MOVING A DISTRICT FROM A K-6 TO A K-8 BUILDING: ACTION RESEARCH ABOUT BRINGING BACK STUDENTS TO THEIR HOME DISTRICT

A Doctoral Capstone Project

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Sue Ann Mariani
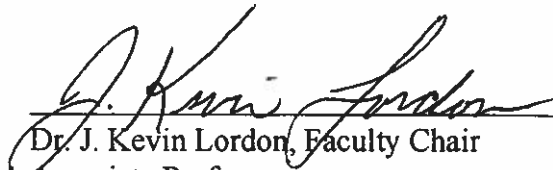
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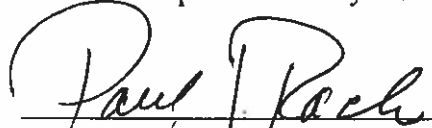
We hereby approve the capstone of

Sue Ann Mariani

Candidate for the Degree of Doctor of Education

7/8/21

Dr. J. Kevin Lordon, Faculty Chair
Associate Professor
Doctoral Capstone Faculty Committee Chair

7/8/21

Dr. Paul J. Rach
Receiver/Retired
Doctoral Capstone External Committee Member

Dedication

I dedicate this capstone work to my husband Mark Mariani, my daughter Kennedy

Moyer, and my parents David and Sally Long. They have provided me words of

encouragement and pushed me to completion during the process. Each has continuously

supported me and continued to cheer me on and for that, I am eternally grateful. I also

dedicate this to Paul Rach for his unwavering support throughout this journey.

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Finally, to my husband Mark and daughter Kennedy, who sacrificed days, nights, and weekends so that I could write and rewrite. Your love and support carried me through to the very end. Thank you will never be enough.

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Abstract

Duquesne City School District has been identified as a seriously financially struggling

school district by the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE). Duquesne City had

the 9-12th graders transition to other local school districts to receive their education with

the district paying the tuition bill to the receiving school districts for those students. This

decision to make the move was made by PDE and had the 9-12th graders placed in the

two local school districts in 2007. However, the school district was unable to recover

financially to some extent and subsequently in 2012 placed the 7th and 8th graders in the

same school districts that the 9-12th graders attended because, at that time, it was less

expensive to pay tuition than to operate a middle school. The purpose of this research is

to gain an understanding from the parents/guardians, the teachers and staff as well as the

community members what it would take to have a strong academic programming, what

resources the students needed as well as how the community and school district can work

together to support the return of the 7th and 8th graders. The research was based on survey

questions and interviews. The results of the research provided support for the return of

the 7th and 8th graders as well as specific suggestions on how to make the academic

programming stronger, what resources were needed and how the school district and

community could collaborate to support the students.

CHAPTER I

Duquesne City School District has been operating as a Pre-K-6 School District since 2012. With no high school and no middle school, the Duquesne community has been fractured. However, with the School Turnaround efforts and the serious strides that the School District has taken, there is hope building in the community and light at the end of the dark tunnel.

Background

Duquesne City School District has been identified as a seriously financially struggling school district by the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE). Duquesne City, in an effort to be able to meet financial obligations and meet academic needs, had the 9-12th graders transition to other local school districts to receive their education with the district paying the tuition bill to the receiving school districts for those students. This decision to make the move was made by PDE and had the 9-12th graders placed in the two local school districts in 2007. However, the school district was unable to recover financially to some extent and subsequently in 2012 placed the 7th and 8th graders in the same school districts that the 9-12th graders attended because, at that time, it was less expensive to pay tuition than to operate a middle school. The school district was assigned a Chief Recovery Office in November of 2012, then placed in Receivership on April 1, 2013 by a Judge of the Allegheny County Court of Common Pleas as recommended by the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE). This recommendation was the result of the elected board rejecting the Recovery Plan written by the Chief Recovery Officer. The law permits PDE to recommend the Court appoint a

Receiver to oversee all aspects of the school district as well as act as the Board of

Directors if the elected board does not approve the Recovery Plan written by the Chief

Recovery Officer. The loss of the 7- 12th graders to neighboring districts fractured the

Duquesne City Community and continues to leave a stigma in the community and creates

a poor comparison to other school districts within Allegheny County.

Focus

This study will focus on how the Duquesne City School District can improve the

academic programs, improve student resources, and work collaboratively with the

community to support the students going into 7th and 8th grade. The researcher is

attempting to change the grade configuration of the Duquesne City School District from a

Pre-K to 6 to a Pre-K to 8. In order for this to occur, it is imperative that the District focus

on academic programming to close the achievement gap, as well as make sure that we are

asking the parents and guardians what they feel should be included in the academic

programming for the 7th and 8th graders. Keeping the current student resources is

important to the district, but it also important to know what other resources the parents

and guardians would like to see and to seek community input. Creating a school-

community partnership will benefit the district, but the benefit to the 7th and 8th graders

is also going to be explored. This could also brand Duquesne City as a model of *School*

Turnaround, where the school district is poised to transform from a low-performing

school district to a high performing school district.

Research Questions

When the district was placed in Receivership, the Receiver had to implement a plan for recovery. Since 2013 there have been multiple amendments made to the original recovery plan, and in the latest amendment, the 4th amendment, the district is now permitted to take on new debt and bring back the 7th and 8th graders. With the provisional approval of the 4th Amendment by PDE and ensuing approval by the Supervising Judge of Allegheny Court of Common Pleas, I needed to move forward on asking the parents/guardians, staff and community members how they felt about the changes that have taken place in Duquesne City as well as make sure that we are meeting their expectations of the academic and social and emotional needs of the students, especially as we bring back 7th and 8th graders. I set out to answer three research questions:

1. In what ways can the school district improve the academic program for students going into 7th and 8th grade?

2. In what ways can the school district improve the student resources for students going into 7th and 8th grade?

3. How can the school district and the community work together to support the 7th and 8th graders?

Having received the approval to move forward with the 4th Amendment, I plan on having multiple town hall meetings with the parents/guardians, having a faculty meeting with the staff to let them know of the planning for the transition of the current 6th graders

staying for the 2021-2022 school year as 7th graders and then in the 2022-2023 school year as 8th graders, before transitioning to the other local school districts for 9-12th grade. The town hall meetings and faculty meetings will allow me to share the plan and progress for the return of the 7th and 8th grade students. I will send out surveys to the parents/guardians and faculty and staff at Duquesne City and conduct interviews with community members.

Expected Outcomes.

As a result of the research and data analysis, the researcher hopes to have a firm understanding of what academic programs and student resources are needed including what current programs and resources should be maintained to support the 7th and 8th graders so that Duquesne is the only choice for educating their 7th and/or 8th graders. The researcher also hopes to gain insight on how the district and community can work together to support the 7th and 8th grade students. This information will also benefit the researcher by sharing the data with the Pennsylvania Department of Education for their consideration in the approval of the reconfiguration of the School District from a Pre-K-6 to a Pre-K-8.

Fiscal Implications.

Having the 7th and 8th graders come back will also help the district financially by saving the district approximately $1 million dollars a year in tuition costs. The savings takes into account that both grades are back in the building. This

$1 million dollar savings was factored after the district takes into consideration the number of teachers, support staff, curriculum materials, and facility equipment needed for the 7th and 8th graders to be in the building. This will also have a direct impact on the tuition that we pay to charter and cyber charter schools as well by reducing our per pupil payment to those identified charters according to the required formula.

Summary

Creating the school as more of a community school where parents/guardians have access to much needed resources in our poverty stricken community will also be helpful. Duquesne City can be a model for school turnaround, but it will take a lot of work and dedication by not only the faculty and staff of the school district but also the community taking an interest in the school district and supporting the students both academically and athletically as well. In the end, Duquesne City could be a model for other school districts around the state of Pennsylvania to follow but also around the country and world.

Chapter II Literature Review

Background Information

State takeover of school districts started in the 1980's. This is when laws started to be passed by states to help support failing school districts, whether for financial reasons or academic reasons or both. By 2017, 33 states had passed laws on school takeover and 23 states had actually taken over a school district within their state (Barnum, 2018). Some states and their legislatures will put school districts which are in serious financial distress into Receivership (Bradley, 1991). According to the Pennsylvania Department of Education (2012), Receivership occurs when

> "the Secretary of Education shall petition the Court of Common Pleas, in the county where the largest part of the district resides, to appoint an individual to serve as a Receiver for the district if:
>
> - The school board rejects the CRO's (Chief Recovery Officer) Financial Recovery Plan;
>
> - The school board does not comply with directive issued by the CRO;
>
> - The school board does not satisfy the objectives in the Financial Recovery Plan during a period of time after its designation of financial recovery is terminated; or
>
> - In certain instances, related to severe financial recovery school districts, the school board votes to move to Receivership.

When the Receiver is approved by the courts all duties of the

CRO and the school board transfer to the Receiver, with the

exception of the ability to levy taxes and for the board to

reorganize every December.

- The CRO could be appointed as the Receiver

- The CRO could stay in place to advise the Receiver

The Receiver must implement the Financial Recovery Plan

which is attached to the petition provided to the Court of

Common Pleas. A Receivership shall expire three years

after the initial appointment of the Receiver - the Secretary

may petition the courts for an extension. When a school

district exits receivership, the school board will resume full

control." (pp. 2-3)

A school district can enter receivership by the state court appointing a receiver to

manage the district's financial and/or other affairs (Hirschfield et al., 2016).

In 2020, Wong and Shen concluded that in an "estimate prior to 1995, the majority of state

takeovers were for financial crisis or failures in management, and just 27 percent included

academic goals for students.

Today, more state takeovers are driven by academic challenges

but in some states, financial mismanagement remains an important

rationale." (p.

From 1988 to 2000, in 26 states there were a total of 40 school districts taken over

by the state that governed them. The reasons range from fiscal issues and academic issues

only to a combination of the two and finally a whole comprehensive takeover that included management (Wong & Shen, 2001).

"In the three years after 1997, however, the

percentage of comprehensive takeovers has risen to 67

percent and the percentage of takeovers solely for financial

and/or management has dropped to 22 percent. The general

trend, following on the heels of the big city takeovers in 1995-

97, is for city/state takeovers to involve more than just

financial management." (Wong & Shen, 2001, p. 9)

In 2001, Wong and Shen were able to conclude that

"While it is still too early to know where takeovers will lead

(whether to sustained improvement or falling back), the

components for success include: clear and attainable goals,

working together with the existing administration for a

smooth transition, and making the takeover heads (i.e.

mayor) accountable as well as the teachers, students, etc."

(p. 23)

The Thomas A. Fordham Institute indicated that there are remedies available for schools which are in financial hardship. They suggest that districts should look at a change in leadership/administration, including board members, including new "powers" (pp. 3) that previous administration may not have had and finding other monies available that were not available before (Zeehandelaar et al., 2015). There are three options to consider when making a change at the leadership/administration level, all depending

upon the severity of the district's financial crisis. The options range from hiring a

financial advisor who assists the superintendent and the school board, to the appointment

of a financial management panel or group responsible for the finances of the district, to

naming a district manager who oversees the district's financial and operational systems

(Zeehandelaar et al., 2015).

Zeehandelaar et. al. also go on to discuss how the new powers can include

liquidating assets, using bonds to repay debts, raising taxes as well as altering contracts to

save money. One other solution, that is usually not a popular decision, is to dismantle the

school district and/or consolidate buildings both internally and/or externally. One last

recommendation that they propose, but is a last resort, is to file for Chapter 9 bankruptcy

(2015). The authors also go on to talk about new money. They only reference two

different options, asking the state for small advances on subsidy payments and requesting

a long-term loan (Zeehandelaar et al., 2015).

Chapter 9 bankruptcy filing, although a last resort, can help a financially distressed

school district in the long-term. A bankruptcy filing would give a district the ability to

modify a teacher's contract, extend a litigation claim or limit a creditor's claim against the

district's assets. However, filing for bankruptcy will affect the district's ability to borrow

money later down the road, so it should be considered an absolute last resort (Hirschfield

et al., 2016).

School districts that have been able to recover when they have been taken over

have been able to do so when there has been system-level governance (Steiner & North

Central Regional Education Lab, 2005). In Pennsylvania, the education department

appoints a receiver or chief recovery officer to oversee the district. Creating an oversight

body at the "top" allows more state control. The state then can designate others. giving them the responsibility of overseeing district operations and holding them accountable for the reform (Steiner & North Central Regional Education Lab, 2005). In Philadelphia, one of the successful tactics was for the city school district to participate in a "friendly takeover" (p. 1) with outside providers to take over 45 of their lowest performing schools (Rhim & Education Commission of the States, D.C., 2005). The most significant takeaway from this partnership was that it was more of a "hybrid public/private initiative" (p. 4) versus a management company taking over the schools. By partnering with the provider, the school district still had some say in school operations (Rhim & Education Commission of the States, D.C., 2005).

This was not the case in the Chester Upland School District in Pennsylvania. In Chester Upland, the district, which had been identified as failing, tried to restructure an approved method under No Child Left Behind. The Pennsylvania legislature in 2000 passed the Education Empowerment Act (EEA) that qualified the district for state takeover for being considered "financially distressed" as well as not performing well academically historically (Rhim & Education Commission of the States, D.C., 2005). Chester Upland also tried to hire an outside agency to run the school district, but it only chose nine of the 10 schools within the district. Another obstacle was that the state department of education was also dictating the restructuring which caused strife between the district, the outside agency and the families and community. Unfortunately, due to these disagreements, the obstacles between the district and the management company were insurmountable and thus the restructuring effort in Chester Upland fell flat (Rhim & Education Commission of the States, D.C., 2005).

Restructuring is only one option available when states take over school districts. A more popular option and one that has more success is school turnaround. School turnaround was one of the four reform models under the School Improvement Grant (SIG) that were introduced under the No Child Left Behind Act. To be eligible, schools had to be identified by the state as "the lowest-performing, persistently failing 5 percent of low-income schools (defined as schools that receive Title I funds), and selecting them for a turnaround effort" (Backstrom, 2019, p. 11). The other three models were transformation, restart and closure (Backstrom, 2019).

According to the Center for School Turnaround (2019), schools need to focus on instruction for the school turnaround to be successful. There are two approaches that they suggest:

1.   Diagnose and respond to student learning needs that supports school transformation, and

2.   Provide rigorous, evidence-based instruction that supports school transformation

Creating action plans that are not based on summative assessments but rather the smaller formative assessments along the path towards mastery allow teachers to have deeper conversations around their students' data as well as get support from principals and other curriculum leaders on the best way to move students forward. Having a calendar is also a key component because it allows principals to build into the schedule time for teachers to meet and discuss the data with both their colleagues as well as other administrators (Hambrick Hitt & Meyers, 2019).

In providing rigorous, evidence-based instruction, Hambrick Hitt and Meyers (2019) suggest the creation of teams that have deep content knowledge and are superior at instruction. Development of pacing guides with built in formative assessments along with the maturation of common assessments allow teachers to check for mastery and align or realign instruction. One key factor to providing rigorous, evidence-based instruction is to make sure that principals know what this instruction looks like. Principals also need support in ensuring that teachers are providing high quality instruction to be effective (Hambrick Hitt & Meyers, 2019).

School turnaround practices are as much a district issue as they are the school issue. As school leaders begin to think differently about how they deliver rigorous evidence-based instruction and planning, district administrators also need to think differently about how they support the schools with budgets and other resources (Hambrick Hitt et al., 2018). There are four areas upon which district leaders should focus: "turnaround leadership, talent development, instructional transformation, and culture shift" (Hambrick Hitt et al., 2018, pp. 5,7,9,11). Each area includes indicators of readiness and provides support and clarity for the support of school personnel. District-level support removes the idea that recovery is a school problem and is up to the principal and teachers to figure out. When district leaders participate in the turnaround practices, all develop a better understanding that there is no magic pill and that the turnaround effort takes time and dedication by all (Hambrick Hitt et al., 2018).

