Observations from the School Campaign Trail:
An Ethnography of One District’s Levy Committee

Dissertation

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Abstract

Historically, the national government has provided very little funding for public schools. While states have contributed a larger amount, the biggest burden has been shouldered by local school districts; for when state and federal funding sources fall short, public schools must derive the remaining revenue from local property taxes and a direct appeal to community citizens. The most increasingly common method for communities to recuperate these losses is to ask its voters to pass ballot initiatives at ever-increasing rates. These near-constant school levy campaigns are costing communities dearly, both financially and in terms of the good will that exists between the schools and its community.

As the number and intensity of school levy campaigns has grown, so has the research literature exploring them. Many of these studies, however, are quantitative analyses of pre-existing data or completed voter surveys. This study instead focused on the daily activities of a pro-levy campaign in one Midwestern community through a qualitative ethnography that used the participant-
observation method of gathering data. The study began with the researcher’s desire to understand the inner workings of a pro-levy group. To that end, initial research questions included: *How does the levy group organize itself? What message did the group want to convey, and how did its members work to spread that message?* However, due to the ethnographic nature of the study (which recognizes the fluidity of a research topic), as well as the levy’s eventual defeat, the topic ultimately shifted to *reasons why a levy is voted down in a community that historically has been extremely supportive of its schools*. In addition to having possible implications for school districts and future levy campaigns, this study tested the usefulness of an ethnographic approach that is underdeveloped in the school levy literature.
Dedication

To J, for planning countless activities to entertain the kids while I wrote. Thank you for encouraging and loving us all so completely.

To L, T, and C—my most important pupils (and teachers). Daily I smile with gratitude that I get to be your mom.
Acknowledgements

This dissertation, like most I suppose, was not a solo endeavor. I am foremost grateful to my advisor, Dr. Beverly M. Gordon, with whom I have had the pleasure to work for over twelve years. Her constant guidance, encouragement, and advice have been vital to my success as a graduate student. I would also like to thank the other members of my dissertation committee—Dr. Amy Shuman and Dr. Bryan Warnick—for their careful readings of, and suggestions for, my work. I am humbled to be learning with such learned professors. Finally, I must acknowledge the pro-levy campaign committee who immediately welcomed me into the group. Several members invited me into their homes during hectic moments—preparing dinner, readying children for bed, tidying rooms—all the while displaying the passion they had for passing the school levy. Although the 2012 levy failed, I know the district is in good hands with these tireless volunteers working behind the scenes.
Vita

Previous Education and Work Experience

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August 1999-June 2005.....High School Teacher

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Publications


Fields of Study

Major Field: Education

Area of Focus: Cultural Foundations in Educational Studies
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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

This chapter will discuss the background and history of public school funding in general, the setting of the study, as well as the history of the target community. It will also look at the purpose of the study, provide initial research questions, and discuss the limitations and significance of the study.

Background

• History of Public School Funding

Adequate funding for America’s public schools is essential in maintaining the nation’s compulsory education system. Yet “even though education is discussed by presidential candidates and Congress periodically passes major legislation, no more than 10 percent of public school revenues have ever come from the federal government” (Berkman and Plutzer, 2005, p. 17). In fact, although there has been a small, gradual increase in national revenue earmarked for public education over the years, in fiscal year 2009 the federal government
supplied only 9.6% of public school system funds (U.S. Department of Education, see Figure 1.1 below).

![Figure 1.1](image)

Figure 1.1  Percentage distribution of revenues for public elementary and secondary education in the United States, by source: Fiscal year 2009

Local school districts, then, are left to derive the remaining revenue from state funds, local property taxes, and a direct appeal to community citizens when those sources fall short (Menefee, 1977, p. 2). This last form of revenue has had far-reaching consequences, as “school persons from Horace Mann to the present day have called for systematic efforts to secure monies from local patrons in the name of the children, the future, and the health of society” (Menefee, 1977, p. 1).

It is not surprising that this patchwork system of educational funding has led to disparities in the quality of education provided to
our nation’s children. In his now-classic text *Savage Inequalities* (1991), Jonathan Kozol provided graphic examples of crumbling school buildings located just a few subway stops from million-dollar facilities. Soon after the text’s publication, PBS produced a documentary, based largely on Kozol’s accounts, entitled "Children in America's Schools" (1996). The film, narrated by journalist Bill Moyers, focused on the educational discrepancies apparent in one state: Ohio. According to the film, the state’s combination of rural, urban, and suburban communities provided the perfect cross-section for the producers’ research. The documentary ultimately highlighted school districts in rich and poor, large and small Ohio communities, and showcased districts whose per-pupil expenditures ranged from $3,088 to $13,752.

Ohio, the film argued, is the prototypical American state, especially in terms of inequitable school funding.

However, despite its reputation as the average state, Ohio actually receives from the federal government less than the national average distributed for public school funding. Some estimates place the federal contribution at “only four to six percent of total Ohio expenditure for K-12 public education” (Maxwell and Sweetland, 2008, 1.2). So like most states, Ohio bridges the gap in school funds through a combination of state and local revenue, including levies, bonds, and income tax proposals. The difference is that “Ohio relies
on voter approval of tax levies to support public education to a greater extent than any other state in the nation” (Fleeter, 2007, p. 1). In fact, the number of school levies brought before Ohio citizens is noteworthy: “From 1994 to 2006, for example, there were 3,433 operating levies on ballots in Ohio, averaging 264 levies per year (Fleeter, 2007, p. 17). The operating levies are measured in “mills” (one tenth of a percent), with the millage rate applied to the property wealth in the school district. One mill costs the property owner $1.00 for every $1,000 of assessed valuation each year.

These near-constant ballot issues in Ohio can be traced to a 1976 constitutional amendment, originally known as House Bill 920. Unlike virtually every other state, the millage rate for Ohio’s continuing property tax levies does not typically remain at the voted level. This is because

H.B. 920...‘rolls back’ millage rates in response to inflationary increases in district property wealth resulting from periodic property reappraisal. The erosion of voted millage rates over time in many districts (caused by H.B. 920) is the primary reason that Ohio relies more heavily on local school levies than other states (Fleeter, 2007, p. 1).

When property values increase, the state reduces the amount of money it sends to its schools, “making the assumption that additional property values mean additional property taxes. This assumption is made even though state law prevents this from happening” (Guide to
Understanding Your Property Taxes and Levies. This concept is called "phantom revenue," and since the passage of H.B. 920, local school districts have tried to counteract its effects by asking voters “to approve replacement continuing property tax levies that restore the millage rate to the level originally approved when the levy was first enacted” (Fleeter, 2007, p. 1). As a result, enormous amounts of resources are continually devoted to asking Ohio voters to increase their tax contribution to the schools—just to keep up with inflationary costs (Maxwell and Sweetland, 2008). Indeed it has recently been contended that, “there are two types of school districts in Ohio: those that are on the ballot and those that will be” (Johnson, 2008, p. 45).

Located in a similar Midwest state (SMS), in one of its wealthiest suburbs, the Mathisburg\(^1\) school district found itself in this precise situation in the fall of 2012. The school district, whose most recent levy was passed in 2007, performed an analysis of its fiscal status and determined the following: "In order to avoid continued deficit spending (i.e. expenditures exceeding revenue) while maintaining the quality of service,"

\(^1\) In order to protect the privacy of those involved in the research, Mathisburg is a pseudonym for the actual community in which the study took place. To that end, names, locations, and website addresses have been altered throughout the study. Even the home state has been protected; because it has similar characteristics to Ohio as outlined in the documentary *Children in America’s Schools*, the researcher used SMS (Similar Midwest State) as the state’s designation.
education the Mathisburg community expects, an operating levy is needed. We have been fortunate to stretch the levy to five years; delaying the levy another year would increase our deficit spending and require a larger levy the following year” (http://mathisburglevy.org/category/faqs/). The Mathisburg City School District was asking its community’s citizens to pass a 5.8 mill levy, which amounted to taxpayers paying an additional $178 per year for every $100,000 in appraised property value (http://mathisburglevy.org/category/faqs/).

Setting

- Community Profile

According to the most recent United States census records, Mathisburg, SMS recorded a population of 33,771 in 2010 (http://quickfacts.census.gov). Among those residents the racial makeup is extremely homogenous, as shown on the next page:
Figure 1.2  Racial identities of residents in Mathisburg, SMS: 2010

The charts on the following pages highlight other demographic information as it compares to the state and national data (all information obtained from http://quickfacts.census.gov). The median resident age in Mathisburg is 42.8 years old, while the median age for an SMS resident is 39.3 years. Thirty-one percent of the people who live in the community have children, and the gender breakdown of the community is pretty typical at 52.2% females and 47.8% males. The most common occupations held by community members are shown below as they compare to the rest of the state.

- White alone - 30,726 (91.0%)
- Asian alone - 1,660 (4.9%)
- Hispanic - 547 (1.6%)
- Two or more races - 478 (1.4%)
- Black alone - 262 (0.8%)
- Other race alone - 62 (0.2%)
- American Indian alone – 30 (0.09%)
- Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islanders alone - 6 (0.02%)
Figure 1.3  Income and house value comparison between Mathisburg, the state of SMS, and the country as a whole: 2007-2011

Figure 1.4: Highest educational attainment comparison between Mathisburg and SMS, 2010
Figure 1.5 Most common male occupations: a comparison between Mathisburg and SMS, 2010
Figure 1.6 Most common female occupations: a comparison between Mathisburg and SMS, 2010

From the above information, one can see some atypical trends in the community as compared to the rest of SMS and the nation. To begin, the median household income is nearly double the state average, and the estimated median value of owner-occupied housing is over double that of the state average. In short, on average the
residents of Mathisburg earn more money and live in more expensive housing than most people in SMS. While the gender makeup and average age of its citizens is rather typical of other communities throughout the state, the racial and ethnic makeup is not. The African American and Hispanic population percentages are significantly below the state average, while the Asian population percentage is well above the state average. The educational attainment of people in Mathisburg is also atypical. Ninety-eight percent of its residents over 25 years old graduated from high school (compared with the 87.4% state average), and the percentage of population over 25 years old with a bachelor's degree or higher is significantly above the state average.

A highly educated citizenry in Mathisburg translates into people occupying the jobs one would expect from such a demographic. The top occupations for males in the community—managers, lawyers, top executives, sales representatives, physicians, postsecondary teachers, and computer specialists—are also not representative of the state average, and occur in much greater percentages than in other communities in the state. The female occupation breakdown is also worth noting, as the top occupation for women in Mathisburg is teaching, but not postsecondary like their male counterparts. Instead, most female educators who are residents in Mathisburg are preschool,
kindergarten, elementary, or middle school teachers. The next most 
popular occupations are for Mathisburg women are managers, 
administrative assistants, registered nurses and retail salespeople. It 
appears that the types of jobs that men and women in Mathisburg 
possess fall along very traditional gender lines.

• Mathisburg’s History with School Levies

As the above statistics suggest, Mathisburg is a community that 
prides itself on its high-quality education and parental involvement. 
One only need look at the many generations of families who, after 
leaving the area for college, return to Mathisburg to raise their own 
children. In fact, the program for the annual graduation ceremony for 
MHS seniors denotes fourth generation “Mathisburgians” with an 
esterisk by those students’ names (and there are always several 
dozen). Undoubtedly, this is a community who values education, so it 
should come as no surprise to learn that Mathisburg has long 
supported its schools through passing local school levies. Indeed, the 
last time the community voted down a levy initiative was in 1992. 
Since then, nearly every three years the voters have approved levies 
to maintain and improve the school system.
Purpose of the Study

Since the passage of House Bill 920 in 1976, the issue of public school funding has reached the SMS Supreme Court four times; each time the court ruled that public school funding in SMS is unconstitutional because “there is an incredible reliance on local property and income taxes thus creating substantial discrepancies in per pupil spending between the 611 SMS public school districts” (Alexander, 2004, p. 3). Yet the SMS General Assembly has yet to pass any major reforms to address the issue (Knowledge Works Foundation). These school levy campaigns are increasing in the current economic climate (Ingle et. al., 2011), and unless there are major public school funding reforms in the near future the frequency (and intensity) of school levy campaigns will continue at the current rate or even increase.

As the number and intensity of school levy campaigns has grown, so has the research literature exploring them. Most of these studies, however, are quantitative analyses of pre-existing data or completed voter surveys (Alexander, 2004; Dyer, 1993; Balata, 1981). Unlike those quantitative studies, this study’s focus was on the daily activities of the pro-levy campaign in Mathisburg, SMS through a qualitative ethnography in which the participant-observation method of gathering data was used. The research study sought to understand
the inner workings of a levy campaign committee, and possibly even how someone comes to hold the pro-levy position that s/he does. This could perhaps lead to a better understanding of why a levy passes or fails. The study would also test the usefulness of an ethnographic approach that is underdeveloped in the school levy literature. An ethnographic approach could be beneficial in filling in the stories behind the statistical data that has been collected and discussed in the literature, but the approach needed to be studied. Finally, some of the levy literature studied concluded with a call for more qualitative research in future studies of levy campaigns (Johnson and Ingle, 2009; Johnson and Ingle, 2011).

As both a public school teacher and parent, the researcher has an abiding interest in how schools function. Mathisburg, SMS seemed like a perfect research site for studying levy campaigns because, since the 1980’s, the school district had passed every levy it brought to the voters. So when the Mathisburg School District decided to forgo placing an operating levy on the ballot in the fall of 2010 in favor of waiting until the fall of 2012 (ignoring the normal levy cycle of every three years), it was assumed the levy would pass and that the research study would conclude with writing a “how-to” manual for successfully passing a school levy. When a group formally announced it would be organizing opposition to the levy, the issue was followed
more closely. What the researcher learned is that despite her thirteen years in education she really didn’t know much about how schools are funded, what local levies do for schools, or how many districts face the same challenges every November. The following question eventually emerged: How many other public educators are unclear as to how public schools are funded, and are ignorant of the work done to pass levies in order to recover phantom revenue?

The purpose of this qualitative ethnography was to explore the day-to-day functions of a campaign working to approve a school levy. The researcher decided to become a participant-observer of the group, participating and studying the cultural patterns and perspectives of the group participants in their setting. It was hoped that through description, analysis, and interpretation of the culture of the group over time, the study would illuminate the group’s shared beliefs in an effort to better understand it. This ethnographic method has its history in anthropology; Bronislaw Malinowski, the renowned anthropologist of the early 1900’s, closely studied the natives of the Tobriand Islands in the South Sea. After detailing his qualitative approach and findings, Malinowski concluded that the reason ethnographic work should be done is that perhaps as we read the account of [the islanders’] remote customs there may emerge a feeling of solidarity with the endeavours and ambitions of these natives. Perhaps man's
mentality will be revealed to us, and brought near, along some lines which we never have followed before. Perhaps through realising human nature in a shape very distant and foreign to us, we shall have some light shed on our own (Malinowski, 1961, p. 25).

An ethnographic study, then, could reveal the cultural patterns and perspectives of the group participants in their setting. It is this insight into others that became the ultimate goal for studying the group working to pass a school levy.

Professionally the researcher was invested in the passage of the levy, as she is an educator well versed in the research on small class size and best practices. She knows she is a better teacher when she has more resources and smaller classes, and in order for the Mathisburg School District to maintain the level of educational excellence its community had come to expect from its teachers, the district had to maintain its revenue stream.

A defeated levy would most certainly lead to a loss in revenue and jobs in Mathisburg, a loss that would correspond to real people with real lives. A kindergarten teacher in the district, for example—a young woman in her second year of teaching who daily encourages her students to read and explore their world—would most likely be RIFed (Reduction In Force). A second grade class of nineteen was a luxury (for both teacher and students) that would not exist if the levy failed.
The people behind these statistics would be the ones who suffered the ramifications of a levy’s defeat. There was, however, a greater, farther-reaching consequence if the levy failed: a defeated levy proposal in a district that normally passed its levies could have a devastating, crippling ripple effect on other public school districts across SMS, and perhaps the nation.

Initial Research Questions

For this study, the initial research questions were developed from the desire to understand the inner workings of the pro-levy group. Therefore, one of the first things that needed to be answered was the question, *How does the group organize itself?* Every group has a local organization (Goodenough, 1970)—even if it is so embedded it goes unnoticed. It is this taken-for-granted organization that was of interest in this study. The study was also interested in how the levy meetings—both formal and informal—were conducted. *Were there assigned leaders, or did leaders emerge organically?* Observing and participating would no doubt lead to other questions along the way, but ultimately the study was interested in exploring the group’s collective voice: *What message do they want to convey to others?* And *how do they proclaim that message?* This information could prove
useful not just to this study, but to the myriad school districts across the country that regularly face these levy battles.

As the study progressed, because this was a narrative, fluid study grounded in ethnography and participant observation, it was anticipated that the research would take some turns along the way. If and when this did happen, the questions would have to change to respond according to the new developments in the research.

Limitations of the Study

This study was limited in scope to the qualitative participant-observations that were gathered (in the form of fieldnotes), as well as both structured and unstructured interviews of the pro-levy campaign and its members. While qualitative research is widely accepted as a method of gathering data, the strengths of qualitative research techniques can also reflect their weaknesses. “For example, small sample sizes help [one] investigate research problems in a comprehensive and in-depth manner. However, small sample sizes undermine opportunities to draw useful generalizations from or make broad recommendations based upon the findings” (http://libguides.usc.edu/writingguide). While this is a valid critique of utilizing a small sample size, this study was not interested in drawing broad, sweeping conclusions from the gathered data. Instead, the goal was to explore
the organization of this one group in great detail. Moreover, it was not
the intent of the study to establish causal relationships between the
committee members’ actions and the outcome of the election, nor
close compare the pro-levy campaign to the anti-levy campaign; causality
and comparisons do not align with the study’s research goals and
methods, nor does grand theorizing.

