

Mount Rogers Combined School: The Experiences and Perspectives of Students and Staff When
a Community School Closed

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to document and examine the experiences and perspectives of students and staff who were affected by the closure of Mount Rogers Combined School in 2010. Mount Rogers Combined School was established in Grayson County, Virginia, by the concerted efforts of volunteers and community members who valued education and considered schooling a top priority for the area. The original four-room school was built of rocks and housed grades 1 through 11, taught by four teachers, one of whom also served as the principal (Grayson County School Board [GCSB], 1993). In 1990, it was the smallest school in the Commonwealth of Virginia (United States Department of Agriculture, 1990).

A review of early education in Virginia and early education in Grayson County is documented to place the study in historical context. A brief history of Grayson County is also included in this paper. The qualitative case study documents the experiences and perspectives of the students and staff who went through the school's closure. Both primary and secondary sources were used to complete the study including interviews of students and staff who worked at or attended the school, reviews of official records and documents found in archives, examination of personal manuscripts, inspection of artifacts, and study of general histories.

School divisions close and consolidate schools to improve instructional programs for students, offset student enrollment declines, provide adequate facilities for learning, and for economic savings. Communication, developing relationships, transportation, extracurricular activities and course offerings are variables that should be considered when planning a school closure. While transportation and changes in relationships are particular challenges, the overall benefits for former staff members include better access to more resources and professional development opportunities. Former students tend to adapt better than staff members when schools close due to more course offerings and access to a broader range of extracurricular activities. The findings are aligned with the literature that was reviewed for the study.

Dedication

To my mother, C. Linda Perkins

July 9, 1949-July 5, 2013

My mother was a warm, compassionate and vibrant woman who always went out of her way to help others. She was proud, dignified and she had a passion for life. She taught me many things as a young child—never quit, good manners, respect for others, and sound moral values. These values have made me who I am and without her guidance and persistence, this project would not have been possible. She led her life with her heart and with a lot of common sense. While she was always out there to help out, it came with the price of a long talk about being more responsible. As an adult she became my best friend, advisor and confidante. Her greatest quality was to encourage me to make the best of everything and to face problems head on. She was a proud woman who believed that there was no obstacle that couldn't be overcome. Mom always provided me with support, strength and comfort when times were tough. I will continue to draw strength from the things she taught me and live by her example. It was her inspiration that made this project possible.

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To my entire family, I appreciate the patience, encouragement and support you have given me during this process. After mom died, I was ready to give up. Thank you for not allowing me to do so. Dad and Mo, you were always a source of strength and motivation. You were always willing to lend a helping hand and a listening ear. Pete and Diane, you were always there to listen to the challenges that I was experiencing. Thanks for being good sounding boards. Bill and Fran, thank you for providing me with a place to rest my weary head after the countless trips to the mountain. Also, thank you for facilitating conversations and offering suggestions at every juncture. Naomi and Micah, thank you for making me take a break from research to have a little fun and be a kid again.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|------|
| ABSTRACT..... | ii |
| Dedication..... | iii |
| Acknowledgements..... | iv |
| List of Tables..... | viii |
| CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY..... | 1 |
| Purpose of the Study and Significance of the Topic..... | 2 |
| Definition of Terms..... | 3 |
| Literature Search..... | 4 |
| Organization of the Paper..... | 5 |
| CHAPTER 2 HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE STUDY..... | 6 |
| Education in Virginia Prior to 1932..... | 6 |
| The Literary Fund..... | 6 |
| Dr. Ruffner’s Election..... | 7 |
| The Early 1900s..... | 8 |
| History of Grayson County, Virginia..... | 10 |
| Early Education in Grayson County..... | 13 |
| 1830s..... | 14 |
| 1850s..... | 15 |
| 1860s..... | 16 |
| 1870s..... | 16 |
| 1880s..... | 17 |
| Late 1800s and early 1900s..... | 17 |
| Consolidation in the 1920s..... | 19 |
| CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY..... | 22 |
| Research Design..... | 22 |
| Data Sources..... | 23 |
| Participant Recruitment and Selection..... | 24 |
| The Participants..... | 25 |
| Interview Protocol..... | 28 |
| Data Analysis..... | 30 |
| Limitations and Delimitations..... | 32 |
| Institutional Review Board Approval..... | 33 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| CHAPTER 4 THE BEGINNING OF THE END | 35 |
| The Facility Study..... | 35 |
| The Closure Process..... | 41 |
| Construction begins | 45 |
| Construction falls behind schedule | 46 |
| Construction continues to fall behind schedule | 48 |
| Grand opening delayed | 49 |
| The protest continues | 50 |
| Construction delays school opening for all of Grayson County Public Schools | 51 |
| The voices of Mount Rogers Combined School..... | 51 |
| Student and Staff Perspectives of the Closure Process..... | 53 |
| Staff Perspectives of the Effects of the School Closure | 54 |
| Communication..... | 54 |
| Communication regarding construction issues | 57 |
| Communication regarding the elimination of high school classes | 57 |
| Colleague relationships..... | 59 |
| Emotional trauma..... | 60 |
| Student Perspectives of the Effects of the School Closure..... | 62 |
| Communication..... | 62 |
| Communication regarding the elimination of high school classes | 63 |
| Course offerings..... | 64 |
| Extracurricular activities..... | 68 |
| Transportation..... | 69 |
| Relationships..... | 70 |
| CHAPTER 5 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION | 74 |
| Credibility and Trust..... | 75 |
| Quality of Educational Opportunities | 78 |
| Community conflict | 82 |
| Conclusions..... | 85 |
| Recommendations for Future Research..... | 88 |
| Epilogue | 89 |
| References..... | 92 |
| APPENDIX A INITIAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR FORMER STAFF MEMBERS AT MOUNT ROGERS COMBINED SCHOOL..... | 102 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| APPENDIX B INITIAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR FORMER STUDENTS AT MOUNT ROGERS COMBINED SCHOOL | 104 |
| APPENDIX C INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR COMMUNITY MEMBERS | 106 |
| APPENDIX D CROSS REFERENCE OF RESEARCH QUESTIONS WITH INITIAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR PRIMARY PARTICIPANTS | 107 |
| APPENDIX E REVISED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR FORMER FACULTY MEMBERS AT MOUNT ROGERS COMBINED SCHOOL | 108 |
| APPENDIX F REVISED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR FORMER STUDENTS AT MOUNT ROGERS COMBINED SCHOOL..... | 110 |
| APPENDIX G REVISED CROSS REFERENCE MATRIX OF INTERVIEW QUESTIONS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS FOR PRIMARY PARTICIPANTS | 112 |
| APPENDIX H CERTIFICATE OF COMPLETION FOR TRAINING IN HUMAN SUBJECTS PROTECTION..... | 113 |
| APPENDIX I VIRGINIA POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE AND STATE UNIVERSITY INFORMED CONSENT FOR PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH PROJECTS INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS | 114 |
| APPENDIX J MOUNT ROGERS SOL DATA | 116 |
| APPENDIX K SCHOOL CLOSURE TIMELINE..... | 117 |
| APPENDIX L PHOTOS OF MOUNT ROGERS SCHOOL | 120 |

List of Tables

Table 1 *Grayson County Schools Facility – Base Plan* 36
Table 2 *Grayson County Schools Facility – Alternate Plan 1* 37
Table 3 *Grayson County Schools Facility – Alternate Plan 2* 38
Table 4 *Grayson County Schools Facility – Alternate Plan 3* 39
Table 5 *Grayson County Schools Facility – Alternate Plan 4* 40
Table 6 *School Closure Timeline* 117

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

When Mount Rogers Combined School was built in 1932, there were only four rooms built of rocks that were carried by horse and sled from the nearby creek bed. The school was built in the Whitetop community by volunteers and community members. The school was built between the two highest peaks in Virginia, Mount Rogers and Whitetop Mountain during the Great Depression (Dellinger, 1998).

Settled in the early 1800s, Whitetop was mainly a farming community with fertile lands producing large amounts of acorns and chestnuts to feed livestock (Graham, 1976). Whitetop became a bustling boom town because of the timber industry in the early 1900s. According to Graham (1976), in 1913, a railroad was built on Whitetop to transport lumber to Abingdon, Virginia, and West Jefferson, North Carolina. At the time, Whitetop was the highest point of the Virginia-Carolina Railway and the highest point of any railroad east of the Rocky Mountains (Stamper, 1976). At one time, there were as many as six trains running daily for timber freight, passenger transport, and mail delivery. During the 1930s, Whitetop had a bustling economy and had a large hotel, a lodge, and a dance hall (Graham, 1976).

When Mount Rogers Combined School opened in 1932, there were four teachers serving grades one through eleven. One of the teachers also served as the principal (Grayson County School Board [GCSB], 1993). The enrollment was between 80 and 100 students. In 1951, additional classrooms, a library, and a gymnasium were added to the existing facility. Soon after, a cafeteria and indoor plumbing were included in the renovations (GCSB, 1993). According to Dellinger, (1998), additional updates were made in 1978 and 1983.

During the 1970s and the early 1980s, Mount Rogers Combined School housed nearly 200 students. The school competed in varsity and junior varsity athletics and afforded students all of the opportunities that other schools in the commonwealth had to offer. During the late 1980s enrollment dwindled. In 1990, Mount Rogers was the smallest school in Virginia (United States Department of Agriculture, 1990). In 1993, the staff at Mount Rogers was reduced to 12 teachers one of whom also served as the librarian. Some of the teachers taught multiple grades and special education classes. The principal served as the school guidance counselor (GCSB, 1993). In 1997, a single student composed the entire senior class (Hauslohner, 1997). When the

doors of the school were closed in 2010, there were nine teachers serving 88 students according to the school's Virginia Department of Education School Report Card (2010).

Purpose of the Study and Significance of the Topic

There is no known formal historical record of student and staff experiences at Mount Rogers Combined School or their perspectives on the school's closure. What were the experiences of the students and staff who attended and worked at the school up to and during the closure? What events led to the eventual closure of Mount Rogers Combined School? What were the perceived effects of the school closure by students and staff? The purpose of the study was to document and examine the experiences and perspectives of students and staff who were affected by the closure of Mount Rogers Combined School in 2010. Much can be learned by providing a record of the closure of Mount Rogers Combined School by documenting the experiences and perspectives of its students and staff.

Research on rural schools and the communities that they serve has not received the attention that research on urban schools has garnered. Rural schools have challenges that are very different than urban or suburban schools. According to Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, and Dean (2005), due to rural schools' isolation and due to the small populations that they serve, research on rural schools is very limited. According to Link (1986), rural school history should be preserved because there is very little documented research due to regional characteristics and geographic isolation. Research on rural schools would benefit educators because many of the practices implemented in rural schools such as multigrade classrooms and creative scheduling, would be considered innovative in other settings (NEA, 2008). Many rural schools, including Mount Rogers Combined School, implemented those practices years ago due to the limited availability of resources.

Schools in rural areas are much more important to community viability than schools in urban or suburban areas (Arnold et al., 2005). According to Bard, Gardner, and Wieland, (2006), decisions about rural school closure must weigh the benefits of a more expansive curriculum and the economic savings with preserving the community. The research on rural school consolidation is lacking when it comes to how the consolidation affects students and staff (Kirschner, Gaertner, & Pozzoboni, 2010). According to Nitta, Holley, and Wrobel (2010), the literature on student and staff perspectives regarding school closure is similarly inadequate. Warner and Lindle (2009) wrote that school administrators are faced with "tough choices between facilities

management and instructional needs” of the students when considering school closure (p. 1). Adding to the body knowledge of the history of Grayson County and about rural school closure in Virginia may interest both researchers who work in educational history and researchers of educational methods, climate, and culture. Additionally, the study benefits historians and researchers interested in Grayson County, Southwest Virginia and rural schools generally.

Definition of Terms

A number of terms are used with particular meanings in the study. They are listed here with definitions that convey their intended meaning.

Appalachian refers to the area in Kentucky, North Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia that is along the Appalachian Mountains (Appalachian Regional Comprehensive Center, 2008). The researcher used the term Appalachian as it applies to Virginia.

Closure was used when describing the closing of a school without the intent of being reopened. The term closure is defined by Kirschner, Gaertner, & Pozzoboni, (2010), as “situations where staff and students transfer to new schools” (p. 408). School closures may result in mergers with other schools as a result of declining enrollment, poor school performance or other factors (Bard, 2006).

Consolidation is defined as combining schools for school improvement or fiscal responsibility. According to Bard (2006), consolidation is referred to as “any type of school unification, reorganization or merger” (p. 41). For the purpose of this paper, the definition used by Nitta et al. (2010, p. 4), was used that includes “improved academic and social experiences for students in sparsely-populated areas.” Additionally, consolidation was used as a result of school closures in this paper.

Gatekeeper is an individual that provides access to other potential participants or data (Maxwell, 2012).

Rural is defined as a place with less than 2,500 people (NCES, 2006). For the purpose of this paper, Mount Rogers is also considered remote because the defined zip code for the area is “more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster” (NCES, 2006).

Literature Search

Electronic searches of peer-reviewed articles using the ERIC database were completed on February 10, 2013, and March 26, 2013, using a variety of search terms and key words. *Mount Rogers Combined School, Mount Rogers School, Mount Rogers, Grayson County Public Schools, combined schools* and *rural Appalachian schools* were the key terms that were used. The search for *Grayson County Public Schools* yielded one result on teacher shortages. The search for *combined schools* yielded 142 results, but the majority of the articles were on private schools, colleges and universities or charter schools. The key words *Mount Rogers* yielded articles on the geology of the mountain and other scientific studies that were excluded. The other searches yielded results that were not relevant to the paper and were excluded also. The same key words were used in electronic databases such as HathiTrust and Google Scholar on October 12, 2013. Those searches yielded three articles that were used in this paper.

In addition to computer-aided searches, hand searches in the *Virginia Room* at the Roanoke Main Library were conducted on May 3, 2013. Two books from that search were used in this paper. On June 1, 2013, hand searches for articles and books were completed in two libraries in Grayson County producing no results. A personal copy of the *Grayson County Public Schools' Bicentennial* (1993) was provided by the clerk at the Independence library to assist with research. Additionally, on June 3, 2013, newspaper articles and yearbooks were perused during visits to the Grayson County Historical Society as well as the Grayson Heritage Foundation. While searching for peer reviewed articles, historical documents were retrieved from hand searches at both locations. Educational reports and books from peers, family members and suggested titles from the committee chair were also included in this paper.

Searches of articles in December 2013, January 2014, and February 2014 on *rural school closure, rural school consolidation, school closure, effects of school closure on students, and school consolidation* were conducted. A search of the ERIC database resulted in several articles that were written in the early 20th century. In February 2014, when the search parameters were delimited to recent articles, there were 462 articles on consolidation were identified. The search of the HathiTrust database produced 325 articles on rural school consolidation. Many of those were on charter schools, transportation and the economic justification of closures. There were 98 articles that were reviewed for consideration in this paper. A search on Google Scholar produced many articles that included closures in other countries and were not relevant to this paper. An examination of reference sections in articles and dissertations were also used as part of the

search. Ten peer-reviewed articles on school closure that were not about rural schools were found that addressed the topics of preserving school communities, student achievement, and financial aspects of school closure were used, for this paper. Seven articles on rural school consolidation from scholarly journals were used as were three commentary articles on community protest and perspectives on school closures. References were used from articles and dissertations that were recommended by the committee chair in March 2014. There were eight articles selected on district and school closures that were used for this paper.

Organization of the Paper

This paper is organized into five chapters. The first chapter includes the introduction, the purpose of the study, the significance of the study, and search procedures. Chapter 2 includes a brief historical description of early education in Virginia. While providing a chronological narrative of the history of education in Virginia, Chapter 2 also sets the historical context of the study and provides accounts of early settlers and the discovery of Grayson County. A history of early education in Grayson County is also included. The methodology is located in Chapter 3 and includes research design, data sources, data analysis, participant recruitment, and selection as well as descriptions of the participants in the study. Chapter 3 also includes the Institutional Review Board approval. A chronological description of the school closure process is located in Chapter 4. The experiences and perspectives of the effects of the closure on students and staff are also included. The findings, conclusions, recommendations for future research and reflections are located in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 2

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

Education in Virginia Prior to 1932

According to Margaret Gunter (2003), early education in Virginia began with the core belief that schooling was not the responsibility of the government and was patterned after the education system in England. Prior to 1619, the Virginia colonists were mostly adults and schooling was not necessary. Shortly thereafter, orphans and paupers were sent to Virginia with the expectation that they were to be apprentices and learn a trade (Buck, 1952). The poor laws or apprenticeship laws in England were developed to provide training to indigent minors and after the discovery of the New World, many were sent to Virginia to learn a vocation (Gunter, 2003). The Apprenticeship Laws of 1643 and 1646 assured that children were taught trades or vocations with an emphasis on Christian education (Heatwole, 1916).

Many of Virginia's early schools were developed to educate the growing orphan population and were small private community schools created by neighboring landowners with clergymen as teachers (Gunter, 2003). Wealthier citizens employed private tutors to instruct younger students in reading, arithmetic, and the catechism (Heatwole, 1916). Once the students were older, many of them attended schools known at the time as grammar schools which were created for secondary and postsecondary instruction. In the early eighteenth century, education in Virginia consisted of private tutors for the wealthy, community schools for the middle class, and secondary training from grammar schools (Heatwole, 1916).

The Literary Fund

Private teachers and community schools became the norm for education in Virginia until Thomas Jefferson introduced a bill calling for a state-run education system that included elementary and secondary schools as well as a state university (Gunter, 2003). In his plan, *A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge*, Jefferson proposed free schooling, regardless of class, for a minimum of three years and secondary schooling for those who had the proven ability to participate. Jefferson's ideas for education were not popular and they were hampered by the perception that free schools were for poor children, indigents, and paupers (Salmon, 2010). According to Buck (1952), the stigma persisted for years. Colonization and conflicts with Native Americans also caused some resistance to public schooling (Buck, 1952). Wealthy

citizens opposed school taxes because they took issue with having to fund schooling for their poor neighbors. Additionally, public support for taxes used for education had strong opposition because of the secular control required by the government (Link, 1986). However, in 1810, the General Assembly, prompted by Governor John Tyler, created The Literary Fund, which soon became the basis for funding a free public education in Virginia and provided assurances that there would be state control in subsidizing schools throughout the Commonwealth (Maddox, 1918).

Money from the Literary Fund was earmarked for scholarships for higher education until 1822 when disbursements were made to localities, based on population, in order to provide free schooling to those unable to afford private schools (Gunter, 2003). According to Heatwole (1916), each county was responsible for finding indigent children and providing teachers for students. In turn, the state would pay three or four cents per student that attended school. In 1829, there was a surplus in the Literary Fund and the General Assembly allowed county governments to use the funds for building new school houses with the stipulation that the schools were available to all children (Heatwole, 1916). In 1860, the U.S. Census listed 67,024 students in Virginia, reflecting less than 5% of the school-age population. According to Heatwole (1916), Virginia's participation in the Civil War required all of the money in the Literary Fund to be transferred into accounts that were earmarked for defense. The money was converted to Confederate bonds and therefore they were of no value once the war ended (Heatwole, 1916). After the Civil War, Virginia's financial infrastructure was destroyed with a failing economy (Salmon, 2010). By 1870, over 20% of the population in Virginia was illiterate, creating alarm among Virginia leaders (Heatwole, 1916).

Dr. Ruffner's Election

Upon the adoption of The Underwood Constitution of 1869, compulsory attendance laws were instituted with taxes and levies to support public schooling. Funds were distributed to localities based on student population (Salmon, 2010). In March 1870, Dr. William H. Ruffner was elected by the General Assembly as Superintendent of Public Instruction and was charged with the management of school funding and other matters associated with organizing a public school system (Gunter, 2003).

Within 30 days of Dr. Ruffner's election, he created a plan that allocated funds from the state and local governments for education (Buck, 1952). With those funds, stipulations were

given to localities that required them to provide free schooling to all students between five and 21 years of age (Gunter, 2003). Within three months of the governor signing the plan, on July 11, 1870, superintendents and trustees were appointed. They were charged with taking a census of student populations and determining the number of local schools in each county (Heatwole, 1916). In November 1870, when schools were opened, there were nearly 130,000 students enrolled with an average daily attendance of 30%. Southwest Virginia led in the number of students participating in public schooling. Grayson County had the highest percentage of the school population enrolled of any other locality with 66% enrolled the first year (Heatwole, 1916). According to the *Annual Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction of the Commonwealth of Virginia* (1885), under Dr. Ruffner's leadership, there were over 1,400 superintendents and trustees appointed throughout the Commonwealth. Dr. Ruffner was the state superintendent for 12 years and was followed by Mr. R. R. Farr.

Under Farr's leadership, the Industrial Institute for Colored Youth at Petersburg was established and school attendance throughout the commonwealth increased (Heatwole, 1916). The first conference for school officers was held in Richmond, which generated more support for public schooling. Shortly thereafter, the State Normal School at Farmville was created strictly for training female teachers. While there were 751 more male teachers than females at the beginning of Farr's tenure, by 1885, there were 55 more women teaching than men (Heatwole, 1916).

In the late 19th century, the priorities for education in Virginia were teacher training, pupil attendance, library programs, and improved instruction, which soon became the foundation for Virginia's public school system (Gunter, 2003). In 1886, textbook adoptions were a priority, as well as increasing funds for public schools. A few years later, industrial education and trades programs were added to improve secondary education (Buck, 1952). By 1890, the emphasis was on the quality of instruction and teacher preparation (Heatwole, 1916). During this time, teacher licensure requirements were inconsistent and certification was the responsibility of each individual school board (Link, 1986). Standardizing teacher licensure requirements and curricular materials became a priority while encouraging school systems to consolidate and provide transportation, especially to students living in rural areas (Buck, 1952).

The Early 1900s

At the turn of the century, a new state constitution was ratified in 1902. The constitution directed the General Assembly to manage school systems throughout the state. A State Board of

Examiners was established to oversee the management of the school divisions and implement teacher certification requirements, as well as facility inspections (Buck, 1952). Soon after, school divisions were established by the General Assembly for each locality and were governed by individual school boards (Gunter, 2003). In May 1905, Superintendent Joseph W. Southall spearheaded a campaign with Governor A. J. Montague to make education a priority. A few of the features that were included were vocational and agricultural training, a high school in close proximity to all students, school libraries, and special programs for the “defective and dependent” (Gunter, 2003).

Dr. Southall’s successor, Dr. Joseph Eggleston continued his vision by overseeing the replacement of one-room schools with larger, consolidated elementary schools and establishing guidelines for facility construction. The number of high schools increased rapidly from 60 schools in 1897 to 522 schools in 1917 (Heatwole, 1916). During Eggleston’s tenure, the first guidelines for establishing elementary school curricula were created in 1907 and the guidelines for high school instruction outlining the required units of study were established in 1910. While public schools for white children were becoming uniform, during Eggleston’s tenure as Superintendent of Public Education, the state received funding from the *Negro Rural School Fund*, which had been endowed by Anna T. Jeanes of Philadelphia to supplement curricular improvements and teacher training in the South (Buck, 1952). Shortly thereafter, standards and minimum requirements for all accrediting schools were to be regulated by the Southern Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools, which was created in 1912 (Gunter, 2003).