Turnaround Leadership

The first area that a district should use to support schools is turnaround leadership which indicates that the leader should prioritize improvement and communicate its urgency. At the school level, the principal can develop leadership or instructional leadership teams that will help provide the staff with challenges around school turnaround and build collaboration among the staff. The principal and leadership team can create turnaround goals or priorities and then share them with the rest of the staff, parents and even students so everyone can have a stake. The district administration can support school leaders and their priorities by ensuring the existence of developed policies as well as comprehensive data analysis that justifies any changes or expenditure of resources. The district can also invite the community to help implement the policy and create other efforts to support the school and the efforts of school turnaround (Redding et al., 2018). The school and district leaders also need to create short and long-term goals in order to measure effectiveness. Targeted supports should be developed to ensure that schools and staff meet their goals (Redding et al., 2018).

Talent Development

The second area focus is talent development. Being able to create a pool of teachers from which to hire would be ideal. Districts can use the principles to develop interview questions. Administrators can support schools by creating a selection model as well as different measures of data-driven questions (Redding et al., 2018). Another measure is to offer specific professional learning for teachers and principals. By creating specific professional learning opportunities, teachers and principals can learn side-by-side as well as create differentiated and targeted adult learning needs specifically around the

school's turnaround priorities. Clear performance expectations should be set. In my

district, I clearly defined expectations not only for teachers but also for principals

regarding priorities. From my district standpoint, clear expectations provide a realistic

view of responsibilities and activities needed for rapid school improvement (Redding et

al., 2018).

Instructional Transformation

The third area of focus is instructional transformation. The utilization of

professional learning communities (PLC) gives teachers the opportunity to review student

work on a daily and weekly basis. Teachers should use that data to drive their instruction

and create small learning groups to support students in mastering content knowledge.

Districts should create specific protocols to use during professional learning community

meetings when reviewing data and creating learning plans for students. During the PLC

meetings, teacher teams can be led by an instructional leader who has an exemplary

knowledge base of the content who can provide solid examples of rigorous evidence-

based instruction. Districts can also provide examples of rigorous evidence-based

instruction. Schools can remove barriers for students so that they have the same

opportunity to learn. Some examples are after school instruction, Saturday school

enrichment programs, credit recovery and other potential virtual online learning. In

another example of barrier removal, districts can give parents of younger students the

opportunity to do laundry at the school so that parental support strategies can be learned.

School leaders are doing what they can to remove barriers by providing extra resources as

available (Redding et al., 2018).

Culture Shift

The fourth area of focus that a district should use to support schools is culture shift. It is in the district's best interest to build a strong community that has an intense focus on student learning. Schools can establish this through building policies and procedures, recognizing student accomplishments as well as individual classroom configuration. Districts can align student learning with professional evaluations, and provide avenues to share successes and challenges. Once the school turnaround effort has started, one practice to consider both at the school level and district level is to gather stakeholder feedback through surveys, focus groups or even a suggestion box. By asking for the feedback, school leaders are demonstrating that opinions are valued and incorporated into turning the school around (Redding et al., 2018). One last area for consideration is to include families as well as students when setting educational goals. The establishment of educational goals may be a newer concept with school turnaround, however with family support, engaging all members of the family may help some students focus (Redding et al., 2018).

Another public-private organization also supports the same recommendations from the Center for School Turnaround. Project L.I.F.T. (Leadership and Investment for Transformation) from the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School District in North Carolina, supports the effort of talent from the four focus areas found in school turnaround. When hiring teachers, Project L.I.F.T. found that retention bonuses and performance awards, and not necessarily the sign-on bonuses, kept teachers on staff. Teachers in the L.I.F.T. schools indicated that they appreciated the professional development that came from the University of Virginia's Darden School of Business, the Relay Graduate School of

Education, and the Center for Transformative Teacher training that helped transform not only their pedagogy but also their curriculum development and classroom management skills (Kim et al., 2019). Executive director of Project L.I.F.T., Denise Watts, indicated that as part of talent recruitment included not only hiring the best teachers but also hiring teachers who are coachable (personal communication, November 08, 2020).

Another key factor for L.I.F.T. was the promising school turnaround practice of time. L.I.F.T. was able to increase instructional time that helped students learn year-round. They provided small group and one-on-one tutoring sessions before and after school to help their students close their achievement gap. Project L.I.F.T. was able to close the technology digital divide that occurred because some families didn't have access to technology. They supported parents and the community by addressing the lack of access to technology. L.I.F.T. schools supported students using technology in the classrooms and the teachers were able to give students personalized learning opportunities (Kim et al., 2019).

School turnaround has its challenges much like everything else, and requires a lot of hard work and dedication by every educator. In the Project L.I.F.T. schools in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School District, an average of 19 teachers were lost a year for a variety of reasons. Sometimes the issue was due to promotion within the school district but sometimes positions simply could not be filled (Kim et al., 2019). The Project L.I.F.T. schools also had challenges that they had to overcome. One of those challenges was in the communication of L.I.F.T. Due to misunderstandings in what Project L.I.F.T. was created to do coupled with the amount of money being received from philanthropies, some mistrust was developed and the lack of a strategic communication plan created a

perception of what the schools weren't. The Project L.I.F.T. schools also had trouble with their data. Since the targets for proficiency kept moving as determined by the state, administrators had limited access to the data to evaluate their efforts in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school district between the schools who were participating in Project L.I.F.T and those schools were not.

Although they had substantial philanthropic dollars to start with, those same funds were not available at the end due to the way the funding was structured. Eventually, the philanthropic dollars weren't as prominent as they once were, thus those schools who were considered Project L.I.F.T. lost a lot of the support they initially had to get started (Kim et al., 2019).

Other challenges that Project L.I.F.T. schools faced leadership changes in a fairly short period of time. The Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools had multiple transitions among five superintendents, the school board and school building leadership. For sustainable school turnaround efforts, leadership needs to remain consistent and supportive. When leadership is stable and supported by the multitude of stakeholders, it is possible to have school turnaround. But due to the constant turnover in staff, program leaders were unable to create a sustainability plan to continue the efforts in the L.I.F.T. schools and thus were not able to totally transfer the promising ideas to other schools within the district. One other obstacle they faced was a small executive team to support all of the schools. The executive team had to constantly bring new people into the fold, by providing professional development to new teachers and school leaders. With the constant change in upper administration and board members, the executive team was also faced with perpetually providing the new district administration with the background of Project L.I.F.T., where

they were financially, as well as try to gather district data to be able to provide a true

picture of the fidelity of the program. Finally, the district faced the challenge of obtaining

the best teachers due to being one of the lowest paying states within the United States.

Due to the increasing poverty, it created further obstacles for students both

academically and behaviorally, which caused massive turnover in staff. Students lost the

support of those dedicated trusted adults with whom they had built relationships (Kim et.

al., 2019).

In school districts slated for state takeover, it's often difficult to retain leaders and

teachers in high poverty areas as well as schools that have large numbers of students of

color (Welsh & Williams, 2018). There are no easy answers, but there are promising

strategies that schools can use, even if a state would take over the district, to turn a school

around.

The school turnaround method of school transformation supports the K-8 school

model because it builds continuity of education. School turnaround is an opportunity for

teachers, administrators and community members to "change and improve their schools

rather than a time to place blame for low performance. Turnaround initiatives positively

influence both the culture of the school and student performance trends" (Liu, 2018, p. 5).

Ultimately, creating a collaborative culture with all stakeholders is one of the biggest keys

to success. Leaning on the community to support school transformation is also a huge

piece of the puzzle. The community can support the school leaders and teachers in making

the necessary changes to the K- 8 school model by supporting the continuity of education

(Liu, 2018).

School choice isn't necessarily about picking a public school over a non- public or private school. School choice can mean choosing a public school within your neighborhood and a brick and mortar charter school outside your neighborhood or a cyber charter school. In states outside of Pennsylvania such as Massachusetts, school choice can also mean districts within a state and county. Choices come down to multiple factors for parents and families. Factors include academic programming, proximity to their home, perception of safety and security, as well as extracurricular opportunities (Mawene & Bal, 2018). Those who believe in school choice fundamentally believe that it forces schools that don't perform up to academic standards to perform better. They argue that parents who choose a school outside of their school boundaries do so because they are looking for a school which performs better academically as a whole (Fossey, 1994).

In Massachusetts, the School Improvement report provided a look into why Massachusetts families were able to change schools as part of a school choice participation initiative. In the school districts that were small, very few students left the school. For those who left l, it was reported by the administration that they didn't leave based on academics, rather, they left for reasons of moving, convenience, or the absence of a specific extracurricular activity. In the much larger school districts it was reported that the students left for lack of safety and due to the administration and the teachers (Fossey, 1994).

Social networking also plays a part in school choice. In a study conducted in Colorado by Altenhofen et al. (2016), the researchers found that more than 50 percent of the parents in the study used a social media platform to make a choice on where to send their children to school. They also found that those same parents relied on informal

information to make decisions about a school rather than solid concrete data (Altenhofen

et al., 2016). In a school choice survey in the Long Beach Unified School District, the top

three reasons parents chose to send their students to a school other than their

neighborhood school were: special academic programs, the safety of the school, and the

better academic programming available (Fish, 1997).

Ultimately school choice impacts not only the neighborhood school but also the

receiving school. Now more than ever public schools have to campaign for their own

neighborhood students so that parents choose the public school over another brick and

mortar charter school or cyber charter school. Public schools must show that they have

academic programming that is competitive, that they are safe as well as provide the

extracurricular activities that parents seek.

State takeovers can be a positive change the district needs when it comes to turning

around a school district that has made poor management decisions, has fiscal issues that

they are unable to solve, as well as when students are not performing academically. In

some large urban school districts, the mayor has a stake in the school turnaround model. In

a study from 2001, it concluded that first,

> " mayoral takeover is linked to increases in student
>
> achievement at the elementary grades. Second, gains in
>
> achievement are especially large for the lowest performing
>
> schools, suggesting that mayoral takeovers involve a special
>
> focus on these failing schools. Third, mayoral takeover seems
>
> less effective for the upper grades, where the cumulative
>
> effects of many years of poor schooling are not easily

reversible. Fourth, when state takeovers produce

administrative and political turmoil, student achievement

suffers. After a period of adjustment, however, state takeovers

may also be able to produce positive achievement gains."

(Wong & Shen, 2001, p. 17)

The Center On Reinventing Public Education has provided some lessons learned

by school districts and states when a state takeover was enacted. The first lesson is "state

takeover is an important but limited tool" (Jochim & Hill, 2019, p. 3). Oftentimes, state

education systems are unable to sustain their efforts and they don't always solve the real

problem a school district faces: "inadequate talent and insufficient per-pupil funding are

not resolved just because states step in" (Jochim & Hill, 2019, p. 4).

Another lesson from the Center on Reinventing Public Education is: "States must

build a local base of political support for their reforms" (Jochim & Hill, 2019, p. 4). This

lesson is important because states should be able to come in and help break up the local

roadblocks and allow their appointees to make effective decisions but also understand the

perspectives of local stakeholders. This leverage is an important step because the ultimate

goal is to return the power to the local school district. The third and last lesson the Center

On Reinventing Public Education recommends is: "Exit strategies must be specific and set

the conditions for long-term success" (Jochim & Hill, 2019, p. 6). This last lesson is

important because the school district shouldn't go back to the way it was running prior to

the state takeover, but it will be up to the state to set clear expectations on how to stay out

of the takeover. State takeover appointees, such as a Receiver, should write a transition

plan and the state education system should be required to make sure that it is followed

through or it will end up on a shelf and the district conducting business in a way that got them into state over status in the first place (Jochim & Hill, 2019).

Summary

It is also important to note that state takeovers can also address any educational inequities that are taking place. Welsh and Williams (2018) stated that "race and power undertones permeate state takeover policy, given that urban districts and schools primarily attended by low-income and minority students are more likely to be taken over" (p. 3). This can usually cause a high turnover in school leaders and teachers. However, if state education agencies can create conditions that still allow some local decision making, as well as getting stakeholder buy-in, state takeovers can be for just a short period of time. An effective transition plan with that aptitude to carry it through will cause the state and the school district to look favorably in the community and create the support to move out of full state takeover. In Maryland, schools can develop a transition plan that must be monitored by the state. The state is then required to front load some additional funds to help support the transition plan as they monitor the plan to ensure that the district is able to be taken off the failing list. However, if the school district is not able to fully implement the transition plan, without the support of the state both financially and educationally, then the state will continue to take over the school district (Wong & Shen, 2001).

Academic Achievement

In 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) included language that encourages schools and states to look into what is causing schools to consistently perform poorly on yearly exams (Jacobson, 2016). Grade span configurations can play a part in student academic achievement. The typical elementary school consists of a kindergarten

or a pre-kindergarten through 5th or 6th grade, with transition into a middle school and/or a junior/senior high school. Other schools have K- 8 schools and one transition to a 9-12 high school and another option of one building as a K to 12 school. Starks et al. (2018) indicated that grade span configurations can sometimes be determined based on enrollment, transportation costs, budget ramifications, and the socioeconomic status of the students. Although those can play a part in grade span configuration, it's the transitions that a student goes through that could affect their overall academic achievement. "Although there may be many reasons for selecting grade configuration within a given school, it would seem, in an ideal scenario, that the single-most important factor should be student achievement and which configuration best fits this goal" (Starks et al., 2018, p. 25).

Looking at the academic test results of students in Baltimore City Public Schools, students who attended a K-5 building versus students who attended a K-8 building, using the summative test results from a Terra Nova reading and math assessment, the comparison indicated that the students who attended a K-8 school scored significantly higher than the students who were in a K-5 or a 6-8 school (Division of Research, Evaluation and Accountability, 2001). In another study of student achievement in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, students who attended a K-8 school versus a middle school had better achievement as measured by the Stanford Achievement Test (Offenberg, 2001). Similarly, in Missouri, the achievement tests indicated that students who transitioned to a junior high had lower test scores than those students who remained in a K-8 school (Whitley et al., 2007.)

There are a number of school districts that are moving away from the middle school grade configuration because of the decline in academic achievement (Yecke,2006). "Abundant evidence indicates that the seeds that produce high school failure are sown in grades 5-8" (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000; Yecke, 2006, p.20). Yecke (2006) also indicated that school administrators were able to show that they had fewer behavioral problems and had higher academic achievement than those who had students who enrolled in middle schools. Seller (2004) supported the change grade configuration being based on factors including "academic achievement, social adjustment, high school preparation, increased parental involvement, and beneficial effect on the community" (p.6). In a study conducted in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, students who attended a K-8 school versus students who attended a middle school had "significant" impact on the effects of 9th grade and their overall grades, attendance and behaviors (Weiss, & Baker-Smith, 2010). Cincinnati, Ohio, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Everett, Massachusetts, Fayetteville, Tennessee, Baltimore, Maryland, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma are some of the biggest school districts around the country which moved from middle schools to K-8 schools and are seeing improvements in academic achievement, attendance and behavior. "Students in K-8 arrangements appear to consistently outperform their counterparts in middle school configurations, traditionally sixth-eighth grade" (Starks, et.al, 2018, p. 23). Even in Europe, the K-8 is the norm for schools, not a middle school (Pardini, 2002). The National Center for Statistics (2000) still reports that middle schools are the most prominent school model, not the K-8.

In Cleveland, Ohio after the move of 21 schools to K-8 schools in the first year, 31.5 percent of the students in 6th grade had passed the Ohio Proficiency Test as opposed

to the 6.8 percent of the 6th graders in the rest of the district (Pardini, 2002). Embedded in

another research study with the Cleveland Municipal School District, in Cleveland, Ohio,

was a study that concluded the "continuity provided by a K-8 school is preferable to the

discontinuity associated with transitioning to a middle grades school" (Poncelet & Metis

Associates, 2004, p. 81). In Milwaukee, Wisconsin, researchers discovered that students

who were in K-8 school had higher academic achievement that was measured by

standardized test scores and grade point averages, especially as it pertained to mathematics

(Yecke, 2006). Keiffer (2013) used nationally representative data to conclude that his

study supported his hypothesis that K-8 students produce better academic achievement

than middle schools, a small one, but it was better. In the study of the students in

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where the researchers studied students who moved to high

schools from a K-8 and traditional middle schools, they concluded that "every experiment

yielded statistically significant evidence and non-significant trends showing that, as a

group, K-8 schools are more effective than middle grades schools serving similar

communities" (Offenberg, 2001, p. 28). Furthermore, academic achievement still needs to

be at the forefront of why a parent would want their child to attend a K-8 school. In North

Carolina, the End of Grade exams have consistently showed that students who attend a K-

8 school achieve higher proficiency, "proficiency indicates a student's test scores is at

grade level" (p. 52), on both Reading and Math than their peers who attend a middle

school (Cooper, et.al, 2016).