Other limitations include the fact that the focus of the study was
one suburban school district in SMS, Mathisburg City School District.
In addition, the time frame was limited to one levy ballot issue during
the fall of 2012. Finally, there was a personal concern on the part of
the researcher that studying the anti-levy campaign committee might
have serious professional and personal repercussions, which is why the
focus of the study shifted to the pro-levy committee. But providing
that distance from the anti-levy group did not eliminate all negative
ramifications; indeed, merely writing about the subject proved to be
controversial, since the topic was so polarizing in the community.

Significance of the Study

Levy campaign studies are relatively new to the educational
research literature. The studies that have been conducted are mostly
quantitative, asking people to complete a survey, or analyzing pre-
existing data (Alexander, 2004; Dyer, 1993; Balata, 1981); few
qualitative, ethnographic studies exploring the everyday life of a levy campaign have been completed. Since school levy campaigns are increasing—and are projected to continually increase in the current economic climate (Ingle et. al., 2013), an ethnography of one pro-levy group could yield valuable insight for those working to pass (or oppose) school levies. In addition, an ethnography of a pro-levy campaign could explore how someone comes to hold the pro-levy position that s/he does, as well as seek to better understand the group as a whole. Finally, the study could also test the usefulness of an ethnographic approach that is underdeveloped in the school levy literature. If found to be useful, this approach could suggest a need for future ethnographic studies of levy campaigns.

Conclusion

Although historically SMS’s schools have been largely funded through local property taxes, a steady decline in public school funding from the state is forcing local school districts to compensate for the shortfall. The most increasingly common method for communities to recuperate this phantom revenue is to ask its voters to pass ballot initiatives at ever-increasing rates. These near-constant levy campaigns are costing communities dearly, both financially and in terms of the good will that exists between the schools and its
community. The in-depth exploration of a group on one side of the school levy issue may provide greater understanding of the school levy issue at large. This could perhaps suggest future studies that point to solutions for alleviating the pressures felt by all parties invested in passing a school levy.
CHAPTER 2: Review of Related Literature

Introduction

This chapter will summarize the current research literature that was consulted for this study. By understanding the work that was done before this study, the collected data can be contextualized as well as supported by current and past research.

Because of its aforementioned demographic “averageness,” as well as the landmark school finance court decision that eventually emerged from the state, Ohio is a salient exemplar of the history of school funding in the United States. For these reasons much of the following discussion will focus on Ohio—recognizing that it is only one state of many that has struggled with issues of public school funding and the passages of levies.

School Funding and Levy History

Americans have long battled to create an equitable funding system for its public schools, and nowhere is this more obvious than in Ohio. As early as 1825 the state mandated each district to levy local
taxes for the schools of its district. In addition to the federal
government’s minor contribution, the state also pledged to financially
support public schools annually. This funding system, which so heavily
relied upon widely varied local taxes, led to inequities in the quality of
education each Ohio student received. For example, in more affluent
districts high property values led to greater funding, while in urban
and rural districts low property values left fewer resources to fund
budget shortfalls or dilapidated facilities (Children in America’s
Schools). Ever since the “1838 mandate that all youth in the state
would be provided free education,” the Ohio legislature has struggled
to design a system that would make this a continual reality for all its
young citizens (Maxwell and Sweetland, 2008).

After nearly a century and a half of attempts to close budget
shortfalls and inequities in school funding, in 1971 a state income tax
was passed and the formula outlining state aid was changed. But even
these measures weren’t sufficient; a comprehensive study of school
finances was authorized and what resulted was legislation that “has
ever since affected the adequacy of funding Ohio’s elementary and
secondary schools” (Maxwell and Sweetland, 2008, p. 2.20). House
Bill 920, enacted in 1976, “effectively limited the revenue from voted
millage to the amount the initial levy was to yield on all real property.
As assessed values of real property...increase, the millage rates on the
classes of real property are effectively reduced” (Maxwell and Sweetland, 2008, p. 2.20).

Over the next 30 years, Ohio's public school districts sent nearly 10,000 levies to the ballot (Starzyk, 2009). “Voters grew weary of the constant campaigns and—unaware of the intricacies of the funding scheme—often questioned why schools were constantly running out of money” (Funding Our Ohio Schools, 2009). Then in 1991 the major series of school funding litigation commenced. The Ohio Coalition for Equity and Adequacy, a coalition representing nearly every school district in the state, formed that same year and—after interviewing several students from several different schools—filed a complaint on behalf of Nathan DeRolph, a 15-year-old freshman at Sheridan High School in Thornville, Ohio. Because DeRolph played sports and visited many schools, as well as the fact that his mother was a teacher and his grandfather was on the school board, the coalition believed “he was the perfect kid to put a human face to a very numbers driven argument: that school funding in Ohio was unequal, unfair, and unconstitutional” (Lieszko, 2013). The lawsuit alleged that Ohio’s system for funding public schools did not meet the constitutional standard for thoroughness or efficiency. It also presented evidence to demonstrate that the school funding system produced unequal, inefficient and inadequate results (O’Brien, 2003).
The DeRolph decision, as it would come to be known, was ultimately decided in 1997, with the Ohio Supreme Court finding the school funding system unconstitutional and ordering the Ohio legislature to remedy the system within one year. As shown in the timeline on the following page, that year came and went with no reform, and even though the courts—including the United States Supreme Court—continued to rule that Ohio’s school funding system was unconstitutional, the Ohio General Assembly refused to implement solutions.
By the time DeRolph IV was decided in 2002, the Ohio Supreme Court refused to consider further litigation, leaving “Ohioans with an unconstitutional school funding system that might very well be perpetually unconstitutional” (Maxwell and Sweetland, 2008, pgs. 2.28-2.29). Not surprisingly, this is the current state of Ohio’s public school funding.

But Ohio is not the only state that has turned to the legal system to address its school funding concerns. Almost every state in the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>House Bill 920 Passes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec. 1991</td>
<td>DeRolph lawsuit filed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar. 1997</td>
<td>Supreme Court rules funding system unconstitutional, orders compliance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar. 1998</td>
<td>DeRolph deadline for compliance passes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feb. 1999</td>
<td>Lower court rules state has not complied with DeRolph order</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2000</td>
<td>Supreme Court rules funding system still unconstitutional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sept. 2001</td>
<td>Court rules school funding system still unconstitutional, orders state to alter methodology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec. 2002</td>
<td>Supreme Court affirms that funding system remains unconstitutional but ends its oversight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2003</td>
<td>Supreme Court reiterates final DeRolph order; prohibits further litigation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct. 2003</td>
<td>U.S. Supreme Court declines to hear the case</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan. 2007</td>
<td>Campaign proposing constitutional amendment to establish high quality education as a fundamental right does not gain enough signatures to place proposed amendment on November 2007 ballot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2008</td>
<td>Campaign suspends effort to place constitutional amendment on November 2008 ballot</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
country has had a similar courtroom history in its quest to find the perfect system to fund public education. In 1971, in response to growing discontent over soaring property taxes, the Minnesota Legislature gave school districts much greater flexibility and scope when asking voters to cover general operating expenses through levy initiatives (Minnesota House of Representatives Fiscal Analysis, 2008). The “Minnesota Miracle,” as it would come to be known, remained in place—relatively unchanged—for over thirty years. And in 1973, Wisconsin’s legislature “created a complete tax base equalization program” designed to relieve local property owners from ever-increasing taxes, while equalizing the levels of educational spending (Association for Equity in Funding).

Like in Ohio, what underscored these school funding policy decisions was the ideal of equalizing education funding. According to the Minnesota legislature, the school funding system had to be reformed because “disparities in the quality of education between property-tax-rich and property-tax-poor districts were egregious” (Minnesota House of Representatives Fiscal Analysis, 2008). However, while universally recognizing that educational funding systems were inherently inequitable, historically state courts have also declared as unconstitutional those systems trying to equalize the funding outcomes. For example, in the 2000 Vincent v. Voight decision the
Wisconsin Supreme Court ruled that students have “a fundamental right to an equal opportunity for a sound basic education” while at the same time holding that “uniform revenue-raising capacity among districts is not constitutionally required” (Vincent v. Voight, 2000). This seemingly contradictory decision left the state reeling, with “Wisconsin's general school aid equalization program...no longer considered a true power equalizing program because districts having the same cost per student [we]re not required to levy the same tax rate” (National Education Access Network, 2014).

In the now-famous 1971 school finance decision of California’s Superior Court of Los Angeles, the court found that the state’s public school funding system relied too heavily upon disparate local property tax revenue, and therefore “fail[ed] to meet the requirements of the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment of the United States Constitution and the California Constitution” (Serrano v. Priest). However, two years later, in 1973, the Supreme Court of the United States found nearly the exact opposite in the case of San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez. The court ruled that the Texas system of public school funding, also largely based on local property tax revenue, was not unconstitutional and could therefore proceed as it had for nearly a century (San Antonio Independent School District vs. Rodriguez, 1973). In the wake of these vastly
different decisions, states grappled with how to enact funding policies that would comply with their individual state laws; most ended up with a formula in which the majority of public school revenue is derived from state and local taxes, as shown in the table below and in the figure on following page.

Table 2.2 National trend of annual public school revenue source, 2002-2012 (nea.org)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>F-8. PERCENTAGE OF REVENUE FOR PUBLIC K-12 SCHOOLS FROM LOCAL GOVERNMENTS, 2011-12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA                                                        88.8 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>ILLINOIS                                                                    65.6 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>NEW JERSEY                                                                  63.4 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>RHODE ISLAND                                                                61.9 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>NEW HAMPSHIRE                                                               61.0 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>MISSOURI                                                                    59.2 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>NEVADA                                                                      56.9 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>NEBRASKA                                                                    56.1 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>CONNECTICUT                                                                 55.8 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>VIRGINIA                                                                    55.1 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>PENNSYLVANIA                                                                54.8 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>SOUTH DAKOTA                                                                53.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>MASSACHUSETTS                                                              52.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>MAINE                                                                       51.8 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>FLORIDA                                                                     50.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>COLORADO                                                                    49.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>NORTH DAKOTA                                                                49.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td>MARYLAND                                                                    49.5 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.</td>
<td>GEORGIA                                                                     47.7 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.</td>
<td>TEXAS                                                                        47.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21.</td>
<td>NEW YORK                                                                    46.2 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22.</td>
<td>IOWA                                                                        45.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23.</td>
<td>OHIO                                                                        44.8 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24.</td>
<td>SOUTH CAROLINA                                                              43.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25.</td>
<td>WISCONSIN                                                                   43.5 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.</td>
<td>OREGON                                                                      41.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27.</td>
<td>LOUISIANA                                                                   39.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28.</td>
<td>ARIZONA                                                                     39.1 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29.</td>
<td>MONTANA                                                                     39.1 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30.</td>
<td>TENNESSEE                                                                   39.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31.</td>
<td>WYOMING                                                                     38.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32.</td>
<td>UTAH                                                                        37.6 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33.</td>
<td>KENTUCKY                                                                    37.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34.</td>
<td>ARKANSAS                                                                    36.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35.</td>
<td>KANSAS                                                                       36.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36.</td>
<td>OKLAHOMA                                                                    36.1 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37.</td>
<td>INDIANA                                                                     35.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38.</td>
<td>MISSISSIPPI                                                                 33.0 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39.</td>
<td>ALABAMA                                                                      32.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40.</td>
<td>DELAWARE                                                                    30.4 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41.</td>
<td>WASHINGTON                                                                  30.1 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42.</td>
<td>CALIFORNIA                                                                  30.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43.</td>
<td>NORTH CAROLINA                                                              28.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44.</td>
<td>WEST VIRGINIA                                                               26.9 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45.</td>
<td>ALASKA                                                                       23.6 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46.</td>
<td>IDAHO                                                                       19.1 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47.</td>
<td>MICHIGAN                                                                    18.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48.</td>
<td>NEW MEXICO                                                                   17.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49.</td>
<td>MINNESOTA                                                                   13.2 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50.</td>
<td>VERMONT                                                                     4.5 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51.</td>
<td>HAWAII                                                                      1.6 *</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2.1 Percentage of revenue public schools receive from local taxes, 2011-12. (nea.org)
School Funding and Public Opinion

In their book *Ten Thousand Democracies: Politics and Public Opinion in America’s School Districts*, Michael B. Berkman and Eric Plutzer present a comprehensive view of issues affecting today’s schools. Published in 2005, the book presents, among other information, extensive research about how U.S. schools are funded—and the public’s attitudes in response to that funding. After outlining the basic structure of how public school funds are derived from local property taxes, Berkman and Plutzer assert their finding that “people will pay for a home in a district with higher property taxes because the tax directly benefits their schools” (Berkman and Plutzer, 2005, p. 26). Their conclusion is based on Charles Tiebout’s ‘Pure Theory of Local Expenditures’ (1956), which “basically says that people, when they can, will move to the community that provides them with the level of spending and benefits that they prefer” (Berkman and Plutzer, 2005, pp. 26). Berkman and Plutzer go on to argue that because of this, policy outcomes in a given community are likely to mirror the preferences of the residents. They conclude that the community’s funding responsibility through property taxes “should have an impact upon both spending levels and policy responsiveness” (Berkman and Plutzer, 2005, p. 27). This system, then, results in a local checks-and-balances relationship for the taxpayer and the local government.
Berkman and Plutzer go on to explain how this local check on property taxes directly impacts the schools of that community. Their research into school levies found that social class might play a role in one’s support of educational spending, although experts disagree on exactly how this plays out. Some economists argue that a “taste for education” derives primarily from one’s own education and social class (Hoxby, 1998), leading Berkman and Plutzer to argue that “presumably, well-educated, middle-class people (on average) place a higher value on education than others. This value translates into a willingness to pay higher taxes personally, pay more for houses in better school districts” (Berkman and Plutzer, 2005, p. 37). Others point to “groups that have been consistently liberal and supportive of the Democratic Party—African Americans, lower income groups, renters and city dwellers—as the core population supporting educational spending” (Berkman and Plutzer, 2005, p. 38). While the research suggests an ambiguous connection between support for school taxes and social class, other factors are more clear-cut. These include age (seniors are 15% less likely to support educational spending than younger voters), race (African Americans are 5-8% more supportive of educational spending), and whether or not one is a parent (parents with school-age children are 5-11% more likely to vote in favor of a school levy) (Berkman and Plutzer, 2005, pp. 38-
43). Berkman and Plutzer conclude that “not all tax increases are controversial. But when they are, young voters, African Americans, parents, and those with a high level of educational attainment themselves are likely to support it” (2005, p. 61).

Another important factor in determining local support for educational spending is the public’s opinion of the school district. Stanley Elam, longtime director of Phi Beta Kappa’s annual Survey of Public Attitudes toward the Public Schools, has argued, “public opinion, in the last analysis, is what distinguishes the possible from the impossible in public education (Elam, 1995, p. 1). One conspicuous area of educational spending that is open to constant public opinion is per pupil spending, especially since “the largest category of educational spending per pupil is teacher salaries and benefits,” which can range from 60% to over 85% (Berkman and Plutzer, 2005, p. 30). According to Hanushek (1996), during the past several decades, expenditures on teachers have increased steadily and have translated into higher salaries for teachers. But this increase in teacher salaries has also resulted in smaller class sizes for students; indeed the rate of overall instructional spending during the past several decades has reached an all-time high, and most of the excess during this period has been spent on books, materials, and aides (Odden and Picus, 2004).
Even evidence of where the tax dollars are being spent may not be enough to compel a citizen to support educational spending. Anti-tax groups can take advantage of school levy issues on the ballot, promoting them as a means for people to register their dissatisfaction with their schools (Wirt and Kirst, 1997). And since these local school referenda are often the only opportunity for citizens to vote on governmental spending, they are “the most effective and obvious means by which citizens can register their decision to slow down government spending and taxation” (Guttman, 1987, pp. 141-142). These anti-tax groups may also focus on teachers’ unions, as “in nearly all cases, strong unions are associated with higher per-pupil spending” (Berkman and Plutzer, 2005, p. 120). They may encourage citizens to counter unions’ political and economic influence when given “the opportunity to vote directly on referenda concerning tax collections” (Courant, Gramlich, and Rubenfield, 1979, p. 806). These local tax issues provide a system in which “local residents can defend themselves against the possibility that unions will press for contract terms that are well outside residents’ collective preferences” (Berkman and Plutzer, 2005, p. 123).
Current Levy Research

Most research of levy campaigns is quantitative in nature. For example, using logistic regression, Ingle et. al. “sought to understand the relationship between district characteristics, district finances, levy characteristics, and campaign expenditures with new operating levy outcomes” (2013, p. 41). And others have used their statistical analysis of voting outcomes to create manuals and handbooks that would aid districts in their levy campaigns (Whitman and Pinter, 1990; Rampelt, 2012). While this information can be useful to levy campaign committees, there is a dearth of qualitative, ethnographic research describing the campaigns themselves, including how they are organized and how they function. Understanding levy campaigns could add to the research literature by fleshing out the numbers and presenting scenarios and narratives from people actually doing the campaign work.

As the complicated history of school funding previously showed, levy campaigns in most states are not going away. In 2011, 367 school tax issues were on the ballot in SMS, and that number was down from 434 in 2010; approximately one third of those pass each year. “This means that the average school district will have to place an issue before the voters three times before it passes” (Rampelt, 2012, p. 2.1). Since the current funding system does not appear to
face reform any time soon, school districts will continue to rely heavily upon local property taxes, which generate 50-60 percent of total revenue for the majority of public school districts nationally (House, 1989). With stakes this high (and no where else to turn) school districts must do everything they can to pass their levies, for “levy-election results frequently mean the difference between the curtailment or expansion of educational services” (House, 1989). Trying to observe and describe the inner workings of a district campaign could ultimately lead to the creation of strategies for successfully passing a school levy.

