

Resistance to School Consolidation in a Rural Appalachian Community

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Abstract

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School consolidation, which involves closing one or more schools and combining them into a single school, is a common phenomenon in rural Appalachian communities due to out-migration and lack of funding for public schools. When school consolidation occurs, the local school may be closed, or students from other communities may be bused to the school. Community residents, however, do not always agree with the decision to consolidate their local schools. When this disagreement occurs, residents may choose to participate in organized resistance activities to show their opposition, make their voices heard to local politicians and the media, and seek an alternative to the proposed consolidation.

This case study of school consolidation in one rural Appalachian county seeks to document and analyze the struggle in which community residents engaged in an effort to prevent local schools from being consolidated. Data was collected in the form of semi-structured interviews conducted with members and sympathizers of a resistance organization called TOPS. TOPS was formed in 2001 to oppose school consolidation, but its members were not successful in keeping their local schools open. Many schools in McDowell County have been consolidated or are scheduled to be consolidated in the near future. For example, Big Creek High School, which was at the center of many consolidation debates, will be closed in 2010. Its students will be bused to a new, consolidated high school.

I conducted interviews during fall 2006 and spring 2007 to determine community members' grievances concerning consolidation, to establish a narrative of their struggle against state government officials, and to provide a basis for analyzing the movement's failure to achieve its goals. I used these interviews, along with TOPS' documents, local newspaper articles, and literature from other anti-consolidation efforts, to examine possible reasons why TOPS was not successful. Social movements literature, particularly the concepts of framing and repertoires of contention, formed the theoretical basis of this analysis.

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Introduction

“Big Creek High School? It is a physical structure that epitomizes hope, and unlimited horizons. It is what education is supposed to be for all people. And it hurt incredibly. It is hard to describe how it hurt my heart and my soul the first time I passed that the school and watched them destroy the football field so they could build the new pre-K through eight elementary school there. One of the first times I passed this, I had to stop my car. It was so hurtful. And just talking at the grocery store, how many people said that was true. It is one of the things, one of the few things in this community that we hold dear to our hearts and souls and it’s being destroyed. It’s a sad and terrible thing.”

--Franki Patton-Rutherford

The local, rural school is not simply a building, a brick or wooden edifice nestled into the West Virginia mountains. To residents of McDowell County, the school is much more. It is a place where one can feel connected to generations of ancestors and neighbors who walked the halls that today’s students now tread. It is an invitation for parents to play an active role in their children’s educational and extracurricular pursuits. It is a chance to be treated as an individual, not as a number. It is a sanctuary of hope, possibilities, and dreams for future generations. But most importantly, the local school is an opportunity for children to receive a quality education in their own communities, with no need to endure long bus rides across the winding mountain roads.

For the residents of McDowell County, the proposed consolidation of several schools represented a threat to all of these benefits of the small, local school. If schools were consolidated, the community members argued, children would be subjected to long bus rides across narrow, dangerous mountain roads to attend a large school far from their homes. Moreover, children would not receive the degree of individualized attention from teachers in a large school that they had received from the smaller schools' teachers. Many students would not have the opportunity to participate in extracurricular activities, and their parents could not be involved in school functions, because the length of time

required to travel to the new school would make it difficult for working parents to attend meetings or transport their children home from after-school practices. The community itself would lose a gathering place where people could come together to interact with neighbors and watch local children compete in athletics--a loss that would also be felt by local businesses, which were supported by attendees of these events.

In this thesis, I will present a narrative of the actions of TOPS, a social movement organization that formed in opposition to consolidation, and I will examine two aspects of the anti-consolidation movement in McDowell County: strategies and tactics, and framing. These factors are integral to any social movement and play a role in determining the movement's success. A discussion of the framing process and strategy/tactics used by the movement, therefore, will illuminate possible reasons for the movement's failure. For example, the movement's frame does not appear to have resonated with older individuals, limiting TOPS' membership and recruiting capabilities. The tactics they chose, meanwhile, were not sufficient to cause the state to give the People's Plan—TOPS' proposed alternative to the state's consolidation plan—serious consideration.

Background

“We don’t have a movie theater, we don’t have a mall, we don’t have these things. Things that involve our community, and pull our community together, involve the school. It’s basketball games, football games, it’s things that revolve around the school. So when they take the school out, they’ve taken the heart out of this community.”

--Marsha Timpson

School consolidation is the combining of two or more schools, often due to lack of funding. The process involves the closing of at least one school and busing of displaced students to a school in another community. In McDowell County, for example, Big Creek High School and Iaeger High School (among others) are to be closed, with the students from both schools being bused to a new school located in Bradshaw. Consolidation may mean that students no longer attend schools located near their homes; instead, they often attend larger schools that serve more students. Financial concerns are often cited as a reason for consolidating schools. Operating fewer buildings and employing fewer personnel are seen as ways to decrease the school system's expenditures and balance budgets. Residents of the communities served by the schools in question, however, do not necessarily agree with the decision to consolidate. This was the case for many people in McDowell County.

McDowell County, with a population of just under 24,000 (2006 estimate), is the southernmost county in West Virginia. The county's population has been steadily declining since 1950, due largely to a loss of jobs resulting from the mechanization of the coal mining industry (Myers). According to US Census data, 33% of people in McDowell County lived in poverty in 2004, giving this county the highest percentage of people living below poverty level of any county in West Virginia (SAIPE: West Virginia, 2004). Thousands of people have moved out of McDowell County in search of employment and opportunity. As a result, the population of school-aged children and the amount of tax dollars available to support local schools have also decreased. School consolidation has been proposed and/or implemented as a way to reduce the number of

schools in operation in the county, in response to declining population and smaller budgets.

Driving through McDowell County, the impact of coal mining is clear. Strip mine sites can be seen from several angles along the road to War and Caretta. Mountaintop removal mining, a controversial form of coal mining in which the earth on top of a mountain is removed and dumped into surrounding valleys, also takes place in the county. Much of the land in McDowell County—approximately 85%, according to Big Creek People in Action’s statistics—is controlled by absentee landowners.