The advantages of students staying in a K-8 school versus moving to a middle or

junior high school is because they typically will have lower class sizes and fewer teachers

per grade. Students will be able to be part of a school system for approximately nine years

instead of three or four years if they were to move to a middle school. A K-8 school is also

a neighborhood school, where the students have been coming to school since they were

five years old and the parents are also familiar (Offenberg, 2001). In Colorado, the

education commissioner believes that due to the smaller spaces and closer educational

community within the school, K-8 schools are better for students because students have

built better relationships with teachers and staff and help support them as they move

through school (Pardini, 2002). K-8 schools provide the opportunity to build relationships

with students but also lasting relationships with teachers and parents and among teachers

(Offenberg, 2001). This also gives the students and families the ability to have access to

academic, social emotional resources that they have been used to receiving. Students and

families don't have to navigate another school and wait for services to start, especially for

a student who may be struggling, if they are in a K-8 school.

Social and Emotional Learning

Social and emotional learning is an important part of a student's education. "When

we help students to engage productively with one another, understand themselves and how

they think, and better handle the stresses and challenges in their lives, we prepare them for

success now and in the future" (Darling-Hammond, 2019, p. 5). "Integrating social and

emotional learning (SEL) programming throughout curricula to support the development

of healthy behaviors and prevent violence is critical for a comprehensive approach to

school health" (Crooks et.al., 2015, p. 513). Students who are able to have positive social

and emotional skills are able to perform better in school. By using an SEL approach and

integrating it into the curriculum, students will have multiple opportunities to work

through conflict and negative behavior (Crooks et. al., 2015). "Schools will be most

successful in their educational mission when they integrate efforts to promote children's academic, social, and emotional learning, and that strong bonds between student behavior, attainment and learning and their social and emotional development are central" (Dix, et. al., 2012, p. 45). Students who then remain in a K-8 setting will have an already established relationship with a trusted adult with whom to work through conflict and/or negative behaviors, thus providing stability and consistency at a time for students that is already challenging as they transition into young adulthood.

The disruptive behaviors from students need to be addressed in the middle level grades as much as it is in the elementary grades. "Problem behaviors are clear risks for students' academic achievement in school" (Närhi et al, 2017, p. 1186). Students who attend a school with an integrated social and emotional learning curriculum with clear expectations and quick feedback to students have been identified as measures of success with students. One of the keys to successful implementation of a social and emotional learning curriculum is the collaboration between teachers and school leaders as well as developing strong relationships with the students (Närhi et.al, 2017). Darling-Hammond (2019) stated that "The school demonstrate[s] that the social and emotional aspects of learning are much more than a frill or an add-on. They are part of the core curriculum" (p. 7).

However, there are some parents who do not support the K-8 effort. In the School District of the City of York (SDCY), which had six K-4 buildings, two 5-8 middle schools, and one high school, with 4,947 (School District of the City of York, 2013) students enrolled moved to a K-8 model under the direction of the new superintendent. The middle schools had low standardized test scores, high reports of discipline and

suspension rates and had a full-time School Resource Officer on site at all times. Yet, they

still had some of the traditional middle school elements: learning pods, changing teachers

for classes, lockers, a bell schedule, athletics and clubs. When the district moved to a K-8

model, administrators had to redistrict to be able to accommodate the 5-8 students back

into the K-4 buildings. As an assistant principal at the high school during the 2012 school

year, I can attest to how the middle schools were performing academically as well as how

the community was divided deeply on this K-8 concept.

In 2013, I was promoted to principal of one of the K-8 schools, and the hurt and

distrust for some is still evident during conversations with parents and community

members within the school community. I did my best to build the school up as a

community hub for parents and community members, but there were still some parents

who were still not in favor of having the "older" kids in the building with the younger

students. One parent told me, "As a parent I can honestly say that I was totally against it

then and still against it now. In my opinion they need to go back to how it was: keeping

elementary separate from middle school. Bringing them together was exposing the

younger kids to some behaviors and taking them out of their normal environment because

they had to only stay in certain areas (which wasn't happening anyways that's why I said

exposed) and making it unsafe. For the older students (6th- 8th) it took the entire

experience of middle school away from them (I feel like they all got cheated) Those

middle aged students needed that atmosphere of middle school to show them the next step

of growing. It doesn't prepare them for going to high school at all. You don't really get

freedom in elementary. The next step would be a little freedom at your middle school

level so once you get to the high school you should be prepared and ready to handle it" (N.

Gilbert, personal communication, November 3, 2020). There were other parents who had

some of the same fears about moving to K-8 school. One parent shared with another

principal that they were worried that the older kids would not listen and not stay in their

area of the building and then the younger students would pick up some behaviors that

were considered inappropriate. The principal went on to say that there are still parents who

are not in favor of the K-8 model, but have accepted it as a way of life and work with the

teachers and her to do the best they can to create opportunities for the older students to

have some type of middle school type experience. The principal, who also worked at the

high school as an assistant principal before being promoted to a K-8 principal said that she

understood the frustration of the parents who do not like the K-8 model, but said that

overall, it is the best decision for her students and works hard to support all levels in the

building. The community that supports her school is also very supportive and she

indicated that she has a healthy dose of parental support, which makes a difference both

academically as well as behaviorally (M. Sweitzer, personal communication, November

13, 2020).

A student who was in elementary school when the conversations about moving to a

K-8 model were taking place said that she had mixed feelings about not getting that

middle school experience. She said that she loved her neighborhood elementary school

and liked that she was "known" to all of the teachers as she moved up. She liked it

especially when younger teachers would ask her to come and help them with the younger

students with reading or math practice. This student said that her school was already part

of what she considered a tight-knit neighborhood community and the school was just an

extension of that feeling. She indicated that there were still some students who acted out

during class or made other poor choices, so she felt that she really didn't miss the middle

school experience. She also attended a school where the students had lockers and switched

classes when they were in the "middle school grade levels." When I got to high school and

I heard about other friends' experiences in the K-8, they didn't have some of the

opportunities that I had, so I felt bad for them. The student did express that she ultimately

felt that she still had a good educational experience in a K-8 instead of getting lost in a sea

of other sixth-eighth graders (N. Harmon, personal communication, November 21, 2020).

A guidance counselor at William Penn High School within The School District of

the City of York, also provided insight to the K-8 model and students transitioning from

those systems to high schools. She concluded that one of the best goals that William Penn

was able to accomplish was the establishment of a 9th grade academy. It operated as a

school within a school, but it provided the extra support students needed when

transitioning from the K-8 system. The academy was able to support students who had

difficulty transitioning but also provided an opportunity to be supported by a team of

teachers. The team of teachers met daily for a period and they were able to support the

student as whole and not just focus on their academic content. Parents would attend team

meetings and left knowing that their child was being supported by all of the teachers, not

just one. The students eventually saw this as a positive and they also knew that they had

an administrator who would listen to them and their concerns, not just punish them for

making a poor behavior choice. That year being a part of the academy changed not only

the students but the teachers as well. They formed collaboration teams that still stand years

later even though they had to go back to being part of the traditional high school due to

lack of financial support. Teachers will meet on their own time and planning periods to

figure out ways to support their students and collaboratively plan units that support all of their content, not just one course over another. If that 9th grade academy would have been able to continue for more than one year, she believes that more students would have had experienced success and thus been set up for success for the rest of their high school career. One other suggestion that she would have liked to have seen continue was the program where upperclassmen were brought in a few days before school started and partnered with incoming freshmen for orientation type of activities. She indicated that when the incoming freshman came on their first day of orientation, we made a huge deal out of, the band played as they were walking in, teachers of all grade levels were cheering, and the upperclassmen were in the gymnasium waiting for them. The 9th graders all had a starry look in their eyes, whether they were scared or excited, the orientation was a time that they could get an upperclassmen mentor to assist them during the first year of high school (L. Albright, personal communication, November 18, 2020).

One parent, who wanted to remain anonymous, indicated that she liked the K- 8 model in York because all of her kids are in one building. She felt that the school did a good job of separating the younger kids from the older kids. She also liked that the older kids were able to walk the younger kids to school. The parent did ask questions about other elective courses beyond the traditional art, music, physical education, and library, but was still satisfied with how the K-8 school encompassed all of her children in one building on the same schedule (anonymous parent, personal communication, November 19, 2020).

Community

Any community is important to its home school in some form or fashion.

Creating a neighborhood school is one way that public education and community can come together. Community schools are "places where educators, families, nonprofits, businesses, faith-based institutions, and community members form teams and develop partnerships to create the conditions for children to live and thrive" (Jackson, 2016, p. 1). The Coalition of Community Schools also defines community schools as "both a place and a set of partnerships between school and other community resources, with an integrated focus on academics, health and social services, youth and community development, and community engagement" (Maier et al, 2018, p. 19). In Manchester, New Hampshire, citizens put together a team, "Manchester Community Schools Project" (p. 1), to create better conditions for improved academic achievement, behaviors that were considered to be healthy, access to health-care services, safety and security, housing, and mental health (Young, 2015). Community schools have the ability to create equity in conjunction with all types of resources to support the students and their families. Often parents and community members don't know where to go to get services. Young (2015) conducted a survey that indicated that residents didn't know where to go to get services, had transportation issues to get to the services, services were costly, and they didn't feel safe in their own neighborhood. By working together, the school and community can build strong relationships and collaborations to best support the students as a whole, both their academics and social and emotional well-being, as well as provide support to their families (Honda & Liu, 2015). In 2015, the Oakland Unified School District's "board approved a strategic plan that committed to building a full service community school district focused on high academic achievement while serving the whole child, and eliminating equity" (Ruiz de Velasco, 2019).

By creating a community schools approach, the school can support the community

and the community can support the school. The collaboration between the school and the

community can help develop structures and relationships to resources that can be used in

and out of the school building. The relationships that are built can strengthen and help

meet individual needs and that of the family if needed. However, the community school is

also a place where all neighbors can come together to work on something for the school or

community (Maier et al, 2018). A community school is not a program, rather it is a set of

strategies that best support both the school and community with a focus on students and

their families. Those strategies are identified as "pillars" by Maier, Daniel, Oakes, & Lam

(2018, pp. 19- 20), are:

1. "Integrated student supports addresses out-of-school barriers to
   learning

   through partnerships with social and service

   agencies and providers, ideally coordinated by a

   dedicated professional staff member.

2. Expanded learning time and opportunities, including afterschool,

   weekend, and summer programs, provide additional

   academic instruction, individualized academic support,

   enrichment activities, and learning opportunities that

   emphasize real-world learning and community problem

   solving.

3. Family and community engagement brings parents and other
   community

members into the school as partners with shared decision-

making power in children's education. Such engagement

also makes the school a neighborhood hub providing

adults with educational opportunities they want, such as

ESL (English as a Second Language) classes, green card or

citizenship preparation, computer skills, art classes, and

STEM (science, technology, engineering, and

mathematics) classes.

4. Collaborative leadership and practice build a culture of professional

learning, collective trust, and shared responsibility, using

such strategies as site-based leadership/governance

teams, teacher learning communities, and a community-

school coordinator who manages the complex joint work

of multiple schools and community organizations."

These pillars provide schools and communities the ability to create a vision of how they

want to work collaboratively together and use the characteristics of high-quality schools

from the pillars of community schools to create their own plan (Maier et al, 2018).

In 2004, Dayton schools was awarded a grant to revive five elementary schools in

Dayton's neighborhood using the Community School model. The team created objectives

for the first three years during the pilot and then again for five years after the pilot. Dayton

had to create a team of individuals to help build a committed team who was focused on the

work and building the community partnerships. The committee then had to pick the

schools, none of which could be high schools because they didn't serve neighborhoods,

but they had to be in neighborhoods that could be redeveloped quickly. The committee

also had to find non-profit program partners, develop key partnerships, hire site

coordinators as well as create partnerships that were both private and public (Ferguson,

2009).

In the pilot stages, Ferguson (2009) identified some real promise in the

neighborhood schools in providing opportunities for students and families that they did

not once have. The committee was able to create sustainable relationships that have

brought new programs to the schools for both the students and the families. More and

more organizations were getting involved to provide support to the neighborhood school.

Parents began choosing the neighborhood school over sending their children to a charter

school that had to close its doors, and those children were able to come back to the Dayton

community schools. They still face many challenges ahead, with one of the biggest being

sustainability without the funding. However, Dayton is committed to seeing how they can

use this same strategy in their other schools and turning them into community schools as

well (Ferguson, 2009).

Creating a supportive school environment with the community also includes

marketing the school and district. Community and neighborhood public schools have

become subject to competitive marketing strategies by other local charter and cyber

schools within their region. Kotler and Fox (1995) defined educational marketing as "the

analysis, planning, implementation, and control of carefully formulated programs

designed to bring about voluntary exchanges of values with target markets for the purpose

of achieving organizational objectives" (p. 6). Most leaders do not have the background

knowledge to be able to successfully market their schools, yet it has become common

place for leaders to be the ones who are marketing their school (Dâmaso & Ámila de

Lima, 2020). However, school leaders have seemingly identified the need to market their

schools while making sure that students and families felt safe and supported. In a survey

conducted by Anast-May et al (2012), the authors concluded that school leaders recognize

that their schools need to be marketing and they do market their schools, however, they do

not use formal marketing language when they do. Marketing does appear to drive their

action planning but a more formal marketing strategy or use of language may help these

school leaders in the long run (Anast-May et al, 2012).

Arizona school leaders learned that the local charter schools had developed their

own marketing teams and were creating this package of what education was going to look

like for parents to send their child there. Potterton (2018) provided one parent, who was

asked to be part of a team to help market the local neighborhood school. He said that when

he went to a charter school for a tour, he said that he got what he referred to as "The

Cadillac Effect."

> "When you're buying a car, you go look at it, we all have this
>
> vision of what kind of car we want. We want a nice sporty
>
> luxury car or whatever... such as a Cadillac. So schools are
>
> kind of like that for parents. We want our children to be in the
>
> best academic learning environments that we can put them in.
>
> And charter schools and some of the other schools...have
>
> marketing teams, and they have a budget to design their
>
> schools a certain way. And a lot of the newer charter schools
>
> have architecture that is just phenomenal. But the way that

they design their schools to look, and I haven't really been in

too many inside of them, I hear stories from other parents...my

impression is that...the charter school organizations do a

really good job of making this package so that it looks really,

really appealing to parents...that package is like a brand new

Cadillac." (p. 302)

If school leaders would use the concept of the "Cadillac Effect" and apply it to their own

marketing strategies, it may help them think differently when creating that plan of action.

Another alternative for marketing a school is to be creative in looking for access to

revenue funds. Rantz (2019) suggests that schools develop partnerships with businesses

and other colleges and universities to advertise their products and/or services to students

and staff. He went on to say that businesses want access to schools and the district because

of the potential profit that it can provide their company. Schools should create criteria, or

terms and conditions, for advertising. This will create an even playing field for all

potential business partnerships but also allow the schools to be able to make sure that the

business follows the criteria established or forfeit their exposure to the parents, staff and

students of the school (Rantz, 2019).

Now that school leaders have marketed the school and parents are choosing to send

their child back to the neighborhood or community school, why is this the best option for

families and students? Schools that become community schools are typically urban

schools who have a long history of low socioeconomic status with significant instances of

poverty (Medina et al, 2019). The effects of poverty can potentially have consequences

that can be detrimental to sustainable life. Many students who do live in poverty don't

graduate from high school and are more likely to continue the cycle of poverty as adults

(Young, 2015). So how can community schools help students and families break that cycle

of poverty?