In 1918, the General Assembly regulated the compulsory attendance law and established teacher certification requirements as well as moved the governance of schools from districts to county administrations (Buck, 1952). Schools consolidated and attendance increased. It was also during this time that the Virginia Department of Education was established to oversee instruction, facility maintenance, libraries, vocational education, physical education, and teacher certification (Gunter, 2003). The Department of Education worked to consolidate the districts into one operating system and teacher salaries nearly doubled (Buck, 1952).

The next decade was a time for the expansion of professional organizations such as the Virginia Education Association and the Virginia PTA, which sponsored the Student Cooperative Association. Dr. Sidney B. Hall was appointed as the State Superintendent of Schools as the Great Depression began to affect state and local economies in 1931 (Gunter, 2003). During Dr. Hall’s tenure, the educational and professional requirements for division superintendent were

established and included master's degrees and experience in a supervisory role. He also established the first Division of Rehabilitation as well as Special Education and Adult Education programs (Buck, 1952). Hall established recommendations for local communities to improve schools and standardized testing throughout the commonwealth began. It was during this time that funding from the Public Works Administration and the Works Progress Administration was provided for construction and facility maintenance which provided the resources necessary to build the Mount Rogers Combined School in Whitetop, Virginia.

History of Grayson County, Virginia

Southwest Virginia was home to a variety of Indian tribes prior to the White settlers occupying the territory. In 1540, Hernando De Soto explored Southwest Virginia and found a tribe known as the Xualans. The Xualans lived in log houses during the winter months and spent much of the summer hunting and gathering. According to James Stamper (1976a), the tribe was conquered by the Cherokees and while the Cherokees did not occupy the area, they shared the common hunting ground with the Iroquois and the Shawnees. As White settlers began to move west, and after tumultuous encounters with Native Americans, it is believed that the earliest pioneers settled in what is now Grayson County, at the end of the French-Indian War in 1763 (Stamper, 1976a).

In 1765, William Bourne of Hanover County married Rosa Jones from Fredericksburg, Virginia. The two immediately decided to move westward and settled in the foothills of the Appalachians (Stamper, 1976a). They travelled by wagon to Fort Chiswell, Virginia and then by horseback to settle at Knob Fork on Iron Mountain, where they intended to use the fertile land by the New River to create a homestead (Nuckolls, 1982). At the age of 20, William Bourne became one of the first settlers in Grayson County. When Bourne and his family arrived in the area, there were as few as eight other families in the region. Mr. and Mrs. Bourne had seven daughters and two sons. All of the children lived to be very old and established large families of their own.

Another early settler in Grayson County was Minitree Jones. He is assumed to be the father of Rosa (Jones) Bourne. He and two of his brothers, known as Churchill and Spotswood, settled on the New River near what is presumed to be Elk Creek (Fields, 1976). About the same time, Enoch Osborne was settling in the Bridle Creek area of Grayson County. He was joined by his two brothers, Solomon and Ephraim. The Osbornes built a fort around the homestead to protect their families from Native Americans (Stamper, 1976a).

In another account of early settlers (Nuckolls, 1982), it is said that a man by the name of Edward Hale came through the Allegheny mountains and settled by the New River in 1779. He was married to Patsy Perdue and settled near Wolfe Creek (Stamper, 1976a). Lewis Hale was another early settler and he and his wife were en route to Kentucky when they decided to settle in Elk Creek. He built the first church in Grayson County which became known as the Hale Meeting House. Lewis Hale later served in the Revolutionary War and was appointed as a magistrate in Grayson County. His family lived in Elk Creek until he died in 1802 (Stamper, 1976a).

In the late 1700s, Southwest Virginia was sparsely populated and at the end of the Revolutionary War, the issues with expansion and representation were shared by the settlers in Wythe County (Nuckolls, 1982). The county seat was located in a town that was called Evansham, which was later known as Wytheville. The settlers were required to travel many miles over rugged terrain to vote or to conduct government business (Nuckolls, 1982). It was during this time that William Grayson, one of the first two senators for the state of Virginia, supported William Bourne in seeking a seat in the legislature. Bourne's platform included creating a new county for the inhabitants of the area separate from Wythe County. Bourne lost the election but continued to lobby for a new county until May 21, 1793, when Grayson County was established. Court was held in a barn owned by Bourne establishing the boundaries for Grayson County (Stamper, 1976a). During the court proceedings, Flower Swift, Minitree Jones, and Nathaniel Frisbie were appointed as magistrates and William Bourne was appointed as the clerk of the court (Nuckolls, 1982). Nearly a year later on July 24, 1794, court was held in the first courthouse in Grayson County. The first county seat was located in Oldtown, located east of Independence and near what is now Galax, Virginia. During this time Grayson County citizens began to establish small grammar schools for elementary students in some of the communities (Grayson County Heritage Book Committee and the 1908 Courthouse Foundation [GCHB], 1995).

Carroll County was formed in 1842, splitting Grayson County in half. By 1850, Grayson County was in turmoil over the selection of a new county seat. According to Tennis (2004), the community in the eastern half of the county wanted the county seat to remain in Oldtown. The Elk Creek community felt that the county seat would be better situated and more accessible to more residents if it was relocated there. The residents from the southern part of the county remained independent with no strong preference as to where the county seat should be located

(Tennis, 2004). After seeking advice from neighboring counties, the suggestion was made to have the county seat located near the center of the county. The county seat was then moved to Independence, an area named for the independent citizens of that area (Grayson County, Virginia Heritage Foundation [GCVHF], 2007). Orville Anderson was elected as the clerk of the court (Nuckolls, 1982).

Grayson County suffered no major destruction during the Civil War because of its isolated, mountainous terrain. However, many of the men who were farmers found themselves at the forefront of the war as members of the Stonewall Brigade (GCHB, 1995). On April 24, 1861, the Grayson Dare Devils were formed on the banks of Elk Creek. Known for marksmanship, they were a part of Stonewall Jackson's Virginia Infantry Regiment. Of the 160 men, 129 were casualties of war, with most of those dying of diseases such as pneumonia, rather than from battle wounds (GCHB, 1995).

After the Civil War, much of the financial infrastructure in Virginia crumbled as it did throughout most of South (Salmon, 2010). Even so, because of the strength of the people of Grayson County, their communities began to prosper during the Reconstruction period. With the creation of towns and the country's need for raw materials, Grayson citizens capitalized on the situation by building railroads, and sawmills as well as growing crops such as tobacco (GCHB, 1995). The first textile mill was built on Wilson Creek in 1884. Later, in 1902, Colonel F.H. Fries created the second textile mill on the bank of the New River and another town was created. Troutdale became an incorporated town in 1906 and the textile, timber and iron ore industries provided Grayson with a time of huge economic growth. Small businesses were created and towns such as Troutdale, as well as Whitetop and Fairwood, were prospering (GCHB, 1995).

Over a decade later, timber and iron ore became scarce, blight struck most of the community, and the men of Grayson County were again called to battle. Many of the men left for France as World War I began (GCHB, 1995). The towns began to disappear and populations dwindled as community members sought employment and housing elsewhere. Nevertheless, a small community located between the two highest peaks in Virginia was beginning to flourish with fertile lands, a new band mill, and virgin timber. Soon, Whitetop would become a vacation destination as well as the home of a school created for the growing population known as Mount Rogers Combined School.

Early Education in Grayson County

Prior to 1870, most of the schools in Grayson County consisted of schools built in fields that had been abandoned by farmers and were known as old field schools (Fields, 1976). Many were only in operation for a few months out of the year during the winter, when children could be excused from the farming duties required of them (Virginia Department of Education [VDOE], 1887). Students were only required to learn basic reading, writing, and arithmetic. According to the Superintendent of Grayson County, William S. Hale (VDOE, 1887), the primary requirement for assuming a teaching position was to be a man who could maintain order in the school by being able to “flog” the largest boy in the class. State Superintendent Ruffner asserted that discipline and management of pupils was an essential feature for public education (Link, 1986). Similar to other schools within the commonwealth, Grayson County had grammar schools for elementary students, private community schools, and tutors for the privileged (GCHB, 1995). With the inception of public schooling in Virginia in 1870, Grayson County had the largest percentage of average daily attendance in the state, according to the first census submitted to Superintendent Ruffner (Heatwole, 1916).

In State Superintendent Ruffner’s *First Annual Report*, Grayson County was reported to have 44 schools. Many believe that the successful beginning of the school system is attributed to the Honorable F. R. Cornett, a member of the state legislature and the first superintendent of Grayson County Schools (VDOE, 1887). During Cornett’s tenure, most of the schools in Grayson County were one-room schools with very few books and resources available (GCHB, 1995). Cornett remained the superintendent for 11 years and was succeeded by William S. Hale. During the 1879-1880 school year, the schools were divided into three districts including Old Town, Elk Creek, and Wilson. Old Town had a student population of 1,165. Elk Creek had 2,097 students, while Wilson had 1,566 students (Grayson County Historical Society, [GCHS] 2013). By 1884, Grayson County had 78 schools with a student population of 5,574 (VDOE, 1887).

R. L. Wiley (1976) recollected his memories of early schools in Grayson County. Wiley recalled the fall session of 1882 and walking two miles to a log schoolhouse on Point Lookout Mountain. There were approximately 25 students aged five to 20 years old who used materials ranging from the *Holmes Fourth Reader* to *Venables Practical Arithmetic*. Inside the school were benches made of chestnut trees and a box stove used for heating the one-room school. Wiley (1976), remembered that the teachers used a haw switch to maintain order and recalled games played at recess such as Cross Cat and Bull Pen.

Wiley (1976), revealed that learning the alphabet, colonial history, and handwriting were the main subjects taught in the early schools. There were a few students who studied mathematics courses or bookkeeping. It was not until the early 1900s that physical education, hygiene, geography, and civics were included in the instructional program. Maintaining quality educators in early schools was very difficult, and many of the teachers were nothing more than the brighter students in the school (Fields, 1976).

In the late 1800s, teacher effectiveness was measured by the number of students enrolled in classes on a monthly basis (Teaching with photographs, 2013). Additionally, schools were provided funds based on the number of students enrolled and recorded on the county registers. According to Link (1986), state funds for schooling were only allocated for salaries if each school met the minimum requirement for student enrollment. Similar to other rural school divisions, in Grayson County, enrollment numbers were submitted monthly to the county superintendent and, if average attendance dropped below 15 students, funding was withdrawn (Link, 1986).

For many rural school divisions in Virginia, the terms for school sessions were dependent on the farming season as many of the students labored for their families during harvest and planting seasons (Link, 1986). There was no transportation provided and the school term varied across the county from five months to nine months depending on the location (GCHB, 1995). Some of the earliest schools in the County were located in the communities of Long's Gap, Cox's Chapel, Bridle Creek, Independence, Elk Creek, Mill Creek, and Flat Rock (Fields, 1976).

1830s

According to James Stamper (1976c), the first documented Grayson County schools were established around 1830 in the small community located north of Independence called Long's Gap. Because of the commitment to education, the community sustained a school on Buck Mountain and another one on Peach Bottom Creek. Stamper (1976c) wrote that school was only in session for three months during the winter because children were a source of labor for the community and were needed to assist with maintaining farms. While in session, resources were limited and students had to share books. Students were creative during recess, making up games that did not require any equipment, as none was available. A little further south, there were two other communities that were building churches and the buildings were to be used as school houses for students to attend classes.

Southwest of the Long's Gap community, the residents of Cox's Chapel built a church that was also to be used as a school in 1832 (GCHB, 1995). The families were responsible for paying tuition that would supplement a salary for the teacher. However, the teachers sometimes would opt to secure board for payment. The Cox's Chapel community valued education as Joe Cox (1976), recalled in his description of the early settlers in that area. Often, students were required to cross the New River in a rowboat to attend high school (Cox, 1976). While the Cox's Chapel School began to prosper, another community located along the New River began construction on their school facility near Bridle Creek.

In the early 1800s, according to Fields (1976), the Bridle Creek community built the Bridle Creek Methodist Church, which was a one-room structure made of logs and was located near the New River. Sometime in the 1830s, it is believed that a second church was built that had six rooms, a stone chimney, and a huge fireplace on one end. The facility served as both a church and a school until the 1880s, when Dr. A.B. Cox was the teacher (Fields, 1976). Near the turn of the century, a one-room school was erected and became the pride of the community. It was considered to be one of the best schools in Grayson County because of the student enrollment it attracted from surrounding counties (GCHB, 1995). During this time, subjects such as grammar, algebra, geometry and Latin were taught. Books such as *Harvey's Elementary Grammar and Composition* were used in the classrooms (GCHB, 1995). Soon after, the student population grew so much that another building was erected with four classrooms and an auditorium (GCSB, 1993). The Bridle Creek community considered education a priority and this value was shared by the citizens of nearby Independence, the new county seat in Grayson County.

1850s

In the middle of the 19th century, a two-room school known as the Grayson Female Academy was built in the Independence community. It burned down two years later (Stamper, 1976b). Soon after, the local Masons granted permission for the Masonic Building to be used for classrooms for teacher training. The school was called the Grayson Institute (GCSB, 1993). The school became a boarding school with tuition between \$40 and \$60 per session (Stamper, 1976b). While the citizens of Independence and other communities north of the New River began to expand and build schools to serve a growing number of students, there was no school available for students living south of the New River. In 1860, that the Potato Creek community decided to offer classes to both children and adults, as the entire country was about to go to war.

1860s

In 1860, the national census listed less than five percent of the school aged population as active students attending school on a regular basis (Heatwole, 1916). In the Potato Creek community located south of the New River, Mr. Preston Phipps used his old shop building to teach his children and other students in the community near Fox Knob (GCHB, 1993). The school had wood benches and a fireplace on a dirt floor where both young children and adults attended classes while many of Grayson County's men were called to duty during the Civil War. In 1865, the students were moved to a school on the Hardin Cox Farm and it was called School House Springs. The facility was also used as a meeting house until it burned and students were again moved to a two-room log building. It was the only school that was located south of the New River in Grayson County and served students from both Virginia and North Carolina. In 1869, the Underwood Constitution supported student attendance in Virginia with funds distributed based on student population. Later, Ruffner was elected Superintendent of Public Instruction to oversee the public school system while a small community north of Independence began construction of a school near Elk Creek.

1870s

Soon after the Civil War, a thriving community known as Elk Creek was holding classes in a log church and called it the Elk Creek Academy. According to Olive Benkelman (1976), education was very important to the people in Elk Creek. In 1870, a building was erected under the direction of the Methodist Church (Benkelman, 1976). Later, the reputation of the Elk Creek Academy spread and the facility quickly became inadequate. Many of the residents of the community provided room and board for students who travelled to the area to attend the Academy. At this time, a man by the name of William Delp erected a log structure known as "the boarding house" in his back yard and housed male students who attended Elk Creek, according to Benkelman (1976). Soon after, enrollment soared and another building was erected. Curricular offerings included geography, music, art and agriculture. Later, the Elk Creek Training School received funding as the Fifth Congressional District Agricultural High School and became the first accredited high school in the county (Benkelman, 1976). The school's accreditation became another source of great pride for the residents of Grayson County in addition to the county having been recognized as having the highest percentage of students in attendance of any other Virginia locality despite the disadvantages of having its students living in rural communities.

1880s

In southwestern Grayson County, the small community of Rugby consisted of a grinding mill, two grocery stores, Corinth Baptist Church and a blacksmith shop (GCHB, 1995). Although small in size, this little community revered education and built a two-room school for students attending school in grades one through seven. The town was called Rugby because of the rugged terrain in the area and while the topography could have inhibited school attendance, the community held education as a priority so students attended school consistently and frequently while in session (GCHB, 1995). While the western half of Grayson County began to build schools and expand offerings, the eastern half was growing due to the construction of textile mills and dams along the New River (GCHB, 1995).

Late 1800s and early 1900s

Virginia ratified a new state constitution in 1902. It was around this time that the Flat Rock community, located between Independence and Fries, served students in a two-room school built on a large rock (GCHB, 1995). The two classrooms were called the “Little Room” for primary students and the “Big Room” for the intermediate students. Students spent time studying as well as playing games and swinging on grapevines. Water was carried from a nearby spring and students were transported by buggy if they did not board near the school (GCHB, 1995). Also during this time, students who lived farther north were attending a new school built in the town of Fries to meet the needs of the growing population due to job opportunities at the new textile mill on the New River.

In 1902, on the banks of the New River in far northeastern Grayson County, students attended the eight-room school that was built by the community to serve children whose parents worked in the newly constructed textile mill built by Colonel F. H. Fries. Three hundred homes were constructed in the area and students attended the two-story wood structure for elementary school (GCHB, 1995). As the population grew, citizens in surrounding areas were also erecting schools in communities such as Carsonville and Providence.

In 1907, the students living in northeastern Grayson County in the communities of Carsonville and Pine Mountain attended school in a two-story wood structure (GCHB, 1995). The students were taught on the first floor and the second floor was reserved as a community meeting room. Prior to 1907, the students attended school in the Pleasant Hill Methodist Church. A little further east, closer to the town of Fries, the Providence community established the

Eureka Academy in 1907 (GCHB, 1995). Students from the Stevens Creek area and Ivanhoe also attended the Academy, which was a two-room elementary school. Aware of the development of high schools throughout the state, the citizens were concerned about the lack of high school courses available to their children. Consequently, the Eureka Academy began to offer high school classes to students who boarded in surrounding homes (GCHB, 1995). The number of high schools in the commonwealth increased from 60 in 1897 to 522 in 1917 (Heatwole, 1916). While students living in the more populous eastern half of Grayson County were attending their schools, the residents of the southern half of the county began to develop partnerships with the border state of North Carolina and to build schools that were easily accessible in more isolated communities.

In the Grassy Creek community of Grayson County, near the North Carolina line, many students attended one or two-room schools at Upper Grassy Creek, Lower Grassy Creek, and Long Branch (Hamby, 1998). Upper Grassy Creek School served students in grades one through seven with a partition separating the two schools into primary, (grades one through three) and intermediate (grades four through seven). Parents provided the furnishings for the school, such as desks, and the school was served by an outside spring used for water and outdoor restrooms (Hamby 1998). Similar to the facility at Upper Grassy Creek, the surrounding schools in Grayson County had limited resources available to them because of the mountainous terrain. Students in nearby schools in North Carolina, such as Helton, North Fork, and Beaver Creek, also experienced the same challenges. Students attended the schools until 1913, when the new Virginia-Carolina High School and Elementary School was built on land and with materials donated by Mr. Catlett Pugh of Grayson County and Mr. Greer Parsons of Ashe County, North Carolina (GCHB, 1995). While the school was eventually called the Virginia-Carolina High School, students in grades one through eleven attended the school. Funding from Grayson County was eventually provided for the elementary school and the high school was to be subsidized by Ashe County, North Carolina (Hamby, 1998).

While the southwestern part of Grayson County continued to build schools, the Baywood community, located in the southeastern part of Grayson County, became very concerned about the limited access to high school courses for their children (GCHB, 1995). In 1913, Baywood High School was built by parents in the community after concerns were shared about the long distances children were required to travel to get to school and the lack of secondary offerings. During William S. Hale's tenure as the superintendent in Grayson County, there were 69 one

room schools (Diamond, 1954) and several of the schools were located in the Baywood area. Most of the schools did not have water, indoor plumbing or heat (GCSB, 1993). The schools included grades one through seven and were known as Austin's School, Collin's School, Crab Orchard School, Cold Springs School, Hale's School, Longview School, McKnight School, Moore's Mill Creek School, Rector's School, Round Meadows School and Stony Knoll School. A boarding house was built for students living outside of the area beside the newly constructed high school (GCSB, 1993). The new high school included four classrooms and a large auditorium. Baywood was one of seven high schools in Grayson County built to consolidate many smaller schools. Consolidation efforts were continued throughout the area and were a priority for Kyle Cox who became the Superintendent in Grayson County in 1920.

Consolidation in the 1920s

By 1929, similar to the schools in the Baywood community, Grayson County had consolidated many of the one room schools and old field schools in order to provide better offerings with more experienced teachers (GCHS, 1983). During that time, the school board had seven members, each serving for a term of four years. In 1929, there were seven high schools and 81 elementary schools. Additionally, there were seven schools for African American students. The high school population consisted of 387 students with 23 teachers, while the elementary schools had 4,690 students with 140 teachers respectively. The seven schools that served African American students had one teacher per school (GCHS, 1983). Wiley (1976) wrote that after the turn of the century, schools consolidated and many students did not attend their community schools. With the development of roads and automobiles, a school bus afforded children better access to other schools with more offerings (Wiley, 1976). In 1929, as schools in Grayson County began to grow and consolidate, the citizens of Whitetop, Virginia, were constructing a dance hall and lodge that would soon host annual music festivals and draw thousands to rural southwestern Virginia (GCHB, 1995). A few years later, Mount Rogers Combined School was to be built to serve the citizens of the community.

The Effects of School Closure on Students and Communities

School closure has been a controversial issue for the last century. In the early 1930s there were more than 130,000 school districts in the nation and by the end of the 1990s, there were less than 15,500 (Sell, Leistritz & Thompson, 1996). "Weak local economies provide weak financial support for rural schools" and therefore, school closures become the "official solution"

for balancing the needs of the community with “the pressure for a more equitable distribution of limited state monies” (Fanning, 1995, p. 2). Duke states that it is important to “understand as much as possible about how particular schools form, develop and confront the challenges of survival” (p. 258). There is little evidence that suggests that school closures are caused by single events. Rather, the closures are usually a slow, drawn out process that has the potential to become politically charged especially in small, rural communities that have very little recourse in protecting their neighborhood schools (Sher & Tompkins, 1976).

According to Khattri, Riley, and Kane (1997), preserving the unique characteristics of rural schools and the role the school plays in isolated, less populated areas has not garnered the rigorous research it deserves. School closures in rural areas tend to produce a “decline in civic and community organizations” and that lack of participation in community events “was attributed to disagreements between some individuals as a direct result of the consolidation” (Sell et al., 1996, p. 21). Schools located in small rural areas are recognized by community members as “the hub of local activities” (Fanning, 1995, p. 2). Additionally, research on the relationship between the school and communities with low density populations is limited (Kirschner et al., 2010). According to Howley, Johnson, and Petrie (2011), “studies of the experience of district consolidation from community and teacher perspectives are rare” (p. 7).

A review of the literature on school closure and the effects on students and staff produced varying results. Research on the experiences of those affected by school closure is “not only limited, it is often contradictory” (Nitta et al., 2010, p. 3). According to Oncescu (2013), relationships changed within communities as a result of the closing of small, rural schools. Rural families felt as if they had been separated from the community, although new relationships had been developed (Oncescu, 2013). A literature review conducted by members of the Scottish Government (2012), revealed that rural school closure had many potential effects including: (a) conflict between communities, (b) loss of a local “social and cultural resource,” (c) loss of community “identity and confidence”, and (d) mixed reactions to the closure (p. 22).

