

AN EVALUATION OF STAFF CULTURE
DURING AND AFTER A SCHOOL MERGER

by

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ABSTRACT

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This qualitative research study sought to evaluate the merger of two schools in terms of the staff members' pre-merger and post-merger perceptions in an effort to identify best mechanisms in which two schools can successfully merge and create a positive climate among staff following a declining enrollment trend. Participants in the study were veteran staff members who had established collegial relationships and were comfortable with established procedures within their schools prior to the merger. Staff perspectives were obtained by utilizing an online survey that contained both Likert scale and open-ended follow-up questions. Additionally, several staff members participated in personal in-depth interviews. Results showed that teachers who were blended into the new school desired focused leadership, clear school procedures, and collegial time in order to create a common culture. Participant recommendations included bringing in an outside mediator to facilitate staff and department meetings along with providing sufficient time for groups to discuss curriculum and school policies prior to the first day of instruction as a mechanism for fostering unity.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Education has been influenced by numerous trends throughout the history of the United States from educational reforms that separated students into grade level cohorts to changes in policy in order to provide academic equity for all. The educational system has undergone transformations as needed to keep up with a changing society.

One current dilemma that some districts encounter occurs when they are faced with a declining enrollment trend. Factors that contribute to declining enrollment include a decline in local employment conditions and population shifts. Because school funding is directly tied to enrollment numbers, districts that experience a chronic declining enrollment trend also experience fiscal difficulties. When encountering such a trend, districts must make difficult decisions. Because of the connection between student enrollment and funding, the district's and subsequently the school's fiscal stability are imperiled. Under these circumstances, school boards and districts have to find ways to distribute their dwindling funds that are a direct result of lower enrollment figures in their schools. The decision is never easy.

Following local debates and public comment, and after weighing their options, some school districts opt to consolidate or merge schools to preserve

funding. When the decision to merge schools is finalized, most districts lack a process for combining the staff of the merged site.

District decisions are based on fiscal needs, and many senior administrative personnel overlook the impact of the consolidation on the staff members themselves. Prior to any merger decision, seniority lay-offs are a first attempt for school districts to achieve financial viability. When this attempt fails, the staff who remain and who will invariably be affected by the combining of schools are veteran teachers. This makes the challenges of fostering a common culture between two often very distinct school cultures difficult. Without a plan and a guideline, the merger of two staffs who already have ingrained procedures and attitudes can make for a painful and confusing transition.

The district in which I was employed, as well as several others in the county in which I worked, was impacted by a declining enrollment trend resulting in the merging of several local schools. I established that there was a need for determining the processes in which an administrative team could create a positive culture among staff at a merged school site. I thought the study had the potential to benefit other districts and school personnel across the country that are faced with similar circumstances.

The United States has been influenced by several declining enrollment trends through the decades (Ellerson, 2008; National Center for Educational Statistics), yet little information exists within the literature on how to foster a positive climate for veteran teachers who experience a significant shift in their work environment during

a merger. In addition, information is lacking that would aid school or district administrators in the process of fostering a positive culture.

Chapter Two provides an overview of the literature by first reviewing the historical background of middle schools. It also discusses the impact of declining enrollment on schools and districts, along with the options they have in order to deal with the fiscal pressures that result. The chapter concludes with coverage of school culture and climate.

Chapter Three explores the methodology of the study, beginning with the implementation of the research itself and the compilation of the data. It includes the rationale behind the development of the research question and defines the process of developing a mixed method study that included an online questionnaire and follow-up interview questions. School profiles are included in the chapter to help ground the study in the school community in which the research was conducted. Additionally, the process by which I solicited participants for both the survey and online questionnaire are explained within the chapter. Finally, Chapter Three reviews the processes in which the data were recorded and analyzed.

A summary of the results from both the online survey and the follow-up interviews are included in Chapter Four. Results taken from both the online survey and the follow-up interviews are organized by the questions posed to participants. Results from the online survey were aggregated in order to determine positive and negative trends in relation to developing positive climate among staff. Survey participants were encouraged to follow up each question with clarifying comments. I

grouped themes and recorded them for analysis. Additionally, several members from the merged staff agreed to participate in follow-up interviews. Results from the interviews were once again combined into common trends and recorded for analysis in Chapter Five.

The analysis of the data is presented in Chapter Five in which the experiences of the staff involved in the merger are reviewed and analyzed in order to determine staff perceptions prior to and after the merger. Teacher, support staff, and administrator perceptions of the merger reveal evidence as to how to implement a merger with the least amount of negative impact on a staff and ultimately their student clientele.

Chapter Six offers conclusions and an exploration of the limitations of the research. Finally, specific recommendations relating to the process of developing a system that would support a merging staff based on the results of the study are noted along with implications for further research.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

From a denominational church based system to a state administered tax based system, education has made a variety of transformations in the United States. One type of change encompassed the school's configuration by separating the one-room multiage schoolhouse into elementary, junior, and high schools. Through these configuration changes, the middle school concept took hold and has developed into an integral part of many districts.

While every configuration has its challenges, the middle school poses some unique ones due to its middle position where grade levels and staff can and are moved from elementary or high school sites into the middle level school. Since public education in the United States is now funded based on student enrollment, a school's student population has a significant impact on the school's financial resources. During a trend of declining enrollment, schools or districts decide on how to cut costs. Extra-curricular activities, classroom resources, and staff are usually the first to be cut in order to balance the budget. In cases of chronic declining enrollment, schools are closed and merged.

With any merger there are hurdles for the newly combined employees. They need to develop professional relationships with each other and within the organization. This can be challenging if the culture of the two merging schools is

vastly different. In light of these challenges, this review addresses the climate and culture of schools in order to reveal the barriers a merging staff might face.

History of Education

North America's educational heritage began in Europe (Cordasco, 1976; Cubberly, 1920). From this beginning, it developed along with the culture of the country from the colonial period to today. Each era in the United States brought reform to the educational system; each reform brought new challenges and ideals to fuel the purpose and focus of education in the U.S. From the influence of early European educational practices through the development of the educational system in the New World, the challenge of educating the youth of the United States has evolved from charity systems to publicly funded systems. The formalization of education termed the public school was implemented and subsequently has undergone a variety of changes that parallel the political and social changes occurring in the country.

Charity school forerunner of the public school

The charity school developed to educate the poor in both urban and rural areas (Jeynes, 2007). The urban charity school was comprised of a system of free denominational schools with a focus on reducing poverty and crime along with teaching Christian morals and the three Rs: reading, writing, and arithmetic (Altenbaugh, 1999; Jeynes, 2007). Typically rural charity schools were conducted in a hastily erected cabin where traveling teachers with limited skills would come to educate the pupils (Reese, 2005). The charity school was developed in order to offset

families' lack of ability to educate their children at home (Jeynes, 2007; Spring, 1994). Many reformers believed that there was a moral breakdown occurring among youth, and they wanted to keep society's youth off of the streets (Jeynes, 2007). The charity school paved the way for the United States to move toward a more comprehensive and accessible schooling mechanism; however, it would take decades before the country adopted the common free school (Altenbaugh, 1999; Kaestle, 1983).

The development of the common school.

The American common school was initiated in order to promote social stability through establishing a common ground for youth (Reese, 2005). The schools formally appeared around 1830, and by 1860, all states had some form of common school (Cubberly, 1920; Power, 1991). In a country that was democratic, reformers cried out that the citizens needed systematic training that would promote social and moral values while ensuring a greater opportunity for everyone (McClellan, 1999; Reese, 2005). Horace Mann, among others, was a proponent of the common or free school (Spring, 1994). He advocated for a school that was taxpayer supported and whose focus was to educate youth in morality, as well as the three Rs (Jeynes, 2007). His argument stemmed from the widening of class divisions following the Revolutionary War and the increase in social unrest (Reese, 2005). He also advocated that mass education would create social improvement within the country (Spring, 1994). In promoting the vision of the common school, he advocated that the school would not be common due to its inferior nature such as the

charity school, but rather be a place that was good enough for the wealthy and affordable enough for the poor (Altenbaugh, 1999).

Some of the social and educational developments that stemmed from the common school were more unified textbooks and age-grading systems in urban areas (Spring, 1994). More citizens began to accept the idea that taxes would support schools, which had been a long running debate between local and state authorities (Reisner, 1922; Spring, 1994). In addition, the United States adopted the policy of having states monitor the progress of their schools and financial allocations through a system of educational administrators (Altenbaugh, 1999; Reisner, 1922).

Development of high schools.

While the first local publicly funded high school was established in Boston in 1821, the United States did not embrace the concept for the general population until much later. There were approximately 24 high schools in the country in 1840, and it was not until after the Civil War that there were a significant number of high schools in the United States (Cubberly, 1934). In fact, it took a Supreme Court case, commonly known as Kalamazoo, in 1872 to establish that tax money could support a high school (Cordasco, 1976). By 1890, 7% of 14 to 17 year olds were enrolled in high school, and by 1936, 65% of the same age cohort were enrolled in high school (Cubberly, 1934; Reese, 2005). This trend was partially due to increased technological advances, stronger child labor laws, and greater parental influence stemming from the lack of jobs during the Great Depression (Reese, 2005). Since that time, high school has become an integral part of the educational system of the

United States; four-year high schools were established to serve students in a variety of capacities including expanded technical training, college preparation, curriculum, fine arts, and business training (Glass, 1927).

With the continuum of education reaching into grade twelve, reformers looked to find a way to better serve the needs of students and society. Educational leaders began to work toward a more comprehensive system that could meet the needs of adolescent students. The answer to the problem was to establish a new educational configuration, the junior high school.

Development of Junior High Schools

There is no exact date that determines when the junior high school developed. It appears that several came into existence during the first decade of the twentieth century (Lounsbury, 1984; Moss 1969). One junior high school was initiated in Berkley as a laboratory of democracy program in 1909 while others were established in Ohio and New Hampshire in 1908 and 1910 respectively (Cubberly, 1934; Lipsitz, 1977). While many others claim to be the first to implement the junior high school, there is no debate that it came into existence and was rapidly adopted (Lounsbury, 1984; Moss, 1969).

The junior high or intermediate school was a consciously planned educational system that developed over time and utilized a variety of models. The rationale behind restructuring the eight-grade elementary school into a 6-3-3 or a 6-2-4 where grades kindergarten through sixth were in an elementary school, grades seven through nine were in a junior high school, and grades ten through twelve were

conducted in a high school. Other schools would use a kindergarten through six model with a seventh and eighth grade junior high school and a four year high school consisting of grades ten through twelve; arguments for changing the configuration from the K-8 model included fewer dropouts, more diverse instruction, increased vocational training, and expanded opportunities for socialization (Lounsbury, 1984; Moss, 1969). Junior High advocates argued that older students needed a structure where they could explore their own aptitudes, so they would be better equipped to make choices about their future in the world of work (Glass, 1927).

Function of the junior high school.

One key function of the junior high school was to be a bridge or transition between the elementary and the high school; it was meant to keep students from leaving or dropping out of grades 7 to 10 when most elementary type models could no longer challenge or address the 11 to 15 year old students' academic and developmental needs (Judd, 1916). Proponents of the junior high school also claimed that for economy of time students could receive more complex content, so they could complete high school and college at an earlier age (MacIver & Epstein, 1992; Moss, 1969). The junior high was also meant to provide a variety of services for adolescents such as improving discipline, varying curriculum, and providing a venue for socializing the youth of the country (Glass, 1927). By offering such subjects as home economics, business, industrial arts, languages, music, and art to this age group, the junior high school could entice grammar school graduates who had completed their compulsory education period into secondary school (Briggs, 1920).

This would produce students who would be better equipped to determine their future in society and become employed in a variety of occupations (Cuban, 1992; Judd, 1916).

Along with the junior high school functioning as a bridge, keeping students enrolled, and eliminating facility overload, it also was viewed by many as an experiment in moral, technical, and vocational education. Others felt that the junior high should function as a check on the physical, mental, and moral evils that come out of the adolescent period (Lipstiz, 1977). Many proponents of the junior high school felt that the adolescent was unique and had different educational needs than an elementary or senior high school student (Cuban, 1992; Lipstiz, 1977). However, even with recommendations from many educational experts, the junior high school did not meet many of the goals advocates set.

From the 1930s to today, junior high schools continue to be a part of the educational system (MacIver & Epstein, 1992). Whether or not they are deemed successful depends on to whom one speaks to in the field of education (Moss, 1969). The junior high has accomplished a variety of educational reforms such as keeping more students in school, diversifying curriculum, and providing limited vocational training (Cuban, 1992; MacIver & Epstein, 1992). Several deviations from the original purpose of the junior high school included teachers having control of both the design and direction of classroom activities, classroom teachers doing most of the talking, student testing consisting of a recall of isolated facts, and hours of seatwork for students (Cuban, 1992). The educational climate for 10 to 14 year olds that

reformers started out to create had turned into a mini version of the senior high school (Cuban, 1992; Moss, 1969). Key elements such as vocational education disappeared along with guidance counseling by teachers (Cuban, 1992). In response to the trickle down of the senior high school into the junior high model, the middle school movement emerged.

Rationale for middle school.

Each educational reform has had its proponents, and in the early 1960s a set of educators cried out for change in the junior high school system (Cuban, 1992). The call was to form a school where 10 to 14 year old students could learn in ways that matched their maturation level (Cuban, 1992). These new schools would serve students in grades 5 or 6 through grade 8. Students in grade 9 would be moved back into the senior high school to better prepare them for college entrance (Moss, 1969). Since the elementary school focused on children, and the high school focused on adolescents, the middle school movement was created to meet the needs of pre-adolescents (Moss, 1969). The primary goals were to address the rapid physical and mental changes that pre-adolescents experience (Juvonen, 2004; Moss, 1969). In light of these goals, the middle school movement gained ground in the United States.

The first middle schools appeared in the early 1960s, and within two decades they had grown to 4,329 (MacIver & Epstein, 1992). By 1977, middle school administrators were stating that middle school was a program geared specifically to the social, psychological, moral, and intellectual needs of early adolescents (Eichorn, 1975). It was not created as a mere bridge between elementary and senior high

school, but rather as means to improve our educational system (Juvonen, 2004). One key argument to the change in configuration was to provide a more stable environment for students to develop healthy social and academic habits (Pulliam & Patten, 2007). Middle schools were to utilize such practices as interdisciplinary teams, discovery and inquiry methods of teaching, teacher advisor plans, and flexible scheduling (Alexander, 1995; MacIver & Epstein, 1992). By utilizing these mechanisms, the school could foster a sense of academic purpose and personal commitment for students in order to attain their own educational goals (Juvonen, 2004).

Yet with the challenges of overcrowded facilities, lack of teacher training, and minimum grade standards, the aim of the middle school movement has fallen short of creating a unique system that is designed to meet the needs of the child in the middle (Alexander, 1995). Middle level institutions still struggle with being the place in which districts fix their facility and enrollment problems (Juvonen, 2004). As a result, many middle schools are junior high schools in practice and middle school in name alone (Alexander, 1990). Even today, districts are changing their configurations with some returning to the K-8 model to best meet the needs of the culture of their district (Pulliam & Van Patten, 2007).

Enrollment

Public schools in the United States have grappled with fluctuating enrollments throughout the second half of the twentieth century, and the shifting tides have ebbed and flowed for many districts into the first decade of the twenty-

first century (Ellerson, 2008). Enrollments have varied from the mushrooming student populations that peaked in the 1950s to their decline in the early 1980s and back into the climax of the mid-1990s (Bishop, 1979; National Center of Education Statistics, 2008). Public school enrollment in the country is projected to set new records every year until 2017 (Ellerson, 2008; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2007; NCES, 2008). Yet even with the recent projections appearing positive, many geographical areas in the country are impacted with declining enrollments, and districts can continue to expect enrollment figures in various regions to fluctuate as population and economic changes occur in urban, suburban, and rural America (Cook, 2004).

Declining enrollment.

