



## Australian and International Journal of Rural Education

### URBANNORMATIVE REFORMS MISSING THE MARK: RURAL SCHOOL CONSOLIDATION IN NEW YORK STATE, USA

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#### Abstract

For close to fifty years, rural and non-metro counties in New York State have suffered economic and demographic declines. This paper examines the impact of urbannormative educational reform efforts on one community, and the continued crisis emerging after the consolidated district closed the elementary school. Using Discourse Analysis, two sets of voices are interrogated for their narrative during the crisis. The paper uses social and traditional media in an effort to uncover often ignored or forgotten voices who argue against the public, dominate narrative concerning rural educational reforms in the United States.

#### Introduction

In rural, upstate New York, an area loosely defined as communities from the Catskill Mountains north to Canada and west towards the Great Lakes, a demographic trend continues that multiple researchers (Fitchen, 1991; Johnson & Lichter, 2019; VanGundy, et al., 2016) described as an ever increasing out migration of young students seeking their fortunes and livelihoods elsewhere. As authors, including Carr & Kefalas (2009); Corbett (2007) and Weis (1990), have chronicled, rural communities are experiencing ever increasing impact from globalization. Schafft & Jackson, eds (2010) demonstrate how this mobility is increasingly jeopardizing rural areas, and weakening the social bonds that create an image of what pundits describe as quaint towns. New York State, as a subnational political division of the United States of America, is a tale of two areas. The New York City Metro (“*the city*”) located in its southern area dominates the state in many ways. In the region north of the “*city*” a number of medium sized urban areas, such as Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, Utica, and Albany form regional hubs that service large suburban and rural areas. Statistics from the National Census Bureau, the New York State Education Department, and local regional planning commissions identify almost half of New York as rural (NCES, 2014). Located within the State’s borders are two significant wilderness areas Adirondack and Catskill mountain preserves, as well as the middle reaches of the Appalachian Mountain range, a massive multi-state geographic feature that dominates the Eastern United States. Yet there is a strong “*urbannormative*” approach to policy by the state (Fulkerson & Thomas, 2016). In practical application, the concept conveys the ideals of an urban area are normative and accepted as default. Rural areas are therefore, considered different, and are in need of remediation to move reality closer to urban ideals. This paper, as explained below, questions the urbannormative approach by state government, and reports on the impact of those policies on rural communities.

## Background

During the latest United States recessionary period of 2008-2012, non-federal level political and educational leaders publicly and repeatedly called on local school districts to consolidate as a money savings measure, and a way to improve educational opportunity for students within their boundaries (Jakubowski, in press). Consolidation is the legal combination of two previously existing Local Educational Authorities (school districts) into a new agency responsible for educational activities within a defined geographic area (NYSED, 2015). The New York State Education Department indicates that two types of consolidation are prevalent in New York State: centralization and annexation. This paper, using a single exemplar case study (Stake, 1995), examines the voices which emerged when debating the closing of the smaller of the two communities' elementary school. In light of the 2016 presidential election in the United States, increased scholarly attention and research has focused on the rural (Harkins & McCarroll, 2019; Theobald, 2017; Wurthnow, 2019). Rural communities, especially in metro dominated states such as New York have increasingly felt isolated, ignored, and devalued.

New York, a sub national political division of the United States is located in the Mid-Atlantic Northeastern region. New York is home to significant agricultural and resource extraction areas, with the production of farm related products accounting for the second largest portion of the economy. While the New York City metro and suburban areas have thrived, the upstate economy has declined. A spoken tension between the “downstate” and “upstate” areas exists in the political, economic, and social dialogues across the state (Thomas & Smith, 2009). In a state such as New York, the yearly government budget decisions are subject to discussions and debate on how to best spend tax dollars on public goods and services. In New York, the total 2019-2020 proposed budget is \$176 Billion dollars (US). The New York City metro area generate significant portions of this income. The upstate area receives significant aid in the forms of grants and educational transfers, creating divisive feelings between regions.

