowed to or teachers wanted to retain students weren't allowed to, stricter policies around that."

Overall, the teachers interviewed had more limited comments related to decisions and policies that guided the consolidation. Many reflected they just didn't see that level of decision making from the school site level, although their responses were rather insightful. As with the other interviews, the question related to decisions and policies was a challenging one. The central office administrators also provided interesting and reflective responses to this question.

Collaborate and integrate. Central office administrator Donna said, "There were many task forces formed and many articulation meetings trying to bring all the leadership teams and district office, central office from the four districts together to formulate the beginning and the birth of this new district which I thought was an opportunity to start something fresh, new, and use all of the expertise and experience and knowledge." One of the critical tasks that was begun prior to the actual July 1, 2008, consolidation was to build a summer school program. "And it was great collaboration, great leadership coming all together planning all that." It was one of the first steps in creating a seamless system.

The integration of K-12 was further noted by central office administrator Nadia. "Initially, I think district leaders were looking at ways to integrate K-12." Decisions were formed around the influences of the four prior districts and their leadership. Additionally, it was clarified by Nadia that "I think community interests drove a lot of the decisions, community pressure, politics, many agencies involved, city council members, NAACP, community groups, the media, the Sacramento Bee, Board elections going on, all those drove decisions maybe more at that time than student achievement."

Summary. Providing a seamless preK-12 system in the new TRUSD was a clearly an emphasis as the district consolidated. Teachers, site principals, and district office administrators recognized the efforts to align and unify the systems. The articulation of the grade levels to move from the individual districts into the unified district was the reason for the creation of networks. The networks created an alignment preK-12 with the high school and the respective feeder schools.

The importance of data and student achievement as well as a seamless system in TRUSD were well articulated through the interviews with the participants. A third theme emerged in the process which brought light to the importance of the culture and the sense of community in the newly formed district. The following reports on the insights of the participants in this theme that emerged.

Theme Three: Creating Culture and Community

When the district consolidated, each of the four precursor districts brought forth their own unique culture. A significant goal in the formation to TRUSD was to create a sense of culture and community that represented the newly formed district. Within the structure of this study, the participants shared this theme of culture and community. The efforts that district leadership provided to create a TRUSD culture were articulated by interviewees. One question asked of all the interviewees addressed their views and observations of leadership strategies that focused on relationships and culture that facilitated the consolidation. As with many of the responses from the participating educators, there was much variance in their respective observations and thoughts.

Culture. Central office administrators all reflected on the array of meetings and activities that attempted to bring leadership together and build the culture of the newly

formed district. As central office administrator, Rhonda shared, "Quite honestly I think early on we spent a lot of time with consultants and caring for the culture but in all honesty, I think we left it too soon. The reality was that wasn't fully implemented or realized down to the site level." Rhonda went on to say "the stagnation we have kind of felt in years 4 and 5 is because the culture is being formed, it is not being cultivated," Rhonda continued, "so we still have a culture but what happened is the negative pieces start to seep in and it will become the norm unless we care for the culture again."

Central office administrator Gilbert also reflected on the efforts early on in the consolidation and shared "it was a positive time." Gilbert told about how the superintendent supported getting to know each other especially before making tough decisions. "At the beginning he (superintendent) was slow to make decisions, he was quick to seek out a recommendation or suggestion or ideas to accomplish certain things." The importance of seeking input and building relationships was evident to Gilbert in the first year or two of the consolidation.

It was clear that the observations aligned with the experiences that each interviewee had through the consolidation process. Central office administrator Nadia indicated that "Initially there was a retreat, a leadership retreat and we were all reading a book together as a building block." She went on to share that a climate committee was formed and sponsored some events to bring leadership together. "I don't think these initiatives took root to do what they were supposed to do; so much turnover and distrust. There was some trust building among the principals at the site level more so than at the district level," shared Nadia."

Team building and activities were also commented on by central office administrator Donna. "Initially we had a lot of activities and team building among the leaders. And it started with the task forces, a couple of events, conferences, and prior to the consolidation and after." Donna also shared there was a lot of talk about which prior district you were from. "It's more perception and more of the leadership."

Trust. Trust and loyalty played an important role in the decisions and policies of the consolidation according to the thoughts of central office administrator Gilbert. "In the very beginning, it was by design that the new superintendent built positive relationships around schools and so every school had a selected team." Those teams met monthly with the superintendent to develop the mission, vision, processes, and protocols with the help of an outside consulting agency. Gilbert viewed the process as "developing trust and collegiality as we moved forward as a new district." Further reflection from Gilbert brought to light the issues around politics and loyalty that was observed. "With a district as large as we are and with four distinct districts that came together, the woven fiber through the whole unification was loyalty to your prior district."