There are a variety of factors that contribute to a declining enrollment trend in schools and districts. Birth rate, aging populations, in migration, housing trends, alternative educational settings, and land use all have the ability to impact enrollment in a district. A key factor contributing to loss of enrollment is changing birth rates (Bishop, 1979; Lapkoff & Gobalet, 1997). Birth rates in the United States peaked around 1990 and have dropped through the end of the decade (Lapkoff & Gobalet, 2004). This birth rate spike can be explained by looking at the grandchildren of the so-called Baby Boom era; these students are considered to be part of the echo boom generation (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). These echo boomers migrated from urban to suburban areas in order to bring up their families (Cook, 2004; Unknown, 2000). Once the children of the echo boomers were no longer of public

school age, suburban neighborhoods suffered from lack of pupil registration in their elementary schools. (Cook, 2004). These aging populations in neighborhoods that were once dominated by younger families contribute to low enrollment figures in suburban areas because without housing turnover, young families do not have the option to move into neighborhoods (Cook, 2004; Jimerson, 2006). Housing costs and availability impacts enrollment as well because most young families tend to locate into an area with affordable housing, and young families contribute pupils to neighborhood schools (Lapkoff & Gobalet, 1998). Additionally, some locations that have employment for parents may lack adequate housing facilities for families; therefore, families settle in neighboring areas or counties and commute to work (Ellerson, 2008; Schwartzbeck, 2007).

Some school districts are affected by in-migration in which families move to other parts of town to find better neighborhoods or high quality schools (Ashton & Buescher, 2003). Recession related migration impacts school enrollments as well (Lapkoff & Gobalet, 2004). Sometimes families move to other states or regions to find employment, which results in a loss of pupils for many districts in areas suffering from economic downturn (Lapkoff & Gobalet, 2004). Along with housing and migrating families, private and charter schools are taking a bite out of public school enrollment figures as well (Stover, 2006). As more and more educational options become available, parents who are worried about district stability and/or school decline, move their children into other educational facilities (Cook, 2004). No Child Left Behind mandates and schools of choice impact public education by

allowing parents several educational options (California Department of Education, 2008; Jayaraman, 2008; Stover, 2006).

A lesser-known factor contributing to declining enrollment is changes in land use. Agricultural land use has changed due to lack of available water for irrigation (French & Thomas, 2003). In traditional farming communities, large agribusiness has taken its toll by purchasing and consolidating family farms thus forcing many farmers in rural areas to migrate to cities (Fanning, 1995). In addition, changes in resource management have contributed to forest-based business closures and a decline in the fishing industry; both of these have had adverse results on student populations (French & Thomas, 2003).

Economic and demographic changes are the main causes of declining enrollment for schools and districts alike. Notable factors include birth rate, aging populations, changes in job market, housing costs, increased school choice, neighborhood decay, uneven development, and land and resource use (Cook, 2004; Jayaraman, 2008).

Impact on school budgets due to declining enrollment.

Along with a large portion of states in the country, many rural and urban districts in California are experiencing declining enrollments (Schwartzbeck, 2007). One significant problem that goes hand in hand with lower enrollment figures is the loss of revenue to districts (Cook, 2004). Since districts are paid on a per pupil basis, loss of student enrollment severely impacts the funding districts receive (Jayaraman, 2008). Districts receive two types of funding: general purpose which is used for

salaries, maintenance, utilities, etc., and categorical which is used for specific purposes (Kaplan, 2009.) Categorical funds are earmarked for specific programs such as special education, class size reduction, and staff development (Kaplan, 2009.) When enrollments dip, the fixed funding sources are spread over fewer students; this leaves districts with less revenue to provide the same services their communities are accustomed to receiving (Jayaraman, 2008). For small or large districts that are experiencing chronic declining enrollments, the fiscal effects can be devastating (Jimerson, 2006). This is because fixed costs such as school facilities, utilities, and transportation remain the same or increase with inflation (Jayaraman, 2008). As a result, many districts are faced with thin resources to serve their shrinking school populations as costs rise for such items as transportation, supplies, special education, and health care benefits (Jimerson, 2006). In light of their fiscal crisis' districts are forced to make tough decisions about schools, programs, and personnel.

Ways of dealing with declining enrollment and budgetary concerns.

Declining enrollment and the resultant fiscal implications impact schools and districts in adverse ways. In order to offset the negative aspects, many districts are utilizing creative practices in order to provide services to students (Cook, 2004). Some rural districts have moved to share administrative duties and transportation costs while others choose to alter their instructional programs in order to meet their fiscal goals (Schwartzbeck, 2007). The most frequent options districts take are to cut

programs and personnel in addition to implementing school mergers (Schwartzbeck, 2007).

Cutting personnel is a first step that many districts take in order to balance their budgets following a period of declining enrollment. Since personnel account for 85 to 90% of a district's expenses, it follows that many districts look at taking reductions in this area (Bloom, 2009; Flack, 2009). Administration, certificated, and classified personnel are reduced to the greatest extent possible in order to balance budgets (Bloom, 2009). In addition, administrators find themselves serving in one or more roles or administrating multiple programs for their schools or districts; one example of this type of consolidation is having an administrator serve as half time superintendent along with being Title I coordinator for a district (Oregon School Funding Defense Foundation, 2005). Having administrators serve in a variety of functions impacts schools negatively because state and federal mandates do not diminish as funds are reduced (Townley & Schmider-Ramirez, 2007).

Teachers are also scaled back as districts enlarge their class sizes in order to maximize funds (Ablamsky, 2008). Many districts that implement class size reduction are changing their policies in order to gain more money by increasing the teacher/pupil ratio (Ablamsky, 2008). In California, teachers must be notified by March 15 if their district is planning on reducing staff; districts do this by sending out a reduction in force or RIF notice notifying teachers and support personnel of their termination for the following school year (California Education Code 44929 & 44954, 2009). Scaling back of a school's or district's teaching staff creates

challenges in scheduling and reduces program offerings as well as increases class sizes (Bloom, 2009). In addition, nurses, counselors, bus drivers, custodians, librarians, and classroom aides all are viewed by school boards in terms of their impact on the school budget and many of their services are scaled back or eliminated (Fitzgerald 2009; Nye, 2008).

School mergers.

Some districts have found it necessary to close or consolidate schools in order to balance their budgets during a declining enrollment trend. For districts that use this option, one or more schools are closed, and students are reassigned to another school (Cook, 2008). Business managers and School Boards base their case on the fiscal savings a merger can bring due to consolidated staffing, larger class sizes, and merged programs (Bard, Gardener & Wieland, 2005; Oregon School Funding Defense Foundation, 2005). Most often the forced merging of two or more schools takes a heavy toll on the communities that are left with a vacant facility (Bard, Gardener & Wieland, 2005). In some cases, the neighborhood or community that was impacted by a school closure suffers from out-migration, further population decline, and neighborhood deterioration (Bard, Gardener & Wieland, 2005). In others, the community suffers from a lack of common identity through lost social, cultural, and recreation activities (Fanning, 1995; Jimmerson, 2006).

Once a school merger happens, students are impacted in several ways. The first change typically comes in the length of bus rides for students who live in neighborhoods whose school closed (Bard, Gardener, & Wieland, 2005). In some

cases, especially in rural areas, the students have to be transported by bus over long distances to attend their new school (Eyre & Finn, 2002). The increased busing time can impact younger students who may have to spend up to three hours on a bus daily (Eyre & Finn, 2002; Strange & Malhoit, 2005). School consolidation also leads to lack of parental support in school activities and events because parents have to travel considerable distances in order to participate in school-related activities such as conferences and sporting events (Sell, Leistritz, & Thompson, 1996). In addition, students who are involved in a merger often lose their opportunity to be able to participate in extra curricular activities due to lack of transportation or the extra transportation time it would take for them to be able to participate (Jimerson, 2006).

Impact of school mergers on staff.

While the merging of schools has a large impact on students, parents, and communities, it also impacts the school staff. Staff members who were comfortable in their roles in their previous school face new challenges as they combine (Cook, 2008). Past practices that revolve around schedules for assemblies, parent conference protocol, and school-wide discipline procedures become areas in which teachers in a merged school find they may have to rework how it was always done (Cook, 2008; Hutton, 2005). This can be very stressful on both the staff of the school who was housed on the site prior to the merger and the staff that has moved to the merged site because they may have been asked to change classrooms, grade levels, or blend with new curricular teams (Wertz, 2003). Based on state Education Codes and the district's Collective Bargaining Agreement, staff can either apply or

choose their new teaching assignment if they are relocating from the closed school (California Department of Education, 2009). Some school boards develop a memorandum of understanding between the schools and the Department of Education prior to the school closure (California Department of Education, 2009; Victoria Department of Education, 2009). For the staff who were originally at the site that will house the merged staffs, they are administratively placed based by state education codes, the local collective bargaining agreement, seniority, and credentialing (California Department of Education, 2009). When staff is faced with such a large upheaval in their work environment, they are put under a tremendous amount of stress (Kyriacou & Harriman, 1993). For staff that was originally at the school site there are questions about what changes are going to take place (Kyriacou & Harriman, 1993). For staff moving to a new site, they may feel as if they are new hires at their newly assigned school (Kyriacou & Harriman, 1993).

The merging of schools is a complex task that has implications for communities, students and staff. In rural areas, some lose what they perceive to be the heart of their community. A multitude of students in a school merger situation are impacted by longer bus rides, and in the case of a merger or consolidation, staff will be reassigned or merged into a new school site.

School Climate and Culture

In times when significant change is being implemented within a school, both the culture and climate of the organization need to be evaluated (Tableman, 2004). Gaining insight into these two dynamics of school processes helps develop clarity for

those implementing and dealing with a school's organizational change (Van Houtte, 2005).

There are inconsistencies within the education community in defining the term school climate (National School Climate Council, 2007). However, many agree that school climate encompasses the character, atmosphere, tone, ideology, feel, or milieu of a school (Bear, Blank, Smith, 2009; Hernandez & Seem, 2004; Tableman, 2004). The construct of a school climate can also be described as the physical and psychological aspects of a school, or in essence, the personality of a school (Tableman, 2004). In actuality, school climate is a broad concept that is complex and extensive in scope (Marshall, 2004).

The climate of a school can also be characterized by the educators' collective perceptions of routine behaviors or patterns in relation to the interactions among the administration and teachers and among the teachers themselves (Hoy, Smith, & Sweetland, 2002; Hoy & Woolfolk, 1993). This subjective perspective of how individuals perceive their environment directly impacts their buy-in to the school and its purpose (Loukas, 2007). Climate is a quality of the school environment that is experienced by participants, affects their behavior, and is based on their collective and individual perceptions (Hoy, 1990; Van Houtte, 2005). In essence, school climate belongs within the perceptions of the individual working or attending the school site (Van Houtte, 2005).

Climate can also be determined through the quality and character of school life, and in this way, it can be determined whether or not a school has a positive or

adverse affect on the people who work and attend the particular educational facility (Tableman, 2004). How individual members feel about their relationships with administration, colleagues, and students is an integral component of school climate (Van Houtte, 2005). Within this definition, climate can be considered as a presence of norms and values that focuses everyone's attention toward a common purpose or lack of one (Jerald, 2006). While articulating a common definition of climate poses many challenges for researchers and educators, all agree it is an important indicator of a school's well being (Marshall, 2004; Hernandez & Seem, 2004). School culture also defines the atmosphere of a school site. If school culture is viewed through the lens of an anthropologist, then the culture of a school is the historically transmitted pattern of meaning within a school entity (Stolp, 1994). It can be determined through both implicit and explicit frames of reference (Van Houtte, 2005). If one looks at the culture of a school in implicit ways, then school culture can be defined as the set of shared meanings, beliefs, values, and assumptions of the members of the organization (Van Houtte, 2005; Tableman, 2004). If one views the culture of a school in explicit ways, then culture is expressed through visible artifacts, expressive symbols, and the patterns of behavior within the organization (Van Houtte, 2005). Overall through implicit and explicit ways, a school's culture can be described as its personality, which in turn encompasses the school's cherished traditions, unwritten rules, unspoken expectations, and proud heritage (Apple Learning Exchange, 2001). It is based on past experience and provides a template for future action based on how things are always done (Center for Improving School Culture, n.d.; Tableman, 2004).

Identifying or defining the culture of a school through an implicit lens allows the assumptions of the people within the organization to come to the forefront (Van Houtte, 2005). Identifying the assumptions of the staff in relation to their ability to impact the school helps determine the cultural health of the school (Jerald, 2006). The culture of the school lies within the group consensus about what defines the school and what is important (Center for Improving School Culture, n.d.). Whether the staff assumes the administrative team will lead them or work against them can be a factor in determining their school's culture (Jerald, 2006). In addition, assumptions within the community of the school that the teachers will foster inquiry and thought or that the site is doomed to be low performing is another indicator of a school's culture (E-Lead, n.d.). A school's implicit culture then can be described as its historically transmitted patterns of meaning that is shaped, handed down, and reviewed through story telling and shared experiences (Stolp, 1994). These are reflected in what staff members discuss at meetings, their agreement on which teaching techniques work, and how amenable they are to change (Cromwell, 2008).

Some of the explicit cultural traditions of a school can be seen in the emblems, mottos, or mission statements on the walls of a facility (Stolp, 1994). Whether the staff defines the school as one of athletic success, popularity, or low achievement, is a driving component of a school's culture (Jerald, 2006). School culture describes the work environment in relation to the layout of buildings, the decorative heritage, and the traditions of the staff (Architects of Achievement, 2003). Examples of these include locating school mottos or mascots in visible places,

sharing of student work in hallways and on bulletin boards, along with embossed clothing that illustrates the common purpose of the combined social network of the school (Apple Learning Exchange, 2001).

Culture influences the behavior of the participants within the school, so they know how to think and act in order to be accepted participants in the social system (Van Houtte, 2005). School culture drives how the internal and external problems the group faces within the school structure are confronted (Van Houtte, 2005). These beliefs and functions of the school culture are formed by the surrounding society of the school (Van Houtte, 2005). When the social consensus divides, then sub cultures form (Van Houtte, 2005). This aspect of a school's culture affects how people interact during problem solving and decision making processes (Peterson & Deal, 1998). Organizational culture can influence the behavior of individual members, yet it is also considered as a mosaic where particular views are shared by some while others lie within subcultures of the school structure (Van Houtte, 2005).

In essence, the school culture is a property of the social system which encompasses the norms, beliefs, and assumptions that push the behaviors in the system (Van Houtte, 2005). It contains both intrinsic and extrinsic components and is controlled by the assumptions of the participants in the organization and gives the organization a distinct identity (Van Houtte, 2005; Stolp, 1994). While many educators use the terms climate and culture interchangeably, climate and culture have two distinct relationships in an organization. Climate belongs to the individuals in the system and encompasses the individuals' perceptions of the school

organization and their perceptions of the relationships among administration, parents, students, and other staff members (Hernandez & Seem, 2004; Van Houtte, 2005).

Culture belongs to the social system itself; it is identified by historical traditions and is controlled by group conformity and acceptance (Van Houtte, 2005).

Since school climate is such a powerful force in how the members of the school feel about the school's environment, it is important to identify the components of school climates. School climates can be described using several metaphors such as open, healthy, or positive (Hoy, Sabo, & Darnes, 1996; Tableman 2004; Van Houtte, 2005). For climates that have adverse affects on the school's staff and students, terms such a toxic, closed, or negative can be used (Bear, Black & Smith, 2009; Muir, 2006).