Education expenditures constitute \$27 billion. New York State directly aids almost all of its nearly 700 independent school districts. The aid ranges from a small percentage of a school district's overall budget to a significant percentage of smaller, poorer schools in rural, upstate areas. In 2008, the “Great Recession” affected smaller, poor school districts in significant ways. New York State's legislature created a “gap elimination adjustment” reducing promised aid increases to dependent districts who could not raise revenue through tax increases (Jakubowski, in press). Simultaneously, the state also implemented a limit on local school district's abilities to raise local property levy, or taxes, by a complex formula that changed approval from a simple majority of voters to a super majority of voters. The state also empanelled three commissions to study how to reduce the overall tax burden in the state, the highest in the United States. All three commissions called on local, small, and poor school districts to consolidate (Jakubowski, in press).

In rural areas across New York, local communities felt under attack- their economies had stagnated for almost twenty years, resulting in significant population losses. The schools, now also under attack, were community economic and social cohesions, and in some instances, the only source of employment in many areas. Lyson, (2002); Sipple, et al., (2019) both examined how critically important small rural schools are to communities in New York State. Tieken (2014) found rural schools in many ways define a community in research conducted in Arkansas. With the loss of population, economic activities, and now official state government calls for school consolidation, some communities honestly felt as if their very existence was in jeopardy (Steele, 2010).

## School Consolidation Process

New York State has established a multistep consolidation process to study two questions. First, would consolidating the two districts improve the fiscal efficiency of the educational process for both communities? The second question asks if a consolidation would improve educational opportunities for residents in the area (NYSED, 2015.). The Boards of Education, composed of elected residents from a school district area, will decide if they wish to pursue a consolidation study with a geographic neighbour. The two districts will then hire a consulting group to run the consolidation study and conduct a myriad of data analysis required by State Education department. Usually the state representative of the area will assist the districts in applying for and receiving state funding assistance to pay for the study.

The consolidation process involves the selection of an advisory committee, composed of residents, staff, and administration from the two districts. The committee meets with the consultants and examines a wide variety of data about the two districts. The committee examines fiscal data including tax revenue, state aid, and potential grants. The fiscal data under committee purview includes staffing levels of administration, teaching, and support staff. Contracts between bargaining units and management staff are compared between the consolidation partners and regional averages. Bussing, building usage, and tax rates in each affected community round out the examined fiscal data.

The committee also examines in detail the curriculum and state test achievement data to determine how a consolidation would alter the “*given reality*” of what the two districts have accomplished alone previously. Usually extracurricular activities and enrichment programs which were cut by the districts previous rounds of budget crisis are described and identified as potentially restored under a consolidation.

Finally, the committee examines each of the school district’s demographic data. Exploring birth rates, in and out migration, as well as ethnic groups, language diversity and socio-economic status of each of the communities paints a picture for the communities about what their schools look like, and what a new district, if created, will represent.

After the report is completed, the data and information is then sent to the New York State Education Department for review. If the report indicates that tax rates will fall in at least one community, and educational opportunities for students will improve, then the report is approved and a vote is scheduled to determine if the two communities support consolidating. This advisory or “*straw*” vote is the first of two votes that must pass in both school districts if the consolidation will take place. A second, or binding vote, officially creates the new district and determines the composition of a new governing board of education.

New York State has supported school district consolidation since 1958, and after the initial success of consolidating small rural one room districts into centralized schools, there has been a significant lack of success in consolidation attempts. Since 2015, only two out of almost 10 attempts have successfully consolidated districts (Jakubowski, in press). There are a wide variety of reasons why these consolidations fail. Research conducted internationally and nationally in the United States have identified some trends.

### Why Consolidation fails

National rural research has found three themes emerge in defeating consolidations even when state governments support the policy (Jakubowski, in press). First, many communities do not wish to lose their schools as the institution forms the basis for identity. Community members hold the school as

the central focus for the area, and are attached to the efforts which the school undertakes to make residents feel a part of the group. Second, many communities do not support consolidation because they will lose an institution which is directly under their control. Economically, politically, and socially, schools in the US, and New York, reflect the values held by community members. Residents are able to exercise control over tax rates, policies, and curriculum to some extent in local schools. For many areas, consolidations will result in tax rates increasing, even if the purpose of consolidation was to lower taxes. Third, residents often do not see how a consolidation will directly benefit them, or their children. For many, the idea of a longer bus ride, or bigger classes, fewer extracurricular opportunities with more children or higher paid administrators or teachers is a lose-lose proposition.