Research on the effects of school closure on students is scarce and the few studies of “how closures affect displaced students yield a mixed picture” (Kirschner et al., 2010, p. 408). According to Sell et al., (1996), the parents’ perceptions play a role on the effects of school closure because of the “concern for the educational welfare of their children” (p. 2). Students felt as if they were not a part of the decision making process regarding school closure, resulting in feelings of hopelessness and loss of personal identity (Kirschner & Pozzoboni, 2010). Similar to

those of students, according to Morton (2009), teachers' perspectives of school closure "relates to the experience of death and dying" (p. 66). Additionally, teachers were concerned about the communication process when districts were considering school closure. Many felt afraid of the uncertainty that they faced and felt helpless in thinking their perspectives had no bearing on the ultimate decision to close the school (Morton, 2009).

The research on student achievement as a result of school closure is mixed. A review of the literature on the effects of student achievement after school closure by Howley and Howley (2006) reveals that most of the research compares achievement with school size rather than as a result of closure. Small rural schools may provide students with more individualized attention and instruction, while consolidating with larger schools may provide students with access to better teachers, extracurricular activities, and more rigorous academic classes (Witt, 2011). According to Kirschner et al (2010), some students were appreciative of the newer courses and extracurricular offerings, while others experienced difficulty with being separated from favored teachers and staff members.

This research on what was both the most geographically isolated school in Grayson County and the perspectives of the effects of the school's closure on students and staff will interest both researchers who work in educational history and researchers in educational methods. Grayson County has long-held traditions of community based and controlled schools. Most of the early Grayson County schools were initiated, run, and paid for by local community members. The citizens of Grayson County also placed strong value on education as evidenced by having had the highest percentage of enrollment when public schools were established. Grayson County had consolidated many of the one room schools and old field schools in the early twentieth century to provide better offerings with more experienced teachers. The documented experiences and perspectives of the effects of the Mount Rogers Combined School's closure on students and staff will benefit historians and researchers interested in Grayson County, Southwest Virginia, and rural schools generally.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the study was to document and examine the experiences and perspectives of students and staff who were affected by the closure of Mount Rogers Combined School in 2010. Three research questions guided the study:

1. What factors and events led to the closure of Mount Rogers Combined School?
2. What were the experiences of the students and staff during the final year of the school's operation?
3. What were the perspectives of the students and staff of Mount Rogers Combined School of the effects of the school's closure?

Research Design

According to Creswell (2005), qualitative methodologies are the best research strategies for narrative research and documenting the experiences of people. Qualitative research methods were used in the study. In qualitative studies, the researcher serves as the facilitator who collects data by analyzing documents, observing behavior, and conducting interviews (Creswell, 2005). According to Maykut and Morehouse (2002), qualitative research has specific characteristics that should be considered such as: (a) an exploratory or descriptive focus to provide a deeper understanding, (b) an emergent design which provides the opportunity for the research design to evolve, (c) a purposive sample to reflect the experiences in the research, (d) data collection in natural setting, (e) evolving data, (f) qualitative methods in data collection, (g) inductive data analysis and (h) a case study approach to reporting research outcomes. Maykut and Morehouse (2002) write that “these eight features provide a framework for designing and implementing a qualitative research study” (p. 47). Accordingly, the study employed qualitative methods to gather data for examining the experiences and perspectives of the students and staff on the school's closure.

According to Rossman and Rallis (2003), “case studies seek to understand a larger phenomenon through examination of one specific instance” (p. 104). Case studies also provide participants with the opportunity to “speak for themselves” and “are most effectively presented within a rich narrative” (Maykut and Morehouse, 2002, p. 121). Case studies provide descriptive, real-life context to the situations that are being studied and should be used when there is a “desire to understand complex social phenomena” (Yin, 2003, p. 3). For those reasons, the

research design was to conduct a case study to document and examine the experiences and perspectives of students and staff who were affected by the closure of Mount Rogers Combined School.

Data Sources

Data for the study were collected from participant interviews, observations from site visits, documents, and other artifacts. Interviews with school personnel and former students provided first-hand accounts of the school's operation and closure. The interview data were the foundation of the study. Primary source documents including school board minutes, manuscripts, and reports, such as the Grayson County school facility study, and a supplement provided to the board of supervisors were also examined and utilized. Other documents were used as evidence to describe the perceptions of people who were once a part of the Mount Rogers Combined School community. Artifacts including photographs, mementos, personal possessions, and yearbooks were examined and included as available. Secondary sources that were relative to the study including general histories and accounts recorded in previous research were also used.

According to Creswell (2005), triangulation is the "process of corroborating evidence from different individuals, types of data or methods of data collection" (p. 252). Using multiple methods of data collection provided the study with credibility. By comparing interview data with data from other sources, all data were examined, analyzed and interpreted to arrive at the most likely conclusions possible. According to Gay and Airasian (1996), field notes are the "observer's record of what he or she has seen, heard, experienced, and thought about during an observation session" (p. 126). Field notes are also considered a running record in that the researcher "captures as much detail as possible about the physical environment and the activities and interactions among people" (Rossman and Rallis, 2003, p. 196). An audit trail was utilized and includes transcripts, field notes, and data collection. According to Maykut and Morehouse (2002), an audit trail "allows you to walk people through your work, from beginning to end, so that they can understand the path you took and judge the trustworthiness of your outcomes" (p. 146). The combination of comparing data collected from multiple sources, keeping field notes and documenting an audit trail ensured triangulation. The transcripts, field notes and audit trail will be kept in the researcher's home office in a locked file cabinet for security purposes. Once the research is complete, all data will be destroyed.

Participant Recruitment and Selection

Purposeful sampling was used in this qualitative study, as the researcher selected “specific participants, events, or processes” (Rossman and Rallis, 2003, p. 137). The selection of participants was determined by the potential participant’s relationship to the school, longevity of the relationship, knowledge of the school closure experience, and the ability to contribute to the study with reliable and verifiable information. The primary participants in the study were students and staff who attended or who were employed at Mount Rogers Combined School at any time from the initial discussions of the school’s closure in 2006 until the school closed in 2010. Secondary participants included community members who had first-hand knowledge of the closure processes and experiences.

In an effort to determine if a study was viable, initial contact was made with potential candidates for participation during the development of the methodology chapter with the approval of the committee chair. Contact was made with Mrs. Wilma Testerman, who functioned as a “gatekeeper” for the study. A gatekeeper is a knowledgeable person who provides access to other potential participants (Maxwell, 2012). Mrs. Testerman attended Mount Rogers Combined School as a student and later worked as a teacher and principal beginning in 1950. She retired in 1999 prior to the closing of the school. Mrs. Testerman agreed to participate in the study and suggested other possible participants to contact. Another gatekeeper was Mr. Gary Galbreath, a former Teacher of the Year for Grayson County Schools, who taught at Mount Rogers during the 1970s and who was still very involved in the community at the time of its closure. He agreed to participate and suggested additional participants as well. Mrs. Ellen Stick, a former principal in Grayson County Public Schools, also served as a gatekeeper. She facilitated initial conversations with resistant participants and suggested community members who were willing to participate.

The primary participants in the study were interviewed about their experiences and their perspectives of the closing of Mount Rogers Combined School. Community members were used as a secondary set of participants to provide background information, verify factual information, and serve as sources for triangulation. The selection criteria for individuals to participate in the study were determined to assure that students and faculty were represented and to include a variety of perspectives. Student selection was based on age at the time of closure and attendance in the school as a secondary student. Participants were required to be over the age of 18. Therefore, former students must have been at least 14 years old at the time of the closure. While this criterion limited the number of potential participants for the study, the researcher determined

that the students would provide richer and more in depth descriptions of their experiences if they had been a high school student who attended Mount Rogers during the closure process.

In addition to relying on the gatekeepers' referrals, the researcher sought primary and secondary participants in person at festivals and other activities that took place at the Mount Rogers Combined School site. Notices of the study were given to attendees at the events in an attempt to identify qualified participants and to expand the participant pool beyond the gatekeepers' suggestions (Seidman, 2006).

The researcher lived in the area until the age of six and has family members who continue to live in Grayson County. The researcher is a Grayson County property owner and knows the area well. Having spent many summers on vacation there, the researcher considers Grayson County an area rich in Appalachian traditions that are valued and appreciated. None of the researcher's family members live in the Whitetop or the Mount Rogers community.

The Participants

There were 18 participants in the study including five former students, eight staff members and five community members. Due to the limited number of participants available and because all but three chose to remain anonymous, and to protect the integrity of the study, careful consideration was given to the descriptions of the participants. Descriptors include the relationship of the participant to the school and an approximate number of years the employees were associated with the school or the number of years the participant attended the school. An approximate number was used so that there are no identifying criteria that might compromise the identity of the participants. The number of years staff were associated with the school is listed in increments of five with a maximum of 25. All names used are pseudonyms. The descriptions of the participants follow:

1. William lived in the Whitetop community. William also worked at the school for more than 25 years. William was not employed during the closure timeframe. William is no longer employed and no longer lives there. As a participant, William was considered a community member instead of a former staff member because William's relationship to the school did not meet the criteria for staff participation.
2. Marion is a former staff member at the school. Marion worked at the school for more than 15 years. Marion was employed during the closure discussions and the eventual closure of the school. Marion is still employed as an educator in another school.

3. Grant is a former staff member at the school. Grant worked at the school for more than 15 years. Grant was employed during the closure discussions and the eventual closure of the school. Grant is still employed as an educator in another school.
4. Dale is a former staff member at the school. Dale worked at the school for more than 15 years. Dale was employed during the closure discussions and the eventual closure of the school. Dale is still employed as an educator in another school.
5. Carson is a former staff member at the school. Carson worked at the school for more than 15 years. Carson was employed during the closure discussions and the eventual closure of the school. Carson is still employed in another school.
6. Wilson is a former staff member at the school. Wilson worked at the school for more than 20 years. Wilson was employed during the closure discussions and the eventual closure of the school. Wilson is still employed in another school.
7. Carroll is a former staff member at the school. Carroll worked at the school for more than 15 years. Carroll was employed during the closure discussions and the eventual closure of the school. Carroll is still employed in another school.
8. Olivet is a former staff member at the school. Olivet worked at the school for more than five years. Olivet was employed during the closure discussions, but was not employed when the school closed. Olivet is still employed in another school division and left the area during the beginning of the closure process.
9. Henry is a former staff member at the school. Henry worked at the school for more than 10 years. Henry was employed during the closure discussions and the eventual closure of the school. Henry is still employed in another school.
10. Roger is a former student at Mount Rogers and has younger, primary school age children who also attended Mount Rogers during the closure timeframe.
11. Wendy is a former student at Mount Rogers. Wendy lived in the Whitetop community until adulthood. Wendy graduated prior to the school closure and is employed in another school.
12. Laurel is a former student at Mount Rogers. Laurel attended the school until it closed and then transferred to the new facility, Grayson Highlands School in Volney, Virginia and Grayson County High School. Laurel is currently a college student.

13. Rugby is a former student at Mount Rogers. Rugby attended the school and was to be transferred to Grayson Highlands until the construction delays prevented the transfer. Rugby graduated from Mount Rogers during the school closure timeframe.
14. Barton is a former student at Mount Rogers. Barton attended the school until it closed and then transferred to the new facility, Grayson Highlands School, in Volney, Virginia. Barton was also transferred to Grayson County High School in 2011 when the secondary offerings at Grayson Highlands School were eliminated.
15. Virginia was a community member and a school board member during the school closure discussions and the eventual closure.
16. Jackson was a community member and advocate for Mount Rogers. Jackson is employed in another school division.
17. Ashe was a community member and worked for Grayson County Public Schools for more than 15 years. Ashe does not work for the school system and currently does not live in the area.
18. Wayne was a community member and worked as an administrator for the county government during the beginning stages of the closure process. Wayne continues to live in Grayson County.

Several emails, phone calls and letters were sent to the Grayson County Board of Supervisors and the Grayson County School Board during the summer and fall 2014 requesting interviews for the study. Additionally, requests were sent in September 2014 to other community members who were suggested by other participants as potential sources. One former school board member responded to a phone call and was a participant in the research. Emails were sent to three members of the board of supervisors on October 7, 2014. Two additional supervisors were contacted via email on October 8, 2014. There were no responses by email. Phone calls were made to follow-up on the emails but there were no return calls. Two former students consented to being interviewed on October 12, 2014, but did not return phone calls. It was also on October 12, 2014 (the date of the Molasses Festival), that notices were posted on the outside of the Mount Rogers Volunteer Fire Department, three local stores and the public library. The notices contained the purpose of the study, contact information and included a picture of the exterior of the school. The notice at the fire hall was taken down within an hour. Emails were forwarded again on October 19, 2014 to the supervisors and board members as an additional

attempt to seek potential participants. Also, on October 19, 2014, an email was sent and a phone call was made to a community member who was an outspoken advocate for Mount Rogers. There was no response to the email or phone call. There were three additional former staff members who were suggested as potential participants by participants in the study and community members. Emails, phone calls and a personal visit to the new school sites yielded no response from the three potential participants. Requests were sent to three other former staff members who were employed during the school closure process and eventual closure. One declined and two did not return phone calls or emails. Three other community members requested to participate, but were not selected because they did not meet the participant selection criteria. In January 2015, additional emails were sent to the members of the board of supervisors and a specific request was sent to the county administrator. None of the members of the board of supervisors responded to the request. The county administrator referred the researcher back to the administrative offices of Grayson County Public Schools for information. On January 23, 2015, contact information was given to the researcher for the previous county administrator. Phone calls were made to that individual requesting participation. Also, additional contact was made with a gatekeeper seeking additional suggestions for participation. A community member who worked in Grayson County Public Schools during the discussions of the potential closure was suggested as a potential participant. That community member agreed to participate. The community member did not however, work in Grayson County Public Schools once the school closure process had begun. On January 31, 2015, a former official who worked for Grayson County government was interviewed. The official was very knowledgeable about the funding parameters associated between Grayson County Public Schools and Grayson County. Again, on January 31, 2015, emails were sent to the County Administrator and the supervisors with no responses.

Interview Protocol

According to Rossman and Rallis (2003), interviewing is how a researcher probes into the participants' experiences and gathers data about their perspectives. Posing open-ended questions, building rapport with the participants, and asking appropriate and relevant follow-up questions are necessary so that the "interview yields a narrative" (Rossman & Rallis, 2003. p. 183). Different interview questions were developed and asked of participants based on their relationships to the school. An initial set of questions for interviews of staff members appears as

Appendix A. An initial set of questions for students is presented in Appendix B. Questions for secondary participants appear in Appendix C. A matrix was developed that cross referenced the initial interview questions with the initial research questions (See Appendix D). The interviews were recorded as explained to the participants. An outside service was used to transcribe the interviews.

Prior to the interviews, the researcher field tested the initial interview questions with a small group of individuals who had experienced school closure. According to Creswell (2005), field testing or pilot testing allows the researcher to “make changes in an instrument based on feedback from a small number of individuals who complete the survey” (p. 367). Participants for field testing included two former principals and one teacher from Alleghany County Public Schools located in the Alleghany Highlands, a rural Virginia community bordering West Virginia. Two elementary schools there, Boiling Spring Elementary and Falling Spring Elementary, closed at the end of the school year in 2013. After granting informed consent, the principals and a teacher participated in field testing questions for this study. Field testing the questions provided the researcher with the opportunity to determine if the interview questions were easily understood and appropriate. Some of the questions were redundant and eliminated. Field testing also provided the researcher information to determine if the questions should be changed or modified (Creswell, 2005). Additional questions were added so that rapport could be established. Questions that did not relate to the research questions were eliminated. Field testing provided the researcher with the opportunity to practice the use of the interview protocol and analyze and interpret the data. Identifying emergent themes from the field test interviews and the ability to practice coding the data proved beneficial during the actual study. Additionally, the researcher was provided feedback on the order of the questions by a member of her examining committee. The feedback, along with the data from the field testing, yielded a revised set of questions for former staff members, which is presented as Appendix E. The revised questions for former students are presented as Appendix F, while the matrix cross referencing the revised questions with the revised research questions is presented in Appendix G.

Once participants were selected for interviews, information regarding the research study and the interview process was provided. The researcher requested that the participants suggest dates, times and locations that would afford a minimum of 60 minutes for the interviews. The participants were informed that the interviews would be recorded and transcribed. Interviews were conducted in a variety of settings that included a church, a fire house, a private home, and

two different school locations. Phone interviews were also conducted when participants were not available for a meeting date or time. While the use of phone interviews was not preferred, it was necessary to accommodate four participants and be sensitive to their schedules. The participants' contributions were believed to be extremely valuable to the study. The interviews took place at various times between May 2013 and January 2015.

The first interview that was conducted was with William, a community member who also served as a gatekeeper. That interview was conducted in the participant's private home and took over three hours. Two interviews of former staff members, Grant and Dale, were conducted in person at a church. One of the interviews took approximately 45 minutes to conduct while the other took a little more than an hour. Two former student interviews, Wendy and Roger, occurred at a school during face-to-face meetings. Three staff interviews, Henry, Wilson and Carson, were conducted in person at a school setting on two different occasions. Two of the interviews took approximately one hour. One of the interviews took over 90 minutes. Three former students, Rugby, Laurel and Barton, were interviewed at the Mount Rogers Volunteer Fire Department during the Molasses Festival on October 12, 2014. Two of those interviews took approximately 45 minutes and the other one took over 90 minutes. One former staff member, Olivet, and a community member, Jackson, were interviewed in school settings outside of Grayson County Public Schools. One of those interviews took 45 minutes and was conducted with limited time constraints. Follow-up emails were sent for clarification and to provide the researcher with supporting documents for the study. The other interview took approximately 90 minutes. Two community members, Wayne and Virginia, as well as two former staff members, Carroll and Marion, participated in phone interviews. The researcher had previously met the two former staff members. However, a face-to-face meeting with the community members were not possible due to the participants' schedules. One community member decided to answer interview questions via email.

Data Analysis

The constant comparative method was used to analyze data (Maykut & Morehouse, 2002). According to Maykut and Morehouse (2002), "the search for meaning is accomplished by first identifying the smaller units of meaning in the data, which will later serve as the basis for defining larger categories of meaning" (p. 128). Once the interviews were transcribed and reviewed by participants, the data were hand coded into units of meaning and sorted into

categories. According to Creswell (2005), coding is the “process of segmenting and labeling text to form descriptions and broad themes” (p. 237). Through inductive reasoning, the units of meaning were placed in categories.

Primary and secondary sources from Grayson County School Board Minutes and Grayson County Board of Supervisors meeting minutes were acquired online and by through hand searches that were conducted at the county administration building. There were 74 Board of Supervisors meeting minutes and agendas that were perused. There were 51 Grayson County School Board meeting minutes and agendas that were examined for information on the closure process and discussions. Of those, 16 different meeting minutes and meeting agendas were used for the study, beginning in January 2007. Additionally, newspaper articles from The Galax Gazette and The Independence Declaration were analyzed for the study. There were 21 articles from The Galax Gazette and four articles from The Independence Declaration that were cited. Additionally, supporting documents for meetings were provided by participants such as a graduation speech and a handout that was provided to the Board of Supervisors. A personal copy of the book, *Grayson County Public Schools' Bicentennial* (1993) and yearbooks were perused during visits to the Grayson County Historical Society and the Grayson Heritage Foundation. The newspapers are not printed daily. Consequently, citations do not appear chronologically. This apparent lack of chronological order is because the information provided in the newspapers may have been printed several days after actual events.

An initial discovery sheet, a large piece of white bulletin board paper, was utilized in the beginning of the data collection process. The discovery sheet included words, phrases or paragraphs that were heard during the data collection process. The discovery data provided “provisional categories, derived from [your] broad familiarity with the data” (Maykut & Morehouse, 2002, p. 124). Once the data were collected, several copies of the transcripts, and the primary and secondary source documents were made. Units of meaning (words, phrases, or paragraphs) that were common to one another were highlighted with the same colors. Units were divided into categories. The categories were identified by colored pencils that were similar to the color of the highlighters that were used for the units. The categories were then placed into themes on similarly colored bulletin board paper. For example, the words “bus” or “roads” were highlighted in pink. Categories such as “travel time” or “weather” were identified using a pink colored pencil. Those categories were then placed into themes on pink colored paper bulletin board paper with the title “transportation.” If there were overlapping units or categories, they

were placed in both, using a separate copy of the transcripts. Each unit was compared to other units and if a particular unit did not fit in a specific category, another category was established with a different colored theme. Other units were examined to determine if they fit into each new category. Rules for inclusion, as recommended by Maykut and Morehouse, were used to include or exclude units from a particular category. For example, the rule for inclusion in the category titled “transportation” was that the units related to actual travel time and not hypothetical situations such as weather-related travel. This approach afforded the researcher with the opportunity to compare interviews with one another to establish patterns and then compare the interviews to primary and secondary sources. Themes were then analyzed to determine patterns.

According to Maykut and Morehouse (2002), relationships and patterns across categories must be explored. Data were analyzed and described by coding and cross referencing interview themes with primary and secondary sources. For example, units from a primary source document of collected data that were provided to the Board of Supervisors by a participant on “travel time,” was included under the “transportation” category. Therefore, it was placed on the large piece of pink paper. Also, units in an article in the Galax Gazette (June 17, 2011) entitled “Think the ride is fun? Take the bus,” were also placed on the pink paper because it was considered a secondary source document under the category “transportation.” Categories were then merged into overarching themes and placed collectively. This coding process provided the researcher with the opportunity to explore themes to develop patterns, while triangulating the data.

Limitations and Delimitations

According to Creswell (2005), limitations are “potential weaknesses or problems with the study identified by the researcher” (p. 198). The qualitative researcher serves as the facilitator by analyzing documents, observing behavior, and conducting interviews to gather data (Creswell, 2005). Limitations to the study included the scarcity of sources related to the closure of Mount Rogers Combined School and the small number of students and school personnel who attended or were employed at the school. According to the Virginia School Report Card for Mount Rogers Combined School in 2010, at the time of the closure, Mount Rogers had a student enrollment of 88 with nine teachers (VDOE, 2010). There was a cafeteria manager, a secretary, two bus drivers, two custodians, and an interim/part-time principal. There were only 30 potential participants total who were former students or former staff members. Of those, 16 were former students that met the criteria and were over the age of 18. There were only 16 former staff

members and many of them had relocated, were adamantly opposed to participating, or simply could not be found. Access to some participants was limited due to relocation, death, or refusal to participate. While citizens participated in school board meetings during the closure timeframe, the official school board minutes and documents summarized their interactions with the board and did not provide a comprehensive record that was reflective of the entire dialogue or all events. Other limitations include the passage of time, and the accuracy of the participants' recollections, the candor of the participants and the biases of the participants. Additionally, there was limited contact with a gatekeeper due to the gatekeeper's relocation in the final stages of the study.