Schools that exhibit open, healthy, or positive school climate share many of the same attributes (Hoy, n.d.). These consist of several components embedded within the school setting that encompass the physical, social, affective, and academic environments of the school (Tableman, 2004). The physical environment of a healthy school is welcoming and conducive to learning (Tableman, 2004). It has clean and orderly grounds and classrooms, and it is free from excessive noise and distractions (Freiberg, 1998; Tableman, 2004). The social environment of an open school promotes communication and interactions among staff and students (Bear, Blank & Smith, 2009; Tableman, 2004). In a positive school environment, consideration is given to all members of the school community that is genuine, collegial, friendly, open, and caring (Hoy, n.d.). A healthy affective environment

promotes a sense of belonging and self-efficacy (Hoy & Woolfolk, 1993; Tableman; 2004). Teachers in the school have high morale and foster a sense of community within the school established on trust and respect (Hoy, Sabo, & Darnes, 1996; Hoy, Smith, & Sweetland, 2002). Teachers are optimistic and look at the positive in situations, themselves, and others (Muir, 2006). In addition, a positive open school is driven by the academic environment which promotes learning and achievement (Tableman, 2004). In this setting, students persist in their goals, strive to achieve, and are respected for their academic progress and successes (Hoy, Smith, & Sweetland, 2002). High standards are clearly articulated through work expectations and performance standards (Hoy, n.d.). A healthy school climate based on open, healthy, and collegial relationships promotes professional interactions and contains a strong academic emphasis while empowering teachers, and it creates effective schools where teachers want to teach, and students are engaged in learning (Bear, Blank & Smith, 2009).

In contrast to a healthy, open, positive school climate is the converse: an unhealthy, closed, or toxic climate. Schools with an unhealthy climate have a physical environment which lacks cleanliness, order, and ownership from the school community (Tableman, 2004). The pervasive feeling of the school would encompass pessimism where many on the staff would make claims such as, “We won’t get a new computer lab, why bother trying” (Muir, 2006). The social environment of an unhealthy school exhibits limited or hostile staff interactions (Peterson, 2002). In this case, teachers are isolated or pitted against each other (Hoy, 2009; Tableman, 2004).

There is a lack of trust and hope within the school setting (Muir, 2006). Teachers do not celebrate their successes together, and blame abounds within the school (Peterson, 2002; Hoy, n.d). In a toxic affective climate, teachers and staff feel unappreciated and unvalued (Tableman, 2004). Staff interactions lack authenticity and can be undermining to the health of the organization (Hoy, n.d). In addition, the leadership of the school makes decisions behind closed doors, further validating the lack of value in the members of the school (Sweetland, & Hoy, 2002). In schools where there is an unhealthy culture, one may see an academic environment that is lacking in clear goals (Tableman, 2004). In this case, expectations for student and teacher achievement are low (Peterson & Deal, 2002). Teachers are defensive and engage in turf battles claiming, “I have taught this way for years, so why should I change” (Muir, 2006), or “The problem lies with the student, not my teaching practices” (Muir, 2006). These teachers are unwilling to take personal responsibility for student performance (Hoy, n.d). All in all, unhealthy, toxic climates can be altered through a variety of mechanisms, but change takes time and persistence (Bear, Black, & Smith, 2009; Peterson & Deal, 2002).

Conclusion

Middle schools have developed throughout the United States and serve a particular function in society as an intermediary between elementary school and high school. During times of fiscal crisis, districts seek to balance their budgets through lay-offs and consolidations. When schools have to merge due to a declining enrollment trend, the staff involved in the merger change school configurations or

sites. This results in a loss of culture for one school and a restructuring of culture for the merged site. In order to facilitate a smooth transition for staff, it is necessary to work towards fostering an open climate in which the staff from both sites work toward common goals and values in order to create a healthy energized school environment promoting a high degree of job satisfaction for teachers and strong academic and social growth for students.

The following chapter will explore the methodology I used in order to answer the question: what would facilitate the creation of a positive climate among faculty and staff during the merger of two middle schools due to declining enrollment?

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The changes brought about by a school merger can have lasting effects on the climate and culture of a school. This chapter outlines the process of the study on school mergers through the development of the research question and the subsequent review of the literature to ensure there was a need for a study on school mergers. Brief school profiles are included to ground the study in the school community. The chapter also outlines the steps I took in preparing and conducting an online mixed method research instrument, as well as the process of conducting follow up interviews with participants. Lastly, the chapter provides the methods by which I obtained my results and the subsequent analysis of the findings.

Focus of Research

When a serious declining enrollment trend in our local area reached a point at which several districts' school boards saw the need to merge elementary and middle school sites, the impact of seeing one school's personnel merged with another offered an opportunity to research the effects of a merger on the staff of the merged schools. Prior local history of such actions showed evidence that some of the schools that had experienced similar circumstances were still striving to foster positive relationships among the staff at their merged site. With this in mind, I wondered what actions could facilitate a smooth transition among any newly merged

staff in a district impacted by declining enrollment. I formulated my research question to pursue the answers to these goals. In addition, I reviewed the literature that pertained to districts that have faced similar circumstances and found that there was a gap in relation to promoting a positive climate between staff at merged school sites. With this in mind, I set out to survey staff perspectives of the merger both before and after the event.

Background of Two School Sites

I conducted my research at two Northern California middle schools. They were both located in a school district that was experiencing a declining enrollment trend during the time of the research. The following are descriptions of the two sites using pseudonyms. The data used in the descriptions were compiled by Ed-Data and the California Dept. of Education for the year 2007-2008, the year prior to the merger of the two schools (Education Data, 2009).

Bay School was comprised of grades 6 to 8. Classified as a Large Town school, by the US Census bureau, Bay School lies in an incorporated area with greater than 25,000 and fewer than 250,000 people. Bay School's population consisted of 499 students prior to the merger. Seventy-one percent of its students participated in the free and reduced lunch program which qualified the school as a school wide Title I school. Fifty-six percent of its student population was classified as White (not of Hispanic origin). Bay School ranked 46 on the diversity index set forth by Ed Data. The diversity index measures a school's ethnic diversity by using a ranking scale. Scores that are closer to 0 indicate students are mainly from a single

ethnic group showing less diversity, and schools which have scores closer to 100 indicate a more evenly distributed ethnic population. Bay School's staff included 27 credentialed teachers and 20 classified staff; in addition, they had two full time administrators.

Valley School was located in the same district as Bay School. It was also comprised of grades 6 to 8. Valley School was classified as a small town school which by definition means it was located in an incorporated area that has a population less than 25,000 but greater than 2,500. The student population was 655 during the school year prior to the merger. Forty-four percent of the student population qualified for free and reduced lunch. Valley School was classified as a school wide Title I site. In addition, sixty-three percent of the student population was classified as white (not of Hispanic origin). Valley School ranked a 27 on the diversity index. Valley School's staff included 33 full time teachers and 17 classified staff. There were two full time administrators at Valley School.

Background.

The announcement of the merger occurred in May 2007 three weeks prior to the culmination of the school year. Many of the staff of both schools were still unsure if they would be returning to a job with the district in August. This situation made it challenging for the administration of the merged site to have a complete picture of which personnel would be assigned to the new site. In addition, the principals of both the merging middle schools retired which left the new administrative team without a consultant in which they could refer to in relation to

the procedures or policies of the prior schools, or the district with an option of keeping one of the current principals at the merged site. It should be noted that there were other administrators in the district that had served each site as Vice Principals that were available to the district to keep continuity in some capacity within the administrative team at the new site. Due to financial constraints and restructuring of several sites in the district, the new school began without negotiated collaboration time.

Survey Creation and Implementation

In designing the research questionnaire, I sought to formulate questions that would help me gain insight into the staff's perspectives in relation to the school merger.

I felt that it was important to create questions that would help me gain insight into the perspectives of both of the merging staffs. I wanted to know how long each participant had worked in the profession and how long they had been at their site prior to the merger. I reasoned that having demographic information would help me determine how enmeshed the respondents were in their prior site culture. I also sought to determine how each participant felt about their school climate prior to the merger in relation to several aspects including staff interacting at meetings, staff collaborating on curriculum, staff meeting common goals to improve student achievement, staff following common discipline procedures, staff exhibiting mutual respect for differing opinions, and staff communicating. In turn, I felt posing the same question to the participants with the change in focus to the newly merged site

would show perspectives both before and after the event. These data on how staff ranked their perceptions of their prior school and the merged school would help determine how impacted the merged staff felt about their collegial relationships following the merger.

Because a school staff must make cooperative decisions regarding school policies, I sought to determine how participants ranked the decision making process at their prior school in comparison to the merged site. By inquiring about how effective the staff felt about their experiences with cooperative decisions, I hoped to determine if their prior experiences with making decisions within an institutional setting reflected on how they had or wanted to make decisions with their newly formed staff.

Each school's administration can have a significant impact on the climate and culture of a school. In a merging situation, the staff members from each site might have very different experiences with their administrative leadership team. I formulated questions that would help gain insight about each school staff's outlook in relation to the leadership at their site prior to the merger. The proposed question asked participants to rank their administrative leadership prior to and after the merger in relation to promoting a shared vision for student achievement, meeting school wide curricular objectives, maintaining a safe school environment, supporting teachers with challenging students and parents, supporting staff development that is teacher initiated, and maintaining non-negotiable core values for the school. With

these questions I sought to understand how each staff felt about their administrative leadership both before and after the merging of the sites.

Complex organizations use a variety of communication procedures in order to run efficiently. To determine how effectively the organizational structures and procedures were communicated at the new site, I created a question that allowed respondents to rate the communication both before and after the merger.

Determining how people ranked this would allow me to share how effective or ineffective the communication was at the newly established school site.

Some administrative teams work toward developing a positive climate within their staff by incorporating team-building activities. I sought to determine which of the staff had participated in team building, and if they had, whether they felt the workshop or training was an effective tool to help develop collegial relationships among the staff. I developed this question to further gain insight into the needs of the staff members in relation to determining how to bring them together to get to know each other following a merger.

Because changing sites or having a large percentage of new staff can cause personal trauma, I created a question that asked participants what types of support they received and what types of support would have benefited them most. The final inquiry prompted the participants to provide any suggestions for making a merging transition smoother for the people affected. With these last questions I hoped to gain recommendations in regard to what types of support a merging staff needed in

addition to gaining ideas to help those who may have to transition through a school merger.

In order to complete my study, I felt going in-depth with semi-structured interviews would give me more information about the impact the merger had on the school staff, so I could more fully determine what would help facilitate a smooth transition between two merging school sites.

Follow up interview question development.

One important facet in determining the impact of the merger was to survey if participants had had prior experience with a merger situation. To clarify whether or not interviewees had participated in a merger situation, I formulated a question to determine if this was the first merger situation they had encountered in their career. If the interviewee had indeed been through a similar experience, then I decided to use the qualitative semi-structured interview method to probe about the process their district implemented and their subsequent feelings about the transition.

I also inquired about the interviewees' reaction to the merger and their projections about how their new school might look or feel. I was looking for insight to their initial feelings and reactions to the upcoming change in their work environment. In addition, I prompted them to expand about types of projected barriers they felt would inhibit the staff from smoothly integrating into a cohesive educational unit.

A school's administrative team has a key role in helping staff communicate towards common school goals. With this in mind, I asked about the school's

leadership in relation to creating positive forums for staff to interact following the merger. I followed up with a more specific question relating to the five days prior to school opening. For most staff members, these days consist of school wide meetings, department meetings, and classroom preparation as well as staff training. My goal was to gain insight into the participants' perceptions of what happened to them following the merger during a high stress time of a school year: the first few days.

Following the inquiry relating to the interactions among newly integrated staff members at the beginning of school, I formulated questions that inquired about the school structures in the first weeks with students. I pursued this question in order to determine how the staff felt about their new school environment and their new relationships with colleagues once students entered the campus environment.

I then asked a set of questions that related specifically to interactions among staff once school was underway. These questions included related ideas such as describing the procedural aspects of the merged site, assessing the climate of the new school half way through the school year, evaluating colleagues' reactions to the merged staff, reflecting on outcomes, and reviewing the impact of the merger on students' achievement.

School mergers impact everyone on a school campus. To assess this, I addressed how the administration of the merged site impacted the climate of the school. I hoped to gain insight about school personnel and their perceptions of whether administrative leadership could have a significant impact on the merged

school, or if the staff perceived that the teachers themselves needed to reach collegial consensus independently.

The final questions probed more into the idea of what ways staff could work to establish collegial relationships. The questions focused specifically on what types of activities or events would help a new staff get to know each other both professionally and personally in order to foster positive collegial relationships. The final questions asked for specific advice for any teacher who might be undergoing a school merger. I asked this question to determine what advice interviewees might share with others to lessen the impact of the merging process and to move them forward in their new work environment.

Prior to presenting the survey questions to the Institutional Review Board, I met with the merged school's administration for approval of the questionnaire and follow-up interview questions. Several colleagues, who did not participate in the study, as well as my committee chair, reviewed the questionnaire and follow up interview questions prior to presenting it to the school staff through the online service. The finalized survey and follow up interview questions can be found in Appendix A.

Selection of participants.

Since determining the effects of a school merger on staff directly relates to the perspectives of the staff themselves, only current staff at the newly merged site were invited to participate including administrators, teachers, and support personnel. Thirty-two of the merged school's staff members participated in the online survey,

and of the fifteen staff members who volunteered for a follow-up interview, 8 were selected.

Implementing the survey.

After finalizing the questions and receiving approval from the IRB panel, I contacted participants by email, inviting them to participate in the study. Included in the initial email were explanations about the nature and philosophy behind the project. Prospective participants were asked to take an online survey through a paid service, SurveyMonkey. I included an invitation both in the email to staff and through hard copy placed in school mailboxes. In addition to describing the online portion of the study, the invitation encouraged all staff to participate in a personal interview. A copy of the invitational email and letter are located in Appendices B and C.

The online questionnaire was completely anonymous and included a combination of Likert scale questions, Likert scale questions with room for additional comments, and open-ended responses. Participants had as much room as they desired to elaborate on their response to the questions posed to them or add additional information as they saw fit.

The survey was opened to the staff on June 1, 2009, and was closed on June 30, 2009. Twenty-five participants took the survey prior to June 15. After I sent out a reminder on June 15th, I received four more responses, and following a June 19th reminder, I received three more responses. The survey was closed on June 30th. There were a total of 32 staff members who participated in the online survey, with 28

of them completing all questions. Participants represented a cross section of the staff in that they included administrative, certificated, and classified staff.

Follow up interviews.

Fifteen staff members volunteered to participate in personal follow up interviews. Of the fifteen volunteers, I interviewed eight participants. I chose these volunteers over the others partially due to the need to make interview appointments at convenient times and partly to keep a balance of perspectives between Bay and Valley school volunteers. Of the eight interviewees, three were men, and five were women. They were seasoned staff members with no fewer than 10 years experience with the district. Three represented Valley School's staff that had to change campus, and three represented Bay School's staff that worked at the current facility of the merged site prior to the merging. One interviewee worked at both schools the year prior to the merger, and one came from a different site within the district but had worked at Valley School several years prior to the merger. I felt this was a strong cross section of participants for the study.

As I began setting up appointments for the interviews, I anticipated each interview would take thirty to forty minutes to complete. I set up interviews before school, at lunch, after school, and on the weekend. The first interview was held on June 2, 2009. I allotted a half hour for the interview to take place, and I immediately discovered that I needed more time to complete the interviews. As a result, I had to complete the first interview in three separate half-hour sessions. With a new time schedule for each interview in mind, I made more time for the subsequent interviews

and rescheduled some of the participants. All in all, the interviews lasted between forty minutes to two hours.

Prior to each interview, every participant read and signed the informed consent letter. In addition, they were verbally reminded that they did not have to answer any question and that all responses would be kept strictly confidential. I reminded them that while writing up the results, I would use pseudonyms or refer to generalized themes that would not be personally tied to any participant. All interviews were recorded using a digital recording device. They were then uploaded as MP3 files and transcribed into Word documents.

Working with the data.

I took the results from the online survey and tabulated the statistics. Numerical data were recorded, and open-ended narrative responses were sorted using qualitative analysis techniques. Like trends emerged, and I reported them as noted by the participants, so I could refer to them for analysis. In addition, for some of the questions that yielded statistical results using the Likert scales posed in the questionnaire, I recorded aggregated results using percentages.

The opinions of participants revealed in the personal interviews took numerous hours to transcribe from the audio MP3 files into Word documents. Once the interviews were transcribed, I utilized qualitative methods to sort participant responses into broad categories and like themes for further coding and analysis.

Limitations of research instrument.

