

District at the Edge
Policy, Community, Place and Belonging in a School Closure Debate

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Abstract

In 2019, the School Board for the small, rural Marion-Chester Area School District (MCASD) in Wisconsin voted to dissolve the district entirely after the repeated failure of local ballot measures requesting additional funding. This dissertation presents an examination of the dissolution crisis in MCASD, drawing on socio-cultural policy perspectives and utilizing qualitative, ethnographic methods to answer the question, how can we understand the constellation of contexts and factors, especially public support, policy structures, and local dynamics, that shaped the financial crisis in MCASD, a small, rural, financially bankrupt school district threatened with total dissolution? Taking seriously Weis and Fine's (2012) call for critical bifocality, I direct attention to both individuals and structures and the ways in which each mattered in MCASD. First, I explore the ways in which local factors both shaped and were revealed through the controversy, including debates over community definition, the place and purpose of schools for communities and individuals, questions of legitimate decision-making in educational policy. In doing so, I capture the complexity of this crisis and the ways in which it speaks to multiple ongoing educational policy debates while also revealing complications and contradictions within rural conservatism. Then, I direct attention to the policy structures that surrounded MCASD, including educational policies like those governing school funding and subjecting schools to market pressures and non-educational policies such as those addressing land use. I argue that existing policies functioned as a trap, leading MCASD into an untenable situation that the School Board felt could only be addressed through dissolution. Finally, I develop the notion of strategic belonging, a technique in which some residents of the MCASD asserted affinity with a neighboring community in a way that supported their perceived educational, resource, and racial self-interest. This study makes empirical and theoretical contributions to multiple literatures, including those examining rural education policy and politics, neoliberal and

marketizing educational policies, and the politics of education writ large; further, it has practical implications for educational policy in Wisconsin and beyond.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Wisconsinites love a lot of things. They love cheese, bratwurst, and beer; they love cheering on the Packers football team and complaining about Illinois drivers. Many Wisconsinites also love their public schools, which can be key community institutions. It was therefore shocking when, in the spring of 2019, the School Board for the Marion-Chester Area School District (MCASD) voted to dissolve the district entirely because of a lack of local financial support. The dissolution order issued by the MCASD School Board triggered a flurry of activity. Members of the community organized a non-binding referendum on the question of dissolution, and the state Department of Instruction (DPI) convened a Dissolution Board to approve or reject the order. Through it all, MCASD hung in the balance, a district on the edge of dissolution facing an uncertain future.

It would be easy to dismiss the case of MCASD as an outlier, a strange case of a small, rural district with financial problems and a community unable or unwilling to resolve them. However, my research documents the problems and conditions that led to and shaped the crisis in MCASD, conditions which are far from unique in the United States. MCASD faced intra-district tensions, disagreements over the purposes of public schools, and policy structures that seemed stacked against them, none of which are unique to the district. While the dissolution order was eventually overturned by a state-convened board, it did not solve the problems facing the district: it was left clinging to existence while still facing significant challenges, a portrait in miniature of struggles facing districts across the nation.

In this dissertation, I examine the dissolution crisis in MCASD with an eye to understanding the underlying values, attitudes, and structures that shaped it. I set out to answer the following research question: how can we understand the constellation of contexts and factors, especially public

support, policy structures, and local dynamics, that shaped the financial crisis in MCASD, a small, rural, financially bankrupt school district threatened with total dissolution? People often discuss school or district closings as due to individual ineptitude or inefficiency; however, I ultimately find that a variety of factors impacted the crisis in MCASD, including tensions over community definition and the purposes of schooling; policies, both educational and not, that combined to “trap” the district; and a strategy of strategic belonging adopted by some members of the community to pursue their own self-interest.

Although this study focuses on one unique case, it has implications and significance well beyond the boundaries of MCASD. It develops multiple literatures, including those considering the place of schools in communities, neoliberal and marketizing education policies, the politics of education, and the politics of rural spaces. It also makes several theoretical contributions, including an interpretation of education policy as a trap MCASD was subject to and developing the notion of strategic belonging as a tool to understand the politics of education policy. Finally, it has real-world implications for education policies in Wisconsin and beyond.

Literature Review

Schools, the Purposes of Education, and Community Definition

Public schools are a unique institution within United States society. They are places where we, the public, send our children to become adults, to gain the skills and aptitudes they will need in the future. To frame the politics of education I look to work that examines the purposes of education and its relationship to the shifting political, economic, and social context of the United States. Philosophers and historians of education have long devoted attention to the purposes of education. Labaree (1997), for example, divides the purposes of public education into three

categories: democratic equality (the preparation of citizens), social efficiency (the preparation of workers), and social mobility (preparation of individuals to compete). In his view, the central problem of education is not technical, but political, as we debate and balance the extent to which schools should pursue those three goals. Such perspectives illustrate some of the tensions inherent to American public schooling.

Public schools are also places where values and norms are communicated and passed on, and in doing so schools become sites of community definition. Mayo (2007), in her discussion of sexuality, gender, and education policy, writes that “decision making about curricula and school policy . . . is a moment when community is enacted. It is also a moment when plans are made for how the community will be represented and enacted in the future” (p. 39). Rosen (2009) also emphasizes the importance that school policy can have for defining and communicating a community’s values by describing the symbolic role that policy plays as both an expressive and constitutive force.

Schools do not only create and define community through the communication and construction of values; they also do so through the interactions and relationships they facilitate. Researchers examining school closures draw attention to this function of schooling by witnessing the struggles that come when such communities fade; for example, Ewing’s (2020) notion of institutional mourning captures

the social and emotional experience undergone by individuals and communities facing the loss of a shared institution they are affiliated with . . . especially when those individuals or communities occupy a socially marginalized status that amplifies their reliance on the institution or its significance in their lives. (p. 127)

By developing this notion, Ewing draws attention to the complex ways communities and institutions are intertwined, especially within contexts of structural and historical inequalities.

The community definition function of schools is particularly important in rural spaces.

Writing particularly about the rural school-community connection, Schafft and Biddle (2014) note:

As local social institutions, schools play critical community roles. While they prepare young people for participation in a variety of social, economic and civic spheres, they are also one of the main social institutions that help to define and provide coherence to the communities where people live . . . as public institutions mandated with providing services to all eligible local residents, schools also remain one of the primary enduring *local* institutions, run by locally elected school boards, providing a context for collective identity and association, a site for shared intergenerational identity, and an important context for community interaction, social solidarity, and collective actions. (p. 558-559, emphasis original)

Thus, in places where there are few other public institutions, schools become even more important as sites of community definition and collective identity.

Previous work has demonstrated that educational controversies are contexts which can surface and make particularly visible the complex roles that schools play in society. For example, Binder (2002) found that debates over such issues as the teaching of creationism of Ebonics in different communities were entwined with questions of cultural norms, insider and outsider status, and political and institutional power. A study preceding this one, in a community near the area served by MCASD, found that a debate over policies related to transgender students was not only a place of contestation over school practices but also about who truly counted as a member of that community in a time of shifting social and political dynamics, and also surfaced complex feelings of

belonging and alienation among community members (Brecklin, 2017). Given the importance of schools as social institutions, especially in rural areas, it is important to investigate a situation in which one community seemingly abandoned their public schools to the point of near-collapse.

Marketization and School Choice

A key theme of U.S. educational policy change in recent decades is the expansion of marketizing policies, especially “choice” policies that provide mechanisms for students to attend schools other than their local public school. These policies introduce market pressures into public education, assuming and encouraging neoliberal logics of competition and individualism for both students and schools; drawing on Strassman (1993), Windle (2015) notes that “school choice is based on an economic model of the autonomous, self-interested individual voluntarily entering into contractual exchanges with others” (p. 38). Scholars have further criticized school choice policies as “normalize[ing] white, privileged consumption as a basis for revamping public education systems” (Chen & Moskop, 2020), thereby further entrenching systemic inequalities. School choice policies also destabilize the contexts under which schools must work: “with school choice, public schools no longer have guaranteed streams of students or resources; they must compete for these while pursuing complex goals with difficult-to-measure outcomes” (Chen & Moskop, 2020, p. 5). While choice programs often claim a goal of improving education for all students, and especially students of color and economically disadvantaged students, many scholars have critiqued them as reinforcing racial and economic inequalities (Chen & Moskop, 2020; Saporito & Lareau, 1999). Moreover, there is mixed evidence as to the success of choice programs in improving educational outcomes for students (Berends, 2015; Riel et al., 2018; Usher & Kober, 2011), calling into question such programs’ efficacy at meeting any of their ostensible goals.

Scholars of school choice have emphasized the importance of neoliberalism to understanding the expansion of such policies (Horsford et al., 2019; Windle, 2015). Neoliberal logics infuse discourse in the United States and globally; as Harvey (2005) notes, “Neoliberalism has, in short, become hegemonic as a mode of discourse. It has pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world” (p. 3). Apple’s (2006) explication of what he describes as the larger ideological projects of the political right has been particularly influential in making sense of the expansion of marketizing policies in education. He argues that the right is made up of a coalition of four groups: neoliberals, neoconservatives, authoritarian populists, and members of the new middle class. Importantly, although Apple points to these groups’ effectiveness in concert, he also argues that there are differences and tensions between them. He describes the neoliberal position as:

They [neoliberals] are guided by a vision of a weak state. Thus, what is private is necessarily good and what is public is necessarily bad. Public institutions such as schools are ‘black holes’ into which money is poured—and then seemingly disappears—but which do not provide anywhere near adequate results. For neoliberals, one form of rationality is more powerful than any other—economic rationality. Efficiency and an ‘ethic’ of cost-benefit analysis are the dominant norms. All people are to act in ways that maximize their own personal benefits. Indeed, behind this position is an empirical claim that this is how *all* rational actors act. (p. 31-32, emphasis original)

The connection between such positions and the expansion of marketizing or “school choice” policies is clear. If the rational actor is a self-interested, economic actor seeking to maximize their

own benefit, then it is appropriate—even just—to structure education policy in a way that facilitates such benefit-seeking. Apple elucidates the connection, writing:

For neoliberals, the world in essence is a vast supermarket. ‘Consumer choice’ is the guarantor of democracy. In effect, education is seen as simply one more product like bread, cars, and television. By turning it over to the market through voucher and choice plans, education will be largely self-regulating. (p. 32)

Thus, neoliberal policies (re)shape how people think about and engage in, not only education, but also their communities and government. Although neoliberal policies appear neutral, they are far from it; as noted by Lipman (2011), “policies are, in part, discourses—values, practices, ways of talking and acting—that shape consciousness and produce social identities” (p. 11), and neoliberal policies and discourses have been particularly effective at doing so in recent decades.

Marketizing policies, infused with neoliberal logics, take multiple forms; in Wisconsin, key policies include charter schools, two local and one statewide voucher programs, and statewide inter-district open enrollment. The histories of choice policies in Wisconsin demonstrate some of their complexity and the ways their promise has been framed and their flaws experienced. For example, the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP), one of the first large-scale voucher programs in the country, was initially conceived as a mechanism to allow Milwaukee students of color to access the kinds of education the city had failed to provide in their local public schools. However, the program and its relatives—the Racine Parental Choice Program and the Wisconsin Parental Choice Program—have served to increase racial segregation while failing to address the needs of children of color. Many choice policies at work in Wisconsin and elsewhere are complicated in rural spaces; for

example, it is often not feasible or even desirable to attempt to open a charter school in a rural area (Bryant, 2010).

Inter-district open enrollment, which allows students to attend school in a district other than the one their home is zoned for, is a key educational choice policy in Wisconsin and in the MCASD. However, such policies have not been significantly examined by researchers (see Chapter 4 for further discussion). Moreover, the literature on school choice overwhelmingly centers on urban or, less frequently, suburban spaces, largely ignoring rural contexts (Bryant, 2010). Thus, the conditions under which the MCASD dissolution crisis occurred—a rural district significantly impacted by an inter-district open enrollment program—are unique in the literature and deserving of further attention.

Rural Schooling and Politics

Rural education has long been relegated to the periphery of both scholarly and policy attention (Biddle & Azano, 2016; DeYoung, 1987; Schafft & Biddle, 2014). Despite this, rural spaces are diverse, complex, and evolving places that provide rich sites for social research. “Rural” can mean the Mississippi River delta or the Midwestern plains; it can mean wealthy coastal retirement communities or struggling mountain towns. While the popular imagination often assumes that “rural” means “white,” people of color have always lived in rural spaces, and rural spaces are increasingly racially diverse (Love, 2021).

Central to the study of rural education and rural politics are notions of rurality and rural identity, each of which is amorphous and difficult to define. Even seemingly simple questions can be hard to answer: for example, how is a rural space defined? Corbett (2021) contends that “If ever there was an established and problematic binary, it is that of rural and urban space” (p. 170). “The

rural” is often constructed simply, in terms of distance from metropolitan centers; Tieken (2014), drawing on Howley, Theobald, and Howley (2005), takes issue with that construction, writing that:

And it’s this feeling—something beyond the size of a population or its proximity to a city—that many rural scholars and advocates feel should actually define rural: ‘the *rural* in rural is not most significantly the boundary around it, but the meanings inherent in rural lives, wherever lived.’ ‘Rural,’ then, is a matter of the commonplace interactions and events that constitute the rural ‘lifeworld,’ a value mostly overlooked by the media and academia, and a significance impossible to quantify. This understanding, shared by many of the residents of rural communities, is tied to place; it provides a geography-dependent sense of belonging. Rural, in this conception, is not simply a matter of boundaries. It constitutes one’s identity; it shapes one’s perspectives and understandings’ and it gives meaning to one’s daily experience. This identity, this shared and place-dependent sense of rural belonging, gives rural its significance. (p. 5)

Thus, Tieken critiques the ways in which rural is often defined as that which is not-urban, instead pointing to the importance of interactions, place, identity, and belonging in making sense of rurality.

Rurality and place-based identity can be central to the ways in which people think about politics and make political decisions. Cramer (2016) for example, demonstrates one way that place and politics can be intimately related through what she terms rural consciousness and the related rural resentment against cities. In her conception, rural consciousness is

An identity as a rural person that includes much more than an attachment to place. It includes a sense that decision makers routinely ignore rural places and fail to give rural communities their fair share of resources, as well as a sense that rural folks are fundamentally

different from urbanites in terms of lifestyles, values and work ethic. Rural consciousness signals an identification with rural people and rural places and denotes a multifaceted resentment against cities. (p. 5-6)

Researchers have found that members of rural, poor, and working-class communities, particularly those who are white, have less support for social welfare programs including even those which they themselves could or do benefit from; existing work suggests that race, class, geographical place, and emotion play important roles in that (lack of) support (Cramer, 2016; Hochschild, 2018; Metzl, 2020; Quadagno, 1996). However, these studies have typically not examined K-12 public education, which is often the place that members of the public have the most sustained, visible contact with the public sphere. Further, while in the wake of the 2016 election of Donald Trump scholars and journalists have turned increasing attention to rural spaces, especially white, conservative voters within those spaces (e.g. Albrecht, 2019; Kurtzleben, 2016; Monnat & Brown, 2017; Wuthnow, 2018), they have failed to fully capture the differences within that demographic, leading to significant blind spots in our understanding which this study begins to address.

As introduced above, rural schools are often central institutions in their communities. They are not only places where students are educated; they are also places where adults are employed, families receive social services, and communities come together for shared social events. The centrality of schools to communities has sometimes been understood as coming at the expense of quality academics; in her work, Tieken (2014) struggles with the question asked of her by an Arkansas state senator, “are these schools for communities or students?” However, Tieken ultimately rejects the question itself, arguing that student and community are inseparable from each other. Scholars of rural education and politics have argued that rural communities and schools are

complex and diverse, but existing work does not fully capture that complexity and diversity. This study contributes an examination of a unique case to that ongoing conversation.

Theoretical Framework: Socio-Cultural Understandings of Policy

In contrast to traditional conceptions of policy as a techno-rational tool for problem solving (Weimer & Vining, 2017), this study relies on a conception of policy as socially constructed and context-bound. Scholars have argued, for example, that policy problems are not objective realities that policymakers observe and react to, but are instead developed through social and cultural interactions and active processes of framing and categorization (Benford & Snow, 2000; Edelman, 1985; Gusfield, 1996; Stone, 2012). Viewing policy through a sociocultural lens thus allows consideration of the contextual, cultural, and subjective dimensions of policy that are missed in other perspectives.

Scholars who study policy using a sociocultural approach particularly emphasize the importance of context and culture in shaping policy. Stone (2012) makes this point by contrasting the dominant model of policymaking, in which people act primarily for their own self-interest, with her model of political society, the *polis*, which she describes as:

A model of community where individuals live in a dense web of relationships, dependencies, and loyalties; where they care deeply about at least some other people besides themselves; where they influence each other's desires and goals; and where they envision and fight for a public interest as well as their individual interests. (p. 10-11)

Changing one's conceptualization of the society and culture surrounding policy decisions and their relationships to policy directs attention to different motivations, possibilities, and limitations than might otherwise be considered. For example, Majone (1989) notes that "all important policies

require political and moral choices to be made in a context that is characterized by norms, beliefs, goals, and pressures” (p. 146). Contexts that matter for any given policy can exist on multiple levels of scale (Datnow, 2006) and at different historical times (Morgan, 2006), and understanding those contexts is essential for understanding policy. Thus, this project incorporates attention to multiple contexts as well as the central policy decision at stake.

A socio-cultural perspective also draws attention to the ways policy acts outside of what might be expected. Policies can shape categories of thought and create new categories of people (Mettler & Soss, 2004), norms and standards (Levinson et al., 2018), and kinds of politics and policies that can follow (Schneider & Ingram, 1997). Further, using a socio-cultural understanding of policy allows for analysis that incorporates people’s subjective ideas, beliefs, and experiences as well as material and “objective” realities. Yanow’s (2000) description of her approach, interpretive policy analysis, explains the assumptions that make such analysis possible:

Unlike approaches to policy analysis grounded in positivist philosophy, interpretive approaches consider a hard and fast distinction between facts and values to be ontologically untenable. If the world as we know it is perceived and understood through theoretical constructs, there is nothing ‘factual’ in an objective sense about human acts and events. (p. 15)

In the current, politically polarized climate, socio-cultural approaches can be particularly useful. Roe (1994), who advocates a narrative approach to policy analysis, argues that:

Many public policy issues have become so uncertain, complex, and polarized—their empirical, political, legal, and bureaucratic merits unknown, not agreed upon, or both—that

the only things left to examine are the different stories policymakers and their critics use to articulate and make sense of that uncertainty, complexity, and polarization. (p. 3)

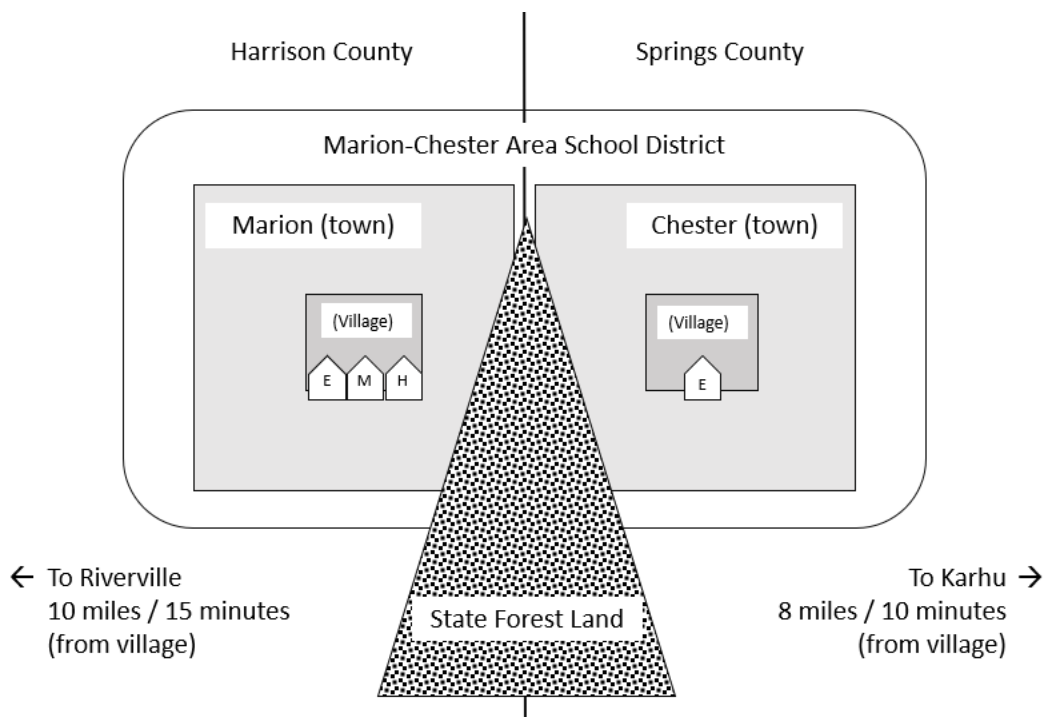
These characteristics of a sociocultural understanding of policy make it possible to take an expansive view of policy and policy debates, directing attention not only to the technical issue at hand but also the contexts, values, beliefs, and histories that surround them.

Context: Marion and Chester

Marion and Chester¹ are two small, neighboring towns in Wisconsin. Located midway between two urban areas, each community consists of two, nested parts, an outer town and an inner, more population-dense village (see Figure 1-1). Driving into the area from the West, the first community you encounter is Marion, in Harrison County. Marion is home to three of the district's four schools: Marion Elementary in its own, aging building and Marion-Chester Middle School and High School, which share a large, new building. Along Marion's Main Street, or just off it, are many of the trappings of small-town life: a grocery store, a hardware store, the public library, the historical society, a church, a bank, a diner, several bars, and a gas station.

Leaving Marion, a curving road takes you past a lake and under the arching branches of a state forest, across the county line into Springs County and then into Chester. Chester's downtown struck me as an interesting mix of old and new. Alongside the aging churches, bars, and diner with chicken-themed décor were newer coffee shops and stores selling local goods and products. I conducted this research in wintertime, when both towns were dark too early and covered in ice and snow. This did make for some lovely moments, however: for example, in Chester I went on a

¹ Names for research sites and associated places are pseudonyms, as are all participants' names.

Figure 1-1*Map of the Marion-Chester Area School District*

hayride around the village to look at Christmas lights, a Bluetooth speaker blasting carols from the leader's wife's cell phone.

Marion and Chester share many cultural and physical similarities, and historically—as will be discussed in later chapters—they were demographically very similar as well. However, differences between the communities have been growing in recent decades. Since 1990, the population of the Village and Town of Marion have held fairly constant (see Table 1-1); in the same time, the population of both the Village and Town of Chester have close to doubled. While the Village and Town of Marion and the Village of Chester are similar in terms of their racial demographics, each about 90-93% white, the Town of Chester is even less racially diverse, with a population that is 97% white. There are also class differences between the communities: for example, the median income in

the Town of Chester is more than twice the median income in the Village of Marion. These similarities and differences will be explored in greater detail in later chapters, particularly Chapter 5; for now, suffice it to say that while the two communities have in many ways a similar, shared history, their present differences have caused tension between them.

Table 1-1

Demographic Data (2019, unless otherwise noted)

	Marion		Chester	
	Village	Town	Village	Town
Population	1800	1100	2100	3600
Population (1990)	1500	1200	1100	2000
Median Household Income	\$52,400	\$80,900	\$80,400	\$110,000
Not Hispanic or Latino:				
--White alone	93%	90%	90%	97%
--Black or African American alone	1%	0%	0%	0%
--Asian alone	0%	0%	0%	0%
--American Indian or Alaska Native alone	0%	0%	5%	0%
--Two or more races	1%	0%	0%	1%
Hispanic or Latino				
--White alone	3%	8%	1%	2%
--Black or African American alone	0%	0%	0%	0%
--Asian alone	0%	0%	0%	0%
--American Indian or Alaska Native alone	0%	0%	1%	0%
--Some other race alone	1%	2%	2%	0%
--Two or more races	2%	0%	1%	0%

Source: 2019 American Community Survey (5-year estimates) and 1990 U. S. Census. Errors in totals due to rounding.

Marion and Chester, together with a few smaller outlying areas, constitute the Marion-Chester Area School District (MCASD), and have since 1971. Prior to that year, Marion independently operated the Marion School District, with its own elementary, middle, and high schools. At that time, Chester operated its own elementary school while being part of the Karhu Area School District (KASD) for the provision of high school. In 1971, residents of Chester successfully petitioned to detach from KASD and join with Marion to form the MCASD (see Chapter 5 for a more detailed exploration of the district merger).

MCASD's Dissolution Crisis

Background

The vote to dissolve the school district did not come out of nowhere. In contrast to the state at large, where communities overwhelmingly tend to approve referendums for additional school funding (Fox, 2020; Hall, 2021), voters in the communities served by MCASD repeatedly rejected funding referendums; since 1990, they had only passed two out of a proposed seventeen funding referendums. Most recently, and most significantly, the MCASD school board announced in November of 2018 that they would be asking for \$11.5 million over 4 years, which they believed to be essential for the continuing functioning of the district. Because of restrictions on when funding referendums may be raised, they were unable to put the referendum to the voters until April of 2019. At that time, the voters denied the referendum with only 39.2% of votes cast in favor.

In a mirror of the 1971 merger, community members largely understood the refusal to fund the district and to work towards dissolution to be driven by residents of Chester, especially residents of comparatively new subdivisions in the Town of Chester. There was precedent for this view,

especially as this was not the first attempt to break up the MCASD in recent years—there had previously been an effort to detach part of Chester and attach it to the Karhu district.

After the April 2019 referendum failure, the school board adopted an order to consider dissolution. They explained their decision to the public in this way, via a statement on the school district's Web site:

In November 2018, the Marion-Chester Area School District School Board presented its voters with an operational referendum question for the spring 2019 election. The design of the operational referendum was to support the ongoing operations of the district itself, including academic and extra-curricular programs and general maintenance of its facilities. The public was informed that if the referendum were to fail, the District would not have enough funding to continue beyond the 2019-20 school year, and would consider dissolution of the District.

On April 2, 2019, the voters of the District went to the polls. The results of the referendum were 1473 for, 2276 against, meaning the referendum failed. On April 8, 2019, the Marion-Chester Area School District School Board took the first step in the legal process of dissolution of a school district by approving a resolution considering dissolution of the school district via a 6-1 vote, in accordance with Wisconsin Statutes, Chapter 117. Following advice from legal counsel and state statutes, the next step for the Board in this process will be to present and vote in July 2019 on a resolution to dissolve the District following the 2019-20 school year. At that point, the School District Boundary Appeal Board/ Department of Public Instruction will become officially involved in the process. According to statute, a final decision by the school district boundary appeal board must be made by

January 15, 2020. Future steps in the process, including any public hearing dates, will be detailed and shared with the public as they are given to the District by the School District Boundary Appeal Board and/or Department of Public Instruction.

In July of 2019, the MCASD school board officially voted to dissolve the district. The following statement was shared to the school district's Web site:

At its July 1, 2019 regularly scheduled school board meeting, the Marion-Chester Area School District (MCASD) school board adopted a resolution ordering the dissolution of the district. This decision came after a failed operational referendum vote on April 2, 2019, which would have provided funds sufficient to operate the district. The dissolution order will now be submitted to the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction and the assigned School District Boundary Appeal Board for its consideration and decision in keeping with Wisconsin state law.