## Methods

This study focuses on using one exemplar case study to describe the voices which emerged during the debate on implementing an urbannormative policy solution in a rural area of New York State. The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2014) classifies the district under review as rural. Using Stake's (1995) Exemplar Case Study approach, this paper selected one school district composed of two previously independent school districts who had experienced a consolidation processes during the 1998-2000 time period. In this example, an assurance had been issued by the larger of the two districts to the smaller one guaranteeing the continuation of an elementary school in both communities even after consolidation. As part of this study, local newspapers and social media sites were identified as potential resources for source materials. The materials were then downloaded into multiple Microsoft Word documents.

As a way to support the case study research, and as part of a broader dissertation (Jakubowski, in press) research program, Gee's (2014) Discourse Analysis formed the basis for reviewing and understanding material presented in the reports and sources concerning consolidation. Discourse Analysis is the process of determining the context behind language and its uses. Gee (2014) makes it quite clear that conversations, and word choices have meaning in context. By examining media reports, as well as the informal online discussion boards concerning the school consolidations through Discourse Analysis, this paper intends to shed some light on what White & Corbett, eds (2014) call the paucity of research into rural areas. Partially a goal of this research paper was to broaden the research into rural areas, but to also allow the unheard voices to tell their story using their own lens and understanding of the events from the consolidations. These unheard voices often emerge in what Scott (1990) calls a "*hidden transcript*" of discussion emerging away from elite members of the community. This task was accomplished in the coding scheme used to identify discussant's points. After first identifying the overall topic of the source materials sub topics were then identified. Two levels of coding occurred: a general, topical coding scheme, and then a specific, example based coding level. An example is shown below:

*With a heavy heart and a lot of anxiety on some of the board members, I think, and parts of the community, yes, we made the decision to bring all of our students here on the (main) campus and to be one school. (ET, 2012)*

The first level of coding I identified is the general topic, which I describe as student placement. The second level of coding within this quote is the negativity emotion ascribed to this administrative action. By having identified the two levels, student placement, and negative emotion, I then could reflect upon the urbannormativity of the situation: the superintendent's explicit citing of one school on one campus. This idea translates into the urbannormative understanding proclaiming bigger is better. Gee's (2014) Discourse Analysis of this quote leads me to believe that the language used by the superintendent is indicative of someone who wants to convey the narrative of understanding the

feeling of loss to the community. Critically, the discourse also reveals the idea that the decision did not sit lightly on board members, and they empathise with community members who feel loss and question the decision making process.

### **Theoretical framework**

This paper uses the theory of urbannormativity as its foundation. Defined by two sociologists, (Fulkerson & Thomas, 2016) the definition is illuminating:

*The basic idea that this entails is that urban life is normal and desirable and thus the standard, while rural life is deviant and abnormal as compared against the urban standard.*

Examining this definition, and the theory which has emerged from works created by many rural scholars, the case studies within this article, and the broader field work conducted on rural school consolidation begins to reveal that to the people in rural areas, rural is normal, and the urban demand for reform by bigger school districts is dissonant to what is lived and experienced.

As researchers have discussed with the sudden attention paid to rural areas (Theobold, 2018) and the increasing rebuttals to stereotypical views on rural areas (Catte, 2018) when a researcher examines a rural area, the research is about ...one... rural area. Rural areas are unique, and are not different. Rural people exist as they choose to, and should not be “othered” due to the urbannormativity of school reforms. The three case studies examine within this paper try to give voice to areas which are still, even with the increased attention on rural areas, ignored, due to the simple chance of geography that their towns exist within a metro dominated state in a metro dominated region of the United States.

### **Personal Connections**

My selected case study emerges out of my personal teaching experience. Schulte & Walker –Gibbs (2016) identified self-study and rural education as a combination resulting from the reality most rural researcher’s experience- they have been in rural places, by birth or by profession. As White & Corbett (2014) report, most rural educators and researchers have deep personal connections to rural- through lived experiences. And so I add to this research tradition by telling my own story. I also now switch to the first person, because I lived and experienced these events, and it forms a very real influence on my research.