The K-8 model in a small community can help both the school and the community.

There has to be a sense of trust and respect built between the school, the students and

families as well as with the community stakeholders. There will be turnover in all areas,

and thus everyone will need to remain flexible, but the benefits of creating the overarching

collaboration to support both the students and the community outweigh the challenge of

change. The consistency of the community partnerships will also be beneficial for students

and families. For example, sustaining the mental health and social services will be key for

sustainability for all (Medina et al, 2019). Some of these changes can change the trajectory

path for a child, thus impacting both the school and the community. Students, with the

support from the K- 8 school, will be able to build resilience and grit as they learn to

overcome obstacles that come along their way (Kerr & Dyson, 2016). Community schools

can be established when the community, both school and non-school, come together and

create an action plan that focuses on what is best for the community as a whole (Honda &

Liu, 2015).

By creating a community school within the K-8 model, there are a plethora of

possible resources that can be available to students and their families. The partnerships

and collaborations between the school and the community have the potential to bring into

the school for both the students and the community: higher education, social services,

mental health services, non-profit organizations and other business and community

agencies (Zuckerman, 2019). In California, there was a bipartisan introduction of HR

5168, Full Service Community Schools Act. This act creates a community school where both public and private organizations can collaborate. The act requires that each community school focus on these five components:

1. Expanded Learning Opportunities

2. Health Services

3. Family Support and Engagement

4. School Infrastructure to Support Collaboration

5. Systems to Gather and Analyze Data

Although each school's exact resources to support students and their families may look a little different, they will all focus on the same five components (Honda & Liu, 2015, Proposal for HR 5168, 2009). Resources such as Kindergarten readiness, support for academics, completion of high school, enrollment into college, as well as making sure students have resources in and out of the school are essential (Zuckerman, 2019).

State takeover schools can be well intentioned efforts to help a failing school district from the poor financial decisions that school boards tend to make as well as the opportunity to help the school that also has a history of poor academic performance. State takeovers have a history of occurring at districts that have low- income students, minority students, and are considered in urban areas. However, even with state takeovers, state education agencies are still not able to get to the root of the problem: a financial formula for funding schools that doesn't meet the needs of the students, lackluster teachers and school leaders who aren't able to lead. Nevertheless, if the state-appointed receiver is able to turn both the financial situation and academic performance around, it will still require a clearly established transition plan to be able to be removed from state takeover status. The

receiver will ultimately need to build relationships with the different stakeholders within the community to support the school before, during and after the transition.

There are a number of reasons why a K-8 school model is the best for students. By continuing the continuity of education for those students, they have a better chance to continue to build those relationships with teachers and school leaders, and teachers can continue to work collaboratively to build successful relationships with the parents/guardians. Consequently, with that continuity of education, students perform better in school as well as have better ability with conflict resolution and even better relationships with trusted adults at the school. Elementary schools historically have better social and emotional learning curricula that prove to be effective at the elementary level. However, it will be extremely important that K-8 schools continue with those SEL services for students as they progress through the middle level grades. Although not every parent agrees with the K-8 model, as they tend to lean towards the idea that the students who are in the middle level grade configuration miss out on opportunities unique to middle schools, schools can support those same efforts for just those students. It will take creative planning and support, but the middle level grade students who would normally transition to a middle school can still be afforded the same or similar opportunities that other students who attend a middle school would receive.

Communities can also benefit from a K-8 model school. School districts should consider creating their K-8 school into a community school where the school becomes a one-stop-shop for students and their families. By creating a community school, outside resources can support not only the students and their families, but also the community at large. Creating a community school concept is something that would need a dedicated

individual to help keep the communication open between all stakeholders within the school community. The opportunities that can be available for students and the community alike are well worth the sacrifice of creating a community school.

Marketing the school can be complex and difficult for school leaders who are not qualified to market their school. Although school leaders do market the school, they don't necessarily use the marketing language that successful charter and cyber schools have because of their inability to hire a dedicated marketing director to promote the school. Getting school leaders to follow the idea of the "Cadillac model" of marketing can help those school leaders, who have no formal marketing experience, with an idea of how to best market the school to new and prospective students and their families.

Summary

Moving to a K-8 grade configuration model from a traditional elementary and middle school has benefits that outweigh the disadvantages. Although statistically, there are still more middle schools than there are K-8 schools, the research has been clear that the continuity of education that occurs while students attend a K-8 school has benefitted the students both academically and socially and emotionally. The relationships that are built throughout elementary school with teachers, peers and even with the parents/guardians can continue in a K-8 model. The transition to middle school can alter a student's confidence academically, socially and emotionally. The support that a K-8 can offer to the students can continue and not be disrupted as students transfer from an elementary school to a middle school. Research was also clear that students who stayed in a K-8 model performed academically better than their peers who attended a traditional middle school.

The K-8 model is an option that most urban schools have moved to in order to best meet the needs of their students. The K-8 model allows students a better opportunity to perform academically, have the support of trusted adults, as well as the continuity of SEL services as needed. Whether in state takeover or just a district which is looking to better support their students, the K-8 model provides a unique opportunity for the intimacy of a small school feel in an urban setting.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

Chapter two provided an in-depth look on past research regarding academic

programming, student resources in schools as well as community partnerships. The

researcher used the process of applying for grade level reconfiguration from the

Pennsylvania Department of Education to go from a Pre-K-6 district to a Pre-K-8 district.

Chapter three will focus on the status of the Duquesne City School District, its past third-

party participants and the research plan with fiscal implications. It will also focus on the

mixed methods approach of the data collection.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to identify the academic programs and student

resources that are needed to support 7th and 8th grade students. It also addresses how the

Duquesne City School District and the community can work together specifically as it

relates to 7th and 8th grade students. This study is important because it correlates to the

reconfiguration of the district from grades Pre-K-6 to Pre-K-8. The research method used

was a mixed methods approach. The important part of the mixed methods approach in my

research is the triangulation of the data. Since I am collecting both qualitative and

quantitative data, it will be important for me to use triangulation to ensure the validity and

reliability of the research (Hendricks, 2017).

The researcher is also working on the reconfiguration of the Duquesne City School

District from a Pre-K-6 to a Pre-K-8 building, the process of which led to the development

of the research questions.

- In what ways can the school district improve the

academic program for students going into 7th and 8th

grade?

- In what ways can the school district improve the student

resources for students going into 7th and 8th grade?

- How can the school district and the community work

together to support the 7th and 8th graders?

The researcher will collect quantitative data from a survey sent to the

parents/guardians and the staff of Duquesne City School District to determine what ways

the district can improve the academic programs and student resources for those students

going into 7th and 8th grade. Parents and guardians will include those who live in the City

of Duquesne and whose children attend the Duquesne City School District. Age, race,

income, gender and marital status of the recipients will not be collected or recorded.

A separate survey, conducted in the form of an interview with identified local

community members will collect qualitative data. This group of individuals will be

stakeholders who live within the Duquesne City School District and have connections

with the educational history of the community. The interviewees may or may not have

children enrolled in the district. Age, race, income, gender and marital status of the

individuals will not be collected or recorded.

As a result of the study, the researcher will have identified what ways the school

district can improve the academic programs specifically for the 7th and 8th grade students.

The study will also correlate student resources for the school district to use for the

incoming 7th and 8th graders. Related to the study is how the school district and the

Duquesne community can collaborate to support the 7th and 8th grade students.

Setting and Participants

The Duquesne City School District is a suburban public school district located 12

miles south of Pittsburgh in the east hills of Allegheny County, and serves the City of

Duquesne, a former mill town on the banks of the Monongahela River. The Duquesne

City School District encompasses approximately two square miles. Census figures indicate

that Duquesne had a population of 11,410 people in the early 1970's when the steel mills

employed thousands of people and provided good-paying jobs. According to the 2000

federal census data, it served a resident population of 7,352; however, according to the

2010 federal census data, the resident population declined to 5,566 people, a loss of 51%

of the population. This decline in residents obviously had a powerful impact on the school

district. The median household income in Duquesne was $21,714 compared to $51,651

statewide, according to the same Census year. The educational attainment levels for the

Duquesne City School District population (25 years old and over) are 89.5% high school

graduates and 9.2% college graduates (Wikipedia Website, 2021).

In 2000, the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) acted under then

existing state legislation and appointed a Board of Control (BOC) for the management of

School District budgetary and educational policy. The school district was officially

certified as a "Financially Distressed" School District (Pennsylvania Department of

Education, October 2000). The BOC consisted of three members appointed by the

Pennsylvania Secretary of Education, one of whom was required to be a resident of

Allegheny County, and met monthly in Duquesne to manage the district.

The BOC operated the academic and financial matters of the district until 2012,

when new legislation dissolved the BOC and created the management system which

continues today. During the years the BOC was in operation, there were numerous

changes to its membership and the chair position was occupied by at least four different

people. In addition, there were several third-party day-to-day managers during those years.

After several different management efforts, the Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS) provided

oversight for one year (2006-2007) and the Allegheny Intermediate Unit (AIU) managed

all academic and business operations for four years (2007-2008 to 2010-2011).

Throughout those years, there were frequent changes in superintendents, principals,

teachers, and support staff. Some of the superintendents were actually employees or

former employees of the management entity - for example, PPS appointed one of their

retirees to act as superintendent and the AIU assigned the superintendent duties to one of

their senior staff as an additional duty. In 2010, the AIU opted to employ a

"Superintendent of Record" who was a part-time superintendent with an office in the

building. The "Superintendent of Record" reported directly to the Executive Director of

the AIU. When in June 2011 the AIU and Duquesne ended their management contract

early through mutual agreement, the BOC appointed an Acting Superintendent to manage

the day-to-day operations of the District. That arrangement existed for the last two years

of supervision by the BOC.

Similar to the City of Duquesne under an Act 47 Recovery Plan, a law which

placed financially troubled local government entities under state supervision, the

Commonwealth of Pennsylvania issued a Declaration of Financial Recovery Status for the

Duquesne School District in November 2012, noting that Duquesne eliminated its senior

high school program in 2007 and its junior high program beginning with the 2012-2013

school year in an effort to reduce overall expenses. The school district was not able to

offer comprehensive educational programs and services such as advanced placement

courses, foreign languages, extracurricular activities and competitive athletics, especially

at the high school level. The relatively low enrollment and ongoing financial difficulties

made such opportunities impossible.

Further, during November of the 2012-2013 school year, the Secretary of

Education appointed a Chief Recovery Office (CRO) to prepare a Recovery Plan as

outlined in the new legislation addressing both academic and fiscal operations and to

submit the plan to the elected Board of Education for approval after review and approval

by PDE. It is pertinent to note that the elected board was returned to authority when the

BOC was dissolved in November and could remain in power by approving the Recovery

Plan prepared by the CRO. After an extension granted by PDE to complete the Recovery

Plan, the CRO presented the plan to the elected board for approval. The elected board

chose to reject the plan by an 8-1 vote, knowing full well that such action would result in

the elected board losing nearly all of their legislative authority. After the elected board

rejected the Recovery Plan, the Department of Education, working in conjunction with the

Allegheny County Court of Common Pleas, placed the school district in Receivership and

the Court appointed a Receiver recommended by PDE to provide oversight and

management of academic and financial matters to ensure children and families are

provided adequate educational programs and services (DCSD Financial Recovery Status,

Act 141 of 2012). Therefore, Duquesne City School District is not governed by an elected

school board, but continues to be a state-controlled initiative for oversight of academic

and financial matters. Under the direction of a Court-appointed Receiver to ensure

compliance with district-wide systems, policies and procedures, the district's nine school

board members continue to be elected by the community at large and serve in an advisory

role to the Receiver. The Chief School Administrator (Superintendent of Schools) is

contracted by the Receiver and is commissioned by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania

and as such is an employee of the district. A Chief Recovery Officer, appointed by the

Department of Education, serves as an advisor to the Receiver and Superintendent for

academic and financial matters according to Act 141 of 2012 (Pennsylvania Department

of Education, May 2021).

The Receiver has authority to take certain actions that streamline approval

processes to meet state and federal compliance; to act as the elected Board of School

Directors; and to take formal action for all school district matters at the scheduled monthly

Receiver Business meetings. School directors meet in formal session only semi-annually,

in June to set the Real Estate and Act 511 tax levies and in December at its Reorganization

Meeting (DCSD Financial Recovery Status, Act 141 of 2012). The only other

responsibility reserved for the elected board is to incur new debt, such as a bond issue for

building renovations. It is important to note that if the elected board refuses to set the tax

rate or approve a bond issue recommended by the Receiver, the Receiver has the option of

taking the elected board before the courts to require them to approve those

recommendations.

Since the decision to send 7th and 8th grade students to receiving districts in 2012, the school district operates one elementary school, Pre-K through 6th grade and provides a continuum of educational programs and support services for approximately 419 students (as of September 30, 2019) and employs 80 professional and non- professional staff in total. Students in grades 7 to 12 are given the choice to attend either the West Mifflin Area School District or the East Allegheny School District for a total enrollment of 342 students as of September 30, 2019.

The quantitative data will be collected by an anonymous survey that was sent to the parents and guardians of the students in grades 5-7 in Duquesne City School District. The researcher also asked the teachers and staff of Duquesne City School District to complete the same anonymous survey as well. Local Duquesne community members who were interviewed did sign a consent form to participate in the study that was previously approved by the IRB at California University of Pennsylvania found in Appendix A. This group of stakeholders were selected because they live within the Duquesne City School District and have deep connections with the history of education in the community. The interviewees may or may not have children enrolled in the district.

Intervention & Research Plan

As a result of attempting to reconfigure the Duquesne City School District by the researcher, to move from a Pre-K-6 to a Pre-K-8 school district, the door was opened for research on what best practices in terms of academics, student resources and community collaborations have been used by other districts. There is an abundant amount of research on what constitutes a solid academic program for middle school students, what social and

emotional student resources should be included to best support students and how the development of community schools supports not only the students but also the community at large.

After exploring the past research, it is the researcher's intention to survey the parents/guardians of the incoming 7th and 8th graders as well as the teachers and staff to identify what they feel are the best academic supports needed for the 7th and 8th graders. That survey will also ask for specific student resources that the parents/guardians and teachers and staff would like for the 7th and 8th graders to have to ensure their success at the middle school level. The researcher will also interview key stakeholders within the school community to gain an understanding of how the school district and community can work together to support the 7th and 8th graders in the community.

Determining the types of academic programming will be an important part of the overall research and will help the researcher determine what types of academic programs the parents/guardians wish for their child to have as a 7th and/or 8th grader. Research has shown students who attend a K-8 school outperform their peers on the Stanford Achievement Test who transition from a K-5 building to a 6-8 middle school (Offenberg, 2001). In one particular study, researchers discovered that the higher academic achievement from students in 9th grade was due to the students who came from a K-8 school and not a typical middle school of 6-8. The achievement was based on standardized test scores and grade point averages (Yecke, 2006). The researcher will use the information gathered from the parents/guardians and the teachers on academic programming to determine the best plan of courses so that the Duquesne students will have the greatest opportunity for the same academic success as found in the research.

The researcher kept the survey rather simple, with only a few direct questions to

gain the thoughts and feelings of the parents/guardians and teachers. Historically,

Duquesne has not had a high percentage return rate with surveys that are too lengthy or

redundant, from their respondents' perspective. The survey was only five questions, with

four of them choosing an option. The very first question revolved around the support of

the return to 7th and 8th grade to Duquesne. The last question allowed for

parents/guardians to provide feedback on what they saw as a way to make a better

educational experience for their child through an open-ended question.

The survey question for the parents/guardians specifically asked if the individual

completing the survey felt that Duquesne was providing a challenging, yet supportive

academic experience. The last question on the survey allowed for parents to provide

specific information related to how they thought the district could improve. The survey

also asked parents/guardians and/or teachers if they would help support the athletic

programs by volunteering to coach, run the concession stand or anything else needed.