The Marion-Chester Area School District faces three significant issues regarding existing state funding. First, the District has a high open enrollment cost due to many resident families choosing to enroll their child(ren) in other districts. Second, the District has declining resident enrollment, leading to smaller overall classes and, in turn, less revenue. Third, the District has limited tax base growth in the commercial and industrial sectors that would distribute the tax collected to a larger pool of payors.

School districts around the state face similar issues, but none have the combination of all three at the levels MCASD does. When coupling these factors with the overall size of the District population and the failed referendum, the PEASD School Board found no realistic

long-term or sustainable way to fiscally operate the district while maintaining a high level of education that its students deserve.

In September, community members petitioned for an advisory referendum, an up-or-down vote on the question, “Shall the Marion-Chester Area School District dissolve?” That referendum was held in November and also failed, albeit more narrowly than the funding referendum in the spring (53% voted yes, 47% voted no). With the adoption of the dissolution order and the holding of the advisory referendum over, authority for the dissolution passed to a state-convened Dissolution Board.

Formal Structure

The MCASD School Board’s vote to dissolve the district triggered a process specified by state law. According to procedures laid out in §117.10, the School District Boundary Appeal Board (SDBAB) is made up of 12 members appointed by the State Superintendent, with one sitting school board member from each of the Cooperative Educational Service Agencies (CESAs)² in the state being nominated. From those sitting members, the Dissolution Board is made up of seven members: the state superintendent or his/her designee, as well as six members drawn from the School District Boundary Appeal Board, including two members each from small-, medium-, and large-sized districts. None of the members on the Dissolution Board may serve on school boards of districts which would be directly affected by a potential dissolution.

The Dissolution Board is granted the authority to accept or deny the dissolution order adopted by the MCASD school board. They are required to hold public hearings, at which they will

² CESAs in Wisconsin are an intermediary organizational level between school districts and the state. There are 12 CESAs, each comprised of multiple geographically contiguous school districts.

listen to testimony from members of the public, representatives of school districts that could be affected by the potential dissolution, and other speakers they may invite. The board then ultimately makes their decision based on specific criteria, “as they affect the welfare of all of the children in all the [affected] school districts” (Dissolution Board orientation materials). Those criteria are:

1. Geographical and topographical characteristics of affected school districts, including estimated travel time to and from school and other factors.
2. The educational needs of all potentially affected students, as well as the programs offered by each district and the ability and commitment of each district to meet those needs and continue that programming.
3. The programming impact of any potential transfer of territory between districts.
4. The testimony and written statements of residents of affected school districts.
5. The estimated fiscal impact on affected school districts, including both assets and liabilities.
6. If a reorganization would make any part of a school district’s territory noncontiguous.
7. The socioeconomic level and racial composition of pupils who reside or will reside in affected districts and “the effect that the pupils . . . will have on the present and future socioeconomic level and racial composition of the affected school districts and on the proportion of the affected school districts’ enrollments that will be children at risk.”
8. The results of any advisory referendum.
9. Other appropriate factors, at the Board’s discretion.

After the hearings and open meetings, the Dissolution Board then votes to uphold or deny the dissolution order, and issues a written explanation for their decision, referencing these criteria.

In the case of MCASD, the members of the School District Boundary Appeal Board were named to the Dissolution Board in October of 2019. They began holding public meetings that November.

Public Hearings

The Dissolution Board held a series of four public hearings on the issue of MCASD's dissolution. Following the distribution of schools across the two communities, three meetings were held in Marion, in the Marion-Chester Area High School gym, and one was held in Chester, in the Chester Elementary School gym. The details of what was said and done in these meetings will be discussed further in later sections; in short, they were contentious, emotional, and deeply painful to witness. Invited presenters included a representative of the MCASD school board, faculty and staff from MCASD schools, and representatives from each of the surrounding school districts that could potentially be impacted by the dissolution. Community members also provided testimony, including parents of children who did and did not attend MCASD, MCASD students and other youth, and other community members. In addition, over 400 pages of written testimony were submitted to the Dissolution Board both in-person and via a dedicated email address.

Outcome

At the conclusion of the dissolution hearings, the SDBAB held a series of public meetings to consider their ultimate decision. The morning of the final open meeting, I interviewed a school board member at a combination Mexican restaurant and gas station in a nearby town. With resignation, sorrow, and an edge of frustration, he told me that he believed, based on their questions and comments in previous meetings, that the board would reject the dissolution. He was right. That

night the dissolution board members sat at folding tables in the high school gym and voted. The final result, 6-1, was as the school board member predicted: MCASD would stay open.

Battle Lines

At its simplest, the debate over MCASD and its potential dissolution came down to two positions. One group, who I will refer to as Maintainers, wanted to keep the district in the Marion-Chester Area, opposing dissolution. The other group, who I will refer to as Dissolvers, wanted to see the district be dissolved. Both of these groups were overwhelmingly made up of white conservatives; however, they held very different views on educational policy and the purposes and place of schools in rural communities. Here, I will briefly introduce the two groups.

Maintainers

Maintainers wanted to see the school district continue to exist. For the most part, they wanted it to remain in its current form, although some were willing to consider a partial division whereby part of the district would detach and join another; regardless of their position on that idea, they were united in desiring to keep an independent school district. The community understood most people in both the Village and Town of Marion to be Maintainers, as well as some people in the Village of Chester. Many of them were long-time, even multi-generational, residents of the area, while many of the newer resident Maintainers had moved to the district specifically because it was small and rural. Many, but not all, Maintainers had children who attended or had attended MCASD schools or had attended them themselves. The reasons people gave for wanting to maintain MCASD most notably included appeals to the educational value of small schools and to the social and cultural value of schools to small communities. They also often denounced Dissolvers as selfish

or short-sighted, and critiqued state educational policy—especially inter-district open enrollment—as causing the crisis their district faced.

Winona Moore was the quintessential Maintainer. Winona grew up in a nearby town, while her husband grew up in Marion. After living for a time in a different part of the country, she and her husband moved to Marion when they had children so that they could raise them around relatives in a small, rural community. A lifelong horse lover, Winona seemed to always be wearing a purple MCASD baseball cap, a purple-and-white MCASD jacket, and jeans tucked into tall, shiny riding boots. She valued the small, rural nature of MCASD, and had many positive experiences with the district. Once she found out about the potential dissolution, Winona became very involved in activism supporting the district, organizing other parents to lobby for their schools. Her activism made her a polarizing figure in the community—Maintainers often spoke very highly of her energy and dedication, while Dissolvers often described her as a nuisance.

Dissolvers

Dissolvers wanted to see the district dissolved. Community members understood most Dissolvers to be from Chester, especially the more recently-built subdivisions in the Town of Chester. Many, but not all, of them were comparatively new to the area; however, in a community like Marion and Chester where some people's families had lived there for generations, “comparatively new” could mean having moved in anywhere from the last few years to the 1990s. While some Dissolvers had sent their children to MCASD schools or even attended themselves, many of them currently took advantage of the state's inter-district open enrollment policy to enroll their children in other districts, primarily Karhu. Overwhelmingly, the reasons they gave for supporting the district's dissolution were related to its poor financial situation, although some

Dissolvers additionally pointed to alleged academic and disciplinary failures in the district. They often described Maintainers as foolish, naïve, or short-sighted. There was diversity within Dissolvers, however, in ways that there were not amongst the Maintainers. The primary distinction that I observed within the Dissolvers was between people who viewed the dissolution as a necessary evil and people who more actively wanted to see the district dissolve.

Tim Irving is a good example of the former type of Dissolver. A local business owner, Tim joined the school board several years before the dissolution crisis to try to fix what he viewed as poor decisions being made by the district. He then had the unenviable role of serving on the school board that voted to dissolve the district that his children, his mother, and he himself had attended. Tim was not happy about the dissolution, and if he had seen a way to avoid it, he would have taken it; however, he believed that the facts were such that the district could not continue, and dissolution was therefore necessary.

Ken Newman is an example of the latter kind of Dissolver, viewing the dissolution of the district as not just necessary, but also good. Ken believed the district was providing a sub-par education, even in comparison to other public schools. Ken opposed government intervention in all areas of life, telling me that institutions like public schools and the Post Office were unnecessary because the private market could provide those services. However, if the community were to have public schools, then Ken preferred them to provide what he considered a good education in a cost-efficient way. He believed MCASD was failing at that, while neighboring districts were doing much better, and wanted MCASD to dissolve as a result.

Jessie Davis represents perhaps the majority of Dissolvers, with a position somewhere between Tim and Ken. Jessie, who lived in the Town of Chester with her child, attended several of

the public hearings about the potential dissolution. I met her at one and was struck by her open and direct demeanor. She sent her daughter to Karhu Elementary School through the inter-district enrollment program and was very happy with her choice. She saw the case of MCASD simply: the district didn't have enough money and it wasn't succeeding at attracting enough students, so it should close. She didn't seem to have any particular animus towards the district, other than being frustrated by what she perceived as irresponsibility with taxpayer money.

Outline

In the next chapter, I will discuss the methods and methodologies I used to make sense of the crisis in MCASD. Following, in Chapter 3 I take a very local perspective on the dissolution debate, exploring discourses of community, debates over the stakes of the debate, and contestation over who could legitimately make decisions about the future of the district. In Chapter 4 I turn to a more structural perspective, considering the ways policy shaped the crisis in MCASD. Chapter 5 returns to a local scale, putting the dissolution debate into historical context and developing a concept of strategic belonging. I conclude in Chapter 6 with a discussion of the significance and implications of this study.

Chapter 2: Methods

The study presented here is a qualitative case study conducted using ethnographic methods, including participant observation, semi-structured interviewing, document analysis, and qualitative social media analysis. Methodologically, it is guided by Weis and Fine's (2012) theory of critical bifocality, Bartlett and Vavrus' (2017) comparative case study, and Charmaz's (2014) constructivist grounded theory.

Methodologies

Given the socio-cultural lens through which this study was conducted, methodologically I drew upon approaches that allowed for consideration of both local experiences and meanings and structural constraints. First, Weis and Fine's (2012) conception of critical bifocality presents:

a theory of methods in which researchers try to make visible the sinewy linkages or circuits through which structural conditions are enacted in policy and reform institutions as well as the ways in which such conditions come to be woven into community relationships and metabolized by individuals. (p. 174)

Drawing on their work in conjunction with socio-cultural perspectives expands the researcher's focus beyond siloed models of individual experiences versus large-scale structures and towards models that consider the sprawling, multidirectional relationships that make up human experiences and society.

This study also draws upon the model of comparative case study research (CCS) developed by Bartlett and Vavrus (2017). CCS emphasizes the interconnected, time-bound nature of policy research. It prompts the researcher to consider three "axes" of comparison: across multiple locations, through multiple scales, and over time. Although this study is primarily grounded in one

district (albeit one that is divided in half), of particular use is CCS's explicit reconceptualization of contexts as social and dynamic.

Finally, this study draws on ideas from constructivist grounded theory. Constructivist grounded theory, developed by Charmaz (2014), builds on the work of grounded theorists like Glaser, Strauss, and Corbin while integrating attention to subjectivity and insights from social constructivism. Like other grounded theorists, Charmaz emphasizes remaining close to your data, coming to understand it and make theory through it by interacting with and comparing the data. A constructivist approach to grounded theory "adopts the inductive, comparative, emergent, and open-ended" strategies of earlier iterations of grounded theory while rejecting the positivistic assumptions inherent in some grounded theory approaches and emphasizing relativism and context. For this study, constructivist grounded theory offered a way to engage with data creatively and with attention to linkages between ideas and across scales.

Site Selection

Two purposive decisions were made during the process of site selection: the choice of state, and the choice of district within the state.

Wisconsin was chosen as the overarching site for this study both for convenience, and because of its significance within the U.S. conversation about educational policy. Wisconsin's educational and political history is rich in both innovation and contradiction and the state has, especially in recent decades, proven to be a national leader in educational policy changes. Elected to the governorship in 2010, Scott Walker implemented a series of controversial educational policy decisions, including massive budget cuts, restricting public-sector unions' bargaining rights, reduced caps on the level of property taxes that school districts could levy without a public referendum, and

expansion of choice, charter and voucher programs. Continuing through and beyond Walker's governorship, education remains a contentious issue in Wisconsin politics, and demonstrates connections to and similarities with the national political landscape. For example, following the proposal of the notorious Wisconsin Budget Repair Bill (Act 10), which instituted many of the above changes to education policy, massive protests converged on the state capitol, with a local newspaper editor remarking "there is really no way to decouple the combat at the state level from the wrestling in Washington over proposals by the same right-wing forces" (Nichols, 2011). What happened in Wisconsin then helped to shape the direction of politics and policy across the nation, which Collins and Carlson (2018) argue is typical of the state's history:

Wisconsin is not a "typical" state regarding its public-sector dynamics. In the early twentieth century, it was at the forefront of public-sector innovation and change. Perhaps ironically, by the early twenty-first century, it had emerged as a leader in public-sector rollback . . . It is this not so much an average case as a bellwether or harbinger. Just as other states emulated Wisconsin's workers' compensation and income taxation programs in the early twentieth century, and followed its lead to grant collective bargaining rights to public workers at mid-century, more than a dozen other states have adopted limitations on public sector bargaining since [the passage of Act 10].

Other demonstrations of Wisconsin's connection to and influence on national educational politics abound. For example, Conniff (2011) notes that not only is Wisconsin home to one of the earliest large-scale voucher programs in the nation (the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program,) but that leaders in and advocates for that program have gone on to hold prominent roles in organizations promoting voucher and choice programs nationwide. Given the complex, contentious, and

nationally connected educational policy environment in Wisconsin, it is an ideal place to study the politics of education policy, as what happens in Wisconsin could have implications for what happens nationwide.

Marion-Chester Area School District was selected for study because of its unique situation as a district whose residents had chosen not to support the district to the point that it faced dissolution. Originally conceived as one-third of a three-case comparative study, MCASD was chosen as an extreme outlier on the spectrum of public support for public education. Where most school district referendums in Wisconsin are passed (Fox, 2020; Hall, 2021), MCASD stands as an example of what can happen where referendums repeatedly fail, and was thus chosen as an analytically interesting case. The disruption caused by the 2020 onset of the COVID-19 pandemic put a halt to data collection in the other two sites, but ultimately provided a valuable opportunity to carefully consider data already gathered in MCASD. Ultimately, I made the decision that the case of MCASD was rich enough to justify presenting as a single case.

Participant Selection and Recruitment

Because I entered the field in MCASD with the intention of understanding the politics surrounding the dissolution debate, I focused participant selection and recruitment first on those who were engaged in that debate. I used the publicly available letters that were submitted to the Dissolution Board by members of the public to gather contact information, and reached out to community members using that information. My primary mode of communication at that juncture was email, as that was the primary means by which members of the public submitted letters. I emailed community members up to three times, introducing myself and requesting an interview, before moving on. I also recruited engaged members of the public through my attendance at public

hearings held by the Dissolution Board. I made business cards with information about the study as well as my own contact information and, during breaks in the meeting, introduced myself to attendants and distributed the cards. In addition to informal conversation at those meetings, I was able to conduct one formal interview immediately after meeting the participant.

Beyond those who were directly involved in the controversy, I also recruited local leaders for interviews, including members of town and village governments, religious leaders, and directors of local historical societies. I engaged in limited snowball sampling; while referrals were sometimes fruitful, I found that the same individuals were recommended several times (for example, a local activist in support of the school district was repeatedly recommended to me as a source). I further attempted recruitment using Facebook, with very little success. I posted invitations for interviews on several pages or groups related to the dissolution controversy, as well as messaged posters privately through Facebook's messenger system. I believe there were two main impediments to recruiting through Facebook, one inherent to the system and one due to my own use of the site. First, at the time of this study Facebook routed messages from people with whom the receiver was not "Friends" into a separate inbox, which many users rarely check and which I believe is where most of my recruitment messages went. Second, although I used Facebook extensively in the past, I deleted my account in 2017 and thus needed to create a new account for this research. Because of how new and unpopulated that account was, I likely read as fake to any potential recruit who examined my profile. Beyond the limits of Facebook, an additional complication to participant recruitment was the controversial and emotional nature of the dissolution debate: while some community members were particularly excited to talk about the issue, others were reluctant to get involved. For example, one government official that I spoke to told me that he personally knew another person to whom I

had sent recruiting emails, who was ignoring them out of a fear of speaking publicly about such a hot topic.

Ultimately, I was able to recruit 23 people for interviews (see Table 2-1). Those included 11 women and 12 men, aged from approximately their thirties to their eighties. Seven lived in Marion, twelve in Chester, and four in other nearby towns. All but one were residents in the school district catchment area. Eight participants supported dissolution while ten opposed it and six didn't express an explicit position. All of my participants were white, and most were part of heterosexual marriages. Of those who expressed their religious and/or political views to me, most identified themselves as conservative and Christian. A few participants described themselves as liberal or progressive, while none described themselves as non-Christian. While my interview participants were not fully representative of the population in the areas served by MCASD—in particular, I was unable to obtain interviews with any community members of color, who were also virtually invisible in the dissolution debate—based on my observations of the dissolution hearings and online discussions, they were fairly representative of those who were engaged in the controversy.

Table 2-1*Participant Summary*

Name	Stance	Location	Gender	Age
Owen Canfield		Marion	Male	
Jessie Davis	Dissolve	Chester	Female	40s
Ed Douglas	Maintain	Other (In the district)	Male	60s
Emma Douglas	Maintain	Other (In the district)	Female	50s
Eugene Hayes		Marion	Male	40s
Tim Irving	Dissolve	Chester	Male	50s
Christine Laughlin	Maintain	Chester	Female	70s
Fiona Martin	Dissolve	Chester	Female	40s
Harold Marshall	Dissolve	Chester	Male	60s
Nate Michaels	Dissolve	Chester	Male	50s
Evan Miller		Marion	Male	
Winona Moore	Maintain	Marion	Female	40s
Mary Nelson	Maintain	Marion	Female	
Ken Newman	Dissolve	Chester	Male	70s
Ernest Norris	Maintain	Chester	Male	60s
Loretta Peters	Maintain	Marion	Female	70s
Nick Smith	Dissolve	Chester	Male	60s
Wendy Tanner	Dissolve	Chester	Female	
Dave Thompson		Other (Outside the district)	Male	
Melissa Thorpe		Chester	Female	40s
Will Ulrich		Marion	Male	80s
Liz Unger	Maintain	Chester	Female	30s
Valerie Wilson	Maintain	Other (In the district)	Female	50s

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted between November, 2019 and February, 2020, using qualitative, ethnographic methods.

Interviews

A key form of data collection was individual interviews. After recruiting participants as described above, I met them at a location and time of their choice. Some people chose to be interviewed in public in their own town; for example, I conducted multiple interviews at an Old West-themed coffee shop in Chester, and one in an ice cream shop in Marion. Others chose to be interviewed in private, in their own homes or offices. Two participants chose to be interviewed in public, but in other towns for privacy purposes, and several interviews were conducted via telephone.

I entered interviews with the intention of learning about the participant, their perspective on the community and the school district, and their experiences through the dissolution controversy. Semi-structured interviews (Seidman, 2013) were appropriate because they enabled me to address those questions that were important to my study while following the insights and revelations surfaced through the interview. Interviews lasted for anywhere from thirty minutes to over two hours. The majority of interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed, and all interviews were documented in field notes.

I found interviews to be a valuable source of information. While public data sources, especially the public hearings and Facebook postings, were revealing, interviews gave participants the opportunity to speak candidly, with the assurance of confidentiality (see below for a discussion of confidentiality concerns). Interviews also gave me the opportunity to hear directly from people

who didn't speak or submit letters to the Dissolution Board, and allowed those who did make public statements to expand on their ideas and discuss topics that were not germane to the persuasive arguments that they made to the Board. Some of the interviews were also difficult on multiple levels, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

Participant Observation

Another key source of information for this study was participant observation. I conducted over 20 hours of observation in multiple contexts in both Marion and Chester. The most important site of participant observation was the public hearings conducted by the Dissolution Board. At these hearings, members of the public were able to present their understanding of the controversy, their experiences with the schools, and their opinions and ideas about both the direction of the district and education policy as a whole. These meetings were revealing not only of the facts and politics of the dissolution controversy, but also of the history and larger contexts of Marion and Chester. At the public hearings, I sat either in the audience or off to the side, moving at breaks to obtain different views of the attendants and Board. I took notes during the meetings on my computer, which was unusual in that I was generally the only one doing so, but unobtrusive. Before and after meetings and during breaks, I chatted with people around me.

In addition to the formal hearings and meetings conducted by the Dissolution Board, I also conducted observations in informal spaces in Marion and Chester. For example, I attended a charity quilting circle at a church in Marion, went on a hayride to see Christmas lights in Chester, and spent time "hanging out" at bars in each town. During informal observations, I participated in activities and chatted with those around me. These observations gave me the opportunity to get to know a bit about the community outside the heated context of the Dissolution Board hearings, as well as to

meet and talk to people other than those I interviewed or saw at hearings. These observations were recorded after the fact in field notes (Emerson et al., 2011).

Documentary Data

Documentary data fell roughly into two categories: contemporary and historical. Contemporarily, the largest source of documentary data was the public letters submitted to the Dissolution Board, which reached over 450 pages. These letters were submitted by residents of Marion and Chester, graduates of MCASD schools, and other concerned individuals expressing their opinions about the potential dissolution, the context in Marion and Chester, and education policy overall, and were essential sources of insight. Documentary sources also included news media coverage, exhibits presented during Dissolution Board hearings, and relevant government records such as Census data, National Center for Educational Statistics records, and others.

Historical data were used to understand the context of the current dissolution crisis, especially the 1971 merger of Chester and Marion into the Marion-Chester Area School District. Historical data sources included articles from the local newspapers, obtained through the Wisconsin Historical Society, as well as materials provided by the Marion Historical Society.

Social Media Data

During the course of data collection, it was brought to my attention by several people I met at public hearings that Facebook was an important site of communication and debate over the dissolution crisis, particularly in three groups: Chester and Marion Together Forever, Chester Area Taxpayers, and Chester Families Choose Karhu. To gain access to posts shared on those sites, I both joined the groups as a Facebook user and applied for and was granted access to the Crowd Tangle program. Through Crowd Tangle, I was able to download post information for all posts to

the Chester Area Taxpayers and Chester Families Choose Karhu sites, which are classified as “groups” by Facebook, and posts made by the owner of the Chester and Marion Together Forever site, which is organized as a “page.” I obtained a variety of information about each post along with their text or other contents, including total number of interactions through such indicators as views and “likes.” Post authors were anonymized in the Crowd Tangle data. For the purposes of this study, I did not conduct a detailed analysis of individual posts. Instead, I observed the types and tenor of conversations that happened in these groups, adding those observations to field notes.

Data Analysis

Data analysis began during data collection and continued through writing, cycling between techniques like analytic memoing and coding to interpret the data.

I engaged in multiple cycles of coding, using multiple techniques including holistic coding, descriptive coding, and in vivo coding (Saldaña, 2016). At different points in my analysis, particularly useful codes included such terms as “experiences in controversy,” “values and ideology,” “place,” and “policy.” Coding was conducted on paper, using Microsoft Word, and using the Dedoose software program. Initial coding and note-taking was performed on several interviews using Word. As ideas began to emerge, I transitioned to Dedoose and a more structured approach to coding. Final coding, using codes specifically related to the sections of this dissertation (for example, “defining community,” “the voters,” and “self-interest”) was conducted using paper copies of the already coded data from Dedoose.

Parallel with both data collection and coding, I engaged in analytic memoing (Charmaz, 2014; Saldaña, 2016). Memo-writing, as part of a process of “writing to learn,” “creates an interactive space for conversing with yourself about your data, codes, ideas, and hunches” (Charmaz, 2014, p.

162). Through memo-writing I developed ideas about my data, bringing in pieces from it. Many of those ideas ultimately found their way into subsequent rounds of coding or this report.

Confidentiality

Throughout this project, I have made a concerted effort to maintain the confidentiality of the people with whom I spoke. Therefore, I have used pseudonyms for places and people, and in some cases have obscured or changed details to make a person less identifiable. Even in cases where statements made were publicly available—such as on Facebook or in letters to the Dissolution Board—I have either assigned pseudonyms or not used a name for the person who made the statement. I do not believe that any of the changes in my identification of participants significantly changes the meaning or interpretation of their words.

There are, of course, limits that come with confidentiality. One of them is that, if others do not know where I researched or who I talked to, it is difficult to check my work. One of my interviewees, Will Ulrich, pointed this out to me while I was going through my standard pre-interview spiel:

Caitlin Of course, I'll make sure to keep your information confidential, and I will use pseudonyms for you and for the town.

Will What? Why would you do that?

Caitlin Well it's kind of standard practice, to make sure that people's privacy is maintained.

Will Well how will people know you're not lying?

Taken aback, I fell back on my standard student response: acknowledge the criticism, then make an appeal to authority.

Caitlin Um, that's a really good point, and it's something that people have been thinking about in the field, but for now since I'm a student I have to follow my advisor's instructions.

Will Well you tell your advisor I think it's a stupid thing to do.

While I acknowledge this criticism, I have chosen to take steps as described above to maintain informants' confidentiality. I hope that, through inclusion of substantial excerpts from my data along with my analysis, the trustworthiness of my conclusions is demonstrated without revealing my research site or participant identities. There is only so far I can go, however, to maintain anonymity of participants in a unique case in the era of Google; Walford (2018) has argued that "In the interconnected world in which we now live, there is practically no chance of maintaining anonymity of research sites" (p. 519). In light of that, I have been particularly careful to omit or disguise sensitive details provided to me by individuals.

Bridging Data Collection and Analysis: Emotion in the Research Process

During data collection, many of my experiences were emotionally charged, and some were very difficult for me. For example, it was sometimes heartbreaking to watch students and their families plead to the Dissolution Board to not close their school, and the mental health struggles one interviewee shared with me in many ways resonated with my own. Because my emotional experiences shaped the ways I conducted both my data collection and analysis, I will take time here to unpack the ways they mattered, with a particular focus on one interview.

At the beginning of my study, I felt fairly confident in my ability to undertake this research. As a white, middle class, Midwestern woman, I expected that I would read as familiar and non-threatening to most people in the community. I've spent a good amount of time in communities not unlike Marion and Chester, both in my previous research in a community not far from the area and visiting the small Wisconsin town my dad grew up in. I anticipated that I would not always agree with or particularly enjoy talking to community members. However, I felt that my previous experiences prepared me for any difficulties I might face. Of course, the reality of the field presented unexpected challenges.

Ken Newman was among the people who submitted a public letter to the dissolution board, and I reached out to him for an interview using the contact information he provided there. His responses were unusual from the beginning. He told me that he would only speak to me "under certain conditions;" when I described my normal procedures for conducting interviews and maintaining participant confidentiality, he responded:

You have answered some of my terms. They are as follows: 1. The interview will only be in person, no phones. 2. No recording, you may take hand written notes only. 3. My identity remains completely anonymous. 4. I will only speak about what lead up to [date], the day the board made their decision, I will not answer any questions for anything after [date]. 5. You must submit the questions you will ask of me by email at least one week prior to the interview.

