Identification, Description, and Perceived Viability of K–12 Consolidated Catholic School Systems

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Catholic education has been in a state of substantial decline since 1965. In order to help sustain the ministry of Catholic schools, one approach that several dozen dioceses have embraced is the K–12 consolidated Catholic school system. This study investigated the organizational structures within consolidated school systems, factors that led to consolidation, and variables that predict perceived viability of the consolidated model. Quantitative and qualitative data analyses were employed using both school system data and individual responses as units of analyses. This study shows that the K–12 consolidated Catholic school system can be a viable model that allows for greater collaboration among elementary and high schools, financial efficiencies through shared staffing and building closures, and reductions of high parish subsidy. This study also shows that while the model may help Catholic schools remain open, the separation from the parish leads to a lack of parish ownership of the school, a sense of competition between the school system and the supporting parishes, and unknown roles and accountability of the new school system.

There is a lack of general understanding and information regarding K–12 consolidated Catholic school systems, including the factors that led to the changes in structure and governance as well as the viability of this emerging model. Limited research exists on Catholic school viability, and no research exists on the extent that the K–12 consolidated Catholic school system is a model that is sustainable. The purpose of this study is to (1) identify the different organizational structures within K–12 consolidated Catholic school systems, (2) determine the factors that led communities to adopt the K–12 consolidated Catholic school system, and (3) identify the variables that predict the perceived viability of the school system model. For dioceses considering a more collaborative approach to school operations, this study will help identify the benefits and limitations of adopting the K–12 consolidated Catholic school system.

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Literature Review

Catholic education has a rich history in the United States dating back to the 17th century, well before this country was established as an independent nation (Hunt, 2005). Following the substantial immigration movement into the United States in the 19th and 20th centuries, Catholic schools grew rapidly with the peak of enrollment coming in 1965 (Buetow, 1985; Convey, 1992; Hocevar & Sheehan, 1991; Hunt, 2000). This period of growth and progress, however, would not continue. The post-Vatican II era of Catholic schools in the United States has been the antithesis of growth and progress.

The decline of Catholic schools beginning in the late 1960s, labeled a crisis by many inside and outside of the Church (Guerra, 2000; Hunt, 2000), can be attributed to several factors: the rapid reduction of student enrollment and available financial resources (DeFiore, Convey, & Schuttloffel, 2009; Donovan, Erickson, & Madaus, 1971), out-migration of Catholics from the inner-city to the suburbs (Haney & O'Keefe, 2007), and two significant leadership challenges: (1) recruitment, retention, and preparation of Catholic school leaders (Schuttloffel, 2003), and (2) a lack of support and oversight of pastors and diocesan offices (Cook, 2008; DeFiore et al., 2009). The weakening enrollment base and availability of financial resources, coupled with unprepared or unsupportive parish, school, and diocesan leaders, have challenged the traditional structure, purpose, and continuation of Catholic schools (Baker & Riordan, 1998; Kelleher, 2004; Kollar, 2003). These challenges have led to the implementation of alternative governance and leadership models within K–12 Catholic schools across the country. Still, little attention has been placed on the issue of Catholic school viability in determining the factors or structures that keep schools open (Buetow, 1985; Convey, 1992; Guerra, 2000; Haney & O'Keefe, 2007; Lundy, 1999; McDonald & Schultz, 2010).

Catholic School Viability

Finance is the most obvious and urgent challenge facing Catholic schools in the 21st century (Cook, 2008; Guerra, 1991) and the primary reason why Catholic schools close (DeFiore et al., 2009). The financial pressures on Catholic schools are often accelerated as a result of substantial enrollment declines. McDonald and Schultz (2012) report that the total number of Catholic elementary and secondary schools has declined by 16% since 2000,

but enrollment dropped a staggering 23.4% during that same time. While it is clear that enrollment and financial pressures impact school viability, only two studies have developed predictive measures that help identify unstable schools prior to closure (James, Tichy, Collins, & Schwob, 2008; Lundy, 1999).

Enrollment

In a study of parish elementary schools in the Archdiocese of St. Louis, James et al. (2008) found a reliable method to predict viability; these factors include total enrollment, enrollment trends, and a ratio of median household income with tuition. James et al. (2008) found that the average total enrollment of parish schools that closed was below 200 while schools that remained opened had an average total enrollment that exceeded 200 students. Lundy (1999) concluded similar results in an earlier investigation of parish elementary schools in the Archdiocese of Chicago where he reported that survivor schools had nearly twice the total enrollment than non-survivor schools (345 to 175). In addition to total enrollment, James et al. (2008) also found enrollment trend to be a significant variable that impacts school viability. Schools that maintained positive enrollment trends were more likely to remain open than schools that continued to lose enrollment (James et al., 2008).

Finance

A second major variable impacting school viability is finance, including revenue sources. Tuition is the most significant source of income today for Catholic schools (Buetow, 1985; Guerra, 1995). Over time, increases in tuition have helped stabilize schools, yet these increases have strained families. In fact, tuition as a percent of median household income has been shown to impact the viability of parish elementary schools (James et al., 2008). Prior to families being charged tuition, parishes, along with indirect subsidies from religious orders, assumed nearly all of the financial responsibility for the parish school (Lundy, 1999). Pastors today, however, are faced with the loss of religious brothers and sisters as well as increasing demands to support other parish and diocesan ministries financially (Nuzzi, Frabutt, & Holter, 2008). With substantial reductions of the subsidies over time, in terms of percent of the school budget, the parish-funding model no longer appears viable (Donovan et al., 1971; Harris, 1996).