By utilizing several mechanisms to gain insight into the perspectives of school personnel, I was able to note some overall perspectives of the participants. Some limitations to using the research instruments of an online questionnaire and personal interviews are that only the perspectives of the volunteers were included in the research results. There may be varying degrees of perspectives that are not represented by the cross section of participants included in this study.

Summary

Enrollment trends effect how districts combine their resources. In the case of a school merger, personnel who may not know each other get thrown together in a changed work environment. Determining how to minimize the negative effects of a dramatic shift in staff is the purpose of this study. The next chapter will review the results of staff perspectives before and after the merging of their schools.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of participant demographics along with descriptions of participant responses in respect to both the online questionnaire and personal interviews. It is organized by the research questions relating to participants' perceptions before and after the merging of their schools. Additionally, data are included in relation to respondent perspectives on the amount of support they received, and what types of support would have benefited them during the merger. Lastly, data are presented in regard to participant recommendations in relation to fostering a positive school climate.

During the compilation process, I edited open-ended responses for grammar and spelling where necessary so that the flow of the participants' ideas is clear. Additionally, due to the nature of informal speech in which participants paused or used, "Um," as a moment to collect their thoughts, I have edited the responses of the personal interviews in order to avoid inconsistencies in grammar and unnecessary repetitions of ideas.

Participant Demographics

Thirty-two staff members participated in the online survey. In describing their affiliation with their school, 66% of the respondents reported that they were certificated teachers, 27% classified personnel, and 7% administrators. With a total

of 40 teachers and 15 support staff employees at the school site, this provided a response rate of 58% of all individuals employed at the school affected by the merger. The participants' total years of employment in the district ranged from 1 year to more than 35 years. Central tendency analysis of the time participants worked for the District includes the following: mean is 15.6 years, mode is 24 years, and the median is 15.5 years. The survey sample represents a majority of seasoned school employees correlating with the declining enrollment status of the District where newer teachers have been laid-off due to contract stipulations regarding seniority. Of the participants surveyed, there was a range of one to eight school sites at which employees had worked within the District prior to the merger. Forty-four percent of the people had experiences working at one or two sites prior to the merger. Thirty-eight percent of the participants had experiences working within three to four sites, and 19% of the employees had worked at five to eight different sites within the district prior to the current merger. Some participants also reported working within a maximum of four sites within other districts.

In order to determine how embedded participants were in their prior school culture, the participants were asked how long they had worked at their previous site prior to the merger. Of the thirty participants who responded, 13% worked at their prior site from one to five years, 50% between five to ten years, and 37% between 10 and 27 years prior to the merging of the school sites. Most participants were

grounded in the culture of their initial school prior to the merger based on the longevity of their employment at the school site.

Perceptions Prior to the Merger

The data in the following section are divided into both specific numeric values in relation to responses to the questions on the survey and generalized themes relating to the staffs' experiences at their school prior to and after the merger. The first portion will focus on perspectives prior to the merger. Results pertaining to questions asked of participants in these sections contain both Likert scaled and open ended responses.

The survey results in relation to participants' perspectives of the overall climate of their school site prior to the merger were rated from Positive to Toxic. The results of the data are aggregated in order to identify positive and negative trends. Therefore, at times the percentages may not add to 100%. Also, while completing the survey, participants could choose a neutral or does not apply response. If the number of respondents in the neutral category was not significant or over forty percent, the data are not included in the results.

Climate prior to merger.

The respondents rated whether or not they felt their prior school had a positive climate. The following table tabulates their aggregated responses for each question and reports the positive and negative trends. Not all participants responded

to each question so the results shown are the percentages of those who chose to respond to the question.

Table 4.1

Participants' Rating of their School Prior to the Merger

	Positive	Toxic	Neutral/Not Applicable
Interactions at meeting	63%	20%	16%
Collaboration on curriculum	61%	13%	26%
Meeting common goals to improve student achievement	70%	10%	20%
Following common discipline procedures	61%	19%	19%
Exhibiting mutual respect for differing opinions	56%	23%	19%
Communication	53%	6%	39%

Several of the staff members' follow-up comments in relation to the climate of their prior school centered on having clear communication and a team approach to curricular objectives as well as discipline policies at their previous school site. One teacher commented, "Prior to the merger, my campus had a team-oriented environment. Staff, regardless of position, communicated well, supported each other, and took time to connect about goals and objectives. There was also a level of consistency that provided students with healthy boundaries, empowered personal and social accountability, and laid the foundation for a strong and vibrant community."

Some shared alternate views about their school's climate in relation to their prior administration before the two schools merged. "Bay School had bad leadership prior to the merger. There were favorites and conversely those who were not listened to." Another staff member felt that their prior administration directly

affected their school's climate, "We went through various administrators and especially vice-principals which had a profound effect on the consistency of disciplinary procedures. There was very little continuity from year to year." Another teacher felt the climate of their site was shifting towards a more collaborative environment prior to the merger due to mandatory school-wide inclusive staff development training. "The only opportunity we had to come together as a staff was during our English Language Learner Acquisition (ELLA) training. While some teachers on our staff were resentful at first, that training did begin to bring us together as a staff."

Some teachers chose to comment about specific negative staff interactions with each other at their prior school site revealing a lack of staff unity prior to the merging. As one teacher noted, "We tried to cooperate; however, there were two people who always responded in the same way, and we had to try to avoid their demands." Another related their lack of positive interactions to some staff being set in their ways. "Some staff have opinions and habits that persist through the years [and that held us back]." Each school's staff involved in the merger appears to have distinct qualities in their interactions and perceptions of their prior school site.

Cooperative decision-making before the merger.

In order to garner information about staff perspectives in relation to the climate of their prior school site, participants were asked to rate the school staff's capacity to participate cooperatively in making decisions regarding school policies.

Twenty-five percent of the participants surveyed commented that their staff was involved in the decision-making process regarding school policies prior to the merger. One teacher commented positively about the staff's ability to make cooperative decisions at their prior site. "Staff was very involved in making and enforcing school policies." Fifty percent of staff felt somewhat involved. Twenty one percent responded that their staff was primarily uninvolved. To express the style of decision making at their site prior to the merger, one participant noted, "What was discussed and decided on at staff meetings didn't always become policy. At times, it felt like the administration gave the staff an opportunity to have input, but if it didn't give the outcome administration wanted, it didn't happen." These results suggest the staff perspectives from the merged schools were split on school wide decision-making.

Prior leadership.

Strong leadership can be a means to focus a school's employees toward common goals and positive interactions. The following table illustrates the responses of those surveyed in relation to their perceptions of the leadership at their school prior to the merger. Again, because not all staff members responded to all questions, the results presented are of those who did chose to respond, and the N varies by question.

Table 4.2

Staff Perceptions of Leadership Prior to the Merger

Do you feel you have strong leadership prior to the merger in relation to:	Yes	No	Not Sure/Not Applicable
Promoting a shared vision for student achievement	72%	17%	11%
Meeting school wide curricular objectives	66%	17%	17%
Maintaining a safe school environment	76%	4%	20%
Supporting teachers with challenging students and parents	62%	7%	17%
Supporting staff development that is teacher initiated	43%	20%	30%
Maintaining non-negotiable core values for the school	50%	10%	30%

Based on these results, it appears that for the most part staff members felt they had administrative support at their prior site.

School communication prior to merger.

The culminating question posed to participants in relation to their perceptions before the merger centered on rating their school's leadership in communicating organizational structures and procedures. Of the 29 respondents, 43% felt that there was clear communication on these issues, but they provided no follow up comments to expand on their perceptions. Thirty-one percent felt organizational structures were somewhat communicated, and 20% felt that there was no communication. Of the few follow-up comments, three focused on administrative secrecy and lack of communication. One teacher reflected about their prior school's administration, "The organizational structures and procedures were done behind closed doors." One other

teacher stated in relation to administrative decision-making, “Things were pre-decided, and we were given the sense of helping, but it wasn’t real.” Another staff member focused on their frustrations in relation to feeling as if they were wasting time in developing structures and procedures that were not utilized and communicated to staff by administration. “The various committees were either secretive or too complicated and not implemented. I never felt we benefited from most of the time and energy put in by committee members.”

Overall the resulting perceptions of the combined staff members were fairly positive with respect to their prior schools, yet some recalled specific administrative barriers that dampened their perception of having clear communication and development of school procedures.

Perceptions After the Merger

The survey results in relation to participants’ perspectives of the overall climate of their school site following the merger were rated from Positive to Toxic. The following results are taken from parallel questions participants answered about their school prior to the merger. The only difference in the presentation of each survey question was the shift in relation to the newly merged school. Data were aggregated to note positive and negative trends, so in some cases the data may not add to 100%. In addition, responses that were neutral or that did not apply were not reported unless they were numerically significant.

Perspectives of school culture following merger.

Since two distinct staffs merged into a single facility, the teachers and staff were asked to rate the climate at the merged site. The results of their aggregated responses are noted in the table below. Not all participants responded to each question, as a result the number of responses may vary by question.

Table 4.3

Participants' Rating of their School Following the Merger

	Positive	Toxic	Neutral/Not Applicable
Interactions at meeting	48%	26%	28%
Collaboration on curriculum	25%	32%	41%
Meeting common goals to improve student achievement	32%	29%	37%
Following common discipline procedures	36%	46%	16%
Exhibiting mutual respect for differing opinions	20%	53%	26%
Communication	23%	50%	26%

Many of those surveyed commented positively on their new school's leadership. As one teacher noted, "The difference is in the type of leadership, and since the merger the staff has been given more control over their classroom and curriculum."

Some staff members' comments focused on how administration did not provide enough time at the new merged school site for teachers to share ideas about curriculum and discipline. "We don't have enough time to share ideas. A shotgun approach just gets feelings aired without time for positive reinforcement. Now is the time for staff development."

While the results show a positive trend in relation to the staff attitudes toward administration, the majority of the comments revealed specific challenges among the merged staff. One challenge that was brought forward by a teacher focused on establishing common discipline policies at the merged site: “We needed to establish common discipline procedures and communicate these to both office staff and teachers before the school year started. Valley School had its procedures, and Bay School’s were different, so we had teachers doing what was common to their previous school which caused some confusion.”

One teacher commented about the lack of whole staff communication by administration and individuals on the staff recalling a failure to adhere to communally agreed upon procedures that contributed to a negative climate at the new site, stating, “One [whole staff] decision made in the fall was overturned by a few teachers going behind the backs of others.” The perception of having a lack of unity among staff can divide people and create tension among school employees.

The results also illuminate the challenges faced in creating a positive climate at the new school due to the perception of some teachers about the attitudes of some transferred or established staff members. A staff member stated, “There are a few teachers who have shown extreme disrespect toward teachers of the ‘other’ school. This attitude and behavior have undermined our desire to build unity.” One of the surveyed participants commented, “Some of the transferring staff have exhibited arrogance and prejudice both toward the students of Bay School and staff with their

inappropriate, insensitive, and judgmental comments. It has also been shared by a parent that one of these people actually disses on Bay School in [the] classroom.” Additionally, the tension between the two staffs was observed by a staff member who was new to the district and school, “I started at Bay School in January. My position on the campus is one of invisibility and as such I hear and see comments and attitudes by teachers and other employees that I find derogatory and detrimental to creating a whole and cohesive learning environment.”

The results, in relation to the attitudes of the two staffs, illustrate the inability of the merging staffs to look at the circumstances from each other’s point of view. A Bay teacher stated, “Once again, I think the majority of us are working to make this the best school for the students that we can. It is unfortunate that the small-minded malcontents [those from Valley] work to undermine collegial unity. I can tell you one thing; if I had transferred to Valley School, I would have behaved in a far more professional manner.”

As a whole, the results of this survey indicate disunity among some staff at the new site.

Cooperative decision-making after the merger.

Staff rated how the newly merged site was able to participate in cooperative decision-making. Of the 32 respondents, 80% felt somewhat to very involved, and 18% felt uninvolved. Because the administrative team was also new to the site, and because neither of the staff at the merged schools had prior experience with this

administrative team, several participants commented on the new administration's style in relation to cooperative decision-making. As one noted, "[The] new style of leadership added to staff's involvement in school policies." Another staff member commented, "Our new administration following the merger is much more skilled at communication, and seems to value teacher input and concerns."

Contrary to the positive comments about the merged site's leadership in relation to decision-making, some staff commented about administrative decisions and the ways in which they closed the door to communication. One participant voiced the impression that "policies come top down after the merger, with little or no time for staff input." Another teacher expressed the idea that staff meetings would have fostered collective communication and cited a lack of scheduled meetings as a deterrent, saying, "Without weekly meeting time, there isn't much opportunity [for communication]."

Other comments focused on a lack of communication among staff themselves. As one respondent noted, "We are being cautious still. I am interested in finding out how Valley School people arrived at their present thinking. Sometimes it doesn't even seem as if we are talking about the same thing." One staff member explained the dynamic by stating that after the merger, there were "many more opinions, not very much listening going on, but we did give it A GOOD TRY." This staff member's comment gives the impression they had conceded defeat in the struggle to create a positive environment during the first year of the merger.

Leadership after the merger.

The survey sought to determine the perspectives of the merged staff in relation to their leadership following the combining of the sites. It is important to note the leadership at the merged site did not have middle level experience, and neither of the administrators had worked at Bay or Valley schools. The results of the survey question are noted in the table below. Once again results in the table relate to those who responded to the question, and therefore the N may vary by question.

Table 4.4

Staff Perceptions of Leadership Following the Merger

Do you feel you have strong leadership prior to the merger in relation to:	Yes	No	Not Sure/Not Applicable
Promoting a shared vision for student achievement	45%	20%	34%
Meeting school wide curricular objectives	39%	28%	32%
Maintaining a safe school environment	63%	13%	23%
Supporting teachers with challenging students and parents	69%	10%	21%
Supporting staff development that is teacher initiated	24%	10%	65%
Maintaining non-negotiable core values for the school	39%	21%	38%

Several comments in regard to administrative leadership and support were cautious. One participant wrote, “The time together as a new school is still young. There hasn’t been much time together as a staff working with the administrators on policy.” Another commented on the newness within the school, stating, “I think we are a new school in progress. The school will continue to evolve as we have more

continuity and consistency in administrators.” On a hopeful note, one teacher commented about projections for the administration, saying, “The administration has much to learn to realize its full potential. But the talent is there!”

The final comments diverted slightly from the leadership focus to center on some individuals’ specific perceptions of staff differences in which strong leadership should be able to help bridge. A Bay School teacher stated, “Everything takes time, and those that negatively judge where we are will never be satisfied, because it is not Valley School.” One administrator was realistic in assessing the process of combining two distinct groups into one cohesive body: “We are too early in the process to have all the things listed [in the table] above. The biggest impediment to improvement is inflexibility in the staff.”

School communication following the merger.

Participants responded to whether or not they felt the merged school’s administrative team was effective in communicating organizational structures and procedures to its staff. Of the 29 respondents, 17% felt there was strong communication, 65% felt communication was somewhat effective, and 17% felt there was no communication. Clarifying comments in relation to communication included the criticism that much of the communication occurred “via email [because] we don’t have much time [to meet].” Another staff member’s comments echoed this sentiment: “The use of email and the leadership style of our current administrator are much more transparent.” The use of email as a tool for communication appears to be

something the staff appreciates. One teacher commented about the need for communication to evolve with the coming together of the groups and new administrative team. A participant commented on the ways in which the new school was still changing, stating, “Being ‘new’ as a merger school, I would expect that this transition year would be somewhat in ‘flux’ as we see what structures and procedures best work with this revised more diverse model.” For the most part, the staff noted that communication from the administrative team was evolving as the team figured out how to meet the needs of the staff.

Prior mechanisms for positive climate.

Since both staffs had different experiences at their respective sites prior to the merger, I felt it was important to gain a sense of what types of team or culture building trainings each staff brought with them to the new school. The online questionnaire asked participants if their previous school utilized team building or staff cohesiveness trainings. Twenty-nine participants responded to the question. Of those, 83% stated that their previous school used team building trainings sometimes to regularly, and 17% did not think their school used staff cohesiveness trainings.