Conclusion

This chapter reviewed the literature concerning school funding and levy history, as well public opinion surrounding school funding. It also surveyed the currently available research on levy campaigns. From this literature review, the reader has a better understanding of the work that was done before this study. In addition, this review contextualizes the data collected and serves to ground the study. What is concluded from this review is that issues of school funding and levies are complexly interwoven. In addition, because there are no plans for reform on the horizon, schools most likely will continue to be funded in the same way for the foreseeable future.
Chapter 3: Methodology and Methods

Introduction

This chapter will outline the methodology used in this study through a brief history of the use of qualitative research in educational settings, including a discussion of its characteristics and strengths. The specific type of qualitative research used in this study, ethnography—and more specifically, participant observation—will also be discussed. The theory of cultural rich points as they relate to these observations will also be explored, as will the usefulness of these methodologies in political campaigns. Finally, the coding method used in the collection and analysis of the data will also be explained.

Qualitative Research in Education

The methods a researcher employs reveal his/her assessment of what counts as knowledge. Those using quantitative methods, for example, often aim to make generalizations about collected data—both past and present—ultimately offering predictions and explanations.
Researchers using qualitative methods, on the other hand, seek to explore social phenomena from the perspective of those involved, often to contextualize or transform social conditions.

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world...[and] involve an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011, p. 3).

Since the researcher was interested in understanding and interpreting how the people in the pro-levy group constructed the world around them, she chose to employ qualitative research methods, as they provided the best option for achieving that goal.

• History

The history of qualitative research in education is varied and complex. Its origins cannot be discussed without mentioning Bronislaw Malinowski, widely considered the founder of social anthropology, and often credited with changing how people in the early twentieth century viewed and studied other cultures. Unlike many anthropologists of that era who either brought their subjects to them, or who consulted travelers’ or missionaries’ reports for “evidence,” of a proposed theory, Malinowski insisted on fieldwork to
guide his inquiry. His anti-foundational paradigm argued social worlds are woven together through situated, local organizations that function very differently from the worlds measured through the positivistic science so revered at the time. An advocate for observation and the power of description, Malinowski insisted that any study of social worlds must include carefully planned, well-executed face-to-face interaction: “Success can only be obtained by a patient and systematic application of a number of rules of common sense and well-known scientific principles, and not by the discovery of any marvellous short-cut leading to the desired results without effort or trouble” (Malinowski, 1961, p. 6). And in his effort to create a more disciplined field of study, Malinowski advocated a method of “unquestionable scientific value, in which we can clearly draw the line between, on the one hand, the results of direct observation and of native statements and interpretations, and on the other, the inferences of the author, based on his common sense and psychological insight” (Malinowski, 1961, pp. 3).

This combination of direct observation and author inference laid the foundation for modern qualitative research, and provided a framework for its application to fields outside anthropology. Sociologists at the University of Chicago, for example, contributed to the emergence of qualitative research. Often referred to as “The
Chicago School,” this group of researchers saw meaning as fundamentally embedded in social situations, making such situations worthy of study. Their research relied on firsthand data collection (Faris, 1967) and “depended on the study of a single case, whether it was a person, a group, a neighborhood, or a community” (Bogden and Biklen, 1998, p. 8). Studies from the Chicago School were interested in the ordinariness of everyday life, and emphasized the social, local, interactional nature of reality. Perhaps one Chicago sociologist put it best when he claimed, “behavior can be studied profitably in terms of the situation out of which it arises” (Wells, 1939, p. 428).

But it is Margaret Mead who is credited with the “earliest substantive application of anthropology to U. S. education” (Bogden and Biklen, 1998, p. 8). Much of Mead’s work was concerned with schools and teachers, and included fieldwork in “less technological societies to dramatize the fast-changing educational scene in the United States” (Bogden and Biklen, 1998, p. 8). Mead studied a wide variety of schools—“the little red schoolhouse, the city school, and the academy”—and explored how these different types of schools affected their respective teachers, as well as their interactions with students (Bogden and Biklen, 1998, p. 8). Ultimately, Mead argued, “teachers needed to study, through observations and firsthand experiences, the changing contexts of their students’ socialization and upbringing in
order to become better teachers” (Bogden and Biklen, 1998, p. 8). Margaret Mead’s groundbreaking work undoubtedly influenced the development of qualitative research in education.

- Characteristics

Because its history is rooted in anthropology and sociology, qualitative research is defined by characteristics that one would associate with those fields. The five features listed on the following page, as identified by Bogdan and Biklen (1998), are present to some degree in most qualitative research:
Naturalistic | Researcher is key instrument in studying real-world situations as they unfold naturally; researcher is interested in context of particular research setting.
---|---
Descriptive | Data—in the form of interviews, observations, transcripts, etc.—are collected and can be represented in words or pictures; reports are often “anecdotal.”
Process-oriented | Researcher is concerned with process rather than outcomes or products; avoids rigid designs that eliminate responsiveness and pursues new paths of discovery as they emerge.
Inductive | Avoids seeking evidence to prove/disprove a theory; instead builds arguments as particulars of research are gathered; theory emerges from bottom up.
Meaning-driven | Researchers are interested in how people make sense of their lives; focus is on participants’ perspectives.

Table 3.1: Five features of qualitative research (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998).

- Strengths of Using Qualitative Methods

One of the many advantages of using qualitative methods is that “they generate rich, detailed data that leave the participants' perspectives intact and provide multiple contexts for understanding the phenomenon under study” (http://libguides.usc.edu/). Qualitative research also aids in obtaining a sense of the world that cannot be experienced through statistical analysis, and often “yields results that can be helpful in pioneering new ways of understanding” (http://libguides.usc.edu/). Because the information collected can
vary widely, the subsequent data analysis, interpretation, and presentation of the information can also take multiple forms.

Qualitative research, however, is not without its critics. Some perceived limitations of using qualitative methods include fear of the researcher “drifting away from the original objectives of the research in response to the changing nature of the context...[and failing] to investigate causality between different research phenomena” (http://libguides.usc.edu/). These characteristics of qualitative research are actually viewed as strengths by qualitative researchers, and ultimately benefitted this particular research study. Still others argue that the sample size of some qualitative studies is too small, that nothing can be learned from such a small sample. But studies have shown “there is a point of diminishing return to a qualitative sample—as the study goes on more data does not necessarily lead to more information” (Mason, 2010; see also Ritchie, Lewis, and Elam, 2003). So a small sample size in and of it is not problematic in qualitative research studies.

Perhaps the largest criticism hurled upon qualitative research is its perceived lack of objectivity. This argument assumes that there is a large, knowable “truth” to be studied and discovered. Qualitative researchers reject this notion, believing instead that the very nature of inquiry is value-laden (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). To them,
Objectivity is not a concept that has to do with the discovery of truth. Rather, it represents a continuum of closeness to an accurate description and understanding of observable phenomena. It does imply that there is a real world ‘out there’; and while one can construct any number of views of the world, not all will stand up to a fair test equally; and that any one observer can know aspects of that world to greater and lesser degrees of accuracy based on his/her carefulness in observation, recording, and analysis. However, the understanding that any researcher (using any method) develops is partial (DeWalt and DeWalt, 2011, p. 111).

Qualitative researchers acknowledge that being a clean slate is neither possible nor desirable, and that all researchers—even quantitative—are affected by observer’s bias. A qualitative researcher’s goal should be to try to limit observer’s bias, “to become more reflective and conscious of how who you are may shape and enrich what you do, not to eliminate it” (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998, p. 34). A continual acknowledgment of this through rigorously recorded fieldnotes helps the qualitative researcher to “objectively study the subjective states of their subjects” (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998, p. 33).

A closely related criticism of qualitative research is its inherent opportunity for researchers to arrive at different conclusions based on the same information. Quantitative researchers call this “reliability,” and they design studies with this principle in mind. For the qualitative researcher, however, reliability means something different. Since qualitative researchers believe that situations are complex and
multifaceted, they often encourage multiple dimensions of a situation, rather than a narrowing of it. Therefore, “two researchers studying a single setting may come up with different data and produce different findings. Both studies can be reliable,” as the primary goal of a qualitative study is to add to knowledge by generating theory, description, or understanding (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998, p. 36).

- Ethnography

One type of qualitative research is ethnography, whose “method has its roots in ancient history. Poets, historians, travelers, and, later, missionaries wrote detailed observations of the customs and behaviors of the strange-seeming peoples who lived far from their own nations’ borders” (Dobbert, 1982, p. 3). Then in the nineteenth century, as previously discussed, “attempts were made to systematize the research process that gave rise to these representations of other ways of life” (Angrosino, 2002, p. 1). While these methods—based on the work of Malinowski and others—evolved and “took different paths in different places,” they are all united “by the use of field-based, direct observation methodologies” (Dobbert, 1982, p. 4). Put succinctly, “the basic goal of ethnography is to create a vivid reconstruction of the culture studied” (LeCompte and Preissle, 1993, p. 235).
Ethnographers do this through careful study, and detailed fieldnotes and reports:

Ethnography, then, is ‘thick description.’ When culture is examined from this perspective, the ethnographer is faced with a series of interpretations of life, of common-sense understandings, that are complex and difficult to separate from each other. The ethnographer’s goals are to share in the meanings that the cultural participants take for granted and then to depict the new understanding for the reader and for outsiders. The ethnographer is concerned with representations (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998, p. 29).

Ethnographers often ask themselves *What is going on here?*—a question Wolcott (1988) believes is a suitable starting point for ethnographic research. Trying to understand a culture is at the heart of this research; “it is the framework of culture...as the principal organizational or conceptual tool used to interpret data that characterizes ethnography” (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998, p. 29).

Over the past few decades ethnography has become an umbrella term for—and often interchangeable with—many types of qualitative research, including educational anthropology, field research, participant observation, and naturalistic inquiry. However, Harry Wolcott, among others, argues that this broadening definition of the term dilutes the intent of ethnography: “It has been dismaying in recent years to watch educational researchers affix the label ‘ethnography’ to virtually any endeavor at descriptive research. My
own position is that the label, should be reserved for descriptive efforts clearly ethnographic in intent...[to those] oriented to cultural interpretation” (Wolcott, 1987, pp. 37, 43). Despite these various definitions of ethnography, there are common methodological strategies that distinguish this style of inquiry: participant observation, ethnographic interviews, and artifact collection and analysis (McMillan and Schumacher, 1993)—all of which were used in this research study.

• Participant Observation

One of the most common methods employed by ethnographers is that of participant observation, which “represents the starting point in ethnographic research” (Schensul et. al., 1999, p. 91), and “is accepted almost universally as the central and defining method of research in cultural anthropology” (DeWalt and DeWalt, 2011, p. 2). While some people use the terms “ethnography” and “participant observation” interchangeably, most scholars use the terms separately, defining participant observation as one of several methods that can be utilized during ethnographic research. Using Malinowski as a framework, ethnographers recognize that the participant observer is the primary tool of research; participant observation “is a way to collect data in naturalistic settings by ethnographers who observe
and/or take part in the common and uncommon activities of the people being studied” (DeWalt and DeWalt, 2011, p. 2).

Participant observation is advantageous to research because it “enhances the quality of the data obtained during fieldwork…it enhances the quality of the interpretation of data…[and] it encourages the formulation of new research questions and hypotheses grounded in on-the-scene observation” (DeWalt and DeWalt, 2011, p. 10). It is a “strategic method” that “puts you where the action is and lets you collect data…any kind of data you want, narratives or numbers” (Bernard, 2006, p. 343). Once believed to be a method valuable only in cultural anthropology, participant observation is now employed by many well-respected social scientists in myriad fields of study. In fact, for McCall and Simmons (1969), Spradley (1980), VanMaanen (1988), Grills (1998), and Agar (1996), participant observation is the best method of gathering ethnographic information, for when an ethnographer takes an interest in some corner of the world, he or she goes out and encounters it first hand.

Participant observation, that awkward term, simply codes the assumption that the raw material of ethnographic research lies out there in the daily activities of the people you are interested in, and the only way to access those activities is to establish relationships with people, participate with them in what they do, and observe what is going on (Agar, 1996, p. 31).

Both ethnography and participant observation are grounded in the theoretical traditions of symbolic interaction, as well as
ethnomethodology. Symbolic interaction insists that human action takes place in situations that force the subject to define the situation confronting him/her (Blumer 1954). It tends to focus on “the activities of people in face-to-face relations” (Rock, 2001, p. 26). Similarly, ethnomethodology posits that “society consists of ceaseless ever-unfolding transactions through which members engage one another and the objects, topics, and concerns that they find relevant” (Pollner and Emerson, 2001, p. 120). It is clear that symbolic interaction and ethnomethodology are closely tied to ethnography and participant observation.

One research methodology that often appears in qualitative research but will not be a part of this study is grounded theory, which was first described by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Grounded theory often has as its goal the generation of theory that describes basic psychological and social phenomena (Chenitz & Swanson, 1986; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Hutchinson, 1986). This is study, in contrast, is aligned with the ethnographers’ goal of providing a thick description of the cultural phenomenon under study.

- Cultural Rich Points and Their Significance

Linguistic anthropologist Michael Agar put forward a theory specific to ethnographic participant observation. According to Agar,
“participant observation makes it possible for surprises to happen, for the unexpected to occur” (1996, p. 31). He labels these “problems of understanding” as rich points. When a rich point occurs, an ethnographer “learns that his or her assumptions about how the world works, usually implicit and out of awareness, are inadequate to understand something that had happened” (Agar, 1996, p. 31). In other words, a gap arises between the world of the ethnographer and the world s/he is studying. Rich points are the words or actions that signal those gaps, and “are the raw material of ethnography, for it is the distance between two worlds of experience that is exactly the problem that ethnographic research is designed to locate and solve” (Agar, 1996, p. 31).

Once a rich point occurs, Agar suggests that the ethnographer tries to reconcile the two worldviews through coherence. Agar does not mean the ethnographer eliminates ambiguity or confusion in the situation, but rather comes to understand the conflict as his/her problem, not the problem of the people being studied. A cultural rich point does not mean the group is irrational or disorganized; it means the ethnographer “is not yet competent to understand it” (Agar, 1996, p. 31). The ethnographer must assume there is a point of view or context for the action in which the rich point makes sense. It is his/her job, then, “to find out what it is, model it in some way, and
check the model out in the subsequent words and actions of the group” (Agar, 1996, p. 32). The participant observation method of ethnography is bound to present a multitude of rich points for the ethnographer to discover and try to understand.

**Ethnography and Participant Observation in Political Campaigns**

Since Malinowski’s early formulations of ethnography as it relates to anthropology, ethnographic studies have been conducted in nearly every field of social science—including political campaigns. In fact, the use of ethnography is steadily increasing in political science as a way to study locality. Aronoff and Kubik (2012), for example, argue that “if we understand politics as, in some important measure, *locally* produced, we again might turn to ethnography. Indeed, attention to the microlevel of analysis is an important trend in today’s study of politics (Geddes 2003; Weinstein 2007 351-65; Wood 2003)” (p. 24).

Although ethnography in politics is a growing trend, it is by no means novel. In his article “Forty Years as a Political Ethnographer,” Aronoff (2006) describes the political ethnography he designed for his doctoral dissertation in the 1960’s: “The only way I could understand the meaning of politics was to observe the people involved in the processes I wanted to study and learn how they understood what was
going on” (pp. 2-3). He continues with a discussion of the mutually beneficial relationship of anthropology and politics, that research and paradigms in one field can provide “an added value” to another field (Aronoff, 2006, p. 14). But Aronoff isn’t ignorant of the cost of integrating tools from anthropology into political science.

Most scholars tend not to read across their disciplinary (or even sub-field) boundaries. In fact, being interdisciplinary, or bi-disciplinary, can be professionally marginalizing. For example, I have been introduced both as “half a political scientist” and as “half an anthropologist” by very prominent scholars in both disciplines (2006, p. 14).

Despite these attacks to his professional credibility, Aronoff believes in the inherent value of combining the disciplines to arrive at a deeper level of understanding.

American political scientist Richard Fenno (1990) used the participant observation method (he nicknamed it “soak and poke”) to study the Washington, D. C. political process for years. His impetus for doing this type of ethnographic research—besides finding it lacking in political science—was “to address the perceptual question: What does a member of Congress see when he or she sees a constituency?” (Fenno, 1990, p. 57). Although Fenno had no idea what kind of questions to ask the Congress members, or the types of answers he would get from them, he hoped to “be able to piece together their perceptions, categorize them in some way, and generalize about them”
(1990, p. 58). For Fenno, then, using participant observation as a method in his ethnographic research was the only way to retrieve this kind of information from the members of Congress. Indeed, for Fenno, the method changed the nature of his research:

Participant observation seems less likely to be used to test an existing hypothesis than to formulate hypotheses for testing by others or to uncover some relationship that strikes others as worth hypothesizing about testing. It may be an appropriate method, however, at any stage of a research endeavor where there is a felt need for a fresh line of thought (Fenno, 1990, p. 57).

Participant observation, it would seem, can be used in nearly any field to uncover what is happening at a given site, as well as to provide a new line of thinking about a topic that could lead to further questions for future research—including levy campaign committees.