Tuition and parish subsidy have not kept pace with the cost to educate students in Catholic schools (Hunt, 2000). This challenge has forced school administrators to invest in school development programs to help cover the gap of income and expenses (Hunt, 2000). It should be noted that there has been a difference in development efforts between Catholic elementary and Catholic high schools. Parish-based elementary schools have traditionally focused on smaller fund-raisers such as bake sales or dinners. Catholic high schools, on the other hand, have been more successful in raising money outside of tuition with programs such as endowments, annual funds, and capital campaigns. And this has been the case for some time. Between 1974 and 1977, for example, development revenue for Catholic high schools accounted for 5% of the total budget (Bredeweg, 1978). The need to cover the gap continued to grow for Catholic high schools, and development revenue increased to 9% of the total budget in 1993 (Guerra, 1993) but remained flat at 9% in 2008 (Taymans & Connors, 2009).

In response to enrollment declines and mounting financial pressures, Church leaders were challenged as early as 1972 to maintain Catholic schools by considering other structures outside of the traditional parish school (National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1972). Over the last several decades, however, not much has been done outside of closing and consolidating schools. Furthermore, the single administrator model (principal only) and consultative board approach still dominate the way Catholic schools are structured and governed today. The next section will discuss alternative structure, governance, and leadership models that communities across the United States have adopted in order to sustain K–12 Catholic education.

Sustaining Catholic Schools: An Alternative Approach

Since Catholic education in the United States involves a loose network of schools, no two dioceses operate alike when it comes to sustaining those schools (Haney & O'Keefe, 2009). Perhaps one model or solution to keeping Catholic schools viable in every diocese simply does not exist (Haney & O'Keefe, 2009). With this loose network of schools in addition to bishops making decisions with limited or no consultation of the laity, or without consideration of data, it makes it difficult to determine which models are most effective (Greeley, McCready, & McCourt, 1976). And few research studies have been conducted to determine the extent of effectiveness of each of these changing models (Goldschmidt, O'Keefe, & Walsh, 2004; Hamilton, 2008). In an attempt to keep

Catholic schools viable, one approach that several dioceses have supported is the consolidation of Catholic elementary and secondary schools.

Consolidated Catholic School Systems

Enrollment declines and financial challenges are the dominant factors in school consolidation (Burdick, 1996; Lundy, 1999; Mudd, 1989). When considering the major threats of enrollment losses and financial pressures, some pastors and principals feel that consolidation is the only option possible to continue Catholic school education (Mudd, 1989). The success of this model, though, is mixed. While consolidation does provide financial benefits to parishes and schools, major challenges have been identified (Burdick, 1996; Mudd, 1989). One of the most significant challenges of consolidation is the lack of ownership and commitment of the supporting parishes (DeFiore et al., 2009; Feighery, 1959; Lundy, 1999; Mudd, 1989; Theis, 1996). This lack of ownership causes pastors to be more pessimistic about the need to support the consolidated school (Theis, 1996). Attempting to develop an equitable payment among all supporting parishes leads to further resentment (Lundy, 1999; Theis, 1996), including the feeling that the school only sees the parish as a source of money (Theis, 1996).

One relatively new method of restructuring is to consolidate schools by forming a regional system with a leadership team administering all schools (Cook, 2008). This "system" approach is different than multiple parishes merging to form a single consolidated elementary school. K–12 consolidated Catholic school systems involve the merger and collaboration of multiple elementary schools and a single high school (Haney & O'Keefe, 2009). Consolidated Catholic school systems have grown in number and continue to be investigated by dioceses throughout the country (Haney & O'Keefe, 2009). At the time of their study, Goldschmidt, O'Keefe, and Walsh (2004) determined that 31 system models existed across the United States. The authors found that systems reconfigured (as opposed to closing) due to enrollment declines and financial pressures. Of the six systems investigated in their study, five were K–12 Catholic school systems whereas one included only elementary schools (Goldschmidt et al., 2004).

During the 2008 Special Programs for Improving Catholic Education (SPICE) Conference in Boston, Massachusetts, nearly 200 participants traveled from around the country to learn from communities that have successfully implemented the regional Catholic school system model. One of the present-

ing systems, Bishop Heelan Catholic Schools, is located in Sioux City, IA. Bishop Heelan Catholic Schools was established in 1998 through the merger of seven traditional parish schools and one high school. Seven separate boards were merged to form one governing board for the entire school system and an administrative team was hired to lead the new approach (Haney & O'Keefe, 2009).

On a smaller scale, the community in Chippewa Falls, WI, also formed a K–12 consolidated school system called the Chippewa Area Catholic Schools. The Chippewa Area Catholic Schools system was also selected as a nationally recognized model that had successfully reconfigured its schools. In 1987, three original parish schools and one central high school merged. Under a new K–12 consolidated Catholic school system, the three parish schools were replaced with a primary campus (grades K–2), an intermediate campus (grades 3–5), and a middle school (grades 6–8). The high school remained grades 9–12. Similar to Bishop Heelan Catholic Schools, the Chippewa Area Catholic Schools hired an administrative team to oversee the operations of the newly created consolidated school system (Haney & O'Keefe, 2009).

Consultative Boards and Boards with Limited Jurisdiction

Until the 1960s, Catholic schools were a function exclusively of the vowed religious and diocesan priests where laypeople were involved on a limited basis (Hocevar & Sheehan, 1991). Vatican II prompted changes to an "open" Church, including more participation among the laity (Donovan et al., 1971; Hocevar & Sheehan, 1991). The participation among the laity in decisions regarding Catholic schools began with the educational board movement. Under canon law, bishops and pastors cannot delegate ultimate authority of the school to a board (Shaughnessy, 1988), but two types of school boards have given way to increased participation among the laity: consultative boards and boards with limited jurisdiction (Hocevar & Sheehan, 1991; Hunt, 2005; Kim, 1994). Consultative boards operate in the policy-making process and pass along recommendations to the pastoral authority of the school (Sheehan, 1990). Boards with limited jurisdiction have power but not the ultimate authority over the schools. A board with limited jurisdiction has power over limited areas of the educational process (Sheehan, 1990).