During the first two years in which the anti-consolidation debates occurred, the county was struck by two major floods. Erosion due to mining and logging practices were seen as likely contributors to these floods. These floods, as well as the shrinking population and rising levels of unemployment created by changes in the coal industry, affected residents' abilities to participate in anti-consolidation efforts. Individuals who had been affected by floods, or those who were unemployed or had to commute long distances to work, were unlikely to have time and/or financial resources to contribute to anti-consolidation efforts.

History of School Consolidation in McDowell County

“I think, to me, what was of paramount importance to Big Creek People in Action was that if you’re talking about education the emphasis should be on quality.”

--Frederic Torimiro

In 2001, a West Virginia Department of Education inspection of McDowell County’s schools found 260 violations of state educational laws and regulations, including buildings in poor conditions and shortages of qualified staff (Office of Education Performance Audits 2006). Under West Virginia state law, the Department of Education has the authority to seize control of a county’s school system if the Department of Education rules that the county Board of Education is not making progress in correcting problems found during such an inspection (West Virginia Code §18-2E-5:n).

Consequently, the State of West Virginia seized control of the McDowell County educational system in late 2001. Citing a number of violations pertaining to the physical condition and staffing of schools, the state appointed Dr. Mark Manchin as superintendent of the McDowell County Board of Education. Soon after his appointment as superintendent, Dr. Manchin conducted a review of the educational facilities in McDowell County and recommended the closure and consolidation of a number of schools, including several elementary and middle schools, as well as two of the county's three high schools.

Most residents of McDowell County were in opposition to the proposed consolidation plan. Some groups of people of McDowell County came together to show their opposition and to prevent Dr. Manchin's plan from being implemented. One of the groups that formed in opposition to consolidation was TOPS (Teachers, Parents, Students, and Others), which was led by Franki Patton-Rutherford, Executive Director of Big Creek People in Action; Tom Hatcher, Mayor of the Town of War; and Marsha Timpson, a staff member at Big Creek People in Action. TOPS members created a new educational plan, entitled the "People's Plan for Excellence in Education". The "People's Plan," as it was known by its supporters, emphasized the people's desire to provide

children with high-quality educational opportunities in schools located in the students' home communities. In addition to the People's Plan, TOPS and other parties sued the state Board of Education, but were unsuccessful in court.

While the consolidation debates were taking place, the McDowell County Board of Education was effectively powerless. The power to consolidate the schools lay with Manchin and the state Board of Education. As Franki noted, past anti-consolidation efforts that targeted the local Board of Education were consistently successful, but when power (and the target of the movement) shifted to the state level, grassroots resistance had never been able to prevent consolidation. In the case of the Big Creek-Iaeger consolidation, the school board was asked to vote once, on a proposition that would have provided several million dollars in funding to build consolidated schools in return for enabling the consolidated high school to be built on school-board-owned land in Bradshaw. When the board rejected the motion, legislation was quickly passed to allow the state to take over the land in question.

A timeline of the events leading up to and following the state's decision to consolidate many schools in McDowell County is available in Appendix 1. This timeline summarizes the events presented in this chapter.

Consolidation of the McDowell County schools is currently proceeding according to the plan created by Manchin and the West Virginia Board of Education. Several schools have already been closed; others will be closed in the near future; and construction is underway on new, consolidated schools. Appendix 2 lists the existing and proposed schools in McDowell County and gives the outcome of each school by 2010. Existing schools are denoted as either "closed" or "remains in operation," and proposed schools are listed along with the communities they will serve.

Methods

“The town dies to a great extent when your high school or your elementary school is closed. That’s our challenge. Our challenge here is to make sure that this town does not die simply because the high school has been closed.”

--Tom Hatcher

Despite the efforts of the residents of McDowell County, the West Virginia Department of Education ultimately approved Dr. Manchin’s original plan, and consolidation is currently proceeding according to that plan. Why did the people’s efforts to prevent consolidation fail? To answer this question, I collected data in the form of interviews with members of the resistance organization TOPS and with other individuals involved in the McDowell County consolidation debate. These people represented several communities and varying roles in resistance efforts. During the interviews, participants were asked to describe their roles in the anti-consolidation movement, as well as their personal connections to the schools in question. These semi-structured interviews lasted approximately 90 minutes each and took place during the fall 2006 and spring 2007 semesters. Many interview participants were eager to begin speaking as soon as the interview began, and this was encouraged provided that, at some point, relevant pre-determined questions were answered. I believed that it was important to allow interview participants to speak about topics they felt were important, rather than adhering strictly to a list of questions.

I used a snowball sampling technique to identify individuals to interview. I had met Marsha (and briefly met Franki) during my prior service-learning experiences with Big Creek People in Action. While on a volunteer trip to McDowell County, Marsha spoke to our group about the anti-consolidation efforts and the impact that she felt consolidation would have on her community.

As an Appalachian native with ancestral connections to McDowell County, I was intrigued by her story. I had never lived in McDowell County, and I had rarely visited the county before beginning my study. However, my maternal grandparents were born in

McDowell County and lived there until several years after their marriage, when they moved to Virginia. My heritage probably made it easier for me to gain entree into communities in McDowell County, because I was able to “talk kin”—discussing who my ancestors were and even where their graves were located—with people in the community. I grew up in a small town in Virginia, about a half hour’s drive from Big Creek People in Action. My community had also fought (unsuccessfully) to prevent its schools from being consolidated, so I wanted to know more about the efforts of the people of McDowell County.

Since I had learned about TOPS from Marsha, she was the first potential interview participant I contacted. After her interview, I asked her to recommend others with whom I could also speak. This snowball sampling technique allowed me to gain entrée into McDowell County through an organization with which I was already familiar—Big Creek People in Action. I interviewed six people for this study.