Methods

For this ethnography of a levy campaign, data was gathered in a number of ways. A combination of qualitative methods was used to gather the various perspectives of the Mathisburg citizens as they related to the passage of the levy: participant observation (in levy campaign meetings, walk-n-talks, formal presentations, etc.), structured and unstructured interviews with key personnel, essays from the media, and personal statements from participants and voters.
(both public and private). The researcher witnessed interaction among the levy campaign participants and gathered individual statements from several sources. Throughout the process these findings were recorded in a manner similar to that of a traditional ethnographer: through a series of fieldnotes. These fieldnotes were coded—rudimentarily at first, then more systematically as the fieldwork drew to a close. The table on the following page shows the codes used to organize the collected data, as well as the abbreviations used for each code.
Table 3.2 Codes used to organize the collected data

The codes created were largely based on the framework provided by Bogdan and Biklen (1998), in which the researcher searches through her “data for regularities and patterns as well as for topics [the] data cover, and then [she] write[s] down words and phrases to represent these topics and patterns. These words and phrases are coding
categories. They are a means of sorting the descriptive data [she has] collected” (p. 171). In this case, the researcher applied the same codes outlined above to all her fieldnotes (which included interviews, meetings, and media representations), while still in the data collecting phase, and then began to look for emerging patterns. This helped the researcher identify the cultural rich points and discrepancies in the data, allowing her to refine the central research question. Throughout the process she relied upon Glesne’s (2006) advice regarding coding: “Learn to be content with your early coding schemes, knowing that with use they will become appropriately complex” (p. 150). Luckily, the skeptical researcher did find this to be the case.

As for objectivity, the researcher acknowledges that her data collection and analysis was unavoidably affected by observer’s bias. Her goal was not to try to eliminate the bias altogether, but to limit and continually acknowledge it through her fieldnotes. For rather than making claims to represent reality, researchers should, perhaps, simply acknowledge a) the creativity that goes into any account or interpretation or re-presentation of it, and b) how it is socially located and shaped, and should seek, through their work, to explore and present the various influences that have colored both their informants’ stories and their interpretations of these (Sikes and Gale, 2006).

So instead of trying to make claims of objectivity, the researcher tried to acknowledge that her fieldnotes and interviews were largely
recounted by locally situated participants, and she worked to “explore and present the various influences that have colored their...stories.”

But being forthcoming about this type data and its collection doesn’t please all researchers. Collecting these types of narrative accounts as one form of data is often derided, and “can still have negative consequences for how that work is regarded within the wider academic research community” (Sikes and Gale, 2006). This perception of narrative as inappropriate for serious research pursuits still persists, despite Norman Denzin’s notion that narrative “forces the social sciences to develop new theories, new methods, and new ways of talking about self and society” (2000, p. xi). Narratives are still associated with

fabrication and untruths: in other words with the opposite of the traditional goals of “scientific” research. Despite the so-called “paradigm wars” appearing to reach their final stages, we can still find evidence of academics in some quarters coming back to the unhelpful and outmoded science vs. non-science, positivist vs. interpretative/naturalistic, objective vs. subjective, binary (Sikes and Gale, 2006).

These binaries, however, do appear to be fading. The twenty-first century has seen “a progressive blurring of the boundaries between scientific and literary writing, between fact and fiction, true and imagined,” causing researchers from vastly different fields to borrow from other traditions, “writing about, reporting and analyzing aspects of social life in forms that have been called faction, creative
non-fiction, ethnographic fiction, true fiction and the non-fiction novel” (Sikes and Gale, 2006). It is within this context that the ethnographic approach to data collection was conducted.

**Conclusion**

This chapter outlined the methodology used in the study. The chapter also provided a brief history of the use of qualitative research—including ethnography and participant observation—in educational and political settings. Finally, the chapter included an explanation of the coding method used in collection and analysis of the research data.
Chapter 4: Presentation of the Data

Introduction

This chapter will present the data collected during the months the researcher was embedded as a participant observer in the pro-levy campaign. In previous and subsequent chapters the researcher referred to herself in the third person because “traditionally, academic writing in the social sciences has been expected to follow a particular basic format, with certain variations being acceptable according to specific genre conventions” (Sikes and Gale, 2006). Writing about oneself in the third person is one such standard convention. The researcher of this study has adhered to that guideline for every other chapter but this one. In this chapter the researcher will present her findings in narrative form. Because she used a firsthand, participant observation method to collect data—primarily fieldnotes and narrative interviews—the researcher decided to use a first-person narrative to recount that information. By presenting her mostly narrative findings within the context of her own narrative style, the researcher is
positioned in the argument—fully supporting her belief in using narratives as research.

The decision to present her findings in narrative form will allow the researcher to best recount the personal interactions that were gathered, with the intent of accurately relaying not only the actions of the campaign members, but also the overall tone of the campaign itself. For “the essence of narratives is to make connections, to link events, feelings, experiences into a neat, tidy, logical and consequential sequence” (Sikes and Gale, 2006). While the researcher makes no claims about the neatness and tidiness of her narrative data collection and presentation, she found the use of narratives beneficial in terms of helping her study subjects (and herself) see the experience with the levy committee as “logical and consequential.”

Major Participants during the Campaign²

The people described below were the major participants in the pro-levy campaign. Most were the people who were interviewed and observed more than others, although some were just people who played pivotal roles in the action that unfolded during the campaign.

² As mentioned earlier, to protect the anonymity of Mathisburg and its citizens, all names are pseudonyms.
Mark Slots: Mathisburg Levy Committee Co-Chair

Ben Rubin: Mathisburg Levy Committee Co-Chair

Susan Pollina: Former teacher, and chairperson of the levy opposition group, Educate Mathisburg

Gayle Meddick: A relative of Mark

George Pardee: Independent consultant for levy committee

Mary Storm: Former communications director for a neighboring school district, and local news reporter

Pre-Campaign

The Mathisburg City School District had been on a three-year levy cycle for the past few decades. In April of 2010 the Mathisburg School Board began looking for people willing to run its upcoming levy campaign. Later that year, after consulting with the treasurer and reviewing the district’s finances, the school board decided they could stretch their budget another year, postponing the levy until 2011. They believed this would be seen as a sign of good faith by the district and appreciated by community members who were no doubt concerned with the still-stagnant economy. In April of 2011, the topic was once again revisited, and Mark Slots and Ben Rubin, both involved community members, attended a meeting initiated by the superintendent at the district office. At that meeting, when the question of who would want to be part of the core levy committee was...
posed, Mark and Ben volunteered. The superintendent wrote their names on a white board, and according to Mark and Ben, the superintendent assigned roles based on where the names were placed on the board. He eventually circled Mark and Ben’s names, and at the second meeting told them they had been chosen as co-leaders of the levy committee.

Mark and Ben started meeting every two weeks, and in May of 2011 they began putting together marketing materials for the levy campaign. In June, their discussions centered around the amount of millage that should be placed on the ballot. Later that month, the superintendent relayed to Mark and Ben that the district could stretch the budget one more year, essentially extending the levy cycle from three to five years. Their last meeting was in June 2011, and at that meeting they decided to halt the levy committee meetings since the levy was being tabled for yet another year. Mark recalled feeling “elated” because he now had time to truly prepare for the campaign that would take place the following year.

Over the next year, Mark and Ben poured over the files from the three previous levy campaigns. They met with the chairs of these previous campaigns to ask for advice, and in April resumed their regular bi-weekly meetings. They also began conducting regular meetings with the rest of the levy committee, which at that time
consisted of roughly 55 people. In late-August 2012, the pro-levy committee officially launched its campaign at a levy kickoff rally held at a community park.

Just over a week later, a group of Mathisburg citizens, saying they were concerned about school district finances, mounted a campaign to oppose the 5.8-mill operating levy for Mathisburg schools on the Nov. 6 ballot. The group’s treasurer, Susan Pollina, a retired teacher, wrote a position paper for the group’s website in which she argued

that denying the passage of the school levy on the November 6, 2012 ballot will not affect property values or quality of schools. There is a basic need to address the issues that are driving Mathisburg’s property tax inflation, which exceeds triple the rate of inflation. While perpetual and cyclical property tax increases from all levels of government have reached a financial tipping point, it becomes the responsibility of the taxpayer to question the increasing obligations that are driving our seniors and many others from their homes (http://www.educatemathisburg.org).

It was against the backdrop of these polarized campaigns that I began my research. During the initial stages of design for this study, it was suggested that I consider being a participant observer in the opposition campaign. This idea was intriguing, since it would provide a different “culture” for me to research; indeed, I would not be a “native” in this group and could therefore notice things I might not pick up in the pro-levy group. I decided to reach out to the treasurer
of the group to explore the possibility of me conducting ethnographic research with her levy opposition group. When I read in a newspaper article that the group was holding its first meeting at a local restaurant, I decided to attend.

I arrived to that initial meeting to find about 20 people present, including the group’s treasurer, and another former teacher. There were also a few families and some teenaged children; the rest of the people present were senior citizens. As I approached the group I noticed they were looking over maps and discussing how to canvass the area with their literature. Earlier that day I noticed on the group’s website that people were asked to purchase something to eat at the restaurant since they were allowed to use the space for free, and indeed several people were eating. When I said hello to Susan, I told her that I was also a teacher and told her of my desire to do an ethnographic study of a levy campaign. She said she did not have a problem with that, and then was very forthcoming with information. While she was talking I sensed that she just wanted to be heard, to get her story out. During our conversation, Susan painted the following picture: several teachers were on the anti-levy group’s side and the campaign was going to get ugly. Susan even said a former school administrator planned on writing a letter to the editor of the major newspaper in town asking people to vote NO. She said she
would love to meet me for lunch to discuss my research in more detail.

So I left my email address with her, and she gave me the names of people to follow up with as consultants with opposition groups throughout the state.

Over the next few days, Susan and I had the following email exchange:

Dear Researcher,
The first article here is from Opportunity SMS whose President is Michael Wills. He is someone that would be great for you to interview. He would give you so much material. The School Funding Townhall Meeting that I went to last week had Michael as the moderator. He and the other panel members talked about solutions & challenges faced by districts. The title of this event: School Funding - How much is enough?
S

Hi Susan.
Thanks so much for the information you forwarded. I would love to grab coffee with you sometime early next week to discuss all of this in more detail. Are you available Monday or Tuesday morning? Also, please feel free to keep sending me articles, notices of meetings, etc. I appreciate your help with my research.
Many thanks,
Researcher

Hi again, Researcher.
Another good resource for you would be to google SMS Institute. This is where Michael Wills use [sic] to work. His book that is out is "Taxpayers Don't Stand A Chance: Why SMS Loses No Matter Who Wins (And What To Do About It)."  
S
Even after the above short exchange, I was starting to feel unsettled about fully embedding myself in the opposition group’s campaign for six weeks. After lengthy conversations with my advisor and other committee members, I concluded that while researching the opposition group would yield interesting information, no amount or type of information would be worth the ethical dilemmas I would find myself facing as a result of the conflicting interests. Because I am an educator, I could not become a participant observer in the anti-levy group as a neutral observer/researcher. Moreover, my concern regarding risk to my professional reputation weighed heavily on me. Therefore, I decided to observe and participate in the pro-levy campaign, a group I could fully engage in without fearing personal or professional repercussions. So, I immediately emailed one of the co-chairs, Mark Slots, and he responded right away with the following:

\textit{Hi Researcher,}  
\textit{I want to help you out but our team is in crisis management as our opposition has done literature drops and we are not ready for it and have been scrambling - you wanted to know how it works - well it works only as hard as you work at it. I likely will pull close to all nighters Wed and Thurs to get done. We may meet Thursday as an emergency meeting but everything is on the fly right now for the next 72 hours - the plan is there is no plan just keep plugging away to get to Saturday’s walk-n-talks - you are welcome to help with those.}  
\textit{Mark}
When I responded that I would definitely help out with the walk-n-talks, and to let me know if he needed help with anything else, he sent me a reply right away:

*I need help today. I have 48 hours to get what I can get done to help the event on Saturday. Come spend part of today with me and you’ll see campaign in controlled panic mode and we can talk. I live at ________ and I have a fairly kid proof home if you need to bring a little one with you - I am working as hard as I can but I cannot do everything,

How’s that for a plea for help, come over anytime,
Mark*

Less than an hour later I was driving to Mark’s house and, although I did not know it at the time, I would be making that trip dozens of times over the coming months. I had no idea what I was in for.

**Campaign**

From the first time I met with Mark at his house, he seemed a gregarious, passionate, high-energy person. Everything about him seemed grand, from his house and yard, to his truck, to his mannerisms and speech. The only thing that wasn’t big was his stature. Physically, Mark was a small man but he fully embraced people (both figuratively and literally). Although trained as an attorney, Mark was a jack-of-all-trades. He knew a little about a lot of things, and he loved engaging with people on a variety of topics.
Several years ago, Mark—together with his wife—decided that he would stay home and raise their three children. Since then, Mark has been completely invested in the local school community. He has created the middle school’s website and organized fundraisers, and he even volunteered regularly in his children’s classrooms. With boundless energy and a more flexible schedule than most, Mark was as an obvious choice for a levy committee co-chair.

My first task with Mark was indicative of how I would spend most of my time with the committee: organizing things. The day-to-day operations of a levy campaign were less than glamorous. There were fliers to copy and sort, packets to staple, and plans to create in order to energize volunteers and spread the group’s message. Consequently, a lot of time and energy was spent doing these tasks. I learned this firsthand upon my initial arrival to Mark’s house. After an introduction to his background and a brief campaign history, Mark explained that our first task was to organize the first walking campaign (he called these “Walk ‘n Talks”), during which volunteers were to canvass neighborhoods distributing literature. Since the first Walk ‘n Talk was in three days, we needed to organize the maps, the databases, the bags, the fliers, etc. to distribute to the volunteers. We began organizing the items into piles at his house (his dining room table, he remarked, “won’t be clean until Thanksgiving”). Eventually,
we got in his truck and headed to FedEx/Kinko’s to make copies of each of the packets we assembled.

In the car Mark told me a campaign secret that I was not to share with anybody: his relative, Gayle, had been embedded in the opposition group as a “secret spy” for several weeks now. Gayle had been attending the group’s weekly meetings at the restaurant I visited, keeping her head down, and not saying much. It occurred to me that she was probably there when I stopped in and spoke with Susan, the group’s treasurer. *Would Mark’s relative think I was somehow spying on them if she recognized me?* But Mark said that Gayle had discovered valuable information this way. For instance, the literature drop that we were organizing that very day changed because Gayle reported that the opposition was also canvassing neighborhoods this weekend, specifically targeting seniors on fixed incomes. So Mark said our literature changed to include a bi-fold brochure designed with senior citizens in mind. At this point the opposition group seemed a lot more organized and politically savvy than the levy committee thought they would be.

Later that evening, I attended an informational meeting for the Walk ‘n Talk volunteers at a local coffee shop. The owner of the shop was a supporter of the levy and offered up his place as a kind of “campaign headquarters” for our work. This was extremely helpful
because according to SMS Revised Code 3315.07, “no board of education shall use public funds to support or oppose the passage of a school levy or bond issue or to compensate any school district employee for time spent on any activity intended to influence the outcome of a school levy or bond issue election” (SMS Bureau of Code Revision). Because of this, the school board and administrators were very cautious about the amount of district resources (including buildings, personnel, time, supplies, etc.) they allowed the levy campaign to use. District employees, for example, were prohibited from working on the levy campaign during the contractual school day. And the levy committee even asked personnel to correspond about the levy using only non-school email accounts. Needless to say, the offering of the coffee shop as a meeting place was extremely beneficial to the campaign, and it became the meeting place for much of the group’s public work.

Most of the 65 people attending the organizational meeting were teachers and administrators. However, because the district employs over seven hundred staff members, I was somewhat surprised with the turnout. Mark pressed on, however, and led the gathering by speaking of the need to really put a positive face on the levy issue. To do that, he said, “We need to go door-to-door asking people for support and distributing information.” Volunteers were to return to the
coffee shop on Saturday morning between 9-10am to pick up their packets that listed the neighborhood they would be canvassing, as well as other materials. Mark had no formal training in this kind of campaign leadership, although he seemed comfortable in his position as leader. When the superintendent finally spoke, he recounted several war and battle metaphors, apparently to boost morale. He said that, “while there is a lot of organizing from the generals, we know the battle is won by the foot soldiers.” When he was done the audience filled with teachers applauded politely. One teacher asked if she and others should write letters to the editor. The superintendent responded yes, although they could be sent to him and he would forward them on to the appropriate people. She was somewhat worried about not emphasizing the right things in the letter and asked if it would be edited for corrections and clarity. The superintendent said it would be.

That Saturday, the day of the Walk ‘n Talk, I woke up and went straight to the coffee shop to help check in volunteers. It was a very cold morning, so people were warming up over cups of coffee. That day I was not going to canvass but was specifically helping to explain to volunteers that—in teams of two—they were given Saturday through Tuesday evening to canvass their neighborhood and return their bag and information to Mark’s house. Several people checked in
with their partner and then headed inside to look over the map and their designated area. Others went right back to their cars and were off. Mark set up a time-lapse video and took a lot of photos for the levy campaign’s Facebook page and website. The overall mood was very upbeat and positive, despite the weather, and although there were fewer than forty pairs of volunteers, those who did show up seemed highly motivated. It was at this Walk ‘n Talk that I first met the other co-chair of the group, Ben. Ben was the exact opposite of Mark in nearly every way. He was soft-spoken and offered his opinion only after others had spoken. He told me his corporate job was pretty time-consuming, so Mark had been taking the lead with some of the organizational tasks, especially those that needed to be done during the day.

Later that day I was at a social function when one of the guests, who happened to be a teacher in the district, began talking with me about the levy. She shared her exasperation at people who were publicly saying they would not support the levy. In fact, she revealed that her parents decided not to vote for the levy because they believed “teachers are spending too much.” She said that besides this not making any sense, she was so angry with her parents that the three of them cannot even talk about it when they are together. Other people present for this conversation said they knew “families with kids in the
schools” who were voting NO. Everyone who voiced an opinion at the shower, however, appeared to be supportive of the levy. When one person said she wanted a sign but was told by Mark that the campaign ran out of signs, someone else said she had an extra sign in the car she could give her.