President-Principal Model of School Leadership

Another substantive change in Catholic schools is a trend that moves away from the principal-only leadership model. School administration has become more complex over the years, and the president-principal model of school leadership has emerged as an alternative to the single administrator approach. This model, slowly adopted over the last 25 years at the high school level, has proven to be a popular way to structure school administration and divide the responsibilities of education and finance (Commission on Research and Development, 1991; Dygert, 1998, 2000; James, 2007, 2009; James & Vercruysse, 2005; Mullen, 1998). Although schools with the president-principal model report stronger development programs than those without presidents (Guerra, 1993, 1995), there are several intangible benefits to the model: board development, strategic planning, and aligning actions with the school's mission (James, 2009). James (2009) claims that the president-principal model gained prominence because it was more successful than the autonomous principal model in solving the problems of enrollment, marketing, and financial issues.

Summary. A consolidated Catholic school system, as described in this study, can be defined as a system of K–12 schools in a community that is supported by parishes and administered by a leadership team rather than a single principal (Sheehan, 1986). While the K–12 consolidated Catholic school system is a structure of governance and administration unlike the traditional parish school (Cook, 2008; Goldschmidt et al., 2004; Haney & O'Keefe, 2009), the viability of this model may also be attributed to enrollment and school finances (Goldschmidt et al., 2004). For the purposes of this study, enrollment factors consist of total student enrollment and enrollment trend, and school finance factors include revenue sources (tuition, subsidy, and development) and the ratio of tuition and median household income. Enrollment and school finances are utilized to determine the extent that the K–12 consolidated Catholic school system is viewed as a viable alternative to the parish or diocesan school.

Methodology

This study sought to investigate all known K–12 consolidated Catholic school systems in the United States. The purpose of the study was to provide an in-depth review of the varying structures within Catholic school systems, identify the factors that led communities to adopt the K–12 consolidated Catholic school system, and determine to what extent major stakeholders view this

emerging model as a viable option to sustain Catholic school education. A perceived viability mean was created in an attempt to help identify independent school system factors that impact stakeholder perspectives of the model. Perspectives on viability were sought as opposed to annual diocesan reporting due to the challenges of obtaining the information as well as the difficulty to compare school system data across multiple dioceses accurately. This study employed quantitative and qualitative methods through the use of a survey instrument.

Sampling, Distribution, and Data Collection

During the 2010–2011 school year, an attempt was made to contact pastors and school administrators of all known K–12 consolidated Catholic school systems. Prior research (Goldschmidt et al., 2004), online investigations, and a request from diocesan superintendents revealed an initial total of 80 K–12 consolidated Catholic school systems in the United States. One system was used in the pilot study, and the remaining 79 systems were mailed surveys to a total of 487 pastors, principals, and school presidents. Five of the 79 systems (for a total of 36 participants) failed to meet the criteria as a K–12 consolidated system and were eliminated from the study. These schools operated independently from one another with separate governance structures but were part of a collaborative "system" in an attempt to reduce costs. Of the 74 remaining systems and 449 participants, 66 systems (89.2%) and 199 pastors and school administrators (44.3%) responded to the survey.

Instrumentation

The researcher designed the K–12 consolidated Catholic school system survey using the viability research on Catholic schools (DeFiore et al., 2009; James et al, 2008; Lundy, 1999) and included school system structure, enrollment, and financial variables. The survey instrument consisted of 43 items. For Part I (*Introduction and Demographic Information*) and Part II (*School System Information*), pastors and school administrators were asked to respond to questions regarding personal demographics and school system structure, enrollment, and finances. Part III (*Structural Change and Viability*) consisted of two questions. Question one asked respondents to rank the top five factors that led communities to adopt the school system model. Question two allowed respondents to rate the viability of the school system model using a 4-point Likert scale. Part

IV, *Open-Ended Questions,* gave respondents the opportunity to identify the specific strengths, weaknesses, and needed improvements of the K–12 consolidated Catholic school system model through their own descriptions.

A pilot study was conducted with one K–12 consolidated Catholic school system based on a convenience sample to ensure validity of the survey and refine the perceived viability mean. The pilot study was limited to one system due to the small population of K–12 consolidated Catholic school systems. Responses from the survey were entered into a statistical program, SPSS version 19.0, to perform a reliability analysis and to test the construct of the dependent variable–perceived viability. Initially, 12 statements based upon research from DeFiore et al. (2009), James et al. (2008), and Lundy (1999) were developed to create the perceived viability mean. Following an item analysis (corrected item total correlation and inter-item correlation) five statements with a coefficient alpha of 0.81 were used to refine the perceived viability mean. The following statements have been identified as the construct of the dependent variable, perceived viability: (1) the school system model will survive, (2) the system model has improved finances, (3) the system model has improved development and fund-raising efforts, (4) student enrollment has improved in the school system, and (5) the system model has improved buildings/facilities.

Analysis

The school system was the unit of analysis for all research questions and statistical procedures, except for the open-ended questions. Responses were averaged from pastors and school administrators associated with individual school systems in order to create a school system mean. The procedure of analyses for this study was to employ descriptive statistics, analysis of variance, regression, and statement coding techniques.

Descriptive statistics, and more specifically frequency distributions, were used for each of the areas identified through the *School System Information* section related to structure, enrollment, and finance. A frequency distribution also provided information of the overall means of the factors that are most associated with changing to the K–12 consolidated Catholic school system model. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted on the factors that led to the consolidation, and a regression analysis was performed to identify the independent school system factors that impact perceived viability. Finally, coding of open-ended statements using grounded theory techniques was used to obtain participant perspectives as to the benefits and limitations of K–12

consolidated Catholic school systems.

