Fall 2010

Reconfiguration Alternative Assessment at the Unatego Central School District

Dale Losee
State College at Oneonta

RECONFIGURATION ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENT AT THE UNATEGO CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT

BY

DALE LOSEE
B.S., STATE COLLEGE AT ONEONTA, 2006

CAPSTONE PROJECT

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters in Public Administration in the Graduate School of Binghamton University
State University of New York
2010

Accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Masters in Public Administration
in the Graduate School of
Binghamton University
State University of New York
2010

David Campbell _____

Assistant Professor

Department of Public Administration

December 3, 2010

Kristina Lambright _____

Assistant Professor

Department of Public Administration

December 3, 2010

Charles Molloy _____

Superintendent of Schools

Unatego Central School District, Otego, New York

December 3, 2010

Abstract

Unatego is a rural, upstate New York school district with a student population of slightly under 1,100. Both New York State education regulations and district policy determine the educational policy for the school district. Nearly sixty-three percent of Unatego's funding is derived from state sources. However, in the recent past, these resources have been decreased, compelling Unatego to explore alternative avenues to meet programmatic needs. From this exploration process, three distinct alternatives emerged. This analysis attempts to determine which alternative is optimal for Unatego as an organization. Cost analysis techniques found in Cost-Effectiveness Analysis (CEA) is utilized to determine the financial composition of each alternative. This is followed by an assessment of stakeholder acceptability. The key findings of the analysis is that merging the district's elementary schools would yield the greatest net cost savings and that having a K-2, 3-5 configuration is the most acceptable to stakeholders.

Executive Summary

Unatego is a rural, upstate New York school district with a student population of slightly under 1,100. The primary source of funding is from state sources, which accounts for sixty-three percent of the district's revenue stream over the past three years. This analysis examines the financial composition and acceptability of three reconfiguration alternatives: one (K-4, 5-12 configuration), two (K-2, 3-5, 6-12 configuration) and three (K-4, 5-8, 9-12 configuration).

Utilizing techniques found in Cost-Effectiveness Analysis (CEA), each alternative's financial composition was determined. In addition to the financial analysis, an assessment of the acceptability of each alternative was performed by collecting input from district stakeholders. The findings of the financial analysis indicate that alternative one (K-4, 5-12) would generate the greatest cost savings, while alternative three (K-4, 5-8, 9-12) had the least cost savings. Table nine from the analysis displays a summary of the financial analysis for each alternative compared to the status quo.

Table 9.
Summary of Financial Analysis

Option	Cost	Cost Savings	Net Cost
Status Quo	$18,448,841	$0.00	$18,448,841
Alternative One (K-4, 5-12)	$18,577,394	$647,109	$17,930,285
Alternative Two (K-2, 3-5, 6-12)	$18,506,221	$220,211	$18,286,010
Alternative Three (K-4, 5-8, 9-12)	$18,809,396	$374,761	$18,434,635

The findings of the acceptability assessment indicate that alternative two (K-2, 3-5, 6-12) was the favored choice of district stakeholders, while alternative three (K-4, 5-8, 9-12) was least favored by district stakeholders. Table ten from the analysis illustrates stakeholder's perceptions of the acceptability of each alternative.

Table 10.
Alternative Acceptability

Option	First Choice (Total Occurrences)	Second Choice (Total Occurrences)	Third Choice (Total Occurrences)	Fourth Choice (Total Occurrences)
Status Quo	1	7	1	0
Alternative One (K-4, 5-12)	2	0	5	2
Alternative Two (K-2, 3-5, 6-12)	6	1	2	0
Alternative Three (K-4, 5-8, 9-12)	1	0	1	7

The analysis provides several key findings: alternative one (K-4, 5-12) has the most cost savings potential for Unatego, alternative two (K-2, 3-5, 6-12) is the most acceptable to stakeholders, and that alternative three (K-4, 5-8, 9-12) ranks the lowest in terms of both cost savings and acceptability. Based on the financial and stakeholder acceptability analysis, it is recommended that Unatego eliminate alternative three from further consideration, and focus efforts on the remaining choices.

Dedication

This project is dedicated to my family. To my mother and father, who sacrificed so much to provide for their children. To my brothers, who always took the time to listen when I was having a difficult time. To my best friend, Amy, who spent countless evenings listening to me talk about my school work. I owe so much to all of you, thank you for inspiring me to dream, and to become a better person.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Charles Molloy and Nick Rosas at the Unatego Central School District for mentoring me throughout my time as intern and during this project. The time which both you spent working with me meant a great deal.

I would also like to thank Dr. David Campbell for taking the time to work with me throughout the semester. The feedback which you provided challenged me to think through problems, and to produce a better product.

I would also like to thank Dr. Kristina Lambright for taking the time to work with me throughout the semester. I truly appreciate the feedback which you provided during each stage of my project.

Finally, I would like to thank the entire faculty at the Department of Public Administration and my classmates for three wonderful years.

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Problem Definition

Many of the challenges which administrators of non-profit and government organizations are centered on financial issues. Administrators at the Unatego Central School District are also faced with the problem of not enough financial resources to meet expenditure demands of the organization. Sizable cuts in state aid have made budget preparation difficult for the 2010-2011 fiscal year (Unatego, 2010). It is also likely that aid will continue to decline in the upcoming years; given the current economic condition, it is doubtful that Unatego will continue to receive current funding levels from New York State (N. Rosas, personal communication, August 4, 2010).

The first financial element at Unatego which requires examination is revenue sources, which can be divided into three components: state aid, local property tax, and the fund balance. The primary revenue source for Unatego has traditionally been revenue from state sources. After an examination of the yearly revenue stream contained in the budget, it can be ascertained that Unatego has consistently received sixty-four percent of its revenue from state aid (Unatego Budget, 2010). The main part of state aid which Unatego receives is formula aid, which is based in part on wealth measures, such as the ratio of enrolled students to property values and income levels of district residents (NYSED, 2008). As depicted in the table below, the rate of growth of Unatego's main source of funding has been declining for several budget cycles.