Two days later I was back at Mark’s house reorganizing supplies for “Walk ’n Talk 2.0.” Gayle, Mark’s relative, was reading the newspaper at the table where I was working, so we began talking. When the topic eventually turned to the levy, Gayle told me she had continued to spy on the opposition group. When I asked her how she felt infiltrating the group she said “fine,” and that she never said much during the meetings because she “didn’t want to draw too much suspicion.” She told me that the group’s ideas—that teachers and administrators are paid too much, that tenure secures bad teachers—are not all bad, but “it’s the way they’re going about it that’s wrong.” She shared with me that she is a conservative Republican, a card-carrying member of the NRA, and that she believes in the idea of lowering taxes. But she also knows “the value of education,” and that the schools need the financial support, whether you “agree with their policies or not.” Ultimately, she said, “These are good schools that my relatives go to, and they need our support.”
The next day I arrived to Mark’s house and saw this on his front lawn:

![Figure 4.1 Photo of yard signs indicating support for conservative, anti-tax candidates and support for an increase in local property taxes to support the Mathisburg Schools.](image)

Mark had been very upfront about his conservative political leanings since our first meeting, but he was quick to point out that he also cares deeply about education and teachers. His mother was a teacher for 30 years and instilled in him a passion for learning. The signs on the lawn were interesting. Three of the four signs endorsed people who espoused very conservative, no-tax stances on policy. Yet in the middle was a sign supporting the levy and a property tax

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3 For the sake of protecting the anonymity of SMS, the candidates’ names in all but the Romney signs have been censored.
increase, which, based on the size of Mark’s large home, could be no small sum. When I asked Mark how he reconciled these seemingly incongruous ideas, he gave me a similar answer to Gayle’s from the previous day. There are a lot of things wrong with our educational system, he said, but “saying no to this levy won’t changes those things.” In his ideal world, Mark said he would like to see peer evaluations for teachers, pay based on incentives and merit, and a dissolution of the tenure system. But those things must be negotiated with the union and “have nothing to do with the levy,” he argued. He believed that the community needs to support the schools financially and then get involved with the school board to help direct the money and change policy.

As Mark and I talked he told me that back in May the campaign conducted a poll showing that based on the fact that it was a presidential election year, and factoring in results of prior levy votes in the community, Mathisburg was split 55%-45% FOR the levy. Now that we were thirty days out, Mark thought we were 52%-48% or tighter and ultimately believed the final result would be 53%-47% FOR. My perception at that point in the campaign was that the results would not be that close, that the final outcome would be more like 65%-35% FOR the levy. Later, two teachers from the district arrived to help with entering information into several databases. They stayed
for over two hours because they wanted to help with the campaign but were unable to do any of the walk and talks. When I asked about the sentiment in their building regarding the levy passing, they said they thought the levy would pass without a problem, and that most teachers in their building did, too. Although I, too, was optimistic about the levy passing, I did think this was an interesting perspective. Perhaps they reached this conclusion because they did not encounter much opposition throughout the day (unlike the daily feedback Mark and I received), but only heard reinforced YES votes.

That evening, I arrived to the district’s administrative office for a meeting with the Core Levy Team Members. Right away I noticed that the tone was serious, which was a change from previously upbeat, relaxed meetings. I wondered if people were beginning to think that maybe we would not win. Mark debriefed everyone about the latest happenings in the campaign, which included an email blast that the opposition group sent out the day before. Several people reported annoyance at receiving the email and not knowing how they were on the group’s list. Was there something illegal about how the opposition obtained email addresses? Someone also mentioned that other, larger campaigns (referring to the presidential campaign of Obama vs. Romney) did not use email blasts, as such tactics were unconventional. The superintendent responded, “Politics and passion
don’t cease to amaze. Someone would vote against a $1000.00 tax increase but then turn around and donate $5000.00 to beat it.” There was a lot of discussion about whether or not the opposition’s message (“It’s OK to say NO”) seems to be working. Recently, several people have emailed the district treasurer with very specific questions, and anecdotally, several committee members shared that they have friends (with children in the district’s schools) who want more specific information about the levy.

The superintendent then spoke, countering the opposition’s email point by point. He did so while writing on the white board, as seen in the photo on the following page.
The superintendent said that the teachers’ contract negotiations in 2014 will have to include a discussion about a dual salary schedule, based upon when a teacher was hired. Newer teachers, he maintained, will most likely be subject to more stringent evaluations that include some form of merit pay. His comment seemed to suggest that he wanted to focus on passing this levy, and then he would focus on reevaluating the district’s current direction. He hinted that he would go back to the teachers to say the election was very close, and

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4 Again, parts of this photograph were censored to protect the anonymity of Mathisburg.
that next time the community will reject a levy if they do not make concessions on salary structure, benefits, etc. I understood his comment to mean that the administration will use this close race as a leveraging tool for contract negotiations with the Mathisburg staff in 2014.

Part of the purpose for this meeting seemed to be about boosting morale within the campaign. Several negative encounters with citizens have deflated some of the positive energy of the group. The district’s communications director raised the point that the opposition’s arguments would be identical if this were a fire or levy campaign, that their goal is no more taxes, period, so we should not take it personally. Then there was a lot of brainstorming about the type of response (what and how) we should give to the opposition’s email blast. Someone mentioned that at this point 10% of people have already voted, so there is a bit of a time crunch we need to consider. Everyone agreed we needed a “marketing pow-wow,” and they scheduled a time for the marketing group to meet the following evening. The superintendent and treasurer reported that they had spoken with the largest city newspaper in the area as well as the local newspapers to relay our message, and suggested our next target should be the parent base of the community, perhaps even the parents who have already voted, urging them to talk to their friends.
This meeting clearly suggested that we were sowing the seeds for the next levy campaign by running this campaign with an ever-present eye on the next one. Mark kept reminding me that this one is a dress rehearsal. In three to five years, he said, the opposition will be better organized and better funded. The superintendent ended the meeting by saying, “If Obama wins, the Tea Party needs to regroup and will either die or come back stronger.” It was interesting how tied to the presidential campaign this levy issue seemed to be. His comment was also interesting, as several people told me that he was a Tea Party member himself.

In general, the levy results were difficult to predict at that moment. Just the week before I thought the levy would pass by a double-digit margin, but I was beginning to get the sense that people want a reason to say no to a tax increase. People we thought were solid YES votes were saying, “Well...I have some questions,” or “I’m not so sure how I’m voting.” These comments had been more abundant since the opposition sent out their email blast that highlighted certain statistics (like, “85% of the district’s budget goes to personnel” in some form, and “27% of administrators are double dipping after retiring”). On the other hand, Mathisburg teachers thought the campaign was doing a great job and were quite optimistic about the results. Campaign members, in contrast, were a little more
skeptical. They received the emails; Mark received nine emails yesterday alone asking about specific numbers that appeared in the opposition’s email blast. The opposition’s information was getting out there, so the pro-levy campaign committee members were becoming a little nervous.

Later that week Mark told me about George Pardee of supportSMSschools.org who had been hired to consult for the campaign. According to their website,

Support SMS Schools is twice as effective as running your own campaign. SOS had a 41% passage rate for additional levies on November 2, 2010, while school districts that did not use SOS had a 19% passage rate. The evidence is clear that SOS doubles your chance of winning a levy campaign. Levy assistance for your campaign is $400 (supportSMSschools.org).

The organization helped Mark with strategy, marketing decisions, etc.

I met Pardee the following weekend when he stopped by Mark’s house to check in and see how things were going. Pardee had been the head of supportSMSschools.org for years, and he had consulted with 24 different levy campaigns in the fall of 2012 alone. He said he would sit down with me after November 6 to give me lots of information, including an article he just wrote with an assistant professor at an SMS university who has published extensively on levy issues. Pardee told me this piece was just picked up by a journal and will be published soon. During our conversation he talked about the
importance of rebranding and reframing the conversation communities have regarding levies. According to him, the opposition “wants to keep it just about money and taxes, and we need to reframe the discussion and argue that our competitive salaries entice the best teachers to come here. Because at the end of the day, we have high expectations for our kids.”

That week I was also able to talk to the communications director for the district. He said he is concerned with the opposition because they are so “organized with noise.” He also remarked on their literature, calling it “so deceitful.” The director went on to say, “They throw out one or two major points and that’s worrisome because we can’t counteract that message with a couple of bullet points.” He also said City Council had planned on endorsing the levy, but apparently the council members were not unanimous and they needed to be for an endorsement. In addition, one council member was planning on publically opposing the levy. According to the communications director, it was ironic because this council member had children in the district, as well as relatives who were employed by the district. Despite all this, the communications director was still feeling pretty confident. He said the district had not had organized opposition to a levy since the early 90’s; but even then, he recalled, it was nothing like this. He did think the marketing team needed to be more specific,
more concrete in the last few weeks of the campaign. For example, he said the team should include specific numbers in the materials being distributed, as that was what the opposition was doing and was apparently what people wanted to see and read.

When the levy committee met again that evening, the meeting began with a discussion of finances. Mark had sunk at least $3300.00 of his own money into the campaign and was debating whether or not to submit his receipts for reimbursement. The levy group had $40,000 in its account, but there was an understanding that the group would leave $10,000 in startup money for the next levy campaign. So basically the group had $30,000 to work with, and Mark said he would wait until the end of the campaign to see if he would just donate the money in kind. According to him, “My wife said that getting reimbursed was up to me, that that money isn’t going to break the bank.” There was some discussion about whether or not the opposition had similar donors to their campaign; the consensus was that they probably do.

Mark reported out that he met with leaders from other district campaigns that were trying to pass levies issues on the ballot this fall. The leaders in these districts said they would like to organize a rally for people to gather and create awareness of—and support for—these school levy issues. Our group decided that for now we should focus on
our own campaign and should not waste the scarce resources we have on trying to combine forces. While the group could not see the immediate benefit of merging forces, everyone agreed creating a consortium for sharing information and ideas would be helpful to all districts, especially in non-election years. A levy committee in a neighboring school district told Mark they were glad this “levy-opposition stuff” finally came to Mathisburg because they had been dealing with it for over 10 years while Mathisburg had been living in a bubble. Now, they said, Mathisburg could understand what they had been going through all that time.

At this meeting I also learned how school board elections were tied to all of this. For example, if two members were elected to the school board who vowed never to vote for tax increases, they could stall any board business. That was why, according to a school board member who was also on the levy committee, the school board had tried to anticipate this and recruit for school board elections candidates who would remain open-minded when it came to funding issues. There was widespread belief among the group that the opposition would run a candidate (or two) for school board the following year. The opposition group did not appear to be backing down; indeed, they may have been gaining steam. Mark, for example, reported that every other day he received a position paper and the same Vote NO brochure
in a Ziploc baggie tied to his front door. The opposition, he concluded, definitely knows where he lives.

The meeting ended on a somber note, as there was increasing worry within the pro-levy group about the growing unrest in the community—especially among families with children in the district. Just that day I saw another NO sign go up in a yard with children. Everyone at the meeting shared a similar story and agreed that after we win we would need to discuss a low-key, permanent, ongoing campaign for the schools that deliberately highlights for the community the schools’ successes. The group discussed the need for a strategic, dedicated communications director; the current communications director was not trained in marketing/communications, and the media landscape has shifted so drastically as to warrant someone with specific training.

On the evening of October 16, I went to Mark’s to disassemble/reassemble bags. It seemed like I was constantly doing this; there was a surprising amount of organizational work that needed to be done throughout the campaign. Mark’s family was sitting down and about to eat dinner. He sat down and told me that when I arrived, he was in the middle of texting me to see if we could forgo tonight, as he was exhausted. I said absolutely and reminded him that if my presence ever got to be too much to just let me know.
The next day, I took an unfinished Walk ‘n Talk route and canvassed a neighborhood, knocking on doors and dropping literature at homes where no one was home. To say this was difficult to do, especially alone, would be an understatement. I found myself wishing people were not home just so I could leave the materials in their door. With each approach and climb up to the door, my heart raced and I had a newfound appreciation for all the people who have ever knocked on my door to sell their product or solicit my support. This was truly democracy in action, and it was humbling. Most people I encountered were friendly, even if they simply took the literature and went back inside. But a few wanted to voice their concerns and one person was downright angry. The concerns ranged from “Teachers get paid too much already,” to “I can’t believe how much the superintendent makes!” There were also concerns about programming (“Do we need Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses at the high school?”), and a perception that the district did not adequately respond to their queries (“They did nothing about my kid who was diagnosed with dyslexia”). The worst encounter I had was with a middle-aged woman who told me to leave her property; she was voting NO because the district “keeps asking for money. Enough already. ENOUGH!” Then she slammed the door. Needless to say, I left as quickly as I could.
At the “marketing pow-wow” that evening, the core marketing team met for the final time. “This is the last shot we get, the last push for mailing out,” Mark commented. “We should be a little more aggressive at this point.” Together the group reviewed the prices of different paper options, folding options, etc. Mark said, “We only have so much money left” so we have to make decisions. The team discussed some changes they wanted to make on the brochure, including a flipped quote and some fonts. Finally, they discussed whose testimony they wanted to put on the card as someone who endorsed the levy. They had approached a local storeowner who was beloved in the community; his family had owned the store for decades. Despite his history of generosity toward the schools, he declined, saying he would rather not get involved. The group finally decided on choosing someone who was not notable in the community (the superintendent, the treasurer, a realtor, etc.) because according to the group, the person endorsing the levy needed to be relatable and look like s/he had no agenda for supporting the passage of a levy.

I woke up the following morning with research fatigue. I had been spending large chunks of time nearly every day discussing strategy, attending meetings, canvassing the neighborhoods, talking with Mark, and folding pamphlets; I was tired. I had to attend a candidate/issues event that evening that I was not looking forward to.
Everywhere I went I was beginning to feel attacked. People either told me their concerns, or they went out of their way to ignore me. I was already beginning to get a negative feeling about the levy passing when I ran into a current Mathisburg teacher who told me, “I know I’m a teacher, but the opposition raises some good points.” She also told me she canvassed in support of the levy because ultimately she knows it needs to pass in order for the district to retain programming and staff. This was a very interesting dichotomy and one I kept hearing over and over: I support the schools but the district needs to find a better way to compensate and evaluate teachers and administrators. Even though the operating levy would not immediately change teacher/administrator contracts or compensation, the opposition had done an excellent job of framing the NO vote as one that registers disapproval of the current salary and compensation package for Mathisburg employees. The logic was that if enough people expressed this view through a failed levy, the school district would have no choice but to listen to their concerns.

School Board Meeting: The Showdown

At the municipal building that evening, I arrived to Mark, a little shaken, asking me if I had heard what happened. Apparently someone called a local news channel to tell them she had a NO sign
posted in her yard and was being harassed by Mathisburg teachers.

The news channel went to the house and interviewed the person (in disguise). The following is a transcript from the story:

In Mathisburg, volunteers with an organization called Educate Mathisburg handed out fliers Wednesday, urging residents to vote no on a school levy.

But a more immediate issue is on their minds.

"October 29th, we had five signs stolen that day over the course of 24 hours, and then probably in the week and a half we've had about eight signs stolen," said Susan Pollina of Educate Mathisburg.

It is not know who is stealing the signs and the motivation, but Mathisburg City Schools said, "We don't do those things. Our committee doesn't do those things, and we hope it stops, and supporters of the levy say their signs have been stolen as well, as many as two dozen of them."

Mathisburg police are taking names and phone numbers when someone calls to report a stolen sign, but they're not taking police reports.

"The police right now, they're in a tough situation because they don't want to spend the resources on a petty theft like this," Pollina said.

But there was no time to dwell on that issue, as we needed to talk with community members who were attending that evening’s event for more information. I noticed we had a table set up with our literature displayed but I did not see a table, nor did I recognize anyone in the building as being from the opposition group. Over the next thirty minutes we had 12 different groups of people stop up to the table for
information. Mark answered most of the questions. Although when one older woman approached the booth, I asked if she had any questions. She responded, “I have a lot of questions.” In particular she wanted to know about a specific speaker the district brought in for professional development (she pointed to a pro-levy brochure that touted the professional development the speaker conducted with the district in terms of 21st Century skills). She wanted to know who he was, what his credentials were, and why he was selected to lead the district in professional development. I asked if she had been to our website and she said she had but “couldn’t find any answers and no one seems to know anything.” She thanked me then walked away. If this was any indication of how carefully the community was scrutinizing every decision the district made, our side was in trouble.

Another couple stopped up and said they had children in the schools but that they lived in an area where a lot of seniors lived and they were hearing a lot of negative things about the levy. They said they were supportive and believed teachers were underpaid. When they left a young couple came up and asked how much the levy would cost. They also wanted to know what the money would go toward. We gave them a brochure and told them that 85% goes toward staff salary and benefits, which was right in line with the other 614 school
districts in SMS, most of whom spend between 82-86% of revenue on staff salary and benefits.

Then we all went inside the council chambers for presentations about several ballot issues, of which the school levy was one. The levy was the last issue to be discussed, and the superintendent and treasurer made a presentation highlighting the specifics of the levy. Afterward, there was time for several questions that the moderator read aloud from preselected 3 x 5 cards that were submitted by audience members earlier in the evening.

**QUESTION 1:** “My friends say they aren’t going to vote for the levy because teachers are paid too much. Is that even addressed in this levy? Will teacher compensation be addressed?”

**Superintendent:** “The levy is about maintenance, not about teacher salaries. We can foresee a time when blended learning, online learning, reduces the burden of staffing.”

**Treasurer:** “The levy cycle and negotiation cycle are different. Should the levy fail, the teacher salaries will not be affected.”

**QUESTION 2:** “How do wages and benefits stack up to other districts?”
**Superintendent:** “We’re competitive. A few districts even pay 90%. We are at 86%.”

**QUESTION 3:** “How much state revenue have we lost?”

**Treasurer:** “$2.6 million so far. The state is responsible for only about $600.00 per pupil. The new funding formula will probably be worse, based on other districts like ours.”