Results

School System Information

General Characteristics. A total of 66 K–12 consolidated Catholic school systems (89.2%) responded to the survey. The majority of the Catholic school systems that responded are found within the Great Lakes and Plains regions. The Great Lakes region represented 43.9% (IL, IN, MI, OH, WI) of the sample, Plains 37.9% (IA, KS, MN, MO, NE, ND, SD), Mideast 7.6% (DE, DC, MD, NJ, NY, PA), Southeast 6.1% (AL, AK, FL, GA, KY, LA, MS, NC, SC, TN, VA, WV), and the West/Far West 4.5% (AK, AZ, CA, CO, HI, ID, MT, NV, NM, OR, TX, UT, WA, WY). The New England region (CT, ME, MA, NH, RI, VT) did not have K–12 consolidated Catholic school systems represented. It was also of interest to the researcher to identify the location of the school systems: inner-city, rural, suburban, or urban. School systems in urban locations had the highest response (51.5%) followed by rural (31.8%), suburban (15.2%), and inner-city (1.5%). Migration to the suburbs where fewer Catholic schools are available (Haney & O'Keefe, 2007; Lundy, 1999) along with families moving to warmer climates (DeFiore et al., 2009) could be two reasons why the consolidated system model is represented overwhelmingly in urban and rural settings of the Great Lakes and Plains regions.

A range of 126 years separates the oldest and newest K–12 consolidated Catholic school system. The oldest system was established in 1885 whereas the newest system was established in 2011. Since 2000, 23 school systems have consolidated (36.5%), 17 systems were consolidated in the 1990s (27.0%), and 11 consolidated in the 1980s (17.4%). The remaining 12 systems consolidated between 1885 and 1975 (19.0%). Three systems failed to report the year in which they were established.

Structure and Governance. The K–12 consolidated Catholic school systems that responded to the survey have an average of just over three schools in each system (M = 3.06, SD = 1.67) with the range of schools between one and eight. While the range of principals working within systems is the same as the number of schools, there are slightly fewer principals, on average, than the number of schools (M = 2.73, SD = 1.50). Further investigation found that 37.9% of the systems have at least one less principal than they do the number of schools. In other words, principals within these systems appear to be shared

between schools.

Although it was originally thought that K–12 consolidated systems were adopted to save schools from closing (Haney & O'Keefe, 2009), this study confirmed the opposite. The K–12 consolidated Catholic school system survey included questions regarding opening and closing of schools at the time or since consolidation occurred. Investigation of systems shows that 72.6% of all systems that responded closed schools either at the time of or since consolidation.

Reporting and accountability of the principal and president were questions in the study that sought to determine how many systems embraced the president position, who the president reported to in terms of accountability, and who the principal reported to in the hierarchy of administration. Tables 1 and 2 identify the systems that reported on these two questions. Seventy-three percent of the systems have adopted the president-principal model of school administration. In this model a president oversees the entire system from kindergarten through grade 12. In some systems the title of system administrator, superintendent, or CEO is used instead of president; but the responsibility of oversight of the entire system is the same across all titles. Principals, on the other hand, administer a school, campus, or specific grade levels within the system. Table 2 identifies the reporting hierarchy of principals. Authority to make financial decisions also solicited responses to determine the centralization or decentralization of each system. It is clear that each system is highly independent of the Catholic schools office. Table 3 shows that only 3.0% of the final financial decisions are made at the diocesan level (Catholic schools office) compared to 42.4% of presidents and 39.4% of boards.

Table 1: President-Report

	Frequency	%
Board	27	40.9
Catholic Schools Office	7	10.6
Pastor/Dean	16	24.2
Other	1	1.5
Not Applicable	15	22.7
Total	66	100.0

Nearly all K–12 consolidated Catholic school systems are sponsored by parishes (68.2%) or dioceses (27.3%). There are two corporate or private systems (3.0%), and one system is considered other (1.5%). Consultative boards make up 65.2% of the systems, and boards with limited jurisdiction represent 25.8% of the systems. Other types of boards are the smallest group with 9.1%.

Table 2: Principal-Report

	Frequency	%
President	43	65.2
Board	8	12.1
Pastor	9	13.6
Catholic Schools Office	3	4.5
Other	3	4.5
Total	66	100.0

Table 3: Final Financial Decisions

	Frequency	%
President	28	42.4
Principal	4	6.1
Board	26	39.4
Catholic Schools Office	2	3.0
Other	6	9.1
Total	66	100.0

Enrollment. Total enrollment and enrollment trends are critical factors in school viability, and questions on enrollment were included in the K–12 consolidated Catholic school system survey. Total K–12 enrollment within consolidated Catholic school systems is fairly diverse, as seen in Table 4. Systems with a total enrollment of 600 students or less represent 57.1% of the sample. Systems with more than 1,000 students represent 19.0%. Table 5, enrollment trend, shows that 51.6% of the sample reported that total enrollment has remained stable (within 5%) over the last three years. Of the remaining systems reporting on enrollment trend, 37.1% had enrollment declines and 11.3% reported enrollment growth over the last three years. Further investigation was conducted to compare the total enrollment of the school and enrollment trend. Of the systems responding to the question, systems with total enrollment of more than 800 students were more likely to have stable or enrollment growth

(84.2%) compared to systems reporting enrollment decline (15.8%). For systems with enrollment of 800 or fewer students, 53.5% reported stable or growing enrollment and 46.5% reported enrollment decline of greater than 5%.