While reading interview transcripts, it became clear to me that there were two distinct activities taking place: meetings of TOPS, which included writing the People’s Plan, recruiting new members, and attending school closure hearings to present the People’s Plan and give speeches supporting TOPS’ views; and the lawsuit against the state Board of Education. It appeared that most people who were involved in one activity were not involved in the other, with the exception of Franki, Tom, and perhaps a few others. The lawsuit was part of TOPS’ strategy and operated as a function of TOPS, but very few members of TOPS participated in it (even though TOPS was named as a co-plaintiff). Tom, for example, was more involved in the lawsuit than in the writing of the People’s Plan, while Marsha contributed a great deal to TOPS and the People’s Plan but had little experience with the lawsuit. Because these two activities were separate yet linked, I felt it was appropriate to include separate sections in this thesis devoted to each activity.

Additionally, I examined documents relevant to the movement, such as the People's Plan, newspaper clippings, and court proceedings. Many of these documents were generously provided to me by my interview participants; others were found in online archives of the Bluefield Daily Telegraph, a newspaper that serves southern West Virginia; and some were publications provided by Challenge West Virginia, a small-

school advocacy organization. Analysis of these written records, combined with transcripts of interviews with movement leaders and participants, provided a more complete picture of the actions of TOPS in attempting to prevent the closure and consolidation of their local schools.

Literature Review

“When we had the schoolhouse we were forever having singing, plays, or people came from other places with something. [...] We could have suppers. We had a real nice cafeteria and big lunch room they would let us use. I miss the school worse than anything because it [consolidation] took away so many things from us. It took away a place to have anything and it caused people to move away”

--Geneva Waller, It Comes From the People

In this literature review, I will discuss collective identity in Appalachia and the role of the school in creating collective identity, which is necessary for social movement formation. In McDowell County, of course, education—specifically the local, community school—was the primary focus of this social movement. I will then discuss movement dynamics and power structures unique to Appalachia, and I will end with a review of framing and strategies/tactics in social movements.

Sense of Place and Community Identity

“Appalachia is that somewhat mythical region with no recognized boundaries. If such an area exists in terms of geography, such a domain as has shaped the lives and endeavors of men and women from pioneer days to the present and given them an independence and an outlook and a vision such as is often attributed to them, I trust to be understood for imagining the heart of it to be in the hills of eastern Kentucky where I have lived and called my home and where I have exercised as much freedom and peace as the world allows” (Still 1986).

As shown by James Still’s thoughts about his home in the Appalachian region, place plays an important role in shaping Appalachian people’s sense of self-identity. “Place” may be a geographic location, such as a particular town, or a physical location, such as the local school. Since place is so important in Appalachia, sharing a common place, along with sharing social institutions, aids in developing community identity (Hinsdale, Lewis et al. 1995). This shared place gives residents a community center in

which to reinforce existing social bonds and create new ones. According to Oldenburg, there are “three realms of experience”: domestic life, work life, and social life (Oldenburg 1999). As a gathering place, the school fulfills the function of providing a location for the third realm of experience.

Role of the School in Shaping Community Identity

Small, local public schools in Appalachia tend to serve as more than simply educational institutions. They are also places that link together the students, teachers, and adult community members (DeYoung 2002). Multiple generations of community members may have attended the same school, perhaps being taught by the same teachers, and teachers may have social relationships with their students outside the school. The school building itself may be used for social events such as parties, meetings, or receptions. These functions of the rural school lead DeYoung to refer to it as a “community center”.

When the school is threatened by consolidation, community residents may become consciously aware of the importance of the school in community identity. Geneva Waller’s sentiments in this section’s opening quote echo DeYoung’s assertion that the school is a community center. When the school was closed in her community of Ivanhoe, Virginia, Waller understood that closing the school had a negative impact on the ability of community members to hold social events and reinforce community identity. School consolidation inevitably raises questions of whether the school should be seen primarily as a gathering place or as an educational institution (DeYoung 1995).

Collective Identity in a Social Movement

Collective identity is a process by which individuals create frameworks with which to think about action, build relationships among actors, and create emotional bonds to the movement and one another (Melucci 1989). Collective identity is found even in less structured forms of collective action. Likewise, lack of collective identity can contribute to a lack of mobilization. Did collective identity exist among members of TOPS? TOPS held meetings in many communities affected by consolidation, but this may have allowed few opportunities for participants from different communities to meet

one another. For example, a community member who attended a meeting in Berwind may not have had an opportunity to meet people who attended a meeting in Jaeger. If participants did not have the opportunity to form relationships and emotional bonds with one another, mobilization efforts may have been hindered.

Was TOPS a Social Movement Organization?

One conspicuous difference between TOPS and conventional examples of social movements is the lack of non-institutionalized forms of protest by TOPS members. The organization discussed these methods, but decided against their use. Instead, members chose to use more institutionalized activities, such as speaking at public hearings and pursuing a lawsuit against the state Board of Education. Given this discrepancy between TOPS and traditional social movement organizations, can the anti-consolidation action in McDowell County be considered a social movement?

According to Goldberg (2), “a social movement is a formally organized group that acts consciously and with some continuity to promote or resist change through collective action.” TOPS appears to have been formally organized, with regular meetings, a basic “chapter” system in which meetings were held in multiple communities to make the organization more accessible to a larger number of people, and a leadership structure in which a few individuals were particularly responsible for creating and managing the group. TOPS acted consciously because it had a written statement of its goals, entitled “People’s Plan for Excellence in Education.” The group may not completely fit Goldberg’s description of “continuity,” because it does not appear that formal membership in TOPS was possible, but the group did persist and remain active until the decision to consolidate was made. TOPS clearly was formed to “resist change,” namely, a change in the structure of the county school system, and it participated in collective action in the form of making speeches, distributing petitions, hiring a lawyer, and distributing literature informing others about school consolidation.

McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly define “contentious politics” as “episodic, public, collective interaction among makers of claims and their objects when (a) at least one government is a claimant, an object of claims, or a party to a claim, and (b) the claims would, if realized, affect the interests of at least one of the claimants” (5). There are, in

this case, quite a number of claims being made. On the side of the state Board of Education, there is the claim that the McDowell County schools do not meet regulations, that the state has the authority to take over and control the schools, and that the state has the authority to consolidate the schools. Residents of McDowell County, however, argued that there were multiple reasons why the schools should not be consolidated, that the state should not have the authority to consolidate the schools without consulting local people, and that the voices of McDowell County residents who opposed consolidation were unfairly silenced.

TOPS, therefore, had some of the foundations of a social movement, but very little mobilization actually took place. No non-institutionalized forms of protest were used, and TOPS' efforts were generally limited to the lawsuit and to presenting the People's Plan at closure hearings. Additionally, after the lawsuit was decided, the leaders of TOPS did not pursue the matter further. TOPS, then, was a relatively short-term resistance effort using institutionalized means of protest. It was not a full social movement, but it did have many of the basic elements of a movement. Why did a movement not emerge from TOPS' efforts?

Barriers to Mobilization in Appalachia

“The ‘social movement’ that has risen in Appalachia more closely resembles a coalition, a loose alliance, a network of disparate groups, leaders, followers, and tendencies—a movement of movements. It has focused on single issues and addressed complex, interlocking sets of issues; it has battled powerful and shifting targets; it has sought to relate short-term victories to long-term change; and it has uncovered connections between local problems and national and global crises” (Glen 1993).

One explanation of the limits of TOPS' mobilization may lie in the unequal division of power between McDowell County residents and representatives of the West Virginia Department of Education. According to Gaventa's “rule of anticipated reactions,” in which a powerless actor does not challenge a powerful actor for fear that

the powerful actor may respond by invoking sanctions against the powerless (Gaventa 15). This sentiment has been echoed thus far in anecdotal accounts of McDowell County Board of Education employees who feared loss of their jobs should they speak out about consolidation. More generally, TOPS members decided that they did not want to be seen as “uncontrolled citizens” (Timpson), and they felt that the organization would be labeled as such by its targets if non-institutionalized forms of protest were used to oppose consolidation.

A pattern of continual defeat of the powerless by the powerful may also lead to non-action (16). In McDowell County, school consolidation has taken place in the past. A series of unsuccessful attempts at resisting school consolidation may have led to a sense of fatalism among McDowell County residents, resulting in a lack of action against later consolidations despite anti-consolidation sentiments among many members of the community.

Social movement framing

Framing is the process by which participants in a movement articulate the movement's goals and objectives and present the movement to others. Movement leaders and members make conscious decisions on how they should portray the movement to targets, potential members, and others. Frames are generally chosen to portray the movement in an attractive light or to make the movement's arguments sound as convincing as possible. A well-chosen frame can help a movement recruit members and achieve its goals, while a poorly chosen frame can hinder the movement or contribute to its demise.

According to Snow and Benford (1988), framing is composed of three tasks: diagnostic framing, which explains the problem at hand (and why it is a problem); prognostic framing, which offers a solution to the problem; and motivational framing, which attempts to persuade people to join the movement to solve the problem (Noakes and Johnston). Frames must also be resonant; that is, potential movement participants must identify with the frame and find its arguments compelling.

There are six factors listed by Snow and Benford (1992) that contribute to frame resonance:

- frame consistency (the frame’s values, tactics, etc. fit logically together),
- empirical credibility (the frame is consistent with the audience’s worldview),
- credibility of frame promoters (the frame is “pitched” to potential members by credible speakers),
- experiential commensurability (the frame is consistent with the audience’s everyday experiences),
- centrality (the frame’s core values and beliefs are important to the targets’ lives), and
- narrative fidelity (the frame matches the target’s culture and basic assumptions).

A lack of frame resonance may hinder movement recruitment, because potential members will not identify with the movement’s goals and values.

Successful frames should be grounded in their society’s culture and values (Zald 266). For example, McDowell County is a rural area with high rates of poverty. The decline of coal-related careers had led to a relative scarcity of jobs, but many residents of the county are eager to see some sort of economic development that would provide jobs for McDowell County residents. Education is viewed as an opportunity for future generations to escape poverty and make better lives for themselves, whether they choose to live and work in McDowell County or to move elsewhere. Consolidation can be seen as affecting McDowell County on multiple levels: the local school is seen as providing a good education for children, but it also provides economic support for local businesses and jobs for community members. Residents of McDowell County value both education and economic development highly, so a movement frame could be strengthened by emphasizing both values.

Strategies and Tactics

Strategies and tactics, or “repertoires of contention,” describe the set of actions that a movement chooses to use in attempting to achieve its goals. Repertoires of contention are well-defined subsets of all actions that a movement could theoretically use. (Tilly 131). By choosing certain actions to use, a movement necessarily constrains

itself; for example, a choice to use only nonviolent actions places constraints on “when, where, and how effectively a group of actors can act” (Tilly 131).

A strategy is a movement’s general plan of action; the strategy outlines the ways in which the movement will convert resources into action. Tactics are the specific actions used by the movement (class notes). In the case of TOPS, for example, the strategy included using institutionalized, non-protest forms of contention; presenting an alternative to the state’s consolidation plan in hopes that this alternative plan would be accepted by the state; and using nonviolent, legally accepted forms of action. Specific tactics included the creation of the People’s Plan and the lawsuit filed against the state.

A successful strategy promotes the movement’s goals (class notes). Among the goals of TOPS were recruitment of new members (which included persuading community residents to attend public meetings of TOPS), retention of small, local schools wherever possible, and increased community and parental involvement in children’s education. The strategy of presenting an alternative educational plan, for example, was intended to promote the goals of retaining local schools and increasing involvement in education.