Table 1.
State Aid by Budget Year in Constant Dollars

Year	State Aid Amount	Dollar Value Change	Percent Change
2007-2008	$10,328,854		
2008-2009	$10,829,544	$500,690	4.8
2009-2010	$11,125,618	$296,074	2.7
2010-2011	$10,362,166	-$763,452	-6.8

(NYSED, 2010, Unatego, 2010)

There are several alarming issues with declining state aid being the single largest component in Unatego's revenue stream. First, it would seem logical to believe that based on past budget trends in New York State, aid amounts will continue to decrease. Second, the issue of over reliance on one source of revenue presents many dilemmas for administrators. Third, it is difficult to compensate for losses from a single, large source of funding such as state aid; it may be extremely difficult to replace a large loss of revenue with other sources. Fourth, there are also problems with complacency; an organization comes to expect revenue to be consistent on a yearly basis; there would be little reason to explore alternative revenue sources and cost cutting measures. Finally, over-reliance leaves little autonomy in the budget process for administrators; the fiscal condition of New York State determines the financial situation at Unatego.

The second largest revenue source for Unatego is local property taxes. Over the past several years, revenue from property taxes has remained relatively flat at thirty-two percent of total revenue sources (Unatego 2009, 2010). One possible reason why property tax revenue has not increased is due to capacity. In order to raise more revenue from property taxes, Unatego would need to increase the property tax levy, which in turn would affect the tax rate. In 2009, Unatego's tax rate was $16.63 per $1000 (NYOSC, 2010).

When comparing this number to other local school districts, it is apparent that Unatego has a relatively high tax rate. In order to provide context to Unatego's tax rate, several adjacent schools of comparable in size to Unatego were selected. The following table demonstrates that Unatego's tax rate is the second highest in the region.

Table 2.
Local School District Tax Rates

School District	Tax Rate Per $1000
Sidney	17.26
Unatego	16.63
Unadilla Valley	14.48
Delhi	11.95
Walton	10.57

(OSCNY, 2009)

Based on the information in the table, it would appear that Unatego's ability to raise more revenue from the property tax is already limited based on the idea capacity.

The final revenue component which needs to be examined is the utilization of the fund balance. For the 2010-11 budget, Unatego appropriated four hundred thousand dollars from the organization's fund balance (Unatego, 2010). This figure represents an eighty thousand dollar increase from the previous budget. One issue with relying on the fund balance as a source of revenue is that once the funds are depleted, they cannot be utilized again for future use. After the four hundred thousand dollar appropriation, there would be five hundred thousand dollars remaining in the fund balance (Unatego, 2010). Should there be another five hundred thousand dollar budget shortfall in 2011; the fund balance would be nearly exhausted, leaving little money for future budget shortfalls. Therefore, continuing to draw revenue from the fund balance to fill budget gaps is not a sustainable option for Unatego.

Increasing expenditures is another budget challenge which is confronting administrators at Unatego. Two of the largest expenditure items in Unatego's budget are salaries and health benefits. Both expenditure items are contractual in nature which Unatego has a legal obligation to fulfill. To better understand yearly changes in salaries and benefits, a table has been provided below.

Table 3.
Salaries and Benefits

Budget Year	Salaries	Dollar Change	Benefits	Dollar Change
2006-2007	$8,482,479		$4,078,835	
2007-2008	$8,620,084	$137,605	$4,263,795	$184,960
2008-2009	$8,655,159	$35,075	$4,147,234	-$116,561
2009-2010	$8,661,945	$6,786	$4,335,097	$187,863
2010-2011	$8,118,082	-$543,863	$4,611,096	$275,999

(Unatego, 2010)

An examination of the table reveals two key pieces of information. First, in the 2010-2011 budget year, the salary figure has decreased. Second, the benefits category has increased four out of the past five years. Both findings are troubling for different reasons. The decrease in salaries was due to cuts in staff; it is questionable if the practice of decreasing staff on a yearly basis is a sustainable for Unatego; at a certain point, staff levels will reach a critical number, and programmatic issues could arise. The concern regarding increased costs of benefits of a strategic financial nature; should this trend continue, benefits become a unsustainable expenditure in subsequent budget years.

The financial problems noted above are cause for great concern for the district. Superintendent Molloy has indicated that the financial issues the district is facing are serious, and that there is no relief in sight for Unatego (C.Molloy, personal communication, August 2, 2010). Due to the issues noted above, administrators have identified three potential long term solutions to the financial situation which Unatego is currently facing. The three alternatives identified were: closing one of the school's elementary buildings, reconfiguration of the school's elementary buildings, and a reconfiguration of all of the school district's buildings. Each alternative identified would need to meet several criteria. First, the alternative would need to maintain Unatego's mission. Second, the alternative would need to address the budget challenges which are confronting Unatego.

Closing one of the elementary buildings would shift all elementary students to one location, and leave one community without a school. Reconfiguration of Unatego's elementary buildings would consist of dividing elementary students into two groups: kindergarten through second grade and third grade through fifth grade. Realignment would be similar to reconfiguration of the elementary schools, but would be more encompassing. Instead of changing just the elementary buildings, all grade levels would be affected, and would involve changes in all three district-owned buildings. The process of evaluating the alternatives mentioned above can be linked to many aspects of public administration, such as effectiveness and efficiency.

Several challenges are present for each of the alternatives described above. First, the financial component of each alternative requires further exploration. Second, the acceptability of each alternative would needs to be determined. In addition to these two criteria, intangible aspects of each alternative, such as operability issues would need to be explored further. The attributes of each alternative are displayed in the table below.

Table 4.
Attributes of Alternatives

Option	Key Attributes
Alternative One: K-4, 5-12	Places kindergarten through fourth grade in one elementary building
Alternative Two: K-2, 3-5, 6-12	Places kindergarten through second in one building and third through fifth in one building
Alternative Three: K-4, 5-8, 9-12	Places kindergarten through fourth grade in one building, places fifth through eighth grade in the unoccupied elementary building, and leaves ninth through twelfth grade in the high school

Research Question:

With a broad perspective in mind, which alternative would be the optimal choice for the Unatego Central School District?