Some of the specific questions include:

- Duquesne is planning on bringing back the 7th and 8th
  graders and only have one transition to 9th grade to East
  Allegheny or West Mifflin. Do you feel that this is the best
  for our school?
- Academics are the driving force to a successful student.
  How confident are you that Duquesne is challenging yet
  supporting the students academically?

- A PreK-8 education model will provide the students with

the same resources throughout their time at Duquesne

(Restorative Practices, Counselors, continuous curriculum,

iPads or ChromeBooks, etc...). Is there a resource that we

are missing that you think that we should add or look to

add?

The school district is initially planning on returning football and basketball for boys and

volleyball and basketball for girls. Cheerleading will also be offered to all students. This

question was designed to find out how invested into the 7th and 8th grade

parents/guardians and teachers are in anticipation of the 7th and 8th graders returning.

Another aspect of the 7th and 8th graders returning to Duquesne will be the

resources needed to support the students socially and emotionally. In the survey to the

parents/guardians and the teachers, one of the questions that will be asked is what

resources do they feel their child needs or would like to see continued. Research

conducted in 2017 indicated that students who attend a school that integrates social and

emotional learning in the curriculum, have clear expectations and students receive

feedback are the students who have experienced the most success (Närhi et al., 2017).

Research also supports that students who are able to have positive social and emotional

skills are able to perform better in school. By using a social and emotional learning

approach embedded within the curriculum it will provide students multiple opportunities

to work through conflict and negative behavior, thus resulting in better academics overall

(Crooks et. al., 2015).

The researcher only had one question related to the social and emotional learning and resources needed for the return of 7th and 8th graders. Currently the district provides restorative practices, which is a one-to-one technological device provider, and partners with outside agencies for counseling services and a rigorous curriculum. Again, the individual who was completing the survey would have the opportunity to provide specific information related to resources they felt that the district needed or needed to retain to support the 7th and 8th graders in the last open- ended question.

The last facet of this research study is how returning 7th and 8th grade students will support the community. In moving from a traditional school model to more of a community school model, it will support not only the students but the community as a whole. Community schools are "places where educators, families, nonprofits, businesses, faith-based institutions, and community members form teams and develop partnerships to create the conditions for children to live and thrive" (Jackson, 2016, p. 1). Maier et al (2018) also put value into the concept of community schools because it allows for the development of opportunities for the school, community and community resources to work together that can focus on academics, health and social services, youth and community development, and community engagement. Interviewing the community leaders will provide valuable insight on how to move forward in that direction.

When interviewing the community members, the researcher also kept to a few specific questions. All of the questions were open-ended, but were specific enough to draw out specific answers on how the school and community can work together to make the return of the 7th and 8th graders as seamless as possible as well as benefit the community in a positive way. The questions focused on what the community currently

offers, how would a 7th or 8th grader know how to access those resources in the

community, as well as asked what specifically the school district could do to support the

community but how could the district partner with the community to provide for the 7th

and 8th graders.

The fiscal implications of this research plan will benefit the Duquesne City School

District substantially because they will not be paying the tuition of the 7th and 8th grade

students to the neighboring school districts. According to 24 P.S. Education § 16-1607:

Attendance in other districts, "...(4) For the 2012-2013 school year and each school year

thereafter, the per pupil tuition rate that a school district designated under paragraph (1)

shall receive for each reassigned student in a regular or special education program shall be

the greater of ten thousand dollars ($10,000) or the product of:

(i) the tuition rate established for the prior school year; and

(ii) the greater of:

(A) The percentage of increase in total budgeted

revenues available to a distressed school district; or

(B) The index is pursuant to the act of June 27, 2006 (1st Sp. Sess., P.
L.

1873, No. 1), [3] known as the "Taxpayer Relief Act,"

for the distressed school district" (Pennsylvania

School Code, 24).

Currently, Duquesne's Act 1 Index figure is 4.9%, the highest in the state as shown

in Table 1. The Act 1 Index is determined by the MV/PI ratio which is a measure of real

estate market value (MV) and personal income (PI). The higher the ratio, the higher the

level of poverty experienced by the community. Duquesne's rate is 0.8856, which

indicates that the district is one of the poorest school districts in the state. It is not a

coincidence that the City of Duquesne is also designated as one of the poorest

communities in Pennsylvania. (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2021).

Table 1

Statewide Ranking-Allegheny County School District's Act 1
Index (those similar to Duquesne and in close proximity)

Rank	School District	County	2020-2021 MV/PI Aid Ratio	2021-2022 Adjusted Index
1	Duquesne City	Allegheny	0.8856	4.9%
5	Clairton City	Allegheny	0.8467	4.8%
15	Sto-Rox	Allegheny	0.8189	4.7%
23	McKeesport Area	Allegheny	0.7752	4.6%
49	South Allegheny	Allegheny	0.7641	4.5%
62	East Allegheny	Allegheny	0.7134	4.4%
92	Brentwood Borough	Allegheny	0.6832	4.3%

99	Highlands	Allegheny	0.6834	4.3%
129	Elizabeth Forward	Allegheny	0.6388	4.2%
157	West Mifflin Area	Allegheny	0.6346	4.2%
193	Penn Hills	Allegheny	0.6324	4.1%
200	Steel Valley	Allegheny	0.6137	4.1%
213	Bald win- Whit ehall	Allegheny	0.5803	4.0%
241	Plum Borough	Allegheny	0.5697	4.0%

The Act 1 Index directly affects the tuition that is paid to West Mifflin and East Allegheny School Districts, as well as the tuition that is paid to charter and cyber charter schools. This is because the higher West Mifflin/East Allegheny amount is used to determine in part the charter and cyber charter tuition rates. Table 2 outlines the tuition paid to the two school districts collectively for 340 students. Assuming that the number of students will remain flat, the rate of tuition is unsustainable for Duquesne, as Duquesne's four-year cumulative change in tuition rate is 17.8%. The most recent annual financial report (AFR) from the Department of Education from 2018-2019 school year also indicates that the four-year instructional expense increase for East Allegheny was a -2.5% and for West Mifflin it was only 7.5%, while Duquesne was paying an increase in the tuition rate at 17.8% (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2021). Due to the

consistently rising tuition costs associated with paying the districts of East Allegheny and West Mifflin, which has absolutely no relationship to the actual increasing cost of instruction, the growth rate in tuition is not sustainable and will eventually bankrupt the district. Therefore, it is imperative that Duquesne stop the bleed of tuition costs overall and with the 7th and 8th grade students, by ensuring the Pennsylvania Department of Education, the parents/guardians and the community, that what is best for the students of Duquesne is to remain in Duquesne for as long as possible, and that would constitute the return of the 7th and 8th grade students.

Table 2

Tuition Paid by Duquesne City School District to Receiving Districts for Students in Grades 7-12

Year	Tuition Rate/per student	Yearly % Change	Cumulative
2017-2018	12,718.23	-	-
2018-2019	13,214.24	3.90%	3.9%
2019-2020	13,703.17	3.70%	7.7%
2020-2021	14,278.70	4.20%	12.3%
2021-2022	14,978.36	4.90%	17.8%

2022-2023*	15,712.30	4.90%	23.5%
2023-2024*	16,482.20	4.90%	29.6%
2024-2025*	17,289.83	4.90%	35.9%

Projected

In Table 3, the tuition that Duquesne pays between charter schools and to the neighboring school districts is rising, due to the Act 1 index calculation. The tuition the district pays to East Allegheny and West Mifflin has gone up 30% in three years (>$1 million). At the same time the tuition is rising for East Allegheny and West Mifflin, so is the cost of tuition for charter schools. The tuition costs for charter schools is up 15% in the same three years. This growth in tuition expenses has a major financial impact on Duquesne. As the obligatory tuition payments to East Allegheny and West Mifflin continue to grow upwards, this directly affects the tuition rate to charter schools due to the PDE-363 calculation (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2021).

Table 3

Tuition Paid to Receiving School Districts Expense Trend

Year	Charter Tuition	East Allegheny & West Mifflin Tuition	Total	Charter % Increase (cumulative)	EA/WM % Increase (cumulative)
2016-2017	3,350,700	3,543,739	**6,894,439**	-	-
2017-2018	3,657,360	4,069,875	**7,727,235**	9.2%	14.8%
2018-2019	3,897,781	4,257,161	**8,154,941**	16.3%	20.1%
2019-2020	3,861,637	4,605,401	**8,467,038**	15.2%	30.0%
2020-2021	4,208,000	4,794,911	**9,002,911**	25.6%	35.3%

School districts typically rely on funding from their local source via taxes. Duquesne has

not raised taxes in over 20 years. They have had the same millage rate of 17.5, which at

100% collection, does not even equate to $100,000. Table 4 is a summary of the millage

rates for public school districts in close proximity to Duquesne. The researcher compared

the millage rates and value of one mil, or the amount of local funding that one mil

generates. It was determined that Duquesne has the lowest millage rate of the compared

districts. While this equates to lower taxes, it also makes it difficult to raise taxes,

especially when the tax funding isn't going to help balance the budget. This is important

to note because it clearly demonstrates that the district does not have the capacity to

infinitely fund unnecessary tuition expenses. Therefore, returning the 7th and 8th grade

students would be financially and academically advantageous to the district.

Table 4

Allegheny County Millage By Budget Year and the Value of a Mil for

Duquesne and other surrounding school districts.

School District	2020-2021 Millage	2020-2021 Value of One Mil	2019-2020 Millage	2019-2020 Value of One Mil	2018-2019 Millage	2018-2019 Value of One Mil
Duquesne	17.5000	94,907	17.5000	69,391	17.5000	67,822
Clairton City	***	120,088	27.3031	125,775	26.2417	107,400
Sto-Rox	24.0900	287,000	24.0900	287,502	24.0900	292,102
McKees-port	20.0600	761,145	20.1600	766,019	19.4800	769,863
South Allegheny	20.2600	279,680	19.5000	319,595	17.8600	319,124
Brent-wood	32.7121	351,273	31.5480	361,916	30.5373	360,626

High- lands	24.8800	686,807	24.8800	694,664	24,6300	692,319
Elizabeth Forward	25,6823	727,459	24.7899	736,600	24.0213	730,800
West Mifflin	25.3765	839,779	24.4965	920,696	24.4965	935,000
Penn Hills	29.6965	1,316,631	28.6646	1,370,375	28.6646	1,383,361
Steel Valley	25.0800	635,025	24.2170	641,299	23.4890	603,580
Baldwin- Whitehall	21.7600	1,918,000	21.7600	1,872,887	21.0500	1,860,000
Plum Borough	21.0757	1,513,570	21.0757	1,509,790	21.0757	1,457,372

Within this chart, it is easy to see that Duquesne, Sto-Rox and Plum Borough have not raised taxes in the past three years. The table also shows that the Duquesne City School District has the lowest millage rate in the county at 17.50000.

Research Design, Methods & Data Collection.

This is a mixed-methods research approach relying on answers from surveys

completed by the parents/guardians, the teachers and staff as well as interviews of

community members to investigate ways the community and school district can work

together to support the return of the 7th and 8th graders to Duquesne. The creation of the

survey, found in Appendix B, was crafted with the parents/guardians and teachers in mind.

The precipitating factor in the researcher initiating the work with school transformation

was prompted by a request of the parents/guardians when the researcher started at

Duquesne. During the different stakeholder meetings throughout the district when the

researcher first started, the parents/guardians as well as the community members would all

detail how the community was fractured with the loss of the 7-12 graders. Those

stakeholders challenged the researcher to find a way to heal the fractured community and

restore the pride of Duquesne by working on bringing back the 7th and 8th graders. In

order to acquire insight into the decline of the community and school the researcher

needed to gather data. One of the tools used to gain that insight was a survey.

The survey was intended to gain an understanding of what the parents/guardians

and teachers felt that their child/student would want and/or need as a middle school

student. A central question asked if they supported the efforts of returning the 7th and 8th

grade students to Duquesne and what specific academic programming and social and

emotional resources they wanted their child to have as 7th and 8th graders. With the return

of the middle school grades, it was also important to the researcher to find out if the

parents/guardians and teachers would support the return of the athletic programs by

volunteering and/or coaching the students. Duquesne has a rich history of athletic

accomplishments and being able to revive the athletic program would support the

community in restoring the pride but also support some of the smaller businesses in town

with outside visitors shopping at their local stores. The last question was the most critical

because it was open-ended and allowed the parents/guardians the opportunity to name

specific academic programs and/or social and emotional resources that they felt would

best support their child. The survey administered to the parents/guardians and the teachers

contained five questions, four of which were Likert scale or yes/no questions which would

yield quantitative data. The last question in the survey was open-ended as were the

interview questions, all of which will provide qualitative data.

The data collection will begin with a survey to the parents/guardians of students

who are in grades 5-7. This survey will be sent out electronically to the emails on file for

each student. The survey to the teachers will be sent to their work email addresses. The

survey, which contains the same questions to both the parents/guardians and the teachers

will be sent the first week back from the holiday break in January 2021. They will be

given a week to complete the survey with a reminder email going out the day before the

survey closes on January 11, 2021. If a low return rate on the first push of the surveys is

received, the researcher will resend the survey out the week of January 25, 2021 to capture

more responses. The researcher did send out the survey again the week of January 25,

2021 to all of the same parent email addresses that we had on file from the first time the

survey was sent out due to the small return rate. The researcher did not send it to the

teachers a second time because the return rate was significantly better than the parent

responses to the survey.

Due to the small sample size collected in the data collection, the researcher did not

anticipate any issues with study. The survey data however, will provide the researcher

with options on how and what academic programming and social and emotional resources

that parents/guardians and teachers would like to see kept or added to the school district.

There really is no baseline data for this effort, but the data is intended to drive academic

programming and social and emotional resources needed to best support the 7th and 8th

graders in the Duquesne City School District. The survey will also help the researcher

assess whether parents/guardians and teachers support the initiative of the district and

researcher on bringing back the 7th and 8th grade.

Community interviews will take place in February. That month will provide the

flexibility to meet the different scheduling constraints of community members. The goal is

to meet with three to five different community representatives, with at least a minimum of

three. The interview questions will be sent out ahead of time to all of the community

representatives so that they can preview the questions and make a firm decision on

whether or not to participate. A letter describing the interview and the intent of the

questions and answer as well as the consent form will also be sent along to the identified

community representatives ahead of time. The targeted participants will then have a full

disclosure of the intent of the interview and what the researcher is planning on doing with

their answers.

The researcher was only able to confirm three community members to participate

in the study. Again, due to the small sample size of data collection, the researcher does not

anticipate any issues with the study being conducted. The interviews will allow the

researcher to look at the multiple avenues in supporting the 7th and 8th graders in

transitioning back to the school district as well as within the community.

The researcher was able to successfully receive IRB approval for this study, found

in Appendix A. The surveys and interview questions can all be found in Appendix B. The

survey and interview questions did not have a financial component, the financial analysis

of returning the 7th and 8th graders is from the district level.

Validity.

The validity of this study will be based on the triangulation approach found in

mixed-methods research design. Cross referencing and comparing the open-ended

question on the survey that the parents/guardians and teachers completed will be key in

validating the data. The questions asked are directly related to the 7th and 8th grade;

however, some of the suggestions that may be received could be related to a service their

child is currently using and/or receiving and they would like it to continue. The questions

will address specific academic programming and social and emotional learning resources

that they feel will best support the district's 7th and 8th graders. The researcher intends on

providing percentages, tables and quotes to support the research study and its validity.

The surveys are completely anonymous in nature, so there is an assumption that

the individual who is completing the survey is being honest and trustworthy. Lincoln and

Guba (1985) indicated that the trustworthiness of the study can be associated with their

research on the trustworthy criteria. Therefore, it aligns well with the researcher believing

that the individuals who completed the survey were being honest and trustworthy.