The staff members who had participated in cohesiveness trainings at their prior site were asked to clarify in which types of trainings they participated, and if they felt the trainings were effective in guiding staff to develop collegial relationships. The results are noted in the table below. Note that each school

provided distinctly different trainings, and not all of the staff members participated in each training.

Table 4.5

Which Trainings Did Your Administration Use?

Training Program	Valuable	Not Valuable	Not Applicable
Ropes Course	0%	5%	95%
Color of Your Personality Traits	36%	32%	32%
Rafting/ Team Building Games	36%	10%	55%
Rate Yourself as a Learner	30%	18%	52%
Who's Got the Cheese	20%	15%	65%
Introduce Your Partner	41%	18%	41%
Other	27%	0%	72%

Themes presented by the participants in the follow-up portion of the survey centered on prior administrative driven team building, Bay School's Program Improvement status working as a catalyst for cohesiveness, and collaboration/team meetings working to create staff unity.

Several participants provided examples of administratively driven team building trainings such as reading a common text and discussing it, doing a personality trait inventory, and watching curricular videos to name a few. However, the persistent theme in their comments was that the team building efforts were "short lived," "unplanned," and "ineffective" with a few notable exceptions.

Others responded in relation to how Bay School's Program Improvement status brought the staff together as a team. "The best thing to happen to us was PI. That gave us focus and outside help." Another Bay teacher commented about the

English Language Learner Acquisition (ELLA) training before the two staffs came together, stating, “I also consider the ELLA training of the last two years to have been cohesiveness training (in methodology), at least in the first year of [the] training.” This comment specifically excludes the second year of training due to the combining of the two school sites even though the training continued with the merged staff.

Some respondents focused on meetings and collaboration as a mechanism for team building and cohesiveness. Their responses, illustrated by the following comment, relate to the lack of collaboration time offered by the district for the newly merged site, “Before the merger, we had a monthly staff meeting; department meetings with core subject/elective/PE teachers; committee meetings [relating to] academic, discipline, social, Program Improvement areas;... These allowed us to be cohesive and fruitful.” One teacher commented about a useful training that once again centered on staff collaboration, stating, “There was a school team from Southern California that came and presented to us after their school had gone through a difficult transition. It was extremely helpful to hear about what worked for them with ‘at risk,’ difficult students and parents, and how they develop programs that helped staff and students succeed.” Several staff members commented that collegial time to work on the common needs of the school was the best way to build cohesion. As one teacher expressed about administrative initiated trainings, “Any top down event tends to be a brief annoyance that I try to forget the second it’s over. I loved

rafting, but I don't think it really helped anything." Veteran teachers wanted time to work together on common goals more than formalized administrative get-to-know-you trainings.

The results of the teachers' perspectives in the survey are disconnected with the administrative perspective in relation to get-to-know-you trainings. As one administrator stated, "All the teambuilding initiatives were useful in that [they] collected people, opened communication and expanded comfort zones. I feel it is important to infuse these types of activities on a consistent basis to promote healthy teams, bridge differences, and teach people how to work together. Besides, when we have fun as a group, we open up opportunities to learn and grow together and begin forming lasting bonds." The administration and staff do not view their staff development time in the same way. In this respect teachers call for time to work together on school related issues and curriculum, rather than get to know you better activities and trainings.

Support Prior to Merger

When the staff was surveyed about their perceptions of the types of support they received prior to the merging of the two school sites, twenty-five staff members responded to the question using the open-ended format. Several themes emerged in the responses. They centered on classified personnel, summer meeting, and support.

Several of the classified participants commented in relation to the types of support that would have benefited them. One classified employee commented, "[I

received] none [no support in dealing with the transition]. As a classified person I would have liked to have met the merging group when school opened. It took me all year to meet the teachers, and I am still not sure who they all are.” Other classified personnel commented on feeling “appreciated” and “respected” by staff during the merging process.

A few respondents focused on an optional summer meeting being the only vehicle for staff support prior to the merger. Several teachers commented about the meeting itself. One stated, “We met with a core of teachers during the summer and started a dialog on main issues.” Another teacher expanded on the limitations of an optional meeting format for teachers, saying, “Discussion of the vision of the new school was slightly addressed [during the meeting]. [An] OPTIONAL meeting was available, but should have been more organized and mandatory to get everybody there including support staff.” All in all, the results show that the summer meeting was not productive in bringing the sites together because it was optional due to contract stipulations, and therefore no decisions could be made regarding school policy.

Many of those surveyed commented on the lack of support that was in place for staff prior to the merger. Sixty-four percent of the participants stated that there was “none,” “zero,” and there was “no closure from one school to the next.” In fact, one teacher commented there were “no systems in place,” and there was a “lack of instructional tools, materials and supplies to meet enrollment levels” at the merged

site. In addition, most staff expected the district to support the two schools during the merger, but they did not feel as if they received any. A teacher stated there was “none [no support] from the District Office.” Another stated that they had “no guidance [from the District Office] in any way whatsoever. In fact, [we experienced] institutionalized chaos.” In spite of that, another employee noted, “I feel that our school leadership (administration) tried to adapt to the needs of this merger, sometimes in the best ways they could with the limited time given.”

Some teachers commented about the support they saw or experienced by others who moved to the new site. One teacher commented, “The staff that moved over did a very good job supporting one another through the process leading up to the actual move.”

Others commented about how hard the support personnel worked to get teachers’ belongings shifted into the new facility. One teacher felt supported by the custodial staff stating, “Custodial help was amazing during the merger. They helped pack up and move all of our supplies to the new site.” Contrary to the positive support felt by some, one teacher focused on their department’s inability to support one another during the merging process, saying, “The science program was given additional support, including a stipend to assist in staff development and Program Improvement. In spite of this incentive, members were very hesitant to meet and collaborate.” The people who reported feeling support prior to the merger were

those who moved sites, and the support they felt was towards each other. However, support was not felt within the merged school's departments.

Support desired.

Merged school employees were asked what types of support would have helped make the transition between the school sites easier. Twenty-five people responded to the open-ended question. Their responses centered on several topics including structured transition, more time, better communication, and the District Office.

Several of the staff surveyed commented about having an outside transition team to assist with the merging process. One teacher suggested "a structured training with professionals" would have helped the merging process. Another expanded on the need for an outside facilitator, stating, "Because each department had pretty established ways of doing things, I think it would have been nice to have some outside person. Someone with a strong teaching curricular background but not from either [of the merging] site[s] [to] sort of guide us through our initial meetings."

Along with establishing a need for an outside facilitator, many felt that the district needed to provide more time for the staff to come together to create policies and collegial relationships prior to the first week of school. A majority of those surveyed commented that having more time would have been a major benefit in creating a smoother transition during the merger. They felt they needed "more time to understand both [site] systems." Several teachers commented on the need for a

system to be put in place. As one of them noted, they needed “structures and a time line for decisions to be made and implemented [in relation to] the merger.” Another teacher expressed feelings about the lack of time provided by the district for the staff to have preliminary time to work together, noting, “We needed time to plan [new policies and procedures]. We did not merge. We had to take on [the] existing school’s rules and procedures.”

Some participants felt that getting together before Valley School closed would have supported the newly formed staff. Several teachers commented in relation to getting together in the spring before the schools merged. One stated, “My thought is we should have met last year.” Another teacher offered this suggestion: “Prior to the merger, if both the Valley School and Bay School staffs could have had a few business and social get-togethers. I feel these get-togethers would have been icebreakers, relieved some fears, anxieties, and false assumptions.”

Some participants felt that communication in relation to the process of combining sites by both district and site leadership was the type of support they needed in order to have smooth merging of the two school sites. One teacher noted, “I would have liked to have been told what was going to happen and what I would have to do” in relation to the move. A certificated employee stated in regard to the doubling of staff at the site, “[I needed] meetings with the new administration [and] staff to communicate office procedures.”

The final theme focused on how some staff members would have liked the District Office to provide support to the site. As one teacher stated, “[I would have liked] an understanding about what the District and Board goals were relative to the merger.” Another expanded on the same idea, saying, “It seems like the promises made by the District were not actualized.” The teachers at the merged site did not feel that the District Office put systems and structures in place to support their own vote which blended the two middle schools into one new school.

Benefit merging staff.

Staff members also responded to an inquiry that focused on what types of support would have benefited them during the merger transition. Themes from this question focused on meeting and interacting with others, receiving support from the District, and using an outside group. Some of the staff surveyed established that meeting and interacting before school opened would have benefited the teachers and support staff in creating a stronger school community. As one staff member stated, “Team building initiatives and collaborative discussions that were on-going and consistent would have greatly benefited all staff (regardless of position).” Some of the participants felt the school’s staff would have benefited from more meeting time, both to get to know each other and to come together on school policies. As one teacher suggested, “[We needed a way to] meet the staff, maybe a board with everyone’s picture and a title or subject [they teach].” Another advocated for formal meeting time to work on school policies stating, “[We needed] time to plan and

[create] a true merger.” Another expressed the need to have something for everyone to work on in order to develop common procedures for the staff to come together, saying, “[We needed a] more definite structure of a discipline system, and a philosophy we could all come together on.”

Others commented on how a school visitation prior to the merger could have helped the staff understand each school’s distinct systems. One teacher suggested, “I wish that folks from each school could spend a day at the other campus-maybe by department... Just imagine if the whole X department came over, and each teacher was [partnered] with another [and] they stayed on campus all day- watched break, observed how students went to lunch, etc. It would be a great way to know where your new colleague is coming from in terms of school climate, so both staffs got to visit the other site.”

Several comments focused on how the District Office might have helped the merging schools. One teacher noted, “I feel that more direction as to what needed to happen and what was happening would have been beneficial. The district and the site didn’t seem to have their acts together, so they weren’t on the same page. No one seemed to know what was going on.” Another teacher elaborated on the need for the district and cabinet to support their decision to merge the sites. As one teacher states, “We needed more DISTRICT support, in terms of meeting time, release time to help [with] blending two schools.” In addition, “We needed cabinet visibility on

campus.” Many of those surveyed felt that the people who authorized the merger did not support their own decision at the site level.

Several of those surveyed focused on the usefulness of utilizing an external consulting group. As one participant notes, “[We needed] staff time spent with some sort of cutting edge professional school mediation/consulting group to hold at least one or two mediations sessions in which hopes, fears, facts, fictions about each [of the] merging schools could be laid out in the open. [Topics could be] discussed, and either released or ironed out, so that the merger staffs come to the current year table more cohesive and with realistic expectations of each other, students, administration, [and the] school community.” Another teacher commented about their perceived lack of organization by the district office in relation to the combining of schools, stating, “Everything was done as a reaction, and none was done proactively. [We would have benefited from] a professional to discuss a large size school such as we were going to have and ways to integrate the two schools’ cultures.” Staff involved in the merger were clear in the ways in which the transition between the schools could have been smoother.

Participant Recommendations

The closing question of the survey asked participants to note any comments or recommendations they had in relation to the merging of schools. Several comments discussed the role of administration as being a key component. For example, one participant stated, “In terms of recommendations, I think most people

understand that strong leadership coupled with the opportunity to work toward achieving the goals set forth by our administration in terms of school climate, etc. are really key. I think it comes down to time and leadership.” One other participant commented on the importance of school leadership, saying, “Building cohesiveness and a new school community takes time, compromise, listening, planning, and requires everyone, in some way to let go of the past practices that are no longer useful. Also, in a school setting, whether the teachers like it or not, or whether it is wise or not, all structures, procedures, and practices are not on the table for our [the teacher’s] input. SOMETIMES, faith in the direction of school leadership is essential while continuing to work diligently along the way with patience.” While some participants’ closing comments focused on the need for strong leadership and trusting followers, other comments reached out to those who are absorbed into a new school site. For example, one participant wrote, “It is so important for displaced staff to be validated for the loss they have suffered” while also “...assist[ing] the existing organization to understand that things [like policies and procedures] may have to change.”

The online survey provided participants with an anonymous forum in which to express their perceptions in relation to the school merger. The following section provides responses from those who volunteered to participate in a follow up interview.

Personal Interviews

The data in this section are taken from eight in-depth personal interviews. Results are sorted in the order questions were posed to the interviewees and by the themes that emerged within the data.

Reactions.

Interviewees had mixed reactions to the announcement of the merger. One teacher who was interviewed expected the merger while several others expressed shock or dismay following the announcement by the school board. The teacher who expected the merger stated, “I expected it. That was my reaction. I kind of felt it [the merger] was coming.” Another teacher expressed optimism following an initial negative reaction when he stated, “My first reaction was negative, but after thinking about it, I thought it was a good idea to funnel all of the students in our district into one school because it would add more diversity and eliminate the competitive aspect of two schools.” Yet other employees felt differently. The disparity in reactions was apparent when one Valley teacher commented, “I was shocked, shocked that they closed Valley School with it having a larger student population. I figured they would move the smaller school [Bay] into the bigger one.” Another interviewee also focused on feelings of shock in regard to the decisions made by the district office, stating, “[I felt] shock, even after all of these years of bad decisions by the district office. Having to wrap my brain around this decision. I would like to see the books and exactly how much money was saved.” Another interviewee commented, “It was

like the death of one school and the creation of another. It was not something I looked forward to. I anticipated that it would be uncomfortable and unpleasant, and it would not resolve itself quickly.” Reactions from participants varied according to the site at which they had worked at prior to the merger.

Projections.

Staff members had a variety of projections about their new school before the merger took place. The most common projections focused on student discipline, school philosophies, school structural changes, and department cohesion. One staff member noted, “I was concerned about the out of class time: the passing periods, the breaks, the lunchtime... It was going to be a new environment with 800 students versus 400. I wasn’t sure what type of discipline system would be put in place.”

Several of the interviewees commented about the challenges of blending the two school’s philosophies. One teacher reflected, “I didn’t have a thought that the staff of both schools would be so different and so unable to really hear each other, and communicate as well as I would have expected, so my initial projection was it was going to be fairly smooth.” Another teacher was hopeful, stating, “I thought it [the merger] would be good because the mix of staff at Bay was not tight.” Others had a less than favorable projection. One Valley School teacher said, “[The schools have] very different personalities. I didn’t expect to be working collegially and smoothly with some people.” A Bay School teacher went on to state, “Bay School

had a history of working as isolationists. I knew it would not be accepting [of Valley].”

Some interviewees focused their projections on the loss of the sixth grade along with the middle school model during the merger. “Bay School has always had good teachers, but they act like a little high school where everybody is isolated. They don’t have the teamwork that you get at a true middle school.” Another teacher commented about the same idea by stating, “I was concerned about the school having a seventh and eighth grade mentality like a junior high school with a middle school name. It was that old junior high school structure I was worried about.”

The final theme that emerged from the question about staff projections in relation to the merger was centered on department cohesion. Both middle schools and junior high schools have discipline specific departments such as English, math, and science that need to work together in order to develop common guidelines in relation to curricular objectives and grading policies. One of the teachers interviewed stated, “I was concerned about department cohesion.” Another expressed concern about developing respect among the departments as she noted, “At Valley, people did not act as if one discipline was better than the other. No [academic] discipline was above the rest, and everyone was totally accepted.” The results show some of those interviewed felt they expected the changes brought on by

the merger while others felt dismay and anxiety about how the staff at the merge site would relate to each other.

Barriers facing staff.

Interviewees were queried as to what barriers they thought incoming staff would face at the newly merged school. Four themes emerged from the responses including fears about administrative leadership, challenges with support staff, lack of time, and differences between school cultures of the merging sites. Those who felt anxiety over administrative changes addressed their fears in several ways. One teacher stated, “They say the principal always sets the tone of the school. Bay’s former administrative staff was leaving.” Another said, “I knew whatever administrator took it on it was going to be a big time huge challenge.” Some interviewees felt that having a new administrative team without prior experience at the middle school level was a barrier to a smooth transition between sites. One teacher commented, “I think we needed someone with a lot of experience to blend the two staffs. Our administrator did not know what middle school looked like.”