This email prompted my first strong emotional response of my dealings with Ken. His suspicion and what seemed to me to be unusual requirements made me uncomfortable, and I wasn't sure if I wanted to go ahead with the interview. Ultimately, however, I decided that as a woman who

has done her share of online dating, and as a dedicated—if morally conflicted—consumer of true crime media, I had the awareness and strategies I needed to be safe meeting him. So I set out to conduct the interview at a coffee shop of Ken’s choice (he wanted to be far enough from his home town that nobody would see him with me), leaving my destination, approximate schedule, and instructions to follow up if I didn’t check in safely with a friend.

A knot settled in my stomach when I recognized Ken, an older, slightly overweight white man with grey whiskers who had, at one public meeting I observed, raised his voice and almost yelled at the other attendants while making his comment, striking me as combative and unpleasant. He was never anything other than polite to me during the interview, and he revealed himself to be a dedicated father who likes his rural community for the privacy it affords him; nevertheless, my emotions never settled, and I was on edge throughout the interview.

Ken’s political views were conservative and, I would argue, paranoid, and he expressed strong anti-government sentiments, including predictions of violence. He opposed both the way public schools are currently run, which he considers immoral and against American values, and their continuing existence. From my notes on the interview:

Ken described himself as a “staunch conservative.” “I believe in the Constitution.” Ken is “fed up with the left’s attempt to subvert the entire Constitution.”

“Common core needs to be obliterated,” and “was a leftist movement to absolutely dumb down our children.”

Regarding our rights: “If we don’t teach them to our children” then they won’t “know or care when you lose them.”

These views were accompanied by a dedication to firearms and bellicose vision of American politics that left me truly unsettled. Again from my interview notes:

Talking about the rally in Virginia related to the 2nd Amendment, he said that “there’s gonna be bloodshed” if people’s rights continue to be infringed.

“I’m a patriot. I know what freedom is, I know how fragile it is.” He mentioned a Reagan quote about being one generation away from losing freedom. He noted that “treason is still a hanging offense,” and the Democrats in Congress should be hung. “If we lose freedom here [in the U.S.], this is the last stronghold. There’s nowhere else to go.”

At the end of the interview, Ken asked me how I felt knowing that he had a concealed firearm on his person. Because of our conversation, I knew that he was committed to following and promoting gun safety procedures, so I made some comment along the lines of feeling “better than I would have felt at the beginning of the interview.” That was, strictly speaking, true. Also true was that I felt afraid, anxious, and worn-out, and that I cried in my car before heading to my next interview. The next day I wrote to my advisor:

[The interview] was intense, and really difficult for me. . . This person is a 2nd Amendment absolutist, and a lot of his ideas were not only troubling (xenophobic, anti-government, anti-public school), but also pretty scary . . . I think I need to take a couple days off to get a little distance. This will ultimately be really good data . . . but getting it has taken a lot out of me.

After that interview, I spent a lot of time thinking about Ken Newman, our interview, and why it hurt me so much. While much of that thinking was unhelpful rumination, examining my emotional response to that interview was ultimately analytically fruitful.

Conflicted Empathy and Political Emotions

A line in Kleinman and Copp's (1993) discussion of empathy with research participants provided a useful starting place for my emotional analysis of this interview. They write:

Intimate relationships usually evoke wide-ranging emotions, from sympathy to hatred. But, in our close relations with participants, we only expect good will. When we break the feeling rule by failing to have good feelings, we may accuse ourselves of empathic incompetence. If we understood our participants better, we tell ourselves, surely we would like them. (p. 28)

At the same time, "our feeling rules are not entirely consistent. We make an exception to the rule of sympathy when we study settings where participants routinely perform cruel acts, bring emotional harm to the innocent, or espouse beliefs that objectify others." In some ways, this suggests why I might feel distressed by my interview with Ken: to put it very plainly, I do not like him. I believe his views are ill-informed, short sighted, and selfish, and that he does damage to the world by acting on them. However I also think that, looking at Ken from within the worldview he occupies, he is a fundamentally decent, good man. It's difficult to negotiate this dissonance between my understandings of and feelings about a research participant. However, I do not think that is the only challenge at work.

This interview, as well as other, less threatening ones, surfaced contradictions between and within my own ethics, political views, and professional goals, especially regarding empathy. For example: I maintain an ethical commitment to empathy, trying to understand the world as others see it, as well as a commitment to working for the common good. What does it mean, then, to have empathy for someone whose views I believe work against the common good? Similarly, my vision of political progress requires challenging systems of oppression and inequality, and I believe that part

of that progress requires us to take other's views seriously even when we disagree with them.

However, speaking and writing about Ken's views with any kind of empathy feels as if I am working against political progress—am I doing damage by directing so much attention to these beliefs?

Moreover, as a researcher, what do I contribute by focusing on someone whose views, especially given the ascendancy of the far right during and after the Trump presidency, arguably fall within the political mainstream? Are those in power the strange that should be made familiar, even if, like I believe Ken would, they perceive themselves to be marginalized?

Identifying the conflicted notions of empathy that I hold pointed to important questions for me to consider, both as a researcher and as a person. In trying to make sense of these contradictions and deciding how to move forward, Hage's (2010) conception of political emotions provided crucial insight. He writes that "political emotions are those emotions related to our sense of power over ourselves and our environment as we pursue those goals, ideals, and activities that give our life meaning" (p. 141-142). This concept provides a useful starting point from which to make sense of the emotional dynamics of and fallout from this interview.

Take, for instance, the intense anxiety I felt after the interview: thinking about the things Ken said left me with a kind of undifferentiated worry that wore me down and left me feeling hopeless. Thinking about that anxiety as a potentially political emotion, I asked myself: what about my interview with Ken spoke to my sense of power(lessness)? What goals or ideals that give my life meaning did it touch on? In doing so, I realized that much of the anxiety I felt after talking to Ken was anxiety over the future of public schooling. I value public schools in part because of their public-ness, and I view them as an essential part of our society; Ken, on the other hand, spent a significant amount of time talking about the failures of public schools and rejecting the need for

them at all, and he was not the only one of my interview subjects to do so. Recognizing that Ken is not likely to seriously consider alternative points of view on the matter, and that he is far from alone in his view, left me feeling powerless to challenge what I see as a deeply damaging strain of thought in American educational politics. Thus, the anxiety I felt could be understood as arising from my sense of powerlessness in the face of opposing political discourse. Conceptualizing my anxiety as a political emotion related to different visions of public education helped me to clarify what I found important in that interview and has helped to shape my analysis.

Chapter 3: Community, Place, and Belonging

In this chapter, I explore the ways in which community, place, and belonging were constructed through the dissolution debate in the Marion-Chester Area School District (MCASD). Speaking in interviews and public hearings, writing in letters to the Dissolution Board and to other community members on Facebook, those involved in this controversy contested the boundaries and nature of their communities, the place of the schools within them, and who, precisely, the community and school belonged to. Through doing so they spoke to questions of the nature of rurality and the purpose of schooling, drawing out the significance of the public schools as creators and symbols of community.

This chapter is divided into four sections. In the first, I illustrate the importance of the school dissolution debate to community ties in MCASD by sharing the experiences of community members who saw interpersonal relationships strain and break because of it. In the second, I will explore the ways in which this controversy provided space for contestation over community definition, surfacing competing definitions that relied on history, institutions, or economic relationships to draw community boundaries. Then, I will consider the ways in which the stakes of the dissolution debate were understood, which revealed different ideas about the place of schools in the lives of individuals and in the community while also speaking to conceptions of the nature of rurality. Finally, I will turn to debate over which voices should have priority, and who should have legitimate decision-making authority, in the dissolution debate.

Broken Ties: Educational Controversy and Relationships

I begin this chapter with a brief vignette illustrating the importance of the dissolution debate to community ties in MCASD. At the time of the dissolution hearings, I was living about an hour

away from Marion and Chester. It was generally a nice drive, mostly down two-lane highways, and after a few visits I started to recognize and look forward to landmarks on the way: my favorites were the small building with a big round window that put me in mind of a hobbit hole as interpreted by Frank Lloyd Wright, and the turn from one road to another, looking over farm fields and wind breaks of trees, where I saw one of the most beautiful sunsets of my experience. One night, however, I regretted the distance. Because my own car was in the shop, I was borrowing my dad's, a little white Saturn that could charitably be described as "well-used." When the Dissolution Board hearing I was observing let out at almost 9 pm, I stepped into the cold, dark December night to find that the car would not start. I took deep breaths of crisp air and tried not to panic at the idea of being stuck an hour from home with snow threatening. Watching the last people drift out of the building, I approached a man to ask if he knew anyone who could give me a jump. "I can," he answered. Within minutes, a group of men had gathered to help. One drove his truck onto the grass to line up with my car, one offered extra-long cables, and one held a large flashlight up to illuminate the scene. My car successfully started, I thanked the men profusely, and heard one say to another as they turned towards their own vehicles, "See, we can still work together, regardless of what happens in there."

The men's teamwork was remarkable because only a short time before they had been at a meeting that was deeply tense, often sad, and sometimes hostile. The controversy over the potential dissolution of MCASD had caused—or sometimes merely surfaced—painful ruptures between towns and individuals. At the community level, it was generally perceived that Marion wanted to maintain the district while Chester wanted to dissolve it. At the individual level, people described the debate as highly contentious and even hostile, with some individuals reporting that they lost friends over the issue. In public meetings and private interviews, people spoke about the ways in which the

debate over dissolution had changed their relationships to their friends and neighbors, rarely for the better.

The extent to which community ties and personal relationships were fractured demonstrates the importance that this controversy held for people in Marion and Chester alike. Evan Miller, whose children went to MCASD schools until dissolution seemed likely (at which point he enrolled them in a nearby district), gave insight into the community-wide impacts on interpersonal relationships:

There's a lot of people that just don't like each other because of this [controversy]. And I'm impartial, I've got friends on both sides, so I don't really—it is what it is. But, it puts a lot of strain on [the community]. People would take it very personally, like, 'why would you move into the Marion school district and then school choice your kid out?' 'Well Marion sucks.' 'Well you know, you never went there.' And so that's kind of—it's a really broken community now. I mean, most of Chester wants nothing to do with Marion. Marion wants Chester just because of the kids. But a lot of people just don't get along no more.

People openly described using derogatory nicknames for people who took different positions on the issue of school dissolution. Supporters of dissolution often called those who supported the school district “the purple people,” because of their use of the school district’s purple-and-silver team logo as a rallying symbol, while supporters of the school district called those who supported dissolution “nopers,” because of their propensity for saying “nope” to any and all proposals to maintain the district. They also demonstrated falling levels of trust in other members of their community. For example, multiple people in the Chester Taxpayers group on Facebook, as well as several speakers at the public hearings, accused district supporters of vandalizing their cars and other property. I don't

know the truth of these accusations; when I asked a local reporter covering the debate about them, he dismissed them as overblown. Regardless of their objective truth, however, the accusations are significant as evidence of the dramatic lack of trust between communities that this controversy revealed.

The public meetings were vivid demonstrations of the tensions between both individuals and the communities involved. As a researcher, I left the meetings mentally exhausted and deeply sad, drained by the tension, anger, and grief that resonated throughout the school gyms where the meetings were held. Community members experienced them even more acutely. For example, Wendy Tanner, a relatively new Chester resident whose children were enrolled in a private school, had this to say about her experience:

Caitlin What were your thoughts as you watched those meetings?

Wendy I was pretty shocked actually.

Caitlin Really? In what ways?

Wendy Well, people's behavior for one thing. Just the, you could palpably feel the animosity between the two different communities, between Marion and Chester. I've never experienced anything like that, where you could walk into a room and know where you should sit and where you shouldn't sit.

Even to an outsider, the physical divisions between people who supported and opposed dissolution were very clear, with Maintainers and Dissolvers sitting together in clearly defined groups with little to no overlap. In my field notes, I ultimately stopped noting how many people applauded for different speakers, just writing "clapping as expected" based on the speaker's position on the school

district, knowing that the same people in the same places would either clap or stare silently forward, arms crossed.

In individual interviews, several community members told me about long-standing relationships that had been lost to the dissolution controversy. In one particularly emotional moment, a former MCASD teacher described to me how a former student of hers had become very vocally pro-dissolution. They were friends on Facebook, and had been friendly with each other when they met around town—now, the former student barely acknowledged her, which the former teacher experienced as a deeply hurtful rejection. Tim Irving, a School Board member and MCASD graduate, told me that there were people in town who would no longer speak to him because of his role in the dissolution.

These stories indicate the deep importance that this controversy had for the people in the areas served by MCASD. Integral to many of the conflicts that arose through the dissolution debate were questions of community: what it is and who belongs in it.

“That is Your Community”: Defining Community through Educational Policy Debate

While the dissolution debate in MCASD was ostensibly about one, clear cut question—should the district be dissolved or not? —underlying the question was an even thornier issue of community definition. Some Maintainers described a community that encompassed both Marion and Chester, united by a shared history and a shared school district; some described a community that partially included both, predicated on support for the school district. Many Dissolvers dismissed the idea that Marion and Chester were in any way one community and provided alternative definitions, often based on economic relationships.

Here, the controversy speaks to questions of the relationship between schools, community, and place, and the ways they are conceived and constructed. These perspectives draw attention to the importance that public schools can have for community definition. Marion and Chester are, by most measures, two separate communities: they are separated by several miles, a state forest, and a county line. However, because of the shared school district, some residents in both Marion and Chester could make the case that they belonged together forever.

Chester and Marion, Together Forever?

The main Facebook page frequented by Maintainers was called “Chester and Marion, Together Forever,” a name that observers of the controversy could perhaps be forgiven for finding overly optimistic. The name reflected a conception of the two communities as united through the school district. However underlying this image of unity was two different, though related, views of community definition. From one perspective, Marion and Chester were indeed one community, defined not only by the school district but also by shared history and character, even though there might be tensions between them and some of the traditions that united them may have faded. Others denied that there was an essential connection between Marion and Chester themselves. Instead, they saw *supporters of the district* within the two areas as one community, uniting Marion and Chester through the school district without any underlying tie between the two communities.

One District, One Community

A key argument made by some Maintainers was that Marion and Chester were linked together as one community, tied by a shared history and, of course, through shared schools. Observers often underlined the communities’ connection through the school district by referring to the dissolution of the district as a divorce, as in this comment from local reporter Dave Thompson:

Cause a small town like that . . . it's definitely gonna impact the entire town. So you're having the scenario of, you know, people, it's kind of like going through a divorce. The people in Chester and people in Marion divorcing each other, it's kind of ugly.

For many of those who viewed Marion and Chester as one community, the history of the district formed the basis for that understanding. Marion was originally home to its own, independent school district, while Chester was part of the Karhu School District. In 1971, Chester separated from Karhu and joined with Marion to form the Marion-Chester Area School District. This was prompted most immediately by the passage of a bond issue in Karhu to raise money to build a new high school, which would have raised taxes in the community. There was also a sense at the time, according to people who viewed the two communities as united, that Chester was more like Marion in terms of character—that both of them were rural, farming communities while Karhu was larger and growing. Thus, from this perspective the Marion-Chester Area School District did not artificially join together two different communities, but made official existing ties between similar towns.

Along with the shared history, for some Maintainers the schools were an essential part of building and maintaining the community between Marion and Chester. One letter writer, a graduate of MCASD schools, described his experience moving from Chester Elementary to Marion-Chester Middle School:

In 6th grade we were introduced to a brand new set of individuals from a town over. I remember going skating in Karhu while being forced to socialize and become friends with this group of strangers from Marion. This social setting and conjoining of two schools made us be social, open and accepting of others helping us grow at an early stage compared to other school district.

For this graduate, the schools were what brought Marion and Chester together, forming them into one community.

One District, Two Communities

Others, including both Maintainers and Dissolvers, denied that the Marion and Chester formed one community while still relying on the schools as a tool for community definition. Instead of using the school district boundaries, however, they used school attendance and/or support for MCASD as the marker of community definition. Evan Miller, quoted above, described this attitude when he said that “Most of Chester wants nothing to do with Marion. Marion wants Chester just because of the kids.” From this perspective, Marion and Chester were essentially separate, with Marion—generally understood as wanting to maintain the school district—valuing Chester not as an essential part of its community, but as the home of kids for the schools.

Liz Unger, a resident of the Village of Chester whose children attended MCASD schools, worried about the separation between Marion and Chester. Speaking about the geography of the region, she noted that “there’s really nothing in the middle [of Marion and Chester], because that’s that state forest land. You basically drive between trees on your way from one community to the other. So there’s really not one community gathering space.” For her, the schools filled an essential role in creating a community from two different towns; she was optimistic that some of the proposed plans to save the district, like combining Marion Elementary and Chester Elementary into one school, would further develop the community. Liz’s main concern, however, was with those who moved into the community and did not support the local schools. She saw those who made the decision to open enroll their children to a different district as being somehow outside the

community, or not fully part of it. Expressing her frustration with what she saw as open enrollment families' instigation of the dissolution debate, she told me:

I don't think it's right for one side, people that feel a certain way to just move into a community and then decide how they want it to look. And then they're a minority, but [they say] 'Okay, well, I think there's a nice little town, I'd like to live there. But I don't want my kids to go to school there.' And then they just start this mission to change that. I think that's unfortunate.

Liz, and those who shared their view, traced the dissolution controversy to people who were not truly part of the Marion and Chester communities, who moved in from somewhere outside and decided to change things to their own preference. Thus, for some interviewees, people's position on the dissolution debate came to stand for their belonging—or not—to the community. From this perspective, the state's open enrollment policy, guided by neoliberal principles of *individual* benefit-maximization, facilitated an abandoning of local community, fracturing a community into pieces defined by residents' support of the local schools.

Divided by the Grand Canyon

Not everyone viewed the two communities as tied together. Some, like School Board member Tim Irving, instead saw them as fundamentally separate: as “two drastically different communities . . . divided by a county line that basically is like the Grand Canyon. It's six miles divided by a world apart.” In contrast to those who defined community through the school district, others—especially Dissolvers—offered an instrumental definition of community that especially relied on the geographical locations of employment and business. From this perspective, community is an instrumental and, especially, economic construct.

This difference struck me the most clearly in one hearing of the Dissolution Board. Speaking directly to Marion residents in the audience, one Chester resident said that “this [Marion and Chester together] hasn’t been a community in many years . . . Riverville is your community where you [Marion residents] shop and carry out daily business.” I was surprised to hear someone tell other people so directly who their community was, to define it economically and to say that the speaker was not part of it. That speaker was not the only person to reference shopping and other financial relationships as defining community. This letter writer tied together taxes, shopping, and identification in explaining their view:

Our family has chose [sic] to reside in Springs County. We live, work, and contribute to Springs County Programs as well as pay taxes to Springs County. Karhu is the next closes community to our Chester community within Springs County. We identify with Karhu. Karhu is where we take care of our basic family needs of shopping and daily necessities.

From this perspective, it was the instrumental aspects of life—working, shopping, paying taxes—as well as identification that defined community. That Marion and Chester shared a school district did not mean they shared anything else. Thus, this educational policy controversy did not only surface ways in which community was defined through the local schools and people’s opinions on them, but also alternative definitions of community that rejected the schools as meaningful symbols.

The Stakes at Hand: The Place and Purpose of Schooling

Throughout the dissolution debate, two distinct but related threads of contestation addressed the place and purpose of schooling: what is the role of schooling for the *individual*, and what is the role of schooling for the *community*? Thus, the controversy spoke to ongoing questions

about the purpose of schooling and the role of schools in communities, which are particularly salient when seen through the lens of contemporary individualizing visions of schooling.

David Labaree (1997) provides a framework for understanding conflicting visions of the purposes of education. He identifies three distinct educational goals: democratic equality, “the perspective of the citizen, from which education is seen as a public good, designed to prepare people for political roles,” social efficiency, “the perspective of the taxpayer and the employer, from which education is seen as a public good designed to prepare workers to fill structurally necessary market roles,” and social mobility, “the perspective of the individual educational consumer, from which education is seen as a private good designed to prepare individuals for successful social competition for the more desirable market roles” (p. 42). The turn to neoliberalism has particularly challenged public conceptions of education as they decouple schooling from the communities they serve. As discussed above, neoliberal logics assume that people act as individual, self-interested actors who seek to maximize their own benefit. Within the modern neoliberal context, the question asked of Tiekens (2014)—are schools for the community, or for the student?—became relevant to the crisis in MCASD.

Schools and the Individual

A dominant view of education within the MCASD dissolution debate was as a private good. Almost universally, people centered what Labaree (1997) would call the social mobility goal of education, expressing concern for how students in MCASD or other districts would be prepared for their individual futures in the job market. Across both Maintainers and Dissolvers, participants in the dissolution debate emphasized the importance of schools providing a quality education for individual students. One of the key ways in which people talked about the role of school in the lives

of individuals was their ability to provide students with opportunity. However, the ways in which they defined “opportunity” differed between the opportunity to compete (largely Dissolvers), and opportunity to participate (largely Maintainers).

Opportunity to Participate

Maintainers, who wanted to keep the district from dissolving, often spoke about the value of a small, rural school. Unlike many Dissolvers they did not see a contradiction between small schools and opportunity. This was because they often defined opportunity differently: rather than emphasizing the opportunity to compete, they emphasized the opportunity to participate.

A parent of students who graduated from MCASD, speaking at a public hearing, provided an example of this definition of opportunity. She said:

Students [in MCASD] can be on multiple sports teams, band, chorus—at football games you’ll see many of the band members in their football uniforms. We might not have the number of options of larger school districts, but what we do have is available to everyone, which makes kids well-rounded.

For people like this parent, quality education that produces “well-rounded” students is defined not by the mere presence of different activities, but by the ability of students to meaningfully participate in the activities that are offered. Mary Nelson offered a similar perspective:

I think a good education is well-rounded. I think kids have opportunities that they’re comfortable with. And I mean a school can just offer a lot, but then a lot of the kids aren’t able to do it. I don’t think that’s necessarily an opportunity. I think it’s only an opportunity for some.

Here, she argues that the presence of opportunities isn't enough if there are students who aren't able to participate; it's the ability to participate that makes a meaningful opportunity. Later she elaborated on this point, using the example of the basketball team:

[MCASD High School] was in a previous conference that we were towards the bottom. We were one of the smaller schools, so we weren't the best, but the kids would get so much out of the sport because all the kids pretty much at least got to be on the team—whether they played every game, that's a whole 'nother thing, but they get to be part of the team. They get to support their team, and hopefully they get to play and work their way up. But at least they get on, they don't get, you know, they don't get booted off if they're just not quite good enough and never get the opportunity.

Local minister Owen Canfield also used the example of sports when explaining the opportunities available in small, rural schools:

Owen I'll tell you, my experience would teach me is that in a small school, you have more kids with access to opportunity.

Caitlin How do you mean?

Owen Well, you know, you got one football team in Karhu. Okay, so you got a very limited number of kids that you can pull from your population to be on that football team. Here [in MCASD], every kid that wants to be can be on the football team, in the band, whatever they have going on.

Growing up in [larger town]—a very nice school—you had to kind of pass, to make the grade. You had to be among the best to get into whatever.

Theater, sports. There was a criteria you had to match up to. So I think kids in smaller schools just have a broader experience of life. I was a track runner in high school. That's basically all I did for four years. Here, kids will be in track, they'll be in football, basketball, band. So you have one kid participating in multiple ways.

Winona Moore, a strong advocate for maintaining MCASD, especially emphasized the ability to participate that a small, rural school provides:

And they [teachers] do this for the kids, pretty much anything a kid shows any interest [in] and wants to be involved they work with them. And there's great opportunities for the kids here because, you have so many kids that can play four sports in a year plus be in band, plus be, you know, at all these other extracurriculars. And they get so much experience from trying all these different things, knowing that the teachers are there to support them, help make it happen, and make sure they're involved, and they're actively participating.

And [when] these kids join a team or a club or whatever it is, they're not sitting in the corner watching everybody else do the work, because they're a small school. Everybody has to contribute for it to be successful. Whether they win or lose, the fact that they've had the opportunity to explore so many different things and be a part of the team and go through the highs and lows together, and [there's] just so many things that they can get working together, having those close friends and relationships.

For those who viewed opportunities this way, such opportunities were a benefit of a small, rural district: one teacher asserted that students would lose out in larger districts, because "there is just no

way” to do the same things as in a small district. Thus, this conception of opportunity became a justification for maintaining MCASD as a small, rural district independent of its larger neighbors.

Opportunity to Compete

When asked to compare MCASD to other school districts, Dissolvers often pointed to perceived better opportunities available in other districts, especially Karhu. As a larger district, Karhu was able to offer courses and activities that MCASD was not able to offer on-site (although MCASD was able to expand their offerings through online options and partnering with other organizations). Even Maintainers acknowledged this difference: for example, at one public hearing an MCASD teacher started his comments by acknowledging that other, larger districts “have some tangibles that we don’t.” However, it was not only the presence of those courses and activities that constituted opportunity from this perspective—rather, what was important was the opportunity to compete.

Of those I interviewed, Jessie Davis spoke most emphatically about the importance of competition in school. Jessie and I spoke in the almost-empty cafeteria of Chester Elementary School during the second public hearing of the Dissolution Board. With light brown hair and a thick turtleneck sweater, a small gold cross necklace dangling from the top, Jessie reminded me of a grown-up Kelly Kapowski (from late-80s teen sitcom *Saved by the Bell*). She chose to enroll her daughter in the Karhu school district and has been very happy with that decision. Speaking about how she made that choice, she told me:

Caitlin I’m curious, other than [test] scores, what kinds of things did you think about when you were making the decision about where to send your daughter?

Jessie [In addition to logistics, test scores, and taxes], all the opportunities that are available.

Caitlin What kinds of opportunities were you thinking about?

Jessie Um, they have all the sports opportunities. They have all the AP opportunities, they have all the special ed opportunities. They have an incredible summer school program to help children that either need more work to catch up or children that want to work ahead to be more proactive, to get ahead in their school career. Tons of opportunities that way.

But yet it's not, it's not a 'everyone wins' either because that's not a good concept either. It's, you have to make the team, you know, you have to work at it. That's important too. I mean, you can certainly have lots of activities, but you also have to be able to do well scholastically and there should be some way to cut, you know, the people that are able to perform. Because at some point the children will need to learn the facts of life, that not everybody wins.

Caitlin So it sounds like to you, part of a good school is having at least some level of, some kind of competition within the school.

Jessie Yes.

Caitlin Why do you think that's important?

Jessie Well, it's something that they need to learn for life. I mean, the best performers are going to get ahead and so they need to know. [In my daughter's school], the competition is really stiff in the elementary school to get into AP. If you're not in the 98th percentile, you don't make the AP group.

Thus, for Jessie and others like her, the different programs and services that Karhu offered did not alone make it a superior district; rather, it was the opportunity to *compete* in the larger district that mattered.