According to Simon (2011), delimitations are “those characteristics that limit the scope and define the boundaries of your study” (p. 2). Delimitations are variables that the researcher controls for research (Simon, 2011). For the purpose of the research, the timeframe of the study was delimited to the beginning of official discussions of the school's closure in 2006 until the school was actually closed in 2010. Primary participants were delimited to individuals who were attending the school as students or working at the school during the school closure timeframe. Secondary participants were delimited to persons who had first-hand knowledge of the closure experience. Those included were employed at the school, active community members, or students who were enrolled for a brief period during the preferred timeframe.

Institutional Review Board Approval

After receiving the examining committee's approval of the proposed study, the researcher requested approval from the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board. The Institutional Review Board oversees research involving human subjects. According to Rossman and Rallis, (2003), research institutions must approve research by requiring informed consent, gathering contact information of the researcher and supervisor, ensuring the privacy of the participants, and assuring minimal risk to participants.

The Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board requires research training on human subjects prior to beginning any study. The researcher completed the training on human subjects as required by Virginia Tech (see Appendix H). Prior to beginning the study, the researcher had to gain approval for the study by providing the Board with information such as the subject pool, recruitment methods, consent process, study procedures, and data collection. The application to

the Board was completed once permission had been granted by the examining committee and was approved on June 3, 2014 (see Appendix I).

Participants were asked to take part in interviews for approximately 60 minutes about their experiences and perspectives. Each participant was advised of any potential risks and was given the opportunity to end the interview or withdraw from the study at any time. Participants were informed that the interviews would be recorded and transcribed. They were also told that they could remain anonymous and that information would not be shared without prior approval. Participants were told that personal information would not be divulged and be kept in a secure location. The researcher provided participants with a written copy of the informed consent as required by the Board.

CHAPTER 4 THE BEGINNING OF THE END

When Mount Rogers Combined School was built in 1932, there were only four rooms built of rocks that were carried by horse and sled from the nearby creek bed. In 1990, Mount Rogers Combined School had the lowest enrollment of any school in Virginia (United States Department of Agriculture, 1990). There had always been rumors and whispers of closing Mount Rogers, but the unwritten rule or the rural legend, referred to by some as a “gentlemen’s agreement,” was that the standard for closure was that the school would remain open until enrollment dropped below 100 (Grayson, personal communication, March 22, 2013). Mount Rogers Combined School had been a survivor of sorts until budget cuts and new accountability systems that measured school success by standardized test scores and student achievement drew more scrutiny from policy makers. By the 2005-2006 school year, enrollment had dropped to 87 at the small, rural school. The Board of Supervisors and the Grayson County School Board had to take a close look at how every dollar was being spent.

Transportation routes and attendance zones fell under intense scrutiny. In response to those issues and a push for environmental stewardship as well as compliance issues with the Americans with Disabilities Act, the Grayson County School Board commissioned Oliver, Webb, Pappas & Rhudy, Inc., an architectural firm in the New River Valley, to conduct a facility study of all its school buildings in 2006. The future of Mount Rogers Combined School was in jeopardy. The combined effects of the visits of the facility study team and the drop in enrollment caused members of the Whitetop community to begin to feel that the rumors of the school closure were becoming a reality. (A timeline is located on page 145 that includes the events as they are described regarding the school’s closure.)

The Facility Study

On March 8, 2006, the Grayson County School Board commissioned Oliver, Webb, Pappas & Rhudy, Inc. to conduct a facility study of all Grayson County Public Schools (School Board Meeting Minutes, 2006). The purpose of the facility study was to “document the current condition of the main building systems and determine the feasibility of renovating and expanding the facility to meet programmatic requirements for a Community School as established by Grayson County Public Schools” (Oliver, Webb, Pappas & Rhudy, 2006). The study included evaluations of attendance zones, buildings, sites, HVAC needs and systems, plumbing,

technology, and ADA compliance. A technical report for each school was included that provided an assessment to determine “feasibility of renovation.” The study also included “The Technical Report” which provided an estimated “Cost Savings Per Average School Closed” which was \$300,900 per elementary school closed (Oliver, et al., 2006).

The presentation of the facility study and the construction plan included phases for construction with a timeframe and cost estimates for renovating all of the schools (Oliver, et al., 2006). The study was presented by the firm to the Grayson County School Board and the Grayson County Board of Supervisors at a joint meeting on December 12, 2006 (Board of Supervisors Meeting Minutes, 2006). It was during that meeting that the staff and students began to realize that closing Mount Rogers was no longer a rumor. It was becoming a reality.

The Grayson County Schools Facility Study (Oliver, et al., 2006) included a Base Plan which provided a timeline for renovating all of the schools. The Base Plan did not propose any school closures or consolidation and was the most expensive plan totaling \$51,400,000. The renovation timeline in the Base Plan extended until the 2020-2021 school year and concluded with the renovation of Grayson County High School.

Table 1

Grayson County Schools Facility – Base Plan

| Plan | Renovate/Construct | Timeline | Suggested closures |
|-----------|---|--------------------|--------------------|
| Base Plan | Renovate: Elk Creek ES, Bridle Creek ES, Baywood ES, Fairview ES, Providence ES, Independence ES | Phase 1: 2009-2010 | None |
| | Renovate: Mount Rogers Combined School, Independence MS, Fries MS | Phase 2: 2010-2011 | None |
| | Renovate: Grayson County HS | Phase 3: 2020-2021 | None |

Alternate Plan 1 included constructing new K-5 schools on the eastern and western ends of Grayson County, closing three schools, and renovating four existing facilities including Mount

Rogers Combined School. The total cost for this Alternate Plan 1 was estimated at \$47,500,000 with a projected completion date of 2020-2021 after the renovation of Grayson County High School.

Table 2

Grayson County Schools Facility – Alternate Plan 1

| Plan | Renovate/Construct | Timeline | Suggested closures |
|------------------|--|--------------------|--|
| Alternate Plan 1 | | | |
| | Construct: New Western Grayson ES and New Eastern Grayson ES | Phase 1: 2009-2010 | Bridle Creek ES, Providence, ES, Baywood ES, Fairview ES |
| | Renovate: Central Grayson ES (Independence ES), Mount Rogers Combined School , Grayson County MS | Phase 2: 2010-2011 | None |
| | Eastern Grayson MS (Fries) | | |
| | Renovate: Grayson County HS | Phase 3: 2020-2021 | None |

Alternate Plan 2 proposed constructing two new elementary schools on the eastern and western parts of the county, closing five schools (including Mount Rogers Combined School), and renovating three schools. The timeline included closing another school during Phase 2 and the final renovations would not be complete until 2021 with the renovation of Grayson County High School. The cost for this plan was estimated at \$44,000,000.

Table 3

Grayson County Schools Facility – Alternate Plan 2

| Plan | Renovate/Construct | Timeline | Suggested closures |
|-------------------|---|--------------------|---|
| Alternate Plan 2: | | | |
| | Construct: New Western Grayson ES | Phase 1: 2009-2010 | <i>Mount Rogers Combined School,</i> Bridle Creek ES, Providence ES, Baywood ES, Fairview ES |
| | Renovate: New Eastern Grayson ES (Fries) | | |
| | Renovate: Central Grayson ES (Independence) | Phase 2: 2010-2011 | Elk Creek ES |
| | Grayson County MS | | |
| | Renovate: Grayson County HS | Phase 3: 2020-2021 | None |

Alternate Plan 3 included a newly constructed school in the western part of Grayson County and renovating an elementary school in the eastern part, while closing five schools. The timeline was similar to Alternate Plan 2, except for an additional school closure in Phase 2. The cost for Alternate Plan 3 was estimated at \$45,600,000.

Table 4

Grayson County Schools Facility – Alternate Plan 3

| Plan | Renovate/Construct | Timeline | Suggested closures |
|-------------------|---|--------------------|---|
| Alternate Plan 3: | | | |
| | Construct: New Western Grayson ES | Phase 1: 2009-2010 | <i>Mount Rogers Combined School,</i> Bridle Creek ES, Providence ES, Baywood ES, Fairview ES |
| | Renovate: New Eastern Grayson ES (Fries) | | |
| | Renovate: Central Grayson (Independence) and Grayson County MS | Phase 2: 2010-2011 | Elk Creek ES, and Fairview ES (if not selected in phase 1) |
| | Renovate: Grayson County HS | Phase 3: 2020-2021 | None |

Alternate Plan 4 included construction of a new school in the western end of the county, closing three schools (including Mount Rogers Combined School), and renovating the K-7 school in the eastern part of the county. Phase 2 of Alternate Plan 4 included closing two additional schools during the 2010-2011 school year, renovating the K-7 school in Independence, and building a new school in the eastern part of the county. The timeline for projected completion was the 2020-2021 school year with the renovation of Grayson County High School. The estimated cost for Alternate Plan 4 was \$49,400,000.

Table 5

Grayson County Schools Facility – Alternate Plan 4

| Plan | Renovate/Construct | Timeline | Suggested closures |
|---|--|--------------------|--|
| Alternate Plan 4: (Recommended to the Grayson County School Board and Grayson County Board of Supervisors) | Construct: New Western Grayson ES | Phase 1: 2009-2010 | <i>Mount Rogers Combined School,</i> Bridle Creek ES, Providence ES |
| | Renovate: New Eastern Grayson ES (Fries) | | |
| | Renovate: Central Grayson (Independence) | Phase 2: 2010-2011 | Elk Creek ES, Fairview ES |
| | Construct: New Eastern Grayson ES | | |
| | Renovate: Grayson County HS | Phase 3: 2020-2021 | None |

As part of the Facility Study, each school in Grayson County received a rank based on a Likert-style scale with the following points used to determine the feasibility of renovation: 4-Excellent, 3-Very Good, 2-Good, 1-Fair and 0-Poor (Oliver, et al., 2006). The study also included a cost analysis to compare renovation versus new construction. Transportation and attendance zones were also evaluated. The group awarded Mount Rogers Combined School a score of 1.3. The estimated cost of renovating the school, with additions, was \$2,752,900. The cost of constructing a new building was estimated to be \$4,750,000.00 (Oliver, et al., 2006). According to the study, the score reflected the following description: “Buildings of marginal adequacy in construction and condition. Design is inadequate and too inflexible to be adapted. Mechanical systems may be obsolete and in poor condition. Feasibility and cost analysis will indicate major renovation probably not economically feasible” (Oliver, et al., Technical Report Introduction, Commission No. 0609, 2006). Mount Rogers Combined School ranked lowest in the criteria addressing handicapped accessibility and hazardous materials. The presence of asbestos and other hazardous materials would require removal.

The facility study presentation was also a part of the School Capital Construction Plan (referred to as the Five Year Plan by some participants) presented on January 3, 2007 by

members of the school division's central office staff (Board of Supervisors Meeting Minutes, 2007). The Board of Supervisors announced that there would be a public hearing at Grayson County High School on January 29, 2007 for comments on the School Capital Construction Plan.

During the public hearing some staff members and community members were outspoken about the possible closure of Mount Rogers Combined School. According to the School Board minutes, (January 29, 2007), there were five speakers who were opponents of the school closure. Those that spoke were Jerry Young, Patsy Blevins, Rebecca Absher, Kenneth Kilby, and Chris Isaacs. For former students and former staff members, the rumors about potential closure had become a reality. It was time for the community to share the unique attributes of the school and express concerns regarding the loss of their school. The concerns that they shared were: transportation, weather, larger class sizes, the music program, student transfers to other school divisions, and loss of personal relationships among the students and staff.

The Closure Process

On January 19, 2007, members of the Grayson County School Board, Superintendent Elizabeth Thomas and other school personnel presented the Grayson County Schools Capital Construction Plan in an open hearing to the Board of Supervisors (Board of Supervisors Meeting Minutes, 2007). The Plan included much of the information from the Grayson County Schools Facility Study. According to the Board of Supervisors meeting minutes, on February 8, 2007, Dr. Thomas requested that the Board of Supervisors support the school board's recommendation to adopt "Alternate Plan 4," as part of the School Capital Construction Plan, which included closing Bridle Creek Elementary School and Mount Rogers Combined School and renovating Fries K-7 School. The meeting was adjourned until February 14, 2007 to provide time for the supervisors to review the supporting documents (Board of Supervisors Meeting Minutes, 2007).

At the meeting on February 14, 2007, comments were received by the superintendent from the supervisors regarding transportation, weather, number of students affected, and scholarships [those that were specific to Mount Rogers] for students at Mount Rogers Combined School. Mr. William Cox, Director of School Maintenance, provided the Board of Supervisors with an overview of the facilities highlighting the major areas of concern such as fire alarms, school size, electrical and plumbing issues, and school security (Board of Supervisors Meeting Minutes, 2007). Supervisor Ralph Tuggle asked about closing Mount Rogers School and questioned if closing would be "taking away the heritage. If funding could be found for Mount

Rogers, what would be the consequences of that as to how it related to the plan?”(Board of Supervisors Meeting Minutes, 2007). Dr. Thomas replied that “it would cripple the plan” (Board of Supervisors Meeting Minutes, 2007). The Supervisors announced that the School Capital Construction Plan would be voted upon at the March 8, 2007 meeting and a joint work session with the Grayson County School Board was scheduled for March 1, 2007. According to the Grayson County Board of Supervisors meeting minutes, the members of the Board of Supervisors voted 5 to 0 to approve the School Capital Construction Plan (Board of Supervisors Meeting Minutes, 2007).

On motion of Douglas Carrico, duly seconded by Thomas Maynard, the Board of Supervisors approved the following resolution with a 5/0 vote:

RESOLUTION

Whereas, the education of the children of Grayson County is a major responsibility of the county government, including the Board of Supervisors and the Grayson County Public School System; and

Whereas, a proper educational environment, including up to date facilities, is an important factor in ensuring that the educational opportunities provided to the students attending county schools will allow them to achieve the level of education necessary to succeed in the 21st century job market; and

Whereas, the Grayson County Public School System has conducted a two year study of the system’s facilities which documented the current condition of the main building systems and the effort which would be required to meet the school system’s programmatic requirements for educating the children of the county for the next 25 years; and

Whereas, the results of that study have shown that the existing school facilities are characterized by crumbling infrastructure, do not meet current life, safety, building or energy codes; and

Whereas, it was determined that without major capital investment, the current “band aid” approach to building maintenance and modernization will continue until imminent building system(s) failure; and

Whereas, the Grayson County School System has adopted a long range Facilities Improvement Plan to address needs of the System, and which, when completed, will result in modern, up to date school facilities in which a proper educational environment for the county's children can be established; and

Whereas, the Facilities Improvement Plan adopted by the Grayson County School system is the most cost effective approach to securing the future educational opportunities of the county; and

Whereas, the Grayson County School System has agreed to put into place a budget request format and procedures discussed in the attached School Plan Requirements which will allow the tracking of cost savings and the allocation of those savings to the debt service resulting from the long range Facilities Improvement Plan; and now,

Therefore be it resolved, that the Grayson County Board of Supervisors hereby approves the Grayson County Public School System's Facilities Improvement Plan as presented; and

Therefore be it further resolved, that the Grayson County Board of Supervisors requests that the Grayson County Public School System take the necessary action to implement the requirements contained in the School Plan Requirements document dated March 5, 2007 which is attached and thereby made a part of this document; and

Therefore be it further resolved, that the Grayson County Board of Supervisors, upon completion of the action required by the attached School Plan Requirements, authorizes the Grayson County Public School System to proceed with Phases One and Two of the School System Facilities Improvement Plan; and

Therefore be it further resolved that the approval and authorization contained in this resolution is contingent on the accuracy of the estimates provided by the Grayson County School System, and if the actual cost bids for the plan deviate by greater than 10% from estimated, this plan must be reauthorized by the Grayson County Board of Supervisors. (Board of Supervisors Meeting Minutes, March 8, 2007)

On March 26, 2007, at a joint meeting of the board of supervisors and the school board, the 2007-2008 budget proposal was presented. At the Grayson County Board of Supervisors meeting on April 5, 2007, it was suggested by the supervisors that the Grayson County Planning Commission be involved in all decisions regarding school facilities. The supervisors scheduled a public hearing on April 19, 2007 to review the School Board budget. On April 26, 2007, the supervisors approved the budget and began to make plans on how the money should be spent that was to be saved from closing schools (Board of Supervisors Meeting Minutes, 2007). The decision had been made. Mount Rogers Combined School would close and a new school in western Grayson County would be constructed. The school would house students from Bridle Creek Elementary School as well as students from Mount Rogers Combined School. A separate high school wing would be available for Mount Rogers students until graduation. The school would serve as a satellite of Grayson County High School.

The news was traumatic for the Mount Rogers Combined School community. Some of the opponents of the closure became somewhat open to the idea because the high school students from Mount Rogers were going to have their own high school on the western end of the county. The new school was going to be a “state of the art” facility and while some of the former students and former staff members were skeptical that they were going to have their own high school, the idea of a new school made the closure of Mount Rogers somewhat tolerable for others (Dale, personal communication, May 21, 2014 and Henry, personal communication, October 13, 2014).

On September 24, 2007, the Grayson County School Board agreed that SunTrust Bank was to provide the funding for school construction. On October 11, 2007, the Board of Supervisors passed a resolution for the Industrial Development Authority to act as the agent for acquiring land for the new school. At the March 20, 2008 Board of Supervisors Meeting, the School Board budget was presented. A public hearing for the School Board budget was scheduled for April 17, 2008 (Board of Supervisors Meeting Minutes, 2008). The Grayson County Board of Supervisors approved the school division’s request for operations and debt service funding in the amount of \$2,313,530.

On Monday, May 12, 2008, the Grayson County School Board voted to name the new school, Grayson Highlands School (New Grayson School, 2008). The school would house students in kindergarten through seventh grade from Bridle Creek Elementary School as well as the high school students from Mount Rogers Combined School. According to the Director of

Instruction and Assessment, Stephen Cornett, the school would be a “satellite of Grayson County High School” so that the current Mount Rogers high school students would be able to complete diploma requirements (New Grayson School, 2008). According to the Virginia Department of Education Public School Facilities Cost Data (2008), the contract for constructing the new Grayson Highlands School was awarded on July 7, 2008 for \$8,877,400. On July 10, the Grayson County School Board recommended and the Board of Supervisors approved a permit for building the new school in Volney, Virginia on Route 16. On July 14, 2008, Grayson County School Superintendent, Elizabeth Thomas, told the Galax Gazette that the “plan is to have the school ready for the 2009-2010 school year “(New Grayson School, 2008). Mount Rogers Combined School was to close at the end of the 2008-2009 school year.

The announcement was a confirmation to some in that the citizens living in western Grayson County were finally going to have their own school. It was exciting for some and devastating for others. The former students and former staff members at Mount Rogers were going to have the opportunity to stay together at the new “high school” wing at Grayson Highlands. While the travel times were going to be challenging, the idea of having a brand new building was very tempting to some of the previous opponents of closure. The Mount Rogers Combined School community became somewhat divided on the issue. Some were insistent on preserving their community identity and did not believe that the high school wing was sustainable (Dale, personal communication, May 21, 2014 and Carson, personal communication, June 13, 2014).

Construction begins

According to the Galax Gazette (Groundbreaking set for new Grayson School, 2008), a groundbreaking ceremony for Grayson Highlands School was held on July 31, 2008. Superintendent Thomas explained that while there had been a few construction delays, including the installation of a well system and paving roads, the plan was to work on the foundation, walls and roof so that crews could work through the winter months and have the building ready for the 2009-2010 school year (Groundbreaking set for new, 2008). According to the Galax Gazette, the contract had a penalty clause that included a 450 day completion timeframe. It was also announced that the new school would have silver and burgundy as the school colors and an eagle as the mascot.

Construction falls behind schedule

According to Grayson County School Board Meeting Minutes, the Grayson Highlands School Project was behind schedule in the early fall of 2008 (October 13, 2008). The School Board was going to consider options for extending public water lines or building a well on the site. The construction plans did not include provisions for water access to the facility. The school administrators were working with the county administrator, William Ring, to discuss options and were hoping to get back on schedule during the winter months. According to the Galax Gazette, in November the contractors lost 15 of 20 workdays due to inclement weather and 18 days out of 23 days in December due to unseasonably cold and snowy weather. With record cold temperatures, the construction crew missed 21 out of 22 days in January (Grayson school behind schedule, March 25, 2009). Frustration levels among school board members continued to escalate when on March 23, 2009 Grayson County school officials were told that the school would not open until December 2009. They were also informed that there was, in fact, no penalty clause in the contract for construction delays, as previously shared by school personnel in the October 2008 School Board meeting (New Grayson school slips further, May 25, 2009). School Board officials were informed that the earliest start date for the new facility would be during the second semester, January 2, 2010. The month of February 2009 proved to be similar to the previous three months in that 21 days of construction were lost to bad weather. For the students and staff at Mount Rogers Combined School the news was bittersweet. They were going to have an additional semester on the mountain.

On May 19, 2009, the Grayson County School Board presented a budget request that was published in the Galax Gazette. The request stated:

We understand the economic difficulties our region is experiencing. But if we want a prosperous community, we must invest in a high quality education system. Education has proven time after time to be the best solution to poverty and weak economic conditions. Predictably, some elected officials will state “I’m here to protect the taxpayer.” Taxpayers do not need protection. They need assurances that their money is being invested and wisely spent. Unfortunately, a debate is ongoing concerning responsibility of the school system to provide funds for new facilities that are in progress for the Phase 1 projects in Fries and in the western section of the county. We would like to clarify some facts:

- The architectural firm that conducted our facilities study provided good estimates of the potential savings of \$300,900 per average elementary school closed.
- In deliberations, we agreed that educational requirements for students were to be met as our first priority. We agreed the cost of the facilities improvements would be shared by the county and the school system. We agreed that our ability to provide savings to apply to improvements would depend on stability of state funding.
- State funds have not remained stable. Since the 2005-2006 school year when we began working on facilities improvements, we have lost enrollment of approximately 200 students. We have suffered a loss of sales tax revenue of \$163,271 for the 2008-2009 school year and a loss in state basic aid of approximately \$650,000 for the 2009-2010 due to the economic shutdown.
- In good faith and trust, the school system provided the county with \$201,870 in June 2006 to be designated to the facilities plan and \$410,537 in June 2007 to be used for land acquisition and architect and engineering fees. These monies were provided earlier than expected and before the end of Phase 1 to the board of supervisors. Had they applied the total amount of \$612,407 to our facilities plan as agreed, it would have saved the taxpayers at least \$130,000 in interest charges.
- In June 2008, the school system again provided the county monies with \$413,000 requested to be used for the facilities plan and \$375,000 requested for buses and fuel, which we have not received. We requested an accounting of how the total amount of \$1.130 million was used, but have not received this information. Nor have we been provided an accounting of the county's contribution to the facilities plan.

Communities that invest in strong public school systems have a highly educated workforce and better economic conditions. As adults and leaders, we must be the voice of our young people. The supervisors will have a public hearing on the budget May 5, 6:30pm at the Grayson County Courthouse. Please communicate to our elected officials

that the price of school failure is much greater to the taxpayer than the price of success.”
(Grayson should invest in education, May 13, 2009)

In response to the School Board’s statement, citizens of the county turned out in force at the next meeting of the Board of Supervisors. “Nearly 75 people packed the Grayson County Courthouse for a public hearing on the 2009-2010 budget for the school division” (Grayson schools still need to trim spending, May 18, 2009). Board of Supervisors Chairman Mike Maynard explained the supervisors’ roles in the budget process and said that no decisions had been made and that none would be made until the budget meeting occurred and that “any suggestion that the board has not been a supporter of Grayson schools is misguided” (Grayson schools still need, May 18, 2009).