Teachers tended to be more pragmatic in their responses to leadership as it relates to culture. Teacher Delia felt positive about the consolidation "because we have more support." She shared that in the prior district things didn't get done if someone was out sick. "I remember one time in kindergarten I had a field trip scheduled and the bus didn't show up because the person was out sick." She further reflected that there are more staff to help get things done. "I remember being very excited about consolidating because there would be more resources."

Teacher Nancy saw active school board members as a positive experience. "The board members were coming to events on our campus. Administrative staff coming in and introducing the trainings offered by the district also helped build the culture. "Some of the trainings that were coming out to blend and unify us. When we did the customer service one, and trying to blend, not just the district but the community that we serve."

Community outreach was also reflected by teacher Gina as an opportunity to provide leadership around culture and relationships. "I do know our principal made a few attempts at, like, community outreach and things like that." Gina shared, "I have been to a couple of them and it's not well attended. A couple of parents at best show up."

Teacher Rita did not know of any specific leadership efforts that focused on the consolidation but stated, "I do feel like we have great people that work in the district." Rita reflected on the prior district and felt like much more had been done there. "Prior to the merge I felt much more like this is our district, a sense of unity, not so much anymore." Some efforts to bring district teachers together happened through the new language arts adoption and the professional development opportunities. "We did get together with other schools and were able to share ideas."

Consensus. Principals' perceptions regarding relationship and culture building strategies were wide and varied. Their experiences guided their responses to the question as they were interviewed. Principal Rick saw differences in how managers approached this critical piece. "Managers that were able to pull people from previous separated districts and put those heads together in constructive ways quickly around where they all agreed. They seemed to have a bigger impact on the whole. And a lot of consensus

building, if they were collaborative in their approach." Contrary to this collaborative approach, Rick did observe that others "were soloing a bit and still only connecting with folks that they knew." This approach made it more difficult for others to get things done and to be comfortable working with them.

"The district made an effort to get principals together and break up the different districts," shared Principal Dave. This was accomplished through various meetings and trainings. This elementary principal felt geography also played a role in the connections made by the principals. The networks that were formed to align K-12 allowed for smaller groups of administrators to get together to visit each other at the schools and share ideas. "I think the district has done a really good job of getting us together rather than figure it out on your own."

Principal Nate articulated the efforts of certain district office staff that "put a lot of time and energy into parent involvement, community involvement, and parent retreats." Nate felt this work supported the work that was also being done at the school site. Additionally, the training by the district on observations and teaching was helpful in bringing everyone together. "It was good to see the district move into that direction because I find it to be just a very useful tool."

The final comments on this question came from Principal Gary who shared that "There were some kind of exercises where we all got together to discuss great practices that we had from our previous districts that we would like to continue." Gary was certainly concerned by the negative comments made about the prior secondary district and the impact that had as an administrator from that district. "As a principal from the

secondary district, I felt discouraged when they were openly criticized or openly ridiculed in front of us."

Summary. Decisions and policies guiding the consolidation clearly reflect the positions and prior experiences of the individuals interviewed. Through the first couple of years of the consolidation, the district was also faced with economic downturn and a need to close and reconfigure schools. This work was significant in the shaping of the newly formed TRUSD and perhaps it is hard to sort out how things might have been different if the economy had been more stable through this monumental conversion.

Results and Interpretations

This research provided further insight into the complexity and challenges facing school district consolidations. All aspects of school district consolidation present with positive and negatives, whether it is the student achievement and related outcome data or the leadership guiding the process. Certainly the richness of the discussion and responses to the questions are evident with the teachers, principals, and central office administrators. Their openness and astute observations into the complicated consolidation of four very unique districts into one unified district creates a wealth of information to share and reflect upon. It is clear in the research completed for this study that consolidation issues are complex and polarizing. The leadership and the responsibility for garnering community support lies with the district superintendent.

The information collected through available data sources, interviews, and observations presents a broad and varied view of the efforts to consolidate these four districts. Themes emerged in areas of student achievement and it was clear that the

district leadership emphasized the importance of data and achievement and used these areas as a catalyst for the efforts of merging the districts.

Advocates of consolidation efforts have argued that consolidation provides a diverse, comprehensive curriculum, better facilities, better trained teachers, a broader range of extracurricular activities, and more diverse social opportunities for students (Howley et al., 2011). On the opposite side of the argument, it is suggested that smaller schools provide better activities and student support, reduced disciplinary actions, improved attendance, and improved student outcomes (Driscoll et al., 2003). The data gathered in this study will no doubt add to the arguments on both sides of the consolidation discussion.