Not all Dissolvers used different opportunities as part of their argument against the school district. In particular, people who generally liked the school district but didn't believe it could be financially viable did not make this case. For example, the School Board President, who voted for dissolution and presented to the Dissolution Board in favor of it, emphasized that he believed in the quality of the opportunities and education that the district provided. However, it was almost only Dissolvers who did emphasize competition. In doing so, they embraced not only a private view of the purposes of education, but also a neoliberal one, in which the purpose of schooling is to prepare the individual to be successful in the market.

“Reality” and School Closing Debates

A common refrain among people who emphasized the importance of competition in school was that it more closely mirrored “the real world,” which was important for students to experience. Interestingly, arguments about what students need to accept in terms of competition and opportunity closely mirrored similar arguments about what Maintainers needed to accept about the school closing, and were sometimes even made by the same people. At a public hearing, one speaker addressed Maintainers, saying that “Part of life is moving on when things don't go your way.” Later in her comments, she compared the referendum results and potential dissolution to sex education:

This decision is really not monumental. The voters spoke twice, and they said no, we don't want to give money to the schools out of our taxes. You teach students that no means no in sex ed, and you have to learn that yourself . . . Life is going to be full of traumatic events

[like your school closing], and you have to adapt, you can't continue to cater to them. If they don't learn these skills at a young age that's not going to be beneficial to them.

Again, this brings into relief a neoliberal conception of education. The school, from this perspective, was not an essential public institution, but a service, one that had been provided by one school and could easily be provided by another.

Intermission: Farmland, Small Town, Horse Country, Rural

Before moving from the ways participants in the MCASD dissolution debate conceptualized the relationship between school and individual to the ways they understood the relationship between school and community, it's necessary to turn again to the question of community definition. Rather than looking at questions of who belongs in which community, however, here community definition refers to debates over what *kind* of communities Marion and Chester were. While both Marion and Chester had historically been rural, farming communities, the character of Chester, in particular, was arguably changing and suburbanizing, which created a sense for many that they were different kinds of places with even less tying them together. Importantly, it also created a sense that the schools occupied a different place in the communities of Marion and Chester, and that the potential dissolution had different stakes for each. Distinctions were drawn between Marion and Chester particularly in terms of their rurality. Within the Marion-Chester Area School District, Marion was universally understood to be rural, while the rurality of Chester was more contested.

Marion: (Still) A Small, Rural Town

Universally, Marion was understood to be a small, rural town. When asked to describe it, people emphasized qualities commonly associated with the rural: they talked about farmland, outdoor pursuits, and the Future Farmers of America club at the high school. This was understood

to be in line with Marion's history. The local historical society carries texts emphasizing the rural history of the community, including one focusing on muck farming in the region. Throughout the controversy, while some people did reference that Marion functioned to an extent as a bedroom community for people who commuted to work (especially to Riverville; see Table 3-1 for travel times), at no point did I hear anybody contest Marion's status as a small, rural town.

Is Chester Rural?

In contrast to Marion, Chester's rurality was more ambivalent. Although residents of Chester often described their community as rural, in speaking about it they often went back and forth between emphasizing its rural qualities and emphasizing the factors that brought it closer to larger communities (see Table 3-1 for distances to nearby communities), leaving a more suburban impression of the community. This kind of ambivalent rurality was brought out, for example, in Jessie Davis's discussion of Chester:

So I chose Chester because I wanted a place where I could someday have a horse, that was my dream. And I now have horses in my front yard . . . I live in the town [of Chester]. I think it's, um, I think of it as my paradise. I live, you know, in an area where I'm close to the woods, I can ride my horse whenever I want. And yet I'm conveniently close to a lot of the conveniences of life that we all like to have as well, like you have in [urban] Madison. It's a little bit further to go than either in [large cities] Steiner or Laketown, but you know, Karhu has, there's a lot of the modern conveniences available. So I'm able to enjoy the paradise and have the conveniences nearby.

Here, Jessie emphasizes that she appreciates the more rural aspects of Chester, "her paradise," such as having the space to own horses, while still being close to the amenities of a larger town like

Karhu. A member of the Chester Village Board, Nick Smith, revealed a similar tension in his description of Chester:

Chester is a rural community. It's a small bedroom community, most of the people here don't work in Chester. They work outside, either Springs City or points North, South, East, or West of there. Some work in Steiner, like myself during my working years . . . We are a small town. We do all the small town things, with parades in the summertime and community events periodically. We have some wonderful organizations. I'm also a board member of our Chester Historical society. We have a museum right on Main Street, and we work on telling the public about the history of Chester and the surrounding communities. And it's kind of interesting to see how people lived back then, and how much nicer we have it today.

Table 3-1

Distance from Village of Marion and Village of Chester to Nearest Communities

Community	Marion		Chester		
	Population	Distance	Community	Population	Distance
Riverville	14,700	10 mi./ 15 min.	Karhu	8,000	8 mi./ 10 min.
Adams	8,000	18 mi./ 25 min.	Springs City	72,500	16 mi./ 25 min.
Laketown	258,000	50 mi./ 1 hr.	Steiner	593,000	40 mi./ 45 min.

Note: Distances and travel times given are approximate and were retrieved using Google maps. Travel distances and times for residents of the Town of Chester in particular are generally shorter than given, due to the location of most new residential developments. Also note that residents' identification with other communities did not necessarily relate to travel time.

When asked about any changes he's seen over time, Nick pointed to population growth and development, especially of residential subdivisions:

There's been a whole lot of changes. There's obviously a lot of subdivisions that have been added. The village population has grown over time, as well as the town. And there's a lot of young people moving into our newer subdivisions.

Then later, he compared Chester and Marion and their potential for development:

So there's a difference in money, you know, in this community [Chester] versus Marion. And one of the biggest reasons in Marion is that Harrison County has no growth there. They have a big farmland maintenance program in place, so they're not looking to make increases, or to increase the number of residents, they're mainly concerned with farmland preservation. So all the growth goes on over here [in Chester].

Thus, over the course of his interview, Nick gave a somewhat conflicted image of Chester. On the one hand, he emphasized the "small town things" that the community did, and explicitly described the community as rural. On the other hand, he emphasized the growth that the community was undergoing, explicitly comparing Chester to the more farm-focused Marion. That development was also on the mind of Ernest Norris, who had served for many years in various governmental roles in the Town of Chester:

We try to keep it quiet, rural looking. There's only so much you can do with development, people have their rights to do what they want with their property within reason. So you go through the years, we've had numerous subdivisions, an industrial park, and so forth, but we still try to maintain the rural atmosphere. Which, it's a tradeoff. So you have to be very careful with your developments. You want large lots rather than small city lots, to keep open

land. And so its more the appearance of rural rather than suburban, and that type of subdivision.

Notably, Ernest describes Chester as *rural looking*, maintaining some features of rural communities while experiencing significant development.

Together, comments like these by Jessie, Nick, and Ernest support the idea that Chester was a different *kind* of rural than Marion. Tim Irving captured this in his description of the community:

Part of our kind of divide, [is] where more people in Marion identify as rural versus people in Chester who identify as, well, we're only five minutes from the freeway. I mean rural is kind of a hook on our side [Chester]. We like quiet, and we like to have our horses, and we like the space, but we're not rural.

In Tim's description, Chester's rurality was more of a "hook," a community quirk that brought in people looking for space, rather than an identity like it was for people in Marion. He further tied that difference in attitudes towards rurality to attitudes towards education:

[People who don't like MCASD say] 'We don't want rural. We want forward thinking. We want AP classes, we don't want ag and shop. We want AP history, AP calc, AP--because my son or daughter, when they get to high school, is gonna need all of those classes, cause they're never going to learn about agriculture.'

With this context, then, of the contested rurality within MCASD, and Chester in particular, I will move now to discussing the ways the relationship between school and community were understood and contested in the MCASD dissolution debate.

Schools and the Community

An additional level of debate within the larger dissolution debate was the place of schools in the community: Maintainers emphasized the school district's centrality as a social and economic institution, often portraying it as essential to the survival of Marion in particular, while Dissolvers dismissed those concerns and instead described it as a drain on the community, emphasizing the fiscal cost to the individual.

School as Social Institution

Writers considering rural education often emphasize rural schools' places at the center of their communities. For example, from a report for the National Association of State Boards of Education:

Schools matter not only to students but also to surrounding communities, and in rural schools they are particularly influential, as they are often one of just a few institutions. Rural schools may be a community's largest employer, and they support other businesses in town: Their buses are serviced at the local garage, and their bills are paid at the local bank. Rural schools can knit the social fabric of local communities. (Tieken & Montgomery, 2021, p. 8)

Those who supported MCASD echoed this perspective. When Maintainers talked about the school district, they often emphasized its place at the center of the community. Loretta Peters, a retired MCASD teacher, described the importance of the school to the community from her cozy living room, blocks from the high school, Christmas tree glinting in the corner:

Everybody knows the school schedule. Everybody goes to the homecoming game in September, October. Everybody attends all the sports events from football to basketball to

track to baseball. We have a bazaar every November. I think it's the booster club, the sports booster club sponsors that and so everybody goes to that.

All the concerts, for example, for Christmas and springtime, the school plays, these are all community activities that people can walk to. And we're not a very rich community. I don't know how many rentals we have in comparison to people who own their homes, but I would say a lot of people are middle to lower class, who find it difficult to get any kind of highbrow entertainment. So, I think the community things that the school offers, people attend.

The band always marches in whatever parade we have, we just had a Christmas parade and the high school band played in that and I can hear them, you know, they're three blocks away, I could hear them.

Here, Loretta describes the schools, especially the high school, as a social and cultural hub for the district. Interestingly, she especially pulls out the role of the school in providing access to "highbrow" forms of entertainment, such as plays and concerts, to people who might not otherwise partake of it. While she describes this as a class issue, it could also be a rural issue: living almost an hour from the nearest large city, plays and concerts are not the easiest forms of entertainment to access for those in Marion and Chester.

Winona Moore, an activist working to maintain the district, also emphasized the role of the school as a social institution within the community:

Whether or not you have kids in the school, especially when you have a small school like this, the [high school/middle school] building itself represents so much for the community. They have the community center up there. There's birthday parties and church functions up

there and anniversary parties and baby showers and, you know, so many things go on up at the school that, without that, where do you go to meet or have parties or social functions like that?

Things like, in the wintertime, they open up the school for people to go and walk the halls, so you get a pass and if the weather's bad you can, you know, walk the halls of the school and get some indoor exercise. So you know just little things like that to continue to keep the community feeling that connection to the school and to the kids.

In addition to the school building acting as a resource for the community, Winona emphasized the services that students performed within the community. In an interview, she told me “our kids put in thousands of hours of community service, like last year it was something like 5,000 hours of community service that they put in. That's huge.” At a public hearing, she submitted to the board a letter that was written on behalf of the district by the Red Cross in recognition of the blood drives held by students:

I have here a letter thanking the district, from the Red Cross, thanking them for the number of lives they've saved by holding blood drives, over nine thousand lives. You guys are probably being touched by students walking these halls, and you probably don't even know it.

In this small community, the schools were also part of a social network that included local churches. In interviews with local ministers, they described interacting with the local schools in multiple ways, both renting and providing space for services, concerts, and other events, collaborating on volunteer projects, and celebrating graduates from the local school district.

Some members of the community also described the school district as contributing to the community by attracting people to the area. Interestingly, one of the only times race was explicitly mentioned during this controversy was in the course of someone making this point. At the first meeting of the Dissolution Board, a slim, white man in his thirties with his hair combed forward into a small fauxhawk came to the microphone and introduced himself as a resident, teacher, and husband to a teacher in the district. In the course of taking on administrative responsibilities (without the title of administrator; see discussion of cost ineffectiveness below), he told the audience that he had “looked closely at the racial demographics” of MCASD and the surrounding districts. He said:

I am frightened by some of the neighboring districts and their lack of diversity. I almost wonder how it is humanly possible to have so few [racial] minority students in the modern era . . . Families that used to be migrant, and come and go, they don't come and go anymore, because they stay here and put down roots. I don't know how you could take the melting pot community here and try to split it.

In this rural community, migrant workers were understood to be Mexican or Latinx people who moved to different areas seasonally in search of farm labor. Throughout the dissolution crisis, people of color were almost entirely missing from the debate, with the exception of a few students who spoke to the Dissolution Board. However, in this instance they were rhetorically brought into the debate as evidence for the school's value to the community: because MCASD schools were part of what induced migrant families to “put down roots,” that was presumed to be evidence of their quality and value to the community.

While people in both Marion and Chester identified the school as a social institution or family, it was widely seen as *more* central to life in Marion. Loretta Peters, quoted above, told me the following:

I personally think it's terribly important for the community, for the Marion village community to maintain a school system because as I said, the school is the hub of the community in my opinion. And so I think it, it would be almost maybe the demise of the village in a way if the school district were dissolved.

This letter writer also emphasizes the centrality of the schools to Marion, in particular:

You've [the board] surely come to understand that unlike for Chester, the MCASD is the cornerstone of our Marion community. It remains a gathering place, supports our local businesses, and is a major employer. Yet it's been clear for at least 10 years that the majority of the Chester community does not feel connected to the MCASD, does not fully support the joint school district, and would never support a referendum . . . If Marion residents lose their school district, their home values plummet, and their sense of community is gone, they lose on all fronts, while Chester continues on with little consequence.

This quote in particular indicates the way many people described experiencing the dissolution crisis, as an abandonment of not only the district but also of Marion by residents of Chester. For people like this letter writer, the stakes for Marion were existential.

The different significance ascribed to the school closing for Marion and Chester was related to the different ways the two communities' rurality was understood. Marion was understood to be rural in a way that Chester was not—it was perceived to be more self-contained and more distant

from other communities, while Chester was understood to have closer connections to larger towns like Karhu. Liz Unger, a Chester resident and mother of MCASD students, expanded on this point:

I actually feel worse for Marion than I do for Chester because Chester at least is a little closer to the next big town. Marion is really in the middle of nowhere, and they're surrounded by the state forest . . . They're surrounded by all that unbuildable state land. And their closest school district is Riverville. I mean, I feel for them, I really do. If Marion didn't have their own school, then these kids are talking about long bus rides and participating in after school activities and everything just being more difficult. And yeah, I would have been really sad for Marion if they didn't have a school anymore. Chester has, you know, Karhu School District near enough that it wouldn't make as big of an impact as Marion.

Liz and others like her understood the stakes of dissolution to be much higher for Marion than for Chester because of the integral role it played in the social life and infrastructure of the town. In addition, it was also perceived to be an essential economic institution.

School as Economic Center

In addition to seeing schools as social institutions, some members of the community also described them as essential economic institutions. The school district was seen as an economic center to the town in two primary ways: through driving commerce in local businesses, and through providing employment.

During the dissolution hearings, repeated concerns were expressed about the ripple effects that the district's dissolution could have on the local economy. In the story that was most frequently told, the schools brought commerce to local businesses, and without the daily draw of the schools those businesses would lose out. For example, people referenced the local gas station and Subway

restaurant as significantly benefitting from the traffic of people heading to and from the schools. Interestingly, although it could be argued that the school district contributed most directly to the local economy through its role as an employer, this aspect of the school's economic role in the community was referenced much less than the one previously described. Just as the school district was understood to be more important to Marion socially, it was also understood to be more important to Marion economically.

The economic stakes for Marion were also tied to the presence of multiple school buildings in the village. In addition to Marion Elementary School, Marion was also home to the large, fairly new building that housed both MCASD Middle School and MCASD High School. That building in particular was a difficult sticking point in the dissolution debate: it was assessed at a high cost because of its use value, but would likely not be kept open in the event of a dissolution and would be difficult to sell for any other purpose. Having been built to meet the needs of middle and high school students, its suitability for other purposes was widely doubted, to the point that it was a barrier to alternatives to dissolution: while one proposal for the district was to become a one-building district, housed in the middle/high school building, the costs required to remodel the school to meet elementary students' needs were considered too high by some. While the school *in use* was thought by advocates for the district to bring economic value to the community, there were concerns about the potential economic burden that the empty school building could present. A local reporter covering the dissolution crisis told me "You close the school in Marion, it will be a disaster for that community. I don't know what they would ever use that [building] for. It just, it would not be good."

School as Drain

It was mostly for supporters of the school district that it represented a central and essential social or economic institution. For opponents of the district—the Dissolvers—the schools did not generally represent something positive. For example, Harold Marshall told me:

The village [of Marion] isn't going to dry up and fall in the dust like people say, "Oh, you close the school, Marion's gonna close." You got a multibillion dollar business, how's it's gonna close? The gas stations aren't going to close. The restaurants aren't going to close because people are still going to need to eat. [The diner] has been around at the same location for probably 60 years now. It's a small, family-owned business. They're not going to close

Beyond simply not being essential to the community, Dissolvers often portrayed the school district as a blemish on the community, or as a drain that siphoned away resources for no return. Moreover, like a drain, from this perspective the loss the district brought to the community was inherent to it and could not be stopped so long as water—or funds—were provided to it.

The sole pro-dissolution speaker (other than the representative of the School Board) who spoke at the first Dissolution Board meeting brought this view forward. In an emphatic statement describing her experience with the school district and its supporters, she said:

The district is failing and the voters know this to be true. Enough is enough with the poor academics, bullying, and high taxes. The purple Marion-Chester people will come before you . . . and they will cry their tears in the hopes that they will sway you. That is not the whole truth. The facts are, this district has poor academics, there's bullying, and the only cuts made

are the ones that hurt students. The administration never cuts their six high paid positions.

Many believe Marion-Chester is a corrupt, overspending cult.

For people like this woman, the MCASD was nothing but a burden on the community.

The Place of Politics

The controversy over dissolution in MCASD was sharply divided and highly contentious, speaking to vividly different understandings of the purposes of education and the place of public schools in communities. These are inherently political positions, and people took them very seriously. Loretta Peters, who understood the controversy as essentially pitting Marion against Chester, compared it to the impeachment proceedings against then-President Donald Trump:

It's just like the impeachment process. There's such a division between Democrat and Republican in the impeachment process of Trump. The same thing happens here. There's a division between the Chesterites saying, we want to leave, and the Marion people saying we want to stay, and there's no way on God's green Earth that we're going to change anybody's mind.

Unlike the impeachment proceedings, however, the dissolution debate was not drawn along party lines. A particularly interesting aspect of this political debate is that the people involved overwhelmingly used similar language to describe their views. Most people that I spoke to used some combination of the terms conservative, Republican, and/or old fashioned to describe their values.³ This was not a case of political polarization the way we might expect to see it, with

³ Perhaps ironically, one of the only people to describe themselves to me as liberal—or rather, as a “progressive, avant-garde kind of person”—was an elderly, retired Catholic nun. She opposed dissolution.

Democrats and Republicans lining up in support of opposite positions. Rather, this debate surfaced differences within conservative American political views, complicating popular understandings of rural conservatism as monolithic.

“Old Fashioned”

A common way that people I spoke to described their views was as “old fashioned.” For example, when asked how she would describe her values, Christine Laughlin told me she was “pretty old fashioned,” and Wendy Tanner told me “I’m pretty traditional, maybe what you would expect to be the quote ‘norm’ 20 years ago, really, or 30 or 40 maybe even.” However, what those “old fashioned” values contained led to very different positions on the dissolution of MCASD. For Christine Laughlin, being “old fashioned” meant that she “very strongly value[d] public education, a free press, democracy, peace, religion, religious tolerance,” and she therefore supported maintaining the MCASD. In contrast, for Wendy Tanner, old fashioned values meant values that aligned with her Christian faith, and she strongly supported dissolving MCASD.

Fiscal Responsibility

A personal and political value that many people in the community espoused, often tying it to a larger system of conservatism, was fiscal responsibility. For example Evan Miller, who had a complicated view of dissolution, described his values this way:

Evan I’m Republican, I go to church, I’m hardworking.

Caitlin When you say that you are Republican, what does that mean for you?

Evan For me it means, first of all, fiscally responsible . . . I believe government should be run like a business . . . I liked the school, I liked the teachers, I liked the people. But at the same time, I’m pissed that they let it get to that point, so

I'm just kind of jaded from that perspective. I'm not wanting to put up with it anymore, you know, because I mean, in our personal lives, we can't do that and then run to voters for a whole shitload of money, it just doesn't work that way.

Market Conservatism

While both Maintainers and Dissolvers endorsed fiscal responsibility, one difference between them was the extent to which Dissolvers pointed to market-based logics and arguments to justify their view that the school district should be dissolved. These arguments ranged from the view that schools should be run like a business to the less common, but still present, view that public schools are inherently inefficient and should be privatized.

Nate Michaels is an example of a person who expressed market-oriented policy preferences for schools while still supporting public education in general. In fact, almost the first thing he said to me when he called me in response to a recruitment email was that "I'm going to disappoint you but I support public education." He told me that people are often surprised to find out that he supports public education because he had been so vocally pro-dissolution; I myself was surprised, because I had read strident and abrasive Facebook posts he wrote decrying the MCASD in no uncertain terms. However, he explained, his problem was not with public schools in general, but MCASD in particular. In his view, the district had failed to successfully compete against school districts like Karhu. Because of that failure to attract students and to responsibly manage its finances, the district as a whole had failed, and he thought dissolution was the only appropriate step.

In public statements, Harold Marshall and Nate Michaels seemed to align very well. While Nate was primarily outspoken on social media, Harold had a presence both online and in person; in

fact, my first introduction to him was when he raised his voice aggressively while speaking to the Dissolution Board. Both of them supported the dissolution of MCASD, and both of them believed that MCASD had failed in the marketplace of education. However, where Nate explicitly supported public education, Harold explicitly rejected it. In an interview that began with him quizzing me on the Bill of Rights of the U.S. Constitution, he explained to me that the purpose of government is to provide those services that cannot be efficiently provided by the private market. Law enforcement, in his view, is an example of something that is within the appropriate realm of government; education, on the other hand, is not. He supported the dissolution of MCASD, and thought that districts like Karhu were providing a superior education; however, his ultimate preference would be for the private provision of education.

“The Voters,” “The Taxpayers,” and Claims of Belonging To

Within the debate over dissolution in MCASD, an oft-reiterated claim was that “the voters have spoken.” This was a reference to the two key referendums that had been held, one of which failed to raise operating funds, and the other of which endorsed dissolution. For the Dissolvers who pointed to these results, the fact that the two referendums both tended to support dissolution was evidence enough that the district should dissolve. Maintainers, on the other hand, did not acquiesce to these claims. Instead, they challenged the authority of “the voters” by using other evidence, especially claims of longevity within the community, to instead assign responsibility and ownership of the district elsewhere. This debate over school dissolution in one small, rural district speaks to fundamental questions that underlie public education in a diverse society. Who gets to make decisions about schools? Which groups’ desires have priority over others? Who, in short, do the public schools belong to?

“The Voters”

In discourse about the dissolution, one group loomed large: “the voters.” Two referendums were important to the dissolution crisis. The first, in May of 2019, arguably set off the crisis when the community failed to approve a referendum to raise \$11.5 million over 4 years for operating expenses. That referendum failed at 39% approve to 61% disapprove, which prompted the School Board to pass the initial dissolution order. The second referendum, held in November 2019, was an optional part of the dissolution process. In that referendum, voters were asked the question, “Shall the Marion-Chester Area School District dissolve?” That proposition passed at 53%-47%.

At multiple Dissolution Board meetings, people who supported the dissolution of the district appealed to “the voters,” making the case that they had spoken, and they said to dissolve. One public hearing speaker seemed resentful that the Dissolution Board had been convened with the power to approve or deny the dissolution order. She started her comments by saying, “I really don’t want to be here today. I feel that I’ve voted twice, and the voters have said what they wanted,” implying that the people with legitimate decision-making authority—that is to say, the voters—had already made their decision. This resentment towards the Dissolution Board was shared by others who prioritized the authority of “the voters,” like this letter writer:

I was discouraged and angered to see the form you [the Dissolution Board] are using at your public hearings. There are boxes people can check to express why they are there (in favor of dissolving or not in favor of dissolving, to name a couple options.) When questioned why that form had options like that, your representatives said it was to ensure the opinion of the community was being accurately represented. Why would your public hearings better

represent the feelings of the community over the 3⁴ votes passed just this year? . . . If you on this Board consider the people at your public hearings to be the accurate voice of the communities and not the 2 actual referendums we have had, then what you are doing is a partisan farce. The communities have spoken not once, but twice. The school Board has voted to dissolve. It is your job to help the surrounding communities determine the best way to assimilate the Marion/Chester students, in the best way possible for those students and families. It is not your job to decide it is in the best interest of the students to keep this failing school district open and ignore the 2 votes by the actual taxpayers of the communities.

In statements like these, the results of the two elections were assumed to rightly be final and binding. Another letter writer put it even more simply: “We the taxpayers have spoken our wishes through our voting. I thought that in this country the majority wins...that doesn’t seem to be the case here!”

This resentment towards the Dissolution Board, especially in conjunction with appeals to decisions made by voters, speaks to the complicated place of the public in this school closing debate. The Dissolution Board’s statutory responsibilities include the need to consider the impact on *all* potentially impacted students and communities, not only those served or represented by the dissolving district. Indeed, a key reason for the Dissolution Board’s ultimate rejection of the dissolution order was the impact on other districts: they were concerned about the fairness of asking

⁴ In this instance, the letter writer counted the School Board vote on the initial dissolution order as one of three votes, the other two being the funding referendum and non-binding dissolution referendum.

other communities to take responsibility for debts assumed by a district they had no voting authority over.

While Dissolvers frequently made appeals to the electoral results, Maintainers sometimes questioned the legitimacy—or at least the unity—of the voters’ voice. One speaker at a public hearing said, “The vote was very close, so that ought to tell you something,” following that with, “yes, they voted, they voted, but what about the ones who want their kids here? We don’t want to take the easy way [and open enroll], we want to keep a school here in this town.”

Arguments about the will of the voters in this debate frequently ignored the impact that the dissolution might have on those who did *not* have the ability to vote in either referendum. There were two main ways in which non-voters were represented in the debate. The first, and likely most influential, was the consideration by the Dissolution Board of the potential additional tax burden that dissolution would impose on residents of surrounding districts, as described above. The second was through statements of MCASD students, especially high schoolers, who often expressed frustration that they, the ones most directly impacted by the potential closure, had no official way to influence the decision. Such pleas were, I suspect, largely ignored by the Dissolution Board (who did not explicitly refer to them in their decision), and were often dismissed by Dissolvers as “crying kids.” Missing from the debate entirely were the perspectives of those who are not allowed to vote, especially immigrants.

For those who appealed to the authority of “the voter,” the people who had the ability to vote and exercised it were understood to be the ones who had legitimate decision-making authority over the future of the school district. “The voter,” however, was not often brought up in isolation. The voter was often tied to—or even conflated with—another actor, “the taxpayer.”

“The Taxpayers”

Another group that was commonly appealed to, especially by Dissolvers, was “the taxpayers.” The image of “the taxpayer” was very powerful to many people who engaged in discussion about the potential dissolution: in fact, the Facebook group that was understood to be home to the most vocal pro-dissolution advocates was called Chester Taxpayers.