Table 4: Total K-12 Enrollment

	Frequency	%
200–400	15	23.8
401–600	21	33.3
601–800	7	11.1
801–1,000	8	12.7
More than 1,000	12	19.0
Total	63	100.0
Missing	3	
Total	66	

Table 5: Three-Year System Enrollment Trend

	Frequency	%
Decline 5% or more	23	37.1
Remained within 5%	32	51.6
Grown 5% or more	7	11.3
Total	62	100.0
Missing	4	
Total	66	

Finance. Catholic schools rely most heavily on tuition income to balance budgets. On average, 62% of total income for Catholic schools comes from tuition (McDonald & Schultz, 2010). For Catholic school systems responding to the survey, however, 54.1% reported a reliance on tuition at less than half of total school income. The average tuition charged for one elementary child within K–12 consolidated Catholic school systems is $3,020 compared to $3,383 nationally (McDonald & Schultz, 2010). Average high school tuition for one child in K–12 systems is $4,648 compared to the national average of $8,192 (McDonald & Schultz, 2010). While system elementary tuition is slightly below the national average, secondary tuition within the system is substantially less than the national average. The average median family income across communities adopting the K–12 consolidated Catholic school system at

the time of the study was $60,863, which equates to 5% of total family income going to support one elementary child within the system. This compares to the only Catholic school viability study that investigated tuition as a percentage of median household income and found that tuition charged for one elementary student was between 5% and 7% (James, 2006).

Nearly all K–12 consolidated Catholic school systems are supported by multiple parishes. Of the systems that responded to the survey, 45.5% are supported by two to five parishes, 30.3% are supported by six to 10 parishes, and 12.1% are supported by more than 10 parishes. Only 4.5% of systems are supported by a single parish and another 4.5% are not supported by parishes. Parishes associated with systems support Catholic schools, on average, at 46% of total parish income compared to the national average of 24% (DeFiore, in press). As a percentage of total school income, 73.8% of systems reported a reliance on subsidy of at least 20% of total school income. The national average of Catholic elementary school subsidy as a percentage of total income is 22% (DeFiore, 2011).

For Catholic high schools nationally, development income from independent fund-raising accounts for 9% of total school income (Taymons & Connors, 2009). Slightly more than half (54.1%) of the systems reported that development accounts for less than 20% of their total budget. This means that 45.9% of systems rely on development at 20% or more of total income, which is more than twice the national average. Of the systems that responded to the survey, 77.2% have an endowment or separate foundation. Systems with endowments average approximately $2.4 million in total assets, and systems with separate foundations average approximately $3.2 million.

Factors of Consolidation

Participants were asked to rank factors, in order of importance, which led communities to move away from the parish-based and/or central school model to adopt the K–12 consolidated Catholic school system. System scores for all factors were generated and placed in order of importance (Table 6). The top five factors, in order, associated with moving to the system model include: financial challenges, enrollment decline, centralize administrative responsibilities, building maintenance and facility upkeep, and inconsistent finances between schools.

Table 6: Factors Leading to Consolidation from Most Important to Least Important – System Scores

Factor	Mean	SD
Financial challenges	2.73	1.564
Enrollment decline	2.36	1.596
Centralize administration	2.32	1.473
Building maintenance	2.02	1.157
Inconsistent finances	1.67	0.936
Expand fundraising	1.55	0.899
Parish support decline	1.46	0.987
Inconsistent education	1.36	0.687
Quality leadership decline	1.11	0.374

Note: The mean score represents the average ranking of each factor across all systems responding (a higher mean score indicates a more important factor for consolidating).

The first two most important factors of consolidation—financial challenges and enrollment decline—are not unique to K–12 Catholic school systems. In fact, this study confirms prior research on regional Catholic schools where it was reported that schools reconfigured due to enrollment declines and financial pressures (Goldschmidt et al., 2004). Prior studies on Catholic school closings and consolidations have also shown financial challenges and enrollment decline as the top reasons for the change (Burdick, 1996; Lundy, 1999; Mudd, 1989). What is unique with the system model, perhaps, is that centralizing administrative functions is an important factor for adopting the system. As cited previously, 77.3% of all systems have centralized administrative functions by adopting the president-principal model of school administration; and all K–12 systems have a single school board—consultative or limited jurisdiction. Two additional important factors that impact the move to the system model include building maintenance and inconsistent finances between schools.

Further investigation occurred to compare independent system variables of enrollment and finance with factors leading to consolidation. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted for each of the top five consolidation factors and the following school system enrollment and finances areas: total enrollment; enrollment trends; tuition, subsidy, and development revenue as a percentage of total system income; and budget management. Centralizing administrative responsibilities and total system enrollment was significant ($p = 0.003$). Additional analysis showed that as total system enrollment increases, centralizing administrative responsibilities becomes an important factor lead-

ing to the K–12 consolidated Catholic school system model. No further analyses were found to be significant.

Perceived Viability

All participants were asked to rate nine opinion statements regarding the K–12 consolidated Catholic school system model using a likert scale. Ratings ranged between 1 and 4 with 1 being strongly disagree, 2 meaning disagree, 3 being agree, and 4 meaning strongly agree. System scores were generated for each of the nine opinion statements. Based on the system scores, the top ratings (those closest to 4 – strongly agree) included: the change to form a system was necessary for survival (M = 3.55, SD = 0.49), an effective leader currently leads the system (M = 3.22, SD = 0.55), and the system model is one that will survive (M = 3.22, SD = 0.55). On the other hand, statements receiving the lowest ratings (those closest to 1 – strongly disagree) were: the system model improved parish finances (M = 2.65, SD = 0.64), the system model improved enrollment (M = 2.66, SD 0.60), and a strategic plan is currently in place and followed (M = 2.92, SD = 0.57). The final three statements received ratings above 3 (agree) and include: the system model improved school finances (M = 3.11, SD = 0.51), fundraising (M = 3.08, SD = 0.57), and buildings/facilities (M = 3.03, SD = 0.63).