There are no comparisons to this study within the state of Pennsylvania. Much of

the research associated with this study was comparing the academic results of those

students who were in a traditional elementary school, grades K-5, with those students

who attended a traditional middle school, grades 6-8. The researcher found no evidence

of any school district returning students to their school district, rather the research

showed school districts, which closed middle schools to create K-8 schools. This study is

groundbreaking with regard to the fact that the research is identifying how students who

attend other school districts would benefit from receiving their education within their

home school district. No school is being closed as a result of this study; rather the school

district that the researcher is studying would be re-enrolling students who the

Pennsylvania Department of Education had sent to other neighboring school districts. The

biggest impact is the opportunity to improve the education of resident students, while a

strong secondary impact would be the financial gain the school district would receive by

not paying the tuition to the other school districts. Financial projections indicate much

lower costs associated with educating the students in-house than the cost of paying the

ever increasing tuition.

Summary

Whereas chapter two provided an in-depth look on past research regarding

academic programming, chapter three provides an overview of the research study, its

purpose and its methodologies. Relevant stakeholders were solicited and selected for

survey completion and interviews in order to collect qualitative and quantitative data.

Current financial data regarding the district's local taxing ability and the impact of tuition payments on the district's financial standing clearly indicates that a return of a subset of the student population, specifically 7th and 8th grade students, would benefit the district.

Survey questions asked of study participants indicate strong local support for the return of 7th and 8th grade students. The triangulation of the data from the surveys and the interviews will provide the perceptiveness to the researcher of what the parents/guardians and teachers would like to see continue or would like added to support the 7th and 8th graders academically, socially and emotionally. The interview questions will provide insight on how the community members feel about the return of the 7th and 8th graders but also ways to support them and their families as well as identify ways the school district can support the community. With this information firmly in hand, the researcher is confident that forward progress can continue in this study.

Chapter IV

Data Analysis and Results

The basis for this research study came out of the conversations that the research had when she first became the Superintendent of the Duquesne City School District in March of 2018. After the community was fractured when the students in grades 7-12 were sent to neighboring school district, a sense of lost pride permeated the community like a cancer. During the stakeholder conversations that the researcher convened, it was abundantly clear that the pride of Duquesne needed to be restored, and it started with returning the 7th and 8th students to their home district.

As part of the preparation for the conversation around the return of the 7th and 9th grades, the research focused on how other school districts performed at the K-8 level versus having a middle school as well as what social and emotional resources other districts have to support 7th and 8th graders. The research also focused on how to create a community school that could support the student, his/her family and also the community. Parents/guardians and teachers/staff provided the data for optimum academic programming as well as the social and emotional resources needed to support the 7th and 8th graders through the use of a survey. Other stakeholders provided data on how the community and school district could work together to support the return of the 7th and 8th grade students to their home district through personal interviews.

This chapter will focus on the data analysis of the quantitative data and qualitative data collected with the survey and the interviews. The data will indicate the academic programming the parents/guardians and teachers believe is most beneficial as

well as the specific resources that are requested. The data will also provide scenarios,

which facilitate the cooperation of the school district and community at large.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process the research used to analyze the quantitative data was in

the form of bar charts and tables. This information was recorded with the parent/guardian

or teacher/staff completing a survey as they answered the four multiple choice questions

of the five questions on the survey. There were 17 parents/guardians and 30 teachers/staff

who completed the survey. The resulting data was then displayed in a bar chart, which

proved to be the easiest to understand. The last question in the survey was an open-ended

question, using qualitative data analysis, the research then had to create a tally chart in

order to identify the specific academic programs and/or social and emotional resources the

respondents felt would best benefit students who remained enrolled in the Duquesne City

School District for 7th and 8th grade. The results were then converted to a table with

themes and specific ideas reflecting the responses.

The qualitative data collected through the interview process was then analyzed in

an effort to determine different response patterns. There were five community members

who were asked to participate but only three of them agreed to be interviewed. The three

community members who did agree to participate were a pastor, the mayor, and the

elected board member who also works for the Allegheny Intermediate Unit as a parent

outreach specialist. All of the community members who were asked to participate have

been working with the community for years and/or have lived in Duquesne their entire

lives. /the two who did not participate were chosen specifically because they are business

owners. From these patterns, the researcher was able to interpret the data in a way that helped identify other ways that the community can help support students. Each community member who was interviewed provided a deeper perspective into the setting of the community, which ultimately led the researcher to be able to answer the research question.

The survey questions, found in Appendixes B and C, are aligned to the research question, 'In what ways can the school district improve the academic program for students going into 7th and 8th grade?' The survey question, number three, is related to academic achievement. Survey question number five could also be aligned to this research question as well due to the respondents having the ability to provide an open-ended question related to improving academic achievement.

The survey questions, found in Appendixes B and C, area also aligned to the research question, 'In what ways can the school district improve the student resources for students going into 7th and 8th grade?' The survey question, number four, is related to resources for students. This survey question also provided the opportunity for parents/guardians and teachers/staff to select "other" and provide a specific resource that they felt would be beneficial to the students.

The research question, how can the school district and the community work together to support the 7th and 8th grade, is aligned to the interview questions found in Appendix D. The members of the community who participated in the interview were able to provide the researcher with specific ideas, such as providing access to community

resources, creating the paradigm for the school district to become a community hub for

access to resources and designing solutions to solve problems.

Results

Table 5 provides the data from the parents/guardians, teachers and staff who

completed survey question number one. The data indicates that of the parents/guardians

who responded, 76.4%, or 13 out of the 17 respondents, are confident that returning 7th

and 8th grade students to Duquesne City School District is a good thing. A total of 76.7%

of teachers and staff, or 23 out of 30 respondents, indicated a positive response to the

return of the 7th and 8th grade students to the district.

Table 5

Parents/Guardians and Teachers and Staff Support of Returning the 7th and 8th Grade
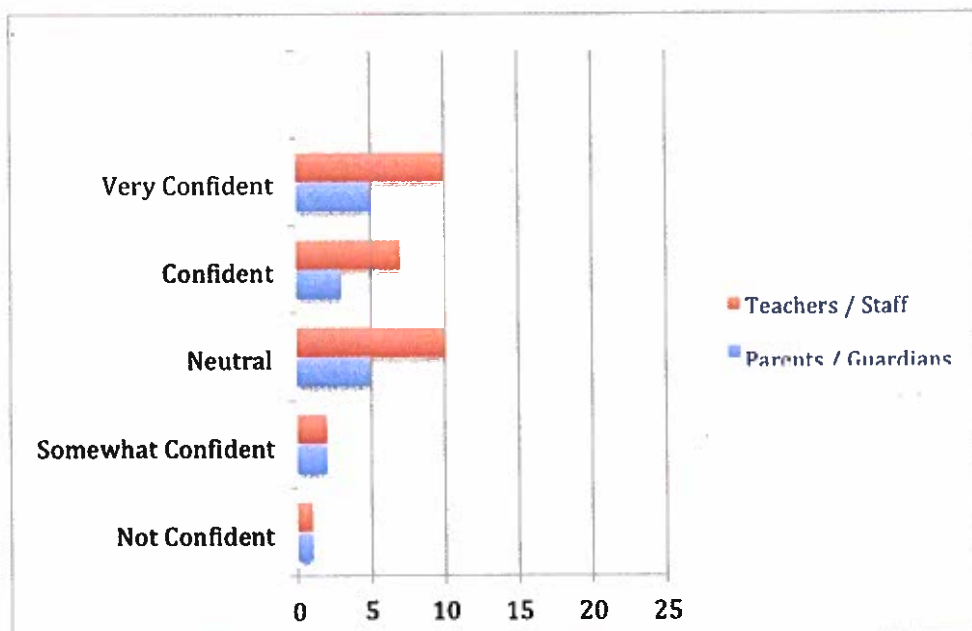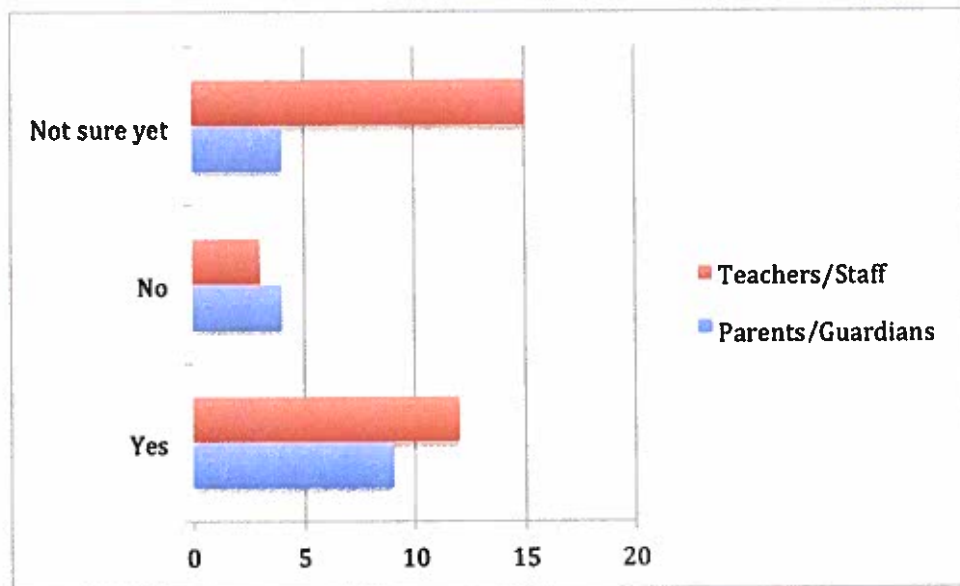
Students

Table 6 provides the quantitative data addressing the possibility of returning

athletics to the Duquesne City School District as organized, school-sponsoring offerings.

There has not been organized, school-sponsoring athletics for middle school since 2012

and 2007 for high school students Duquesne has a dominant history of section and

division championships as well as a few state titles in football and basketball. Athletics

also provides the opportunity for students to represent their community, improve their

academics, how to work as a team, build social relationships and improve time

management (Chen, 2020).

In order for athletics to return to Duquesne City School District in the middle

school grades, it will be important to have the different stakeholders volunteers to help

support the students by coaching, mentoring, selling tickets, providing security, or helping

in the concession stand. To gauge how much interest there would be in supporting the

return of athletics, knowing that there would be a strong need for volunteers to make it

happen, the researcher posed a question to the parents/guardians as well as the teachers

and staff.

Table 6

Parents/Guardians and Teachers/Staff supporting the Return of Athletics

The researcher also wanted to know if they perception was that Duquesne City

School District was currently offering an academic program that was rigorous and

challenging to the students. The perceived lack of rigor in previous years may have

encouraged parents to send their child to a different school. This question for both the

parents/guardians and the teachers/staff allowed the individual completing the survey to

provide specific details. Only one parent/guardian who completed the survey indicated

that they would like more challenging content for the students who are more advanced.

There were no teachers or staff who had any recommendations for the researcher. Table 7

provides the quantitative data from the parents/guardians and the teachers/staff. Based on

the responses from both surveys, the parents/guardians and the teachers/staff are confident

that the Duquesne City School District is providing a challenging and rigorous curriculum.

The researcher was hopeful that the last question of the survey, "In a few words, what

would be the one thing that Duquesne could do to make the education better for our

students", will yield results that will indicated moving the parents/guardians who initially

indicated that they were "no confident" or "somewhat confident" to "confident" or "very

confident."

Table 7

Parents/Guardians and Teachers/Staff Response to Academically Challenging

Curriculum
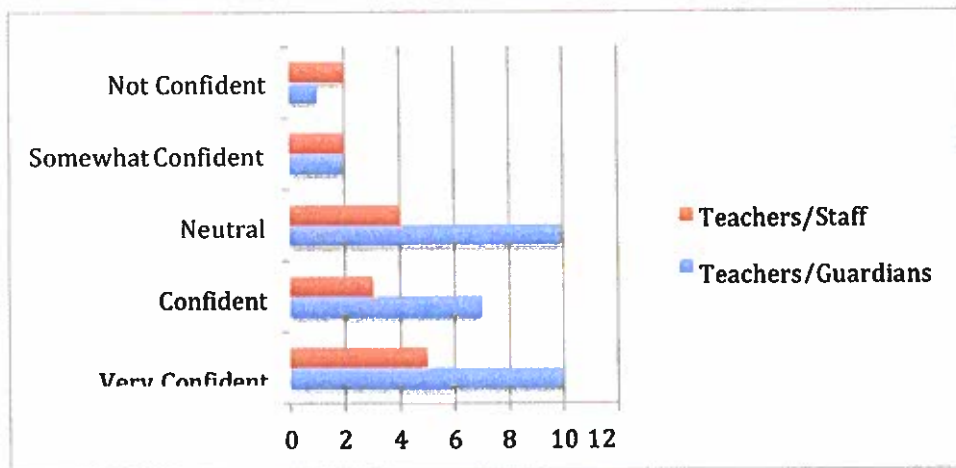
The final quantitative question the researcher asked the parents/guardians and the

teachers/staff regarded the resources the students currently have at the Duquesne City

School District or what types of resources they would like to see when the students

transition to the 7th and 8th graders. The researcher provided some examples and the

context for those who were completing the survey. Examples included information that

the school district already provides a technology device for students to use and some

students also receive counseling services while in the school building. Table 8 indicates

the quantitative data collected from question 4. Of the teachers/staff who completed the

survey, two of the responses were indicated as "other" and the respondents either asked a

question or provided a suggestion. The question that was asked was questioning whether

electives were going to be offered in 7th and 8th grade students and the comment indicated

that the whole school needed intense emotional support building wide. The "not sure yet"

category had a higher percentage from the teachers/staff than the parents/guardians. This

is somewhat puzzling to the researcher since the teachers/staff actually work in the

district. This may need to be due to the fact that the district already provides a plethora of

resources to students, technology and mental health, that possibly the teachers/staff just

don't know what else is out there to provide to the students.

Table 8

Parents/Guardians and Teachers/Staff: What Resources (i.e. counseling, iPads,

tutoring) Are Needed to Support the 7th and 8th Graders Returning?
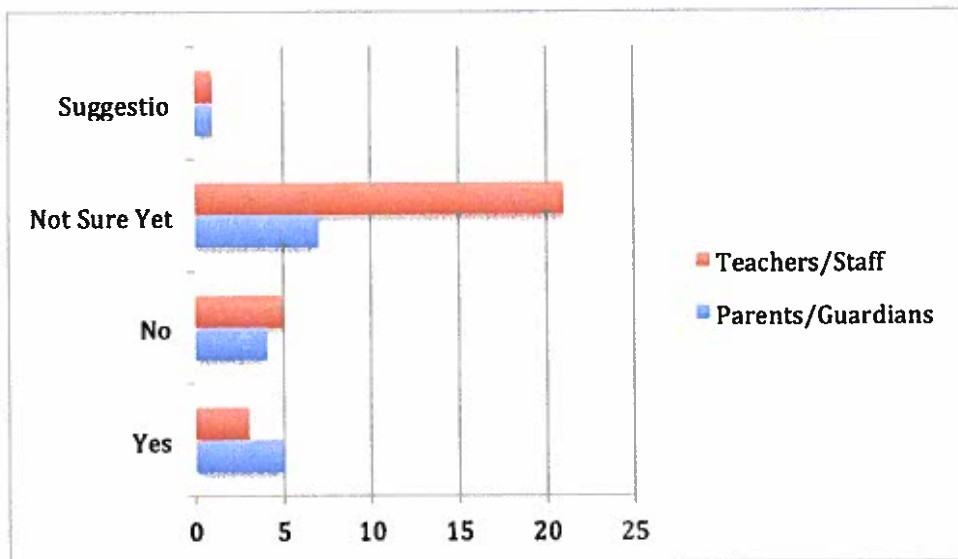
Tables 9 and 10 display the results from the last question of the survey. It was an

open-ended question and the respondent had to key in their answers. This open-ended

response, which was designated to collect qualitative data that will help the researcher

move the education of the Duquesne students forward. Table 9 shows the responses from

the parents/guardians and Table 10 reflects the responses from the teachers/staff. There

were three to four major themes in each table, with overlapping items expressed in each.

Due to the limited responses from the parents/guardians, the specific items suggested are

small in number. Nevertheless, the responses are useful because they were specific

enough to be incorporated with other efforts the district is implementing.

Table 9

Parents/Guardians: In a Few Words, What Would Be The One Thing That Duquesne Could Do To Make The Education Better For Our Students?