One of the arguments made involving the taxpayers was that the school district had failed in their responsibility to them, and therefore did not deserve their continued support. Wendy Tanner described this position in an interview:

Wendy I don’t think the school has been, or the school board, the decision makers over the years, have been conservative enough with the finances. I don’t think that they’ve been good stewards of the taxpayer’s money.

Caitlin What does being a good steward of taxpayer money look like?

Wendy Well for instance, spending money you don’t have, that’s a huge one. Or spending money on things that are maybe more frivolous than, you know, really educationally important.

Caitlin Are you thinking of certain examples?

Wendy You know, nothing particular is coming to mind, but I just know that they have not been able to live within their means as a school board for a very long time.

To view public schools through the lens of the taxpayer is to complicate the public-private distinction. Within Labaree’s (1997) framework, the taxpayer views education as a public good,

because the taxpayer has an interest in an educated society with competent workers. However, within the context of the MCASD dissolution debate, those who took the perspective of the taxpayer were generally concerned with individual financial cost. The impact of increased taxes on individuals' lives was a common refrain in public hearings, and was a significant concern for many community members. At a public hearing, one woman said:

The [residents of the] district can't support and afford the taxes needed to keep the district up and running and thriving . . . The referendum would have increased taxes by 30%. As a retired couple with health issues, me and my husband would have had to choose between medical care and taxes. A third of students in the district are in need, retired families, all of these people would have a hard time paying more taxes.

Sometimes, the role of the taxpayer and the role of the homeowner were intertwined with ideas about fiscal responsibility and a concern for future individual economic benefit, as for the letter writer who said:

Please DO NOT let them [the district] continue to hold us hostage to their reckless spending!! Having our home as part of the Karhu school district helps with our home resale value along with a huge bonus of having a school district that clearly knows how to give children a high quality education along with keeping taxes down.

From this perspective, the role of the taxpayer was a purely private role, from which the main concern was limiting individual costs and maximizing potential future benefits.

Maintainers who critiqued the position of the taxpayer also took a similarly private perspective, like the speaker at a public hearing who exclaimed, "life is not about your stinking money! You'll pay taxes everywhere," implying that the impact on taxes of the proposed referendum

was not a legitimate consideration. Others were concerned about the potential impact of increased taxes, but wanted the school district to remain open regardless.

Participation and Legitimate Belonging To

For some Maintainers, the positions of voter or taxpayer were unimportant to decision making about the public schools. Instead, they pointed to the people who actively participate in the school district as the ones who had a legitimate stake in the future of the district. One teacher, speaking at a public hearing, cited the letter from the Department of Public Instruction indicating that the educational welfare of students should be the number one priority for the Dissolution Board. In an even toned voice, with a kind of wobbly strength, he pleaded with the Board to maintain MCASD, saying that “Students whose parents have open enrolled them in surrounding districts are not MCASD students. It is *our* students who are affected if MCASD dissolves.” From this perspective, then, it was the students who were participating in the district already who had the strongest claim to consideration in the dissolution debate.

All three of these positions—that the voters, the taxpayers, or the participants should be prioritized in decision-making about the district—complicate the public nature of public schools. Each one of them argues that some part of the public that the schools serve has a more legitimate interest in their future than others. This controversy provided an opportunity for that debate to be held.

Conclusion

The surface of the dissolution debate in MCASD was like looking at a stormy sea: the churn of emotions, the froth of conflict, were all clear to observe. As a researcher, I felt myself tossed by them as I watched the dissolution hearings unfold with their heartfelt pleas, hostile glares, tears, and

even raised voices. However, just as there is always more happening under the surface of the water than on it, there were complex currents running under the dissolution debate. Those involved in this controversy, by contesting the future of the school district, also contested the boundaries and nature of their communities, their relationship with each other, and who could legitimately speak on it.

Chapter 4: The Policy Trap

In this chapter, I examine the policy structures that surrounded and shaped the dissolution crisis in the district. The structures the state put into place—especially open enrollment and a funding system that relies heavily on temporary referendums—essentially trapped the district, lading MCASD into an untenable situation which ultimately resulted in the school board passing the dissolution resolution. The educational policies that were implicated were further complicated by the geographical space the district occupied as a rural district surrounded by larger, suburban districts, as well as different land use policies in the two counties the district spanned.

The Structure and Dissolution of Wisconsin School Districts

Overview: Public Schooling in Wisconsin

Wisconsin public schools serve 830,000 students in 422 districts, of which 232 are classified as rural by the National Center for Education Statistics. Public education is provided for in the Wisconsin state Constitution, Article X, which reads in part:

The legislature shall provide by law for the establishment of district schools, which shall be as nearly uniform as practicable; and such schools shall be free and without charge for tuition to all children between the ages of 4 and 20 years; and no sectarian instruction shall be allowed therein; but the legislature by law may, for the purpose of religious instruction outside the district schools, authorize the release of students during regular school hours.

The Department of Public Instruction, under the direction of the non-partisan, elected Superintendent, has charge of public schooling and libraries for the state.

Wisconsin provides education for students through several different avenues. First, each district administers public schools. These are publicly funded institutions (see below for a discussion of school funding in Wisconsin) which are generally responsible for educating students within a given geographic area and serve the majority of publicly educated students in the state. Second, Wisconsin also maintains a system of charter schools, publicly funded schools that operate without “most state rules and regulations in exchange for greater accountability for results” (Department of Public Instruction, 2012). Charter schools can be physical or virtual, and may be authorized by public school districts or one of a limited number of authorizing bodies specified by law. Finally, the state also provides for publicly funded education of some students in privately-run schools through one of three “Private School Choice Programs,” commonly known as voucher programs.

Wisconsin public schools, including charter schools, are monitored through two accountability systems, one each at the state and federal level. Each system relies heavily on results of the Wisconsin Forward Exam (WFE), a standardized test administered in grades 3-8 in English Language Arts and Mathematics, grades 4 and 8 in Science, and grades 4, 8, and 10 in Social Studies. Results from the WFE are used to generate school- and district-level report cards as part of the state accountability system, along with measures such as chronic absenteeism, and are also used as part of the identification system established under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

Funding School Districts: Taxes, Revenue Limits, and Referendums

Schools in Wisconsin, like most places in the United States, receive funding from three primary sources: the federal government, the state, and the local community. Overall, about 7% of school funding in Wisconsin comes from the federal government, 45% comes from the state, and local communities provide the remaining 48% percent. The state distributes aid to districts based on

a power equalizing formula “designed to reduce reliance on the property tax, weaken the link between the size of a school district’s per pupil property tax base and the resources it had available to support per pupil spending, and reduce differences across school districts in per pupil spending” (Reschovsky, 2021, p. 3). The formula that determines state aid is notoriously opaque: a speaker at a state education advocacy conference I once attended told the gathered audience, “If anyone tells you they understand the school funding formula, they’re lying.” Nonetheless, in this section I will attempt to give a succinct overview of Wisconsin school funding.

A key number to pay attention to in the discussion of any Wisconsin school district’s finances is its revenue limit. The revenue limit, first introduced into law in 1993, was part of an effort to limit the amount of money local governments spent on education, representing a broad disinvestment in public schooling. The revenue limit is a set value that defines the maximum amount of money a district can raise from the *sum* of state aid and local property taxes (money from categorical and federal grants are not subject to the revenue limit). Districts’ revenue caps are determined based on each district’s state aid and local non-referendum levies from the previous year. A per-pupil inflationary increase is provided for in state law; this increase was initially set at \$190 per student, and through the first years of the policy’s existence the yearly allowed increases rose with inflation. Beginning in the 2009-10 school year, however, the yearly increases to revenue limits have been substantially smaller; in the 2011-12 school year, revenue limits were actually *decreased* by an average of \$554 per pupil, and since the 2015-16 school year has been \$0 (Department of Public Instruction, 2015; Reschovsky, 2021).

Revenue limits matter to districts and the communities they serve in several ways. Most importantly for schools, they largely define the per-pupil funding they have available to them (with

the exception of categorical or federal grants, which are not included in the revenue limit). For communities, they—in combination with the state aid formula—define the level of property taxes the local school district can levy. In fact, if a district’s state aid increases by more than its revenue limit does, property owners will see a property tax *decrease*. Revenue limits are not, however, tied to any kind of district characteristic other than property values, which means they do not take into account that some students may be more expensive to educate—such as those with special needs, emergent bilinguals, or students from low-income households—or that some districts may face unique challenges—for example, small districts cannot take advantage of economies of scale to keep their costs down. These additional costs are some of the reasons why a district may need funding above its revenue limit.

The main mechanism by which school districts can raise tax money above their revenue limit is to pass a funding referendum. These referendums ask local communities to agree to a tax increase for either a single year or over a period of time. Increasingly, rather than proposing referendums for one-off expenses like school building repairs or updates, school districts are turning to referendums to garner essential operating expenses. The majority of these referendums pass (Fox, 2020; Hall, 2021), which makes the repeated failure of referendums in MCASD particularly noteworthy.

The expansion of inter-district school choice and other marketizing policies has added additional complications to Wisconsin’s education funding, which will be discussed in the next subsection.

Marketizing Policies in Wisconsin Education

Wisconsin has a significant history of marketizing education policies. For example, it is the home to one of the earliest large-scale voucher programs in the country, the Milwaukee Parental

Choice Program, established in 1990. Under Governor Scott Walker, voucher programs were extended first to Racine in 2011, and then to the entire state in 2013. In addition, Wisconsin has allowed for charter schools since 1993.

The most relevant marketizing policy for this study is inter-district open enrollment. This policy allows students whose residence places them in one district's catchment area to apply to enroll in a different district. First established in 1997 with caps on allowed numbers of inter-district transfers, in the 2006-7 school year caps were lifted, allowing an unlimited number of transfers so long as the receiving district is accepting outside students. This policy is marketizing in that it introduces "competition" between districts to attract students from other districts while maintaining their own; however, as Turner (2020) notes, it has also served in some districts to reinforce or exacerbate racial segregation and can contribute to budget shortfalls. That an inter-district choice policy should have these effects is supported by research in other contexts: for example, in their examination of inter-district enrollment in metropolitan Denver, Holme and Richards (2009) found that the policy was often used for higher-income students to exit districts of lower socioeconomic status and enter more advantaged ones.

The effect that inter-district open enrollment has on a district's finances is somewhat complex. The student who open enrolls to another district is counted in their home district's membership for the purposes of state aid distribution and revenue limit calculations; thus, when budgets are initially set, they appear as if they will enroll in their home district. However, the Department of Public Enrollment transfers a set amount of money from the home district to the district in which the student enrolls. The amount of money transferred per student "is equal to the prior year state average per student cost for regular (non-special education) instruction, co-curricular

activities, pupil services and instructional support services” (Department of Public Instruction). This money is not counted as a reduction in state aid, and districts may not increase property taxes in order to recoup the funds that accompany open enrollment students to other districts, which means that open enrollment costs appear in school district budgets in much the same way that other expenses do. In many cases, a district’s leaving and entering open enrollment numbers essentially balance out; in other cases, a district may receive or lose enough students to make a significant difference in the amount of money they have available to educate the students that remain.

Dissolving a School District

If a district’s School Board, for whatever reason, no longer feels that a district is able to continue to educate students, its members can vote to issue a dissolution order. As described in Chapter 1, the school district dissolution process is laid out in state law. To refresh, once a School Board votes to issue a dissolution order, the School District Boundary Appeal Board convenes a Dissolution Board made up of seven members. The Dissolution Board may accept or deny the dissolution order based on specific criteria. Those criteria are:

1. Geographical and topographical characteristics of affected school districts, including estimated travel time to and from school and other factors.
2. The educational needs of all potentially affected students, as well as the programs offered by each district and the ability and commitment of each district to meet those needs and continue that programming.
3. The programming impact of any potential transfer of territory between districts.
4. The testimony and written statements of residents of affected school districts.
5. The estimated fiscal impact on affected school districts, including both assets and liabilities.

6. If a reorganization would make any part of a school district's territory noncontiguous.
7. The socioeconomic level and racial composition of pupils who reside or will reside in affected districts and "the effect that the pupils . . . will have on the present and future socioeconomic level and racial composition of the affected school districts and on the proportion of the affected school districts' enrollments that will be children at risk."
8. The results of any advisory referendum.
9. Other appropriate factors, at the Board's discretion.

Historically, Wisconsin has consolidated many school districts. However, under the current dissolution procedures, no school districts to date have been dissolved.

The Policy Trap: How Policy Worked to Create and Shape the MCASD Dissolution Crisis

Local history, geography, politics, and other factors heavily influenced the dissolution crisis in MCASD. That is clear. However, what is also clear is that policy, especially state education and conservation policy and county land use policy also heavily shaped the crisis. Having surveyed education policy in Wisconsin more generally, I will now turn to the ways in which those policies worked in MCASD. Christine Laughlin, a Chester resident and former MCASD teacher, gave me this overview of how policies mattered in this case:

Besides the state land not paying taxes, we have the two communities that are kind of at each other's throats. And then open enrollment I think has been going on for nineteen years, and I think that really, really killed us because we're small. We don't have the facilities, we don't have a swimming pool, we don't have a lot of the stuff that bigger, even nearby bigger districts offer. So we lost something like 40% of our students over the years. It's pretty hard to keep going with that small enrollment. So open enrollment I think was a real killer.

[Then there's] the revenue caps that [Governor] Tommy Thompson placed on us in 1993 that were supposed to be temporary that have been ongoing. Frankly, the legislature that took \$1.2 billion out of K-12 education in the last 10 years. The chickens are coming home to roost, you know, how can they not? And we're so small that all those problems compound to make it what it is. I think public education has been taking a big, big hit financially everywhere. And when you're a small district it's going to get harder. I guess I could see it coming, but we were always plugging away for another year, another year, another year, and then this came up.

I argue that, in MCASD, education policies enacted at the state level not only shaped the dissolution crisis, but also in some ways led to it. By enacting an inter-district, marketizing school choice program that imposed costs on local districts, without sufficient attention to the potential place- and size-based impacts on different districts, the state put MCASD in an untenable situation, which the local School Board felt could not be resolved in any way other than to dissolve.

School Choice in MCASD

There were many ways in which Marion and Chester residents took advantage of the educational options available to them. Loretta Peters gave me this overview:

We have a lot of people in the village who homeschool. We also have the Chester factor, where there are a lot of families in Chester who would wish to go to Karhu's school system instead of ours. So that's a big factor . . . A lot of people are opting for private schools that they can send their kids to and they get money for it, too, we have to subsidize them.

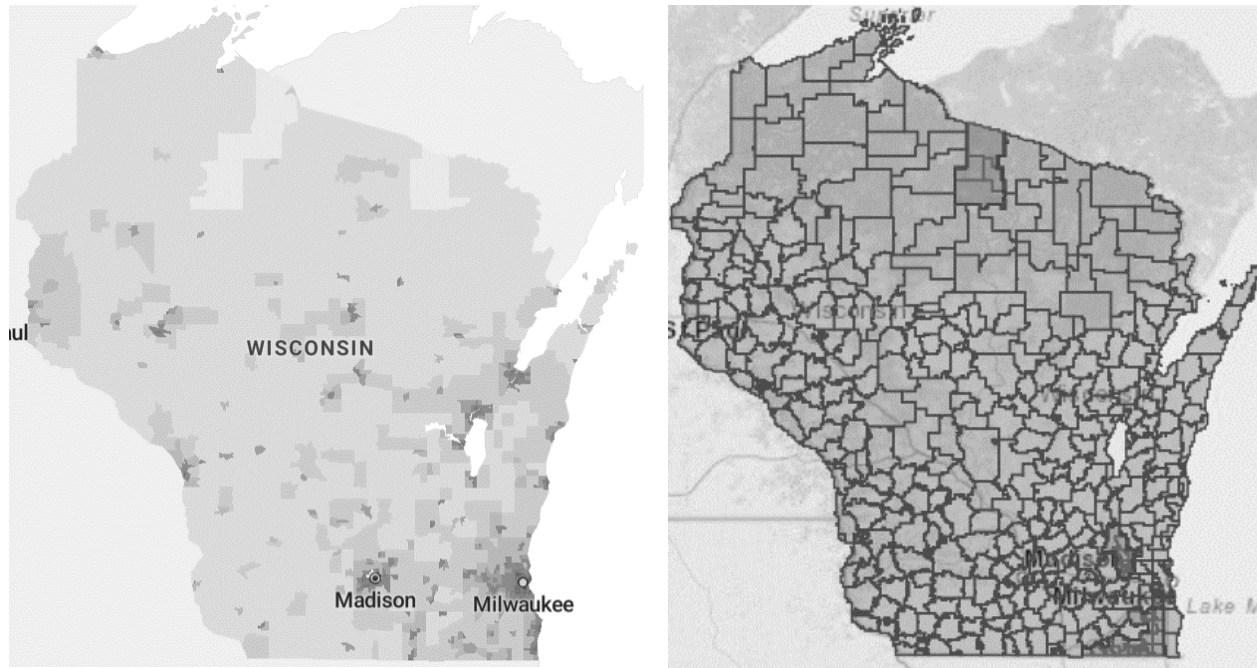
However, of most concern to the school district was open enrollment. A large proportion of students who would ordinarily be enrolled in MCASD schools instead enrolled in other districts, especially Karhu.

The open enrollment situation in MCASD was extraordinary in the state. In the 2019-20 school year, 421 MCASD students open enrolled to other districts, while only 43 students from other districts enrolled into MCASD. This meant a net loss of 378 students, the 9th largest loss in absolute numbers in the state; all the districts who lost more students were significantly larger to begin with than MCASD. Those students, when compared to the 647 that enrolled in the district, represented a loss of 37% of the potential total enrollment. They also represented a \$2,851,467 expense for the district.

Parents' motivations for open enrolling their children to other districts are discussed in more detail in other chapters. One complication that was unique to MCASD, beyond the desires of individual parents, families, or students, was its geographical location. Unlike most rural districts, which tend to be bordered by other rural districts (see Figure 4-1), MCASD is surrounded by more populous districts. MCASD is classified by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) as being in Locale Category 42: Rural—Distant. Seven districts border MCASD, and none of them are classified as rural (see Figure 4-2 and Table 4-1). Several of the community members I spoke to described this geographical quirk as being a major contributor to the open enrollment imbalance faced by MCASD.

Figure 4-1

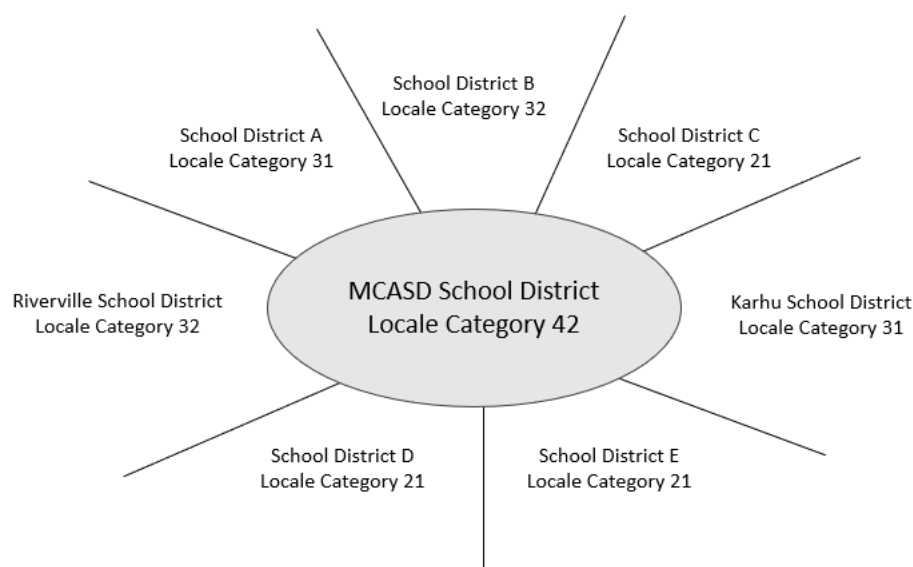
Comparing Population Density and School District Boundaries



Left: Population Density in Wisconsin (U.S. Census via Social Explorer); Right: School district boundaries (WI DPI). Remembering that approximately half of Wisconsin's districts are categorized as rural (NCES), note how there tend to be multiple districts in between areas of more population density

Figure 4-2

Districts Bordering MCASD and their NCEC Locale Categories

**Table 4-1**

NCEC Locale Category Descriptions

Category	Title	Description
21	Suburban—Large	Territory outside a Principal City and inside an Urbanized Area with a population of 250,000 or more
31	Town—Fringe	Territory inside an Urban Cluster that is less than or equal to 10 miles from an Urbanized Area
32	Town—Distant	Territory inside an Urban Cluster that is more than 10 miles and less than or equal to 35 miles from an Urbanized Area
42	Rural—Distant	Census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an Urbanized Area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an Urban Center.

The character of MCASD's neighboring districts mattered to those people who pointed to them as a reason for the dissolution crisis because it was commonly perceived that larger, more populous districts could offer resources and opportunities that small, rural MCASD could not. Mary Nelson described the problem to me:

You know, small rural districts, they can't compete with the larger schools. Open enrollment's a huge problem. We have a lot of kids that open enroll out mainly because of the geography, we can't compete with—I mean, you drive past Karhu, and they have this beautiful, big school. They have all kinds of stuff there. Marion has a beautiful building, but we don't have a huge auditorium. We don't have everything that [other districts] have and we can never have it because, you know, we just can't afford it.

School board member Tim Irving described the problem of geography to me this way:

So as you drove down [to the MCASD area], you drove through the corridor of [three rural communities], those are all communities that look just like Marion. The difference is, they're surrounded by communities that look just like them. So there isn't that draw to go somewhere else. There isn't the Land of Oz on the yellow brick road four miles down the road. There's another school that looks just like yours, eight miles down the road. So they embrace themselves and they support themselves, and they don't open enroll, or if they do open enroll then back and forth, it nets out to a negligible number. We lose 40% of our kids to other districts, and that's before dissolution.

From this perspective, because of who it neighbored, MCASD was competing in an inherently imbalanced market. The school districts around it weren't operating under the same kinds of conditions as a small, rural district. Moreover, the districts that neighbored MCASD weren't just

larger, they also had excellent reputations for providing high-quality education. Evan Miller pointed that out to me in our phone interview:

Around Marion we probably have three of the better school districts in the state—three of the top 50, I’m just guessing. So that’s probably part of Marion’s problem as well. Parents want their kids to go to [one of those districts]—I mean, you’re sure to hear it two or three times if you talk to them, ‘My kid goes to such-and-such district.’ It’s like a status symbol.

Thus, in the area that surrounds them, MCASD stands out as a district that is smaller, less well-resourced, and of lower status than those that surround it, making open enrollment a particularly attractive option for many parents. Or as Tim put it, “Down here in this area, we’re not looked at as a unicorn, we’re looked at as an albatross. We’re looked at as that leftover place.”

Funding MCASD

In addition to the challenges of being a small, rural district surrounded by larger, more populous districts, MCASD also faced serious funding issues, as seen in the multiple failed referendums the district proposed and the funding challenges that arose from inter-district open enrollment.

Failed referendums, community complacency, and business metaphors

The MCASD School Board did not issue the dissolution order lightly. It followed a series of failed referendums in which the district had sought additional funding from the community and been rebuffed. Since 1990, MCASD had proposed 17 funding referendums, all but two of which failed. (The two that passed, in 2001 and 2003, were for repairs and additions to school buildings.) As described above, this is unique in Wisconsin, where communities tend to pass referendums. Thus, when the 2019 operating referendum failed and the School Board decided to consider

dissolution, they were making their decision against the backdrop of a long history of failure to receive community support.

After each failed referendum, and with open enrollment costs rising, the district adapted by cutting costs elsewhere. The School Board took an approach of trying to cut costs with as little shock to the school as possible, taking advantage of things like resignations and retirements. School Board member Tim Irving described their approach this way:

We always tried to mitigate. We looked at what happened in the school, and we tried to mitigate the pain and limit it. So, for instance, we had a kindergarten teacher resign because she had a baby and she never came back. So we melded that [into our decisions], we called somebody internally to take that position. So we didn't have to rehire, so there was one way of saving 35, 40 thousand dollars, and really nobody knew [we had done it].

We did it on our own. So we looked at things that happened and tried to take advantage of those first. Last year when the assistant principal left at the middle school, we didn't replace him, so there was \$80,000 of savings. When different people would leave or would resign, they left making more money than the new person coming in.

Even after referendums failed, the district was sometimes able to find ways to make the changes they had initially wanted the referendum money for: for example, after one failed referendum that would have funded school renovations, the district was able to complete the work using a different mechanism. However, because the district was able to keep functioning after multiple failed referendums, and because the cuts made in response were made in as quiet a way as possible, many community members came to believe that additional funding wasn't needed, and that the school could keep going regardless of what happened at the ballot box. Winona Moore described that view

this way: “So many people were just like, ‘You know what, referendums never pass here. Life goes on. School goes on. They deal with it. So I’m just not going to pay any more in taxes and those of you who think we should are crazy.’” Christine Laughlin also observed a kind of complacency and reluctance to grant funding to the schools, telling me:

I know people that routinely vote ‘no’ [on referendums]. Whatever the school wants? ‘No.’ They need money for this? ‘No.’ They need a new roof? ‘No.’ They need money for that? ‘No.’ And I think the sentiment is, ‘they’ll [the schools] just keep plugging along, just fine, they always have.’

One reason people didn’t agree with providing the school with additional funds was that they believed the school should operate within the budget provided by the state, which they assumed should be adequate for the school’s needs; following this logic, comparisons were often made between school funding and a household budget. Under this model, many members of the community assumed that if the school lacked funds for necessary things, it was because they were spending money frivolously, like Wendy Tanner who told me “I mean, when you’re running your family household budget, if you don’t have money for shoes then why are you going to get your nails done?”

In a similar vein, community members often compared the school district to a business, indicating that if they could not attract enough “customers”—that is, students—and their attendant funding, then the school deserved to go “out of business.” Village of Chester government member Nick Smith put it this way:

Caitlin So I know one point of discussion has been the school choice program in Wisconsin. What do you think about it?

Nick I think it's great.

Caitlin Yeah?

Nick Yeah, because what it's done is it forces everyone, just like a business, if you have a product that you are proud of, and you can sell, you'll sell it. If you don't have a good product, you're gonna fail. You not going to survive if you don't have a decent product.

And I think that's what's happening. I mean, why are people abandoning the school district? They're not doing it just for the fun of it. They're doing it because they don't see the value here that they see elsewhere. School choice brings that out, it says, you know, you're going to have to shape up or ship out, one way or another. Just like any business does.

From Nick's perspective, and the perspective of many others in the community, it was inappropriate to grant the district's request for additional funding because their financial struggles were evidence that they weren't doing a good job at providing what the educational "customer" wanted, a perception of public schooling and citizenship that echoes Apple's (2006) critique of the neoliberal view that "education is seen as simply one more product like bread, cars, and television" (p. 32).

However, even beyond the question of if education can be thought of as a "product," as Tim Irving pointed out to me running a school district is not the same as running a business or a household budget. He explained it to me this way:

Tim The difference is, at a store if you lose customers, you can raise the price of a gallon of milk by ten cents. At a school, you can't change the revenues.