Additional investigations occurred by creating a perceived viability mean for each system followed by a comparison of system structure, enrollment, and finance variables. The following opinion statements showed high correlations with the statement *the system model will survive* and were used as the perceived viability mean: the system model has improved finances for the system (r = 0.621), the system model has improved development efforts (r = 0.626), student enrollment has improved in the school system (r = 0.553), and the system model has improved buildings/facilities (r = 0.413).

A stepwise multiple regression analysis was conducted using the perceived viability mean on the following school system variables: number of schools, number of parishes, total system enrollment, tuition percentage, system debt, enrollment trend, budget, foundation, and the relationship between tuition and median household income (tuition ratio). As seen in Tables 7 and 8, of all the investigations conducted, enrollment trend was the only variable found significant in predicting perceived viability. Table 7 shows that enrollment trend accounted for approximately 28% of the variance in viability, which was statistically significant ($F(1, 56) = 4.81$, $p = 0.03$). Enrollment trend had a

$\beta = 0.29$, $t = 2.91$ indicating that as enrollment stabilizes or grows, the system is perceived as more viable.

Table 7: Stepwise Regression of Major Predictor Variables on Perceived Viability

Model	R^2	R^2 Change	F	p
1	.28	. 08	4.81	.03

a. Predictors: (Constant), Enrollment trend
b. Dependent Variable: Perceived Viability Mean

Table 8: Coefficients of Excluded Variables of Perceived Viability

Model		B	t	p
1	Schools	-.06	-.44	.66
	# of parishes	-.12	-.95	.35
	Total Enrollment	.03	.22	.83
	Tuition percentage	.13	.97	.33
	System debt	.13	.99	.33
	Budget	.01	.06	.96
	Foundation	-.22	-1.71	.09
	Tuition Ratio	.04	.34	.74

Dependent Variable: Perceived Viability Mean

Independent analyses took place on each of the independent factors and opinion statements using stepwise multiple regressions. The number of schools was found to be statistically significant in predicting the necessity of the change to form the consolidated system ($R^2 = 0.14$, $p = 0.003$). Systems with fewer schools identify the move to the system model as one of survival more so than systems with more schools. Enrollment trend was significant in predicting whether or not a strategic plan was in place and followed ($R^2 = 0.09$, $p = 0.02$). Systems with growing enrollment are more likely to have an adopted strategic plan. An effective leader currently leads the system was also found to be significant in predicting the presence or absence of a foundation ($R^2 = 0.07$, $p = 0.046$). Finally, enrollment trend was significant in predicting whether the system model actually improved enrollment ($R^2 = 0.16$, $p = 0.002$). Systems that have experienced recent enrollment growth are more likely to identify the K–12 system model as helping to improve enrollment compared to systems with declining or flat enrollment.

Open-Ended Questions

The final stage of data analysis involved reflections from participants on the strengths and weaknesses as well as changes that would improve the K–12 consolidated Catholic school system. These reflections were gathered through responses to open-ended questions. The four open-ended questions were:

1. What do you feel are the greatest strengths of the school system model?
2. What do you feel are the greatest challenges to the school system model?
3. What would improve the school system model?
4. Do you have any further comments not covered in the survey?

Data from these open-ended questions were analyzed using grounded theory procedures (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). While grounded theory is a qualitative technique that emphasizes development of a theory, the data analysis techniques are beneficial when investigating a largely unknown Catholic school model to help identify emergent concepts from responses to open-ended questions. The core method of data analysis in grounded theory is the constant-comparative method. This method seeks to establish theoretical constructs, essential codes, and categories from the data by looking for cause, structure, context, and correlations between themes or emergent concepts continuously as data is collected and analyzed (Sherman & Webb, 1988).

To begin the data analysis, participant responses to each open-ended question were reviewed, and a list of themes from the data was generated. These themes were generated not from the entire response to each question, but rather from separate statements within each response that appeared to be distinct from the other. For example, for question one (benefits of the model), a participant response included financial efficiencies and better educational opportunities for the students. This type of an example resulted in two themes from a single participant's response. For the next step of the data analysis, codes were assigned for themes that were generated for each open-ended question. Memos were written for the codes and participant responses were identified as supporting documentation. This process resulted in core concepts that helped to identify the benefits, limitations, and improvements needed to the consolidated Catholic school system model.

Benefits to the K–12 Consolidated Catholic School System

A total of 175 participants (87.9%) responded to the first open-ended question. The responses to this question resulted in 303 overall themes, 24 of which were distinct. The highest frequency theme for greatest strength of the system involved opportunities for collaboration and coordination among schools within the system. The coordination and collaboration for the K–12 consolidated Catholic school system is seen in many forms. These benefits include a seamless K–12 curriculum, sharing of teachers and educational resources, strong communication between elementary and high school teachers, consistent tuition rates and salary scales, and coordination of fund-raising activities. One pastor commented on the benefits of the system model by stating:

> We have four school sites (K–3, 4–6, 7-8, and 9–12). There are 1290 children in the system. With this model, we are able to pool more resources of people, finances, professionals, and faith to assist children on the path of education and formation.