Conceptual Framework

An essential component in the process of determining which alternative is optimal is recognizing that in most cases, no single criterion can measure the potential of a given solution. Instead, one must consider multiple aspects of a solution derive an answer. The alternatives which Unatego is considering should be evaluated using four specific criteria. This literature review will explore concepts available on alternative selection. This will provide the basis for determining an appropriate method to examine the alternatives.

Literature Review

Multiple Criteria

Selecting the best choice among policy choices, known as single alternative selection is a complex and difficult task, which is further complicated when more alternatives are added for consideration. The undertaking becomes more difficult when multiple criteria are added into the decision process. Consideration of multiple criteria in alternative evaluation is important for reasons such as understanding the broad context of a situation and recognizing that problems exist when multiple criteria are often in direct competition with one another. (Majone, 1989; Stokey and Zeckhauser, 1978; Zeleny, 1982). One potential avenue to address issues with multiple criteria is to include a step in the policy analysis process which addresses the issue of multiple criteria. (Patton and Sawicki, 1993). The problem with examining multiple criteria is that some criteria may be easily quantified, while other criteria are not. Also, some criteria may

be in direct competition with other criteria. In the case of alternative evaluation at Unatego, four criteria exist: financial, programmatic, acceptability, and operability.

Financial Considerations

The financial impacts of each alternative in question can be quantified. This criterion is perhaps the most simple to measure. The literature available indicates a wide range of approaches to determine the financial effect of an alternative. Two of the most widely known approaches are Cost Effectiveness Analysis (CEA) and Cost Benefit Analysis (CBA) which measure the benefits and effectiveness of policy alternatives.

Although the two cost analysis approaches appear to be similar, there are key differences which set the two apart. In the first approach, CEA, benefits are not considered; instead, the focus is centered on which alternative can deliver the desired outcome at the lowest cost (Patton and Sawicki, 1993; Levin and McEwan, 2002). Because of the focus on effectiveness, CEA does not attempt to quantify perceived benefits like CBA entails.

In the classic survey article, Prest and Turvey (1965) provide an account of the basic concepts and uses of cost benefit analysis. CBA is described by Prest and Turvey (1965) as means to determine the attractiveness of projects with a strategic approach in mind. The costs and benefits are measured to determine which alternative would be the best choice for a particular policy. From an economic perspective, CBA would be an appropriate choice in assessing alternatives. Present in recent journal articles is the idea that CBA is the most complete economic measure, has a place in goal setting, and can place specific monetary values on policy choices (Robinson, 1993; Alder and Posner, 2009). Adding a monetary value to policy alternatives should be considered to be an important component of the decision making process.

Although it would appear that CBA is a useful method in alternative selection, it does have many critics. Competing standpoints on cost analysis in the public sector range from the concept that techniques such as CBA are inequitable to the concept that measurements such as CBA are imperfect in alternative measurement (Tolchin, 1984; Sinden, Kyser, and Driesen, 2009). Perhaps cost analysis alone is not enough to measure policy alternatives; however, cost analysis could be utilized in conjunction with other methods to measure policy alternatives.

Programmatic benefits

Another potential consideration in evaluating the three alternatives for dealing with Unatego's budget challenges is programmatic benefits. Although the specific programmatic outcomes of each alternative are presently unknown, an ex-ante evaluation of programmatic benefits could be performed. One possible way to achieve an ex-ante evaluation of programmatic benefits would be to utilize a forecasting technique to anticipate future results. Patton and Sawicki (1993) suggest that one technique in forecasting is to use other locales experiences with similar programs to predict how successful the program will be.

Many researchers have assessed the programmatic benefits of grade span configurations. Studies have focused on a variety of concepts, including the number of grade span transitions to the programmatic benefits of consolidation. Burkam, Michaels, and Lee (2007) explore elementary school grade span configuration and student's academic success. In related articles, Coladarci and others (2002) and Dove and others (2010) focus on rural school grade span configuration. Another study conducted by Nitta, Holley, and Wrobel (2010) focused on the programmatic benefits of consolidation.

Stakeholder Acceptability

In addition to financial and programmatic considerations, stakeholder acceptability should also be part of the assessment of each alternative. Often policy decisions are valued differently by stakeholders based on factors such as experience, expertise, and preference, which can lead to competing viewpoints regarding policy alternatives. Stakeholders can include a variety of actors, such as administrators, staff, and community members. The notion of stakeholder input concerning policy alternatives can be organized into the evaluation criteria of acceptability, which refers to which alternative is preferred by key actors (Patton and Sawicki, 1993). The input of stakeholders regarding which alternative is most desired should be factored into the alternative evaluation process based on the idea that each of the alternatives currently being considered could have long term impacts for Unatego as an organization.

First, administrators should be involved in strategic planning. Roberts (1997) suggests that under the directive approach of management, administrators can create high levels of efficiency by acting as strategic planners. Second, middle management should be incorporated into the strategic planning of an organization (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1994). Lastly, analysis of proposed policies can provide data to assist administrators in selecting the best possible alternative. Mintzberg (1994) indicates that policy planners can provide managers with useful information in the planning process.

In addition to administrators, staff and community members should be included in the assessment of each alternative. Difficult times often require innovative strategies which can be derived from a variety of sources; Welbourne (2009) notes that employees can provide valuable insight regarding the current conditions of an organization. Alberts (2007) indicates that involving community stakeholders in the policy alternative decision making process has benefits,

such as incorporating public values in the decision process and reinforcing trust in institutions. Staff members can also provide valuable insight regarding decision making. Therefore, a variety of stakeholder perspectives should be included in the decision making process, including administrators, staff, and community members.