Some respondents also foresaw challenges with the secretarial staff at the merged site. One interviewee commented, “Another really key thing is the secretarial staff and how they relate to parents and teachers. You can have one negative person, and that sets the tone.” Another commented on the same note, “The whole secretarial staff is like the heartbeat of the school, and none came from Valley... I knew they [Bay’s] were going to shoot down [new ideas] quick.”

Other projections in relation to a successful merger focused on a lack of time in getting to know each other or the campus. One staff member noted, “It [the merger] was poorly timed. There was absolutely no time given to teachers to merge. It was like, ‘here.’ ‘Here is your room; go to it.’ There was no time to meet, no time to get to know each other.” Another teacher expanded on the perception of the barriers the combined staff would encounter, as he stated, “The biggest challenge was getting the best of both to create a new thing in such a short amount of time. It’s like a zoo trying to get a whole new facility working together.”

The final theme surrounding the question related to the variance in school cultures. One teacher commented,

Unbeknownst to everyone at the time, [a barrier] was different cultures, different ways of looking at the educational process. Big things, big ideas, it is amorphous to me, and I don’t know if I can articulate them. Like these Bay teachers have much different ideas than I do, or [for that matter] some [other] colleagues I have worked with in the past.

Another teacher pointed out the differences between the staff at both sites, commenting, “The other thing is there are very distinct personalities to these two groups.” One teacher reflected on the barriers that veteran workers face when having to shift their thinking, stating,

The teachers at Valley had been doing it [teaching] for a long time, and the Bay teachers had been at it for a long time, so it felt like the staffs were set in

their ways, but I didn't realize just how different we were. I thought it would be hard, but I wasn't expecting the reality of what it ended up being.

While staff had projections in relation to the barriers they might face during the merger, several challenges presented themselves following the actual combining of the sites.

Forums for positive interactions.

I asked the interviewees about how instrumental the administration was in creating forums for positive interactions among the staff. Since Valley merged into Bay's facility, many of the incoming teachers did not know the arrangement of the buildings, so some comments related to the idea of a lack of leadership in helping orient the new staff into the existing facility. Almost every interviewee commented about the lack of structure set forth by the administration of the new school, and the following comment is illustrative of that concern:

There were a number of staff meetings but really, there has not been a formalized process put in place where forums are set up where people with disparate ideas are talking back and forth sharing feelings, sharing thoughts, trying to come to consensus and cohesion.

Another teacher commented about the lack of structured interactions among staff, stating, "We didn't have any structured way of getting time to say: 'What do you think of this? What do you think of that? How are we going to work together?' So I didn't think there was anything done." Two interviewees commented in relation to

the lack of structure in the school environment itself, stating, “It was almost like being a new teacher in an environment that was not together or organized. When I was a new teacher, I fit into something that existed that was functioning with a system.” Another related concern about her lack of knowledge of the facility and the Bay staff when she states, “We didn’t have a potluck or anything so that people could start talking with each other and get to know each other. It was more like people from Valley were running around with a map trying to figure out where classrooms were and how to find a bathroom.”

Five days prior to the merger.

In order to get a sense of each person’s perspective about how to use the school’s buy-back and in-service days prior to school opening, staff members were asked about what would have made things smoother during the five days prior to school opening. The majority of the participants commented that the school needed a clear vision from their leadership. They also expressed a desire for an autocratic blueprint to work from rather than using the little time allotted for small groups to take parts from each site in the attempt to make new policy. Others felt that an impartial facilitator would have smoothed the way for a constructive beginning. One teacher commented, “I think a really strong vision of what the school would look like from the administrative team and what they expected would have been really helpful.” Another participant cited specific actions that would have been beneficial to the staff during the first days of the merger:

I think we should have had a blueprint put out there that we could have worked with. For instance, there should have been a structured discipline system that we were asked to implement. Like the administration put out what they wanted us to do... The administrators didn't really have a strong opinion about it [the discipline policy] one way or the other. I kind of think to make a merger work you need a little more autocratic leadership at least for the first year... We should have started off more black and white. It would have given us something to debate instead of spending all of our time coming up with something to debate.

Another participant commented about having an outside facilitator come in to support the merging staffs, stating:

I would have liked seeing someone from the outside to help facilitate if the administrators couldn't be everywhere, come in and help lead the discussion in order to help validate the points brought to the table such as what the administration would want the discipline program to achieve. I would advocate a facilitator for some of these merged groups of teachers and staff members as long as the administration had a clear vision to work towards.

Apprehensions or excitement.

When asked about their apprehensions or excitement in relation to the new school year, all participants interviewed commented about how excited they were to work with students again for the new school year. None of the interviewees

discussed apprehensions about working at a newly merged school. One teacher expressed in relation to the beginning of the school year, “Whenever you go back to school you are excited and nervous with a sense of anticipation.” Another teacher expressed, “I look forward to the school year.” While another stated, “I was excited about working with the students.” Teachers’ comments focused on their excitement at returning to the classroom for the new school year.

Challenges or barriers to collegial relationships.

When participants were asked to comment on challenges to developing collegial relationships, three themes emerged that related to past traditions, classified staff, and teaming/collaboration time for teachers.

Respondents indicated that past traditions were hurdles to making the school a cohesive unit. As one teacher stated,

I think both staffs kept saying, “This is the way we did it.” Both staffs felt ownership about their ways of doing things. I heard over and over, “This is the way we did it,” and, “Our way was the right way to do things.”

Another went on to discuss the challenges of bridging past traditions at Bay to which participants at Valley were not accustomed, stating,

[The barrier related to the] past traditions of the site [Bay], the traditions of Bay stayed and none of the Valley traditions were put in place. One day I had three [Bay] teachers tell me that I had a good idea, but they stated, “That

is not the way we do it here.” When I encountered that attitude, I became emotional and lost it.

In relation to challenges in dealing with the classified staff, one Valley teacher offered,

I think the hardest thing for me in the first weeks of school was coping with the classified staff because I didn't know procedures, and I didn't know how things were done. I was surprised on how things were so different. I was not expecting that. [I was confused about] how the custodial staff worked, and office staff worked. Dealing with duplicating and dealing with asking for an order form and asking for this and asking for that. I found that led to apprehension. I was nervous and worried, and I was being set up for conflict because I did not know how things were supposed to be done. I knew I couldn't do things the way I wanted to or I was used to. I was always worried about getting in trouble. How am I supposed to do this task [when the office procedure] is so different?

Another barrier to collegial relationships came through in the lack of time for collaboration. As one teacher stated,

There are no common prep times, and there are no teams. There is no meeting time, and I am not someone who would advocate for more meeting times, but we really should have had more meetings this year. We should have had department meetings and grade level meetings. When you meet in

teams, you get to know people when you sit around and talk about students and bounce ideas off of each other.

Another teacher commented on the same topic stating, “How do you get to know each other when you don’t have collaboration time and come back together as a whole staff to share what you discussed so you can have consensus on a topic?”

School function during the first half of the year.

When interviewees were asked about how the school functioned for the first half of the merged year, the responses had a negative trend. As one teacher expressed,

It was terrible. The first half, we had a new administration, so to give them the benefit of the doubt they were trying to figure things out. In a way, we were all starting fresh because there weren’t protocols exactly in place, or if there were they did not function, so they had to be reworked... Things did not function well. How do we do detention? How do tardies work? Who states whether a student is tardy or not, the teacher or the office?

A teacher who worked at Valley prior to the combining of sites shared the following view of the merged school’s ability to effectively function for the first half of the school year:

Everyone was winging it the whole time, and the secretaries were running the show... I don’t know. I guess that was the way they did it here [at Bay], but it felt very confusing. Half of the time the kids would ask me a question about

something we were doing on campus, and I would have no idea. There was no cohesive communication thing like a single bulletin.

Another teacher offered this impression of the first half of the school year:

[We were] treading water. Everyone was trying to figure out how to make a phone call to somebody. Who do you talk to [in order] to do this? Nobody had explained how to do things. You would go to the office to ask a question of people who did not want to talk to you. It was an awful waste of time.

A classified person made this observation of the first half of the school year:

I don't see the teachers being connected here. Well, some teachers follow rules, and others see that as not quite important. They let the little stuff like gum [slide]. Some staff members don't follow rules. They follow their old set ways.

A teacher expressed frustration with the process, stating,

[The school was running on a] horrible dysfunctional default mode, not well. Nobody was on the same page about discipline procedures – nobody still is, for that matter – or on academic expectations. The first half of the year was more hellish than the second half of the year, but more hellish. It just feels like we are in this horrible dysfunctional family with all of these strange yelling step-brothers, step-sisters, step-parents. It does not feel like a warm homey place to be.

Climate of the school.

When interviewees were asked about the climate of the school, answers were focused both on student and staff perceptions. The comments that related to student perspectives were positive. “I’ve been hearing kids say, ‘Oh wow! This is a nice place. The other kids are okay.’ The kids are positive about being here and fitting together.”

Staff perceptions of the school climate were mixed and related to student behavior and staff integration. One teacher related the climate of the school to student behavior outside of the classroom, stating,

There is this sort of underlying lack of control. The inconsistency all over the place, the same conversations again and again about behaviors... Passing period is wild. After school is wild. Our administration is invisible. Kids roam around with their hoods and cell phones.”

One teacher expected the school’s student population to adhere to school rules in order to feel a positive climate on campus.

Other interviewees related their perceptions of climate to interactions among the staff. As one teacher commented, “I think it’s harder for the staff, and you can hear the staff blaming each other for one circumstance or another, and I don’t feel that has been completely resolved yet.” Another went on to express perceptions of the merged site’s climate, stating, “I think it [the climate] is not very good. I’m not saying it can’t be better, but it is a waste. If there was some frontloading of this merger, it would have been better.” Another teacher saw an improvement of sorts:

It's slightly improved. Through our dysfunctionality, we have found some agreement, and we have sort of come to accept where we are. It's more of a place of acceptance, I guess. We are all exhausted and going through the motions and not pushing issues like we might [have] when we started.

Colleagues' reactions.

One of the interviewees who came into the merger from a third school site commented on colleague's reactions to the change in staff:

I don't know much about the Bay School people, but I know that the Valley School people were in a supreme state of mourning and distress and just kind of a weeping, gnashing of teeth, seriously. I'm not being silly. Really mourning a loss of a school that, as some people told me, had one of the best collegial kind of environments they had ever been in within the last few years. Of course I wasn't there – maybe that's why it was so wonderful. Ha. But things were really clicking, and people were working together, people were communicating, really collaborating, not quote collaborating, but really working together. Kids were feeling the effect of all of that. It sounded like a really great school, and it was really painful for Valley School people to have that broken up.

Another interviewee stated,

The teachers are the problem. Teachers are not making the connections. The teachers are off in their own little things, and for the most part Bay and

Valley folks have not connected. A couple of people person by person, but the staffs have not connected. I just got it the other day. We are two different animals right brained and left brained.

One person who was connected to both school sites prior to the merger stated:

It just sounds like it was hard. Just getting paper supplies or just the little things seemed hard. And that makes everything else hard because you have to do new stupid things like fill out forms. That is just the little stuff. It isn't even the hard stuff like teaching the same thing or using the same text.

Outcomes.

I asked staff members what outcomes have emerged following the transition from two district middle schools into to one merged site. One teacher still felt confusion in relation to the school's overall philosophy. One participant questioned if the school should function as a middle school or junior high due to the loss of the sixth grade students in the merging of the schools when he said,

I don't even think we have fully identified the problems [on campus] because we haven't talked. We need more time to go through philosophy [as a staff]. I think we need to look at a mission statement. Are we a middle school or a junior high? We call ourselves a middle school, but we are actually a junior high. What does that mean? How do we interact with students? That is a weakness here, that we don't have a good relationship with students.

This teacher felt the school lacked the ability to foster positive relationships with students.

One interviewee commented that an outcome of the merger was the loss of culture by Valley School staff members, stating,

Some stuff that made Valley really unique was lost in this merger. It's kind of like the staff from Valley had to come in and become Bay. I think there should have been a lot more team bonding before the schools came together in the summer... Bay may have been fearful because Valley had such a good reputation and so here comes Valley with their good kids. Versus kids over here at Bay where you worked really hard, and it wasn't very rewarding. Maybe they thought that Valley people would come in with their whoop-de-do ideas and want to change, and they [Bay teachers] weren't as willing to work up enthusiasm for change.

Another teacher felt that those who merged from Valley had become complacent toward changing the Bay site and accepting of the stresses in their work environment when he stated,

[I think an outcome has become] complacency [towards fighting for change] like, "Oh, this is the way it is?" "Okay, that is the way it is." We [each segment of the staff] just look at each other. I don't think I know anybody from either staff who is happy with the way it is going from either staff. We are overwhelmed and overworked. And at this point in terms of creating this

unity that...would make our lives so much better. [Instead the staff is] fraught with prickly edginess.

Impact on instruction and families.

In order to determine what impact the merger had on student instruction and families, I asked the staff to share their experiences. The following response is illustrative of staff perceptions:

[As far as instruction,] there is a rumor that one school's idea is that Friday is a kind of day off. The other school's staff believes differently. In that Friday is just another day of the week for instruction. There is some concern because the students, depending on their schedule, are getting mixed messages. If they go to one class, and it's play-day on Friday, and you go to another class and its business as usual, that's confusing for them.

On the same note, another teacher commented,

I think teachers' instruction has changed. I think whenever you're balancing on one foot, something has to give. We are moving into new rooms. We're unpacking and learning new procedures. We're feeling frustrations.

Something has to give. Our teaching suffered.

Some staff commented about public perception of the merger. One participant stated, "From what I hear, the public is not happy." Another said, "[There are] some angry parents." An interviewee noted the students were being taken out the school, stating,

I've seen a lot of kids leave to go to parochial schools and charter schools. I think behavior issues drive them to leave. Parents believe it's too big of a school, and there is too much unsupervised activity that goes on that is not handled the way they want.

A final comment related to one participant's perception of her students' feelings, stating, "I think the kids liked the merger because there was less discipline and the free for all of it. But talk to them academically, and they don't think they got as good of an education this year."

Impact of leadership.

Participants in the interviews were split on their feelings about administrative leadership. Many participants felt the administrative team was comprised of hard working people who were doing their best under the circumstances, while others would have liked to see the administrative team have a clearer vision for the school to follow.

Those who felt positive about the direction leadership had taken expressed optimism. One interviewee stated,

I think they [the administrative team] did the best they could. I think they could have done a few things better. I don't know what I would have done. We got two really good people. I think they worked hard, but they had no guidance and direction from the district office.

Another teacher commented positively about the impact of the leadership team at the merged site, stating, “Without our particular administrative team, we would have been dead meat. They gave us the push and allowed us to work to the best of our ability.” Another teacher noted with compassion that the administration was new to the middle school level, commented, “I think they [the administration] have been a constant positive influence, and they’re always trying to bring things together. They are overwhelmed.”

Others felt the administrative leadership could have been refined more to guide the school during the merging process. As one teacher expressed in the interview,

I don’t feel that they [site administration] have had enough of an positive impact. They’re not out there [on grounds] enough. They don’t enforce the school rules like hats and hoods rules. I notice hats and dress code things all the time. Should I have to be the one to ask students to remove their hat while they are talking to an administrator or other staff member? I remember when there was a decision at the beginning of the year to have a no hat policy, and then there it was in the bulletin [created by the secretarial staff] that hats were only expected to be off when a student entered a building. Some classified personnel even go against [administrative and staff] rules determined at staff meetings. That is part of the lack of leadership. Some of

them [classified staff] should be called to task on that. Classified staff should be expected to be a part of the school team.

Another teacher stated,

Well, we had a lack of leadership, and the talents of the staff haven't been fully utilized by this administration. We haven't had staff meetings. They are being reactive rather than proactive. And a couple of moves by the administrations have set us back.