**QUESTION 4:** “What will happen if the levy fails?”

**Superintendent:** “We don’t have a plan on purpose, because people can cut apart programs and debate that.”

**Treasurer:** “But there will be $3 million in cuts. The district made $3 million in cuts in 2003. The majority of those cuts have not been brought back, so there aren’t many buckets out there to take from anymore. The earliest we could collect on any future levy would be 2014. These are things I hope we don’t have to address.”

**QUESTION 5:** “Would a failure in the levy affect the superintendent search?”

**Treasurer:** “A bleaker financial picture could affect the pool of candidates who apply for the position.”
**QUESTION 6:** ‘When will teachers’ pay be related to performance?

**Superintendent:** “In the 2014-2015 school year. We are piloting a system now that has significant changes in teacher evaluations and salaries”

**Follow-Up QUESTION:** “How will that affect the budget?

**Superintendent:** “It’s so new that it’s unclear right now.”

When the moderator finished, she asked for any live questions from audience members. Someone asked, “How does our cost per pupil compare to other districts?” The superintendent replied that Mathisburg’s is in the highest in the county. Another question came from a man who was there with his adolescent son. He asked, “How does this compare to Oppenbath?” The treasurer responded that comparing Mathisburg to Oppenbath is like comparing apples to oranges. He used the metaphor of the life cycle, noting that Oppenbath is such a young, growing school district that it is in the early phase of its life cycle. As their teachers continued to mature their demands would grow. It is an “economy of scales,” he said. “Their cost per pupil is going to increase eventually; it’s just the way the district life cycle works.” Finally, someone asked if SMS allowed schools to operate in the red. The Treasurer answered, “No. It’s
illegal and then the state will come in to operate. We are one of a four of districts in SMS with a AAA bond rating, and we don’t want to lose that.” The moderator thanked everyone for coming and people dispersed.

On the way to my car, I overheard two men talking. One was an older gentleman with graying hair who was getting into his Cadillac. The other was a bit younger and had a son with him. I recognized him as the one who asked one of the final questions of the evening about how Mathisburg’s per-pupil cost compares to Oppenbath’s. The two exchanged remarks:

“Can you believe the way they presented those numbers?”

“You need to go to the website. Go to the district’s website and you can see how much each teacher makes. And look at some of those old coaches, too. The average teacher makes $75,000!”

As I got into my car and drove away, I was struck by the gulf that seemed to separate the two sides of the levy campaign. Indeed, the presenters that evening and the people I overheard in the parking lot did not even seem to be addressing the same issue.

That Friday I went to a wine tasting event in the community and was introduced to some people who I had not formally met. When they told me where they lived and that they had several children in the school district (grades K-9), I put it together that they had two VOTE
NO signs in their front yard (they lived on a corner, so one sign faced each of the two intersecting streets). I wanted to hear how they reconciled the two positions of parent and levy opponent, but I did not want to talk politics during a clearly social event so I said nothing. I hoped I would have another opportunity to talk with them about the levy, perhaps in a less social setting. These intersecting community issues were definitely getting interesting, and the seemingly incongruous oppositional stance on the levy seemed to be a more and more popular one.

The following week I met Mark at our district’s administrative office because the local ABC affiliate was doing a news story about the levy campaign. When I arrived the news reporter, Mary Storm, was exchanging greetings with the superintendent as the videographer was getting ready. When they began taping the interview, Storm asked him how the presidential race would affect the levy results? He replied that it would be a good thing for voter turnout and for us. Next, Storm said, “Your opposition is saying, ‘It’s ok to say no.’ How do you respond?” The superintendent replied, “It’s also ok to say yes. This is an investment in kids and schools, and their future, but also in property values.”

When the cameras stopped rolling, Storm told me she used to be the communications director at a neighboring school district but she
left after seven years because the levy and bond issues were exhausting. She saw how their superintendents (they had had several in those seven years) were often consumed with these financial matters instead of issues surrounding instruction and curriculum. Our superintendent replied, “Yeah, SMS does things differently. We’re always on the ballot.” Storm agreed and added, “You have to explain the system to people every time because there are lots of transplants from other states that don’t have this system.” Then the crew left and headed to the elementary school to get some video footage of the schools for the news story.

I just happened to be going to that same school for more levy-related information, so thirty minutes later I once again ran into the news crew. A little while later, as I was leaving, a parent of a child in that school walked with me for a bit. She saw me talking to the local news crew and asked why they were there. I told her about my research and that they were there to get some stock video footage of young students. She said, I have to be honest, “I already voted and I voted for the levy, but I did think twice about it.” She went on to tell me that she would not vote for something “just because it keeps your property value high,” that people needed to know how the money was being spent. I tried to explain how SMS schools were funded and that the levy cycle was different from the teacher negotiation cycle, that
the people who would suffer would be the children of Mathisburg who would be in bigger classes. This was yet another interesting exchange that showed the complicated nature of relationships, communities, and elections.

On the morning of October 25, I met Mark at his house to take apart bags (again). When I arrived Mark was busy answering emails and posting on Facebook. He did not look up almost the entire time I was there, as he was pretty focused on his responses. He later told me he spent most of the day formulating responses to Facebook comments and had had several back-and-forth exchanges with certain people. Responding to Facebook with interactive responses was a full-time job, and I witnessed that firsthand that day. As I was leaving, after thinking I was done, we found a whole pile of bags in his living room that needed to be disassembled. I said I would come back later that afternoon. When I did return later to finish taking apart the bags we found at the last minute, Mark was still at the computer responding to posts and comments. He had a really good sense of the social media side of the campaign; because of him, our online presence was updated regularly. Still, it was difficult to know whether an online/social media campaign would be effective at securing the votes of our target audience.
Later that evening Mark and I met at the house of Ben Rubin—the other co-chair of the levy committee—to pare down a database to use for our final mailing. We wanted to eliminate mailing information to the households that had already voted (the County Board of Elections posted daily updates of the numbers of early voters and absentee ballots already returned). Mark said he had been updating the technology campaign all day—even after I left in the late afternoon. Ben was sick but said he “took Advil an hour before we got there” so he would be well enough to do the database work. He seemed pretty lethargic but knew the work had to be done. Ben’s four- and five-year-old children were still awake and eating. When I commented on it, he said the levy campaign had been so time consuming. Mark agreed, saying his wife joked that she did not have a husband anymore; he was married to the levy. About that time Ben’s wife returned home from seeing their daughter perform in a school play. Ben said he was going to the play tomorrow night; his wife said the campaign was driving her crazy because Ben was constantly working on it, and that she would be happy for November 7—the day after the election.

I took this opportunity to ask the levy committee co-chairs their impression of the overall campaign. They said of the original list of 55 committee members, there were 12 who had not done anything
since the campaign kickoff. Ben said the core levy team had evolved, and that “strong performers have self-selected in an all volunteer structure.” When I asked them if knowing the levy had organized opposition changed their strategy, Ben remarked that the NO group gave insight into where the complete opposite side landed. It saved the campaign money because it was basically a focus group. Most people fall somewhere in between the extremes, so other than making people think harder about what they’re going to do, having opposition has been a good thing.

Mark added, “Without opposition we would have run a more superficial campaign. For instance, on September 25, 2012, the communications director said we had already published everything we’d published in [the levy campaign of] 2007. So these past weeks were uncharted waters.”

The next day Mark and I met at 9:00am at Starbucks to highlight maps and write in street names. We were organizing packets to distribute the following morning to the classified staff in the district. They approached Mark about wanting to help in any way, and Mark suggested they do a final literature drop this weekend. So we planned to meet them at the coffee shop the next day to distribute the information and routes. Mark told me we were labeling the maps because not all street names were on the maps, and he wanted to make it as easy as possible for the people volunteering their time tomorrow.
After we labeled the maps, Mark went to Fed Ex/Kinko’s to make copies and I met him back at his place from 2:00-3:00pm to help assemble the bags. In each bag we put enough literature for each residence, as well as pens and a clipboard. This was the third time we had disassembled and reassembled the bags, although it felt like we had done it more than that.

While I was there, another levy committee member dropped by with the latest mailer. We all marveled at it, as it was the nicest of all the pieces we had sent out. The card stock was heavy, the graphics were bold, and the information was plentiful. We all decided that next time (there was lots of this “next time” talk throughout the daily tasks) we would send this piece sooner and to more homes, as—according to the County Board of Elections website—most people had voted by that point. We were not really sure the impact that this piece would have so late in the campaign, but we ordered and were mailing 10,000 copies. Mark said that if nothing else the mailer would remind people to vote.

That evening, Mark and his wife went to the local polling location to vote early, and met other levy campaigns leaders from around SMS. The leaders decided to stay in touch and use each other as resources, perhaps even creating something a little more formal like a consortium that could offer support during the inevitable next rounds
of levy campaigning. Mark reported they were all facing the same sort of opposition that appeared to be funded from national Tea Party groups that then trickled down to local 9/12 groups who met regularly. Mark gathered the names and contact information of the group leaders as a future resource.

Saturday, I met Mark and Ben at 8:30am at the coffee shop. Ben reported that he was feeling much better. When I arrived I helped him unload boxes, and I was surprised to see the coffee shop already so busy. I noticed the signs for “Cross-Country Specials” and overheard someone talking about the cross-country meet happening that day close to the coffee shop. We were quite conspicuous when unloading boxes, putting together packets, and discussing strategy for distribution. During those tasks I noticed groups of people looking at us.

At 9:00am the classified staff members began showing up. There were custodians, food service employees, and even the classified staff’s union president. They brought their spouses and children, too, to help drop literature at homes. We gave them packets, had them pose with the “Vote YES” sign and then they left. In all, we distributed about 15 routes and bags of literature. Mark, Ben, and I decided to stick around for a bit in case anyone else showed up late. We chatted about the campaign feeling (optimistic)
as well as our fatigue level (quite high). Mark and Ben were puzzled by the way the other core committee members had dropped off in participation. They did, however, recognize the fatigue factor for all involved and speculated that perhaps the other members thought they had done their parts earlier and were done now. I suggested that perhaps next time they could ask core committee members to sign up for staggered portions throughout the campaign so the campaign would always be receiving an injection of new energy.

As we were talking a man approached our table and said the group of people at the far end of the cafe (where he was pointing) were opposed to the levy and that Mark should go over there and give them a hard time. So Mark did. He told the people at the table what the man had said and they responded, “Oh, he’s a troublemaker. He’s always stirring up trouble.” Mark noticed they all had shirts on that said “CRAPer” and asked about the name. They said it stands for “Come Run Along the Park,” and that they are a running club who runs and then meets for coffee every Saturday morning. The group never denied their stance and the topic was not brought up again. A few minutes after Mark returned from talking with the runners at the table, a woman approached us. She said she was from out of town and was in the area for the meet. She said she had worked on her school
district’s levy campaign the last three times and she knew how much hard work it entailed. She wished us luck in the election.

As I was taking boxes out to Mark’s car, two older gentlemen who were seated by the door said, “It’s ok to say NO” loud enough for me to hear. I felt as if the comment were directly aimed at me. When I told Mark at his truck about the comment he said, “It is ok. Because we’re going to have enough Yes votes anyway.” Despite the opposition encountered in the cafe, Mark’s mood was still quite positive. I, on the other hand, was no longer so sure, as these types of encounters were becoming more and more regular.

That week, Hurricane Sandy was due to touch ground, and SMS was going to get some residual storms. We were following the weather closely, and Mark posted the following on Facebook:

Okay... following the weather. The official end for the Literature Drop is tomorrow, Tuesday, October 30th, 2012 at 7pm. Please do not distribute material after this point. First off, everyone - FANTASTIC JOB VOLUNTEERING throughout October!!! We have successfully informed every corner of Mathisburg. Secondly, have you ever seen the weather icon look like this?

Be Safe
Citizens for Mathisburg Schools

You may return any unused Lit Drop materials and the bags to ____________ at your convenience ~ Mark
On Halloween, I emailed Mark to ask about our next steps, since the campaign was a week away. He responded,

No news and it is pretty much done at this point. I may scope out some polling stations on Election Day but with so many early-voters I think that 1) the polling stations will be less crowded this year and 2) the areas where we would have to advertise for the issue are far enough away to be ineffective. So, I'll scope it out but nothing planned.

Even though the campaign members were completely exhausted from the intense daily work throughout the month of October, I thought we would be doing some final push during the last week before the election. However, Mark had been told by Pardee that the campaign was pretty much done on October 31; there was not much that could be done to persuade voters at that point.

We did have a final levy committee meeting on November 1, and it felt bittersweet, like something was coming to an end. Everyone could feel it. Mark said his “six year old asked, ‘Is the levy over yet?,’” and that is how we all felt. The communications director said, “The hay is in the barn.” We reviewed the presentation at the municipal building, and the superintendent thought things went well. Then we discussed the numbers for a bit. As of October 31, 2012, 8865 people had requested absentee ballots; 6943 had been returned. We were expecting 20,000 votes total this year because of the Presidential election, and this was higher than the SMS average. It was agreed
that a greater turnout is not better for us, although I had heard conflicting views on this throughout the campaign and was shown data to support both claims. Only 2000 of 5000 pieces of literature were ultimately dropped off at homes that final weekend; someone said we “got Sandy’ed out.” However, over the entire course of all the Walk ‘n Talks, over 8310 homes (of the 16,000 home structures in Mathisburg) were contacted—that included both knocks and literature drops.

George Pardee said if you could physically stop at 25% of the home structures in the community, then that was good. The Mathisburg levy committee made it to over 50% of home structures.

Next we talked about the “Thank You Campaign” that a committee member was spearheading. She said we should be very happy with the overall volunteer effort, especially since some of the literature was created, printed, and distributed in less than 24 hours. She explained her rationale for selecting the thank you gifts: “I wanted to do something but nothing extravagant because I don’t like when I volunteer and get a big gift because if you had that much money why did I need to volunteer in the first place?” It was agreed that there would be different levels of response for the different amounts of time that people spent volunteering on the campaign. Everyone would receive an email. Those who volunteered for a “Walk ‘n Talk” would also receive a Mathisburg Schools pencil with a note attached. Those
people who went above and beyond in volunteering their time to stuff, 
distribute, etc. would receive personalized *Mathisburg Chocolates* with a note attached. There was also some discussion of placing “Thank 
You” stickers on the yard signs around town to tell the community we 
appreciated their support. A committee member agreed to look into the printing costs of thank you stickers.

Then people began offering any final thoughts they had about the campaign. One committee member said she saw a former school board member at a luncheon the previous week. The former board member said our campaign was the most persuasive she had ever seen. The committee member recounting this story concluded, “We’ve struggled, but it’s been worth it.” Another member wanted to talk about the media’s role in the campaign.

“Now that we’re done,” he said, “I think it’s pretty obvious that the paper liked the drama of us having opposition.”

“Yes,” someone else agreed. “The unbalanced, biased headlines throughout have been unethical at best.” Ben added, “In a time when the paper has undergone a restructure, we have upped their readership over the past three months.”

There was some discussion of our yard signs and some committee members thought people were trading signs with other people. “They’ve popped up in the past few weeks in places where
they weren’t before. Perhaps neighbors are moving them.” The committee agreed that we ordered too few signs and would order more next time. Some suggested the opposition pushed people to request our signs. For example, someone heard from a community member, “My neighbor has a NO sign and I want to make a statement.” Next time the signs campaign would “shock and awe” the community, with 250 signs in big places. We would also reserve some for people who request one later in the campaign. Ultimately, we wanted people to feel engaged with the issue and campaign.

We then began to look ahead and discuss the election night gathering that was to take place at the administrative office at 7:30pm, soon after the polls closed. Administrators, teachers, classified staff leaders, etc. would all be invited to attend. The woman responsible for food for the gathering wanted some direction as to types of drinks and food to offer, and after some discussion, we concluded that people would have eaten by 7:30pm, so we should keep the food light. Besides, someone added, “I’m going to be too nervous to eat!” We settled on offering sodas, water, and coffee to drink, and cookies and veggie trays to snack on.

Finally, Ben reported out that we spent over $48,000 over the course of the campaign, which is more than we wanted to spend, and we would have to explore the possibility of donations or fundraisers to
replenish the funds for the next campaign. But people were tired and unwilling to discuss this in any further detail. There was a sense of wanting this to “just be over already!” To that end, Ben said we were postponing the post-election meeting scheduled for next Tuesday to a week or two later (maybe even after Thanksgiving). He would email us with the exact date. Ben and Mark said they would also email people some homework to think about before the next meeting, to bring our thoughts to that meeting. Mark reminded everyone that he was hosting a party at his place the Saturday after the election. He said we would celebrate the levy victory, eat Mexican food, and cheer on SMS’s football team. He planned on inviting the core levy team, big donors, etc. Ben said, “Thank you to everyone for all your hard work. Let’s hope we get a victory!” I noted that there was no talk of what would happen if we were to lose. Instead, we ended with predictions around the table. Everyone thought we would win; some gave straight percentages, while a few added a comment to their prediction:

Peggy: “52%—48%. The absentee voter is the crap shoot; we want enough of a spread so there’s not a recount.”

Kevin: “52%—48%.”

Mark “50%—48%. It’s hard to swing 10 points.” (The 2007 levy passed at 59%.)

Superintendent: “51%—49%. I’d be shocked if we lose.”
Lisa: “55%—45%.”

Ben: “51%—49%.”

Three days before the election, I went to dinner with some people I had met during the campaign. I was looking forward to the distraction and to NOT discussing the levy, but of course that was all anyone in the community wanted to discuss. When one person at the table brought up the topic, I tried to sidestep it. But she pressed on, saying her neighbor—who is a doctor and has two children in the schools—called her into her house to show her the opposition’s website, which listed the salaries of the superintendent and staff. My acquaintance wondered aloud to me, “Where is all the money is going? To the superintendent?” I tried to explain how the superintendent’s salary was actually in line with other comparable districts. I added that small class sizes—a taken-for-granted in the district—required more teachers, and this raised Mathisburg’s per-pupil spending. I tried to keep the discussion about maintaining current programs and class sizes, but she wanted to discuss something else: “How come teachers can’t get fired? We can in the corporate world.” Again, the issue about financing schools with an operating levy—the only legal way available to fund public school districts in SMS—had become an option for Mathisburg citizens to register their disapproval of the
district’s salary and compensation plans. If these people with children in the district felt this way, I wondered how the levy stood a chance.