Summary

TOPS is an example of a potential movement that did not become a true social movement and did not reach its stated goal of preventing the closure of small, local schools. It had many of the elements of a movement: a written strategy that focused on resisting change, definite tactics that were agreed upon by members, a consciously chosen frame, and formal meetings. Why did TOPS not become a social movement or attain its goals? In the remaining chapters, I will describe the activities of TOPS, and then take a closer look at its framing and repertoires of contention to provide possible answers to this question.

TOPS: Teachers, Parents, Students, and Others

“We felt that we were all in this battle together. The more we were, the stronger we were.”

--Marsha Timpson

TOPS held a series of widely-publicized meetings throughout southern McDowell County. Flyers were distributed, announcements were posted on public access television and in local newspapers, and word-of-mouth helped in encouraging community members to attend these meetings. An approximate total of 500 people came to the public meetings held by TOPS. The TOPS members I interviewed saw this number as both an accomplishment (Marsha said, "There were over 500 community residents [who] turned out for these meetings.") and a shortcoming ("I would say probably no more than 500, throughout the county," said Tom). Marsha described members of TOPS as representing many walks of life: "people that were on welfare checks", "teachers that were brave enough to come forward", faculty from three colleges, bus drivers, mayors of several towns, local businesspeople, nurses, coal miners, high school and college students. Tom, however, expressed disappointment that more people did not participate in TOPS.

There was a consensus, however, that recruitment of new members was a source of frustration for TOPS. School personnel were often hesitant to come to community meetings for fear of retribution should their attendance be discovered by their supervisors. Many community members who did not have school-aged children were not interested in participating in TOPS. According to Franki, although anti-consolidation sentiment was widespread throughout the affected communities, individuals frequently expressed a belief that it was useless to fight against the Board of Education. Few of the participants in TOPS' public meetings chose to attend the school closure hearings that the Board of Education was required to hold. When Franki asked participants why they did not attend, she found that they "knew it was useless to present it [the People's Plan] to the state Board of Education."

TOPS did not frame its actions as necessarily being in opposition to consolidation. Rather, members stressed that their primary concern was to provide a

high-quality education for local schoolchildren. Among the factors they listed as being crucial to the quality of education were small, local schools; shorter school bus rides; involvement by parents and community members in schools; public accountability for schools; and new educational programs that emphasized academics, vocational/technical training, and community outreach (People's Plan, p. ii). Therefore, the members of TOPS believed that school consolidation was not conducive to providing high-quality educational opportunities because children could be subjected to longer school bus rides and more crowded classrooms than they would if they were educated closer to home.

The People's Plan for Excellence in Education

"We posed two questions to the folks who were there. Physically where do you want your children to go to school? And what do you want them to learn when they get there?"

--Franki Patton-Rutherford

At community meetings, TOPS members were asked two questions: where should children attend school, and what should they be taught? Based upon answers to these questions, TOPS members created the People's Plan. The People's Plan was a document that outlined TOPS members' views of how to provide a high-quality education, and it was presented as a series of modifications and additions to the Comprehensive Educational Facilities Plan (CEFP) submitted by Manchin. Because consolidation was seen by members as being detrimental to educational quality, the People's Plan was presented as an alternative to the proposed consolidation.

The People's Plan states that small, local schools are seen as beneficial to children in this impoverished county. Small schools, claimed the authors of the Plan, "help to break the cycle of poverty in rural areas and increase opportunities for the success of students during the educational process" (p. i, People's Plan). One of the reasons that the members of TOPS chose to focus upon small schools, therefore, was that they believed the local school provided a better education for children than did a centralized school, and they felt that this improved education would help future generations of McDowell County citizens escape the cycle of poverty.

The People's Plan does not deny that many schools in McDowell County were in poor physical condition; in fact, the Plan concurs with the state's decision of closing some schools, particularly elementary schools that were old, in severe disrepair, and/or inefficient to operate. However, the Plan recommends school construction and renovation plans that would allow students to attend schools relatively near their homes. Manchin's CEFP, meanwhile, advocated larger, centralized schools. Interestingly, the authors of the People's Plan endorsed a view that separate, freestanding middle schools (housing grades 6-8) were not needed in McDowell County, and suggested doing away

with these schools altogether. Children who would have attended middle schools would instead be divided by grade level, with younger students attending local elementary schools and older students attending local high schools. Freestanding adult and technical education centers were also eliminated in the People's Plan by combining these centers into high schools. By eliminating middle schools, adult education centers, and vocational/technical centers, the People's Plan advocated building and maintaining fewer school buildings than did the state's plan. Under the People's Plan, there would have been eleven operational schools in McDowell County, with five of those being newly constructed. The original CEFP submitted by Manchin (which was later modified) endorsed the operation of seventeen schools in the county, with seven being new buildings.

Additionally, as part of its commitment to relieving poverty in McDowell County, TOPS included in the People's Plan pre-K, vocational, and adult education programs. The pre-K and adult educational programs were to be housed in existing schools, and members of TOPS viewed these programs as essential to the well-being of the community. The Plan advocated a restructuring of vocational and technical training to include high-tech and entrepreneurial courses in addition to more traditional courses such as "carpentry, auto mechanics, [and] cosmetology" (People's Plan p. 67).

The People's Plan was a cornerstone of TOPS' efforts to oppose consolidation. It was created by community members and outlined their vision of education in their communities. However, the Plan was rejected outright by the state. Marsha Timpson stated that the Board of Education did not consider the Plan at all. In a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy, many members of TOPS refused to attend state-mandated public closure hearings held by the Board of Education, feeling that presenting the Plan to the state was "useless".

Suing the State

“This is still a democracy. The citizens of McDowell County surely retain the right of self-determination with regards to a decision having such dramatic and long-term impacts—the decision whether to close a community’s school.”