And if you heard [one of the Dissolution Board members], he asked me the question, 'Well if we just divide it down, you're at \$15,000 per kid and other schools are less than that. How come you can't just make that work?' And one of the things that happens is, when you're a small school, you lose economies of scale. We have a superintendent and I think I certainly can justify the work he does. So we have one superintendent for 600 kids in the school district. Karhu has one superintendent for 5,000 kids, so divided up, it's pennies to dollars.

Caitlin The scale changes, but the kind of work doesn't change.

Tim The kind of work doesn't change, no. Say we're only going to have a half time superintendent. Okay, so take his salary and cut it in half. So you've effectively divided by 1,200 kids instead of by 600. Karhu's still dividing it by 5,000.

In addition to the inability to change revenues through "price" adjustment (in the case of a school, the funding granted per student) and the problem small districts face in terms of the economies of scale, Tim also pointed to challenges like teacher contracts and the need to provide certain educational essentials as fiscal differences between schools and businesses. He was familiar with business finance from his job, and one reason that he ran for the School Board was to bring that knowledge to bear. He told the story this way:

So five years ago, as we were bleeding kids and I didn't think leadership was doing what it should be doing, I threw my hat in [to the School Board electoral race]. A person had resigned, I threw my hat in, and I was appointed to the Board. The first thing I learned is, I was happy that I wasn't arrogant and didn't run my mouth at the time because I learned a lot of things about school districts and finance and things like that, that people just don't generally know.

He told me that now, whenever he sees editorials in the paper or comments on social media that so-and-so should be involved in educational governance because of their "business sense," he laughs and shakes his head, because it just isn't the same.

The funding component of the state's open enrollment policy further complicated people's understanding of the district's budget. As described above, the state Department of Public Instruction transfers a set amount of money to the receiving district for every student who open enrolls. However, because that money is considered part of the district's overall budget—even though it ultimately goes to other districts—some members of the community interpreted that as MCASD "counting on money they didn't have." Therefore, when the School Board president presented a slide with the open enrollment costs represented as an expense the district faced, some members of the public viewed it as evidence of fiscal mismanagement, further demonstrating the district's unsuitability to receive additional local funding.

Thus, in MCASD, the community declined to provide additional funding for the school district for several reasons. As described in other chapters, some members of the community simply did not like or value the district, seeing it as a drain on the community. Some members of the community saw open enrollment costs listed as a district expense, and thought the district was

counting on money they knew they would never get. Commonly, critics of the district turned to metaphors of a household or business budget to explain why the district shouldn't expect to get extra money, and should instead live within their means. And finally, some people assumed that—especially given the district's long history of failing referendums—the schools would just do as they always did, tighten their belts and move on. One rationale behind the state's reliance on referendums as a funding mechanism for public schools is that it allows communities to determine the amount of money they want to spend on education. In the case of MCASD, it was not enough for the School Board to believe the district could continue.

School choice and funding decisions

One part of the logic of school choice is that, if students leave a school, the school will adjust by trimming excess costs, adjusting their curricular or extracurricular offerings, or otherwise making themselves more attractive to students in order to retain those they have or attract more. MCASD, however, challenges that assumption. They didn't have the funding to offer the same resources that larger districts did even before the expansion of open enrollment, and after losing a significant number of students to school choice, they were afraid to make money-saving cuts because of the potential those cuts had to drive more students away, leaving them in a double bind from which they struggled to extricate themselves.

When I spoke to members of the community, many of them had ideas about what decisions the district should have made to avoid getting into the dire straits in which they found themselves. One common argument that I heard was that MCASD should have tried to differentiate itself from its academic- and college-minded neighbors by emphasizing the trades. I brought this suggestion to

Tim Irving, who dismissed it, pointing out the negative effect it likely would have had on open enrollment and illustrating some of the challenges faced by the district:

Caitlin One thing I've heard in different conversations I've had is that Marion should have decided to focus on trades more, to keep that aspect strong instead of trying to compete with Karhu and other districts academically. What do you think of that?

Tim I think it's not true.

Caitlin Yeah?

Tim Because when you speak of the trades at our school, we have a shop program, we have a welding program. So we do have trades, but when you only have a school of 200 high schoolers you can only offer one section per hour. It doesn't pay to have two because you're only going to have three kids in that class. The other part is . . . trades are expensive programs to run.

. . .

If the high school was dedicated around the trades and you have a school next door, like Karhu that offers everything, or [neighboring district 1] that offers everything, or [neighboring district 2] that offers a lot—if you don't think your son or daughter's going to need the trades or want to be a part of them, what are you going to do? You're going to leave.

Could it have been done? Yes. Here's the reason why we didn't: because we felt it was going to cost us more kids in the long run.

Figure 4-3

Slide from School Board presentation to Dissolution Board

MCASD

Expenses - Board Controlled

- Potential Cuts versus increased open enrollment
 - Every cut comes with a cost
 - Closing a building
 - Gross savings of \$650,000
 - Extra Bussing of ~ \$50,000 per route
 - Open Enrollment of ~\$7,500 per student
 - Eliminating Co- or Extra-Curricular
 - Gross savings of \$250,000
 - Open Enrollment of ~\$7,500 per student
 - Split classes/ combined grade levels
 - Reduces one staff member @ \$37,492 base salary
 - Open Enrollment of ~\$7,500 per student

29

There were other suggestions made by the community to cut costs. Common proposals included closing one of two elementary school buildings, eliminating extracurriculars, or moving to a multi-grade classroom model. However, as the School Board president argued in his presentation to the Dissolution Board, each of those changes carried with it the potential for even further increases in open enrollment costs (See Figure 4-3). From the perspective of the School Board, the potential savings were not enough to justify the potential extra costs, and so they did not make them.

Thus, MCASD demonstrates a paradox that school choice policies can impose on districts, especially small ones: they lose students because they can't provide the same things larger districts can, but they can't cut costs in response to those losses out of fear of losing more students. They face the terrifying prospect of being caught in a downward spiral, where students leave, they cut

classes or extracurriculars, so more students leave, necessitating more costs, on and on until they have no students left. MCASD's School Board decided to cut the spiral off by voting to dissolve before students could suffer.

Passing the buck on education policy

Several of those involved in the dissolution controversy in MCASD who were the most engaged with education policy debates in general argued that the dissolution was, at least in part, a result of governmental actors wanting to avoid unpopular decisions and passing the responsibility for dealing with them onto local districts. Tim Irving, for example, saw the dissolution crisis in MCASD at least partially as the result of policies enacted by legislature to reduce the number of school districts without having to actively consolidate them. I include here an extended section of the transcript with my interview with Tim, where he lays out how he sees the relationship between policy decisions and the dissolution:

Tim I think that half the legislature or more wants fewer school districts. I think these have been less than veiled, the policies in place have been less than veiled opportunities to eventually run places out of business. 440 school districts is too many . . . You can't operate efficiently when you're a small school district without the support of your local community, without them saying 'we're willing to pay more to have this.'

The idea behind the operational referendums and changing—I mean, mill rates here used to be \$23, now they're \$10 because they changed the funding mechanism. So instead of collecting it all and then spreading it, people in

[Northern towns] were mad about having to give Milwaukee money. So that's why they went to this model where everybody gets a little, and then the locals have to kick in for the rest. But eventually, as we see, locals may not agree.

Think about this one, we talked about it during our presentation. [The referendum] we asked for, in the first year, it was going to affect your mill rate \$1.25. So if you have a hundred thousand dollar house, your taxes were going to go up \$125. And we were asking for \$1.75 million. [Neighboring district] was asking for \$6 million. Their hundred thousand dollar increase was going to be \$16. When you take the operational referendums onto a local level, it's directly impacted by what the local looks like. When there's nothing to divide it [the cost] by, how do you make it better? How do you fix it?

Caitlin It sounds like the state has put you in a situation where instead of them being the bad guys up front and merging schools—

Tim Right. Correct. They let us do it by attrition.

Caitlin They've just created a situation where they forced it onto you.

Tim Correct.

Caitlin So it looks like a very local issue, when in fact it's a state issue.

Tim Right, correct. I agree with that 100%. And again, my nature isn't to be political or yell at legislators, I'm more willing to sit and have a conversation and say, here are the rules that we followed. Here's how it turned out. I'm not going to be bombastic about it. But these are the rules that we lived by, and that we

followed, and this is what happens when we follow the rules. When a community doesn't come to the rescue, you're toast.

From Tim's perspective as a member of the School Board, they had followed all the rules that were laid out for them by the legislature, and it ended with their district facing dissolution, an outcome that he didn't see as coincidental. Rather, he saw the dissolution crisis in MCASD as being profoundly shaped by policies intended to promote district consolidation and to shift the school funding burden from the state to the local community.

Tim's account also brings into consideration a political dynamic which Cramer (2016) has called *rural resentment*. He notes that in previous years, the state had collected more in property taxes and distributed it back to districts, but because Northern (and majority rural) communities did not want to provide funding to Milwaukee and other urban areas, tax rates were lowered and the burden was shifted to localities. This aligns with the dynamic noted by Cramer, in which rural communities felt that they were not receiving the resources due to them, and that they were instead being spent on urban areas. In addition to a place-based rationale, racial dynamics likely also factor into the changing education policy in Wisconsin. In the highly segregated state (Lorey, 2019), Milwaukee is understood to be "diverse"—that is to say, home to people of color. Scholars have demonstrated that white racism can and has limited support for social programs to the point where many people can be said to be "dying of whiteness" (Metzl, 2020), suggesting that revisions to Wisconsin's school funding formula have been similarly racially tinged.

Local reporter Dave Thompson also saw decisions by state-level legislators as key to understanding the dissolution crisis in MCASD. Dave has been reporting on education policy issues

throughout his career. His perception of the situation was that ultimately, no elected officials in Wisconsin want to be responsible for raising taxes, so they pass the responsibility for that unpleasant decision onto local actors like school boards. Again, I include a fairly substantial portion of my interview with Dave so as to capture his argument in full:

Dave The government doesn't want to spend money, they don't want to get involved, basically, in anything. And these referendums have helped save schools over the last twenty-some years, but they really need to come up with a different way to finance our school systems here . . . I think there's a thing in government where [they say], 'Hey, if neighborhood schools close, who cares, we didn't need that many. We need to consolidate and save money and blah, blah, blah.' I don't think they're really doing anything . . . I think they all know the problem.

I don't think anybody is rushing to address anything yet until they see a bigger problem, like having a lot of schools close, a lot of people angry. I think then maybe people would step up and do something, but I think you're a ways away from that now.

Caitlin So right now it's a problem of not wanting to touch a difficult subject, and band-aid solutions like these referendums working well enough?

Dave Yeah, I believe that's what it is. I mean, the referendums, especially in the last 20 years—I've been working on newspapers, and that's always a big thing in every election. Like, 'I guess so-and-so ran for office, but what's the referendum?' . . . The politicians look good [by not raising taxes], but they're

really just turning around and saying, ‘Hey, do you want to keep your school open? Then go ahead and finance it yourself.’ And people are doing that. People are passing referendums everywhere . . .

I don’t think any politician is doing it for the right reasons. I think they’re just trying to keep themselves in good, it’s a good picture to say, ‘We’re tightening the screws, we’re not spending all this money on schools. We’re keeping taxes lower.’ I mean they could raise taxes tomorrow and fix these problems if they really wanted to. They’d be out of office probably, so they’re not going to do that.

Just as Tim Irving saw the crisis in MCASD as at least partially the result of politicians wanting to avoid directly consolidating school districts, Dave saw the crisis as the result of state-level politicians wanting to avoid being the ones to impose higher taxes. In making these points, both men indicate the role of the state in creating the conditions for school district dissolution, with the additional interpretation that the creation of such conditions was a deliberate choice by policymakers.

Decoupling School and Community

One effect that marketizing education policies in Wisconsin have had, which is vividly illustrated in MCASD, is to decouple school and community. A common concern with open enrollment or other school choice policies is that they divorce school and community, and expect students to leave their communities in search of the quality education that should be afforded them by right. In Marion, retired teacher Loretta Peters illustrated this view in her description of the history of choice policies in Wisconsin:

I think originally the school choice [policy] occurred so that inner city kids could have an advantage to go elsewhere and get a better education. I was always against it because I always wanted the better education to come into the inner city rather than the kids having to go out for it. I still maintain that. I worked in the inner city in Milwaukee with the Hispanic community and, you know, they want to maintain their neighborhoods just like we do. So I don't know if school choice was ever a good program. I think it was well-meaning, but I don't think it ever—I don't know. I still think it's a good idea for kids to be educated, especially K through 12, in your own system rather than being bused elsewhere. But that means that there has to be a good educational system within your community.

Comparing her experience with what she described as the Hispanic community of the “inner city in Milwaukee” with the local, majority-white community in rural Marion, Loretta observed that both communities want to “maintain their neighborhoods,” and opined that rather than students leaving their communities to obtain a better education, there should be quality education within communities.

In MCASD, inter-district open enrollment allowed many residents, especially in Chester, to choose their school without reference to the district in which they lived. This represented a decoupling of school and community which was interpreted through the lens of “choice.” Dissolvers tended to emphasize the ways in which members of the community were already taking advantage of Wisconsin’s open enrollment policies to choose other districts, thereby rejecting MCASD and indicating its poor quality. Maintainers, however, used that concept differently than supporters of dissolution. Opponents of dissolution often critiqued the state’s inter-district open enrollment policy, proclaiming that they had already made their choice by living within the

boundaries of the MCASD. For many of those who made that point, their choice was driven by the chance to send their children to a small, rural school.

One speaker at a public hearing, a Chester-based Maintainer, gave a good demonstration of the choice-through-housing logic expressed by many Maintainers. She said:

When our family bought a home in Chester, it was with the understanding that we were part of the Marion-Chester district, and we are very happy with our choice. If the district is dissolved, that takes away the choice of people who moved here on purpose. If people don't like the schools, they have the choice to enroll elsewhere, and that is their choice, and they have the right to make that choice. If you want your tax dollars to go to a certain district, then move to that district. Don't move next door where you can get a cheaper house and try to destroy the schools there.

Maintainers who embraced a choice-by-housing perspective often explicitly linked housing, schooling, and community, and critiqued those who took advantage of the open enrollment policy as abandoning or otherwise dismissing their local community. For example, Liz Unger told me:

I know there's families that want to open enroll out and just want the bigger school districts to swallow us up. But those aren't my people, so I can't really speak for them and why they feel that way. I think, from what I hear is a lot of them hold grudges against the school, they tried sending their kid there maybe ten, fifteen years ago and they had a bad experience, and then they just open their mouths to everybody they know, 'Oh, don't go there! Karhu is so much better, look at their test scores. They're so great.' And then it just almost created this mentality with these new families that are moving here or building in that subdivision that, well, it's cheaper to live in Chester, but we want the convenience of the school district that

we want. So they buy here, and then they send their kids to a whole ‘nother school district which, I think that defeats that sense of community that’s important for me.

For Liz, people who didn’t support MCASD “weren’t her people,” and she saw open enrollment as “defeat[ing] that sense of community.” Ed and Emma Douglass felt similarly. Having described themselves earlier in their interview as conservative, my conversation with them moved on to discussing school choice:

Ed I know as most Republicans want school choice and all that crap. Me personally, I don’t believe in that and never have . . . Just because [someone says] ‘I don’t like that school,’ well, I shouldn’t, we shouldn’t have to pay for that choice.

You know, if you decided to live here and this property is part of this district, then you work to make this district what you’d really like to see or you pay to go somewhere else, like a private school. Because you already have the free education provided to you here. You don’t get to take that with you everywhere else, and the rest of us paid for it . . .

Emma The schools here belong to the public here.

Ed Correct.

Emma And if you don’t want to be a part of the public here, that’s your choice. But don’t hurt us because you’ve chosen to go.

For Ed and Emma, the schools “belong to the public here,” which meant they were place-based and paid for by the people living in the local area.

Emma's last point, where she told an imagined person not to "hurt us because you've chosen to go" to a different school district, speaks to a critique of the relationship between open enrollment and community that was brought up repeatedly in the course of the dissolution debate. For some Maintainers, to dissolve the district was to take away *their* choice that they had made. At the first public hearing, a short, white woman with straight brown hair and a wavery voice told the audience:

Just because you want to go elsewhere, it's not your right to take away my choice, and my children's choice. You can open enroll and take your money away, but you don't have the right to take that choice away. They're taking their choice, but they're leaving me with no choice.

At another hearing, a woman argued that people who open enrolled their children to other districts were also depriving people outside of the community to move in and take advantage of the local schools, saying that "people who live in the district but open enroll their children out are holding that home hostage to people who would choose to send their kids to the local schools." Thus, by taking advantage of the educational choices granted to them by state policy, MCASD residents who enrolled their students in other districts were seen as removing the choice of both current and potential future residents to live in the community and send their children to local schools.

Beyond Educational Policy: Land Use and Public Schools

As discussed in Chapter 4, while Marion and Chester were both described as rural by many residents, they were seen as different *kinds* of rural, with Chester's rurality more contested than Marion's. Underlying many of the differences between the towns were the land use policies governing their respective counties. This was particularly noticeable for Marion, in Harrison County.

Harrison County prioritized maintaining a rural atmosphere, which resulted in limited development and population growth that in turn limited the potential funds available for MCASD on the Harrison County side. In addition to county-level policies, state-level policies protecting a large tract of forest land in the MCASD area also limited the potential for development and growth in the county. Thus, these policies that were not on their face educational nonetheless had an important impact on the school district and its potential dissolution.

Many people in the community pointed to land use policy as at least a partial explanation for the funding difficulties faced by MCASD. A typical example of such an explanation was given by Emma Douglass:

Partly we have a geographical issue [in the district] because it's two separate towns in two separate counties, so you're already dealing with a lot of separation, government-wise, and you can't do anything about that. The counties tax differently. They have different boards, they make different rules. So now you're dealing with a disparity on the size of the properties and what they can be. The Chester area is very much residential, [while] Harrison County has a mandate that a property can only be divided once ever. And so you're dealing with completely different viewpoints as far as land use, so then you start running into the funding issue. You've got fancy big homes over in Chester, and you have lots of agricultural land that gets taxed at pennies on the dollar over here.

Emma was not the only one who identified land use policies as shaping education funding and, therefore, the dissolution in MCASD. For example, this letter writer described the issue as not having enough housing in Marion:

We don't have enough housing in Marion. We are land locked because we are in Harrison County and they value their farm land. If someone desires to build a house in the country, and it is on Class A farm land, they have to buy at least 40 acres of land to build their house. Many can't afford that. I also have neighbors that have put their land in a Permanent Preservation Program. While we love this because it keeps our community rural, it also presents a problem with housing in our Community [sic].

Local education activist Winona Moore also indicated the importance of land use policies to understanding the problems and tensions in MCASD. She framed the challenge, however, not as Marion not having *enough* development, but as Marion and Harrison County focusing on a different *kind* of development than Chester and Springs County:

I think Marion has some challenges when it comes to growth for a couple of reasons. One is being in Harrison County. Harrison County has always had a real strong focus on agriculture and maintaining that agriculture. If you drive around, you will see a lot of permanently protected farmland. So that's farmland that the land owners have committed to forever be farmland, so that can never be subdivided, it can never be built on. So you're never going to see Kwik Trips or Walmarts on it.

So those of us that love and value that think that's a great thing. But it does give you growth limitations there. So you have those that think, 'oh, the dumb farmers should sell their land and let businesses or housing in there to make it grow.' Well, if we get rid of our farmland what are all of us going to be eating? So much of our farmland gives back to the community and food pantries and things like that. And the farmers in turn provide local jobs. Some of

the local farms provide internship opportunities for the kids to get experience, and they have the support of the FFA [Future Farmers of America] programs.

So there's a different type of growth in the area where Marion likes to focus more on the agricultural aspect of it while you have citizens of Chester that want to cram in a bunch of expensive housing and subdivisions and call that growth.

Community members were correct to identify Harrison County as prioritizing maintaining and developing agricultural land over other types of development. In its long-range planning report, the county includes a vision statement that reads in part:

Harrison County values its farming and small-town roots as it plans for the challenges and opportunities of the future. The diverse character of our communities includes urban development, farms, and open space and natural resources within towns, villages and cities that make up a mutually beneficial, diverse and vibrant ecosystem.

The value Harrison County places on its "farming and small-town roots" are further reflected in the land use goals described in its planning documents, the first three of which speak to the desire to maintain and enhance the agricultural and natural resources of the county:

1. Preserve and enhance the county's rural character, including community character, farmland, and natural resources, while supporting growth in areas that promote housing and economic development goals of this plan.
2. Guide and manage development patterns which preserve the county's natural resources and prime farmland to provide benefits to the regional economy, and best utilize the county's existing transportation and utility structure.

3. Ensure that new development aligns with the existing development and preserves and enhances the natural environment of the county.

In Springs County's planning documents, on the other hand, agriculture and farming are far less visible.

This emphasis on agricultural land use over industrial, residential, or other kinds of use matters for schools in two primary ways. First, by its nature farmland results in a much lower population density than other kinds of land use, which means there are fewer students that might attend a school district. With fewer students, the district receives fewer funds, and runs in to problems like the lack of economies of scale described by Tim Irving, above. Second, farmland in Wisconsin is taxed differently than other kinds of land. According to Wisconsin law, "Agricultural land shall be assessed according to the income that could be generated from its rental for agricultural use." In practice, the use value of agricultural land is often much lower than the value that could be derived from selling it, especially in areas where residential or business development could be profitable. Depending on their enrollment in different programs like the Farmland Protection Program, farmland can also be granted various benefits that lower their tax burden. Therefore, the funds generated from property taxes on agricultural land are lower than they would otherwise be; while there are certainly societal and individual benefits that follow preserving rural lands, in a system that relies on property taxes to fund schools, this puts rural school districts at a financial disadvantage.

The case of MCASD illustrates the ways in which non-educational policies can nonetheless have educational implications. The state of Wisconsin and Harrison County have chosen to prioritize maintaining farmland, a reasonable and understandable goal in a state that has historically

been known for its agriculture. However, pursuing that goal places limits on schools in ways that were likely not intended by policymakers, accidentally adding a layer to the policy trap in which MCASD found itself.

No District is an Island: Dissolution and the Surrounding Districts

John Donne wrote that “No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.” Just as no man is an island, so is no school district independent of others, a reality that the dissolution process in MCASD emphasized. The impact that MCASD’s dissolution would have on the seven districts that surround it, as well as the potential impact on districts throughout the state, became central issues to the controversy. The ways that school district representatives and community members talked about the impact illustrated the connections between districts, especially the potential for the fall of one district to drag others down with it and the electoral implications of asking residents of one district to assume responsibility for debts accrued by another.

If MCASD were to dissolve, the impact on surrounding districts would not be negligible. Not only would districts need to absorb the extra students who had previously attended MCASD, they would also need to divide up the assets and—most troublingly—the debts held by MCASD. The debt, in particular, was of major concern. As reporter Dave Thompson observed, “Other districts do not want these kids coming there because the debt comes with them.”

Importantly, the districts surrounding MCASD were operating under many of the same constraints and challenges. For example, in its letter to the Dissolution Board, one district noted that

[Our district] has operated under an operational referendum to exceed the revenue limits since 2006. We will again be seeking an operational referendum at the April, 2020 election as

our current operational referendum expires on June 30, 2020. Should this referendum not succeed, the Board of Education [of our district] will need to consider next steps, which could possibly include budget reductions in the millions of dollars.

This district, much like MCASD, hovered on the edge of crisis. For fifteen years, their community had agreed to support them with additional funds, unlike the community MCASD served; however, one adverse election would leave the neighboring district scrambling. They argued in the same letter that it would be detrimental to their district to absorb any of the territory served by MCASD, because the attendant costs might not be outweighed by the additional funds brought by growing enrollment.

That district was not the only one facing potential crisis. Another district wrote to the Dissolution Board:

[Our district] is in a precarious financial position . . . Last year, the District asked voters to support an operational referendum to avoid making further budgetary cuts. That referendum would have had an impact on property taxes of \$16 per \$100,000 of assessed value. The referendum failed. The District then had to make additional budget cuts of \$1.9 million for the 2019-20 school year.

[Our district's] financial needs are not going away and we need a long-term sustainable solution. Consequently, the Board is currently finalizing language for another operational referendum for April of 2020. Without an infusion of funding, [our district] is facing insolvency in the next three to five years.

...

Given [our district's] financial state, [our School Board] passed a resolution on November 12, 2019, affirming the fact that [our district] cannot assume a portion of the dissolved MCASD. If [our district] is assigned MCAD's students, assets, and debts, it will hasten the timetable for [our district's] insolvency and a larger student body will be displaced.

This district, like the one discussed above, was relying on an upcoming referendum to stave off financial crisis. In their letter and presentation to the Dissolution Board, they argued that to take on any of a dissolved MCASD's students, assets, and debts would be to hasten their own potential dissolution crisis. Thus, the situation in MCASD was understood to not only have implications for other districts' enrollment and expenditures, but also for their continued survival.

Not all of the districts that would be impacted by MCASD's dissolution were in the same precarious position. Karhu, for example, expressed a willingness to both take responsibility for the Springs County side of MCASD in the event of dissolution and to keep Chester Elementary open in such an event. Karhu was alone in its optimism, however. Riverville School District, which would likely take the majority of students on the Harrison County side of MCASD if it dissolved, both started and concluded its presentation to the Dissolution Board with the statement "Riverville School District does **NOT** want the Marion-Chester Area School District to dissolve" (formatting original). They elaborated in a letter:

As we testified at the [Dissolution Board hearing], the Riverville School District (RSD) does not want the MCASD to dissolve. We believe that every school district should be provided with sufficient financial resources to educate the students who live within the boundaries of the school district.

...

RSD is one of many school districts in Wisconsin dependent on passing referenda for operating funds. Adding any additional costs to a school district or making any changes that might erode community support, could bring about the nightmare scenario of a cascade of dissolutions for financial reasons.

For Riverville School District, the dissolution debate in MCASD had potentially existential stakes for them as well; yet, despite the extent to which they would be impacted by MCASD's dissolution, the only input that they had in the debate was an invited statement to the Dissolution Board.

This speaks to an issue that multiple speakers and letter writers brought to the board's attention, and which ultimately played a role in the board's decision to deny the dissolution order: the lack of representation that members of other communities had in the dissolution debate. For example, a representative for a neighboring school district wrote:

It is realized that the MCASD held an advisory referendum and 53% of the voters supported dissolvency [sic]. I am confident that given the influencing factors and concerns shared [in the letter] that if [our district] had held an advisory referendum regarding the dissolvency [sic] of the MCASD, and the reassignment of debt to the taxpayers of the [our district], the residents of [our district] would have voted to deny dissolvency [sic] of MCASD.

The residents of the [neighboring district] are paying on their own [school district] debt . . . Asking our residents to assume debt from the MCASD is unreasonable.

Emma Douglass also pointed this out in our interview, saying:

I've read a lot of them [Dissolvers] saying, 'Now the taxes are going to go up. We've got to do something with the district. We can't just [let that happen].' But what they, in my opinion,

what they failed to understand is that they may have voted that way [to dissolve the district], but those other communities had no say in this. They [Dissolvers] may be 800 people, but then they're [people in other communities] more like 5,000, and those 800 should not affect 5,000 others without that 5,000 voting.