**Election Day: November 6, 2012**

I woke up that morning at 5:30am because I was the co-chair of the Election Day bake sale at a Mathisburg elementary school and had to pick up the donated coffee. When I arrived at the school—where voting was also taking place—people had already lined up to vote, even though the polls did not open until 6:30am. The line was filled with people who barely made eye contact with me and my co-chair. In fact, despite our big PTO Bake Sale sign not many people interacted with us except to purchase something. No chatter, no small talk.

That was precisely what I had been feeling the last week or so. Very few of the people I interacted with on a daily basis—parents, community members, etc.—asked me how the campaign was going, or how I thought the levy vote would go. I was not sure what that meant, but it was definitely noteworthy. I was feeling anxious about the results. Every minute the levy committee members and I had poured into the campaign the last several weeks would all end that evening.

At 7:30pm I arrived to the district’s administrative offices. The levy committee decided to get together as a group to watch the results
as they were reported. At first there were only a few people present, including a local news videographer and a newspaper reporter. I helped put out the snacks that were purchased and then stood around and chatted with people. Everyone was tense, nervous. No one was eating. A few people sipped soda and water.

Perhaps it was the anxiety in the air, but people were very forthcoming with their opinions that evening. When discussing the paradoxical nature of the Romney and YES signs I photographed on a few front lawns, one current Mathisburg teacher told me, “People with Romney and Vote YES signs are my colleagues.” This teacher was baffled as to “why people would vote against their own self interests.” Another current Mathisburg teacher chimed in that she and her husband were voting for different presidential candidates, “but they are united in this levy campaign.” Right before the numbers were reported, a district administrator told me, “I’ve had my mother-in-law’s voice in my head all day and I’m so mad about it. My mother-in-law wanted to vote [the levy] down because it was an increase in taxes and she says the district hasn’t been fiscally responsible.” The administrator was clearly upset that his own family member could cast a vote that he believed would negatively impact his work and children.

Finally, the election numbers began scrolling across the large TV screen that someone lent and set up for the party. Early on it looked
like the levy was losing 45%-55%, but that was the absentee vote only. Then administrators started coming into the room one by one from their respective buildings (which were also polling places) and they did not look happy. I could tell from the looks on their faces that the numbers were not good. They passed a paper around and the numbers were a lot worse than we expected; the food on the table was barely touched because no one wanted to eat. With a ten-percentage-point difference in votes, it was highly unlikely that the levy would pass, and everyone in the room realized this rather quickly.

Ultimately, around 10:00pm, the superintendent gave a concession speech. A board member also spoke, as did Mark and Ben. Everyone repeated the same message: that they were glad we lost by a landslide (ten percentage points were considered a huge defeat by most analysts); otherwise we would “second-guess our campaign decisions.” The speeches included a lot of discussion about where the district would be going from here, and about asking the community what they wanted, as clearly they were trying to send the district a message. *What does the community want?* was a refrain that was repeated frequently. After this levy defeat, staff members’ positions would be cut and students’ class sizes would go up. The committee speculated that this was not what the community really wanted when they voted NO on the levy.
The live election results also revealed that two other local districts passed their levies, and that a third’s levy issue was currently tied and would be finalized when the provisional ballots were counted (it ultimately passed). Apparently Mathisburg was the only school district in our region of SMS whose levy failed. On my way out I had a few conversations with people on the levy committee who were notably devastated and angry. One woman was so upset she said, “People in Mathisburg voted down the levy so they can still get their hair and nails done.” She added, “It’s all smoke and mirrors about the people in Mathisburg acting like they have a lot of money when they don’t. They do it to try and climb the social ladder as quickly as they can.” Her assessment was that people rejected the levy because they simply could not afford it. Another woman shared her opinion and recounted a story about canvassing a neighborhood with literature. She said that when one woman got angry with her about the levy costing too much money, she thought, “Well you’re at home, aren’t you? You’re able to not work.”

But the Mathisburg City School District had not lost a levy since 1992. I could not help but wonder if the levy’s failure was truly a response to the poor economy, or if something else was going on in the community. Because of this suspicion, I was feeling disheartened. More than the district losing the much-needed revenue, and knowing
that Mathisburg must do this again in a year (or sooner), I was disappointed knowing that the rhetoric about teacher salaries and benefits probably helped defeat the levy. The campaign exposed the community’s complicated attitude toward public education. On the one hand, Mathisburg proclaimed a fervent support for education; yet on the other, the community rationalized (or failed to see) the immediate effects of not passing an operating levy—teachers would be fired and class sizes would go up—in hopes of registering disapproval of the current direction of the district.

The Aftermath

In the wake of the levy’s defeat, I decided to maintain a presence in Mathisburg for at least a while to gather a sense of the community’s reaction. So the morning after the election I walked to the local elementary school, where there were mixed reactions. Some people approached me and wanted to discuss the outcome, while others wanted to talk about everything but the levy. A week later, the middle school hosted a football pep rally at which I was approached by a mother who I knew peripherally. She told me she was so upset that the levy did not pass, and wanted information that she could forward to her friends and neighbors. I told her I would email her the school board’s official response.
Later that day, I met with two teachers from the district. One said that morale at her building was really low, that it “feels like the community doesn’t support us.” I also met Mark for lunch. When I walked in it was like greeting an old friend who was going through a difficult time. He confessed that he was more disappointed in the outcome than he originally thought he would be. He also discussed others’ reactions to him in the immediate aftermath of the campaign. People told him everything from, “If I only knew the campaign needed help,” to “I know you worked really hard to pass the levy, but here is why I voted against it.” He already had ideas to raise funds for the next campaign, although he was unsure when that would be. He thought it needed to be next November, that rushing to put it on the spring ballot would not be a good decision, especially with the pending retirement of the superintendent.

That weekend was Mark’s “It’s OK that the Levy Didn’t Pass” party. He had already scheduled a victory party at his house, so he decided to go ahead with the party but rename it. Mark’s rationale was that we all worked so hard that we needed a good release. The party was catered by a Mexican restaurant, and many members of the levy campaign—including the superintendent and an administrator—were present. There did seem to be a release, like everyone wanted to eat and socialize, and begin healing. There was a lot of laughter,
but there were also several conversations about the levy and speculation as to why it failed. The superintendent was tight-lipped about strategy, but when pushed, said he would reach out to the committee soon to discuss Mathisburg’s next steps in more detail.

The levy talk continued throughout the fall; I could not escape it, even at Thanksgiving dinner. One of my sisters-in-law, who lives in a nearby suburb of Mathisburg, was shocked at the levy’s failure and “didn’t think that would happen in Mathisburg.” Another family member commented on how voters probably linked the levy to teachers’ salaries and their seemingly endless increases. Later in the month I met with district leaders to hear their opinions about what programs and positions would likely be cut. I concluded that there would no doubt be a lot of lobbying for programs and staff in the coming months as the superintendent decided what stayed and what didn’t.

At a school event in December I saw a district administrator (and community parent). He told me the cuts at his building would “be big. Kids will have to pay a lot more to play sports, class sizes will go up, and teachers will be teaching a lot more kids.” He felt there was not clear leadership during (or after) the levy campaign about where the district was headed, and feared that the work he had done over the years to build programs was being undone all at once. Ultimately, he
was unsure where Mathisburg City Schools would land in the wake of the levy failure: “If we cut the programs that differentiate us, what will make us special?”

But even with cuts in programming I feared the next levy committee would face a long, uphill battle. As I sat writing this chapter in a local restaurant, I could overhear a conversation between two men about teachers: “Where else can you make $75,000, get your benefits paid for, get your retirement on top of that, and get three months off?” These were the same comments I had been hearing during the previous several months. This was the climate in which the levy failed, a climate that would not be much changed by the time the Mathisburg voters were once again asked to approve a levy.

At the levy campaign committee wrap-up meeting in mid-December, the superintendent spoke first. After informing us that the purpose of this final meeting was “debriefing and reflection,” he continued: “We thought we had one more successful levy campaign in us until the storm hit. But given the economy, organized opposition, public sentiment, etc., we ran into a buzzsaw.” Even the treasurer agreed the defeat was due to “a confluence of events.” The communications director said the opposition group boasted it was ok to say no because nothing would happen, so next time we should go to the community with a list of what would get cut if the levy does not
pass. Other committee members agreed this was a good strategy, as they encountered people who said, “That’s what’s going to happen? I would’ve voted YES if I’d know that!”

The then media and marketing campaigns were discussed. Someone suggested that the headlines of the local newspaper’s Letters to the Editor were weighted toward the opposition, and that lots of letters supporting the levy were “touchy feely, which fueled the opposition because there were no hard facts.” Someone observed that the opposition did “fewer things in terms of marketing but did them very well.” One member said she received feedback that we should have advertised in the Mathisburg News, that people told her they still read the newspaper (especially the community/local news). Despite all the hours on Facebook and Twitter, it appeared that some people felt that a traditional marketing campaign would have proven more beneficial. The committee seemed to agree that we employed a lot of different marketing strategies through several different avenues, and that perhaps next time we should scale back to more traditional forms of advertising.

Someone talked about how the momentum seemed to shift during the campaign: “People put out a yard sign and then as October rolled on some of [the signs] were moved to the garage. Did they change their minds? Perhaps they did not want to be so vocal in light
of the opposition’s campaign gaining steam?” Others suggested our campaign assumed a lot of YES votes (like parents) and did not spend enough time solidifying our base. There was also a question about some of the strategies adopted for the campaign. For instance, George Pardee told the committee to include no more than 80 words on any piece of literature because after that people stop reading. But was that the best strategy for the highly educated citizens of Mathisburg? After the election people reported that the levy committee never provided any specifics about what the money would go toward, that we needed to disseminate more information.

Finally, we turned to discussing how to proceed from where we were. The superintendent said, “We need to make adjustments and cuts. Right now we see this as an opportunity to respond to the community’s desires to lower our cost per pupil and be responsive to the message we heard.” He also suggested the opposition was not going away and would likely only get stronger. In fact, the treasurer reported that even after the levy’s defeat, SMS Media Trackers, a group with ties to the levy opposition committee, filed an open records request for all of the treasurer’s emails, presumably to pore over how the campaign spent its money. So it was agreed that an all-volunteer levy campaign would not work next time; the committee needed to hire a team well versed in this type of work. In addition to talking to
the committee’s counterparts in several nearby suburbs to discuss our next steps, the superintendent and treasurer had scheduled meetings for the following week with two prominent public issues firms with experience in local levy campaigns. If the district decided to do post-campaign polling and focus groups, “it should be done sooner rather than later so people are still passionate about the issue.” The information gathered from this research would help in determining when to put the levy back on the ballot. According to the superintendent,

It will not be in May, that’s for certain. Odds are it will probably be November 2013, but that’s not set in stone. We have to talk with the city about their levy needs, and the two most senior board members will be retiring and their spots will probably be filled in 2013 election. So there are a lot of factors to consider.

Someone asked if the committee members should continue to send in letters to the editor, “to keep the information out in front of the community.” The superintendent replied that in February and March, cuts would be made. “Then,” he said, “articles about the cuts will begin, followed by letters to the editor complaining about the cuts.” He suggested we send out an email in the spring, updating parents about the levy. In that email we should provide an opportunity for people to opt into receiving more emails about the levy, as well as details for how they can get involved in the campaign. For now, the superintendent said our immediate steps should be:
1) Shut down the levy website and Facebook page. “We don’t want any more input until we take a breath and review all the information.”

2) Decide on the future of the levy leadership team. “What do we do with the people around this table? The new superintendent will be hired in the next six months and will be the leader from then on. He should decide what to do with this group.”

Mark ended the meeting by reporting that the school board really appreciated the group’s effort. He said members thought the group worked together and used resources well. He concluded, “After the shock—and about three weeks—I remembered all the good parts of the race. This was the best race I’ve ever been involved in. One of the best campaigns, one of the most positive we’ve ever had. We stayed clean and positive. I’ll remember that.”

Conclusion

This chapter presented the data collected during the months the researcher was embedded as a participant observer in the pro-levy campaign in Mathisburg, SMS. Because she used a firsthand, participant observation method to collect data—primarily fieldnotes and narrative interviews—the researcher presented her findings in
narrative form. This allowed her to best recount the personal interactions that were gathered throughout the campaign, with the intent of accurately relaying not only the actions of the levy committee members, but also the overall tone of the campaign itself.
Chapter 5: Analysis of the Data

Introduction

This chapter will analyze the data presented in the previous chapter. The goal is to create meaning from the ethnographic narrative by contextualizing it within the theoretical frameworks outlined in chapter two. Because this ethnography began with a detailed description of the setting, it must be followed by an analysis of the data collected in that setting, all the while looking for themes and patterns that may emerge (Stake, 1995; Wolcott, 1994). In an ethnography, data analysis is different from analysis associated with other forms of data collection. This is because in an ethnography, the researcher is interested in the language of the setting’s participants. He or she “work[s] with the data to identify units of information that contribute to themes or patterns—the study’s findings. Therefore, analysis has to do with data reduction and data display” (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2012, p. 137). This chapter will reduce and display the data in order to identify the patterns and themes that were at work in the pro-levy group.
Cultural Rich Points in Mathisburg

- Contradictions in Parents’ Behavior

As discussed in chapter two, cultural rich points “are the raw material of ethnography, for it is the distance between two worlds of experience that is exactly the problem that ethnographic research is designed to locate and solve” (Agar, 1996, p. 31). Being a participant observer in the pro-levy campaign for several months presented the researcher with various cultural rich points. The most prominent examples included groups of people in the community who, according to their occupation or position, should have been easy pro-levy votes. For example, research has shown that community members with children are more likely to vote yes for a school levy (Parnell, 1968; Smith et. al., 1968, Preston, 1984, Chew, 1992, Berkman and Plutzer, 2005). However, the data collected from this study showed otherwise. A brief post-levy study was conducted immediately following the election and found that only 62% of parents with children in the Mathisburg schools voted for the levy (Fallon, 2012). That same study also found that 62% is the pivotal benchmark indicating the success or failure of the community as a whole. This means over one-third of parents with children in the community did not vote for the levy. This fact is not at all what one would expect from a community so historically supportive of its schools, nor is it consistent with the

• Contradictions in Teachers’ Behavior

Another surprising group of people who exhibited contradictory behavior as it related to the levy were teachers themselves who lived in the district. Over the last few years, Mathisburg School District had been experiencing a lot of turnover. The superintendent, assistant superintendent, and communications director all campaigned for the levy knowing they would be retiring in the summer of 2013. In addition, several other schools in the district had new principals and/or assistant principals, and the teachers had reported an overall lack of community and cohesion among teachers and administrators. Internal conflict and distrust was relatively high, teacher morale was low, and there was a perceived lack of leadership and vision at every level. Therefore, some teachers may have decided to use their vote as way to give themselves a voice during a time in which they felt their concerns were not being heard.

Teaching is a profession that often demands contradictory behavior on the part of educators, or at least an attempt on their part to reconcile their public and private lives (Pajares, 1992). Mathisburg teachers could have seen the levy vote as a way to reconcile their
public and private selves. While they were unable to speak publicly about their distrust in school officials without fear of reprisal, they could vote privately in a way that would ensure their voices would be heard. Since a number of teachers who decided to vote NO were no doubt perceived as influential in the community, this could have been one factor that contributed to the failure of the 2012 levy. Furthermore, the thoughts and concerns of these teachers perhaps permeated those in other voting segments throughout the community. For example, teachers’ voting intentions may have given parents and other community members a justification for the NO vote they were already planning on casting. That is, if a teacher voted against the levy, the average citizen would feel justified in voting the same way.

- Reconciling the Cultural Rich Points of Parents and Teachers

Once a cultural rich point occurs, Agar suggests that the ethnographer try to reconcile the two worldviews through coherence. The ethnographer must assume there is a point of view or context for the action in which the rich point makes sense. In the case of this study, there was an attempt to locate the coherence in the seemingly contradictory behavior of the district’s parents and teachers. In trying to reconcile this cultural rich point, it was helpful to understand the parents’ and teachers’ reasons for voting NO. One pattern that
emerged from the responses of these community members regarding their opposition was that there was no pattern. In other words, personal, individualized reasons abounded for why someone voted against the levy. For instance, a significant level of disenchantment was found amongst these parents in the voting community, and the dissatisfaction seemed to stem from multiple sources—often personal, and individually specific. An example of this is the woman who wanted to know about the speaker the district brought in for professional development. She had an individual, specific complaint about how the district spent its money; this was the only time this specific complaint was heard, but several other individualized complaints about the school district were documented (i.e., the elimination of recess from one elementary school, the inconsistency in identifying special needs and/or gifted children, the dissatisfaction with one particular teacher, etc.). Therefore, the level of dissatisfaction with the schools appeared to be so great for some parents and teachers that a singular issue overrode any likelihood of them voting in support of the levy. A NO vote for them meant their voices would finally be heard.
The Fight for Control

- Feeling Under Siege

Some said the Presidential election year caused an increased interest in the election and a larger pool of voters (including increased numbers of absentee voters, which was reportedly not good for the pro-levy side). Because the levy was on the ballot alongside a Presidential election in which the incumbent was a Democrat (the majority of Mathisburg voters voted for the Republican candidate, Mitt Romney), the anti-tax rhetoric—both nationally and locally—seemed particularly virulent in an attempt to get Republicans to the polls. Again, the Mathisburg district is a very homogenous, conservative, White, upper-middle class, community. A large segment of its citizenry already pays a lot of money in taxes, so the national discussion of being burdened by taxes could have permeated the local levy issue, causing some voters to show their exasperation at the prospect of a tax increase by voting NO.