In addition to acceptability, stakeholder's viewpoints on operability issues should also be taken into consideration. In a broad sense, operability pertains to how well a given alternative could be implemented. Although the financial aspects of each alternative will be captured within the framework of a cost analysis, certain non-quantifiable elements of each alternative would be difficult to express in financial terms. The primary non-financial aspect which needs to be considered is logistical issues such as scheduling and building usage. Patton and Sawicki (1993) indicate that even if a policy alternative receives high ratings in financial and other criteria, it should not be considered a superior policy alternative if it cannot be reasonably implemented.

Methodology

The summation of literature reviewed provides several valuable insights regarding the analysis of the three alternatives which Unatego is considering. First, there is no simple and easy way to assess the alternatives in question. Second, there are limitations to the scope of analysis of this project; although programmatic benefits are a key component in considering each alternative, it is not possible to address this section adequately in this study. Therefore, the study of programmatic benefits of each alternative will be conducted by professionals at the Unatego Central School District. Consequently, this analysis will focus on the following areas: cost analysis, stakeholder acceptability, and stakeholder perspectives regarding operability.

Data Collection

Financial Analysis

The first section of this analysis focuses on the financial composition of each of the three alternatives currently being considered by the organization. In order to evaluate the financial aspects of each alternative, elements of CEA and CBA were utilized. The main goal of the cost analysis was to place monetary values on each of the three alternatives. The key components of each alternative were employee costs, operation and maintenance costs, and transportation costs. In addition to the previously mentioned list of components, building modifications were also considered.

The primary method of collecting data for employee costs and operation and maintenance costs were 2009-2010 expenditure spreadsheets supplied by the Unatego Central School District. The main source of information for transportation costs were figures reported on the ST-3 form to the New York State Education Department (NYSED). Mileage figures were obtained from the Transportation Output Report for Unatego on the NYSED website. After a cost per mile was obtained, it was applied to the additional mileage for each alternative. Additional mileage figures were calculated by using district owned routing software. Finally, cost estimates for building modifications were multiplied by square footage figures supplied by the Unatego Central School District.

Stakeholder Acceptability and Operability

In addition to data obtained from documents, vital input regarding ranking preferences of evaluation criteria were obtained from stakeholders. This type of information was acquired through interviews. Although interviewing a small number of stakeholders was not a

representative sample of the Unatego community, it did provide valuable perspectives on each alternative.

Stakeholders at the Unatego Central School District were asked to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of each alternative. The final question which was asked of stakeholders is to rank in order of preference each alternative. After the interviews were completed, the qualitative data was compiled into tables to determine if there were common strengths and weaknesses for each alternative. Lastly, the aggregated results of stakeholder's rankings of each alternative were tabulated.

In addition to determining the acceptability of each alternative, data collected from the interviews were utilized to discover operability issues of each alternative. The concept was to determine if there were any non-monetary items for each alternative, which could cause unforeseen problems during or after the implementation stage. Patton and Sawicki (1993) assert that even if an alternative is sound financially and is adequate, the superiority of an alternative must be called into question if it cannot reasonably be implemented.

Cost Analysis

By utilizing the "ingredients method" outlined by Levin and McEwan (2002), the necessary components for the cost analysis for the three alternatives in question were examined. The first cost analysis "ingredient" examined was employee related expenditures, which include salaries and benefits. Staff salaries were represented as an average cost figure. However, this approach did have limitations, based on the idea that it could not be determined which positions would be eliminated for each alternative, a precise figure was not obtainable at the time of the analysis.

Should an attrition method be used, the cost savings would most likely be higher for each position eliminated. If layoffs were needed, the cost savings would most likely be lower, mainly because staff members with lower salaries would be eliminated. In addition to average salary figures, benefit data, such as health insurance, retirement, social security, and worker's compensation were added to the average salary to obtain a total estimated cost for each position.

The second cost analysis "ingredient" was operation and maintenance components of each building. The operation and maintenance components examined were actual expenditure figures available for each building. Operation and maintenance data which was analyzed included: electric, heating oil, supplies, and contractual items.

The third "ingredient" was transportation costs for each alternative. Transportation costs consisted of estimated additional mileage required to transport students to their assigned buildings. This data was obtained by utilizing Transfinder, which is a district owned routing software program. After additional mileage estimates were obtained, the cost per mile was applied to the additional mileage. Cost per mile was calculated using the following formula: total yearly transportation department costs divided by total yearly mileage of the transportation department.

The last "ingredient" was building modifications required for a given alternative. This figure was calculated by multiplying the square footage figure needed for each modification by the estimated cost per square foot for each modification. Square footage figures were based on the current usage for programs which need to move to accommodate for each alternative's configuration. Estimated cost per square foot was determined by estimates provided by the district's architect. The two limitations present for calculating building modifications were: space considerations for each alternative and future cost of modifications.

The "ingredients" discussed above were applied to each alternative in the form of either a cost or a cost savings. The last step in the cost analysis was to apply the additional costs and cost savings to the status quo figure. The purpose of this was to illustrate how each alternative compared in overall budget terms. This information was tabulated to provide a holistic view of each alternative's financial composition.

Stakeholder Acceptability

The next area to be examined was stakeholder acceptability. In order to measure stakeholder preference regarding each alternative, interview responses regarding the strengths and weaknesses of each alternative were compiled to determine if there were any similarities between stakeholder responses. The final item analyzed was stakeholder preference regarding alternative selection. Stakeholder's ranking of alternatives was compiled to determine which alternative was the most favored.

Alternative One Financial Analysis

Cost Savings

Alternative one involves closing one of the two elementary school buildings which the district currently operates. In 2009, each elementary school had slightly over two hundred students (New York State Education Department, 2010b). However, the two elementary schools are noticeably different in size. Otego Elementary School is slightly over 37,000 square feet and Unadilla Elementary School is approximately 54,000 square feet. Based on the idea of being able to fit kindergarten through fourth grade at one location, the most likely building to be closed would be Otego Elementary School. Therefore, costs and cost savings were based on closing the Otego Elementary School.

The first item to be considered for alternative one was the potential cost savings related to elimination of staff positions. If one of the elementary buildings were closed, the following positions are duplicates and could be eliminated: one principal, one secretary, and one nurse. These positions equate to a potential cost savings of $195,011. Based on the concept of achieving optimal cost savings, it would be unlikely that any new positions would be created for this alternative.