--Robert Bastress

In addition to the People’s Plan, a lawsuit was filed against the State Superintendent of Schools, the West Virginia State Board of Education, and Mark Manchin as the Superintendent of McDowell County Schools, on behalf of TOPS, the mayors of local towns (including Tom Hatcher of War), some individual citizens, and other groups. The lawsuit alleged that the state Board of Education had violated their rights under the constitution of West Virginia. Their state's constitution, they argued, mandated elected local school board officials. Because the elected McDowell County school board did not have authority under Manchin, the state-appointed superintendent of schools, the plaintiffs in the lawsuit argued that the citizens of McDowell County were denied the right to have democratically-elected officials vote on the closure of Big Creek High School.

The local school board had been essentially powerless during the time the controversy over consolidation was taking place. The Board was given only one vote, on whether to accept approximately \$53 million in federal and state funding for new, consolidated schools in exchange for giving Manchin and the state control over McDowell County Board of Education property. Specifically, Manchin needed the Board to cede land near Bradshaw to him so he could turn it over to the Army Corps of Engineers as a site for the new consolidated high school (Patton-Rutherford). In a vote that caused much controversy, the Board voted against the proposal (“School plan’s fate unclear”). Upon hearing of this vote, Manchin appealed to the state legislature (“For the children of McDowell”). The governor of West Virginia soon signed an emergency resolution to give control of the local Board of Education's property to the state Board of

Education, effectively nullifying the local board's vote (“State school board clears way for McDowell construction contract”).

The final ruling in this case was for the defendants, on the grounds that the West Virginia State Board of Education had ultimate authority over schools in the state, and consolidation was allowed to proceed. TOPS and other plaintiffs chose not to appeal the judge’s decision, effectively bringing to an end TOPS’ resistance efforts. According to Tom Hatcher, “We lost in court. There are still people here who talk about the fact that we still should mount a battle, and my point on that is it’s over with, the courts said you lose. You’ve lost. So we just have to move forward.”

Findings

“I think when you look back on it—and we kept saying this to ourselves—that it was probably better to fight than to not fight. Because I think that it made the fight itself, the opposition to that, certainly let the school board know that there were people here who were vitally interested in the school system and wanted the best school system for their children and their grandchildren. And that there were people in the county who had knowledge about education and certainly had ideas about education and what it should be.”

--Tom Hatcher

Clearly, the people of McDowell County and the officials who represented the State of West Virginia had very different ideas about how best to preserve and enhance the quality of education in McDowell County. The citizens of McDowell County believed that small, local schools were the best way to break the cycle of poverty; while Manchin and the Board of Education felt that new, centrally-located schools would provide the most effective and efficient means of education. The struggle in this situation, therefore, was to determine whose ideas would ultimately be implemented.

When asked whether TOPS considered holding protests, walkouts, or other non-institutionalized shows of resistance, Franki stated that these methods were not used by TOPS, but that she believed a statewide teacher's strike would have been the only effective option. Marsha and Tom also stated that TOPS had considered using non-institutionalized methods, but decided against these tactics. The reasons each interview participant gave for the nonuse of such tactics were unique. Marsha stated, “We did not want them to ever come back and say we were acting like a bunch of uncontrolled citizens,” suggesting that TOPS members may have chosen not to participate in public protest due to a fear of future repercussions from the state Board of Education. Many school personnel feared losing their jobs or being reassigned elsewhere in the county should they participate in anti-consolidation efforts. It is unclear whether this fear was grounded in a real danger of retribution; nevertheless, it prevented teachers and other employees of the school system from supporting TOPS' work publicly. Tom, however,

said that tactics such as protests or walkouts had been discussed, but that TOPS members felt they would not have been “effective,” while Franki stated, “We never tried to work outside the system because it would have been useless.”

Taken together, these responses seem to suggest not only a fear of backlash from movement targets, but also a sense of hopelessness as to the movement’s eventual success. Gaventa’s work suggests that this fear of sanctions, such as the negative outcomes that could result from being seen as “uncontrolled citizens” or the potential for school personnel lose their jobs or be transferred to less desirable jobs, is a result of the power exerted by the West Virginia State Board of Education and/or Superintendent Manchin over the residents of McDowell County. Both the McDowell County activists and the state officials clearly understood the unequal distribution of power between these groups. Many citizens of McDowell County viewed Manchin and the West Virginia Board of Education as unbeatable foes that had the power to impose negative sanctions upon those who argued against the state’s actions. The state officials, meanwhile, seemed to view the concerned citizens of McDowell County as trying to be overly involved in issues of educational policy. According to Frederic Torimiro’s account of one meeting between Manchin and community members,

“He [Manchin] wanted to make it clear that there’s nothing wrong with parents basically, to paraphrase him, baking cookies and becoming involved in those kind of things, bake sales and things of that sort. But on the real substantive issues they [the McDowell County activists] have no business. [...] He was referring to the people who have an intimate vested interest as ‘them,’ as ‘those people’.”

Gaventa also states that continual defeat can bring about feelings of hopeless in movement participants or potential participants. This may have been the case in McDowell County. According to Franki, “We’ve lost every consolidation battle for the last 25 years. Every one of them. When it gets beyond the local board, the local level, the state gets involved, people never win those battles. I don’t know one that they’ve won. Now sometimes they can postpone it a little bit but the board never gives up, they keep coming back, they win those battles every time.” Tom echoed this sentiment: “When you have a body out there that’s in total control, supported by the laws of the state of West Virginia, then it’s logical to assume that you’re going to lose the case. I felt we

were going to lose all the time. I felt it was necessary to do it, but I didn't think we would win it because the laws of the state were against us." These feelings of hopelessness could have contributed to the movement's difficulty in recruiting members—people might have had the belief that "you can't fight City Hall," and so chose not to participate in anti-consolidation efforts, despite being opposed to consolidation. The hopeless feelings are also a reflection of the imbalance of power between the state and the people. Many McDowell County residents who chose to fight did so with the belief that the state would ultimately win, but that the people of McDowell County should try to make their views known.