Another teacher stressed the challenges administration faced in combining the sites without middle school experience:

Our administrator does not have her stride in managing a bunch of crazy teachers, and putting together a framework for a whole school. She is super supportive, but in terms of having all the parts working as a whole, and everybody is firing on similar pistons without backfiring keeping the timing from getting off, she needs some work. The VP, while being a great guy, is not holding students accountable. The VP is sincere in trying doing the right thing. But in meeting with kids, the VP does not know how to guide and hold a hard line. His response is, "What do you want me to do about it?" He doesn't get the sense that he is supposed to be the one who makes the discipline decision. [He is] the one who is supposed to be the hard-line. As a teacher, I don't care what you do. Just do something. Set up procedures and follow through.

Advice in building collegial relationships.

Several people offered their perspective in relation to establishing collegial relationships within the merged site. One interviewee commented,

We got thrown together here not as a collective of friends. We're colleagues. We're all professionals to do a job, and to build collegial respect we needed time. We didn't have teams in terms of specific teams, seventh or eighth grade teams, but maybe meeting with our grade level teams and just talking. "Hey what do you do in your classroom?" Sharing, doing some sort of collaboration on things we teach or just sharing what you teach. When you spend time collegially, you build respect and rapport. You understand other people. You may not agree with them on things, but there comes a certain respect. Everyone here, for the most part, is a professional, and everyone here is doing a good job. When you don't know somebody, it is easier to write them off or ignore them, but from spending time with them you appreciate their strengths. You gain respect. When you don't know someone, that makes it easy to disrespect them or ignore them or write them off. Collegial time is a good time to build relationships. Not the in-services we had [ELLA training]. That was not productive for our staff to bond.

Another person took the same question in an entirely different direction, stating,

I would encourage anyone who comes into this department [English] in the future to push for another outside person to help guide the discussion. It feels

at times as if there is bullying going on. We really needed our administration to be at the meeting to help steer the group in a direction toward a common goal as opposed to doing best practices. [When teachers share a favorite lesson or method of instruction], then it becomes a talent show. It just becomes a time when nobody really cares about what each other does; they are just waiting to tell how well they do something. Nobody really benefits. Everyone feels like they are doing a good job, so best practices are just a talent show. They can create more adversity than integration since there is no common goal, and some feel like they may have to give up a favorite practice.

Advice.

Staff members were asked if they had advice to give to another teacher who was facing a merger situation in order to lessen the academic and personal impact. There were a few commonalities with the major theme being to keep an open mind. As one teacher suggested, “Be open-minded. Don’t be set in your old ways. I think that the biggest mistake teachers make is that they get set in their ways... You have to just let go and be open to newness.” Within the same vein, another teacher noted, “Be open-minded. The people of these two schools came together with completely different perspectives.” One teacher offered personal advice by saying, “Be prepared for a bumpy time. Be open. Resist the urge to focus on your own little needs, your own ideas. Attempt to be open to the group, support group discussion,

and support group thinking.” Another teacher gave advice that would help an individual who is struggling with the changes at the site level, saying, “Stay strong, feel good about your instruction, and your work with students. It will help you keep your sanity.”

Others focused their advice towards those who have to move school sites and the ways in which they would have to redefine their expectations in relation to the closure their old school and the reality of their experiences at the new one. This is expressed when one teacher reflected,

I thought I knew what was going to happen, and I knew what it means to merge schools, but I don't think it's ever what you expect it to be. It's not really a merger. It's more of an assimilation thing. One group will be stronger based on the foundations that are established.”

Another Valley teacher expressed,

It's not going to be easy. Especially if you are the one who is closing. It will hurt. There is anxiety, especially when you feel as if your school felt very comfortable. Where you had license to disagree [with your colleagues], and at Bay people take things personally.

Activities and events.

Two main themes emerged when participants were asked about activities and events that might bring a staff together. They included developing collegial

relationships and participating in recreational activities as a group. As one teacher expressed,

I think professional collegial time works best, and then secondarily is the social time. First, collegial grade level activities. Then you know people.

You respect people, and then you see them as friends because they are. We need to come together first as colleagues.

Another participant commented about the positive encounters she had with colleagues from the other staff during individual learning plan (ILP) conferences for students who were not meeting grade level standards and needed intervention. The teacher stated,

During the ILP conferences, I liked that we had a common goal to work on in a collegial group, and it was the most beneficial collegial time I had all year. It was the only one [process] that worked. I learned about a colleague as a teacher and as a person. I think that could be a good teambuilding activity for the beginning of the year.

Others commented about the standard use of get-togethers like potlucks and luncheons. As one stated, “I don’t know... potlucks, or before school get-togethers. I don’t know how effective they are, but it is something to start with.” Another teacher suggested, “[We need to] get away from campus and have some fun. Go on a jet boat ride or something.” Another teacher proposed, “We need a way to do stupid stuff that shows we have not let go of our child.”

Summary

The results of the study express the views of the staff in relation to the culture of their previous school and the merged school. Staff from both sites expressed challenges in understanding each other's philosophies in relation to school procedures and policies. Additionally both groups identified the need for administrative leadership from both the site and the district as being instrumental in fostering a smooth transition. The following chapter will present the analysis of the data gleaned from the study.

CHAPTER FIVE

ANALYSIS

Introduction

This study was designed to fill a gap in the existing literature by looking at the perspectives of two middle school staffs in relation to the climate of their schools before and following their schools merging, so that I could determine the impact, if any, on their perceptions of their workplace both before and after the schools' consolidation. An analysis of the results of the study revealed several prominent themes which will be discussed in this chapter.

The subsequent sections analyze the data by dividing it into several categories: staff perspectives of their school prior to the merger, district and administrative leadership, and staff perspectives of their school following the merger.

Perceptions of School Climate

While interpreting the data, I found it to be important to note that the mean and median number of years the polled staff had been employed in the district was 15.5. This signifies that most of those who participated in the survey and follow-up interviews were veteran teachers who had worked at their site for a significant number of years prior to the merger, in some cases for their entire careers. The fact that the staffs at both sites struggled with the combining of the two schools could

very well be partially due to how embedded they were in the culture and values of their original school site.

The staffs of both schools felt significantly more positive about the climate of their prior site than they did at the merged site. This could be due to each staff's ability to develop an independent identity as a school with a distinct culture through the longevity of their collegial relationships at their prior schools. Shared values and culture within their school system gave them an appreciation for each other's views, and they had a long history of dealing with issues together without feeling personally affronted when ideas conflicted. In addition, over time each distinct school staff was able to have shared experiences that bonded them as a community at their site. After the merger and without strong intervention to assist both groups to come together in creating a new culture, many of the staff had negative perceptions of both the process and the newly merged school.

Bay school participants felt loyalty to their prior staff independent of administration or perception of cohesion. Bay School experienced a significant turnover in administration prior to the merger, and some staff did not feel as if Bay School worked as a collegial team. Yet, it was apparent that they felt a loyalty to their school, and in fact, they were defensive about many aspects of their school that related to student achievement, curriculum, and procedures. This defensive mode contributed to the inability of the staffs to blend because the Bay staff projected that

the Valley staff felt superior. This could be attributed to the notion that the schools had been rivals for decades in terms of sports, curricular outcomes, and enrollment.

Valley School staff did not have significant turnover in administration, or if they did, the teachers did not report there was significant impact on the school when there was a new member or administrative team on campus. Valley personnel did express that they worked as a cohesive collegial body with clear structures and procedures in place prior to the move to the Bay site. There was an overarching perception that Valley had a strong cohesive staff that worked collectively not only to meet school wide goals but also felt familial and comfortable as a team. In the merger, the Valley staff's loss of school culture was not addressed by administration or the Bay staff which accentuated their pain and created resentment because their feelings in relation to the loss of their school's culture and facility was never addressed. This contributed to their feelings of disunity and longing for what used to be.

Both staffs came into the new school with an embedded loyalty derived from their years as being rival schools in the district that worked from separate philosophical frameworks. The biases they brought with them inhibited their ability to work together cohesively when they were merged together without adequate preparation.

Administrative Leadership

In the merger, the district did not provide support to the site administrative team or the merging teachers to adequately prepare them in the process of merging the school sites. This created a challenge for both the administrative team and the staff of the school to blend into a collaborative unit. Participants noted how hard the new site administration worked in an attempt to combine schools with limited resources. In addition, it was noted that the staff felt the administrative team were great people who just did not have the tools or experience to do the job correctly, and that it may have benefited the new staff more effectively if someone with middle level experience had been there to consult or add continuity to the administrative team at the merged school.

The tools for creating a positive merger, which the site administrative team lacked, could have been given to them by their district leadership if the district had come to the site and provided some extra help during the month prior to school opening through at least the first trimester or provided an outside consultant team to help. With a strong presence from the district office, the district leaders could have seen the challenges of the new site first hand and been able to assist where needed in order to create a climate that would promote a common vision for the school.

In addition, the administrative team lacked support from the district office in developing a work place that encouraged and supported collegial interactions among the staff when the district did not financially support or communicate timelines for

bargaining collaboration time for staff. Participants in the study presented the argument in several forums that the two groups needed time – financially compensated time – to work out new structures in order to lessen the impact of the acute changes to the staffs’ work environment, and that some of the negative impact at the school was directly attributed to the lack of time provided by the district for the staff to create a new team. In essence, the teachers were thrown together and expected to make a smooth transition happen without appropriate levels of support that worked in a counterproductive manner that widened gaps instead of bridging them.

The data suggest a deep need for a transition team to be put in place by the district the year prior to a merger in order to help the new administrative team gather information about the two sites’ cultures in order to guide the new school’s policies and procedures. The transition team would also be there to support the staff as they process their new roles in the coming year as a blended school. By utilizing a transition team model, the teachers and staff would have time to get to know each other prior to the first day of school. This way the teachers and support staff would have a clearer idea of what to expect. A transition team would help eliminate the anxiety felt by the new staff on both sides and help them move forward. Ultimately, if a district makes a decision to merge, it should back up its decision with strong support through the process if it wants to create a new school with a positive climate.

Site leadership.

Not only did the district need to support its merged site's administrative team following their decision to merge two schools, but the site's administrative team also needed to take the lead and establish the school's policies and procedures, convey them to the staff, and orient the new team to the policy. Instead, in this particular merger, the site administration relied on classified office personnel to teach the staff about many of the school's policies and procedures. This deferred authority and caused a perception of adversary conflict for some Valley teachers and favoritism for Bay School's past practices, further exacerbating the negative climate.

The teachers at the merged site respected being a part of a democratic decision-making process which was the style of their new administration, but they wanted policies in place from the start to limit conflicts in relation to the way procedures had been done at the school in the past. Participants clearly revealed the need for decisions to be made by an administrative team that was decisive and gave the staff a base from which to work. Staff members expressed a desire to edit and build upon a pre-determined system over attempting to create policies and procedures from scratch in which the potential existed for both factions to make negative judgments about the other staff's way of conducting business. In particular, staff wanted clearly articulated procedures for communication about such issues as how to sign up for the computer lab, post a school event on the calendar, or take students to an assembly, to name a few. Without systems in place, the staff was

unable to move towards developing a unified front due to the tug of war between each side, creating a dysfunctional climate.

The largest tug of war related to inconsistencies in the discipline policy. Each staff had expectations of particular school rules, yet not all members of the merged staff enforced the rules. This seemed to be particularly challenging for the Valley staff that perceived its site as having a tighter discipline policy which was always enforced by the administrative team and teachers alike. The policy pertained to such issues as students wearing hats and hoods, the student dress code, and students' use of gum. In the new setting, the rules were neither clearly established nor enforced by administrators, teachers, or support staff which created tension and controversy, leaving both groups feeling under-valued and dissatisfied. The only way they could see the issue was through the lens of their past practices, and because the leadership did not enforce the policy school-wide, this left room for individual staff members to, in essence, create their own policies. The result was finger pointing and judgments surrounding a right or wrong way to create and enforce rules with students rather than having the whole staff in accord on student discipline in a manner which was administratively driven and enforced.

In this study, administration and staff members had disparate views surrounding team-building trainings. Teachers expressed that the way they wanted to get to know their colleagues was to utilize collegial time to work on a common school-related goal. Staff views leaned toward the notion that the best way to get to

know new members of their newly configured school was to spend time as colleagues first, and that people get to know each other while listening and expressing opinions about school policy or curriculum while working toward a common goal. Additionally, they perceived that working in small groups toward the common goal would have helped them to get to know each other's philosophies and would have opened avenues for communication. It seems teachers perceived that it was easier to disregard other people's comments as not important when no relationship existed between them and when, in some cases, they did not even know one another's names. When teachers were able to work together discussing student behaviors, they felt they could better see commonalities and bridge misconceptions. While some mentioned potlucks and after-school get-togethers as a catalyst for coming together, most felt that the first steps needed to be tied to the school facility in a manner of sharing a lunch potluck on site, and that as people grew to know each other, other social venues would open up among staff. Some staff suggested that having fun together helps create a positive climate, but that they felt it would come naturally following a building of trust and forming new relationships. They did not see an administrative team building training as the forum for bringing veteran teachers together as a collegial unit. On the other hand, administrators favored group team building as a method for building cohesion. This did not map on to what the teachers felt they needed in order to be able to successfully blend two distinct staffs into a cohesive unit at the school. Teachers perceived that team-building

trainings wasted their time. Thus, the teachers wanted time to work together toward common goals relating to policy and curriculum, and they needed administrators to set up the forum for focused collegial interactions so as to develop a positive school culture.

One explanation for these very distinct ways of forming cohesion could be that, much like teachers who attend conferences in order to improve their practice, administrators attend retreats where they are trained in a specific team-building program. Following the summer's retreat, they return to their school and implement the training. In the case of this research, all team building activities surveyed occurred at the staff's prior site. It is interesting to note that teachers rated them as ineffective, yet they still feel a profound loyalty to their prior school. So it could be determined that the trainings themselves did not promote collegial relationships, instead the shared experiences among the staff over the years was what brought them together.

Additionally, administrative preparation programs may fail to address the development of mediation skills that would help administrators to be able to create collaborative collegial relationships in schools that are in crisis. Thus, it may not be a training about a staff member's personality traits that is most helpful to bring a staff together, but rather the staff needs a means to create relationships by airing views and ideas about curriculum, school policies, or students in a loosely structured,

safe forum and a person with skill in mediation practices who could help facilitate respectful interactions among groups with disparate ideas.

Further, the administrative team would have benefited from forming a teacher leadership team at the new site that could have worked as a liaison between the staff and administration. This team could have kept the administration abreast of the needs of each of the merged sites staffs instead of individual teachers airing their views in the administrator's office which can lead to a perception of favoritism.

Staff Perspectives Following the Merger

The participants rated the new school as having a closed or almost toxic climate. However, both sites had different outcomes in relation to their views. Some Valley teachers may have rated the climate negatively based on their experiences during the beginning of school when the new staff was not provided with a campus orientation, so they were unfamiliar with the site prior to school opening and were unable to help students with questions relating to such issues as room numbers or restroom locations. These veteran teachers who were new to the site felt anxiety, much like that experienced by new teachers, relating to the loss of the comfort of being the experts that they had been at their previous school. This led to a poor atmosphere on campus because the veteran teachers who were new to the site felt displaced and not in control when their only exposure to the campus was four days that consisted of meetings, student orientations, and classroom set up time before the school opened.

In addition, some Valley teachers related frustration that there was no support in place in regard to the loss of their former school site to which some related as being akin to the death of a loved one. Valley School staff in particular mourned the loss of familiarity and community that had been established at their site where many had spent their entire careers. They needed time or some forum in which to process the closing of their school as means to grieve. The closure of Valley was particularly painful for some who had experienced shifts in state and district policy and had joined together to meet the challenge creating a feeling of unity and safety with each other. Much of the staff at Valley had experienced professional peaks and valleys together, creating a familial community which was lost in the merging of the schools and not addressed at any time before, during, or after the merger.

In addition, they did not see any of their practices being implemented at the new site. Many expressed the perception that they were assimilated or absorbed into Bay's way of doing things which took away from them feeling valued as colleagues and viable members of a school setting. Procedures and policies were driven primarily by classified staff, which baffled the incoming teachers from Valley who were accustomed to strong site leadership and a clearly articulated school vision.