#### **Case Study 1: History and narrative**

In late 1998, my first community for case study found itself in the midst of yet another consolidation study. Having attempted at least three other consolidations in the last two decades, the almost annual “dance” of a “Reorganization Study” was underway in this first community. I will label this community as “LV” for the reader’s ease. A small district of not more than 270 students in grades kindergarted-12, the LV district had been born in the 1946 after the centralization of the area’s twenty three common school districts. The Master Plan for School District Reorganization (NYSED, 1958) then called for LV to explore consolidation with its neighbour to the north, a district I will call “C”. During this particular study in 1998, I became a member of the teaching staff in LV and would stay with the district until the end of the school year, when I relocated to Central New York for family reasons.

District LV was considering consolidation for a couple of reasons often cited in research literature. First, its population was small. Due to the enrolment size, the LV district had difficulty offering an expansive curriculum like the larger suburban schools. The district was able to provide some advanced classes, but in 1998-1999, there were few internet options for distance learning. Students

who went off to regional liberal arts colleges and community colleges reported some success with schooling, but the standards movement was on the horizon, and meeting heightened requirements would be difficult with limited staff.

A second reason LV district engaged in consolidation was the financial incentive the state offered consolidated districts. The State Education Department, and the State Legislature promised to every successfully consolidated two financial incentives. The first incentive was an increase of 40% on the combined state aid for the two districts for 15 years following the enactment. With rural communities struggling to finance education, the money from the state would help reintroduce lost programs, and restore some lost positions. Second, building aid to remediate some of the ageing infrastructure is part of the consolidation promise. The newly constitute district could receive an increased reimbursement rate of almost 95% on all construction related costs, including building a new physical structure to meet the needs of the new population. For an area of the state struggling to maintain its 1930s Works Progress Administration building, which was land locked in the middle of the village, and a neighbouring community, C with a rapidly aging school campus, the building aid would provide much needed resources to correct deferred maintenance. The increased state aid and increased building aid were two areas frequently cited in the consolidation study as positives to enact this reorganization of the district.

As the 1998 school year moved on, a straw vote showed both communities were in favour of a potential consolidation. The binding vote was scheduled. Children, community residents, and anti-merger protestors greeted teachers and staff in the morning outside of the school waving “(Mascot) Pride!” signs and “Save Our School” with chants reminiscent of other protest movements. Editorials, letters to the editor, and radio reports concerning the consolidation were daily artefacts in the local news sources. The regional large city press also published stories on the consolidation progress. The straw vote, overwhelming in LV for consolidation, was equally met with lukewarm approval in C, set to annex our district, and make the territory and student’s part of a greater Local Education Authority. One promise within the consolidation study was the maintenance of classes for elementary children at their “home school” once the consolidation happened in the village of LV. A second promise of the consolidation study was the election of designated community seats for the newly formed Board of Education. After these promises, and data, on declining tax rates, and increased incentive aid, and new educational opportunities made public for a final time, the scheduled statutory vote occurred. The results were a defeat.

The larger, annexing community, or C, defeated the consolidation by a slim margin. In LV, the vote overwhelmingly approved consolidation. Some members in LV felt devastated, others were overwhelmed with joy. As the school year continued to move along, cracks in the school community began to show, and a number of new teachers, including me, resigned for personal and professional reasons. Personally, the story ends here, in the summer of 1999, but for my first community, my first home, the saga continued.

In the fall of the 1999-2000 school year, C removed its sitting superintendent and sought a new leader. Its board selected our superintendent to serve as the interim, while waiting the state mandated 366 days from the previous statutory vote to hold a new ballot. This time, the second time, the merger passed in the larger community, and in July of 2000, a new district was born. The newly constituted district created and enacted plans to move staff and students in grades 6-12 out of LV’s home campus and onto the larger campus. Plans and schedules emerged to upgrade the buildings on both campuses. One constant the smaller community held onto was the promise from the larger school board was the continued existence of the elementary school in the village.

## Economic Crisis

After 10 years, as the consolidation aid declined, as expected, and continued population declines became evident, the new district transferred upper elementary students out of the LV elementary school to the main campus. Continued population declines, and retirements by teachers from the district meant more classroom teacher positions disappeared. In 2008, a “*perfect storm*” arose in education in the state, as Sipple & Yao (2015) reported, with the state’s education budget hammered by the “*Great Recession*.” Two major policy issues combined to batter upstate rural communities.