Theme	Specific Items
Supporting Students	- More hands-on learning - Add advanced courses - Keep an up-to-date curriculum - Tutors for kids - Gifted program - Provide more support for kids
Parents/ Guardians	Involve the parents more
Other	- Nothing, doing great - Start the transition with just the kids in 6th grade and not include the current 7th graders already in another school. It's too much transition for them to come back and turn around and transition again.

Table 10

Teachers/Staff: In a Few Words, What Would Be The One Thing That Duquesne Could Do To Make The Education Better For Our Students?

Theme	Specific Items
Communication with Stakeholders	• Communication among all stakeholders • Gain more support from the community
Supports for teachers and staff	• Obtaining and retaining high quality teachers • Provide quality educational resources • Provide students access to other programs • Add languages • Add a gifted program • Add clubs • Add after-school tutoring Add more diversity, including male teachers
Supports for students	• Consistency • Behavior and emotional supports • Changing the mindset from victim Hold students accountable for their actions/behaviors

The qualitative data was developed by the researcher after conducting interviews with community members. There were three community members who agreed to be interviewed and participate in the research. The three community members that did agree to participate out of the five that were invited were: a pastor, the mayor, and an elected board member who also works for the Allegheny Intermediate Unit as a parent outreach specialist. All of the community members who were asked to participate have been working with the community for years and/or they have been in Duquesne their entire lives. The two who did not participate were chosen specifically because they represent the

community and because they are business owners. The researcher was able to document

the different responses by creating a chart and used tally marks to document the different

responses by creating a chart and used tally marks to document how often the same

response was given by the other community members during the interview. The questions

that were asked by the researcher can be found in Appendix B. From the tally marks, the

researcher then able to identify different themes and specific items that were tabulated into

tables. Each question reflected a table with themes and specific items for consideration.

In Table 11, the researcher asked the participants in the interview, "In what ways

do you feel that the district and the community can work together to support bringing back

the 7th and 8th graders?" Table 11 identifies multiple themes and very specific items for

the researcher to consider. The district administration should consider how the

suggestions provided can be used to help parents/guardians to choose Duquesne City

School District as the only institution for learning for their student.

Table 11

Community Member Interviews: In What Ways Do You Feel That The District and The

Community Can Work Together To Support Bringing Back the 7th and 8th Grader?

Theme	Specific Items
Community connections	• Hear and share ideas between the entities • Community groups – Urban League, Duquesne Family Center, Allegheny Intermediate Unit 3, Churches, Boys and Girls Club, Abele, Put People's First Mon Valley, Take-Action Mon Valley, Pittsburghers for Public Transit, Duquesne Youth Athletic Association • Businesses supporting the school district
Communication	• Communicate the needs of the community to the district • Communicate to the different community groups the needs for the school

Education	"We can all be teachers and learners" - Parent collaboration - Educate the parents

In Table 12, the data presented is a compilation of the results of the question, "How could

the school district support the Duquesne Community at large, specifically with the 7th and

8th graders?" Table 12 identifies the themes from those responses as well as specific items

for the researcher to consider. The researcher used the interview questions, found in

Appendix D, to create tally marks for all of the responses and then created a table to

indicate the themes that were identified based on the tally marks.

Table 12

Community Member Interviews: How Could The School District Support The

Duquesne Community At Large, Specifically With The 7th and 8th Graders?

Theme	Specific Items
Curriculum	- Connection to the real world - Having student voice - Cross generational learning - Create an after-school program
Designing solutions	- Create solutions to local problems - Speak to incoming businesses
Create the school as the central hub	- Create a connection to city hall - Create a center for career awareness - Provide a pathway to identify partners and potential partners

The third question asked of the interviewees concerned the resources currently

available to the students enrolled in the Duquesne City School District. The purpose of

this question was to gain an understanding of parents'/guardians' awareness of the

resources and activities available and how to communicate that more fully. The responses

were relatively similar to one another, noting that they mostly referred to the names of the

different organizations that were already supporting the community as a whole. Table 13

indicates that names of the organizations to which the students and their families have

access. Each interviewee was recorded during the interview and they were able to provide

the specific community organizations.

Table 13

Names Of Organizations/Resources Available To The Students And Families In

Duquesne Identified By The Community Members

Boys and Girls Club	Family Support Center	Food Bank	Local Pastors/ Churches	Allegheny Intermediate Unit	Urban League	Auberle
Put People's First Mon Valley	Take Action Mon Valley	Pittsburgher's for Public Transit	Duquesne Youth Athletic Association	Housing Authority		

In question four, the individuals were asked who the school district could contact

to help identify ways that they district could work with the community. This question

identified answers similar to previous answers. The respondents referred back to the

connection to the different organizations that exist within the community. One respondent

also indicated that there needed to be more conversations between the school and city hall.

In the last question that was asked by the researcher to those who were being

interviewed, the researcher wanted to know what questions the interviewee had for the

researcher. In addition, this final question was an opportunity to unearth more knowledge

about the subjects and their thoughts regarding the research topic as a whole. Table 14

lists the different questions that were asked of the researcher at the conclusion of the

interview as well as the answers provided by the researcher.

Table 14

Do You Have Any Questions For Me?

Individual questions	Researcher Answers
What are the current plans for the 7th grade?	The current plans for returning the 7th and 8th graders is still on path. The Department of Education has asked for multiple other documents in order for us to prove that the district has planned for not only the space for the students but also the academic programming that is rigorous. We have created a course catalog, the 7th grade curriculum and are partnering with Waterfront Learning to provide the opportunity for electives for students.
Are we moving forward?	As it stands now, yes, we are moving forward. However, final approval will not even occur until mid-June due to the way school code is written.
What other measures have been taken?	We have created course catalogs, the curriculum, held town hall meetings, called or emailed every 6th grade parent, sent multiple surveys, and have monthly meetings with the two receiving school districts.
I respect the vision that we have.	
No, thank you. You are doing a great job.	

Discussion

Analysis of the data provided a deep dive into what the parents/guardians,

teachers/staff, and community members identify as ways that will benefit their students as

they move up through the identified middle school grades in terms of academics and

social and emotional resources. The researcher used a triangulation approach by

combining the three resources with available data: (1) the survey responses from the

parents/guardians (2) the survey responses from the teachers and staff and (3) answers from interviewing members of the community. The data supports the efforts of the researcher to make sure that there is a robust curriculum in place for rigorous academics and a number of different resources available to support students in and out of the classroom. Further analysis from the community member interviews indicates that there is a deep desire for the school to be more of a community hub and to provide resources to more than just the students and their families.

Reviewing the data for a deeper triangulation, the community members provided responses that could be aligned to what both the parents/guardians and the teachers/staff were stating. However, identifying the disconnect between understanding what resources the school district has access to and the community has access to is something that will need to be addressed as the district moves forward. The researcher was able to discern that the district needs to work more closely with the community so that all are working together in a collaborative manner.

From the survey questions and interviews, the researcher was able to glean very specific examples of academic suggestions for students, specifically in terms of creating more ways to enrich students' academics, offering more advanced courses as well as providing more opportunities for tutoring. The resources indicated were to continue counseling services currently available to the students, continue to make certain that students still have access to a technology device for learning and provide more behavioral and emotional support for all students, not just 7th and 8th graders.

Summary.

The data from the parents/guardians, teachers/staff and community members was

clear, the Duquesne City School District is ready for students to continue their education

in their 7th and 8th grade academic years within their home school district. Each group of

stakeholders provided valuable feedback in offering significant examples on how to

improve the academics at the school district as well as identifying the different resources

that are available to the students and the parents/guardians. As noted on page 39 of this

document, if the Duquesne City School District can follow the lead that the state of

California provided in creating a House Bill around the Full Service Community Schools

Act that created a community school where both public and private organizations can

collaborate by:

1. Expanded Learning Opportunities

2. Health Services

3. Family Support and Engagement

4. School Infrastructure to Support Collaboration

5. Systems to Gather and Analyze Data

(Honda & Liu, 2015, Proposal for HR 5168, 2009), they will have created a situation

where everyone in the community will benefit. The data collected from the community

member interviews supports the efforts that California initiated to create an Act to support

the schools becoming a community hub.

In chapter 5, the researcher will provide concluding remarks and ideas for future research. This research has been valuable to the school district as the researcher was able to provide data and specific recommendations on how to best prepare the 7th and 8th graders socially and how best to prepare the 7th and 8th graders academically.

Chapter V

Conclusions and Recommendations

The data provided in Chapter 4 provides a solid foundation to the researcher on what academic programming and resources students in grades 7 and 8 would need as indicated by the parents/guardians and the teachers/staff if the two middle school grade levels were to return to Duquesne City School District. The responses of the groups were instrumental in the identification of specific academic programing requested and social and emotional resources as well as how the district can support the community and how it in turn can support the students.

The conclusions found within this chapter will provide the researcher with the data needed to create a seamless transition for students in grades 7 and 8 as they return to the Duquesne City School District. It is the primary goal of the researcher to work collaboratively with the parents/guardians, administration, school board, teachers, and the community to create a desirable school environment. A secondary goal is to create a rigorous curriculum that prepares students not only for high school, but also for life after high school, whether it is for continued education at a collegiate level, enrollment in a vocational or technical school, or entry into the work force. The researcher also wants to ensure that students in grades 7 and 8 will have the necessary resources to be successful in and out of the classroom and finally create a better avenue for the community and district to work together.

Conclusions

Data analysis strongly indicates that the parents/guardians, the teachers/staff as well as the community are favor of the 7th and 8th grade students attending Duquesne City School District. Both groups indicated by a 77% majority that they were in favor of the return of students. The Duquesne community has a rich tradition of volunteerism; however, this effort has typically been associated with athletics.

However, it is important to not that academics should still remain as the focus. If students aren't able to earn the grades necessary to pass their courses, those students will not be eligible to participate in athletics. With the focus remaining on athletics, the school district and the students will have a solid plan on whether or not a student can participate in athletics. With the return of athletics, it is predicted that community members and school district employees will ramp up their volunteerism efforts to support the students. This will not only help the students and their families but the researcher also believes that the return of athletics will also begin to revive the community. The community became fractured approximately 15 years ago when the district lost its high school and then middle school five years later.

As the school district and community work together to create a community school, this could also lead to a n avenue of volunteers for the school district outside of athletics. As more and more community and business members start using the school, there will be ample opportunities for the community to see what the district is doing and offer up ways that they can support students through volunteering. This will build upon the bank of volunteers that support athletics to now possibly embrace the academics for students by

volunteering during the school day or connecting the district to resources in and around the community.

The first question that the researcher set out to answer focused on ways that the school district could improve the academic programming for students going into grades 7 and 8. The researcher concluded that the results provided significant suggestions from all groups for academics to be improved for students enrolled in those grades. Currently the students are all receiving the same grade level content in ELA, math, science and social studies. The data revealed that the parents/guardians as well as the teachers/staff agreed, in general terms, when providing suggestions to the researcher on what academic programming needed to be considered for the returning the 7th and 8th grade students. The district should add more support of the students who need extra assistance. The district should also include word languages, gifted programs, advanced courses such as Algebra I and Advanced ELA, and hands-on learning. These suggestions support the researcher's belief that Duquesne City School District will be able to provide a rigorous curriculum that will make the school academically challenging by incorporating the suggestions into the curriculum.

The district could also take the recommended academic programming a step further by putting a strong focus on technology. The district could create a sequence of courses, starting in the younger grades, to provide students more opportunities to utilize technology. Courses specifically around robotics and coding, computer science, and computer applications. Having these types of courses would help solidify why a parent and student should choose Duquesne City School District because they know that they will receive a robust future focused curriculum. The district should also consider adding

academic clubs. These clubs could provide an opportunity for students to come together and take their academic learning a step further. In addition to the clubs, creating a STEM magnet program will also help students make Duquesne as their only choice for education but also potentially draw students from other areas to want to come to Duquesne to receive their education.

As the school district plans for the return of its middle schoolers, the suggestions made by the parents/guardians and the teachers/staff should be taken into serious consideration by the district's administration. They provide easy to apply suggestions and opportunities for students to be successful in their own ways. The community already had a strong partnership with the Boys and Girls Club, which provides opportunities for extended learning and homework help with students in the school. However, the district should also look at building a stronger partnership with the Family Center, the Urban League as well as the city government. These partnerships will provide needed resources to the students and their families of Duquesne. The school district should consider investing in appropriate curriculum materials in a world language for students to remain competitive with other middle school students in the state and country.

Another tangible improvement that the district could implement is a rewrite of the current curriculum to include more lessons with hands-on learning that have embedded remediation and enrichment opportunities during the lesson and not as a separate lesson. Using Professional Learning Communities (PLC's) is one way the district can support creating more hands-on lessons. The district should create specific protocols to use during PLC's when reviewing data and creating lesson plans for students. During the PLC meetings, teacher teams can be led by instructional leaders who have exemplary

knowledge base of the content who can provide solid examples of rigorous evidence-based instruction. The district can also provide examples of rigorous evidence-based instruction (Redding, et al., 2018).

Data collected from the last survey question the parents/guardians completed, see Appendix B, indicated that they felt their students needed more hands-on lessons in order to be successful. The establishment of a more comprehensive gifted program, which the district is already required to provide, may just need to be advertised to the community to make parents and guardians aware of the offering. If parents/guardians are requesting it, the district could use low cost ideas of advertising the gifted program, such as utilizing already established social media platforms.

If Duquesne was able to re-enroll its 7th and 8th grade students, the fiscal implications to the district are substantial. Being able to hire its own staff instead of paying the rising tuition costs to other local school district would allow the district administrators to consider adding a world language teacher as well as potentially adding properly certified ELA, math, science and social studies instructors. There will be costs associated with having to purchase curriculum resources and technology, however, the overall minimum estimated savings in the first year could still prove to be more financially beneficial to the district than paying tuition to other schools.

The second question the researcher focused on was identifying ways the school district could improve the resources for students going into 7th and 8th grade. Providing resources for students was met with limited responses from the parents/guardians, but

plenty of ideas were offered by the teachers/staff, thus the researcher was able to draw a

conclusion that there are ways that the district could improve its resources for students.

The researcher will be able to take the suggestions made by the parents/guardians

and the teachers/staff and share them with the district's administration. The researcher

was intrigued by one of the suggestions. The parent/guardian suggested that the district

should consider only reenrolling 7th grade students first, as the current 6th graders would

become 7th graders and then matriculate to 8th grade. This suggestion was by the

parent/guardian who discussed the social and emotional aspect for a student who has to

transition more than once. If the district was successful in returning 7tn and 8th graders at

the same time, this would force 7th graders to choose between the school they just

transitioned to one year ago back to Duquesne for one year then transition back to another

school for high school. The parent/guardian indicated from a social and emotional aspect

of a student that this was not a good idea and implored the school district to consider a

phased approach instead.

The teachers and staff did provide a number of suggestions that would support the

conclusion of the researcher. If the district would consider a consistent social and

emotional behavior program for all students not just 7th and 8th graders, there would be a

systemic initiative that could build upon each year of progress. The district administration

will have a relatively simple tangible improvement to make because it would require only

adding one or two grade levels to already existing systems rather than creating new

systems for two grade levels. By incorporating this approach, the students who already

have access to the outside mental health provides will still have the same access when they

move to 7th and 8th grade.

Fiscal Implications

The fiscal implications, however, could differ slightly depending upon how the school district would implement the suggestions provided. If the district would consider the parent/guardian suggestion and execute a phased approach to the return of 7th grade in year one and 8th grade the subsequent year, there would be very little financial savings in year one. This would be due to the fact that the teachers in middle school must be content certified and are certified in ELA, math, science or social studies. This would require the district to hire four teachers for one grade level in one year, which would not be as fiscally advantageous as bringing back both 7th and 8th graders at the same time. There is also a cost for curricular materials, professional development for teachers/staff and equipment such as desks and chairs for the students. However, the parent/guardian brought up a valid point about the number of transitions a student would have to go through and the social and emotional impact that could potentially have on those students.