Additionally, consolidation often is marketed to the public under the promotion of enhanced benefits for students (Howley et al., 2011; Nitta et al., 2008). This current research study considered any enhanced benefits for students by identifying key areas of student learning and related student outcomes and comparing the available data before and after the consolidation. Furthermore, the leadership provided through the consolidation and its impact on student learning and related student outcomes were studied through the interviews with staff.

The interviews and data collection focused on student achievement, related student outcomes, and leadership decisions and strategies guiding the consolidation. All three groups interviewed – central office, principals, and teachers – shared that a focus on data and student achievement was at the forefront of the work in the early years after the consolidation. There was a data-driven effort at school sites and at the district level with teachers and principals devoting much time to data tracking, review, and analysis in order

to make a difference in student achievement. Because of the consolidation, there was a dedicated data department at the central office, which was available to school and district staff to organize, disaggregate, and present the necessary information to the district, schools, parents, and community. Teacher Rita went so far as to say they are "bombarded at every staff meeting with data." The key data focus on student achievement in the newly formed TRUSD is a clearly identified theme in this case study.

Studies such as those conducted by Plucker et al. (2007) cautioned school districts in merging with the goal of improving performance. Their findings assert that there are no significant effects on school performance after consolidation. Further, Plucker et al. (2007) suggested, in part, that school tension between students and teachers in consolidated schools and districts may play a role in the lack of improved performance after consolidation.

As was evident in the interviews, a focus on student achievement was also a clearly defined theme with all respective groups' interviews. Teachers spoke of high expectations and an achievement focus, while principals also shared those same comments and expanded to include a "laser focus" on data and student achievement. There was no doubt in the interview process that the district maintained a strong focus on data driven instruction, high academic expectations, and increasing student achievement. When the API scores are analyzed for the years prior to and after the consolidation, there is evidence of this emphasis.

Additionally when Driscoll et al. (2003) explored school district size and student performance, they found that, in California in 1999 the larger district size had a negative effect on students' performance as measured by the API. Their study showed that

students in the larger school districts did not perform as well as students in smaller

school districts. That study provides for an interesting discussion point in light of the

data found in this current research.

With the consolidation of TRUSD, the district's size was significantly larger

overall. This increase in size impacted all four districts, as the expansion for at least one

was approximately ten times what it was prior to the consolidation. Further, this case

study explored the API data from before the consolidation to after and with that the

district's change in overall size.

The API results accessed through the CDE DataQuest site indicates that the high

school students have shown improved achievement as indicated with the API data. There

was a slight drop in the 2008-09 school year when TRUSD first consolidated but after

that year there was a steady upwards increase in the achievement data for the TRUSD

high schools. In 2010-11 and 2011-12 the scores exceeded those of any of the years prior

to the consolidation thus supporting the notion that the focus on student achievement was

paying off for the high schools.

The middle schools were making small gains in the years prior to the

consolidation. A slight increase in the first year of TRUSD occurred with the most

significant increase for the middle schools in the 2011-12 school year. That year shows a

solid gain of 20 points on the API from the 2010-11 school year to the 2011-12 school

year. Clearly, every year following the consolidation, the middle schools scored higher

in their API than in any year prior to the creation of TRUSD.

The third API data set reviewed for the study was centered on the elementary

schools. Overall, the elementary schools showed a significant increase between the last

year of the separate districts and the first year of the consolidation in 2008-09. Those

gains continued in the 2009-10 school year with an increase of over 20 points. With a

decline in the two subsequent years, 2010-11 and 2011-12 evident in the data, an overall

gain is realized and API scores are still well ahead of the pre-consolidation years.

Overall, the district API data at all three grade spans documented in study show

improvement over the years prior to the consolidation. This quantitative data supported

by the qualitative responses to the interviews supports a successful effort to improve the

student achievement of TRUSD students.

Related student outcome data, including discipline, enrollment, and truancy, was

discussed by all the participants in the interview process although it certainly did not

yield the strong comments like that of the student achievement area. Overall, staff at

most levels were neutral on these data points, but one principal clearly emphasized the

improvements in the attendance at his school and felt it had been a focus of both the site

and district. The data gathered through the CDE DataQuest site yielded a range of

information of the data points analyzed.

When reviewing the research on consolidation, it was noted by Harrison (2003) in

a review of student discipline cited a New Jersey study (as cited in Reilly, 2004) that

larger schools experienced more school violence and school crime. Additionally, Welsh

et al. (2000) – supported by a Philadelphia school study (as cited in Reilly, 2004) – found

larger school sizes may increase the number of student incidents and disciplinary actions.