First, the state implemented a 2% tax cap on local municipalities to prevent budgets from continuing to grow. New York State is one of the highest taxed states in the union, and tax rates, especially in the form of school funding, are seen by some business advocates as a deterrent for population and business growth in the upstate area (Jakubowski, in press). The New York State Legislature, on the urging of Governor Andrew Cuomo, passed a cap which limited the ability of local municipalities to pass tax increases on a simple majority vote. Rather the new policy required a supermajority of voters to approve any tax increase above 2%.

Second, the state implemented a withholding of promised aid increases by introducing a Gap Elimination Adjustment, or GEA. The GEA reduced the amount of state aid districts would receive from the government to cover expenses. School districts had budgeted for full implementation of promised aid in past contract negotiations and expenditures, so the change in income meant many schools were facing a deficit, and New York State does not permit deficit spending by government entities.

By 2012, as the economy was still faltering, with local tax revenue and state aid levels still lagging, the school district began to explore the possibility of closing LV’s elementary building. The firestorm was immediate. For residents in the LV community, the outcry was one of shock, anger, and indignation. Using traditional media, and social media outlets, residents expressed their feelings towards the school board and administration’s proposal to close the school as a way to eliminate the budget deficit.

At the April 2012 board of education meeting, the school board voted to close the LV elementary school building. Locally residents appealed the decision to close the elementary school to the Commissioner of Education in New York State. In state education law, the Commissioner may rule on any appeal (also known as a §310 for the subsection of state law) from the field on actions of any public school official. The resident filing the appeal claimed that the action by the school district violated the assurances from the larger community from before the merger, and the 2007 referendum on the status of the elementary school. The Commissioner, finding for the school district, dismissed the appeal out of hand, both for failure to provide correct information, and due to a lack of standing by the petitioner. The building closed, and students assigned to the main school district campus.

## Analysis

What were some of the themes emerging from the online and traditional media discussion of the proposal to close LV’s building? Using Gee’s 2014 Content Analysis as described in the methods section, two themes emerged: betrayal and logical understanding. As Dr. Hal Lawson once said, “*How can you describe with cool dispassion something that to the actors is intensively blazing?*” In this instance, there can be no real dispassion in relaying the words of the residents who thought a promise was made from one neighbouring community to another one.

### **Voice 1: Betrayal**

As the superintendent of the combined district stated to a newspaper in another region of the state discussing consolidation, “*The biggest challenge was for the adults.*” (PS, 2007). It is evident from Facebook contributions, and letters to editors that residents within the former LV school community were displeased with actions the merged Board of Education were undertaken.

*with the capitol project coming to a conclusion, i can say, we look forward to the return of our K-6, i hope to hear that it will happen this year,, however the pieces have been put in place to protect the interests guaranteed the former [school], adjoiment (sic) and all.*  
(Facebook- July 22, 2011)

The community did not like the elementary students taken out of the village, even for a short time during a building project. The Face book page also repeatedly brought to follower’s attention the payroll transparency resources available to community members. In a August 17, 2011 post, the page directed readers to the seethruny.com website, a conservative organization publishing every public employee’s salary and retirement information for the state. The Facebook page also added links to New York State’s ethics laws, and links to other conservative sites, including The Empire Center for New York State Policy and Unshackle Upstate, a group which advocates for reduced taxes and repealing laws in order to boost the Upstate region’s economy. On Feb 17, 2012, the page published a partially legible document purporting to be a copy of the August 24, 1996 Board of Education resolution from the larger of the two communities listing the six promised assurances from the one school board to the smaller one.

The Facebook page then linked on February 24, 2012 to the New York State Commission on Local Government Efficiency (Jakubowski, in press). The commission, empanelled by the Governor, had recommended that local government spending, especially in school districts, was too high to sustain, and had negatively impacted the competitiveness of the state against other, lower taxed states. The panel recommended a series of reforms, including a tax cap on local governments, and reorganizing local school districts. On February 28, 2012, the page indicated that the local school district was exploring an additional consolidation study with other schools in the region. The page indicated “*greed has no shame*”. This post may refer to the increase in salary and benefits administrators, teachers, and support staff received after the first consolidation. The issue raised on line, and in other areas calls into question the compensation levels professional educators receive (Cheng, et al., 2018; Jakubowski, in press) with more conservative leaning individuals indicating teachers are payed too much. The perception that public employees are paid too much in rural areas is a central finding in Cramer’s (2016) research in rural Wisconsin.