Construction continues to fall behind schedule

On May 12, 2009, at the Grayson County School Board meeting, County Administrator William Ring informed the School Board that the construction project had continued to fall behind schedule and the earliest completion date would be February 12, 2010. Plans were still being made for a January opening, because it was still possible, but not guaranteed. Plans were in place to close Mount Rogers and Bridle Creek at the end of the first semester. Both schools would close for winter break and students would return to the new school, Grayson Highlands on January 2, 2010 (Board of Supervisors meeting minutes, 2009).

According to Grayson County School Superintendent Thomas, the staff had begun planning for the transition (Grayson school could open on time, 2009). Bridle Creek Elementary and Mount Rogers Combined School faculty members in cooperation with Grayson County High School faculty members were planning joint faculty meetings and combined PTO meetings. Meanwhile, Grayson County High School coaches were reaching out to the high school students at Mount Rogers (Grayson County School Board Meeting Minutes, December 14, 2009). This was a very sad time for some of the former students and staff. The emotional distractions of the closure made it difficult for the opponents to participate in the transition. The community was struggling to keep their identity and they were in a state of unrest. Those that were open to the idea of having their own school were excited about planning with colleagues from other schools, but were seen as traitors by the opponents (Wilson, personal communication, June 3, 2014).

The Grayson County Clerk of the Works announced at the December 2009 School Board meeting that the school would not be ready until January 18, 2010, due to the five inches of rain

that fell in December, causing even more delays with the new septic and water system. The teachers and students returned to Mount Rogers after winter break and had a few more weeks in their beloved school. The staff unpacked materials and activities that would sustain them until the new school opened. Some of the former students and staff at Mount Rogers were happy that they could stay in their school longer, but for others it felt like they were prolonging the inevitable (Laurel, personal communication, October 12, 2014 and Henry, personal communication, October 13, 2014).

Grand opening delayed

On January 18, 2010, Superintendent Thomas sent an email to the Galax Gazette stating that “weather conditions have prevented the contractors from completing the water system, the septic system and the road project” (Cold temperatures delay opening, 2010). At the February 22, 2010, Grayson County School Board Meeting, Frank Williams of Pinnacle Architects, spoke to the Board and announced that the Grayson Highlands School would not be finished until April. The major issues continued to be the water system and the turning lanes to the school. According to an article in the Galax Gazette on February 26, 2010, when asked about closing Mount Rogers and Bridle Creek, School Board Chairman Shannon Holdaway replied that it was “crazy to move them for 60 days.” Again, the former students and former staff members were faced with the prolonged emotional difficulties of losing their school, planning for end of the year activities, and trying to remain focused for instruction (Dale, personal communication, May 21, 2014).

According to an article in the Independence Declaration (County delays school projects, February 19, 2010),

Grayson County leaders worked for more than four years to create and implement a School Improvement Plan that would build new schools and renovate some older ones. It took the Grayson County Board of Supervisors less than four minutes Thursday to suspend the building program.

Jonathan Sweet, Grayson County Administrator, proposed a resolution to postpone the construction plan. Phase 2 of the plan was set to begin in 2010-2011 and the Grayson County School Board had already contracted a real estate company to secure land for construction of a school in eastern Grayson County (County delays school projects, February 19, 2010). The

article also adds that Vice Chairman Doug Carrico was quoted as saying, “the timing on this resolution is good, especially considering we don’t really know the cost of Phase 1.”

The protest continues

The opening of the new school had been postponed until the fall. The continuous delays gave the opponents of the school closure political ammunition to rally additional support. There were some who believed that there was a slim chance of keeping the elementary students at Mount Rogers because of the extended travel time back and forth to the new school. According to the Galax Gazette [in a newspaper article published 10 days after the meeting] a community meeting at the new Grayson Highlands School took place on May 6, 2010 in the gymnasium where parents and students sat on the new bleachers and met the new principal, John Alexander. Mr. Alexander was the principal at Bridle Creek and was being transferred to the new school (Fall opening a slim, May 16, 2010). Grayson County School Board Chairman Shannon Holdaway, Transportation Supervisor Dennis Roop, Director of Instruction and Assessment Steve Cornett, Maintenance Supervisor Roy Anders, and Director of Personnel and Operations Chad Newman were there to greet the community. Alexander announced that the school would house students in kindergarten to grade 7 and offer core classes to students in grades 8 through 12. Students would be bused to Grayson County High School for electives. The principal said that parents would receive letters in June with the new bus routes and teacher assignments (Fall opening a slim chance, May 16, 2010). What began as a seemingly positive meeting soon became negative. The speakers were met with opposition from some citizens questioning the closure process, the use of the empty facilities and the division leaders responded to questions about funding for the project. Finally, one community member stated that “no matter what your opinion was, now was the time for the community to come together.” That statement was followed by a round of applause (Fall opening a slim chance, May 16, 2010).

At the May 12, 2010 meeting of the Grayson County School Board, there was continued opposition from community members regarding the closure of Mount Rogers Combined School. Sue Blevins, Penny Sizemore and Brenda Walls spoke against the closure. They cited the lengthy ride for elementary students, disparity in funding in different areas of the county, and a history of success at Mount Rogers, as reasons for their opposition. Mrs. Walls also said that there was a “petition against the move and that 689 registered voters had already signed it” (Grayson

Highlands School should open by August, July 16, 2010). Nevertheless, Mount Rogers Combined School remained scheduled to close at the end of the 2009-2010 school year.

Construction delays school opening for all of Grayson County Public Schools

According to the Galax Gazette on July 16, 2010, Chairman of the School Board Holdaway responded after being asked who could answer questions regarding the closure of Mount Rogers that “the school system has held 17 different meetings regarding Grayson Highlands School” and then the public comment section of the meeting was closed by the board. According to Grayson County School Board meeting minutes on July 26, 2010, a special meeting was called and Superintendent Thomas requested an additional change in the school calendar delaying the opening of all Grayson County Schools until August 16 because the construction of Grayson Highlands School was not complete. The lack of air conditioning and the warm temperatures, in addition to the issues with the access road project, would require an additional week for the school to be ready. The first teacher workday was moved to August 10, 2010 and the first day for students was changed to August 16, 2010 (Grayson Highlands School should open by August, July 30, 2010). A ribbon-cutting ceremony for the new school was held on August 3, 2010 with the Grayson County Board of Supervisors, the Grayson County School Board and distinguished guests in attendance. Students and parents were allowed to tour the new school (Grayson Highlands opens at last, August 16, 2010). Fifth District Delegate, Bill Carrico was in attendance and urged the community to come together to celebrate. After the tours, refreshments were served and live music was provided. After the ceremony, the former students and former staff members began to move into their new schools. There were no more delays or meetings. Those that fiercely advocated for their school felt as if they did not have a say in the decision and that their pleas fell on deaf ears (Grant, personal communication, May 21, 2014). The former students and former staff members returned to the mountain, gathered their belongings, and walked out of Mount Rogers Combined School for the last time.

The voices of Mount Rogers Combined School

The former staff members and former students of Mount Rogers Combined School had not previously shared their experiences or perceptions of the school closure and its effects. The study provided an opportunity for them to do so. In addition, some community members were willing to share their experiences.

The former students and staff had mixed responses to the closing of Mount Rogers. Carson (personal communication, June 13, 2014) explained that some of the students and “the younger generation didn’t seem to fight as much as the older ones.” Carson added:

I think people had heard it so much that they did not pick up on what was being said. But, they wanted somebody else to do it. They didn’t want to take the time. I don’t think they wanted to. I think if they had, I think it [Mount Rogers Combined School] could have still been open. (Carson, personal communication, June 13, 2104)

Roger, a former student stated that “The community didn’t really fight it. We should have fought against this. But, we weren’t going to win. It wouldn’t have mattered” (Roger, personal communication, June 3, 2014). Dale (personal communication, May 21, 2014), a former staff member echoed these sentiments: “We just really didn’t believe that it was actually going to come down to it though. Things just got intense when architects started coming in. That’s when it got serious because that was the farthest they’d ever taken it.” A former staff member explained that there were many community members who were absolutely against the closure and most of those were lifelong residents who were not parents of students that were enrolled at the time the closure of the school was being considered (Wilson, personal communication, June 3, 2014). “From my observations, the individuals that were not involved in the school objected more than the people that had kids in school” (Wayne, personal communication, January 31, 2015). “The last four or five years, I’d seen a decline in the support [from] the community at large. We always, I think, was [*sic*] having to fight to keep the school open. We always had to do that” (Carson, personal communication, June 13, 2014). William, a community member who did not have students enrolled in the school explained, “Now, I don’t bluff, but, I would have done something” (personal communication, March 22, 2013).

Right before the school closed, parents started really trying to fight it. Some of the parents were just going to meetings all the time and trying to fight it. And it [Grayson Highlands] was already built. And, it was like you’re a little too late, you know. Nobody really fought against it until that point. (Wilson, personal communication, June 3, 2014)

“I just think people thought it would never happen because every year, we’re going through it. I just think that they thought it would go on forever” (Carson, personal communication, June 13, 2014).

Student and Staff Perspectives of the Closure Process

“Any time you want to close a school, you have the same objections, same arguments, and same interests anywhere you go” (Wayne, personal communication, January 31, 2015). When the participants were asked why they believed the school closed, one of the reasons they cited was the age of the facility. A former staff member replied, “they kept trying to impress upon the people that this was an old building. If we do this [close the school], your kids are going to have better lighting, more space and air conditioning” (Dale, personal communication, May 21, 2014). Another staff member expressed concerns regarding the facility and shared that, “I had some plaster fall down in the corner of my room and if a student had been there, it would have been bad” (Henry, personal communication, October 13, 2014). Virginia (personal communication, October 27, 2014) referenced the Facility Study, stating that when the school facilities were ranked, “Bridle Creek and Mount Rogers, were the bottom two. Structurally, they were just not fit to continue to be used.” A former staff member explained that the facility was so small that it was difficult [to work] because there was no space.

There were times when there was no space and I would go into a classroom and work in the back of the classroom, just depending on what was going on at time at the school. And often it would be in a little hallway or corridor, so that might be by the gym or out at the front double doors where I would just set up a table in, a couple of chairs. (Marion, personal communication, November 11, 2014)

Henry explained (personal communication, October 13, 2014), “we didn’t have the space that we have at this school [name of school redacted to protect identity of participant]. I mean the walls were just lined with stuff and packed with stuff.” Ashe (personal communication, January 21, 2015), said that “the years of apathy and neglect were always visible in some manner despite the beautiful setting in a historic building.”

Another reason some of the students and staff felt that the school was closed was because of the financial savings that would result if the school closed. When asked why the school was closed, a former staff member said it was because of “financial reasons. I mean Mount Rogers was a little school and it cost a lot to run that school. It didn’t make sense to keep it open” (Dale, personal communication, May 21, 2014). A staff member said that it was fiscally irresponsible to have so many teachers there and that “they were going to have to close it because of money, probably because there were so many teachers employed there” (Wilson, personal

communication, June 3, 2014). A community member responded that, “their dollars told them it would make more sense to close the school. And, I think that was an error in judgment” (Jackson, personal communication, October 13, 2014). Virginia, a school board member explained that the economic savings were presented to the Board of Supervisors at every budget meeting. “Financially, and structurally, we had to [close the school]. And we had showed proof of those savings in every budget meeting with the board supervisors” (Virginia, personal communication, October 27, 2014). Virginia also added that “structurally, they [Mount Rogers and Bridle Creek] were just not fit for continued to be used, and we have done [*sic*] the band aids on them for 40 years.”

Two staff members felt that declining enrollment was one of the reasons that the school was closed. “The class size was incredibly small. There were a lot of combined classes. I think, at one point, we had a combination class of three grades with one teacher” (Virginia, personal communication, October 27, 2014). One staff member said that there “were so many teachers employed there for so few kids. Although the elementary was doubled up, sometimes tripled up with classes, there was still a teacher for every subject in the high school” (Wilson, personal communication, June 3, 2014). According to a community member:

In my opinion, there was no way to justify maintaining a high school in order to get accredited with the number of students that you had and the amount of curriculum that had to be offered to get a child what they needed to graduate and go on to something beyond high school. It was a real quandary that everyone had to deal with. There was no solution other than transporting those students [to the high school]. That was always a very difficult thing to sell to the community. (Wayne, personal communication, January 31, 2015)

Staff Perspectives of the Effects of the School Closure

Communication

Communication from the school division regarding school closure was one of the most common issues that the participants expressed in the interviews. For many years, there had been rumors about the possibility of Mount Rogers being closed but none of the participants believed that it was actually going to happen until it did. Dale, a former staff member explained,

It was just three or four years before they closed. They put in the heat [and new windows]. They were saying they were going to close at the same time they were putting things in. I mean [we] were all confused. Why are you doing this if you're gonna close? It really didn't make sense. I had heard rumors ever since I had been there that they were wanting to close and it just – it never happened. (Dale, personal communication, May 21, 2014)

Another former staff member explained that the rumors had been ongoing for decades:

Well, I remember even as early as the 70s and 80s there was always, in the community, a buzz about “Mount Rogers is going to close. Mount Rogers is going to close,” and it never did. And through three or four different tenures of superintendents, it never did. And I know when I came back in [date retracted to ensure anonymity], I was still hearing that, and I just kind of smiled and said, “Yeah. Well I've heard about that for years but it's never happened.” (Marion, personal communication, November 11, 2014)

Former staff members believed that the school division did not convey the gravity of the possibility of school closure. Some read about the proposals in the newspaper. “They had several community meetings and as far as telling the teachers, we read about it in the newspaper” (Dale, personal communication, May 21, 2014). Another staff member said, “I read it in the paper,” (Wilson, personal communication, June 3, 2014). Some of the staff members attended the community meetings, and were shocked by the news from the school system. “I was surprised when the superintendent came forward with her Five Year Plan indicating that one of the initial parts of it would be the closing of Bridle Creek Elementary School and Mount Rogers” (Marion, personal communication, November 11, 2014). Many felt that they should have been given some warning about the discussions. Grant (personal communication, May 21, 2014) explained that “there wasn't a real discussion that I know of about it. They did have a few community meetings about it at Mount Rogers. It was more to display their product than it was to take input.” A former staff member explained that the school division did not advertise the meetings as well as they could have although, “We went to some of the meetings. We really weren't told. We kind of found out as the community did” (Dale, personal communication, May 21, 2014). When describing the closing of the school, one former staff member explained, “I mean the way they

went about it was kind of underhanded. You know all this sneaking under the table” (Dale, personal communication, May 21, 2014).

At some of the Board of Supervisors meetings, there were members of the public advocating for Mount Rogers to stay open. “I felt like there was a slight, slight hope [for keeping Mount Rogers open], but the decision had already been made and the pleas fell on deaf ears” (Grant, personal communication, May 21, 2014). Another former staff member was an observer at the meetings and conveyed the same sentiment. “The School Board was pretty solidified in their decision; it really didn’t matter what anyone said” (Dale, personal communication, May 21, 2014).

Many of the staff members felt as if they did not have a voice in the decision. Some of the staff members were divided on the issue, but those who supported the closure remained silent to avoid conflicts. Voices were intentionally muted, because they did not want to be considered a “traitor by supporting the closing of Mount Rogers” (Wilson, personal communication, June 3, 2014). Roger (personal communication, June 3, 2014), a former student said, “I’m tired of worrying about them closing the school all the time, because it was always a threat. It was a threat, always.” Some staff members felt that they had been silenced by school personnel:

Well, as I said, we were not allowed--we were told by ...[name removed].. absolutely we were not to discuss this with the students in any way, shape, or form. We were not to mention it. We were not to discuss it. We were not to talk about it in any way. So they [the students] would come in. They would be complaining at first and all upset, and I would just pretty much have to say, “I’m not allowed to talk about it. But I completely understand where you’re coming from,” and I would write down that meeting date right there, and that was about all I could do. Because I didn’t want to step out of the lines of what I was allowed to do. I’m pretty compliant. I want to be compliant, and I want to be beneficial to all parties. And sometimes you had to say, “Well, what’s beneficial?” That was one of those times, I guess. I don’t know of more than two students that had any desire to have a new school. There might have been two. The rest of them were perfectly content, perfectly happy at Mount Rogers. (Grant, personal communication, May 21, 2014)

A former staff member explained that when school division representatives came to the school:

and presented to the Whitetop community this plan, it was done without discussions. It was done where, “This is our Five Year Plan. This is what we planned to do” and in a very positive way, but not in a way of “what do you think about this?” to the community. I think the community was frustrated because they felt like they didn’t really have a say in what was coming. (Marion, personal communication, November 11, 2014)

Communication regarding construction issues

According to two of the staff members, the school division’s failure to communicate the construction issues that delayed the closure was extremely frustrating.

Yeah, as a teacher it was a nightmare. Before we left for Christmas, we had to pack up everything because we were told that we would not be back in this school after Christmas. So, teachers packed their stuff and then, we had to unpack after Christmas. (Henry, personal communication, October 13, 2014)

A former staff member said, “That time line changed a few times because of construction. Sometimes, it takes longer than planned and there were two or three times where we were told we are moving and then we didn’t and then we finally did” (Marion, personal communication, November 11, 2014).

Communication regarding the elimination of high school classes

The school division’s decision to discontinue high school classes for Mount Rogers students after one year at Grayson Highlands angered many of the participants.

For the most part, the community was upset. There were some parents that were for the closure because they believed what they had been told. Their child would be offered more opportunities, at the [new] high school and that they would be allowed to stay there. (Dale, personal communication, May 21, 2014)

A former staff member explained:

Well, we were told it could be a K-12 school and anybody could attend. We were told that the kids could stay together. But I knew two years before, that was not going to happen [and] that it would be an elementary. I think if the community had got involved

and they had went [sic] to the meeting and they would have known. (Carson, personal communication, June 13, 2014)

Another former staff member said:

They were told that they were going to have a high school there and that the students [from Mount Rogers] would have a choice. They could either go to the high school wing at Grayson Highlands or go to Grayson County High School. (Grant, personal communication, May 21, 2014)

Some felt that offering high school classes at Grayson Highlands was temporary from the beginning, and that the school division used the idea to quell the community protestors by saying that the western end of the county was getting a brand new high school of their own. One of the former staff members indicated that they knew what the original plan included. That participant felt that if the school division could get the community to buy in to the new high school idea, that there would be nothing they could do once Mount Rogers was closed. “But we knew that beneath it all, it was just a ploy to get rid of our own [school], because once they got rid of it, they’re going to be open to do whatever they want” (Grant, personal communication, May 21, 2014). Another former staff member echoed the responses of other participants. The former staff member explained, “They [the School Board and administrative staff] knew they wouldn’t have a high school in there. They had intentions to put that in there to hush the parents to get it [Mount Rogers Combined School] shut down knowing they [the School Board and administrative staff] weren’t going to. I mean that’s my opinion” (Carroll, personal communication, October 22, 2014). One former staff member said, “To have this school on our end of the county was so awesome. I just really wish we’d kept a high school here [in the western part of the county]. I felt like I knew that it was very temporary, though” (Henry, personal communication, October 13, 2014). A former staff member explained that:

There were some parents that were for it [the closure] because they believed what they had been told about the students. We knew that that wasn’t the case because they never intended to let us stay there but there were parents that believed them so they were trying to get others on board. (Dale, personal communication, May 21, 2014)

Another former staff member, describing the closure process explained, “As the year went on that year, I could see. I kept seeing signs. Yes, they are. They’re lying to us” (Wilson, personal communication, June 3, 2014). One former staff member said that in a conversation with a School Board member that the School Board member said:

Well, you will at least be there. We’re going to at least keep you there three years.” And then after one year, they said, “well, if it’s our ultimate goal, that they come down here, let’s just do it now.” So we were at Grayson Highlands for one year, and then they sent us down. (Grant, personal communication, May 21, 2014)

A former staff member explained:

[name withheld] assured the Whitetop community that the high school students would be able to finish their high school career in Troutdale [Grayson Highlands] as opposed to being bused into Independence to Grayson County High School. And, after a year that was not the case anymore. I felt really bad for the community because they felt [again] like they did not have a say in that and that it had already been decided and it really frustrated a lot of families in that community. (Marion, personal communication, November 11, 2014)

When asked about the experience of hearing the news that high school classes were going to be eliminated at Grayson Highlands, a former staff member said, “They voted to get rid of the high school and I remember the very next day we heard about it. And I wasn’t surprised” (Wilson, personal communication, June 3, 2014). When asked how the news was conveyed, the participant responded, “word of mouth. [Name retracted] who was part of the GCEA [Grayson County Education Association], she was the one who told us first” (Wilson, personal communication, June 3, 2014).

Colleague relationships

Developing relationships with new colleagues resulted in positive and negative experiences for the teachers. One former staff member described her new colleagues as “supportive and since I’ve been down the staff has been really good to work with. I mean I was more surprised about that I guess more than anything” (Dale, personal communication, May 21, 2014). Once the school was closed, one participant described the difficulty that one of her

colleagues was experiencing. “I know that emotionally it just really affected her. She is a great teacher and has adjusted well to the new school with new colleagues, but that was hard for her” (Marion, personal communication November 11, 2014).

At Mount Rogers, all staff members were accustomed to fulfilling a myriad of roles and responsibilities due to the size of the school. The participants commented on how unique the school was and that it provided students with things that, in their opinions, could not be afforded in other settings. Carson (personal communication, June 13, 2014) responded, when asked why it was different than other schools, “The relationship that you form between [the students and staff], it’s not as close knit because it can’t be [because of the size].” Another participant and former staff member explained, “It was close like family [and] everybody was there to help. I mean everybody was like on the same page. I mean, that’s, you know, it’s not here” (Henry, personal communication, October 13, 2014).

All of the participants commented on the family-like atmosphere and the relationships that were developed in such a small setting. “I think the main thing was just it was a family atmosphere. You know, it was just like a big family” (Wilson, personal communication, June 3, 2014). A community member explained that, “everyone pitched in and helped wherever they could” (William, personal communication, March 22, 2014). A former staff member, when comparing her relationships with her colleagues at Mount Rogers to those of her new school, explained, “most of the teachers at Mount Rogers are the ones who stay and help out and clean up afterwards and mop the gym. And the others [staff members at the new school] don’t even come or they just leave when it’s over” (Wilson, personal communication, June 3, 2014). When comparing the relationships at Mount Rogers to relationships at the new schools, one respondent said, “It’s not the same. It’s not the same warmth in community that we felt at Mount Rogers” (Marion, personal communication, November 11, 2014).