When reviewing the expulsion data pre- and post-consolidation, the data clearly

shows the very dramatic decrease in expulsions. The drop from 2007-08 to 2008-09 was

indicative of the efforts of TRUSD to offer alternatives to expulsions. The 2010-11

school year saw an even greater drop with a slight increase from 2010-11 to 2011-12. The expulsions data is clearly demonstrating the decrease in student expulsions following the consolidation.

The suspension data, much like that of the expulsion data, indicates an overall decrease in the student suspensions from pre to post-consolidation. There is little variability in the numbers of suspensions between the 2008-09 school year and the 2009-10 and 2010-11, but there was a dramatic drop in the 2011-12 school year. The decrease in suspensions from 2010-11 to 2011-12 was approximately 2800 incidents. Again, the data suggests the newly formed TRUSD focused on decreasing rates of suspension and expulsion for students from the data in the precursor districts.

As noted in Howley et al.'s (2011) findings related to consolidations, they suggested that schools or districts that are too large result in diminished social performance for students and are associated with more dangerous school environments. The results of this current study would suggest that the consolidation of TRUSD has actually improved discipline at schools sites and the decreases in expulsion and suspension rates are evidence of this.

The enrollment data paints a very different picture pre and post consolidation. The data gathered for the study combined the four separate districts for the four years prior to the consolidation and indicated it was on the decline even before the forming of TRUSD. The enrollment made a significant drop in the first two years of the new district and even though enrollment increased in 2010-11 and 2011-12, it is still well below the total of the combined districts prior to the consolidation. The enrollment loss while

beginning prior to the consolidation continued in a steady decline even with the push to align the grade levels and keep the students in a seamless preK-12 system.

Finally, the truancy data indicates rates overall have increased according to the data accessed. There is some question by the researcher as to the accuracy of this data set, although it was accessed through the same CDE DataQuest site as other data presented previously. The truancy data is collected and reported by districts through the Consolidated Application (ConAp) process. In one of the prior elementary districts, the truancy data reported prior to the consolidation was suspect and indicated extremely low rates of truancy as compared to the other two elementary districts in the merger. The researcher believes that it is likely that the data reported through this process was not accurate but does not know why the data would be questionable. In an informal review of general attendance rates during these same school years, there is not the variance that was seen in the truancy data, although the attendance data is not available as such through the CDE DataQuest site.

Research presented in this case study on district consolidation supports that of Knoeppel et al. (2007). Their study suggested that the quality of teaching experiences will improve as a result of the consolidation process including greater disciplinary specialization, better articulation in expansion of the curriculum, increased collaboration, better equipped classrooms, fewer teaching preparations, and increased support services for students (Alsbury & Thomas, 2008; Hall et al., 2007; Knoeppel et al., 2007; Nitta et al., 2008).

The overall results for the data collected and considered in student achievement and related student outcomes is varied. Definite growth in achievement was shown in the

API data at all grade spans. Discipline has shown significant improvement as evident by the decreases in the expulsion and suspension rates in the data represented. Enrollment in the district has declined since the consolidation and, although showing some improvement, is still below pre-consolidation numbers. Finally, the truancy data is inconsistent. It appears that truancy is up in TRUSD based on the data collected, although this researcher questions the validity of the data represented by some of the precursor districts that was accessed by CDE through the ConAp.

While the student achievement and related student outcomes data was interwoven with rich responses from participants and the solid data accessed through the CDE DataQuest site, the leadership results are more complex to report. Although strong and flavorful discussions with the interviewees provided a wealth of information, it is more challenging to synthesize and interpret.

As might be expected, the leadership strategies and decisions made that guided the consolidation of the TRUSD were less apparent to those further from the actual operations. The teachers in the study were much less aware of policies that the superintendent and other district leaders implemented at the time of the newly formed district or in the few years following this critical juncture.

Throughout the interviews with the four different district teachers, their responses drew on their own experiences from the school site vantage point. Areas that were more real to them included the impact of resources and supports. Delia, the teacher from one of the smaller districts prior to the merge was quick to point out the increase in resources and supports in the newly created district. The world for Delia grew tenfold with the

consolidation which added staffing, departments, and systems that had not been a part of the prior small elementary district.

Other teachers reflected a loss in supports and resources, sharing that the increase in the district size and complexity made it more difficult to access support. They indicated decreases in staff and support services that had once been available to them in their prior district. Speaking of the prior district, one teacher reported when asked about the development of culture and relationships in the new district, "We did much more of this when we were the old district. More united, some of that has been lost. Prior to the merge, I felt more like this is our district, a sense of unity, not so much anymore."

Uniformly, the teachers saw the concrete changes brought about through district leadership as the new district took shape. All spoke about the alignment of the grade levels, preK through adult, and the importance of this seamless approach as a benefit to the students and families. This effort to blend and align the schools provided a critical step to unify the previous separated educational systems into one.