This focus on the inability of people in other communities to have a formal say in the dissolution of MCASD echoes the logic of the voters described in Chapter 3. However, in this case the will of “the voters” is considered to be *less* legitimate because not everyone who could be affected by a potential dissolution was able to vote.

Conclusion

Other school districts in Wisconsin could perhaps look at MCASD with a feeling of, “there but for the grace of God go I.” Overwhelmingly, members of the community told me that they fear MCASD is only the first of what will be a series of districts facing potential dissolution over financial difficulties. Christine Laughlin told me, “I think we’re on the cutting edge of what’s coming.” Dave Thompson said:

I feel they [legislators] think this [dissolution] is this rare thing, and that it isn’t going to happen again for a long time. But if you look at the numbers and at other school districts, when you hear them [they say] ‘It’s going to happen again.’ It’s going to happen more and more. That’s what I believe is going to happen.

Tim Irving was worried, not only that MCASD was merely the tip of a coming wave of potential dissolutions, but that the result in MCASD would make it more difficult for other districts to pass funding referendums and avoid dissolution. I spoke to him the morning of the final public meeting

of the Dissolution Board, at which they were expected to vote to deny the dissolution order. He was disheartened by that result, telling me:

Tim So we [the School Board] spoke specifically about finances [to the Dissolution Board]. We showed them finances that were, that are in a bad spot. We showed them a failed operational referendum by a 60-40 margin, and we showed them an advisory referendum where the community said, we don't want to pay for the school. And it's gonna stay like that.

What they've [the Dissolution Board] done, what they will do with this decision, is make it harder for every school district statewide to pass a referendum.

Caitlin Because now--?

Tim Because what's it going to take to close a school district? We showed them business sense, we showed them the community's word, and we showed them what the local community School Board wanted to do. They said no.

What they've done, though, is said to taxpayers [that] they're not going to close the school. That's a bluff. To an uneducated voter, the state just stepped in and saved us, even though they're not going to give us one more dollar. To an educated voter, they're going to say, 'They're not going to close the school district. See, we told them, just make more cuts. That's what you have to do, you just have to make more cuts.' When we said from the get go, cuts are

going to create more pain. Cuts are going to create less revenue, cuts are going to create more expenses.

They [the Dissolution Board] made it harder. If they make this decision as I expect them to, they're going to make it harder for every school district to pass a referendum, because they've called the bluff.

In Tim's telling, what happened in MCASD is not just a sign of things to come, but a cause of them, because the School Board's very real order to dissolve after the repeated failure of funding referendums was revealed by the Dissolution Board to be nothing but a bluff after all.

The story of MCASD, from a policy perspective, is a story of a policy trap—set perhaps inadvertently, but real nonetheless—into which other districts may fall as well. As Tim Irving noted, “these are the rules that we lived by, and that we followed, and this is what happens when we follow the rules.” The combination of unrestricted inter-district school choice, increasing statewide reliance on referendums for essential educational funds, and a funding system that relies on local property taxes left MCASD in an untenable position. There were, of course, local and non-policy factors that shaped the crisis in MCASD, which are discussed both above and in the previous and following chapter. However, state education policy provided no way to account for any of those challenges. For example, other than a small per-pupil allotment of “sparsity aid” for small districts with dispersed residents, Wisconsin's education funding system does not have sufficient tools to account for the dynamics of place in allocating resources. As a small, rural district surrounded by larger, more populated districts MCASD faced challenges that their neighbors did not, such as increased transportation costs and a smaller student body that limited their ability to access economies of

scale, yet the state could not offer compensation or equalization for those challenges. In fact, the state actively made it more difficult to raise funds to even the playing field through the deliberately low revenue caps. State policies also contributed to the problems in MCASD by encouraging the decoupling of school and community.

The districts that surround MCASD made the case during the dissolution debate that what happened there would directly impact them, and cautioned that MCASD's dissolution could set off a domino effect of dissolving districts. Community members also recognized the ways in which MCASD could perhaps be the first of many districts to face similar challenges. MCASD played by the rules, and but for the intervention of the Dissolution Board would have permanently lost; other districts, playing the same game, are facing down the same stakes.

Chapter 5: Strategic Belonging

As discussed in Chapter 3, a key feature of the dissolution debate in the Marion-Chester Area School District (MCASD) was that it served as a space in which community definition was expressed and contested. Part of that definition was about boundaries, both spatial and metaphorical, and who was a part of which community. Recall, for example, the woman who spoke directly to Marion residents at a Dissolution Board hearing, saying “this [Marion and Chester together] hasn’t been a community in many years . . . Riverville is your community.” Through the controversy over the potential dissolution of MCASD, people in Marion and Chester alike made arguments about community: what it was, who counted in it, and what it meant.

In this chapter, I will return to the question of community, with particular attention to the ways that Chester residents’ assertions about community and belonging intersected with their self-interest, supporting their preferred policy outcome. Especially when placed in historical context within the district, Chester residents’ arguments reveal a technique that I am calling *strategic belonging*, in which members of the community asserted belonging in such a way that their own educational and economic self-interest was promoted. Historically, MCASD was formed when residents of Chester acted on their financial self-interest to separate from the Karhu School District and join with the Marion school district, therefore avoiding incurring the expense of a bond issue to build a new high school. Contemporarily, Chester residents advocated for separating from MCASD and re-joining Karhu, offering explanations for this preference that relied heavily on financial concerns, with educational concerns secondary. The assertion that Chester was more aligned with Karhu in terms of community definition therefore supported Chester residents’ self-interest, making the claim of belonging strategically valuable.

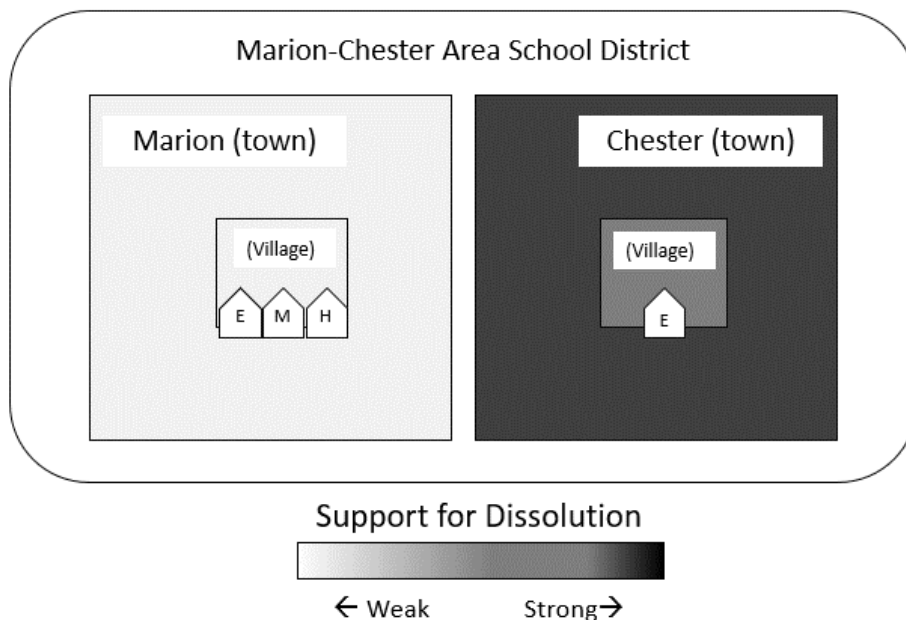
Geography and Policy Preferences

In the school dissolution literature, it is unusual to come across a district where a sizeable proportion of the community it serves actively want to not only close an individual school, but to dissolve the district entirely. This was the unique situation in which MCASD found itself: over 60% of the community had voted *not* to approve the operational referendum, and 53% of voters said “yes” to the question “Shall the Marion-Chester Area School District be dissolved?”

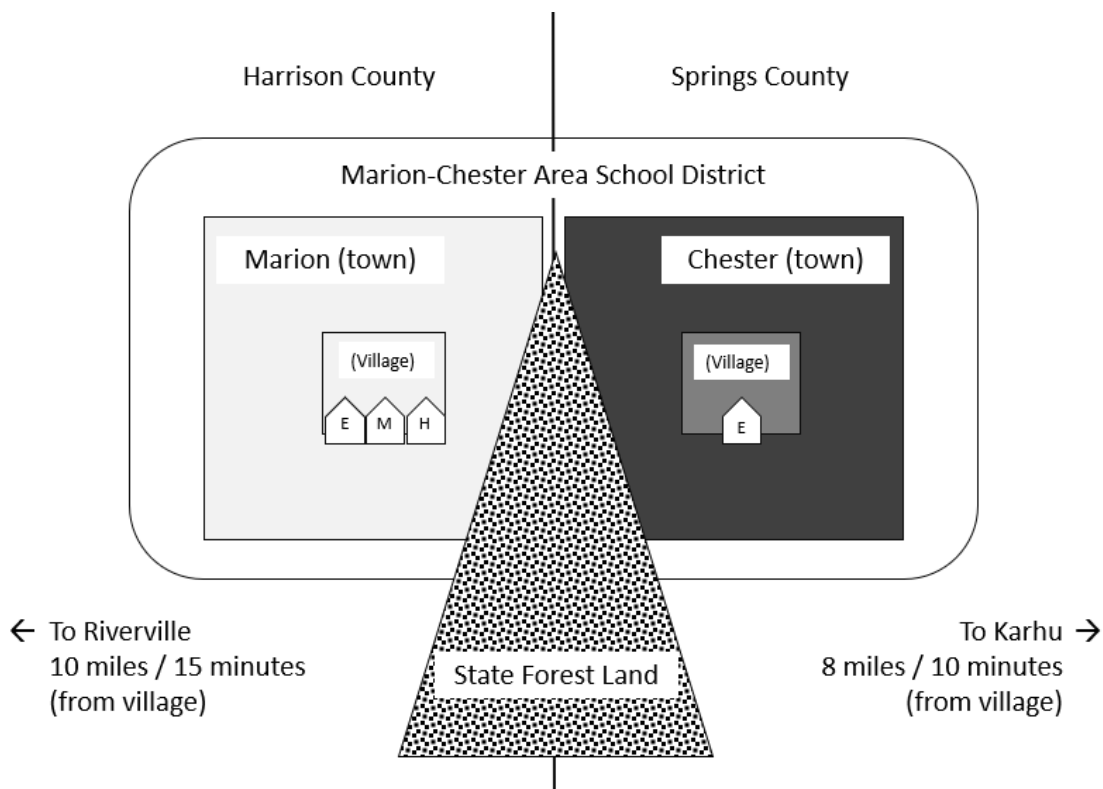
The question of support for the district was not as clear-cut as a simple reading of referendum results might suggest, however. A key complication in support for MCASD or its dissolution lies in the district’s geography. Chester was much more strongly in favor of dissolution than Marion: 75% of the “yes” votes in the dissolution referendum came from the town and village of Chester. Adding an additional layer of complication, it was widely believed in the community that the Town of Chester was the primary source of support for dissolution, with the Village of Chester either more divided or more strongly supporting maintaining the district. As Mary Nelson described in an interview:

Everyone says it’s Marion versus Chester, it’s not, it’s Marion and part of Chester against part of Chester. So the ones that are [in the Town of Chester and] over towards Karhu, those are the ones that are trying to dissolve the school.

This understanding of the physical landscape of the controversy, which is most supported by common perception, election data, and my own observations, is represented in Figure 5-1.

Figure 5-1*Perceived Geographical Support for Dissolution*

Additional geographical context is needed as well to understand the dynamics of the controversy as described in this chapter (see Figure 5-2). First, as discussed in previous chapters, Marion and Chester fall in two neighboring counties, Harrison County (Marion) and Springs County (Chester), each of which have different approaches to and histories of property use and development. Second, Marion and Chester are divided from each other by a large tract of state forest land. Finally, the closest larger community to each area is different: Marion is closest to Riverville, while Chester is closest to Karhu. Riverville is approximately a 15 minute drive from the Village of Marion, and Karhu is approximately a 10 minute drive from the Village of Chester, although many subdivisions in the Town of Chester are even closer to Karhu. While neither community is that far removed from its neighbors, residents described the relationships between them very differently: while Chester residents often talked about working, shopping, or taking their kids to activities in Karhu, even those

Figure 5-2*Marion-Chester Area School District*

Marion residents who commuted to Riverville for work were less likely to talk about connections to that town.

Historical Context

Data for my understanding of the 1971 merger relies on two primary sources: newspaper articles of the time in local publications, especially the *Marion Mail* (which ran the *Chester Courier* as a special section under the same cover), and reports from people I spoke with through the course of investigating the contemporary dissolution debate. Few of those I spoke to were living in the area at the time of the initial merger of Chester and Marion; in evaluating the reliability of their statements, I considered the sources they drew upon (e.g., one Karhu administrator had been able to look at

1971 school board meeting notes), the extent to which statements overlapped with or reinforced each other, and my understanding of policies and events of the time.

The move of one geographic area from one school district to another is not an uncommon process, and the Department of Public Instruction considers a variety of such proposals every year. While it understandably looms large in the community's perception, at the time of the Marion-Chester-Karhu transfer it was not the only property transfer between districts in the area. In one instance, from 1970 into early 1971 multiple announcements appeared in the *Marion Mail* regarding a proposed transfer of one farmer's property from the Marion School District to neighboring Riverville. This was ultimately resolved as a mutual transfer of territory, with several other farmers' land joining the Marion School District as part of the exchange. The finalization of the deal was announced in a February 1971 issue of the *Marion Mail*.

At the beginning of 1971, although the Chester School District operated its own elementary school, it was part of the larger Karhu Unified High School as well. Marion operated its own schools as the Marion School District. Beginning in late 1970, the Chester School District considered, then ultimately petitioned for, leaving the Karhu School District entirely to merge with the Marion School District. When I spoke to members of the community today, a few different stories about that event emerged. One, favored by some Dissolvers, was that the merger was Marion's idea, that they were struggling in some way and "sold Chester a bill of goods" to get them to join their district, as Nick Smith put it. Another, favored by some Maintainers, is that "Chester joined our district [in Marion] at a time when Karhu had no interest in keeping them in their district," as one letter-writer told the history. The most common story was that Chester residents, faced with increased taxes to support a

new high school building in Karhu and perhaps feeling more socially aligned with fellow farming community Marion, were the ones to petition to leave Karhu and merge with Marion.

The evidence that I have seen supports the latter version of events. First, it's not clear that Marion was facing any kind of financial or other troubles: local reporting and School Board minutes show increasing enrollment and more or less consistent tax rates in the district. They also report more proactive movements by the Chester School District to advance the merger—for example, it was they that requested to meet with the Marion School Board. Moreover, the fiscal context leading up to the separation and merger supports the assertion that residents of Chester were concerned about rising taxes. Second, it seems as though Karhu did indeed care about keeping Chester in their district, as demonstrated by one Karhu board member's appeal to have the removal and merger blocked. Regardless of any appeals, the merger ultimately went ahead, creating the Marion-Chester Area School District.

The context for the Marion-Chester school district merger can be further understood by attention to discourse in the local paper. Newspapers of the time indicate a preference for fiscal conservatism and a sense of opposition to taxation and resentment of urban spaces. For example, a July 1970 issue of the *Marion Mail* featured excerpts of articles from two other publications. In one, from *The Wisconsin Tax News*, the author decried a proposed plan by the Federal government to distribute a portion of income tax proceeds to the states, writing “The separation of responsibility sharpens the appetite for spending and dulls the respect for the value of the dollar—even the dollar collected locally.” In the next column, an excerpt from *The Milwaukee Sentinel* critiqued a proposed University of Wisconsin Extension winemaking course on the basis of cost, arguing that “State finances are such that the university and all other tax supported institutions should be on a beer

budget that cannot afford gourmet winemaking courses.” At the same time, the Letter Department column occasionally demonstrated tension in fiscal priorities. On February 25, 1971, the newspaper ran a letter written in response to an editorial critiquing educational expenses, which read in part:

This sort of thinking is just another manifestation of the distorted sense of values held by people today. If people would be honest with themselves, they would have to admit it is not the high taxes they object to, but rather the fact that money spent for taxes cannot be spent on luxuries for themselves. Taxes and especially property taxes have not risen as fast and as far as wages. My wages are three times what they were ten years ago; my property tax has not yet doubled. For many people in this community, wages have risen even faster. They have objected to increasing proportionally their obligation to school, church, and community.

Looking at the reporting in the *Marion Mail* and *Chester Courier*, echoes of the current controversy are easy to see: there appears to have been tension over public spending and concern about taxation on the part of some community members, while others critiqued such perspectives as selfish. The 1971 merger of Marion and Chester provides important context for understanding the 2019 dissolution crisis, and the ways it was shaped by a technique of strategic belonging.

MCASD Dissolution and Strategic Belonging

As discussed in Chapter 3, one reason that Dissolvers gave for supporting dissolution was that there was no meaningful Marion-Chester community. Instead, Dissolvers in Chester, especially, argued that their community ties were with Karhu. I assert that these claims of belonging were strategic, in that they supported Chester Dissolvers’ educational, resource, and racial self-interest.

Educational Self-Interest

Although financial reasons were by far the most common argument given in favor of dissolution, there were arguments made along educational lines as well. Few community members argued that all students in the district would be better served elsewhere (although some did briefly make that case). More often, Dissolvers made the case that Karhu Area School District (KASD) was superior to MCASD, and that the students who went there—i.e., students from Chester—would be better off, thereby emphasizing their own educational self-interest. As one speaker at a Dissolution Board hearing put it, “Why would a parent continue to send their student to a subpar district when next door Karhu is a superior one?”

A key tool that Dissolvers used in support of their position, and which parents of open enrollment students used to explain their choice, was Wisconsin’s district report card system. As part of the statewide educational accountability system, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) releases school- and district-level “report cards,” which rate them based on students’ standardized test scores as well as measures like absenteeism. In doing so, the DPI create apparently objective measures of school quality that can be used to quickly compare schools or districts. For example, Jessie Davis, a strong supporter of dissolution whose daughter was currently open enrolled in KASD, relied heavily on both the district report cards and individual schools’ test scores in her decision to use open enrollment:

I did some research on the scores of the actual schools in the district, both Marion-Chester and the Karhu district. And I found that the scores were highly lacking in Marion-Chester And I know standardized testing isn’t everything, but you know, the middle school was a score of 60 compared to the middle school with a score in the high 70s, you know, a 17

point difference. I felt, in middle school is going to be the lowest performing school because it's a difficult time for children. But you know, looking at the low point and then looking at the high point . . . I said, I have to give my daughter the best chance possible.

Relying on school district report cards for educational decision-making, however, is not a clearly meaningful exercise. Malloy (2019) notes in his examination of Wisconsin's school evaluation systems that "every step in the construction, collection, storage, and calculation of data, including policies, personnel, and facilities, varies by year and by district/school," and that "categories of affiliation, such as who counts as an English language learner or student with a disability, fluctuate in both their official designations and operationalization" (p. 79). He describes multiple critiques of what he calls the Report Card Apparatus, arguing that "the reasonableness of the components, the accuracy of the input data, and the fairness of the weighting are all questioned and contested. The scores that the report cards present seem to have little to do with the actions of teachers and administrators . . ." (p. 93). Thus, if one considers school quality a property that can be objectively, externally evaluated (a position Malloy contests), the school district report cards are far from an ideal measure of them, and arguably do not or cannot present an "accurate" representation.

Setting aside those points, if one believes that the district report cards accurately reflect qualitative differences between school districts, then Dissolvers' reliance on them as evidence for the superior education that students would receive post-dissolution further emphasizes the ways in which their positions were motivated by self-interest. All available report card data up to the year of the dissolution debate for the three main districts involved in this debate are reported in Table 5-1, below: MCASD, Riverville School District (RSD, where most Marion students would be reassigned), and KASD (where most Chester students would be reassigned). If we consider raw scores, then

Table 5-1*School District Report Card Scores and Ratings (All Available Years)*

	Riverville School District		MCASD		Karhu Area School District	
	Score	Rating	Score	Rating	Score	Rating
2018-19	73.0	Exceeds Expectations	70.7	Meets Expectations	83.0	Significantly Exceeds Expectations
2017-18	72.3	Meets Expectations	73.2	Exceeds Expectations	83.1	Significantly Exceeds Expectations
2016-17	72.2	Meets Expectations	73.8	Exceeds Expectations	81.8	Exceeds Expectations
2015-16	70.2	Meets Expectations	73.4	Exceeds Expectations	82.9	Exceeds Expectations
2014-15	n/a		n/a		n/a	
2013-14	66.1	Meets Expectations	68.0	Meets Expectations	78.8	Exceeds Expectations
2012-13	70.2	Meets Expectations	67.0	Meets Expectations	80.8	Exceeds Expectations

Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

RSD and MCASD are quite similar; if we consider rating categories, then MCASD has frequently been rated higher than RSD. Thus, based on these report cards, students from Marion would be reassigned to a district that ostensibly provided a similar or slightly worse education. Chester students, on the other hand, would be assigned to a district that ostensibly provided a higher quality education than MCASD, based either on scores or rating categories. Thus, arguments made by

Dissolvers about the educational benefits of dissolution, especially when using district report cards as evidence, were expressions of their educational self-interest.

Resource Self-Interest

If the goal of Dissolvers in MCASD was only to pursue what they saw as their educational self-interest, then existing policies had already made that possible through the expansion of inter-district open enrollment (an opportunity many families, especially in Chester, already took advantage of). Some Maintainers expressed confusion over why people would keep arguing for dissolution when it seemed as though they already had what they wanted; Liz Unger, for example, told me “I just wish we could all agree to disagree. They already get what they want. They can open enroll their kid into another school district. It’s almost like they’re fighting with a vengeance, like for revenge to take down the schools.” Liz thought that there might be personal reasons for Dissolvers to advocate for dissolution, and for some people there might well have been. However, there was another motivation that linked dissolution with some community members’ self-interest.

By far the most common justification given by Dissolvers for the dissolution of MCASD was related to resources, especially financial resources. For some, their financial logic relied primarily on “the facts,” or on notions of fiscal responsibility: the school district did not have the money to continue operating without additional community support, the community declined to provide that support, therefore the school district needed to dissolve. Others, however, described *individual* financial and other resource benefits that would accrue should MCASD dissolve, with those benefits representing financial motivations to dissolve the district.

Some of the resource benefits that would come with MCASD’s dissolution would accrue directly to those who were already using the state’s inter-district open enrollment policy, most of

whom were understood to live in Chester. For example, local reporter Dave Thomas described the impact that dissolution would have on families' transportation burden:

Right now, if you open enroll your kid, you can go open enroll your kid anywhere. What happens [then] is you have to provide the transportation [to and from school]. But if Marion-Chester closes and these kids get pushed over to Karhu, now you can put your kid on a bus and you don't have to take them in every day.

If MCASD dissolved and those who were currently open enrolling to Karhu were re-districted to be within Karhu's catchment area, their families would no longer be responsible for the costs—financial, logistical, or temporal—of transporting students to or from school, a not-insignificant motivation to support dissolution.

The largest resource-based motives favoring dissolution, however, were financial and related to taxes. Nobody in the district was thrilled about that potential increase in their taxes due to the proposed referendum in April, and even many Maintainers voted against the referendum. Concern over taxes was a particularly prominent argument made by Dissolvers, however. It was a common refrain in many letters written to the Dissolution Board in favor of dissolving the district; for example, the entirety of one letter read:

DPI,

Please dissolve MCASD and join our properties into the Karhu Area School District. We can't afford increased property taxes.

Thanks, [Signature]

Another letter writer was clear about the individual financial benefit of dissolution, especially should the letter writer's property be assigned to the Karhu district:

For me, the situation was all about the numbers. I am a CPA, so I spent many nights calculating scenarios of what potentially could happen if our school dissolved. It did not take long to realize that financially, it would clearly benefit us to be absorbed by Karhu.

Property taxes loomed large in Dissolvers' arguments against the school district. One woman, speaking at a public hearing, explained that she and her recently unemployed husband owned multiple properties, and that to maintain the district or pass a funding referendum would be "a disadvantage to people like us." She was not alone in expressing concern for the potential impact of increased property taxes on her family. Despite the fact that increasing property taxes was not a point of discussion for the Dissolution Board—their only ability was to approve or deny the School Board's motion to dissolve—the potential for a future referendum to fund MCASD was concerning enough to some people that they used it to justify dissolution.

For some members of the community, the financial benefits of dissolution were related to their perceptions of MCASD as a drain, as discussed in Chapter 3. In a letter to the Dissolution Board, this community member was emphatic that the district was failing—a "sinking ship"—and located resistance to providing further financial resources to MCASD within Chester, in particular:

Chester residents are fed up and done with this district! We have refused to pay money to a sinking ship that refuses to make any changes and correct its mentality. I am not going to throw money at something that is beyond repair. Chester residents have been telling me they are done being the money bank for Marion Chester [Area School District] and its narcissistic

attitude. They are done! We are tired of being told to pay up or else. Well 'or else' is right next door to us in the Karhu District.

Why were residents of Chester so much more interested in the financial benefits that could accrue from dissolution? The difference in position between Marion and Chester was often described in terms of the different property values in the two places. For example, member of Village of Chester government Nick Smith told me:

Most of the support for the school is on the Harrison County side, and most of the opposition to the school's continuation is on the Springs County side. And that is because we base our school tax on the equalized value of property. And so our mill rate in Springs County, and the amount we pay for taxes, as you can see, [are] based on our home values as well. So, our home values on this side of the county line are much higher than the home values on the other side. And therefore, people here would pay quite a bit of money. My mill rate this year was \$11 per 1000, which was significantly higher than other communities or school districts in the area. And on the other side, of course, it's not nearly as expensive on the Harrison County side. So people are content over there to just stay the course.

From this perspective, because property values were lower in Harrison County (where Marion is located), residents there were untroubled by paying higher taxes for the local schools. In Springs County, however, where Chester is located, higher property values meant that community members paid more in taxes and were less willing to continue to bear the burden. Thus, any financial benefit that would accrue in the wake of dissolution would benefit those in Chester, a strong motivation for favoring dissolution and therefore for asserting belonging with Karhu.

In addition, and as discussed in Chapter 3, Marion was understood to have closer community and economic ties to the school district than Chester. Therefore, while there might have been individual financial benefits from dissolution, for many Marion residents they were outweighed by the potential community-wide costs from the loss of the district. One homeschooling mom, speaking against dissolution at a public hearing, put critiques of resource-based motives for dissolution bluntly when she exclaimed, “Life is not about your stinking money!” Some Maintainers also asserted that, rather than being a resource boon, dissolution would be an individual resource burden on them. One Maintainer, speaking at a public hearing, reminded the Dissolution Board that “The issue of economically challenged families is important to consider.” Describing herself as “low income,” she said that with her husband imprisoned she was struggling, and that putting her kids in a different district would be a hardship for her and other low-income families, although she did not clarify the nature of that hardship.