Next, in order to determine the number of instructional staff positions which could be eliminated, the current number of class sections for each grade level needs to be examined. Currently, each grade level has four sections, with the exception of kindergarten and fifth grade, which have five sections. The current Unatego School Board policy on the maximum number of students per class is that grades kindergarten through third can have no more than 24 students, and grades fourth through fifth can have no more than 25 students (Unatego Central School District, 2000). After comparing the number of students in each grade level to the policy on class size, it was determined that all grades could operate with four sections. By reducing the number of sections to four for each grade level, the following staff eliminations were calculated: two teaching positions, two classroom aide positions, and one LTA. The staff positions noted above equal a cost savings of $220,211.

The final component of cost savings for alternative one was related to the physical building. The following items were related to this issue: electric, heating oil, and supplies. Although actual figures could be obtained for items such as fuel oil and electricity, other cost figures such as supplies were not available for each building. Therefore, items which could not be directly attributed to each building were prorated by building size. In the following table, building operation and maintenance expenditures are displayed.

Table 5.
Building Operation and Maintenance Expenditures

Building	Allocated Costs	Prorated Costs	Total
Otego	$208,108.65	$23,777.91	$231,886.56
Unadilla	$268,191.38	$35,072.42	$303,263.80
High School	$595,311.80	$110,635.29	$705,947.09

(2009-2010 Budget Spreadsheet Data)

Based on the expenditures displayed for the Otego Elementary School building, approximately $231,886 in expenditures could be saved if this building were closed.

Costs

The next component of alternative one is the related costs which would be incurred should this option be selected. The two main areas pertaining to cost for alternative one were: transportation and building upkeep. Transportation costs related to the additional mileage placed on school vehicles, and building upkeep included items such as personnel, electricity, and fuel oil needed to maintain the building until a final building disposal decision could be made.

The additional mileage on school vehicles for alternative one was calculated as approximately 26,000 miles per year to transport students to their assigned buildings. This figure was monetized by multiplying it by a cost per mile of $2.62 (ST-3, 2010, NYSED, 2010c). Components of transportation expenses included: personnel, diesel fuel, vehicle maintenance, and garage building costs. After this calculation, an estimated cost of $68,120 is obtained for additional mileage required for alternative one.

Calculating building upkeep was more challenging, and consisted of utilizing cost figures for personnel, electricity, and fuel oil for the Otego Elementary School building. In addition to these figures, the Superintendent of buildings and Grounds was consulted to determine an estimate of the costs related to upkeep the Otego Elementary School building, should it be closed. It was estimated that half of a Full Time Equivalent (FTE) custodial position, valued at

$24,078 per year would be needed to perform maintenance duties at the building. In addition to personnel, it was estimated that the closed school building would incur electricity costs of $7,383 and fuel oil costs of $29,091. The total anticipated costs associated with alternative one including transportation and building upkeep equaled $128,673. The table below displays the net cost savings for alternative one.

Table 6.
Alternative One Net Cost Savings

New Cost	Cost Savings	Net Cost Savings
$128,553.57	$647,109.64	$518.556.07

Alternative Two Financial Analysis

Cost Savings

Alternative two would keep all three school buildings open; however, grade levels would be merged. Kindergarten through second grades at one building, while third through fifth would be at the other location. This approach would generate cost savings through elimination of instructional staff positions by having fewer sections per grade.

The following instructional staff positions could be eliminated for alternative two: two teaching positions, two classroom aide positions, and one Licensed Teacher Assistant position. In order to achieve a meaningful comparison, the same values for staff positions which were utilized in alternative one were calculated for this option, and totaled $220,211.

Costs

The main cost associated with alternative two was transportation costs. Much like alternative one, additional mileage would be placed on school vehicles to meet the demands of alternative two. The estimated additional yearly mileage for this alternative equals 21,901, which

was also the lowest estimated increase in mileage of all three of the proposed alternatives. After applying the cost per mile, which equals $2.62, the estimated increase in transportation costs for alternative two was $57,380. Displayed in the table below are the net cost savings for alternative two.

Table 7.
Alternative Two Net Cost Savings

New Cost	Cost Savings	Net Cost Savings
$57,380.62	$220,211.89	$162,831.27

Alternative Three Financial Analysis

Cost Savings

The final alternative would keep all three school buildings open. This option would consist of placing kindergarten through fourth grade in the Unadilla elementary building, placing grades fifth through eighth at the Otego elementary building, and would leave grades ninth through twelfth at the high school.

Based on this idea, cost savings would include both non instructional as well as instructional staff positions which could be eliminated. Upon closer examination, it was determined that the following positions could be eliminated for alternative three: one building principal, one secretary, two teaching positions, two classroom aide positions, and one LTA position. These positions would be eliminated by merging the two elementary schools. No new positions would be created for the middle school due to the fact that the current configuration has a middle school with an administrator and support staff. Using the 2009-2010 expenditure figures obtained from the budget spreadsheet, a cost savings figure of $374,761 is reached.

Costs

The costs associated with alternative three are also unique. In addition to transportation costs, building modifications would need to be made to meet the educational requirements of the middle school students which would be moved to one of the former elementary locations.

The estimated additional mileage for alternative three was 27,693, which made it the highest in additional mileage of all of the alternatives; this can be attributed to the need for more transfer buses than the previous options. After multiplying this figure by the cost per mile which equals $2.62, the estimated yearly transportation costs equaled $72,555.

The main building modification which would need to be made at the unoccupied elementary school would be science labs. Based on the current science labs at the high school building, two rooms with a square footage size of 1,440 square feet would be needed. An estimation given by the school's architect was $200 per square foot, which includes professional fees, building costs, and equipment (N. Rosas, personal communication, October 5, 2010). After applying this cost per square foot to the square footage figure, a cost of $288,000 is obtained. The total costs associated with this option equal $360,555. Depicted in the table below is the net cost of alternative three.