Another substantial decision guided by the leadership was a reconfiguration of some schools. Noted by participating teachers in the study were the changes in the grade level configurations of several district schools. In an effort to help control for the enrollment issues between elementary and junior high levels, the district leadership shifted some sites to a K-8 configuration, while others became fifth through eighth grade or sixth through eighth grade. The teachers and other staff interviewed in the study all cited this move as a significant leadership strategy. Resonate in this case study are indications that it is too soon to tell the impact of these grade-configuration changes on several school on district enrollment, but, clearly, leadership has had positive impacts.

As noted, Elmore (2000) suggested in the literature that leaders who think differently about the work and make significant organization and systemic changes may in fact promote improved achievement. The achievement of students in TRUSD has shown gains since the consolidation and these more organizationally based changes such as changing the grade level ranges of a school may be a factor.

Consolidation issues are complex and polarizing, and the responsibility for garnering community support often is assigned to the local district superintendent. The challenge of the consolidation of TRUSD was perhaps more complex than originally thought. The interviews with district office staff as well as school principals clearly pointed to some of these issues. While all spoke about the alignment of schools, grade configuration changes at some sites, and the strong instructional focus all decisions of the district leadership, they also pointed to other more negative aspects brought about through this unprecedented effort.

Administrators, both central and site level, clearly articulated the importance of the early efforts to build relationships and trust in TRUSD. Through task forces and other committees, the district developed a mission and a vision as key elements. Team building events and activities were designed to bring everyone together. While much time was spent to build consensus, others interviewed noted the concerns of soloing by some individuals or connecting only with those they had known from their previous district. Aligning in networks with the high school and its feeders helped to provide more personal connections for principals. The large and less personal TRUSD was difficult for some administrators who had come out of much smaller districts. The networks allowed the districts to have four smaller units and also supported the pre-K-12 alignments.

In a national superintendent survey, Alsbury and Thomas (2008) cited findings indicating that 86% of respondents favored school district consolidation. Even though the participants shared their views of the leaderships decisions and strategies employed to from TRUSD, all of them felt it was the right decision for the students of the community.

In their research, Nitta et al. (2010) interviewed students and staff to try to understand what happens "on the ground" when a district is consolidated. Their finding suggests that the students adapted better than the adults in the system. This finding was supported in the current study suggesting that leading through change often creates opportunities to achieve strategic objectives as an organization.

Summary of Findings, Results, and Interpretations

This chapter serves as an important segment of the research on district consolidation within the TRUSD. The mixed-method case study provided a deep look into the challenging yet positive aspects of bringing together four separate districts to form a new unified system. This study used interviews, observations, and publicly accessible data to shed light on student achievement in the wake of a school district consolidation and the leadership decisions guiding that process.

The data clearly suggested that the students in TRUSD benefited from the consolidation as evidenced by the increasing API scores at elementary, middle and high school levels. Decline in student discipline was also a factor supported by the dramatic decreases in expulsion and suspension rates after the consolidation of the district. Finally, although the other data measures of enrollment and truancy did not show positive gains, other factors may explain these findings.

Leading change in school consolidation requires strong decisions, well thought-out strategies, and the ability to question deeply held assumptions and long term practices. Providing varied school configurations, smaller networks, and other strategies to blend, unify, and consolidate were critical elements of the leadership process.

Analyzing the findings including interviews, data sets, and the participants' experiences were clustered into the three significant themes discussed in this chapter: (a) Focus on Data and Achievement, (b) Creating a Seamless PreK-12 System, and (c) Building Culture and Community. Conclusions and recommendations arising from the study findings and results are discussed in the following chapter.

Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

Introduction

For the past four years the Twin Rivers Unified School District (TRUSD) has been coalescing as the result of the consolidation of four districts that occurred in July 2008. The important and compelling question regarding the consolidation of these four districts was: *What, if any, impact did the TRUSD consolidation have on student learning and related student outcomes?* This study of the consolidation of the four districts and the creation of TRUSD offered an opportunity to look at aspects of consolidation that have had little or no attention.

Central to this research was a stated problem: The effect of school district consolidation on student learning is unknown and has not been thoroughly examined. Given the continuing consolidation of school districts and the national focus on student learning, knowing the impact that consolidation had on student learning is critical. The researcher sought to investigate this problem using a mixed method case study in an attempt to clarify the impact of school district consolidation on student learning.

This chapter presents the interpretations and conclusions that emerged from this study along with recommendations for actionable solutions. Chapter 5 begins with an integrated discussion of the main themes followed by a description of the essences of leadership in school district consolidation and the impact on student achievement.