In a post dated April 16, 2012, the page reported that the Board of Education voted 5-2 to close the elementary school as a budgetary measure. Comments following that post included one expression of anger: “*Not even cool! This is total crap!*” On May 4, 2012, the Facebook page re-published the six assurances from the larger community. One respondent stated: “*It reminds me of most Indian (sic) Treaties.*” This statement requires significant analysis.

For the purposes of this paper, I will refrain from using “*Indian*” unless it is in a direct quote. Rather, I use the identifying phrase “*Native American Nations*” in recognition of the history and culture the peoples continue to have to the present in the United States (Blackhorse, 2015). The history of the United States contains significant and repeated examples of negative interactions between state and the national governments with the sovereign Native American Nations who inhabited the North American continent before the European contact and extermination period began. New York State is home to one of the largest, and most significant Native American people, the Haudenosaunee

(NMAI, 2009). As European settlers and the state and federal governments representing the United States moved west, the representatives negotiated treaties that theoretically enshrined promises between the governments and the Nations. These treaties were all too frequently abrogated, broken, or ignored (Hauptman, 2001). These frequent, and devastating abrogation destroyed many Native Communities. The reference to treaties in the statement may also be relevant due to the closeness of a Native American Nation's sovereign territory to the community which lost its elementary school. This point is also similar to the history of European- Aboriginal relations in Australia (Maynard, 2007) where colonialists removed and abrogated treaties with Aboriginals. Similar patterns occurred in Canada (Henderson, et al., 2009) with significant and profound impact on Native Nations.

The comparison of a school closing to the abrogation of Native Nation treaties is a false equivalency. A school, while central to a community, is just a building. Its closing should not be in any way equated to the loss of life, or culture, or abuse, which many Natives suffered at the hands of state and federal, and unregulated militia groups. While a person from the smaller community raised this false equivalency, it does indicate that residents felt betrayed by the larger community, one with greater power and leverage over the realities of education within the smaller community.

As additional documents and letters appeared both online, and in the press, the Superintendent and Board of Education issued statements which addressed the closing of the smaller elementary school in the other community:

*With a heavy heart and a lot of anxiety on some of the board members, I think, and parts of the community, yes, we made the decision to bring all of our students here on the Cattaraugus campus and to be one school. (ET, 4/20/2012).*

In this quote, the superintendent expressed the idea that board members and the community were experiencing anxiety. The quote states to the public the extreme feeling of uneasiness among board members and the community over closing the campus. As elected officials, Board of Education members receive blame from community members over tax rates and school based contracts. As Board members negotiate contracts in the United States in union states such as New York, contracts include working conditions, pay, additional benefits such as health care and retirement agreements.

For many rural residents, average pay and benefits are usually quite lower than educators, and there is anger expressed about this reality (Cramer, 2016, Jakubowski, in press). With this situation, closing a beloved campus in a smaller community coming at time when pay and benefits appear to the "average" voter as higher than should be, the Board Members expected, as expressed by the word "anxiety" indicates, conflict over this decision. This is especially poignant with the idea that the Board actively broke a promise to the smaller community. The promise to keep the building open for the foreseeable future was seen by many residents as critical for pushing the smaller community to vote yes on consolidating. Turning now to the other major theme, logic, my case study shifts from the passionate defence of the smaller community's school to the rationale for closing the building.

### **Voice 2: Logic**

As Fulkerson & Thomas (2016) describe in their work on urbannormativity reform efforts, a rural district is inefficient. While the passionate voices argued betrayal, the logical voices used numbers and data to describe the closing as efficient, thereby aligning with the greater urbannormativity reform efforts. The superintendent and the media both promoted the ideas of efficiency, in addition to programmatic benefits the school district would experience by shifting resources away from the smaller school to the unified campus.

The first logical point made by district leadership was the size of student population.

*Out of a total student population of 1,054, the move will affect about 145 students in grades three, four and pre-kindergarten currently attending school in [the smaller village]. Since last year, students in grade five have been housed in the [larger community] campus' new addition, along with kindergarten and grades one and two. (ET, 4/2012).*

Examining the above quote, the superintendent places an emphasis on how few of the total student population will be disturbed. The superintendent also points out that transitioning students away from one campus to the unified campus has already begun. The superintendent later is quoted as saying “*We’ve been undergoing change ever since the district consolidated in 2000*” (ET, 4/20/2012). This quote further reinforces the notion that change is inevitable, and change in education is equated with reform. Reform in education is seen often as improving, and as Theobald (2015) reveals, the urban based reformers have, as a goal, always supported bigger and more urban like schools.