Table 8.
Alternative Three Net Cost Savings

New Cost	Cost Savings	Net Cost Savings
$360,555.66	$374,761.26	$14,205.60

Summary of Cost Analysis of Alternatives

It would appear that a sizable amount of financial resources could be saved by implementing alternative one. Likewise, alternative two has some financial benefits worth considering. Lastly, it is clear that alternative three has the lowest cost savings of all of the alternatives. Displayed in the chart below are the cost savings for each alternative for one year. The cost savings for items such as closing a building and eliminating staff would extend into the future based on the concept that the costs and cost savings would be realized on a yearly basis.

Table 9.
Summary of Cost Analysis

Option	New Cost	Total Cost	Cost Savings	New Net Cost
Status Quo	$0.00	$18,448,841	$0.00	$18,448,841
Alternative One (K-4, 5-12)	$128,553.57	$18,577,394	$647,109	$17,930,285
Alternative Two (K-2, 3-5, 6-12)	$57,380.62	$18,506,221	$220,211	$18,286,010
Alternative Three (K-4, 5-8, 9-12)	$360,555.66	$18,809,396	$374,761	$18,434,635

(Unatego Central School District Budget Spreadsheet, 2009-2010)

Acceptability and Operability of Alternatives

The two most common strengths of alternative one were programmatic continuity and the concentration of district resources. Programmatic continuity consisted of having all programs in one elementary school under a single administrator. Many of the stakeholders noted that there are slight differences in instruction between the Otego and Unadilla Elementary schools. Concentration of district resources was explained as more efficiently using school property, financial resources, and human resources. Several stakeholders indicated that they thought the school could make better use of resources available.

Alternative One

Although alternative one had two significant strengths, stakeholders indicated that there were several critical weaknesses with this option. The most noted weaknesses for alternative one were: community acceptance, loss of a building in a community, and logistical issues, student ride time on a bus and building usage issues. The first weaknesses are closely related in nature; a majority of the stakeholders indicated that community members would find it unacceptable to lose a school, which fills the role of a community center. Logistical issues would include additional ride times for students and scheduling issues for building use. Currently, the majority of students at Unatego have less than an hour bus ride to and from school; stakeholders thought that some parents would be unhappy about an increase in ride time on school buses for their children.

The final question which asked of stakeholders was to rank each alternative in preference. Alternative one received a significant amount of third choice preference responses. Based on the compilation of strengths and weaknesses and the overall preference in alternative selection, it would appear that alternative one would be low in acceptability from a stakeholder perspective.

The interviews with stakeholders also revealed valuable insights to the operability of alternative one. Building usage occurred frequently in the stakeholder's responses to weaknesses to alternative one. The concern was that there may not be enough room in school facilities to adequately accommodate functions. School functions were described in a variety of areas including sports practices and cafeteria space. Innovative approaches would need to be taken to address these building usage concerns.

Alternative Two

The strengths and weaknesses for alternative two were more balanced than alternative two. The three most prevalent strengths for this option were: benefits derived from combining grade levels, no loss of a school building in a community, and flexibility. The benefits of combining grade levels were noted as earlier socialization and educational benefits. Many of the stakeholders also thought that this alternative's strength was because it permitted both elementary buildings to remain open. Lastly, stakeholders thought that this option had flexibility because it would not be as permanent as option one and more space would be available for extracurricular activities.

The three most noted weaknesses of this alternative were: transportation issues, logistics of sharing staff, and community acceptance issues. Much like the first alternative, students would experience an increase in bus ride time, even if it was minute; because of this, stakeholders thought that this would upset some parents. Many stakeholders also thought that sharing staff could also create unintended problems; by having different grade levels at each end of the district, some of the shared staff could become overburdened. Lastly, stakeholders indicated that any type of reconfiguration would be viewed negatively by the community; several stakeholders thought that community members would not be receptive to changing a system which they favor.

The preference order for alternative two was the direct opposite of the alternative one; the majority of stakeholders indicated that this alternative would be their first choice of all alternatives. Based on the number of strengths and weaknesses, combined with the high level of first choice responses by stakeholders, it would appear that stakeholders would be supportive of alternative two.

Stakeholders also provided valuable insight regarding potential operability challenges regarding alternative two. One key notation was regarding the after school program, which is currently offered at each elementary school. Based on the idea that a student could potentially attend a school which was not in their home community, the issue could be where they would attend an after school program. The two most common strengths of this option were programmatic benefits and increased flexibility. Those interviewed indicated that the concept of having three distinct buildings for elementary, middle and high school grade levels would provide educational benefits.

However, the weaknesses identified outweighed the strengths significantly. The overwhelming majority of stakeholders though that alternative three would be inefficient. It was further explained that if a change were to be made, it should have both cost savings and programmatic benefits. The other two weaknesses according to stake holders were transportation issues and logistical issues, such as transportation and building usage.

Alternative Three

When asked to rank alternative three in selection preference, seven stakeholders ranked alternative three the last option they would choose. Based on the compilation of strengths and weaknesses, combined with the number of last choice selections, it appears that alternative three is highly unacceptable to Unatego stakeholders.

Lastly, stakeholders provided insight regarding operability issues regarding alternative three. This alternative appeared to have similar issues as the first two alternatives, which included logistics regarding building usage and after school programs. One positive aspect which surfaced was that middle school students would not need transportation for sports practice, based on the idea that they would already be at the facility where they currently have practice.

Status Quo

Also included in the interview questions was the status quo alternative. This was placed in the interview questions to gauge what stakeholders thought about the current system at Unatego. A majority of stakeholders identified two primary strengths for this policy choice. First, there is a high level of community acceptance. Second, the concept that as an organization, Unatego knows what it has, and works fairly well as whole. Many of the stakeholders indicated that there would be few in the Unatego community who would oppose leaving the current system in place. According to interviewees, community members are fairly content with the status quo and would rather work with what they have than change to another alternative which was not proven.