Conclusions

The consolidation of four districts to create Twin Rivers Unified School District offered opportunities and challenges for students, teachers, administrators, and families.

The research questions for this study were aimed at and focused on the feedback of

teachers, principals, and central office administrators and how they viewed student

learning, related student outcomes, and leadership through their personal lenses.

Conclusions of this study are based on providing viable, meaningful, and effective

answers to each of the study's three research questions. The information collected from

district data, interviews, and observations have provided meaningful answers. The

research questions and discovered answers for this study follow.

Research Question One: How has the consolidation of four school districts into Twin Rivers Unified School District impacted student learning?

Without question the consolidation of TRUSD had a powerful impact on student

learning. The laser focus on data and achievement began immediately upon the

consolidation of the four districts and served as a guiding light for the district. It was a

common theme that everyone could relate to and support whether it was the teachers,

administrators, parents, or community. Even local political figures played a role in the

importance of student achievement in this newly formed district and saw it as pivotal to

the success of TRUSD.

While many changes in general procedures related to the overall operations of the

district occurred, an emphasis on student achievement was a significant focus. Staff and

families both expressed an interest in increasing rigorous academic opportunities for the

students. Students are the key consideration in any school district. We often ask

ourselves how the students are doing and measure that by looking at the achievement data

for the district. The consolidation of the four districts should, in fact, support the notion

that it was better for the students; that notion was examined by reviewing the

achievement data prior to the merge from the four previous districts and then

comparing that data to the student achievement in TRUSD.

Additionally, the API data reported by CDE indicated improved performance of

student achievement at all grade levels. High school and middle school students showed

scores well above those reported in the years prior to the consolidation. Elementary

grade levels had a big boost after the consolidation with a leveling off of scores; however,

the overall API is still above those reported prior to the consolidation.

**Research Question Two: How has the consolidation impacted related outcome rates
of student attendance, suspension, expulsion, and enrollment?**

The related student outcomes reviewed for this study included suspension and

expulsion rates, district enrollment trends, and truancy data. This data accessed through

CDE's DataQuest provided ample opportunities within this study to look at the data pre-

and post-consolidation. Both suspension and expulsion rates dropped significantly after

the consolidation of TRUSD. The emphasis on these areas and the need to offer

alternatives to suspension and/or expulsion provided an opportunity in the new district to

change how student discipline was managed.

District enrollment did not fare as well following the consolidation. The hope that

the new preK-12 system would help offset the "bleed" that occurred between elementary

and junior high did not happen. Enrollment overall declined from pre-consolidation

numbers and although has made some improvements since the deep dive in 2009-10, it is

not even at pre-consolidation rates.

Finally, the truancy rates from before and after the consolidation, offer little

information to guide the study. The pre-consolidation data is questionable and the overall

rates of truancy appear to have increased since 2008. This trend does not match with other attendance data available.

Research Question Three: How did district administrators lead the four merging districts and the resulting Twin Rivers Unified School District through organizational change?

District administrators provided an array of leadership efforts prior to the actual formation of TRUSD in 2008 through the following years. Initial leadership strategies included the development of several of task forces and teams with representatives from each of the consolidating districts. These task forces were charged with making recommendations in specific areas with a goal to create a well aligned and seamless system in the new district.

Another critical leadership strategy was creating a focus on student achievement. Leaders made it clear that the professional educators all had responsibility for all of the students and their success. Because student achievement was the overarching emphasis, it was something everyone could get behind to support. Student achievement was that one area that, regardless of grade level, prior district, or position in the district, had significant importance. The consolidation was based on improving student outcomes and the leaders made sure it was at the forefront. Leaders also provided the guidance for creating culture and community in the new district. Seeking input from principals and teachers, including all stakeholders, and caring for the TRUSD community were instrumental in the minds of district leaders.

Clarifying the impact on student learning and related student outcomes, since the consolidation of the TRUSD was an important story to tell. There were obstacles for all involved, but, given the underlying belief was that the students would benefit from this

consolidation, the stakeholders worked through the barriers. The high expectations and no-excuses approach to moving the new district forward articulated by the Superintendent, Cabinet, and the School Board were powerful. Increasing learning opportunities for students, building a culture of responsiveness, and focusing on students and families built the premise that students were better off in the newly consolidated district.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, results, and conclusions of this study, the researcher offers recommendations for improving practice in ways that address issues of school district consolidation. Given the continuing consolidation of school districts and the national focus on student achievement, knowing the impact that consolidation has on student learning is critical. Recommendations provided are intended to assist both the study site and similar institutions in promoting policies and practices supporting school district consolidation. Additionally, recommendations for further research are included in this section.