Some Dissolvers did express a concern for the well-being of the community more broadly, beyond their own self-interest. For example one woman, describing her experience canvassing in opposition to the referendum to the Dissolution Board, teared up as she talked about meeting an elderly man who was afraid that he would lose his house if the referendum passed. However, the majority of financial and other resource concerns were centered on people’s own concerns, costs, and benefits, and spoke to their resource self-interest.

Racial Self-Interest

It is impossible to understand the push in Chester to dissolve MCASD and join Karhu without paying attention to the kinds of schools students would join if MCASD were to dissolve. The most likely scenario in that case is that the former district would be divided along the county

line, with Harrison County (Marion) students joining Riverville School District and Springs County (Chester) students joining Karhu School District. The district demographics are described below, in Table 5-2. Along many dimensions, MCASD represents a midpoint between the Riverville and Karhu districts. Where MCASD serves 33% students who are categorized as economically disadvantaged, Riverville's student population is 47% economically disadvantaged, and Karhu's student population is only 14% economically disadvantaged. While 3% of MCASD's students are

Table 5-2

School District Characteristics (2019)

	Riverville School District	MCASD	Karhu School District
Enrollment	2000	650	4500
Economically Disadvantaged	47%	33%	14%
Not Economically Disadvantaged	53%	67%	86%
English Language Learners	15%	3%	0%
English Proficient	85%	97%	100%
American Indian	0%	0%	0%
Asian	2%	0%	1%
Black	3%	1%	0%
Hispanic	30%	13%	5%
Pacific Islander	0%	0%	0%
Two or More	3%	3%	3%
White	61%	83%	90%

Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

classified as English Language Learners, 15 % of Riverville’s students are English Language Learners, and essentially none of Karhu’s students are. In addition, MCASD’s student body is 83% white, while Riverville’s student body is 61% white and Karhu’s is 90% white. In short, should MCASD dissolve and the county line division plan move forward, Chester students would join a district that was both whiter and wealthier than the one they left, while Marion students would join a district that was more racially, linguistically, and economically diverse.

The racial implications of the potential dissolution, in particular, were rarely referenced during the dissolution debate, especially by Dissolvers. One of the only times that race was explicitly raised was during a public hearing. The speaker was a parent of MCASD students and a teacher, who until recently had taught and taken on some administrative duties at MCASD. He said:

I’ve looked closely at racial demographics, especially as an administrator—but without the title, because Heaven forbid [the district add an administrative position]—and I am frightened by some of the neighboring districts and their lack of diversity. I wonder how it is humanly possible to have so few minority students in the modern era.

This speaker seemed to be using racial diversity as an indicator of some positive quality within a district. However, he was virtually alone in even acknowledging the racial dimensions of the dissolution debate.

Contrary to the color-blind rhetoric of most people involved in the dissolution debate, evidence shows that race plays an important role in school choice. Racism need not be explicit to shape society: as argued by Bonilla-Silva (2015), in a post-Civil Rights Era America “racial inequality is still produced in a systematic way (i.e., there is still a racial structure in America), but . . . the dominant practices that produce it are no longer overt, seem almost invisible, and are seemingly

nonracial” (p. 1363). School choice programs are not exempt from this racial structure. In a meta-analysis of studies considering school choice both domestically and internationally, Wilson and Bridge (2019) observed that choice programs were consistently found to increase socioeconomic segregation. Summarizing U.S.-based studies, they found that “even targeted [choice] schemes are not wholly successful at reducing segregation, and more universal schemes are actively associated with an increase in segregation, with respect to both social class and ethnicity” (p. 3210).

Marion and Chester are both majority-white communities (see Table 5-3), but they are not evenly majority-white. The Village and Town of Marion, and the Village of Chester, are all 90-93%

Table 5-3

Racial Demographics (2019)

	Marion		Chester	
	Village	Town	Village	Town
Not Hispanic or Latino:				
--White alone	93%	90%	90%	97%
--Black or African American alone	1%	0%	0%	0%
--Asian alone	0%	0%	0%	0%
--American Indian or Alaska Native alone	0%	0%	5%	0%
--Two or more Races	1%	0%	0%	1%
Hispanic or Latino				
--White alone	3%	8%	1%	2%
--Black or African American alone	0%	0%	0%	0%
--Asian alone	0%	0%	0%	0%
--American Indian or Alaska Native alone	0%	0%	1%	0%
--Some other race alone	1%	2%	2%	0%
--Two or more races	2%	0%	1%	0%

Source: 2019 American Community Survey (5-year estimates); errors in totals due to rounding

white and non-Latino. In contrast, the Town of Marion is 97% white and non-Latino. It could be coincidental that the area of the community that is the least racially diverse is also the area of the community that is most strongly in favor of dissolution. However, coincidence or not, the effect is still the same: Dissolvers in Chester, by advocating to dissolve MCASD and join KASD, were acting in their racial self-interest, seeking to rearrange school enrollment in the area so that their children would be districted into schools in which their racial dominance was more clearly maintained.

Self-Interest and Strategic Belonging

As described in Chapter 3, Dissolvers in Chester often asserted that their community did not include Marion, but did include Karhu. They often used instrumental logics to define community, using such economic relationships as employment and shopping to identify where one's community was. Although their notions of belonging were sometimes economic, they were rarely self-described as strategic, or as based in one's own self-interest. However, in the context of the history of the district, and in light of the arguments made in favor of dissolution, the correspondence between Chester residents' assertion of belonging with the Karhu community and their own self-interest is striking.

A complication of my argument that many Chester Dissolvers were using a technique of strategic belonging in their own self-interest is that many Dissolvers worked together in support of their goals. They supported each other in making public statements, worked to canvas against the funding referendum and in favor of the non-binding dissolution referendum and sometimes referred to others' challenges or benefits when making the case for dissolution. However, the notion of strategic belonging does not require that those who use the technique do so consciously. Rather, it is a way to understand the intersections of policy, economics, and society. Strategic belonging points to

the ways in which communities are constructed not only through interpersonal relationships, but also through policies, and within an economic context governed by neoliberal logics of competition and choice.

Explaining Changing Strategy: Class Changes in Chester

Residents of both Marion and Chester observed class differences between the two towns, and noted that those differences had developed over time. For example, Christine Laughlin, a long-term resident of Chester, had this to say about the community's growth:

I remember seeing the population signs coming into [Chester] and we used to be like, gosh, when we were first building here [in the late 1970s] it was like, what was it, 500 or 700-something. I mean it was quite a bit smaller, and all those subdivisions, especially on the East end of our village have sprouted up. So [Chester's] gotten much bigger . . . Chester is much more white collar, Marion is much more blue collar.

Indeed, Chester has been growing significantly faster than Marion, as reflected in Table 5-4. The population of the Village of Marion has remained essentially static since 2000, with only slight growth since 1990; in that time, the Town of Marion has also remained generally consistent in its population. In contrast, the population of both the Village and Town of Chester have nearly doubled since 1990, and the community as a whole is now significantly larger than Marion.

Census data suggests that there was, indeed, a growing class difference between Marion and Chester. The first indicator is median household income (Table 5-5). In both 1990 and 2019, the median income in the Town of Marion and the Village of Chester were approximately equal, while the Village of Marion had the lowest median income and the Town of Chester the highest.

Table 5-4*Population*

	Marion			Chester		
	Village	Town	Total	Village	Town	Total
2019	1800	1100	2900	2100	3600	5700
2010	1800	1200	3000	2000	3500	5500
2000	1800	1100	2900	1700	3000	4700
1990	1500	1200	2700	1100	2000	3100

Population size rounded to the nearest 100

Source: U.S. Decennial Census, except 2019, which was drawn from the 2019 American Community Survey 5-year estimates

Table 5-5*Median Household Income*

	Marion		Chester	
	Village	Town	Village	Town
2019	\$52,400	\$80,900	\$80,400	\$110,000
2000	\$45,500	\$50,400	\$58,200	\$69,000
1990	\$28,700	\$36,600	\$36,400	\$43,800

Amounts presented in U.S. dollars and rounded to the nearest \$100

Source: U.S. Decennial Census, except 2019, which was drawn from the 2019 American Community Survey 5-year estimates

However, the difference between the lowest and highest median incomes in the area grew over time, in both absolute numbers and relative to each other. In 1990, the difference between the median income in the Village of Marion and the Town of Chester was \$15,100, and the median income in the Town of Chester was approximately 1.5 times the median income in the Village of Marion. In 2019, that difference had grown: the median income in the Town of Chester was \$57,600 greater than, or over twice the size of, the median income in the Village of Marion. Thus, considering income alone, the class difference between Marion and Chester has grown in recent decades.

Examining occupation data for Marion and Chester further supports the idea of a growing class difference between the towns. In both 1990 and 2019, residents were employed in similar industries across the two communities and their constituent villages and towns (although it is notable that, in both 1990 and 2019, the Town of Marion is the only area for which agriculture is one of its 3 largest industries, lending credence to the claim explored in Chapter 3 that Marion is more rural than Chester; see Table 5-6). However, data reporting the occupations in which residents were employed reveal larger differences.

Table 5-6*Most Common Industries in Which Residents are Employed*

		Marion			Chester			
		Village	Town		Village	Town		
2019	Manufacturing	26%	Educational services, health care & social assistance	24%	Manufacturing	21%	Educational services, health care & social assistance	24%
	Educational services, health care & social assistance	22%	Manufacturing	20%	Educational services, health care & social assistance	19%	Manufacturing	18%
	Arts, entertainment, recreation, accommodation, & food services	11%	Agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting, and mining	11%	Professional, scientific, management, administrative, and waste management services	12%	Transportation, warehousing, and utilities	10%
1990	Manufacturing durable goods	25%	Professional and related services	21%	Manufacturing durable goods	22%	Manufacturing durable goods	22%
	Professional and related services	23%	Manufacturing durable goods	18%	Professional and related services	19%	Retail trade	16%
	Manufacturing non-durable goods	13%	Agriculture, forestry, and fisheries	15%	Retail trade	15%	Professional and related services	16%

Source: U.S. Census, except 2019 data from the American Community Survey (5-year estimates). The three industries with the highest percentage of residents employed are reported in this table.

In 1990, the occupations of residents in Marion and Chester were similar in many ways; see Table 5-7, below. In 2019, however, there were clearer differences, especially between the town of Marion and the town of Chester. In the town of Marion, the three most common occupations were

classified by the Census as “Professional and Related Occupations” (19% of employed adults), “Management, Business, and Financial Operations Occupations” (14% of employed adults), and “Construction, Extraction, and Maintenance Occupations” (13% of employed adults). Thus, the three most common occupations in the town of Marion represented 46% of employed adults, with 33% in what might reasonably be classified as white-collar jobs. The most common occupations in the town of Chester were fairly similar in terms of the categories represented, but very different in the percentage of the population they represented. In the town of Chester, the most common occupations were “Professional and Related Occupations” (28% of employed adults), “Management, Business, and Financial Operations Occupations” (19% of employed adults), and “Office and Administrative Support Occupations” (16% of employed adults). Thus, the three most common occupations in the town of Chester, representing 63% of employed adults, were all white-collar jobs. This, in combination with the income gap described above, further suggests a class difference between Marion and Chester.

Table 5-7
Most Common Occupations

		Marion		Chester				
		Village	Town	Village	Town			
2019	Production occupations	18%	Professional & related occupations	19%	Professional & related occupations	17%	Professional & related occupations	28%
	Professional & related occupations	12%	Management, business, & financial operations occupations	14%	Management, business, & financial operations occupations	15%	Management, business, & financial operations occupations	19%
	Management, business, & financial operations occupations	10%	Construction, extraction, & maintenance occupations	13%	Construction, extraction, & maintenance occupations	13%	Office & admin. support occupations	16%
1990	Operators, fabricators, & laborers	27%	Operators, fabricators, & laborers	24%	Technical, sales, & admin. support occupations	30%	Technical, sales, & admin. support occupations	30%
	Technical, sales, & admin. support occupations	24%	Managerial & professional specialty occupations	23%	Precision production, craft, & repair occupations	21%	Managerial & professional specialty occupations	24%
	Precision production, craft, & repair occupations	20%	Technical, sales, & admin. support occupations	21%	Managerial & professional specialty occupations	18%	Precision production, craft, & repair occupations	17%

Source: U.S. Census, except 2019 data from the American Community Survey (5-year estimates). The three occupations with the highest percentage of residents employed are reported in this table. Shaded boxes represent occupations assumed to be more generally “white-collar.”

Local explanations for Chester's majority preference to dissolve MCASD and join Karhu School District often pointed to questions of class. Local reporter Dave Thompson, a close observer of the dissolution process, was particularly clear in his class analysis of the controversy:

It really comes down to, almost down to a class system I think a little bit, too. You've got all those 200-300 families ended up taking to open enrolling their kids out of Marion-Chester and pushing them into schools like Karhu. They didn't really go to Riverville, that was more of a poor school, so they chose, they went to the richer, newer school basically . . . I honestly believe it's a class system. Riverville is a very poor school district compared to Karhu. Karhu is the one where they—talk about money, they just built, they just had a \$49 million renovation there. They don't have money in Riverville to do that, there's no money really. And so, their superintendent came out, he was basically like, you know, we don't have any money. It's two very different cultures. The farther you get towards, you know, you've got [large city] Steiner there and the group between Steiner and Harrison county is a very rich area . . . Business [is] starting to swing in that belt a little bit and it's just, they want to go to the newer, nicer, pretty school.

From Dave's perspective, the class dynamics were clear: the people on the Springs County side were richer than those in Harrison County, and they wanted to send their children to a "newer, nicer" school that had the resources for things like renovations. His comments also reinforce the point developed above, that there was a significant difference perceived between the schools that students would end up in should the schools dissolve.

In interviews, Maintainers were more likely to point to class differences as an explanation for the differences in support for dissolution across Marion and Chester. Valerie Wilson was particularly

clear in the way she pointed to the role of class in the dissolution debate. Valerie, who lived in a manufactured home, clearly recalled the woman who referenced owning multiple properties in a Dissolution Board hearing (mentioned above), and referenced her several times in our interview. She had heard from a neighbor of the woman who spoke that the properties she mentioned were multimillion dollar homes, and she brought this point into her explanation of the differences between Marion and Chester:

Valerie Marion is not a rich school by any means. Yeah.

Caitlin Chester is?

Valerie Well, I don't know about the West side [nearer to Marion]. But the far side of Chester has all these beautiful, brand-new subdivisions with multimillion dollar homes. And I know that because it was mentioned at a meeting that this lady owns two homes that are multimillion dollar homes, and she's worried about her taxes going up with the school [referendum] and blah, blah, blah.

Karhu is money. Yeah, more money. But my roots are very poor school. But family oriented. And we think with our hearts, I guess.

Valerie identified MCASD as more “poor school” than KASD, and dismissed concerns about property taxes in wealthier areas of the community with a “blah, blah, blah.” She contrasted that concern about money with supporters of MCASD, who she described as “thinking with [their] hearts.” From her perspective, an important aspect of the dissolution crisis was the opposition between rich Dissolvers and supporters of the poorer MCASD.

Conclusion

The self-interestedness of many Dissolvers' arguments comes into clearer relief when considered against alternatives to dissolution that were not taken. As discussed in Chapter 4, there were a variety of policies that shaped the challenges facing MCASD. Admittedly, changing some of those policies was never going to be a winning proposition in Chester: for example, while ending open enrollment would bring a substantial number of students and their attendant funding back to the district, many families in Chester were taking advantage of that open enrollment policy and very happy with their children's schools. Nonetheless, ending open enrollment is not the only policy change that could have an impact on the difficulties facing MCASD. For example, if members of the community wanted to see increased funding for their local schools without paying additional property taxes, they could lobby to increase the amount of state aid received by MCASD, or to challenge the state's reliance on property taxes to fund education. If their primary concern was the impact that increased property taxes would have on more vulnerable members of the community, such as senior citizens, then they could work to design a system that exempted community members from the operational referendum based on age or measures of need. If Dissolvers were concerned with the quality of education provided in MCASD and wanted to make sure all students in the community were given an education that exceeded state standards, then they could work with the local school board and administrations to understand the schools' needs and how they could contribute to meeting those needs.

Any of those options would have demonstrated a concern for the needs of the community as a whole, and some could have the potential to change systems that challenge districts across the state. However, none of those options were taken in MCASD. I argue that is because the primary concern for many Dissolvers was not the needs of the community as a whole, but their own self-

interest. Thus, rather than adopting a systemic perspective or an attitude of engagement with the schools, they turned to arguments of strategic belonging, pursuing the goals that most immediately met their own interests.

Conclusion

The dissolution crisis in the Marion-Chester Area School District provides a unique illustration of the dynamics of education politics, particularly in rural spaces, and the values, attitudes, strategies, and structures that underly them. Previous research has illustrated that public schools play a key role in defining and expressing community, and that the purposes of schooling are related to the values that community members hold (e.g. Brecklin, 2017; Labaree, 1997; Mayo, 2007; Rosen, 2009). As central public institutions, schools both symbolize and enact the values that a community holds; at an individual level, the values a person holds shape the ways they think about and interact with the schools. My findings highlight the ways that community definition, contested and contrasting perceptions of the place and purpose of schooling, and ideas about who can legitimately make decisions about and for public education were intertwined in one educational policy debate. Maintainers and Dissolvers debated whether Marion and Chester were one community, and what kind of rural each was; they disagreed over the nature of “opportunity” that a school should provide; and they argued as to whether “the voters,” “the taxpayers,” or participants in the school system should have the final say as to the continued existence of the district.

This study further illustrates the complex role that policy played in shaping and even causing the crisis in MCASD, especially through the intersection of education policies that promoted the use of local referendums for school funding and subjected schools to marketizing pressures, as well as non-education policies such as those related to land use. Like many other states, the state of Wisconsin has instituted educational policies that put districts under multiple pressures: through unlimited inter-district open enrollment, they have subjected districts to “market” pressures, and through a funding system that relies heavily on local referendums to raise additional, temporary funds they have subjected districts to additional financial pressures. In MCASD, these policies in

combination left the district in a double bind: as a small, rural district, they had fewer resources than neighboring districts to begin with, and the communities they served declined to grant them additional funding through local referendums. As the district lost students to open enrollment, however, they were reluctant to make cuts to courses, extracurriculars, or other resources out of fears that such cuts would lead to more students leaving the district. These policy pressures were in addition to those that came from non-educational policies, especially those related to land use. Harrison County, in particular, has prioritized maintaining agricultural land, leaving that side of the district with lower population density and a lessened ability to raise funds via property taxes. In a funding system that relies on local property taxes, this means it is harder for rural, agricultural districts to raise funds, even if they can pass referendums. Together, these policies amplified the financial pressures MCASD was under while minimizing the tools available for it to address them, trapping the district in a situation that the school board felt could only be addressed through dissolution.

Finally, the dissolution crisis in MCASD reveals a strategy of strategic belonging on the part of Dissolvers. This strategy becomes particularly clear when considered in the historical context of the district: in 1971, the district was first formed when Chester residents, facing increased taxes to support the building of a new high school in their home district of Karhu and perhaps feeling more socially aligned with fellow farming community Marion, left the Karhu district to join Marion's. Against that background, the assertions that Chester was not a part of Marion's community, and was instead more aligned with Karhu, seems to be a mirror image of the forming of the district. The claims that Chester belonged with the Karhu district served Dissolvers' self-interest from educational, resource, and racial perspectives. The change from aligning with Marion to aligning with Karhu—that is, a change in which community best served Chester residents' perceived self-

interest—can be explained by a changing class structure in the town, with Chester becoming wealthier and more white-collar than Marion, where the towns had previously been more similar.

Contributions to Literature

This study illuminates the impact of school choice in a rural context, thereby developing the literature on neoliberal and marketizing education policies. By providing a detailed examination of the impacts of inter-district open enrollment on a small, rural district, this study expands into a space (rural school districts) and policy area (inter-district open enrollment) that has not often been included in the school choice literature. It details how such policies can interact with others, such as school funding and land use policies, to have wide-ranging impacts on a rural community. Chen and Moskop (2020) note that “school choice rhetoric naturalizes organizational death and sanitizes its impact.” This study de-naturalizes and de-sanitizes the impact that marketizing policies can have on communities, describing the messiness, tensions, and pain left in their wake.

Beyond the outcomes of such policies, this study also examines the politics of them, thereby developing the growing literature considering rural education and politics. It contributes an empirical examination of the ways members of the public in rural communities think about and debate the purposes of education and the place of schools in communities, finding that issues of place and community definition were central to the tensions in MCASD. This aligns with what the literature suggests, that place and community are particularly important to understanding rural politics and rural education. However, this study adds nuance in that it examines a community divided in half, with one side maintaining an agricultural character and the other side developing more rapidly. That complication allowed debates over the nature and meaning of rurality itself to surface, revealing facets that would not otherwise be visible.

This study also contributes a nuanced consideration of white, rural, conservative politics that demonstrates some of the diversity within what is often perceived to be a homogeneous bloc. Residents of both Marion and Chester described themselves as conservative; despite this, they came to very different conclusions about education policy. Many Dissolvers, especially in Chester, looked much like mainstream Republicans in terms of their educational policy preferences: they valued choice and fiscal efficiency, and some opposed government provision of education in general. In contrast, Maintainers—who also generally described themselves as conservative or Republican—had a very different set of educational priorities, which favored maintaining their small district with close ties to the community even at the expense of higher taxes. This demonstrates a fissure within white, rural, conservative politics, as well as speaking to differing conceptions of citizenship and participation. While Maintainers’ description of the place of school in the community often seemed to draw on a Putnam-esque (2000) conception of engaged civic society, Dissolvers’ notions of participation drew on neoliberal logics of responsibility, benefit maximization, and individualism. That these seemingly fundamentally opposed visions of citizenship and the place of schools can exist within the political movement called “conservatism” fundamentally challenges those who would understand “the” white, rural, conservative political voice as unitary or without internal conflict.

Finally, by considering not only the experiences of community members during the dissolution, but also the policy structures surrounding it and the history behind it, this study heeds Weis and Fine’s (2012) call for critical bifocality. It demonstrates the “dedicated theoretical and empirical attention to structures *and* lives” (p. 172) that they argue is missing from much existing research. The case of MCASD cannot be divided neatly into categories—the experiences of community members are inextricably intertwined with the policies that shaped the district and the

logics that undergird them. By devoting attention to "structures *and* lives," this study develops a multi-layered image of what could otherwise be interpreted as a simple failure on the part of one district. Popular portrayals of school or district closings often interpret them as the result of fiscal mismanagement or technical ineptitude on the part of one institution; if the school itself is not blamed, then amorphous "demographic change" is often suggested as the culprit. While both technical failings and demographic change may have been at work in MCASD, this study moves beyond those explanations to look at the ways individual experiences and interpretations, policy structures, and local contexts came together to shape the dissolution crisis and the rural politics of education it encapsulates.

Theoretical Contributions

This study makes several theoretical contributions to our understanding of educational policy and politics. First, by bringing a socio-cultural lens to the study of an educational policy, this study demonstrates the power of such a perspective for making sense of educational policy controversies. In doing so, it also illustrates connections between community definition and belonging and educational policy that would be hidden through a more technocratic or rationalist approach. A key part of the dissolution crisis in MCASD was residents' disagreement about the constitution and nature of their community(ies), as well as disagreements about the purpose of schooling and its societal role. A techno-rational approach, which understands policy as a rational response to a defined problem, would likely uncover the financial disagreements underlying the dissolution debate; a socio-cultural approach is able to go deeper, to understand the social, emotional, and context-based dimensions.

This study also contributes theoretically by developing an interpretation of the policy structures that surrounded MCASD as a trap the district was subject to. The metaphor of a trap illustrates the ways in which schools can be subject to policies that effectively remove their ability to make meaningful choices, even though that is not the explicit intention of the policy. In particular, this study uncovers the kinds of policies that can lead to such a trap in a small, rural district. The school funding and open enrollment policies that were at work in MCASD are also in effect elsewhere in the state; however, in concert with the local geographic context and the different land use policies parts of the district were subject to, they had a very different impact in MCASD than they have elsewhere. This study suggests that, to understand the functioning of educational policies in other places, scholars must consider not only the educational policies themselves, but the ways they intersect with local contexts and with policies that may not seem on their face to be related to education.

Finally, this study develops the notion of strategic belonging as a tool to understand the politics of education policy. The claims of belonging to Karhu that were made by Dissolvers in Chester were strategic in that they served to advance their own self-interest, from educational, resource-oriented, and racial perspectives. Strategic belonging provides a way to understand the intersections of policy, economics, and society, and the ways in which communities and the politics of education are constructed not only through interpersonal relationships, but also through policies and within a context governed by neoliberal logics of competition, choice, and the pursuit of self-interest.

Implications

Through observing the dissolution crisis in MCASD, one policy conclusion was inescapable: the current system for funding schools in Wisconsin is inadequate and needs substantial revision if it is to appropriately provide for the state's public schools. Perhaps most essentially, the school funding formula needs to be revised in such a way that it accounts for qualitative differences between school districts. As a small, rural district, MCASD faced additional costs due to such factors as transportation costs and the loss of economies of scale that were not faced by its neighboring districts. Because the state's funding system had no way to account for those additional costs, the district was placed on an even more uneven footing in relation to its neighbors than it otherwise may have occupied.

A further weakness within the state funding system is the inter-district open enrollment policy. Unrestricted open enrollment leaves the door open for crises like the one in MCASD. In theory, marketizing practices are meant to drive improvement through competition; in practice, as MCASD lost students to open enrollment they became less and less able to make any changes, or even to continue with their current level of services. Moreover, by decoupling residence, community, and school, unrestricted open enrollment removes incentives for people to work for the improvement of their local schools, effectively abandoning students who don't open enroll out of the district. The state should re-instate caps on the number of students in a district who can leave via open enrollment, perhaps at a percentage of total potential enrollment in the district.

The failure of the state's educational funding system is illustrated most clearly by its reliance on local referendums. The ability to contribute additional funding to a district above what is provided by the state does contribute to local control; however, when schools are forced to turn to

the electorate for necessary operating funds, it puts schools in a precarious position. MCASD was not the only district in this study that was operating at the edge: multiple of its neighboring districts told the Dissolution Board that they were operating on referendums and feared what adding additional costs could do to their ability to continue. The state should raise revenue caps to better reflect the cost of educating students, increase state aid to districts, and provide for better systems for re-adjusting revenue limits in the face of changing district characteristics and inflation. The school funding system as it is places an undue burden on districts, forcing them to take attention away from educating students to repeatedly petition the communities they serve for basic needs; as School Board member Tim Irving observed, when a district's community doesn't "come to the rescue," the schools lose.

The crisis in MCASD looks at first glance like an outlier, interesting in its oddity but irrelevant to those not directly impacted. This study proves otherwise. The dissolution debate in MCASD was shaped by many of the same forces that affect districts statewide and, increasingly, nationwide. Moreover, studying it closely uncovered some of the complex relationships between people, place, and policy that underlie the politics of education in rural spaces and elsewhere. Collins and Carlson (2018) described Wisconsin as "not so much an average case as a bellwether or harbinger." My hope is that MCASD will prove to be neither, and that by contributing to the growing body of work and action supporting public education this study will help to make the dissolution crisis there an outlier in truth, a warning of a wave that never comes.

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