Much like alternative two, the strengths were counter balanced by two critical weaknesses associated with alternative three: lack of communication between schools and inefficiency. Although many in the Unatego community are content with the current system, there is still the notion that improvements could be made, one of them being better communications between grade spans. The other weakness was inefficiency; stakeholders indicated that the current system at Unatego could be more efficient.

The status quo choice was also placed in the preference ranking with the three other policy alternatives. The majority of stakeholders placed the status quo second out of all policy choices. Based on the compilation of strengths and weaknesses, and the number of second place rankings, it would appear that the status quo choice was also acceptable to stakeholders. The table below illustrates stakeholder's ranking preferences of the alternatives.

Table 10.
Alternative Acceptability

Option	First Choice (Total Occurrences)	Second Choice (Total Occurrences)	Third Choice (Total Occurrences)	Fourth Choice (Total Occurrences)
Alternative One	2	0	5	2
Alternative Two	6	1	2	0
Alternative Three	1	0	1	7
Status Quo	1	7	1	0

Findings

Finding One: Alternative one: closing one of the district's elementary schools obtains the highest cost savings of all three alternatives.

The cost analysis conducted found that alternative one would have a net cost savings of approximately $518,556. This savings is obtained primarily through staff eliminations which could not be obtained if a building was closed. The second part of the savings is derived from operations and maintenance costs which would be eliminated. It should be noted that if a building were not closed, certain staff positions, such as a building principal, nurse, and secretary would not be able to be eliminated; these positions are required if all buildings remain open.

Finding Two: Alternative two: obtains the second highest net cost savings of all alternatives and has the most acceptability to stakeholders.

The cost analysis conducted found that alternative two would have a net cost savings of approximately $162,831. The savings is far less than alternative one based on the idea that less cost savings would be obtained through elimination of staff positions. Also, there would be no cost savings from operations and maintenance, based on the idea that both elementary school buildings would remain open. Alternative two received a majority of first place selections among all alternatives which were ranked. Alternative two also had weaknesses which were offset by

strengths. It would appear that the weaknesses could be addresses, while maintaining the strengths identified.

Finding Three: The status quo option is the second most acceptable choice to the majority of stakeholders interviewed.

It would appear that stakeholders perceive that there is a need for change, and that there are issues with the current system in place at Unatego. However, the majority of stakeholders also do not want a change if it would dramatically alter the current system. If this were the case, the sentiment would be to improve the current configuration.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Eliminate proposed alternatives which do not generate a high net cost savings

Based on the idea that the Unatego Central School District is seeking an optimal alternative, one that would have a high net cost savings and acceptability, it would not make sense to select an alternative which did not meet these terms at a basic level. Although none of the alternatives alone meet all of these criteria precisely, several do meet the basic needs of Unatego. By eliminating the alternatives which are the least practical in terms of net cost savings, acceptability, and programmatic benefits, policy makers at the Unatego Central School District could focus on the remaining policy alternatives.

Recommendation 2: Evaluate each alternative on programmatic benefits

This study focused on several areas: cost savings, acceptability, and operability. However, it did not explore the programmatic benefits of each alternative. The task of evaluating the programmatic benefits of each alternative is more suited for key administrators at the Unatego Central School District. These individuals have more expertise in determining the

educational merits of each alternative. Furthermore, a specific group of individuals, which works on the LINKS committee, and could provide far more insight to administrators than this study could.

Recommendation Three: Develop a plan to monitor the alternative selected

By monitoring the progress of the alternative which is selected, whether it is one of the proposed alternatives or the status quo with modifications, Unatego as an organization will be able to track the success or failure of the alternative. This will also allow for adjustments to be made, which would otherwise be difficult without achieved data.

Conclusion

The Unatego Central School District has a group of dedicated professionals which carry out the mission of educating the community's future. This task has never been diminished, even in the face of uncertain and difficult economic conditions. Under the current economic conditions, Unatego as an organization is being proactive in their approach to deal with this challenge. This study has produced estimates on potential cost savings of several unique policy alternatives. It is hoped that the information generated in this study will aid the policy makers in their task of making difficult decisions which will certainly affect not only staff and students, but the entire community.

The data analysis and findings of this study could also be useful to other school districts which find themselves in similar predicaments. All school districts have the mission of preparing future generations with a sound education; this is true by both statute and moral responsibility.

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Appendix A

Calculations

The following list of calculations provides a detailed account of each step in the cost analysis of each alternative.

Staff Cost Savings

Average Salary: Summation of 2009-2010 expenditures for each department code/ total number of staff= Average Salary

Total Average Cost of Staff: Average Salary + Health Insurance + Employer Contributions (Retirement, Social Security, and Worker Compensation)= Total Average Cost of Staff

Cost Per Mile

2009-2010 Transportation Operating Costs/2009-2010 Total Annual Mileage= Cost Per Mile

Additional Transportation Costs

Cost Per Mile*Additional Mile= Additional Transportation Costs

Building Upkeep

.05 Full Time Equivalent* Average Custodial Position Cost+.25 Electricity+.50 Fuel Oil= Building Upkeep

Building Modifications

Square Footage Requirements*Estimated Cost Per Square Foot

Alternative One Cost Savings

Average Principal Salary: $330,752.60/4=$82,688.15

Average Cost:
Average Salary $82,688.15+Health Insurance $12,288.00+TRS $5118.39+Social Security $6,325.64+ Worker Compensation $330.75=Total Average Cost $106,750.93

Average Teacher Salary: $5,339,489.50/105=$50,852.28

Total Average Cost:
Average Salary=$50,852.28+HealthInsurance=$12,288+TRS=$3,147.75+Social Security=$3,890.19+ Worker Compensation=$203.40= Total Average Cost=$70,381.62

Average Classroom Aide Salary: $377,492.71/35=$10,786.00

Total Average Cost:
Average Salary=$10,786.00+ Health Insurance $12,288.00+ ERS $970.74+Social Security $825.12+ Worker Compensation $43.14=Total Cost $24,913.00

Average LTA Salary: 151,739.00/10=$15,173.90

Average Cost: Average LTA Salary $15,173.90+Health Insurance $12,288.00+TRS $939.26+Social Security $1160.80+Worker Compensation $60.69=Total Cost $29,622.65