The recommendations are offered primarily based on the specific site and population, which were the focus of this study. Other institutions may benefit from implementing some or all of these recommendations. However, it should be noted that other school systems may have already implemented these, or similar, recommendations. Therefore, each recommendation should be considered for appropriateness within the various institutional contexts or populations that would be impacted.

Recommendations for Action

1. Keep the focus – The newly formed district must keep solid to its mission and vision and keep it at the forefront of the work. Staff, students, parents, and community need to see it, hear it, and repeat it as the unwavering focus on student achievement for ALL students regardless of the issues presenting themselves.

2. Less is more – Future district consolidations should select key high impact areas that have support from staff and community and move them forward with fidelity. Too many initiatives leaves room for error and burnout with staff that are already struggling with the impacts related to a newly formed district.

3. Celebrate success – District leaders providing guidance through the consolidation process need to celebrate the wide range of successes that occur along the way including student achievement, staff accomplishments, and community endeavors.

4. Support the culture – District leaders in the consolidation process should devote time and effort into establishing the culture of the new district and supporting it until it is clearly imbedded into the "soul" of the newly formed district. Failure to maintain the newly established culture may allow the strong but less favorable voices to re-emerge.

5. Value diversity – Consolidation leaders must find ways to be inclusive of all stakeholders in the process. Leaders should take adequate time, provide necessary resources to ensure all staff, families, students, and community have an opportunity to participate in the building of the new district.

Recommendations for Further Research

1. A longitudinal study of the impact of the consolidation on TRUSD would be beneficial particularly as it relates to the data on student achievement and district enrollment.

2. Research further into the ongoing leadership efforts considering leadership through the pre-consolidation, during the consolidation, the first few years after the consolidation, and then farther out to determine how leadership continued in the district.

3. Study district culture to determine if the factions from each of the precursor district continue to have influence or if employees truly become TRUSD and embrace it.

4. Further research on school district consolidation related to the number and type of districts that are brought together for consolidation at any one time, including determining if there is a recommended number and type of district that might more easily be brought together to form a new district.

5. Consider research to determine the ideal length of time the district has to plan and prepare prior to the actual consolidation.

Overall Summary

The potential solutions and recommendations in this chapter were discovered through the research process. The data collection tools – interviews, observations, gathered data sets, and document review – served as a means to state a problem, design a study, yield meaningful results, and produce concrete solutions to the problem.

The important and compelling question regarding the consolidation of these four districts was: *What, if any, impact did the TRUSD consolidation have on student learning and related student outcomes?* This study of the consolidation of the four districts and the creation of TRUSD offered an opportunity to look at aspects of consolidation that have had little attention. The research provided data that the students in TRUSD benefited from the consolidation as evidenced by the increasing achievement scores at all levels. Further evidence of the significant decreases in expulsion and suspension rates after the consolidation support the improvement in other student outcomes.

The consolidating of four districts was a significant challenge with unique obstacles for all stakeholders. Since the first day of the new district, staff, students, and families worked together to build the district that many fought hard to create. TRUSD succeeded in creating a district which positively impacted student achievement and student discipline.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Interviewer: Janet Balcom
Interview Participant #: _____
Date: _____
Time: _____
Location: _____

Interview Questions

1. What is your current position in TRUSD and what position did you have prior to the consolidation?

2. What district did you work in prior to the consolidation and for how long?

3. How does the student learning data differ before and after the TRUSD consolidation?

4. What impact did the consolidation have on other student outcomes such as student attendance rates, student suspension and expulsion rates, and district enrollment?

5. What decisions and/or policies did district leaders use to guide the consolidation?

6. Developing relationships and positive culture are important leadership activities. Describe the leadership strategies you observed that facilitated the consolidation.

7. How did the district maintain focus on student achievement during the first four years after the consolidation?

Appendix B: Consent Form

Drexel University Consent to Take Part in a Research Study

1. Title of research study: Leadership in School District Consolidation and the Impact on Student Outcomes - PROTOCOL NO: **1302001887**

2. Researcher: Janet Jones Balcom

3. Why you are being invited to take part in a research study

We invite you to take part in a research study because you are currently employed in the Twin Rivers Unified School District and were previously employed in one of the four precursor school districts.

4. What you should know about a research study

Someone will explain this research study to you.
Whether or not you take part is up to you.
You can choose not to take part.
You can agree to take part now and later change your mind.
Whatever you decide it will not be held against you.
Feel free to ask all the questions you want before you decide.