Emotional trauma

Mount Rogers Combined School was “a community icon and with it [the closure], they lost their identity” (Wayne, personal communication, January 31, 2015). A community member explained that there were some staff members that were upset about teacher assignments, job security and changes in responsibilities:

I think they felt it coming that they were going to eventually have to try to get a job at Grayson County High School, because I’m sure they knew it was inevitable that there

was going to be some elimination of positions when it consolidated. (Virginia, personal communication, October 27, 2014)

One staff member described the changes in responsibilities for one of her colleagues. “I know the secretary was responsible for a double student body. She worked really hard and has done well, but it certainly was probably not only emotional, but frustrating for her, I think” (Marion, personal communication, November 11, 2014). A former staff member who was not employed during the school closure process explained that the staff felt:

A sense of the betrayal by the county, a sense of loss because they had been part of something special. I was part of something special for six years. I value that experience very highly. So, there's a sense that we know the people over there. We know what was lost. And other outsiders, they have no idea. You could try to tell them, but they'll never know because they weren't a part of it. And, so I think that's the most devastating part because we all, when we talk or exchange an email or run into each other, or whatever it happens to be, there's always that sort of undertone of mutual sadness, that exists. (Olivet, personal communication, October 13, 2014)

One former staff member stated, “I was upset. I was ready to quit. I was very unhappy because I had intended on retiring from teaching and when I found out that they were closing, I was ready to leave” (Dale, personal communication, May 21, 2014). Another former staff member was shocked at the news. “There were a lot of tears. There was [*sic*] a lot of sad kids, and a lot of sad parents” (Grant, personal communication, May 21, 2014). One participant compared it to mourning the loss of a loved one. “Just having to pack up and take stuff out, it was just sad. It was like part of the family had died” (Dale, personal communication, May 21, 2014). A former staff member explained:

It was a very sad time for the community. That school had been for many years the center of lots of community activities. There was not a lot of outward anger. I'm sure there was a lot of inward anger. But it was just respectful, but sad. You just go through the process the way you would any loss. (Marion, personal communication, November 11, 2014)

When a former student was asked how the staff felt, the response was, “They had more students to hassle with. They didn’t like it. They were sad” (Barton, personal communication, October 12, 2014). A community member explained:

The unique aspects of the school, I mean that's something that was lost that they can't measure. That can't be measured in dollars, it was therefore unimportant. A disgrace, embarrassing. And, so I think the things that were lost are the more important things that you'll never find. But it's what the people will tell you about when they finally bare their soul. And they may say it is not because they have to pay more in the terms of what it cost them to educate a kid. (Jackson, personal communication, October 27, 2014)

Student Perspectives of the Effects of the School Closure

Communication

Some of the students went to the Grayson County School Board and Grayson County Board of Supervisors meetings and asked questions about the closing. Many described a sense of betrayal in that they felt that the school division [the School Board and central office administration] was not being honest about what was happening:

I remember going to some of the meetings. I distinctly remember that one of the presenters, and I don’t remember his name, but I still don’t like him til this day. We asked him, point blank, about Mount Rogers and if it was gonna [*sic*] close and he told us all the stupid lies that they all tell you. Well, he lied to my face. I can’t stand him. (Laurel, personal communication, October 12, 2014)

After attending the meetings, some students still had hope that these were just like all of the rumors that they had heard for years. “They kept telling us over and over it was gonna close. From the time I was a little kid. I didn’t really know until tenth grade year. We was [*sic*] hoping the school was gonna stay open” (Barton, personal conversation, October 12, 2014). Similar to the staff, the students felt that communication was an issue. “I read about it in the paper” (Roger, personal communication, June 13, 2014). One of the student participants said:

Well, they kept talking about it and I thought they were gonna [*sic*], close it a year before and then they didn’t. I didn’t think I was going to be able to graduate and then they didn’t

close it again. Finally, they did. They kept threatening it when I was there. I just wish we knew what was happening. (Rugby, personal communication, October 12, 2014)

One former student explained that the lack of communication about the construction issues was of concern to the students because it was very frustrating for the teachers. The student described the packing and unpacking of materials and belongings as particularly frustrating. When describing what was happening, the student explained that:

We didn't really know. We didn't know if it was going to happen or not. I remember the teachers were like "I don't know where to take all of my stuff". They were like "Do I take all of my stuff out of there or not." It was insane. (Laurel, personal communication, October 12, 2014)

Communication regarding the elimination of high school classes

One former student explained that the idea of a new high school was exciting. The former student said:

You know, I thought a high school down there, we could build it up and we could have enough people to do more things. We could do sports. And it was not that far away. It's about a 30-minute drive [to Grayson Highlands]. They didn't give it a chance. My parents live in Whitetop and from their house to here, it's about a 35-minute drive. So, that sounds like a long way. But it takes almost an hour to get to Independence [location of Grayson County High School]. (Roger, personal communication, June 3, 2014)

A staff member kept inquiring with school board members about the new high school wing. After years of the threats of closing Mount Rogers, assurances that Grayson Highlands would continue to offer high school classes was a priority. Conversations with several of the decision makers provided those assurances. "Every time I saw them I'd say, 'So our high school is going to stay there, right?' and they would say, 'Yes, we're going to leave it -- at least five years, we're going to build it up'" (Wilson, personal communication, June 3, 2014). A former student had been told that students would "be able to graduate from Grayson Highlands. When I got my schedule, they had me down at Independence" (Laurel, personal communication, October 12, 2014). The student reported that she was not afforded the opportunity to graduate from Grayson

Highlands. A former staff member expressed concerns about the lack of planning associated with the high school wing at Grayson Highlands:

But then when people [students] started trying to get in, they weren't letting everybody in. And there's [name retracted] and they would not let her come. Now, they [the students] had thought originally that the Mount Rogers kids could go to this high school wing and we'll get more numbers, and you can have sports and stuff like that. I think they intentionally caused it to not work (Grant, personal communication, May 21, 2014)

Another former staff member explained that some students were not allowed to enroll at Grayson Highlands as high school students.

They were going to let Mount Rogers High School students come to the new Grayson Highlands School. So, they were going to blend part of Mount Rogers with Independence [Grayson County High School] at Grayson Highlands. But, kids who wanted to come here who were high school students, they turned them away for the most part unless they were causing them trouble down there. [Name retracted] was a good student. She was an outstanding girl. She came to the open house and wanted to come here. And, her dad went down there and argued with them. And, she didn't get to come here. They made her go down to Independence. (Wilson, personal communication, June 3, 2014)

One of the former students explained that "I think it [having a high school at Grayson Highlands] could have worked if they had tried to make it work. But they didn't give it a chance to work" (Roger, personal communication June 13, 2014).

Course offerings

In the elementary and middle school grades at Mount Rogers, teachers taught multiple grades and content areas. Wilson (personal communication June 3, 2014), explained, "They were combination classes. Sometimes, I even had three grades at one time." One former staff member explained, "that the kids, especially the high schools kids, were missing out on some opportunity as far as education because they [other high schools] offer a lot of other stuff that we couldn't" (Carson, personal communication, June 13, 2014). A former staff member explained, "I had the younger kids, third, fourth and fifth graders prior to lunch and then I had the sixth and seventh

graders after lunch. And, so I was teaching multiple subjects, [and] multiple SOL strands” (Olivet, personal communication, October 13, 2014). The former staff member further explained that:

In the following year, me [*sic*] and another teacher team taught and she did math and science and I did language arts and social studies. So, I taught five grades- language, arts and social studies in the final year that I was there. (Olivet, personal communication, October 13, 2014)

A community member had very strong feelings about the limitations of Mount Rogers. When asked about the academic classes at the school, the response included concerns regarding instruction and how much learning was actually taking place. “How could there be third, fourth, and fifth graders in one class, with six kids? And, their SOL scores were bad, even in third grade much less the ones in high school” (Virginia, personal communication, October 27, 2014). Another community member, stated that “the difficulties students faced being isolated from opportunities as a result of living in poor conditions away from larger communities with better resources” was a barrier to student achievement (Ashe, personal communication, January 21, 2015). “Children coming out of the school were not given what they needed. It was not because they did not try. The situation did not permit it” (Wayne, personal communication, January 31, 2015).

There were some participants who believed that closing the school would be beneficial, because the students needed more course offerings. Four of the eight staff participants believed that going to other schools could be beneficial. One former staff member explained, “I do know that the children with special needs are served, I think, more effectively and more efficiently in this new setting” (Marion, personal communication, November 11, 2014). Another response was that the students could not get the courses or have access to the things that were necessary to sustain life outside of the Whitetop community. “We couldn’t give what they needed. We could give them security and we could give them love, but yet to face the real world, no, we couldn’t give them what they needed. We’ve got to give them more [course offerings and access to vocational classes]” (Carson, personal communication, June 14, 2014).

At Mount Rogers, for secondary classes, there was one teacher for each content area. Many of the respondents joked that one teacher was the mathematics department or another teacher was the science department. Students would have the same teacher for the same content

area for the duration of their high school experience. “The math teacher taught all the math, eight through 12. The English teacher taught all the English, eight through 12. The science teacher taught all the science eight through 12” (Carson, personal communication, June 13, 2014).

While Mount Rogers provided online classes, dual enrollment courses, and extracurricular activities such as track, yearbook, and clubs, the options were very limited. Mount Rogers had a distance learning lab and a business course. One of the benefits of closing Mount Rogers, in the opinion of one former staff member, was that the students would have access to vocational courses. “They offer the mechanics down there, nursing, a lot of other stuff that we couldn’t [at Mount Rogers]. I’d say in the last five years, I felt like they needed more as far as – you know, as far as the vocational part” (Carson, personal communication June 13, 2014).

While many of the respondents recognized the advantages of small class sizes, ranging from five to 12 students in some classes, with the music class having as many as 15, some felt the class sizes were barriers to social growth. “I mean there’s too much out here in this world that you’ve got to do. You know what I mean? You can’t be sheltered all your life. You’ve got to --you’ve got to offer more than just love” (Carson, personal communication, June 13, 2014).

A staff member was concerned about the high school classes and how class rank and grade point averages could be determined accurately. The respondent explained that there was no healthy competition when it came to courses and said, “You don’t have a lot of competition if you have eight or nine kids in your class” (Henry, personal communication, October 13, 2014). The participant also explained that at one time Mount Rogers had a graduating class of one, but eventually another student enrolled and there were two. When the school closed in 2010, there were three in the graduating class (Tennis, 2011). Another former staff member had concerns about the high school classes. “I felt like the high school students were not getting what they needed” (Henry, personal communication, October 13, 2014). Another former staff member when asked about instruction at the high school and graduation replied, “With all the credits that you have to have, you couldn’t do it. You couldn’t do it. It wasn’t enough” (Carson, personal communication, June 13, 2014). Another respondent expressed concerns about secondary offerings at Mount Rogers. The former staff member explained:

One of the things that was always was a concern for me was that, as the children came through the high school program and the secondary program, they were missing

something. It was so basic there. The instruction was so basic that I felt like that they were missing a lot. I felt that they probably needed to be able to move out of the community and become part of the citizenship of Grayson County. (Marion, personal communication, November 11, 2014)

Similarly, “I could see our kids needed -- they needed more and I didn’t know what we were going to do” (Carson, personal communication, June 13, 2014). A former student explained, “I got my Associates Degree. I would have probably been a couple of credits short if we had stayed at Mount Rogers” (Laurel, personal communication, October 12, 2014). Laurel also noted that “We didn’t have foreign language so I did my foreign language online and it also counted towards my college now, so that’s a bonus.”

The staff members who were against the school closure felt that the students were getting what they needed. “I don’t think anyone can say that other schools could offer more than we had. Students could take online courses. There may have been more electives, but is that really what’s important [for the students]” (Grant, personal communication, May 21, 2014). A former student loved the small classes. “In band there was a lot of us, like 15 of us. That was like our biggest class. In PE, we probably had about 10. We had combined grades. There were only three people in my class” (Laurel, personal communication, October 12, 2014).

Mount Rogers experienced limited success in student achievement. The school was reconstituted in 2007-2008 school year due to poor standardized test scores (See Appendix J). According to the Virginia Department of Education website (2015), the term “reconstitution” is defined as “a process that may be used to initiate a range of accountability actions to improve pupil performance, curriculum, and instruction to address deficiencies.” One community member explained that the challenges with multiple grades and content areas being taught in a single classroom, were barriers to student achievement growth that may not be reflected in the data.

Thematic units and lessons were more difficult from 1995 forward with the move from no state assessments to LPTs [Literacy Passport Tests] to SOL assessments. When three students sit for a social studies assessment in third grade, the pass rate can be 0%, 33%, 66% or 100% with the latter being the only score to deem the school accredited. (Ashe, personal communication, January 21, 2015)

The same community member stated that suggestions from surrounding, more successful schools, fell on deaf ears.

The differences in the attitudes [personal descriptors have been retracted] of the abilities of the students, education in general and “the meddling of outsiders” significantly illustrated the obstacles in securing full state and federal accreditation in all core areas. (Ashe, personal communication, January 21, 2015)

Extracurricular activities

Increased access to extracurricular activities was one of the effects of the school closure although one former staff member explained that “If they wanted to play sports, they were allowed to go down to Grayson” (Grant, personal communication, May 21, 2014). “They’re always building up sports. Well, sports is [*sic*] a wonderful thing, but it’s not everything” (Grant, personal communication, May 21, 2014). The same respondent also added, for Mount Rogers, “the parents that wanted their kids to play sports or to participate in extracurricular activities somehow managed to do it.” Roger, a former student explained that at Mount Rogers, “We didn’t have any sports I don’t think except maybe cross country or track” (personal communication, June 13, 2014). Another former student, when asked about extracurricular activities and the difference between the new school and Mount Rogers replied, “more sports and stuff. That’s all” (Barton, personal communication, October 12, 2014). Another former staff member explained that the Mount Rogers parents wanted the students to participate in sports. “They wanted the kids to play sports. It wasn’t offered. We didn’t have enough to have a team” (Carson, personal communication June 13, 2014). One former staff member said, “I just felt like we didn’t have sports programs and stuff for the children. We tried to do basketball and other sports, but there just wasn’t [*sic*] the numbers to even get a team together” (Henry, personal communication, October 13, 2014). A former student explained that:

My brother plays sports and we probably would have had a team ‘cause my brother’s class was really big. But, he probably couldn’t have done everything he wanted to do. He does track. He went to state. He plays basketball. He probably wouldn’t have been as good as he is. He plays soccer. We didn’t have soccer games. So, [having more] sports probably is [*sic*] the only advantage that I can see. (Laurel, personal communication, October 12, 2014)

In addition to limited access to sports, there were also few choices for participating in clubs and other activities. “We had a yearbook staff and we had intramurals” (Dale, personal communication, May 21, 2014). One of the highlights of the instructional program at Mount Rogers was the music program.

Music and clogging provided MRCS [Mount Rogers Combined School] students the most significant opportunities to shine. This is the area in which I feel MRCS provided an authentic educational experience which connected the students to their cultural heritage and could allow them to truly appreciate their ancestors’ accomplishments as well as creatively engage in intergenerational learning. This is the one area where the other schools in the division failed in comparison. (Ashe, personal communication, January 21, 2015)

Transportation

According to the participants, one of the effects of the school’s closure was the additional time that the students spent on the bus. One of the former student respondents said that the students had to “ride on the bus for over an hour and in the winter time it’s [the weather and travel conditions] bad” (Rugby, personal communication, October 12, 2014). One of the former staff members who had researched the travel time said that the students “were putting in 52 ½ hours a week, counting school and bus travel” (Grant, personal communication, May 21, 2014). A community member explained that “kids were being bused a pretty long distance over roads that can become quite treacherous in a very short amount of time” (Jackson, personal communication, October 13, 2014). Another former staff member recognized the issues with transportation times, but indicated that other parts of the county had similar issues. The worst part was “the bus routes but, you know we have kids in other parts of the county that are on a bus just as long” (Henry, personal communication, October 13, 2014). One of the biggest impacts on the students, according to the respondents was the amount of travel time required for younger children. The older students had to travel from Whitetop to Volney and then to Independence for some classes. According to a document that was presented to the Board of Supervisors and the Grayson County School Board during the closure process, the projected travel times, were examined:

At best, students will be on the bus a minimum of one hour and 32 minutes to two hours each way. This is on a good day with clean roads, no accidents, bathroom stops or other problems. It is not a good idea for students to spend as much time on a bus as in the classroom. Students will end up riding the bus two hours each way, if not initially, eventually. Riding a bus four hours a day; 20 hours a week is half the average work week. If a child is on the bus 20 hours a week and at school 32 ½ hours a week, they would be committing 52 ½ hours to going to school. (Anonymous, personal document, January 3, 2007)

It was the opinion of two former staff members that the projected travel times became a reality (Dale, personal communication, May 21, 2014 and Grant, personal communication, May 21, 2014). However, according to a community member participant in this study because Grayson County is so unique, travel times are equitable throughout the entire county. Schools on the eastern end of the County had similar travel times. Long bus rides were not just on the western part of the County as some of the protestors had suggested (Virginia, personal communication, October 27, 2014). A former staff member expressed concerns about transportation, but recognized that it was not exclusive to Mount Rogers students:

I'm very frustrated that the children are having to travel so long on buses, whether to Grayson Highlands School or into Grayson County High School. I hate that for them. It's not something that is independent of this area. All across the state there are people who ride buses for an hour to get to school. So that's not so different, but I hate that for them. (Marion, personal communication, November 11, 2014)

Relationships

In addition to transportation, many of the respondents felt that another effect of closing the school was the development of relationships. One former student said that he liked Mount Rogers more because “we all got along and knew each other. It was a little school” (Barton, personal communication, October 12, 2014). Some of the students were uneasy about going to a new school. When comparing the atmosphere at Mount Rogers to that of Grayson County High School, a former student explained:

I think you're stereotyped like you're presented, like going down there in your camo and your boots. It's not like that at Mount Rogers. We didn't care what you had or what you looked like. We judged people on their character and stuff. But, that changes when you go some place where you don't know everybody. I know all that but once you go to a bigger school, they don't know everybody personally. Cause I know everybody. But, it's just different. (Laurel, personal communication, October 12, 2014)

Another former student believed that Grayson County High School was too big. "I was sad. I hated it. I wanted to be homeschooled. I didn't wanna go down there. [There were] too many people" (Barton, personal communication, October 12, 2014). A former student also described how students interacted with one another:

Our school was very unique. I'm not saying that other schools don't have it, but we really looked out for the little kids. Like, we looked out for everybody. We couldn't be mean and awful. We never bullied. Well, there was picking, but we had a family atmosphere. We were very protective of one another. (Laurel, personal communication, October 12, 2014)

Barton (personal communication, October 12, 2014) explained that "They was [sic] some [students] down there that thought they were better than us. They would make remarks about us being from Whitetop. The staff didn't like it either. The ones that had been up here, they [the staff] kept a pretty close look on us."

It took some time for the students to get established in the new school. One of the former students explained that at Mount Rogers, the students felt "a sense of belonging and I don't think a lot of the kids feel that [at Grayson Highlands or Grayson County High School]" (Roger, personal communication, June 13, 2014). "I [didn't] wanna go down there with all these people I don't know. That's scary" (Laurel, October 12, 2014). A former staff member said that "I just felt like they wouldn't be accepted because they have been so isolated all their life" (Henry, personal communication, October 13, 2014). "Because people felt that the students from Mount Rogers were 'hicks from the sticks,' they didn't really have a good impression of them so the students didn't feel comfortable" moving to a new school, explained a former staff member from Mount Rogers (Dale, personal communication, May 21, 2014). Another staff member responded that at Mount Rogers, "it was different and they didn't have the peer pressure that they have at

Grayson County” (Wendy, personal communication October 13, 2014). One former student described the difference:

The people also judge you. I was judged cause I’m from this side of the county. I don’t know why, I guess they think they are better than us. I think [the people from] Independence think they are a little better than us. There’s a lot more judging in a bigger school. They think that since you live on the mountain that you don’t have a brain and we’re a bunch of hicks--typical mountain stereotype. They think we shouldn’t have all of our teeth. We do have a stereotype of them too and we have a pride issue. It makes us mad. (Laurel, personal communication, October 12, 2014)

A former staff member explained a situation that a student had shared with her:

Some kids especially those older ones who didn’t begin eighth grade at Grayson County High School, I think they just don’t feel like they belong there and they feel like everybody is calling them names. I know they did have some instances of that. There was one boy, he will be a senior next year, who has been called names over and over. And you know he is a sweet kid. (Wilson, personal communication, June 3, 2014)

Another former student explained that a younger relative was having a difficult time in the new school. “One of my cousins bought a little truck and another boy had a diesel truck and when he went down there they made fun of him. They just openly made fun of him about his truck” (Rugby, personal communication, October 12, 2014). Rugby further said, “I’ve asked everybody how they like it down there. They don’t even bother with sports. They don’t like it. They always made comments about people that lived on Whitetop.”

Not all of the social experiences for students were negative and one respondent believed there were more opportunities to develop relationships. One former staff member, when talking about students, said that they had “better [more] friend choices” and that the students had “more things to do that they did not have before the closure” (Wilson, personal communication, June 3, 2014). A community member explained that after observing a special event at Mount Rogers, there were concerns about how students were being prepared for the real world. “Knowing the socialization and the exposure of things, [that students had at such a small school] it was very limited. By having a class size of six from the time she [the student] was in kindergarten all the way through school,” caused her serious concerns in preparing students for college and life

(Virginia, personal communication, October 27, 2014). A former staff member echoed the response. “They were very limited in social areas” (Marion, personal communication, November 11, 2014).

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The researcher incorporated strategies for comparing data as suggested by Boeije (2002). As recommended, the researcher analyzed the data within each of the interviews and then compared data from interviews with similar participants. Next, data from interviews of all of the participants were analyzed collectively. The data from the interviews were then compared to primary and secondary sources as recommended by Boeije (2002).

According to Creswell (2005), coding is the “process of segmenting and labeling text to form descriptions and broad themes” (p. 237). From the hand coding process, units of meaning were identified and placed into categories. The following units were created based on the number of times specific words, quotes, or phrases were used during interviews: transportation, weather, facility, communication, resources, multi-grade classes, music, sports, family-like, enrollment, lies, betrayal, friend choices, colleagues, vocational, death/dying, and protest. The units were then placed into categories. The categories were communication, facility issues, colleague relationships, family-like atmosphere, emotional trauma, course offerings, extracurricular activities, transportation, and social experiences. Exclusionary rules were used to determine which units were placed into categories. Once the categories were compared, they were placed into emergent, major themes.

The major themes that emerged from the data were credibility and trust, quality of educational opportunities, and community conflict. These broad themes encompassed many of the categories, while eliminating those that were not saturated within the data. These themes are reflective of the literature on school closure (Howley, et al., 2011; Lucas, 1982; Stewart, 2007, 2010).

Grayson County school leaders recognized the challenges associated with Mount Rogers Combined School. The facility was aging and becoming more costly to operate. The instructional program was inadequate due to the lack of course offerings and the teaching environments such as multi-grade classes were less than optimal. Additionally, Mount Rogers Combined School had limited success with student achievement. Student enrollment continued to decline and school leaders were faced with the economic challenges of sustaining an expensive and low performing school.