Better educational opportunities and financial efficiencies were the next highest frequency themes. These are outcomes of coordination and collaboration within the system. The consistent curriculum and shared programs lead to improvements in the quality of education that students receive through joint planning meetings or multi-age peer tutoring. Coordination and shared staff avoids duplications of classrooms and programs and provides a more efficient use of teachers, administration, and buildings. These benefits can lead to tremendous financial savings for the school system. One school administrator went as far as to state, "We have saved hundreds of thousands of dollars with faculty, administration, staffing, and resources." The savings realized from the consolidation also leads to better salaries for staff and teachers and a reduction of high parish subsidies. One pastor wrote, "Individual parishes of our community could not finance a preschool–12th grade offering on their own." Another pastor simply put, "It is the only chance for future viability."

Another benefit of the system model is the shared ownership and commitment for Catholic education as well as having professionalized, centralized leadership. There is strength in broadening the base of support among multiple parishes involved in the educational process as opposed to the feeling of isolation with the single, parish-based school. This wider sense of owner-

ship and commitment also spreads to the general community and to alumni who feel called to support the mission and continuation of Catholic education. The consolidated system has led to the formation of a president position and a strong administrative team consisting of the president, principals, controller, and advancement director. The president is able to give more attention to creating a vision for the entire system and use her team to implement educational improvements, centralize the financial processes from tuition collection to accounts payable, and improve development initiatives through coordination of fund-raisers and increased communication with alumni.

Limitations to the K–12 Consolidated Catholic School System

A total of 171 participants (85.9%) responded to the second open-ended question resulting in 248 themes. Of the 248 total themes, 26 diverse themes were uncovered. The highest-frequency theme that emerged from this data set was a loss of parish support and identity. Prior to the implementation of the system model, Catholic education was a ministry of the parish. With the parish-based model, communication from the pulpit was stronger and the pastor made final decisions regarding the school. The formation of the system has caused pastors to appear more reluctant to voice their support of Catholic education and encourage families to send their children to Catholic schools. Pastors may also feel uncomfortable coming into the schools to teach or interact with students and staff that are not part of their parish so they simply stop coming into the buildings. Finally, since multiple parishes support the system, it can be a major challenge to gain consensus from all pastors from the supporting parishes.

The second highest response for challenges within the system involved finances. Many respondents indicated that the systems are losing revenue from the parishes through reduced subsidy and other financial support. The reductions of parish subsidy coupled with declining enrollment and increasing costs have resulted in lower teacher salaries, unstable budgets, and the need to improve development programs. The low teacher salaries may also be attributed to below-average tuition and the significant overhead costs of maintaining a professional, centralized administrative office, including the president position. Finally, the merger of the finances of the former parish-based schools into the system has caused some challenges. Stakeholders of more stable schools feel burdened to carry the weight of less viable schools within the system. Creating consistent tuition and salary scales across the system has also resulted in systems carrying unsecured, operational debt.

Enrollment challenges were the last high-frequency theme for challenges to the system model. School administrators and pastors noted the difficulty of maintaining or increasing enrollment as a result of declining infant baptisms and Catholic population. Coupled with the economic downturn, the affordability of tuition also has an impact on enrollment. Outside of demographics, the economy, and affordability, retaining students from building to building or fighting against the feeling from parents that consolidation is just one step closer to closing altogether can challenge enrollment within the system model as well.

Improvements to the System Model

A total of 134 responses (67.3%) were collected for this survey question resulting in a total of 178 themes. While the number of responses and total themes declined for this question, the number of different themes remained constant at 26. The highest response for improvement to the system model involved finances. Most pastors and school administrators feel that increasing revenue will improve the system and address the challenges that exist within the model. This increasing revenue will not be possible without improvements in development programs, state or federal aid, and/or equalizing a funding model from the parishes.

Parish and pastor support was the next highest theme. Pastors and school administrators identified several ways to improve the system model through parish financial support and pastoral involvement in the schools. Many of the administrators commented that more parishes and pastors should actively support the system. All parishes in the diocese should share in the ownership and support of Catholic schools even if they do not have a school on site. There is also a great need for more pastor presence and involvement in the system. Stronger pulpit support for Catholic education, presence in the schools, and involvement in governance will positively impact the overall perceived viability of the system model.

Leadership improvements were the final high-frequency theme for this open-ended question. To improve the system model, diocesan and system leaders must be strong. The Catholic schools office should play a guiding role during the formation of the system and provide ongoing training of pastors and school administrators after the system is formed. Role clarity and accountability is a concern among those associated with the system, and the Catholic schools office can help by working with pastors of supporting parishes and

school leaders to understand better their roles as well as accountabilities within the system. The diocesan Catholic schools office can also support communities by helping stakeholders cope with the loss of the parish school, which, in many cases, was a century-old tradition. Stronger system leadership is needed as well. Having a professional system administrator or president is critical in the ongoing success of the model. More active involvement is needed from system administrators in the life and activities of the school, and system administrators must actively engage pastors in leadership decisions that impact the system. Finally, presidents should work with advancement personnel to help drive improvements to development programs and stabilize enrollment.

Discussion of the Findings

K–12 consolidated Catholic school systems have average elementary tuition but substantially lower secondary tuition compared to the national average. Parishes financially support Catholic school systems at twice the national average when comparing the amount invested in Catholic schools as a percentage of overall parish income. The dependency on development income for smaller Catholic school systems (fewer students) is also substantially above the national average. The low secondary tuition, perhaps, necessitates the high subsidy and development income to balance the budget within Catholic school systems. Even with average to below average tuition, one-third of systems have experienced an enrollment decline of greater than 5% over the last three years.

The two major factors leading to the system model—financial challenges and enrollment decline—are consistent with prior research on Catholic school closings and consolidations. While the system model was adopted primarily due to these top two factors, forming the K–12 Catholic school system has not been a success on both issues. Participants agree that the system model has improved finances, yet over half of the systems reported that they were not able to balance their operating budget at least once over the last three years. Furthermore, nearly three-fourths of the systems reported that schools closed at the time of consolidation or since consolidation occurred. Similarly, enrollment has not improved with the system model. The opinion statement *the system model improved enrollment* received the lowest rating among participants, and one-third of systems reported enrollment declines of greater than 5% in recent years.