5. Who can I talk to?

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or think the research has hurt you, talk to the research team at Dr. W. Edward Bureau at 1-215-847-8183 or Janet Jones Balcom at 1-530-574-1156

This research has been reviewed and approved by an Institutional Review Board. You may talk to them at (215) 255-7857 or email HRPP@drexel.edu for any of the following:

Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team.
You cannot reach the research team.
You want to talk to someone besides the research team.
You have questions about your rights as a research subject.
You want to get information or provide input about this research.

6. Why are we doing this research?

The important and compelling question regarding the consolidation of these four districts is: What, if any, impact did the TRUSD consolidation have on student learning and related student outcomes? This mixed method case study will explore this question by identifying key areas of student learning and related student outcomes and comparing the available data before and after the consolidation. Student learning and related outcome data before the consolidation indicated some significant concerns, particularly in

achievement. Additionally, data on discipline and attendance indicated room for improvement in three of the four districts.

Framing this research will include review of the public accessible data available on the California Department of Education website on student learning and related student outcomes as a result of the consolidation. Leading through the change brought on by the consolidation and its impact on student outcomes is yet another key focus of this study.

7. How long will the research last?

We expect that you will be in this research study for 1-2 hours.

8. How many people will be studied?

We expect about 12 people here will be in this research study out of 12 people in the entire study nationally

9. What happens if I say yes, I want to be in this research?

Your participation in this research study is strictly voluntary. Should you agree to participate, you will be asked to engage with me in a semi-structured interview. The duration of the interview will last approximately one hour and will take place at a mutually agreeable location. The open-ended questions that will be asked during the interview session are those questions that will allow me as the researcher to comprehend your thinking, your individual experiences, and your assumptions as well as perceptions towards the impact of the consolidation on student outcomes and the role of leadership in the process.

10. What happens if I do not want to be in this research?

You may decide not to take part in the research and it will not be held against you.

11. What happens if I say yes, but I change my mind later?

You agree to take part in the research now and stop at any time it will not be held against you.

12. Do I have to pay for anything while I am on this study?

There is no cost to you for participating in this study.

13. What happens to the information we collect?

Should you agree to participate in the study, all reasonable steps will be taken to maintain confidentiality and to safeguard your identity as a study participant. Information gleaned from the interviews will maintained securely during the study period, and audio recordings of the interviews destroyed following completion of the study. Further, no personally identifiable information arising from your participation in the study will be shared with staff, administrators, or Board of Trustees at TRUSD. Findings from the study will be reported in aggregate so as to protect the identity of participants. Further, though I may have direct or indirect contact with you (prior or in the future) in my role as Assistant Superintendent of Special Education, Student Services, and Early Childhood Education, my role in this research study is separate and distinct. Your willingness or

refusal to participate in the study will have no bearing on current or future interactions we may have in my role as Assistant Superintendent.

14. What else do I need to know?

This study is being done by Drexel University.

Signature Block for Capable Adult
Your signature documents your permission to take part in this research.

DO NOT SIGN THIS FORM AFTER THIS DATE →	

Signature of subject	Date

Printed name of subject

Signature of person obtaining consent	Date

Printed name of person obtaining consent	Form Date

Appendix C: Achievement and Outcomes Charts

High School API Average by Year: Pre and Post Consolidation

Chart: High School API Average by Year showing vertical bars for 2005–2012. Y-axis ranges from 600 to 700. Legend: API Average by Year. Approximate values: 2005 ≈ 643, 2006 ≈ 636, 2007 ≈ 671, 2008 ≈ 666, 2009 ≈ 661, 2010 ≈ 669, 2011 ≈ 674, 2012 ≈ 691.

Middle School API Average by Year: Pre and Post Consolidation

Chart: Middle School API Average by Year showing vertical bars for 2005–2012. Y-axis ranges from 640 to 740. Legend: API Average by Year. Approximate values: 2005 ≈ 670, 2006 ≈ 681, 2007 ≈ 682, 2008 ≈ 688, 2009 ≈ 696, 2010 ≈ 699, 2011 ≈ 705, 2012 ≈ 727.

Elementary API Average by Year: Pre and Post Consolidation

Chart: Elementary API Average by Year
- 2005: ~715
- 2006: ~714
- 2007: ~716
- 2008: ~735
- 2009: ~751
- 2010: ~776
- 2011: ~771
- 2012: ~762

Legend: API Average by Year

District Expulsions by Year: Pre and Post Consolidation

Chart: District Expulsions by Year
- 2005: ~126
- 2006: ~80
- 2007: ~106
- 2008: ~76
- 2009: ~50
- 2010: ~48
- 2011: ~3
- 2012: ~13

Legend: Expulsions by Year

**District Suspensions by Year:
Pre and Post Consolidation**

**District Enrollment by Year:
Pre and Post Consolidation**

**District Truancy Rates by Year:
Pre and Post Consolidation**