School divisions must weigh the academic interests of the students with preserving communities that identify with their neighborhood school (Warner et al., 2009). According to

Lucas (1982), school divisions must balance fiscal responsibility and instructional offerings against community protest when making decisions regarding school closure. When considering school mergers there are two important factors to consider, financial efficiency and improved educational benefits (Howley, et al., 2011). Additionally, school divisions must effectively communicate with those affected by the school closure. There were consistent criticisms regarding communication by participants in the study. Establishing credibility and trust may have prevented or lessened some of the challenges associated with the closure of Mount Rogers Combined School.

Credibility and Trust

Kouzes and Posner (2012) found in three decades of research that leaders' behaviors explain the vast majority of constituents' engagement (p. 25). They argue that "leaders foster collaboration by building trust and facilitating relationships" (p.21). When considering school closures school divisions should create opportunities to develop relationships with those that are impacted by the closure. Opportunities that establish credibility and trust begin with good communication. Holley and Stambuck (2008) recommended that school divisions communicate effectively when considering school changes. They explained that the priorities regarding mergers should be student-centered and school leaders should be transparent with all decisions. They recommended that stakeholders should be given the opportunity to express their concerns and feel as if they have a voice in the decisions. Many of the participants, both former students and former staff members, felt as if their voices were not heard. Some explained that they read about decisions in the local newspapers, which left them feeling as if their opinions did not matter and were not considered.

According to Gunther, McGowan, and Donegan (2011), school division leaders must have an open dialogue with stakeholders because it is an "obligation and an opportunity for schools. Schools need the community's trust and building trust requires good communication" (p. xvi). Gunther et al. (2011) also added that, "school communication must be credible to be effective" (p. xvii). Some of the participants expressed feelings of betrayal and felt as if they were told lies, especially about the high school wing at Grayson Highlands. "Schools must communicate to satisfy the public's right to know, to build trust, and to advocate" (Gunther, et al., 2011, p. xvii). Two participants felt as if the proposal for a high school wing at Grayson

Highlands was a ploy to quell the community protestors. Gunther et al. (2011) also advised that “your critics aren’t going to just go away; you are better off just listening to them” (p. 23).

Stewart (2007) recommended that when debating the need for school closure “Success is based first on good information and second on utilizing effective public relations practices to assure that communication occurs, understanding is achieved, and resolution occurs” (p. 1). Perhaps if school leaders in Grayson County had been more available to the school community, and visited with them more often, more community members would have been open to the idea.

Howley et al. (2010) explained that:

Negative feelings about consolidation can be mitigated when leaders actively attempt to understand community cultures and actively seek to involve parents and community members in the process. Needless to say, such consultation and involvement is an opportunity for citizens to voice objections, and the process of citizen involvement is therefore usually limited, in that it is very carefully managed and contained by educational leaders and policymakers. (p. 8)

The stakeholders who were open to the idea of the school’s closure and felt that it was the right decision later felt betrayed because they had been led to believe that they were going to have their own high school in the western end of the county. Stewart (2007) suggested that respectful discussion is “necessary to help skeptical citizens, critics, and worried parents understand that school closure is in the best financial interests of the school district and the best educational interests of students” (p. 143). Hyndman et al. (2010) recommended that when considering consolidation in small, rural communities, “preplanning in advance and opportunity for public forums is essential because fear of the unknown is the greatest barrier” (p. 141).

Whether the Grayson County school officials were conscientious in their endeavors to communicate with the community was questioned by the students and staff who participated in this study. Consequently the officials experienced minimal success with them. Stewart (2007) said “Present extensive information then, allow the political process time to work” (p. 143). Given that the local Grayson County area newspapers are not printed daily, that many of the residents in Whitetop do not have ready Internet access, and that they have limited cellular service, school leaders faced many challenges communicating with the citizens in the area. The professional staff at Mount Rogers also expressed that they did not receive adequate information about the closure in a timely fashion. The citizens of Whitetop were isolated geographically and

reported receiving minimal written communication. Along with the professional staff, the citizens also expressed concerns about school leaders expressing the gravity of the discussions in a timely manner.

The perceptions of the former students and former staff members were that they did not feel as if the school leaders in Grayson County demonstrated a genuine interest in hearing what they had to say. Perhaps, considering the small number of students, conducting home visits, initiating personal landline phone calls, and posting notices of meetings in the local store and post office would have been beneficial. Confusion regarding closure decisions and delays during construction caused former students and staff members to feel as if they were misled and misinformed. They felt as if their opinions did not matter and that they were not valued as citizens of Grayson County.

Credibility and trust may also be established by collegial relationships for teachers and forming new social relationships for students. Developing relationships was described as an initial barrier to the transition to the new school. Hyndman et al., (2010) explained that “another attribute of community schools is the mutual support provided by school and community” (p. 136). Grayson Highlands School is not a “community school” for former Mount Rogers students and staff given its location and its distance away from Whitetop. Losing their school caused community members to feel abandoned and as if they had no control over what was happening to them. Howley et al. (2011), explained that school closure “erodes a community’s social and economic base - its sense of community, identity, and democracy - and the loss permanently diminishes the community itself, sometimes to the verge of abandonment” (p. 9). The people of Mount Rogers were very protective of their community. They felt that the school was a part of their identity and that it was the focal point of social activities. The participants described the culture as one that was “family-like” and a safe place, free from ridicule and social judgment. Howley et al. (2010) explained that school mergers often “result in personal costs (including increased stress, loss of confidence, and heavier reliance on support networks)” (p. 7). The adults who experienced the closure continue to have difficulty with adjusting to the new school environments. Establishing close relationships with new colleagues compared to those they had at Mount Rogers continue to be challenges. While the new, larger schools may provide the former staff members at Mount Rogers Combined School with more opportunities to collaborate, form more professional relationships, and participate in more professional development activities, the fact that they continue to feel isolated is problematic for them.

The students expressed feelings of sadness and difficulty with “fitting in” at the new schools, but were much more positive about the experience than the former staff members. Research supports this notion. Nitta et al., (2010) explained that students are initially anxious about their new school but after a few months they grow accustomed to the changes and do well. The teachers, however, were still feeling uncomfortable two years after moving to a new school. According to Holley and Stambuck (2008), “Students affected by consolidation are more resilient and able to adapt quicker to their new settings than their teachers and parents.” One of the outcomes of the Mount Rogers Combined School closure is that the students have transitioned much better than the former staff members. The students do have access to more courses, increased extracurricular opportunities and more opportunities to make friends. While the students expressed concerns about the closure, the researcher felt as if they were echoing the sentiments of their parents and former teachers. The students had formed strong bonds within the small school community and expressing anything other than detest for the school closure experience would be seen as an act of betrayal. After a series of follow-up questions were given to the former students who participated in this study, all of them admitted that there were benefits to the closure. The finding supports the idea that the students are more resilient than their older counterparts.

Credibility and trust are communicating effectively, affording staff members with opportunities to establish collegial relationships, and providing students with the opportunities to interact with new peers. By being honest and transparent regarding all phases of the school closure experience, division leaders create opportunities to develop an open dialogue with community leaders. Providing opportunities for staff members to develop collegial relationships will assist with establishing support networks for those affected by the closure as well as assist with adjusting to the new environments. Social experiences and activities for students to interact with new peers and staff members will also enhance relationships that are built on credibility and trust.

Quality of Educational Opportunities

The social experiences of students and staff had to be considered in determining the need for closing the Mount Rogers Combined School. The community member participants felt that the quality of educational opportunities for the students and staff could be improved by more exposure to life outside of the Whitetop community and access to a quality education in a state of

the art facility. Some of the former students and staff were very comfortable with the Mount Rogers Combined School facility. One of the factors that had to be considered before making the decision regarding school closure was an accurate assessment of the school building. The information that was provided in the facility study indicated that the school building was in serious disrepair, not up to current building codes, and not conducive to optimal learning. School leaders were forced to determine whether or not renovation was a viable option.

Stewart (2007) said:

40 years of age is a crucial period in the life of a school building. The process of deterioration is intensifying; major work may have already been completed, but more is needed. Important questions need to be answered concerning how much longer to use the building and how much more expenditure for modernization would be prudent. (p. 150)

Stewart (2007) explained that:

By the time a school building passes the half-century mark and is moving toward age 60, it is usually ready for retirement from service as a regular school building. School boards responsible for school buildings which are approaching 60 years of age and beyond are well advised to consider carefully the costs of modernization versus replacement. (p. 150)

The Mount Rogers Combined School building sits abandoned on School House Road and is in serious disrepair. The researcher conducted visits to the school in spring, fall, and winter of 2013 and spring, summer, and fall of 2014 to the school for observations for this research. While the school had been closed for three years, the observations confirmed that the facility was not optimal for learning. While access to the locker rooms, shop class, and kitchen area was not provided, the researcher observed the concerns that were a part of the facility study conducted in 2006.

At first glance, the signage on the front was falling and the building read, “Mount Rogers ___hool.” (Photographs of the exterior of the facility are located in Appendix L.) The exterior doors were steel and did not seal properly. The bathrooms had wooden, paneled doors that provided moderate privacy for larger students. The sinks and toilets in the student bathrooms were designed for elementary students. The carpet in the library and office area was very dated and worn. The library was very small and the computer lab was created using old, wooden tables attached to the walls in a horseshoe formation. The room was very small and appeared to be a

former office area that was converted into a computer lab. The science laboratory, while large and comparable to other high school science labs in size, lacked the equipment for access to chemicals, water, and gas for adequate, quality instruction. The gymnasium appeared to be in good condition compared to the rest of the facility. Electrical wiring that could not be extended to classrooms was left exposed and running along the ceiling and down the hallway. There were several wires hanging at the ceiling level throughout the entire facility. The wires appeared to be coaxial cables, electrical wires, and phone lines that were visible for the entire length of the hallway. All of the classrooms that were visited by the researcher were older, elementary classrooms with the closets and cubbies at the rear of each room. The facility study also indicated that there was no sprinkler system or fire alarm system, which was observed by the researcher.

While Mount Rogers Combined School still serves as the gathering place for festivals, concerts and other social events, the building has continued to deteriorate. The school closed in the spring of 2010, and the researcher did not gain entry into the facility until the spring of 2013. While the former students and former staff members felt that the facility was in good condition, observations indicated that complacency with substandard resources was common and accepted by those who attended the school as students or worked there as employees.

According to Hyndman, Cleveland, and Huffman (2010), "Consolidated schools offer programs and opportunities, difficult if not impossible, to duplicate in the community school" (p. 134). The quality of educational opportunities for the Mount Rogers Combined School student community did not include experiences afforded to other students such as the ability to participate in extracurricular activities and access to a myriad of social experiences. One barrier to an improved quality of educational opportunities for Mount Rogers students was school transportation. Transportation was mentioned by every participant in the study regardless of their position on the school closure. The amount of travel time was a consistent concern shared by former students, former staff, and community members. Hyndman et al. (2010) explained that small "community schools meant less travel time for students" (p. 137). Grayson County Public Schools decision makers had to balance the costs of new construction and transportation with the academic and social needs of students. Along with many other difficult decisions, determining whether or not travel times were too strenuous on students in order to provide them with a quality education was placed in the hands of elected officials in Grayson County.

Research conducted by the Pennsylvania School Boards Association Education, Research and Policy Center (2009), revealed that “Among rural schools, costs per pupil may decline as the result of the merger. These cost savings may be offset by increased transportation costs” (p. 5). Additionally, the study explained that with rural school mergers “the percent of budgets spent on teachers, books and materials actually tends to decline” (p. 5). A cost analysis of the savings of school closure versus the costs of transportation should be examined, especially in rural communities. While Grayson County Public Schools has not provided a cost analysis of savings from the school closures, travel time and the cost of transportation was a concern from all of the participants in the study.

Jimerson (2007) recommended that there should be limits to travel times required of small children to attend school. Jimerson also questioned if bus rides are longer due to efficiency or, are student travel times included in the development of routes. Travel times should be analyzed as it relates to student achievement and participation in extracurricular activities. It takes approximately 45 minutes to travel by car from Mount Rogers Combined School to Grayson Highlands. It takes about 40 minutes to travel from Whitetop to Independence, the location of Grayson County High School. Given that some students still travel to Grayson Highlands and then to Grayson County High School for secondary and vocational courses, the travel time is comparable to the travel times of other students within the school division according to a former school board member and participant in this study. The school division has utilized alternative transportation options such as snow routes and the use of vans to transport smaller numbers of students to different locations. This practice improved the travel times for students and, while these are not optimal, they are conscientious, cost saving measures by the school division.

Mount Rogers afforded limited access to extracurricular activities, sports and advanced courses for students. The school experienced achievement challenges and school data include gaps in student performance. The quality of educational opportunities for students at Mount Rogers Combined School could be improved with access to more courses and peer choices. A community member described the challenges that students faced due to the geographic location of the school.

What I understand of the academic program is that “classes” of one, two or three students per grade with two or three grades in one room always prevented equal access to

opportunities of their fellow Graysonites down the road. Up until the last 10 years of the school's existence these were times without electronic classrooms, computers or the Internet. Even a phone call to Independence was long distance and there was/is very little cell phone service. The most talented teachers would be significantly challenged to fully provide equal educational experiences for all students as they were required to teach specific Standards of Learning at each grade level. (Ashe, personal communication, January 21, 2015)

Jimerson (2007) said that "research identifies participation in after-school activities as an important factor in helping students feel a sense of belonging and being connected to their schools" (p. 17). Hyndman et al., (2010) explained that consolidated schools tend to provide a more "comprehensive curriculum, diverse social experiences, better facilities, better trained and prepared teachers, and a broader array of extracurricular activities" than small, community schools (p. 135).

As a result of the closure, former students of Mount Rogers Combined School have access to sports, such as basketball, baseball, volleyball, track, soccer, tennis and wrestling. The former students also have the opportunity to participate in school clubs, such as theater, yearbook and academic teams. Vocational classes, such as culinary arts, agriculture, building trades, nursing, cosmetology and computer classes are now available to the former Mount Rogers Combined School students.

Community conflict

While credibility and trust and quality of educational opportunities were themes gleaned from the study, the community conflict that erupted during the closure process was mentioned by every participant. Discussions regarding school closures are unpopular. Citizens often demand opportunity to voice concerns and to be given a platform to do so. School closure processes are frequently politically charged. Providing opportunities for members of the community to feel that they have been heard, that they can trust the people making the decisions, and that the information and choices leaders are presenting will benefit students and communities alike is critical to successful dialogue. The researcher read in the Galax Gazette (July 16, 2010) that there had been over 17 meetings regarding the school closure process. A careful examination of how the meetings were advertised and communicated to stakeholders is revealing. The researcher found one notice of a community meeting in the March 11, 2010 edition of the

Independence Declaration that explained the purpose of the meeting. Unfortunately, the meeting had been scheduled for March 2, 2010 at Fletcher Chapel at Oak Hill Academy (Meeting set to discuss Grayson Highlands School, 2010). The announcement of the meeting in the local paper after the meeting had already occurred was used as political ammunition by the opponents as evidence that the school division was being less than forthcoming about the closure process.

School leaders who are discussing potential school closure should understand that opponents are more often than not using personal experiences and feelings as reasons for keeping the school open, while school leaders typically are using objective information such as achievement data, course offerings, and facility issues as justification for closures (Lucas, 1982). Understanding that notion and facilitating healthy collaboration and communication would benefit school leaders when considering closing a community school. More importantly, the information should be shared in a manner that is not condescending, but rather in a way that is respectful and can be understood by the audience. When considering school closures, involving the community in the decision making process would benefit school leaders, even if there is little hope of compromise. Transparency is of utmost importance in order to garner trust. Reminders that the decisions are being made in the best interest of the students and that the students are the priority in all deliberations would be beneficial. Familiarity with and an understanding of the school climate and community culture should be considered with all communication.

Some participants felt that protestors were more interested in preserving their school because they were satisfied with the status quo and what the school had to offer. Proving otherwise to the Whitetop community would have been beneficial if the argument could have been presented in a way that was not perceived as elitist. Explaining that the school had not been performing as well as it should have could have been a good foundation for the discussion. Sharing with parents that access to certain additional and improved services could be provided in a larger school may have quelled the protestors. Explaining to parents that Mount Rogers could not provide students with access to specially trained individuals such as guidance counselors, occupational therapists, physical therapists and other extended services, may have proven beneficial. While good communication may have assisted with the resistance of some, it may have been difficult to change the minds of those that had an emotional attachment to the school. Community conflict almost inevitably is a result of discussions regarding school closure. Even so, good transition planning could assist with the conflicts and might be seen as gesture of good will to those that adamantly oppose the closure.

Transitions for school closure should be carefully planned and include all stakeholders. Prior to the closure, plans should be presented to the community. Student schedules, transportation routes, community meetings, social activities, and a carefully thought out transition plan would be beneficial. The transition plan should be choreographed and articulated to the community members well in advance. If there are changes in the plans, the changes should be communicated to everyone in a timely manner so that an appropriate adjustment time is allowed. The vehicles for communications may include home visits, personal phone calls, written letters, postings in the local community centers, and the use of local media. The school closure was a very difficult time for the Whitetop community. They felt powerless and that their voices fell on deaf ears.

The closure process for Grayson County was exacerbated because the Whitetop community does not have access to the Internet, the community does not have cellular service, and the community members are very proud and private. The citizens of Whitetop have always felt they have not been afforded the opportunities other Grayson County communities receive. The closure of their beloved school only confirmed the feelings of some of the participants. The issues with communication frustrated the former students and staff. The process, especially the construction issues and delays, also provided the protestors with political ammunition. At every juncture, whether it was that the plans were not carried out in a timely manner, that the financial estimates were not accurate, or that the weather continued to cause delays, the protestors discovered support for their arguments for the school to remain open. Perhaps at the beginning of the closure discussions, meeting with small groups of parents in a potluck gathering would have been beneficial. Later, given the challenges that the division had with construction issues, school leaders could have engaged the community again and explained that while things were not going as initially planned, the overall benefit to the students could possibly outweigh the temporary issues that they were experiencing. The citizens of Whitetop chose to use the challenges with the closure process as opportunities to prove that school leaders had made the wrong decision about closing their community school. This was most evident after the decision to eliminate high school courses at Grayson Highlands. That action caused the community to feel betrayed and to believe that the decision makers had lied to them by promising a high school in the western end of the county.

The closure of Mount Rogers Combined School was a difficult time for the people of Whitetop. The people in the Whitetop community “are independent people and proud of their

heritage. They never felt as if they were getting their fair share because they were so isolated” (Wayne, personal communication, January 31, 2015). While many of the staff members shared the personal and emotional experiences of the school closure, the school community has adjusted well. “I enjoyed the atmosphere at Mount Rogers and all, and I really enjoy being in this new school” (Henry, personal communication, October 13, 2014). Another staff member explained that the location of the new school, in proximity to the staff member’s house, “allows for less travel and more time with the students... and able to spend more time as a part of the faculty as part of the collaborative effort as an educator” (Marion, personal communication, November 11, 2014). While the students have adjusted well and the staff members are still adjusting, there is still a feeling of distrust and being disenfranchised on the mountain. Those relationships should be reestablished and nurtured for the long term benefit of the students.

Stewart (2007) said that “it is human desire to resist change and the most flawless logic often fails to change deep-seated values, beliefs and opinions” (p. 143). While the arguments for closure were hardly presented flawlessly, they probably were doomed to fail with many of the students, staff, and community simply because of their completely different view of the situation. Conflict was all but certain no matter what argument was developed or how it was advanced

Conclusions

School divisions close and consolidate schools to improve instructional programs for students, to offset student enrollment numbers, to provide adequate facilities for learning, and to save money. The student achievement data for Mount Rogers indicated lackluster student performance (until after the school closure discussions were over) and the school division had no choice but to make the difficult decision to close the school. The adults who were affected by the school closure have had tremendous difficulty with the transition to other schools. However, they were isolated from other professionals and really did not feel as if they were a part of the educational community outside of Mount Rogers. Students at Mount Rogers were entitled to similar opportunities offered to other students and it was the division leaders’ duty to provide those to every student in Grayson County Public Schools.

There are no hard data from the school division to document the cost savings of closing Mount Rogers Combined School. The consequences of not providing students with an appropriate education were too great for the students at Mount Rogers Combined School. One additional cost for the school division was the loss of the trust of the citizens from Whitetop due

to miscommunication and contradictory information. Former students believed that they would be able to graduate from Grayson Highlands. When Grayson Highlands finally opened, some of the students' schedules had conflicts with other classes and some of the classes were only offered at Grayson County High School. This was very upsetting and frustrating to the students as well as the former staff members who believed that they were going to be working in a high school wing at Grayson Highlands. Not allowing students to graduate from Grayson Highlands as promised was very disappointing and discouraging to the former students Mount Rogers student who were interviewed.

According to many of the participants one of the biggest challenges associated with the closure was the disruption to the instructional day due to miscommunication regarding the construction delays. The concerns that were expressed by the former students and former staff members included the disruption to the learning environment as a result of packing and unpacking multiple times. In the spring of 2009, the students and staff were preparing to close Mount Rogers and had begun to plan for the final graduation. They began to pack their belongings and to mentally prepare for the last days of school. While students and staff were trying to conduct business as usual, it was a very emotional time. As they were coordinating activities for the end of the year, they were told by division leaders that the school would not be closing until December because of construction delays. The students and staff unpacked their materials and began to plan for an additional semester in their beloved school. The news was bittersweet but the experience was very difficult for former students and staff.

In October and November 2009, school division leaders began to conduct joint PTA meetings, faculty meetings, and community socials to prepare for a January opening of Grayson Highlands School. The students and staff were nearly finished with packing their belongings and planning for the transition to the new schools when school division leaders informed them that the school would not be closing until February. They unpacked their belongings and resumed their normal daily routines. They were to plan for a few weeks and wait for further guidance. This was a very difficult time for both the students and staff because they were unsure how long they were going to be staying at Mount Rogers. Later, the decision was made to delay the opening of Grayson Highlands until the fall. During the early spring of 2010, the students and staff at Mount Rogers began to plan for the final days in their school for the third time. For three former staff members, the realization that their school was going to close for the last time was

compared to grieving over the death of a loved one. Not only was their experience like grieving a death, but also like grieving the prolonged passing of their loved one.

School division leaders planned the ribbon cutting ceremony at Grayson Highlands and students attended their final graduation at Mount Rogers Combined School. Later, during the summer months the division leaders decided to postpone opening all of the schools in Grayson County because of the construction delays at Grayson Highlands. The emotional turmoil as a result of the delays was unbearable according to many of the participants. The amount of instructional time that was spent packing and unpacking materials in preparation of the closure was unacceptable to some of the participants.

The former staff members at Mount Rogers Combined School felt as if they lost the family-like atmosphere that they experienced on the mountain. The emotional upheaval experienced by the former staff members was very difficult and the relationships that they had with division leaders were damaged. Miscommunication created hard feelings that were perceived as acts of betrayal. (A timeline of events that includes communication is presented as Appendix K.) The former staff members still question whether course offerings and sports are tangible benefits, when the sacrifices are small classes and relationships with students. The school closure experience was emotionally painful. However, they gained more opportunities for professional development. They have access to a more collaborative teaching environment by sharing students, strategies, and resources. They also have more students with whom to establish relationships, as well as the opportunity to have better access to resources, such as technology.