The strongest predictor of perceived viability is enrollment trend. Systems

with growing enrollment are more likely to be perceived as viable. Separate investigations on individual viability statements also yield important results. Systems with fewer schools identify the move to the system model as one of survival more so than systems with more schools. A strategic plan is most likely to be adopted and followed in systems that have experienced enrollment growth. Finally, systems that have experienced recent enrollment growth are more likely to identify the K–12 model as helping to improve enrollment compared to systems with declining or flat enrollment.

Based upon the responses from stakeholders associated with K–12 consolidated Catholic school systems, the model is a viable alternative to the parish-based schools. The K–12 consolidated Catholic school system has allowed Catholic education to continue in communities where it might have otherwise not been able to survive. This is a result of the financial savings, improved academics, and sense of collaboration and commitment among many stakeholders within and outside of the system.

While many of the major challenges are resolved or lessened with the "new" model, the struggles of continuing to support Catholic education remain. A significant challenge to the system model is the loss of parish identity and reduced support. The separation from the parishes and uncertainty as to their role in the new configuration has led pastors to become less involved in the school. Pastors and school administrators also concluded that enrollment and financial challenges still remain with the system model, and that the future viability of Catholic schools is dependent upon improving revenue and involving pastors in the life and governance of the system.

Conclusion

The primary purposes of this study were to identify patterns of structure and governance of the K–12 consolidated Catholic school system, determine the factors that led communities to adopt the model, and identify variables that help predict perceived viability. This study contributed to all of these purposes. The descriptive statistics on structure and governance of K–12 consolidated Catholic school systems are rich with data and interpretations. The major factors that led to the system model are consistent with prior research, but other factors were identified that help better explain what led a community to adopt the model. It is also shown through this study that while the system model can be a viable option for communities considering this alternative approach, the separation from the parishes is a significant limitation. Through this study, it

was found that the perceived viability of the system model is dependent upon efficiencies gained from shared staffing as well as high parish subsidies that are unlikely to continue. Even though adopting the system model allows for better opportunities to raise money outside of tuition and subsidy, the weak tuition base makes this approach risky. Relying on development income at a rate significantly higher than the national average also has the danger of creating budget shortfalls if donors are not willing or able to continue funding the school system.

Implications for Practice

The majority of K–12 Catholic school systems are found in declining markets of the Great Lakes and Plains regions of the United States and located in urban and rural settings. While it does not appear to be the "golden ticket" to keep Catholic schools thriving, even with its limitations the K–12 consolidated Catholic school system approach may be the only way to perpetuate Catholic schools in certain areas. With flat or declining enrollment, efficiencies can be gained by moving to the system model through shared staff, buildings, and other resources that may help stabilize the position of Catholic schools in the region.

It should be noted that most systems have adopted the president-principal model of school administration. This critical component may be one of the keys to helping stabilize the schools through the system model. It must be understood, however, that the additional salary and benefits of a president position can be a tremendous financial investment on part of the community. Strict attention should be given when investigating K–12 Catholic school systems to determine not only if the system model is an appropriate alternative but whether or not the two-tiered leadership approach is one that will lead to a return on the investment. The president-principal model with a complete "central office" staff may not produce the intended results that are needed to remain open. A careful study of the cost-benefit analysis of the president-principal model in smaller systems should be conducted.

The most significant challenge facing K–12 consolidated Catholic school systems today is the separation from the local parishes. This separation, along with the fact that parishes financially support systems as a percentage of their total income at twice the national average, cause pastors to become disinterested and unsupportive of Catholic schools. This is partially due to unclear roles on the part of pastors, but it is also a result of the major focus of parish

involvement in the school system centering on financial support alone. Steps should be taken to recognize and support the traditions of the parish and determine pastoral roles when forming the new system. Consideration should also be given to help parishes reduce subsidy to the school system to be more consistent with the national average. Doing so will give the parishes a more stable financial position over the long term.

Finally, diocesan leadership must play an active, engaged, and supportive role within communities considering changing to a K–12 consolidated Catholic school system. This is especially critical from the beginning of the change process to help individuals cope with the loss of the traditional parish school concept that has been in existence in many communities for over 100 years. Equally as important, though, is the need for guidance and support from the bishop and superintendent for pastors, presidents, and principals to understand their roles in the new governance structure. No longer are the pastors responsible for their own parish school. The change forms a collaborative relationship with other pastors, and they must understand their authority and role in the system. School administrators also need to understand their roles and accountability in the system model. Traditionally, principals reported to the pastor, but in the new system it will be important to plan out the authority structure to determine who has ultimate authority to hire and terminate school administrators. To make things even more complicated—and highlight the need for diocesan guidance and support—the type of board will likely bring about changes to authority and accountability. As more and more schools implement boards with limited jurisdiction, K–12 systems using this form of governance from the beginning is just another fundamental shift away from tradition that will require a tremendous amount of time and energy on the part of diocesan leadership.

Limitations of the Study on Suggestions on Future Research

Several limitations exist in this study. When conducting the analyses, it became obvious that some of the school system information questions on the survey instrument were unclear to participants. Additionally, since presidents and principals of each system completed the survey, conflicting answers arose during the data entry phase when only one answer was correct. These limitations were offset by making contacts directly to school system administrators when conflicting answers were found. Finally, the perceived viability mean is limited to the perspectives of pastors and school administrators as opposed to

quantitative indicators of viability. In the future, a study (or multiple studies) focusing more on the specific financial condition, Catholic identity, and educational impact of K–12 Catholic school systems is warranted.

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