Bay staff felt as if they were involved in a hostile take over with Valley Staff coming in with their ways of doing things. Many veteran Bay teachers did not want to relinquish past practices or favorite lessons to become part of a team, especially with the rival school's staff. Their prior practice promoted working in isolation more

like a traditional junior high school where teachers had the autonomy to be the expert in their discipline. The blending of the two site's philosophies, which came from very different corners of the educational spectrum, created anxiety in the Bay staff which also inhibited the new school in blending cohesively.

It appears that the challenges for the merged school were embedded partially in the inflexibility of the adults on campus. The students acclimated quickly to the new environment and peer group. They were comfortable in the newly merged school within a couple of weeks. The challenge was in the inflexibility of the staff to leave their old way of conducting business behind, so they could move into a new era in their careers.

One important area of common ground for the teachers was how dedicated to teaching both staffs were. Participants from both sites unanimously stated in relation to returning to the new school year after the merger that they were excited to see the students and happy to be back from their summer break. This group of teachers showed their greatest commonality was their dedication and enthusiasm for their profession. It appears as if this staff has the most important commonality of all: the love of teaching which could have served as the basis bringing the two groups together.

However, in the case of this merger, the lack of time for staff to be together to make collaborative decisions and connections before, during, and after the merger was almost like the kiss of death for this merged school. The lack of time to come

together created a barrier to forming a smoothly functioning school site with a positive climate. Throughout the study, teachers asked for time to meet, to get to know one another, to get to know the campus, to work together on common goals, to learn about each site's philosophies, and to establish relationships among each other. This lack of time to work together made the transition between the schools extremely difficult for the staff. This can be partially attributed to the idea that the two groups came to the table with vastly different ways of looking at how a school operates.

All in all, following the first year of the merger, the school's staff appeared to be in a forced marriage in which two groups who were already distrustful of each other were forced together to create something workable. This was highly stressful for all involved especially when each side saw each other as being very different, coming from different philosophies and ways of looking at the educational process.

Summary

The staff from both sites felt loyalty to their prior school site which inhibited their ability to establish cohesive relationships. If a district authorizes a merger, it needs to be prepared to support its decision by providing the site administrative team with time and direction before, during, and after the merger in order to have a smooth transition between sites. Additionally, the policies of the school should be administratively driven. The major commonality among the teachers of the merged school was clearly their love of teaching. Finally, both schools studied perceived the new site as being more negative than their prior facility.

The next chapter examines the limitations of the study, conclusions drawn from the research, and implications for future research.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSIONS

As I was working on this thesis, several school boards in the San Francisco Bay Area voted to consolidate several of their schools due to the California budget crisis. The implication of a district's decision to merge schools has wide ramifications in relation to the culture of the new site. Staff involved in a merger needs strong administrative leadership and district support that provides a clear vision of the school's policies and goals for them to work toward in order to lessen the culture shock that occurs when two schools are combined. If a structure is clearly laid out for teachers, they can move toward creating a true merger rather than an assimilation of one staff into another's school culture that can lead to overarching resentment and disunity, ultimately having a negative outcome on student achievement. In today's high stakes educational forum, districts need to put strong scaffolds in place for administrative teams to bring the two merging schools' staffs together much earlier than the week before school starts.

This chapter offers an examination of the limitations of the research study, conclusions, and implications for future research in the area of school mergers.

Limitations of the Research

There were several limitations to this study. The first is only two schools were included in the study. In order to establish a deeper understanding of the combining of school cultures, several schools, including mergers of elementary and

high school sites, would need to be evaluated to determine if the themes that emerged in this study are consistent with themes from other sites. Additionally, the methods by which the data were collected limited the participants to those on the staffs who were vocal about their impressions of the merger or comfortable participating in the study. Not every staff member was interviewed or chose to participate in the online survey. This limited the results in that not all perceptions were presented. Another limitation was embedded in the fact that the research was conducted in a small rural community. In order to provide a sufficient level of anonymity to the participants, the research instrument did not delineate the views of each segment of the merging staff such as administration, certificated, or classified staff which could have gleaned more specific results.

A final limitation relates to the fact that I was a teacher who was a participant in the merger. I may not have been able to gather viable data from specific segments of the staff at the merged school because some staff from the Bay School site did not know me, and they may have felt that I would be judgmental in relation to their thoughts, so they chose not to participate. Additionally, my personal experiences as a staff member blending into the school guided my creation of the study, the development of the study questions, and my perceptions of the data.

Conclusions

The blending of staffs is not easy. The best way to promote staff unity is to provide support at the district level for both site administrators and staff. First, districts need to provide ample time for the new administration to get some feel for

the culture of the two schools during the year prior to the merger. In addition, the new administration needs assistance in developing policies and procedures for the merged site. This could be facilitated by the outgoing administration or by having one person on the administrative team with a background in the grade level of the school. A positive culture would also be better attained by having an outside facilitation team help with preliminary meetings in order to keep a focus on school-wide goals set forth by the administration.

The facilitation team could also assist the staff from the closing school process their loss of culture and identity and help provide them with healthy mechanisms in which to deal with their anger, frustration, and sense of loss due to their school closing, so that they are able to make a healthy professional transition, and so that their emotions of loss do not get projected onto their new work environment.

Districts need to put administrators on the site who have a clear vision for the school that is well articulated to staff prior to the school opening in the fall. With the vision in place and policies set as a blueprint, staff can debate policy and procedures in order to create buy-in from both groups. The ideal of taking the best from both sites, a seemingly admirable method of combining two schools, was not effective and should be eliminated from the administrators' plan of action if they wish to foster cohesion among staff. Rather, the staff needs the administration to set policies prior to the staff coming together, with the understanding that the staff will manipulate and mold policies to meet their new team's needs. This will help

eliminate the “this is the way we did it” mentality that fosters dissension among the new school staff. One way to bring the staff together is to have them debate and amend a pre-set administrative policy that is not a carbon copy of either school’s past practices. In that way, the administrative policy gets to be a focal point toward which the new staff can begin to move rather than each side relating every idea to their school’s past practices.

One situation that administrators should try to avoid is to expect the staff to focus a lot of energy on creating policy during the four days prior to school opening when teachers are focused on setting up their rooms for instruction and do not have a feel for the campus or each other. This may mean that the process needs to begin in the year prior to the actual merger, with multiple meeting times allotted for administrators, teachers, and classified staff from both sites to get to know one another through their joint work on policies and procedures for the following year at their new school.

This study provided evidence that a merging staff would benefit from having extra time to learn the facility in order to relieve confusion and anxiety by staff who were once experts and who are now beginning a new collegial journey. This could come in the form of a formalized orientation that contains an aspect of collegial discussion within a small group or department located in different buildings of the school in order to help the new staff both get a feel for the campus and each other. This would help foster collegial discussion and ground the new staff in the facility. Again, a longer-term process started the year prior to the merger would provide

incoming teachers with the time to become oriented to their new school site and would provide much needed support in the merging process.

Finally, involving skilled mediators in the process of merging schools may be one of the most important steps districts can take to ensure a smooth, healthy transition. This may help to ensure that all voices are heard throughout the process from the initial decision-making through the full merger within a safe forum. A professional mediator would have deep skills to draw out all parties, help them air their concerns and feelings, and guide them toward productive solutions. This would have the added benefit of involving administrators in the mediation process as equal members of the merged school team, rather than having them attempt to function as mediators themselves, a task that is often beyond their skill set and training.

Implications for Future Research

This study was limited to two rural California middle schools. It may be helpful to study the effects of a merger on elementary and high schools to determine if each curricular level has distinct needs. Other related research could separate administrative, certificated, and certificated personnel's perspectives in order to gain deeper understanding of each segment of the school staff needs in order to create a comprehensive transition plan and team. In addition, it would be helpful if mergers are studied in which an experienced administrative team is in place in order to determine if there would be similar outcomes. A comparative analysis of school mergers in urban, inner-city, and rural environments may reveal place-specific

differences that could further refine our understanding of best practices in school mergers.

Summary

The intent of this research was to assess the efficacy of the merger process of two rural middle schools. It revealed that districts needed to put processes in place to support site administration and teachers alike if their primary goal was to create a school with a positive culture. Additionally, site administration needs to articulate a clear vision for the school. Within their vision, they need to create policy, especially in the areas of discipline and procedures, and they should be seen as the leaders in enforcing policy. This may help to eliminate friction among staff who can then come together to mold the policy or debate its effectiveness rather than fight for their traditional way of conducting business. With the worsening budget crisis in California, more schools and districts may look toward mergers as one solution for their lack of funds. It is my hope that this research will help to inform their process so that they are able to make a smooth transition for students, their families, and school staff.

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28.

APPENDIX A

Online Survey

Online Survey

Dear Survey Participant:

Thank you for taking time out of your busy day to complete this survey. The results of this research have the potential to help schools around the country better organize and implement a school merger. Your candid responses are welcome and appreciated through this anonymous format.

Your colleague,

Sheri

1. Which title best describes your affiliation with your school?

Teacher

Administrator

Classified

2. How long have you been employed with Eureka City Schools?

_____ years

3. How many school sites have you had the opportunity to work at in your career?

Eureka City Unified _____ Another District _____

4. How long did you work at your school prior to the merger?

Years at Prior or Current School _____

Years of Service at Initial School _____

5. How would you consider the overall climate of the school you worked at prior to the merger relative to:

Positive Slightly Neutral Slightly Negative N/A
 Positive Negative

Staff interactions at meetings

Staff collaboration on curriculum

Staff meeting common goals to improve student achievement

Staff following common

discipline procedures

Staff exhibiting mutual respect for differing opinions
Staff communication

Comments or Clarification: _____

6. How would you consider the overall climate of the school you work at following the merger of the two sites relative to:

	Positive	Slightly Positive	Neutral	Slightly Negative	Negative	N/A
Staff interactions at meetings						
Staff collaboration on curriculum						
Staff meeting common goals to improve student achievement						
Staff following common discipline procedures						
Staff exhibiting mutual respect for differing opinions						
Staff communication						

Comments or Clarification: _____

7. How would you rate your school staff's capacity to participate cooperatively in making decisions regarding school policies prior to the merger?

Very Involved	Somewhat Involved	Uninvolved	N/A

8. How would you rate your school staff's capacity to participate cooperatively in making decisions regarding school policies following the merger?

Very Involved	Somewhat Involved	Uninvolved	N/A

9. Do you feel you had strong Administrative leadership/support at your school site prior to the merger in relation to:

	Yes	Not Sure	No
Promoting a shared vision for student achievement?			
Meeting school wide curricular objectives?			
Maintaining a safe school environment?			
Supporting teachers with challenging students and parents?			
Supporting staff development that is teacher initiated?			
Maintaining non- negotiable core values for the school?			

Comments or Clarification

10. Do you feel you have strong Administrative leadership/support at your school site following the merger in relation to:

	Yes	Not Sure	No
Promoting a shared vision for student achievement?			
Meeting school wide curricular objectives?			
Maintaining a safe school environment?			
Supporting teachers with challenging students and parents?			
Supporting staff development that is teacher initiated?			
Maintaining non- negotiable core values for the school?			

Comments or Clarification

11. How would you rate you school's ability to communicate organizational structures and procedures prior to the merger?

Well Communicated

Somewhat
Communicated

Not Communicated

Comments or Clarification

12. How would you rate your school's ability to communicate organizational structures and procedures following the merger?

Well Communicated

Somewhat
Communicated

Not Communicated

Comments or Clarification

13. Did your previous school utilize team building or staff cohesiveness trainings?

Yes

Sometimes

No

14. If your prior school utilized staff team building or cohesiveness trainings, which ones did you find to be effective in helping staff appreciate and value each other?

Training	Valuable	Not Valuable	N/A
Ropes Course			
The Color of Your Personality			
Rafting/Team Building Games			
Rate Yourself as a Learner			
Whose Got The Cheese?			
Introduce Your Partner			
Other			
Comments or Clarification			

Please expand on any training you found useful

15. What kinds of support did you receive during the merger?

16. What kinds of support would you have liked to have had prior to the merger?

17. What type of support would have benefited you during the merger?

18. Please note any other thoughts or comments you wish to share about challenges, positive outcomes, or recommendations for a school merger situation.

If you completed the survey and you enjoy coffee, there is an envelope in my box. Take a coffee coupon and enjoy a cup on me. I appreciate your time and input for my project.

Follow-Up Interview Questions

1. Is this the first school merger situation in which you have been involved? If not, describe the other mergers you have experienced.
2. Following the announcement of the merging of the two schools, how did you react?
3. What projections did you have about the merger prior to the schools coming together?
4. What was the largest barrier to the merger that you felt the staff would face?
5. What responsibility did your administration take toward creating forums for positive interactions between staff members?
6. What do you think could have made the five days prior to school opening smoother for the new team of teachers at the merged site?
7. Reflect back to the first few weeks of school, what apprehensions did you have at the time, or what excitement toward working in the merged school environment?
8. What were the challenges or barriers to establishing collegial relationships when the schools merged?
9. Overall how did the newly merged school function during the first half of the school year?
10. Now that the school year is underway, how would you judge the climate of the merged school?
11. What were your colleagues' reactions to the newly formed staff?
12. What outcomes have emerged following the merger?
13. What has been the impact of the merger on student instruction, the students, and their families?
14. What impact has your administrative leadership had on the climate of your school since the merger?
15. What advice would you give to personnel at a newly merged school to help it run more efficiently in the first few months?
16. What are some specific ways you see that teachers can work to establish collegial relationships within a newly formed staff?
17. What types of activities or events do you think would help teachers in a merger situation get to know each other better?
18. If you were to give advice to another teacher who is part of a school merger, what would it be?

APPENDIX B

LETTER TO SCHOOL STAFF

Copy of letter put in staff mailboxes at the school site:

May 18, 2009

Dear Colleagues:

As many of you know, I have been working on obtaining my Master's in Education from Humboldt State University. Since our district has been severely impacted by declining enrollment, I decided to do some work to help transition schools when they have to merge due to a declining enrollment trend. In order for me to complete my research, I am asking for your assistance.

I need to collect data about how you feel the merger at Bay for the 2008-2009 school year transpired. Since this may or may not be a topic that you wish to openly air your feelings, I have created an online survey format that insures your responses will be completely anonymous.

In addition, I am asking for as many volunteers as possible to participate in personal interviews. I have included an informed consent letter, which is attached to this letter. If you have interest, or will let me bribe you with lunch or coffee during the interview, please sign the form. I'll contact you to determine a good time for us to meet.

I thank you in advance for your participation. I hope my project is able to assist with fostering a smooth transition for school personnel who have to merge following a declining enrollment trend.

Respectfully,

Sheri Jensen

APPENDIX C

EMAIL TO SCHOOL STAFF

Copy of email to staff:

June 1, 2009

Hello Everyone:

As many of you know, I am in the final stages of completing my Master's Degree at HSU. As a final component, I need data pertaining to the merging of the two middle schools. In order for me to complete this portion of my research, I'm asking you to take an anonymous online survey. You will find the survey at the following link.

http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=M4lhTetqLUaqa4xhSaD_2bQ_3d_3d

I expect the survey to take you about 20 minutes to complete. Because I know how valuable your time is and in order to express my appreciation, I have purchased a number of Starbucks \$5.00 gift cards. You are welcome to go to my box and take a gift card after you complete the survey. If I run out, I will leave a tally sheet. If you place a tally mark on the sheet, I'll purchase more gift cards tomorrow morning. I will leave the survey open until June 20 for those of you who are experiencing an end of the year overload and need some flex time to complete the survey.

In addition, if you are willing to allow me to conduct a personal interview with you, I would be extremely grateful. I need to gather data from various viewpoints, so I am happy to meet with you before school, at lunch, after school, on the weekend. I'm even willing to buy you lunch or dinner. The personal interview should not take more than 20 minutes and will be completely confidential. Please reply to this email if you are willing to participate in a personal interview, so we can set up an appointment that is convenient for you.

I would like to thank you for your participation in this study. I believe it has the potential to help other schools that are facing a merger situation.

Your colleague,
Sheri Jensen