The unwillingness of some McDowell County citizens—particularly those employed in the school system—to publicly challenge the proposed consolidation plan is a reflection not only of the power wielded by the state, but also of the importance of kinship in McDowell County. People who worked in the school system may have been concerned for their own jobs and their ability to care for loved ones if they were fired, but even those who did not work in the schools were sometimes fearful for their loved ones' jobs. When I asked Franki Patton-Rutherford whether she had personal connections to Big Creek High School at the time of the anti-consolidation battle, she responded, "This community is so small that everybody knows everybody. Everybody is connected in different ways. So we were all connected in this work with that school. And the people from this district anyway, that was the school they graduated from, and their children and their grandchildren graduated from it. So we were all connected." Marsha Timpson added,

"One of our biggest employers in this county is the [local] Board of Education. So almost everybody had a cousin, an aunt, an uncle, a daughter, a son, that worked for the Board of Education. So they were afraid of fighting it because of the repercussions. They were afraid of the repercussions that could come back on their aunt, uncle, brother, son. Are they going to lose their jobs? Are they going to get a transfer into a crappy job?"

In addition to issues of power, the frame chosen by the leaders of TOPS could have alienated some community members or made them feel as if the group was not addressing their concerns. The stated goal of TOPS was to improve the quality of

education for children in McDowell County; however, many community members who did not have school-aged children were not interested in participating in TOPS because they did not have an interest in promoting this goal. This lack of frame resonance limited the number of potential members of TOPS. According to Tom,

“We realized that we did not have people who were willing to come out to meetings to meet and to support the issue. Now they supported the issue, but most of them from their living rooms. And I understood some of that because we’re talking about retired miners and their wives who said, when we were raising our children here we supported the school system and we did volunteer work with the school system and so forth. We’re now retired, our children are grown, they’re elsewhere, we’re not interested in coming out for a lot of meetings around any issue.”

Had TOPS also framed its opposition to consolidation in terms of additional arguments, such as economic impacts of closing local schools, individuals without school-aged children may have participated to a greater extent. Since both economic and educational advances were valued to members of the community, a frame that emphasized both the educational and economic benefits of the local school may have been more beneficial to member recruitment. Framing the organization's work in a way that appealed to a larger group of people might have helped to increase participation in TOPS. Additionally, extending the frame in a way that appealed to older individuals may have aided the creation of TOPS’ repertoire of contention. These older individuals might have provided knowledge and experience from previous resistance activities, such as coal miners’ strikes.

Although the frame chosen by TOPS did not include non-educational functions of the school, it is clear that the schools, particularly Big Creek High School, also held emotional value to the citizens of McDowell County. Franki’s and Marsha’s descriptions of Big Creek High School (see pages 6 and 8) show that the school was not just an educational institution; it was also a symbol of community. Franki also discussed the genealogical significance of Big Creek High School for her family:

“My mother was the first female ever to graduate from high school at Big Creek High School. I graduated in ‘67 and my daughter graduated from Big Creek high

school in 2003. [...] At that high school, they take photographs of the graduating classes and put them on the walls. And just through serendipity you walk down this hall and you see my mother, me, and my daughter right there together.”

Marsha spoke about the community’s response to the final homecoming football game at Big Creek High School:

“When they cut the lights out [on the football field after the game], they would not be turned back on. They would be tearing the field out, building the middle school there. [...] Well, Dr. Manchin and different ones said that it was sentimental hogwash, that people really didn’t care. People did care. If we had three or four hundred people turn out for a game, that’s a great turnout. [But] we had almost 5000 people come to this game. The class of 1957 chartered a bus and came in to that game. So people do have a very deep connection to that school.”

It is unclear why TOPS did not include non-education-related reasons for opposing consolidation in their framing. Franki stated, “It [the reason for opposing consolidation] wasn’t because we were so emotionally attached to these buildings.” However, the school certainly held many meanings for members of the McDowell County communities. Nevertheless, TOPS chose to frame its opposition in terms of what it believed to be the strongest argument against consolidation: preserving the quality of K-12 education.

TOPS attempted to remain within established channels of contention by pursuing a lawsuit against the Board of Education. The judge, however, ultimately ruled against TOPS and its co-plaintiffs. Filing of a lawsuit is a tactic that has been tried by other communities in their efforts to stop consolidation; however, it has not been successful. For example, concerned citizens in Pendleton County, West Virginia also filed a lawsuit against the state School Building Authority (SBA) to prevent consolidation of their school, Circleville School, with Franklin High School—approximately 17 miles away. That case was initially decided in favor of the citizens of Pendleton County, but was eventually overturned by the West Virginia State Supreme Court of Appeals because students at Circleville School were not being denied their right to an education (Spence 88). In the early 1990’s, parents in Logan County, West Virginia filed a similar suit to prevent consolidation after their school system had been taken over by the state; that case

was dismissed (Challenge 9/2002). Legal cases have seen some degree of success in other social movements—including in the case of *Pauley vs. Bailey*, which mandated standards for school buildings and curricula. However, lawsuits have not often been successful in preventing school consolidation.

Conclusion

“It’s not that we don’t care

We just know that the fight ain’t fair”

--John Mayer, “Waiting on the World to Change”

Frame extension, or the modification of the group's frame in order to appeal to more potential participants, could have been helpful to TOPS in its efforts to recruit more people. It is possible that the frame used by TOPS, which emphasized quality of education, did not resonate with people without young children. By broadening the frame to include additional concerns related to consolidation, such as its possible economic impacts, TOPS might have strengthened its appeals to people who were not directly connected to the school system. Residents who did not have school-aged children might have been convinced to speak out against consolidation had they been presented with more reasons to do so.

This history of failure in McDowell County—indeed, in several parts of West Virginia—when fighting against state authorities may have contributed to community members' sense of hopelessness and unwillingness to participate in anti-consolidation efforts. Community residents realized that in the past, efforts to fight the state's consolidation plans had been unsuccessful, and some reasoned that future efforts would also be unsuccessful. Residents of McDowell County who chose not to participate in TOPS seemed to believe that while consolidation was not desirable, the issue did not affect them personally and opposition efforts were unlikely to be successful.