The next quote I wish to examine in this case study involves the use of statistics to justify the closing of the smaller campus. The superintendent states:

*Our enrollment has dropped about 18 percent since the time we consolidated. At the time we consolidated and whenever the board started making plans for the facility, we never would have been able to fit everyone into this (larger community’s campus) building. Now, we fit no problem. (ET, 4/2012)*

Within this specific quote, the superintendent indicates the continued decline in population, and the relative ease of “fit” within the existing larger campus are justifications for closing the school and transferring students to the larger campus. By the standards of urbannormativity, a bigger campus is better. If space exists on the larger community’s campus, it needs utilization as efficiency in spending, efficiency in use, and efficiency in general are all considered hallmarks of “good schools.”

The final quote that supports the urbannormative approach of this case study is the identification of savings from moving students from the smaller campus to the larger campus. As the article reports, the move will save the district \$250,000 dollars in the budget. An additional \$200,000 was saved by redirecting the money from technology upgrades of the smaller campus. Within a \$23,000,000 dollar budget, the moves, including keeping positions vacant due to the change in location, the changes saved the district 2% or the equivalent of the tax cap limit imposed on the district.

### **Summary**

After successfully centralizing the smaller one and two room school houses surrounding their village in the 1940s, LV’s newly unified status was constantly called into question from 1958 until in 2000 the district finally merged with its neighbour, as called for in the 1958 Master Plan for School District Reorganization. The community members of LV believed that they had received an unbreakable assurance from the larger community, that even in the event of a successful merger, LV would always have a functioning elementary school in their village. In 2012, the merged C-LV school board agreed with the district administration assessment that the smaller school needed to close, in order to reallocate fiscal and human resources in a more “efficient” way. Two strands of voices emerged, betrayal and logical. Those representatives of people feeling betrayed compared the closing of their school with the horrific disregard the American Government had for Native American Treaties. The broken promises led to an unsuccessful appeal to the Commissioner of Education, who dismissed the appeals for procedural and merit reasons. The voices of logic used historical trends and data to show

that change is constant, and the smaller school needed to close. The logical voice was tempered with an emotional admission of “anxiety” over this action. However, logic won out.

### Discussion

Within this case study, betrayal and logical voices emerged to argue for and against closing the LV community school, just over a decade after the district consolidation with the larger community, C. While only eight miles apart, the psychological difference over the issue of the school revealed a Grand Canyon-esque difference. This case study clearly demonstrates the urbannormative approach adopted in a metro-centric state, even in the areas of rural policy. Urbannormative policies supported “*bigger is better*” as a goal, with the school system valuing efficiency over other values from the smaller of two communities. As Parshall (2019) described rural community’s physical structure:

*looking inside [the school], we see the daily interaction of the community and provision of services which, while seemingly mundane, are essential to the daily life and well-being of the residents... Abandoned [school] facilities, on the other hand, provide a tangible glimpse as to why residents fear dissolution. These empty places, stripped of their signage, stand as evidence of community decline or failure. (p. 10)*

The greatest fear many residents of a small rural community held came true in this mountainous valley in the declining southern tier of New York State, they had failed their children: the local school closed. Now, another community, once a great rival, would physically hold the location of their children’s education. For many established residents who had graduated from the school, had volunteered at the school, had experienced many of life’s folkways in the school, it was gone, all for the urbannormative reform of efficiency.

For national and international work, the demand for efficiency which emanates from the capital of the nation will not work in the rural areas, with decades of values and systems which are dependent on localness and relationships. The modern economy and government, built on routines, laws, regulations, will need to recognize and honour uniqueness in rural areas. The urban reformers, who for almost a century in the United States, have called rural education deficient (Biddle & Azano, 2016), and demanded mergers as a policy solution will need to re-think their stubborn insistence on consolidation as the “*silver bullet*” to what ails rural education. In reality, what ails rural education is similar to what ails urban education: a poorly constructed system starved of needed resources.

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