The former students of Mount Rogers Combined School adapted well to the transition to their new schools. There continue to be difficulties with stereotypes and the perceptions of some of the former students not “fitting in” at the new schools. Mount Rogers had the “Old Time Mountain Band” which was a highlight of the instructional and extracurricular programs at the school. Many, if not all of the students participated and it was a valuable resource for the students. The school leaders in Grayson County have made a conscientious effort to try to continue the program at both Grayson Highlands School as well as Grayson County High School. It is possible that the economic savings and improved student achievement will indicate that the decision to close Mount Rogers Combined School was in the best interests of all students in Grayson County. If school leaders in Grayson County present that information to the citizens of Whitetop in a manner that is nonthreatening and truthful, perhaps those relationships can be nurtured and restored.

Mount Rogers simply did not have the resources or the number of students to build a sports team, to have multiple school clubs and organizations, or to provide students with typical opportunities to socialize outside of school. Perhaps these opportunities will afford the students of Whitetop with benefits that will outweigh those they associated with attending a small, rural school. No doubt, they will eventually “fit in” better, since very soon there will no longer be former “students from Mount Rogers”.

Recommendations for Future Research

Grayson County school leaders had difficult decisions to make regarding school closures and many questions that needed answers. For policy makers, some of those questions still need answers and further research would benefit school leaders. Classes at Mount Rogers were very small, yet the school did not meet state standards for student achievement. While many educators dream of smaller classes, at what point do classes become too small? Studies to investigate that question would benefit educators and researchers interested in rural schools, class size, and student achievement.

Additional studies of school closures focused on fiscal responsibility would be beneficial to school decision makers, researchers and educators. Questions regarding how long school leaders can or should leave small schools open, before their continued operation becomes fiscally irresponsible, need to be examined. Mount Rogers Combined School was once the smallest school in Virginia. No one knew if there was research-based number of students that was too small or a per-pupil cost that was too high to justify the school’s continued operation. Studies of declining enrollment and economic savings resulting from school closures would also interest rural educators and school researchers.

The research on transportation and travel times is lacking. Travel times and its impact on student achievement, dropout rates, and participation in extracurricular activities should be examined. All of the participants expressed that transportation was a concern regarding the closure. There are no hard data to determine the effects of travel time on achievement or participation in after school activities in Grayson County. Research on travel times, modes of transportation and route development would benefit anyone interested in school transportation.

Additional research should be conducted on the effects of rural school closures on the school communities. Are we closing schools because the community is not thriving or will closing the school result in the community failing to thrive? Does the closure limit the leisure

activities or social opportunities for struggling communities? If opponents of school closures could reconcile school closure proposals with improved achievement, perhaps school closure decisions would not be so divisive.

While these suggestions for research are beyond the scope of this study, they are rooted in one critical belief. Every decision maker and community stakeholder involved in school closures must always ask these questions first: Are we meeting the needs of our students, and if we are not, what will it take to make it happen? Community leaders, protestors, civic organizations and educators must always put students first in every situation.

Epilogue

In Spring 2013, I had completed the coursework for the doctoral program and was having a tremendous amount of difficulty with my original research project which was on turnaround schools. Given that the requirements for accreditation in Virginia, and federal accountability measures changed and continued to change, the extant data for that project had become very difficult to analyze. Given also that my dissertation chair had decided to retire, I felt much like I was going to be one of those students that was going to fall through the cracks. Fortunately, my current chair was sensitive to my cause and having had me as a student while I was completing the coursework, he knew that I was a bit of a problematic student. I believe that he knew that the undertaking would be quite challenging, but he saw potential in me. As any good teacher often does, he immediately provided strict parameters and guidelines that were to be met. I knew that he was my last, best chance at completing my degree and will always be very grateful.

It was also during that snowy spring in 2013, that my mother and I decided to take a mother/daughter trip to the Maple Festival at Mount Rogers. During that trip, I met one of the former principals at Mount Rogers, “Miss Wilma” as she was affectionately called by the community. She had worked at Mount Rogers Combined School for over 50 years. While sitting in the school gymnasium over pancakes and sausage, I learned that her father was one of the men who helped build the original four-room structure. Listening to her share her fond memories of the school is where this project originated.

After discussions with my new chair, my mother and I embarked on a series of road trips to Grayson County and while my mother was a Grayson County native, we knew that we were going to be faced with some opposition in that the people of Whitetop, were very private and skeptical of outsiders. Her status as a Grayson County native was advantageous in the beginning

stages of the study. However, the challenges of gaining access to potential participants, was exacerbated with the sudden, unexpected death of my mother in July 2013. With the help of my extended family, I was able to connect with gatekeepers who were essential in gaining entry into the Mount Rogers Combined School community.

Soon after, the challenges associated with a small number of potential participants became more difficult. There were only 30 potential participants total who were former students or former staff members. The next challenge was determining the worthiness of the study and putting my topic into an educational research context. I followed the golden rule of any research project, which was, “Listen to your chair.” I was also provided excellent guidance by my committee.

This study was not going to be good propaganda for the school. With that in mind, the following recommendations were provided by my committee:

- Avoid romanticizing or revisionist attitude
- Find informants and a range of stakeholders as participants
- Analyze documents and artifacts
- Deal with potential bias
- Delimit your study
- “Be aware that there has never been a school closure that didn’t cause even a mini-uprising of supporters of the wonders of that school” (Sellers, personal communication, May 12, 2013)

From those recommendations, the study morphed into documenting and examining the experiences and perspectives of students and staff. One of the biggest challenges was listening to people share their experiences of the school’s closure. I met people who were never going to be satisfied with anything other than keeping the school open. There were, however, a group of people who were open to it, who could have possibly influenced the attitudes of others, but because of the inadequate communication, and the unkept promise of having a high school on the western end of the county, their credibility was questioned in that the school’s division’s behavior had been a “self-fulfilling prophecy.”

In the beginning, I may have been a little too sensitive to the plights of the people who had experienced losing their beloved school. In the end, as an educator, I was of the opinion that it was simply too expensive socially, academically and economically to maintain a failing

school. The students have more friend choices, increased extracurricular activities and more course offerings. The staff members have access to broader professional community and more resources such as technology. While I feel that the outcome was the best for the students and staff, the school closure process could have been handled with less disruption to the community.

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APPENDIX A

INITIAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR FORMER STAFF MEMBERS AT MOUNT ROGERS COMBINED SCHOOL

Relationship to the school

1. Please tell me about yourself and your experiences at Mount Rogers Combined School?
2. What positions did you hold while employed at Mount Rogers Combined School?
3. What were the dates of your employment at Mount Rogers Combined School?
4. Describe your experiences with extra-curricular activities or clubs.
5. Please share your most vivid memories of the school.

School operations

6. Please describe what your typical day would look like.
7. Describe the academic courses at the school.
8. Describe a typical classroom setting such as number of students and resources available.
9. Were there any particular traditions or activities that were more popular?
10. Were there any activities or traditions that were at Mount Rogers exclusively?

School closure

11. What do you remember about the initial discussions about the school closing?
12. Please describe the process from the initial discussions of potential closure until the eventual closure of the school.
13. What was your reaction to the closing?
14. What effect did the closure have on the students?
15. What was the community's reaction?
16. What have been the ramifications of the school closure on the community?
17. Please share your memories of the final days prior to closure?

18. Were there any benefits to the closure of Mount Rogers Combined School?
19. Did you continue working as an educator? Where?
20. How would you compare your experiences at Mount Rogers to that of your new school?
21. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experiences while employed at
Mount Rogers Combined School or about its closing?

APPENDIX B
INITIAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR FORMER STUDENTS AT MOUNT ROGERS
COMBINED SCHOOL

Relationship to the school

1. Please tell me about yourself.
2. When did you attend Mount Rogers Combined School?
3. Describe your experiences with extra-curricular activities or clubs.
4. Please share your memories of the school.

Daily activities

5. Please describe what your typical day would look like.
6. Describe the academic courses at the school.
7. What were your favorite courses, subjects, and activities?
8. What elective courses were available and which did you take?
9. Who were your teachers? Describe the students in your classes.
10. Describe your experiences with social activities such as prom, festivals, etc.

School closure

11. What do you remember about the initial discussions about the school closing?
12. Please describe the process from the initial discussions of potential closure until the eventual closure of the school.
13. What was your reaction to the closing?
14. What was the community's reaction?
15. How did the students react when the school closed?
16. What have been the ramifications of the school closure to the community?
17. Please share your memories of the final days prior to closure?

18. Did the students do anything special to honor the school, staff, faculty, etc.
19. Were there any benefits to the closing of Mount Rogers Combined School?
20. How would you compare your experiences at Mount Rogers to that of your new school?
21. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experiences as a student at Mount Rogers Combined School or about its closing?

APPENDIX C
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR COMMUNITY MEMBERS

1. What do you remember about the initial discussions about the school closing?
2. What was the community's reaction?
3. What can you tell me about the student and staff reactions when the school closed?
4. What have been the ramifications of the school closure to the community?
5. Were there any benefits to the closing of Mount Rogers Combined School?

APPENDIX D

CROSS REFERENCE OF RESEARCH QUESTIONS WITH INITIAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR PRIMARY PARTICIPANTS

| Research Questions | Questions for Faculty | Questions for Students |
|--|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1. What were the experiences of the students and faculty who were a part of Mount Rogers Combined School during the planning phase of the closure of the school? | 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12 | 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12 |
| 2. What factors and events led to the closure of Mount Rogers Combined School according to the students and faculty? | 11, 12, 13, 14 | 11, 12, 13, 14 |
| 3. What were the experiences of the students and faculty during the final year of the school's operation? | 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 17 | 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 17, 18 |
| 4. What were the perspectives of the students and faculty of Mount Rogers Combined School on the effects of the school's closure after it closed in 2010? | 13, 14, 15, 16, 18 | 13, 14, 15, 16, 19, 20 |
| 5. What effects did the closing of Mount Rogers Combined School have on the students and faculty? | 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 18, 19, 20 | 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 19, 20 |

APPENDIX E
REVISED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR FORMER FACULTY MEMBERS AT MOUNT
ROGERS COMBINED SCHOOL

General descriptive questions and relationship to the school:

1. Please tell me about yourself and your experiences at Mount Rogers Combined School?
2. What were the dates of your employment at Mount Rogers Combined School?
3. What positions did you hold and/or classes that you taught while employed at Mount Rogers Combined School?
4. What extracurricular jobs did you hold at Mt. Rogers during this time?
5. Please tell me about yourself in terms of where you were in your career when the closure deliberations started through to the school's closure?

Teachers' roles, responsibilities and experiences:

6. Describe a typical classroom setting such as number of students and resources available.
7. Tell me the academic program/courses that were available to the students during this time? The extracurricular activities?
8. Tell me about a typical school day for you during this time period.
9. Tell me about your most vivid memories of teaching at Mount Rogers School.

Questions related to the school closure process:

10. Tell me about what you remember about the initial discussions about the school closing?
11. Please describe the process from the initial discussions of potential closure until the eventual closure of the school.
12. What was your reaction to the announcement of the closing?

13. Tell me about your memories of the final days prior to closure and when the school actually closed?
14. What were the advantages to the closure of Mount Rogers Combined School?
15. What were the disadvantages?
16. What were the effects on your colleagues?
17. What were the effects on you, as a teacher?
18. From your perspective, what effect did the closure have on the students?
19. How would you compare your experiences at Mount Rogers to that of your new school (if applicable)?
20. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experiences while employed at Mount Rogers Combined School or about its closing?

APPENDIX F
REVISED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR FORMER STUDENTS AT MOUNT ROGERS
COMBINED SCHOOL

General descriptive questions:

1. Please tell me about yourself as a student at Mount Rogers Combined School.
2. When did you attend Mount Rogers Combined School?
3. Please share your memories of the school.
4. Please describe what your typical day would look like.
5. Describe your academic courses at the school.
6. What were your favorite courses, subjects, and activities?
7. What elective courses were available and which did you take?
8. Who were your teachers? Describe the students in your classes.
9. Describe your experiences with extra-curricular activities or clubs.
10. Tell me about your experiences with social activities such as prom, festivals, etc.
11. What were your most vivid memories of attending school at Mount Rogers Combined School?

School closure

12. What do you remember about the initial discussions about the school closing?
13. Please describe the process from the initial discussions of potential closure until the eventual closure of the school.
14. What was your reaction to the closing?
15. How did the students react when the school closed?
16. Please share your memories of the final days prior to closure?

17. Did the students do anything special to honor the school, staff, faculty, etc.? If so, please describe what was done and the reactions on the teachers and other students.
18. What were the advantages to the closing of Mount Rogers Combined School?
19. What were the disadvantages?
20. How did the closure impact you and your peers?
21. How did the closure impact the teachers?
22. How would you compare your experiences at Mount Rogers to that of your new school?
23. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experiences as a student at Mount Rogers Combined School or about its closing?

APPENDIX G

REVISED CROSS REFERENCE MATRIX OF INTERVIEW QUESTIONS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS FOR PRIMARY PARTICIPANTS

Research Questions

Staff Questions

Student Questions

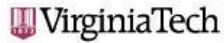
| | | |
|---|-------------------------|-------------------|
| 1. What factors and events led to the closure of Mount Rogers Combined School according to the students and faculty? | 10,11,14,15 | 12,13 |
| 2. What were the experiences of the students and staff during the final year of the school's operation? | 5,8,11,12,13 | 12,13,16,17,18,19 |
| 3. What were the perspectives of the students and staff of Mount Rogers Combined School on the effects of the school's closure? | 12,13,14,15,16,17,18,19 | 18,19,20,21,22 |

APPENDIX H

CERTIFICATE OF COMPLETION FOR TRAINING IN HUMAN SUBJECTS PROTECTION



APPENDIX I
VIRGINIA POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE AND STATE UNIVERSITY INFORMED
CONSENT FOR PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH PROJECTS INVOLVING HUMAN
SUBJECTS



Office of Research Compliance
Institutional Review Board
North End Center, Suite 4120, Virginia Tech
300 Turner Street NW
Blacksburg, Virginia 24061
540/231-4606 Fax: 540/231-0969
email: irb@ut.edu
website: <http://www.irb.ut.edu>

MEMORANDUM

DATE: June 3, 2014
TO: Wayne Tripp, Cynthia Dawn Delp
FROM: Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (FWA00000572, expires April 25, 2018)
PROTOCOL TITLE: Mount Rogers Combined School: The Experiences and Perspectives of Students and Faculty When a Community School Closed
IRB NUMBER: 14-606

Effective June 3, 2014, the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chair, David M Moore, approved the New Application request for the above-mentioned research protocol.

This approval provides permission to begin the human subject activities outlined in the IRB-approved protocol and supporting documents.

Plans to deviate from the approved protocol and/or supporting documents must be submitted to the IRB as an amendment request and approved by the IRB prior to the implementation of any changes, regardless of how minor, except where necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subjects. Report within 5 business days to the IRB any injuries or other unanticipated or adverse events involving risks or harms to human research subjects or others.

All investigators (listed above) are required to comply with the researcher requirements outlined at:

<http://www.irb.vt.edu/pages/responsibilities.htm>

(Please review responsibilities before the commencement of your research.)

PROTOCOL INFORMATION:

Approved As: **Expedited, under 45 CFR 46.110 category(ies) 6,7**
Protocol Approval Date: **June 3, 2014**
Protocol Expiration Date: **June 2, 2015**
Continuing Review Due Date*: **May 19, 2015**

*Date a Continuing Review application is due to the IRB office if human subject activities covered under this protocol, including data analysis, are to continue beyond the Protocol Expiration Date.

FEDERALLY FUNDED RESEARCH REQUIREMENTS:

Per federal regulations, 45 CFR 46.103(f), the IRB is required to compare all federally funded grant proposals/work statements to the IRB protocol(s) which cover the human research activities included in the proposal/work statement before funds are released. Note that this requirement does not apply to Exempt and Interim IRB protocols, or grants for which VT is not the primary awardee.

The table on the following page indicates whether grant proposals are related to this IRB protocol, and which of the listed proposals, if any, have been compared to this IRB protocol, if required.

Invent the Future

VIRGINIA POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE AND STATE UNIVERSITY
An equal opportunity, affirmative action institution

| Date* | OSP Number | Sponsor | Grant Comparison Conducted? |
|-------|------------|---------|-----------------------------|
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| | | | |

* Date this proposal number was compared, assessed as not requiring comparison, or comparison information was revised.

If this IRB protocol is to cover any other grant proposals, please contact the IRB office (irbadmin@vt.edu) immediately.

APPENDIX J
MOUNT ROGERS SOL DATA

| Mount Rogers SOL Data | | | | | | | | |
|--|------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| (Number students in parenthesis 2003-2010) | 1998 | 1999 | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 (94) | 2004 (89) | 2005 (86) |
| 3rd English | 0 | 64 | 57 | 63 | 9 | 38 | 80 | 100 |
| 5th English | . | 50 | 75 | 33 | 78 | 60 | 50 | 44 |
| 8th English | 50 | 100 | 36 | 100 | 67 | 71 | 57 | 100 |
| 11th English EOC | 71 | 67 | 60 | 60 | . | 100 | | |
| 3rd Math | 20 | 82 | 71 | 88 | 36 | 88 | 100 | 100 |
| 5th Math | . | 0 | 75 | 33 | 11 | 40 | 38 | 67 |
| 8th Math | 25 | 75 | . | 100 | 50 | 67 | 71 | 100 |
| Algebra 1 | 25 | 30 | 50 | 55 | 18 | 60 | 100 | 100 |
| Algebra 2 | . | . | 100 | 50 | 67 | | 67 | 67 |
| Geometry | 0 | 38 | . | 75 | 64 | | | |
| 3rd History | 20 | 91 | 100 | 88 | 18 | 50 | 80 | 100 |
| 5th History | . | 83 | 33 | 14 | 56 | 57 | 71 | 75 |
| US Part 1 | | | | | | | | 44 |
| US Part 2 | | | | | | | | 57 |
| 8th History | 25 | 40 | 0 | 80 | 63 | 63 | 100 | 100 |
| US History | 0 | 17 | 20 | 25 | . | 75 | 75 | |
| World History | 17 | 75 | . | 100 | . | | | |
| World History 2 | 50 | 20 | . | . | 67 | 80 | 100 | 88 |
| 3rd Science | 100 | 73 | 71 | 100 | 18 | 75 | 100 | 100 |
| 5th Science | . | 100 | 75 | 44 | 44 | | | |
| 8th Science | 50 | 100 | 75 | 100 | 80 | | 100 | 100 |
| Biology | 63 | 40 | 50 | 75 | . | | 100 | 100 |
| Earth Science | 50 | 100 | 80 | 75 | . | | | |
| Chemistry | 50 | 50 | . | 100 | . | | | |

| (Number students in parenthesis 2003-2010) | 2006 combined (87) | 2007 combined (86) | 2008 combined (97) | 2009 combined (86) | 2010 Combined (88) |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| English Combined | 74 | 85 | 89 | 93 | 83 |
| History Combined | 81 | 81 | 84 | 86 | 75 |
| Math Combined | 60 | 57 | 82 | 81 | 83 |
| Science Combined | 87 | 85 | 87 | 86 | 97 |

APPENDIX K
SCHOOL CLOSURE TIMELINE

Table 6
School Closure Timeline

| Date | Event |
|--------------------|--|
| 1932 | Mount Rogers School built in Whitetop, VA |
| 2005-2006 | School enrollment dropped to 88 students |
| September 2006 | Facility Study conducted |
| December 12, 2006 | Facility study presented to GCSB |
| January 3, 2007 | School Capital Construction Plan presented to Supervisors |
| January 29, 2007 | Public hearing for comments on School Capital Construction Plan during GCSB meeting |
| February 8, 2007 | Superintendent requests that BoS support Alternate Plan 4 |
| February 14, 2007 | School personnel present most serious facility issues to the BoS |
| March 1, 2007 | Joint work session on budget with BoS and GCSB |
| March 8, 2007 | BoS support School Capital Construction Plan |
| April 5, 2007 | BoS requires that GCSB involve Grayson County Planning Commission on construction plans |
| April 26, 2007 | Budget approved by the BoS with discussion on how to use money saved from school closure |
| September 24, 2007 | SunTrust selected as the lender for construction projects |
| October 11, 2007 | Industrial Development Authority appointed as agent to acquire land for new school |

(continued)

Table 6 (continued)

| Date | Event |
|---------------------|--|
| March 20, 2008 | School board budget presented |
| April 17, 2008 | Public hearing on budget and GCSB requests that ½ of the 07-08 budget be granted |
| May 12, 2008 | New school named Grayson Highlands |
| July 7, 2008 | Construction contract awarded |
| July 14, 2008 | Superintendent Thomas tells the Galax Gazette that the plan is to have the new school ready for the 09-10 school year |
| July 31, 2008 | Groundbreaking ceremony for new school |
| October 13, 2008 | Construction plans do not include provisions for water (well/septic) |
| November 2008 | 15 of 20 days lost due to weather |
| December 2008 | 18 of 23 days lost due to weather |
| January 2009 | 21 of 22 days lost due to weather |
| February 2009 | 21 of 21 days lost due to weather |
| March 2009 | School board advised that the new school will not be ready until 12/2009 with a start date of 1/2/2010 |
| May 12, 2009 | School board advised that the new school will not be ready until 2/2010, but Superintendent remains optimistic for 1/2/2010 start date |
| Fall 2009 | Joint community meetings, joint PTO meetings, joint faculty meetings, GCHS coaches meet with MRCS high school students |
| Early December 2009 | Mount Rogers students and staff pack up and prepare for school closure. |
| December 14, 2009 | Clerk of Works informs GCSB that the school will not be ready until January 18, 2010. |

(continued)

Table 6 (*continued*)

| Date | Event |
|-------------------|--|
| Mid-December 2009 | Mount Rogers students and staff unpack enough to prepare for two extra weeks in their home school. |
| January 2, 2010 | Mount Rogers students and staff return to spend final two weeks in their school |
| January 18, 2010 | Superintendent Thomas tells the Galax Gazette that the new school will not be ready until February |
| February 22, 2010 | Architect meets with GCSB and tells them that the school will not be ready until April. School Board Chair responds with “crazy to open for 60 days” |
| May 12, 2010 | Protesters go to GCSB meeting to try to save their school. Request that they allow elementary students to stay. |
| May 16, 2010 | Community meeting at the new school. Tours, refreshments, live music for entertainment |
| July 26, 2010 | Superintendent Thomas requests that ALL Grayson County Schools delay opening for one week because new school won’t be ready. |
| August 3, 2010 | Ribbon cutting ceremony. No AC because lightening struck the compressor. |
| August 16, 2010 | First day for students in new Grayson Highlands School. |

APPENDIX L
PHOTOS OF MOUNT ROGERS SCHOOL



The original four room structure



Front of Mount Rogers Combined School



Main entrance of the school, Spring 2013