The primary tactics used by TOPS were the creation of the People's Plan and the lawsuit against the state. The Plan, intended to provide an alternative to the state's consolidation plan, was the result of a combined effort on the parts of approximately 500 TOPS members. However, it was rejected by the state. The court case, which included among its plaintiffs TOPS, several cities in McDowell County, and multiple individuals, was also unsuccessful, and the plaintiffs chose not to appeal the ruling. Strategies and tactics that might have been seen as "unruly," such as public protests, were not used. However, the tactics that were used had little to no impact upon the movement's

targets—namely Dr. Manchin and the West Virginia Board of Education. TOPS' efforts did not prevent or significantly delay consolidation of McDowell County schools.

According to Franki, the most notable success TOPS experienced came later, in the form of legislation that would limit the length of time students are allowed to spend on school buses. This legislation is currently under consideration in the West Virginia Legislature, although Franki feels certain that it will pass.

Perhaps TOPS would have been more successful had it modified its strategy and used different tactics. The tactics used—the creation and presentation of the People's Plan, and the lawsuit against the state—seem to have done little to advance the organization's goals. Less institutionalized, "unruly" tactics might have caused the state to reconsider its consolidation plan. It seems, however, that overcoming feelings of fear and/or hopelessness would have been necessary before such tactics could have been used.

The example of TOPS shows that grievances and public involvement are necessary but not sufficient for the development of a successful social movement. Frames that are crafted with a wide array of potential members in mind and tactics that cause the movement's targets to take notice are among the elements of a successful movement that TOPS lacked. In addition, external factors such as a history of failure when fighting against the state contributed to an unwillingness of some community members to participate in resistance, despite their opposition to consolidation. While TOPS had some elements of a movement, it did not become a social movement, nor did it meet its stated goals.

Epilogue

Big Creek High School, the focus of much of the work of TOPS, is scheduled to close in spring 2010, and its students will be bused to the new consolidated school in Bradshaw, along with students from Iaeger High School. The community of War will lose a gathering place, a source of economic support, and a symbol of quality education—not to mention a local landmark, since Big Creek High School gained a bit of fame in the movie “October Sky” as the high school from which Homer Hickam and the other Rocket Boys graduated.

However, the citizens of McDowell County are working to ensure that the school building will be transformed into a new gathering place. The Big Creek High School building will be given to the City of War. “We intend to put a museum up there, and a hotel and a cultural center,” said Tom Hatcher. “We’re going to put a coal mining museum up there and a small motel. We’re going to do a cultural center in the auditorium that will celebrate the cultural arts that are in this area. We have even gotten a promise from the school system that they’ll leave everything in the building, including the photos and the memorabilia. So we’ll also take one floor, I think, and do a Big Creek High School museum for people that graduated from there.” Although the school may be gone, the people of McDowell County are still working to ensure that the building remains an asset to their community, providing tourism support to local businesses. The Big Creek High School building will no longer be a site of formal education, but it will serve to educate all who visit about the rich artistic heritage of McDowell County.

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Appendix 1: Timeline of Events

July 2001: Flood #1

October 2001: original state audit of county schools

November 2001: state seized control of McDowell County school system

December 2001: Manchin appointed superintendent, consolidation discussions began

January 2002: TOPS began holding public meetings

May 2002: Flood #2

August 16, 2002: lawsuit filed

February 2003: People's Plan completed; final TOPS meetings

Spring 2003: court case decided

April 16, 2003: West Virginia State Board of Education votes to consolidate Big Creek
and Iaeger High Schools

December 2003: Gary and Anawalt school closure hearings

January 2004: McDowell County Board of Education votes "no" on land/school funding
proposal; state passes legislation to take over future Bradshaw school site

February 2004: Switchback Elementary closed by unanimous vote

Nov-Dec 2005: follow up audit

January 2006: follow up audit

Spring 2006: Big Creek High School stadium demolished, consolidated
Berwind/Bartley/War Elementary School to be built on site of stadium

Spring 2010: Big Creek High School closes

Fall 2008: Consolidated Berwind/Bartley/War Elementary School opens

Fall 2010: New consolidated high school opens

Appendix 2: Proposed Outcomes of McDowell County Schools (by 2010)

School Name	Proposed Outcome (by 2010)
Anawalt Elementary School	Closed; students will attend Mount View Middle School and new elementary school
Bartley Elementary School	Closed; students will attend new school in War
Berwind Elementary School	Closed; students will attend new school in War
Big Creek High School	Closed; students will attend new school in Bradshaw
Bradshaw Elementary School	Remains in operation
Fall River Elementary School	Remains in operation
Gary Elementary School	Closed; students will attend Mount View Middle School and new elementary school
Iaeger Elementary School	Closed; students will attend new school in Iaeger
Iaeger High School	Closed; students will attend new school in Bradshaw
Kimball Elementary	Remains in operation
McDowell County Adult Learning Center	Remains in operation
McDowell County Vocational Technical Center	Remains in operation
Mount View Middle/High School	Remains in operation
Northfork Middle School	Closed due to flooding; students sent to Iaeger Middle School
Panther Elementary	Closed due to flooding; students sent to Iaeger Elementary
Sandy River Middle School	Remains in operation
Switchback Elementary School	Closed; students will attend Kimball Elementary
War Elementary School	Closed; students will attend new school in War
Welch Elementary School	Remains in operation
Welch Middle School	Closed due to flooding; students sent to Mount View Middle School
New middle school (Welch)	Will serve students from Welch and Northfork Middle Schools
New elementary school (Iaeger)	Will serve students from Iaeger and Panther Elementary Schools
New elementary school (War)	Will serve students from Bartley, Berwind, and War Elementary Schools
New elementary school (Anawalt/Gary)	Will serve students from Anawalt and Gary Elementary Schools
New middle school (War)	Will serve students from Bartley, Berwind, and War Elementary Schools
New high school (Bradshaw)	Will serve students from Iaeger and Big Creek High Schools