Average Nurse Salary: $69,251.56/3=$23,083.85

Average Cost: Average Nurse Salary $23,083.85+Health Insurance $12,288.00+ERS $3,231.73+Social Security $1,765.91+Worker Compensation $92.33=Total Cost $40,461.82

Average Secretary Salary: $116,380.00/4=$29,095.00

Average Cost:
Average Secretary Salary $29,095.00+HealthInsurance$12,288.00+ERS$4,073.30+Social Security$2,225.76+Worker Compensation$116.38=$47,798.44

Alternative Two Cost Savings

Average Teacher Salary: $5,339,489.50/105=$50,852.28

Total Average Cost:
Average Salary=$50,852.28+HealthInsurance=$12,288+TRS=$3,147.75+Social Security=$3,890.19+ Worker Compensation=$203.40= Total Average Cost=$70,381.62

Average Classroom Aide Salary: $377,492.71/35=$10,786.00

Total Average Cost:
Average Salary=$10,786.00+ Health Insurance $12,288.00+ ERS $970.74+Social Security $825.12+ Worker Compensation $43.14=Total Cost $24,913.00

Average LTA Salary: 151,739.00/10=$15,173.90

Average Cost: Average LTA Salary $15,173.90+Health Insurance $12,288.00+TRS $939.26+Social Security $1160.80+Worker Compensation $60.69=Total Cost $29,622.65

Alternative Three Cost Savings

Average Teacher Salary: $5,339,489.50/105=$50,852.28

Total Average Cost:
Average Salary=$50,852.28+HealthInsurance=$12,288+TRS=$3,147.75+Social Security=$3,890.19+ Worker Compensation=$203.40= Total Average Cost=$70,381.62

Average Classroom Aide Salary: $377,492.71/35=$10,786.00

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Average Cost: Average LTA Salary $15,173.90+Health Insurance $12,288.00+TRS $939.26+Social Security $1160.80+Worker Compensation $60.69=Total Cost $29,622.65

Average Secretary Salary: $116,380.00/4=$29,095.00

Average Cost:
Average Secretary Salary $29,095.00+HealthInsurance$12,288.00+ERS$4,073.30+Social Security$2,225.76+Worker Compensation$116.38=$47,798.44

Alternative One Cost

Additional Transportation Cost

$2.62*26,000= $68,120.00

Building Upkeep

$24,078.14+$7,383.53+$29,091.90=$128,673.57

Alternative Two Cost

Additional Transportation Cost

$2.62*21,901=$57,380.62

Alternative Three Cost

Additional Transportation Cost

$2.62*27,673=$72,503.26

Building Modifications

1,440 Square Feet*$200.00=$288,000.00

Appendix B

Human Subjects Protocol Approval

Date: October 29, 2010

To: Dale Losee, MPA

From: Anne M. Casella, CIP Administrator

Human Subjects Research Review Committee

Subject: Human Subjects Research Approval

Protocol Number: 1523-10

Protocol title: *Alternative Selection at Unatego Central School District*

Your project identified above was reviewed by the HSRRC and has received an Exempt approval pursuant to the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) regulations, 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2) .

An exempt status signifies that you will not be required to submit a Continuing Review application as long as your project involving human subjects remains unchanged. If your project undergoes any changes these changes must be reported to our office prior to implementation, using the form listed below:
http://humansubjects.binghamton.edu/2009_Forms/012_Modification%20Form.rtf

Any unanticipated problems and/or complaints related to your use of human subjects in this project must be reported, using the form listed below,
http://humansubjects.binghamton.edu/Forms/Forms/Adverse%20Event%20Form.rtf

and delivered to the Human Subjects Research Review Office within five days. This is required so that the HSRRC can institute or update protective measures for human subjects as may be necessary. In addition, under the University's Assurance with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Binghamton University must report certain events to the federal government. These reportable events include deaths, injuries, adverse reactions or unforeseen risks to human subjects. These reports must be made regardless of the source of funding or exempt status of your project.

University policy requires you to maintain as a part of your records, any documents pertaining to the use of human subjects in your research. This includes any information or materials conveyed to, and received from, the subjects, as well as any executed consent forms, data and analysis results. These records must be maintained for at least six years after project completion or termination. If this is a funded project, you should be aware that these records are subject to inspection and review by authorized representative of the University, State and Federal governments.

Please notify this office when your project is complete by completing and forwarding to our office the following form:
http://humansubjects.binghamton.edu/Forms/Forms/Protocol%20Closure%20Form.rtf

Upon notification we will close the above referenced file. Any reactivation of the project will require a new application.

This documentation is being provided to you via email. A hard copy will not be mailed unless you request us to do so.

Thank you for your cooperation, I wish you success in your research, and please do not hesitate to contact our office if you have any questions or require further assistance.

cc: file

David Campbell

Appendix C

Letter of Agreement

UNATEGO CENTRAL SCHOOL
2641 STATE HIGHWAY 7
OTEGO, NEW YORK 13825-9795
www.unatego.org
FAX (607) 988-1039

Charles A. Molloy
Superintendent of Schools
(607) 988-5038

Nicholas Rosas
Business Manager
(607) 988-5020

Letter of Agreement

October 14, 2010

To the Binghamton University Human Subjects Research Review Committee:

I am familiar with Dale Losee's research project entitled Alternative Evaluation at the Unatego Central School District. I understand the Unatego Central School District's involvement to be interviews with key administrators. The interviews will be utilized to obtain knowledge regarding key administrator's preferences on decision criteria of several reconfiguration alternatives currently being considered by the Unatego Central School District.

I understand that this research will be carried out following sound ethical principles and that participant involvement in this research study is strictly voluntary and provides confidentiality of research data, as described in the protocol.

Therefore as a representative of Unatego Central School District, I agree that Dale Losee's Research project may be conducted at our agency/institution.

Sincerely,

Charles C. Molloy

Charles Molloy
Superintendent of Schools