The fiscal implications by bringing both the 7th and 8th grade students would be much more substantial. In the first year, all academic programming and resources would be more substantial. In the first year, all academic programming and resources would need to be purchased and all professional development would need to be held on addressing the middle school student, as well as all of the equipment needed, such as desks and chairs, so the savings wouldn't nearly be as much in year one. However, in year two, the savings could start to climb to closer to $1.5 million dollars and would continue to raise the more the number of enrolled students climbs.

Another way to bring savings to the district is to market the district. Recruiting

students back from charter schools would help out the financial picture of the district. The

district pays approximately $15,000 for every regular education student and $35,000 for

every special education student that attends a charter school. The district should market

themselves so that it allows for parents/guardians and the community members to know

exactly what the academic programming the school district has as well as what supports

are available to students.

The third research question that the researcher focused on was how the school

district and the community can work together to support the 7th and 8th graders. The

researcher interviewed community members all had responses that were similar to one

another and named the same community. Their responses were also critical at providing

suggestions that can be shared with the district administration on how the district can

support the community and the community can support school that was the formed

hypothesis from all of the data collected from the interviews. Community schools can be

established when the community, both school and non-school, come together and create

an action plan that focuses on what is best for the community as a whole (Honda & Liu,

2015). This research will be shared with the administration and they in turn will be

encouraged to meet with the community leaders to begin the process of turning the school

district into more of a community school in Duquesne that will support all residents, not

just the students.

The first step to creating a community school would require the school district to

create a vision and strategic plan. Then the district would want to build a leadership team

followed by creating a needs and capacity assessment of the building. The next steps

should be creating a shared space and facility agreement followed by working on how to finance the community school. The last step would be to complete the research and evaluation of the community school plan (Coalition for Community Schools, 2021).

There are no significant fiscal implications that would come from the executions of these recommendations. Initially, in order to start the collaborative process, it will cost mothing. Initiating the community school could cost the district some fiscal resources moving forward, but by working with residents, that would hopefully help offset the overall costs associated with the creation and implementation of an effective community school.

Limitations

There are several limitations that are associated with this particular research. The mixed methods research design in specific to a small community with approximately 5,500 residents and only 360 students in the school district in grades PreK-6. The low population of both the community and the school district also limited the number of responses. The researcher also provided no incentive for individuals to complete the survey and/or participate in the interview, and by doing so may have limited the number of responses overall.

Although the surveys were the easiest way to attempt to get as many responses from the parents and guardians as possible, limiting the potential respondents to only the parents/guardians in grades 5-7 may have also been the reason for the low responses. The number of parents/guardians who completed the survey was only 17, even after the researcher sent the survey to the parents/guardians on two additional occasions.

Had the researcher expanded the survey to include all students in grades PreK-6, the researcher in all likelihood may have received more responses. The researcher could have also considered entering all participants in a drawing, however, that would have comprised the anonymity of the survey. The researcher conducted a town hall meeting in August of 2020 and could have considered distributing the survey after that town hall instead of waiting until the beginning of the 2021 calendar year. The ideas would have been fresh in the parents/guardians minds and could have even more responses as well as providing other significant suggestions for the administration to consider when returning students.

There are approximately 100 staff members in the Duquesne City School District and only 30% of the staff completed the survey. One way that the researcher could have gained more responses is to have considered a give-away. Although the survey was only five questions long, the survey response was still low. The researcher could have considered doing a presentation to the teachers and staff about the research and how the data would be collected and used. This may have garnered more responses as well as given an opportunity for teachers and staff to answer questions before they filled out the survey. However, the respondents were those employees who have a sincere concern for the future success of the district, and therefore their responses are significant.

It may be of significance to note that this modest parental/guardian response to the survey tool appears to be a rather common result in the district. Conversations with several veteran staff members, which took place after the surveys were completed, revealed that there have been difficulties getting parents/guardians to complete

and return written surveys in previous years. Several thoughts regarding this phenomenon will be shared in the section on recommendations for future research.

The interview process only yielded three individuals willing to be interviewed by the researcher. This limits the number of responses from community members, however, all interviewees had similar responses, so the researcher actually feels that they were able to offer a true reading on how the community feels and had enough suggestions that represent that whole community. Although it would have been nice to have more people willing to be interviewed for data comparison, the data gathered as a result of the interviews is a great way to get started. The data gathered in the interviews provide solid examples of how the community and school district can work together in a mutually beneficially way while simultaneously supporting students returning to Duquesne City School District. Another way to continue to build upon the collaborative approach between the district and the community it to consider working with local businesses to get students experiences in their business, which may help support a future career for that student.

Another limitation to the researcher encountered was due to the pandemic. All interviews were conducted in a zoom platform and recorded. However, the interview question and answers took 20 minutes at most. Due to the nature of having to conduct the interviews on zoom, it is also possible that the community members who declined to be interviewed did so because they were not comfortable with the zoom platform or didn't have the technology to participate in a zoom session. The researcher should consider offering alternative ways for community members to participate rather than zoom for future research.

One other limitation that should be considered is the mixed-methods approach to data collection. The researcher may have received more buy-in if in-person or virtual focus groups would have been considered where parents/guardians and teachers/staff might have felt that their opinion would have been heard. The interviews that the researcher conducted with community members provided more detailed responses and suggestions that the researcher will be able to share with the school district administration.

Recommendations for Future Research.

Based on the data collected by the researcher, there is clearly a want and desire for the district to return the 7th and 8th grades to Duquesne City School District. The responses to the research questions provided a clear path for the district administration. The survey questions and interviews provided very specific examples, such as adding advanced courses, up-to-date curriculum, hands on-learning, a gifted program, adding world languages, and obtaining high quality teachers. Found in Tables 9 and 10, these examples will ensure that academics are the cornerstone of making certain that Duquesne students are ready to enter 7th and 8th grade. The data also provided suggestions for resources to ensure that students are successful.

When reviewing the results of the research, one consideration is to look at the data to gain an understanding of what went well and/or worked and what didn't. What could another researcher improve upon to make the research more robust? Is it feasible to use the idea of reconfiguration and apply it to something other than a school district? This

would need further research, but could be valuable to another school district and/or

researcher who are considering reconfiguration.

However, there was one particular parent suggestion that made the most sense for

what would be best for students. The researcher supports the recommendation of a phased

approach of the return of the 7th and 8th grade students. The school district should

seriously consider allowing current 6th graders to transition to the 7th grade and then the 8th

grade. This limits the number of transitions that the students have to make. If the school

district were to return the 7th and 8th graders simultaneously, then those same students

would then have to also transition back again in Duquesne for 8th grade and then transition

back to another school for 9th grade. That could be considered too much transition for the

students in middle school. The phased approach makes the most sense for what is best for

the students.

A phased approach doesn't help the financial situation of the district in year one.

All certified content teachers would still have to be hired based on School Code

requirements even though they would only be teaching one middle school grade level in

the first year. When the 8th grade students return, the school district would then see a

much bigger financial savings, especially because the current 5th grade class has about 20

more students in it compared to the current 6th grade class. The only cost to the district

would be the cost of buying any updated curriculum resources for the 8th grade.

One of the topics that need a closer look is how to implement an effective

community school. The qualitative data supports a community school, which is aligned to

the research; however, more work and research would need to be done in order for it to be

a true viable option for the Duquesne community. Creating a community school could be its own research project. The Coalition of Community Schools defined community schools as "both a place and a set of partnerships between school and other community resources, with an integrated focus on academics, health and social services, youth and community development, and community engagement" (Maier et al, 2018, p. 19). There would have to be better collaboration with the different community resources and the Duquesne City School District as space and access will be one of the biggest hurdles.

Qualitative research should be the focus of the data collection as well. Surveys are good for collecting data quickly, but with such low responses from parents/guardians and even the teachers/staff, the researcher should consider focus groups or one-on-one interviews with the different stakeholders to gain a more in depth understanding and gain viable suggestions.

On the topic of resolving the issue to low to moderate survey responses from parents/guardians, it may be worthwhile to engage willing non-respondents in face-to-face conversations about why surveys and/or questionnaires are not returned. A few possibilities might be lack of trust based on recent history with managing entities, disregard for the school or administration, the believe that their opinions are not valued, or some other reason. It would be of benefit to the district to secure a broader range of responses when gathering data for decision making.

Due to the district's history of being taken over my multiple entities before being placed into Receivership, a deeper dive into the research could be done on the different groups that were tasked with managing the school district. What types of success did

those governing boards operating the district experience? What challenges did they encounter? What could a new administrator learn from those different governing boards? Why did they ultimately leave the district? How involved was the Pennsylvania Department of Education in selecting the governing board? This research could benefit the district and the newest administrator that comes in to gain an understanding of what the district has gone through as well as have a perspective on what went well and what challenges they faced. The new administrator could use the data collected to improve upon or change when coordinating efforts for a successful turnaround school district.

Another topic of consideration for future research would be to include 9-12th graders in the researchers plan for returning students to the district. What would the research say about what the school district would need to support the 9-12th graders academically and socially? How could the school district find ways to financially become a competitive high school again? What would the school district need to do to build upon the return of the 7th and 8th graders? With the pandemic and the use of online learning, could the school district consider a hybrid approach to 9-12th grade? Including the 9-12th graders into future research opens the doors for the researcher to expand upon current research.

In addition, this research could be used to support other school districts across the commonwealth, and the country, as many look at ways to save money with reconfigurations. This research would help other school districts identify the research needed to support the reconfigurations of moving from elementary and middle schools to a K-8 model. The academic and resource suggestions and ideas provided by the parents/guardians, teachers/staff and the community members can be used as a basis to get

started. School districts that are considering this type of reconfiguration should make sure that they have a clear understanding of how people best respond to surveys and interviews. If history in their school district indicates a low response to surveys, the researcher should consider a more qualitative approach, rather than a quantitative or mixed methods approach.

One final thought for future research is the idea of creating a STEM magnet school. Judson (2014) indicated that elementary schools that promote STEM could set themselves apart by having a rigorous curriculum and put a focus on student achievement. By creating a STEM magnet school at Duquesne students from around the area could choose to send their child to the magnet school instead of their home school in their neighborhood. This type of opportunity would set Duquesne apart from other elementary schools as well as increase enrollment, which would also help financially.

Summary.

Moving a school district from a K-6 to a K-8 is no small undertaking. There are a lot of things that have to be considered in order for the school district to add the two additional grade levels. First of all, the parents/guardians and teachers/staff have to feel confident that the school district is the best place for the children. The parents/guardians have to be considered partners in their child's education, academically and socially and emotionally. The district has to consider what the parents/guardians would like to see in terms of academics and resources that will best support their child(ren). The school district also has to consider how to best partner with the community as well. The famous book from Hillary Clinton, "It Takes A Village…" (It Takes a Village, 1996) can help

lead the groundwork on how to work together to support the 7th and 8th graders. From the groundwork, it can lead to supporting the other students as well.

Overall, returning the 7th and 8th graders is what is best for the Duquesne community. A once fractured community now has an opportunity to heal and begin to restore its pride. The school district will have to strategically plan for the students' return as well as keep an eye on the finances for the long term. The return of the students will help with the overall district finances because the reduction in tuition costs is significantly greater that the expenditures necessary to restore the grade levels. However, the school district needs to be proactive in also aggressively seeking the return of students from charter and cyber charter schools to help offset the overall cost burden of the tuition expense. This research and move by the school district should be viewed as a model of school turnaround and can be emulated by other school districts around the state, country and world.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Institutional Review Board

California University of Pennsylvania

Morgan Hall, Room 310

250 University Avenue

California, PA 15419 instreviewboard@calu.edu

Melissa Sovak, Ph.D.

Dear Sue,

Please consider this email as official notification that your proposal titled "
Moving a District from a PreK-6 to a PreK-8 Building: Action Research About
Bringing Students Back To Their Home District" (Proposal #19-085) has been
approved by the California University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review
Board as amended with the following stipulations:

Stipulation to remove an inconsistency between consent documents:

-The cover letter indicates that for individuals being interviewed:

"...Interviewees will be able to withdraw their statements at any point before,
during, or after the interview. They may... preclude their questions from the
research..."

This is fine, but the interview consent form states instead:

"...during the interview you may request that a comment remain
anonymous...the comment will be reported anonymously..."

This latter statement must be edited to include the participant's additional
option to strike the comment entirely from all records and reports.
(alternatively just replace with the text from the cover letter)

I do not need to re-review this as long as the researcher submits an updated
interview form to the IRB.

Once you have completed the above request you may immediately begin data collection. You do not need to wait for further IRB approval. At your earliest convenience, you must forward a copy of the changes for the Board's records.

The effective date of the approval is 9/22/20 and the expiration date is 9/21/21. These dates must appear on the consent form.

Please note that Federal Policy requires that you notify the IRB promptly regarding any of the following:

(1) Any additions or changes in procedures you might wish for your study (additions or changes must be approved by the IRB before they are implemented)

(2) Any events that affect the safety or well-being of subjects

(3) Any modifications of your study or other responses that are necessitated by any events reported in (2).

(4) To continue your research beyond the approval expiration date of 9/21/21 you must file additional information to be considered for continuing review. Please contact instreviewboard@calu.edu. Please notify the Board when data collection is complete.

Regards,

Melissa Sovak, Ph.D.

Chair, Institutional Review Board

Appendix B

Parent/Guardian Survey

1. Duquesne is planning on bringing back the 7th and 8th graders and only have one transition to 9th grade to East Allegheny or West Mifflin. Do you feel that this is best for our school?

   ○ Yes

   ○ No

   ○ Not sure yet

2. When the 7th and 8th graders return, some of the athletics will also return; football, volleyball and both boys and girls basketball. Would you help out in some capacity to support the students (i.e. Coach, run the concession stand, run the clocks, etc...)?

   ○ Yes

   ○ No

   ○ Not sure yet

3. Academics are the driving force to a successful student. How confident are you that Duquesne is challenging yet supporting the students academically?

   ○ Very confident

   ○ Confident

   ○ Neutral

   ○ Somewhat confident

   ○ Not confident

   ○ What are your recommendations?

   ○ Other...

4. A PreK-8 education model will provide the students with the same resources throughout their time at Duquesne (Restorative Practices, Counselors, continuous curriculum, iPads or ChromeBooks, etc...). Is there a resource that we are missing that you think we should add or look to add?

○ Yes

○ No

○ Not sure yet

○ Other...

5. In a few words, what would be the one thing that Duquesne could do to make the education better for our students?

Appendix C

Teacher and Staff Survey

1. Duquesne is planning on bringing back the 7th and 8th graders and only have one transition to 9th grade to East Allegheny or West Mifflin. Do you feel that this is best for our school?

   ◯ Yes

   ◯ No

   ◯ Not sure yet

2. When the 7th and 8th graders return, some of the athletics will also return; football, volleyball and both boys and girls basketball. Would you help out in some capacity to support the students (i.e. Coach, run the concession stand, run the clocks, etc...)?

   ◯ Yes

   ◯ No

   ◯ Not sure yet

3. Academics are the driving force to a successful student. How confident are you that Duquesne is challenging yet supporting the students academically?

   ◯ Very confident

   ◯ Confident

   ◯ Neutral

   ◯ Somewhat confident

   ◯ Not confident

   ◯ What are your recommendations?

   ◯ Other...

4. A PreK-8 education model will provide the students with the same resources throughout their time at Duquesne (Restorative Practices, Counselors, continuous curriculum, iPads or ChromeBooks, etc...). Is there a resource that we are missing that you think we should add or look to add?

◯ Yes

◯ No

◯ Not sure yet

◯ Other...

5. In a few words, what would be the one thing that Duquesne could do to make the education better for our students

Appendix D

Community Member Interview Questions

1. In what ways do you feel that the district and the community can work together to support bring back the 7th and 8th graders?

2. How could the school district support the Duquesne Community at large, specifically with the 7th and 8th graders?

3. What services are available to the students of Duquesne? How would they know and access them?

4. Is there someone else that the school district should contact to help identify ways that they could work with the community?

5. Do you have any questions for me?