In addition, the levy vote took place shortly after State Bill (SB) 5 was enacted by the state legislature. SB5 was designed to limit the collective bargaining power of certain government employees such as teachers, police officers, and firefighters. The bill was ultimately voted down after opponents succeeded in getting it placed on the statewide ballot. Locally, several prominent citizens were quite vocal in their
support of the bill; one Mathisburg City Council member testified at the statehouse as to why SB 5 should be upheld to prevent ballooning salaries and benefits for teachers and other state employees. It was within this context that the levy was placed on the ballot, and perhaps why voters felt they could take back some control by voting NO.

• Anti-Tax at All Costs

The researcher’s interviews and fieldnotes support the general feeling on the part of the Mathisburg citizens that they were under siege from both the local and national government by being overtaxed. This point should not be overlooked, and was not unrelated to the larger national anti-tax discourse that emerged from in the early twenty-first century. Growing “largely out of the ashes of [Ron Paul’s] 2008 presidential campaign,” the TEA (Taxed Enough Already) Party “emphasized limited government and a return to constitutional principles” (Williams, 2011). In a district as wealthy and conservative as Mathisburg, who reports a majority of its citizens are registered Republicans, any tax increase would have been viewed in the context of the national anti-tax discussion. Therefore, regardless of the need to pass the levy in order to maintain and improve the district’s schools, there was a segment of the Mathisburg population who was not going to vote for any tax increase simply because it was a tax increase,
precisely what the TEA Party movements—both national and local—were advocating. On Election Day, when it was apparent the levy had failed to pass, a levy supporter in the room said, “Well, this is what happens when people are fed up with paying taxes. They can’t control any other taxes but they can control this. So they vote NO for the one tax that would actually have the most direct impact on their everyday lives.”

On the one hand, Mathisburg citizens critically questioning how their tax dollars are spent is welcomed. After all, these are the community’s schools, so the community should have a say in their direction, and the schools should feel accountable to the community. But the researcher found the questioning of even small decisions (perhaps due to the parents’ desire to exert their control) appeared to be eroding the community’s historic trust in its schools and educators. This ultimately led to a staff that felt demoralized, overburdened, and undervalued. The researcher witnessed this firsthand throughout the campaign and talked to numerous district employees—at all levels—who echoed this sentiment. Despite the result of the levy issue, the community members all agreed that they have a long road ahead of them in terms of repairing the damage done to staff/community relations during this campaign. An erosion of trust that emerged from a fight over control seemed to be to blame for this.
A Lack of Trust?

Within the aforementioned group of parents, something interesting was happening. Several people who voted NO for the levy openly revealed their lack of trust in the Mathisburg School System. For these people, rejecting the levy appeared to be less about the cost-per-pupil expenditures being too high, and more about not trusting school officials with their tax dollars. While this is a tempting theory, and may have played a small role in the levy loss in Mathisburg, it is only a portion of the picture. It may on the surface appear that the parents did not trust the Mathisburg School District, but the root of this distrustful behavior seemed to be the desire for control over the community’s schools. For example, during the months of October and November of 2012—the same time period as the levy campaign—one elementary school formed a parent group that was able to independently generate well over $140,000 to fund a new handicap-accessible playground. However, the same geographic area of the city where that school is located overwhelmingly voted down the levy. This may indicate that parents don’t mistrust the schools at all; in fact, this group organized fundraisers and donations for the schools to use toward improvements. These parents were more than willing to put their money into the schools—but in specific, targeted ways to
benefit programs they chose, rather than in support of a general property tax to be used at the district’s discretion.

Research has found that “community dissatisfaction or its perception...shapes cooperation and support in the school” (Leiter, 1983, p. 56). The researcher is arguing that if some Mathisburg parents were dissatisfied with the schools, perhaps their NO vote was a vote for more control. But these issues are complexly intertwined: the desire to control the schools seemed to stem from the previously discussed lack of trust/dissatisfaction in the local school officials, while at the same time the less control Mathisburg parents felt they exerted over the schools, the more distrustful they became. This cycle could be seen in the questions parents voiced over and over again in conversations with the researcher: “Where is the money really going?” “Do you know how much money the superintendent really makes?”

- Historical Antecedents of Parental Control

Such a strong desire on the part of parents to exert control over their community’s schools did not appear overnight. Indeed, there is a long history of middle and upper middle class parents’ increasing need for control over various aspects of their children’s schools. In the 1950’s, post-war insecurities led people to seek reassurance that the United States was still the best country in the world. The people that
fled this insecurity most acutely were the suburbanites of the upper middle and middle classes who sought educational opportunities for their children in order insulate them from social and economic uncertainty. “In order to achieve those ends, however, they had to change the educational system rather drastically, and to do that they had to gain more control over the schools” (Church and Sedlak, 1979, p. 422). So, as Nathan Glazer, Robert Church, and Michael Sedlak have pointed out,

the first call for community control of schools in [the twentieth] century was not voiced by inner city black communities in the late sixties. Rather, that demand came from middle-class residents of the cities who voted for community control with their feet by moving to the suburb where they could exert far more direction over that smaller community’s institutions—especially schools—than they could in the bureaucratized cities” (Church and Sedlak, 1979, p. 422).

So much change was occurring, and “the suburbs, which underwent vast expansion...offered as one of their great attractions good schools and the chance for parents to take a real hand in controlling what happened to them” (Church and Sedlak, 1979, 422). Parents who did move to the suburbs were presented with smaller school districts and many more opportunities to influence and control the schools in those districts.

But while the parents loved this newfound involvement, the teachers found themselves in the position of defending their
profession, for “with this rapid suburbanization went a groundswell of anti-professionalism against the educationalists” (Church and Sedlak, 1979, p. 422). For example, Alfred Lynd, a parent and school board member in a small Massachusetts town, published *Quackery in the Public Schools*, one of the most popular books about education in the 1950s. In it Lynd railed against the training that teachers at the time received. According to him, “people with a normal liberal arts or engineering degree or even a business degree were better trained than educationalists were” (Church and Sedlak, 1979, p. 423). He and his fellow critics “never tired of pointing out that those preparing to teach ranked lower on aptitude and achievement tests than any other group of college students” (Church and Sedlak, 1979, p. 423).

This history of upper middle class flight to the suburbs could help explain what had happened in Mathisburg. If parents historically had a large voice in the school system, then perhaps they were upset when they felt that their voices were no longer being heard. The researcher is arguing that parents’ expectations for control and their perception that that control was going away could have caused great dissatisfaction, causing them to vote against the levy.
Vested-Interest Voting

- Business Community

One group whose rejection of the levy highlighted a vested-interest voting pattern was the local business community, comprised mostly of White men aged 40-50, many of whom also intersect with the first group: parents of school-aged children. Regardless of the research showing that people in business or professional categories are more likely to vote in favor of a levy (Tebutt, 1968), as well as the commonly-held notion that a community’s businesses want nothing more than for its schools to succeed and produce quality citizens, many Mathisburg business people were suspicious of the effectiveness of the school administration and its ability to run an efficient organization. As one local business owner commented to the researcher, “I can’t just go ask people for a levy when I need extra money. I need to budget and be fiscally responsible, so the schools should, too.” While the Fallon study (2012) showed that most voters said they knew enough about the levy in order to make informed decisions, it was unclear whether the aforementioned business owner was aware of the need for school districts in the state to ask voters to regularly increase their property tax to keep up with inflation. Perhaps he instead perceived the schools as poor financial stewards who were asking the community to bail them out with a tax increase. This would
be supported by the fact that people reported to the researcher that their contributions to fund the opposition group were larger than their increased property tax would have been if the levy passed. Some in the business community wanted to voice their concerns over the district’s financial decisions, despite the personal economic cost.

• Senior Citizens

Another theory is that senior citizens in the community voted against the levy because their fixed-income budgets could not afford a tax increase. In many communities, “concerns have been raised about a ‘gray peril,’ where seniors vote against some local services, such as education” (Duncombe et. al., 2003, p. 45). Research has historically shown that younger voters are more likely to support a school levy (King, 1973; McKelvey, 1966; Smith et. al., 1968; Gallup, 1969), while “seniors are 15 percent less supportive of educational spending than younger respondents” (Berkman and Plutzer, 2005). This research would be consistent with the researcher’s findings in her fieldnotes and interviews; senior citizens were very critical of where their tax dollars were going.

Although Mathisburg is wealthier than other communities in SMS, there is evidence that its senior citizens are not exempt from the financials stressors associated with aging. In the Older Adult Needs
Assessment, for example, conducted in Mathisburg several years earlier, seniors reported being, “house rich and income poor.” They also reported that a “fixed income limits [their] ability to say ‘yes’ to levies and community amenities funded by taxes, even if [they are] wanted.” It is possible that some of Mathisburg’s senior citizens supported the community’s schools but voted NO on the levy issue because of real financial concerns.

**Issues of Class and the “Assault” on Teachers**

Although vested-interest voting was one reason cited for the levy’s failure, issues of money and socioeconomic class were also given as potential reasons for the loss. Because Mathisburg had not lost a levy since 1992, the levy committee had to wonder if the loss was a response to the poor economy. And even though Mathisburg was on average much wealthier than the majority of the country, certain people in the city were much better off than others—causing the committee to speculate that the inequity spurred a NO vote. Even the wealthiest citizens of Mathisburg reported feeling the effects of the economic downturn.

In addition, the state of the economy in 2012 seemed to provide momentum for the increasing dissatisfaction with educators’ compensation. Several times throughout the levy campaign people...
commented when learning of teachers’ salaries, whether they read a number in the local newspaper or discovered specific salaries online through the public website disseminated by the opposition group. But the poor economy could not be all that was going on in Mathisburg’s levy failure. After all, three surrounding districts passed their levies in the same tough economy. The public’s surprise at teachers’ salaries and benefits seems to suggest something else was happening in Mathisburg with relation to money and class.

This discourse surrounding money and class—as they related to education—was commonplace in 2012, especially as issues of class were addressed throughout the Presidential campaign. Vice President Biden spoke before the National Education Association in July of 2012, criticizing Presidential-hopeful Mitt Romney’s stance on privatizing education: "You guys—educators, teachers, you are under full blown assault. Romney, Governor Romney and his allies in the Congress—their plan for public education in America is to let the states use Title I dollars to boost enrollment in private schools" (“Biden: Romney's assault on teachers”). Biden went on to say, "I can't think of a candidate for president who has ever made such a direct assault on such an honorable profession" (“Biden: Romney's assault on teachers”). It is worth noting that political polarization on this issue could be due to the fact that between 1989 and 2010, The National
Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) gave “95 percent of their contributions to Democrats in federal elections” (Kahlenberg, 2012, p. 14). This would suggest Democrats and Republicans have a political and financial incentive to continue discussing educational issues in the ways in which they have historically have been framed.

Whether or not Biden was playing politics with his speech aimed at teachers, the national discourse about public sector employees—described by some as an assault on teachers (Watkins, 2012; Kahlenberg, 2012)—was full-blown by 2012. Documentaries like Waiting for Superman (2010) and The Lottery (2010), as well as books such as Class Warfare: Inside the Fight to Fix America’s Schools (Brill, 2011) and Special Interest: Teachers Unions and America’s Public Schools (Moe, 2011) both reflected and encouraged the national debate surrounding teachers and public education. This polarizing discourse could be felt in the Mathisburg levy campaign as well. The researcher’s interviews and fieldnotes were full of citizens’ comments that educators are overpaid—both in salaries and benefits, and there were additional complaints of unions overprotecting ineffective teachers.
How Community Voting Issues Become Tangled

Financing Mathisburg schools with an operating levy—the only legal way available to fund public school districts in SMS—became an avenue for the community’s citizens to reassert their voices and register their disapproval with the way the school district was compensating its employees. Even if the immediate effect of a NO vote would not change the district’s compensation structure—and may have even negatively affected the citizens’ children through larger class sizes—Mathisburg was hoping the defeat of the levy would help to address their concerns in the long term. While families with children, district teachers, the business community, and senior citizens—along with their vested interests in the schools—heavily influenced other community members in regard to the levy, it is difficult to determine how much impact the opposition group had in influencing and securing the votes of people in these groups. A few people reported that they were going to vote NO anyway, so these groups only had a moderate effect on their decision. The anti-levy group may have allowed some citizens to vote NO by providing them a rationale that in essence helped eliminate the potential guilt they may have felt; perhaps the group made the notion of rejecting the levy more palatable. Yet there were people who said the opposition’s
literature “raised some good points,” causing them to think twice about how they were going to vote.

Regardless of the exact impact of the opposition group, one thing is clear: the levy opposition group has changed the way Mathisburg City Schools will market their future levy campaigns. The pro-levy committee thought it could “play above the noise” of the anti-levy group, but in hindsight one could argue the committee did not anticipate nor understand the extent of the community’s disenfranchisement and their desire to rationalize a NO vote. In addition, the community is demanding facts and information in unprecedented amounts. They are clamoring for a campaign that allows them to regain some of the control over schools they believe they have lost. Members of the levy committee spoke of a time when “promoting community spirit and pride” was enough to pass a levy, but that time seems to have passed.

Voting Against Community Interests

Thomas Frank, in What’s the Matter with Kansas, argued that small towns in the state—as well as towns all over the US—often vote for policy that does not further their self-interests, either economically or socially. And while others have certainly offered a more nuanced perspective of small town voters (see Larry Bartels’ 2008 op-ed piece
in the *New York Times*), Frank’s framework can be a useful one in this study by offering an explanation as to how the Mathisburg voters could have been seen as voting against their community’s interests. For example, while it would seem like it was in the best interest of parents to support the levy to ensure smaller class sizes, reduced fees, etc. for their children, some parents found ways of rationalizing a NO vote that reconciled their seemingly-incongruous views. In addition, community members with no children in the schools could be seen as furthering their interests by supporting a levy; a well-educated citizenry benefits them in ways that make their lives better, and schools that excel keep their property values high. But a lot of these citizens without children in the schools voted NO as well.

Frank (2004) and others have shown that voting against a community’s interests is not at all uncommon. Indeed, as Frank writes, “People getting their fundamental interests wrong is what American political life is all about. This species of derangement is the bedrock of our civic order; it is the foundation on which all else rests” (p. 2). Mathisburg, then—according to Frank’s definition—was a pretty typical American town with voting patterns that reflect the often-competing issues and views of its citizens.
Conclusion

At the beginning of the study it was projected that the levy campaign would follow a traditional, predictable path to victory. However, despite the campaign utilizing mostly traditional strategies, the outcome was anything but predictable. What eventually emerged was an interesting phenomenon that could be extrapolated and applied to broader social-political settings both inside and outside of education. This led to the researcher’s ultimate interest in how people manage the multiple, often-conflicting influences upon their identities, and reconcile them into one coherent sense of self. Agar’s work outlining Cultural Rich Points provided one framework for the analysis of the collected data.

Ultimately, it was concluded that the contradictions people live with are not just a result of slipping into and out of different discursive communities; instead, the observed people were actively using narratives to reconstruct memories and experiences in order to reconcile their experience with an expected ideal. In addition, the historical desire on the part of the wealthy suburb’s parents to exert some control over the district’s schools cannot be ignored. This desire both led to and exacerbated an erosion of trust between the schools and the Mathisburg community. Finally, despite a voting result that may suggest some Mathisburg voters voted against the community’s
interests for a variety of reasons, at least one framework supports the theory that these conflicting results are typical of the American voting public.
Chapter 6: Summary, Conclusions and Recommendations

Introduction

This chapter will summarize the research findings taken from the analysis. Chapter six will also address the limitations of the research study, as well as make recommendations for future studies.

Summary of Research Findings

So why study one case? What does one ethnographic study of one pro-levy campaign contribute to the greater knowledge base of educational research? In this instance, it is worth repeating the insight of Kuhn (1987): “A discipline without a large number of thoroughly executed case studies is a discipline without systematic production of exemplars, and...a discipline without exemplars is an ineffective one. In social science, a greater number of good case studies could help remedy this situation” (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 242). There is a dearth of qualitative research on school levy campaigns. The few available studies have focused on macro issues that affect campaigns and have tried to find features common to all of them. Some of those studies
have recognized the limitations of school levy research, issuing a call for more focused, ethnographic study of school levy campaigns:

Well-designed qualitative case studies of school districts that go on the ballot can focus not on generalizability, but on the particularity of their campaign(s) and the rationales for their chosen course(s) of action. Such studies could provide insight into the complexities of their micro-political environments and the strategies used to win support for school levies (Ingle et. al., 2011).

The goal of this study focused on the particularities and rationalities of the levy committee, as well as the larger Mathisburg community, for choosing to support or reject the school levy, since “the basic goal of ethnography is to create a vivid reconstruction of the culture studied” (LeCompte and Preissle, 1993, p. 235). The qualitative observations and considerations identified during structured interviews and informal conversations with campaign committee members, administrators, teachers, parents and community members yielded insights that other strategies such as surveys or exit polls may have missed, ultimately providing a much “thicker description” of the community’s relationship with its schools.

Utilizing narratives as one source of data, and presenting this data in narrative form, illuminated situations that were often complicated and comprised of multiple dimensions. Through multiple and often-conflicting stories the researcher achieved her primary goal of generating description, theory, and understanding of the levy
campaign group. In the end, the multi-layered analysis that emerged from these stories produced a truth much greater than any single “objective” story could have promised.

Using Clifford Geertz’s notion of “thick description” as a place to begin the study, the researcher described what she witnessed while observing and participating in the levy campaign. Her fieldnotes were comprised of structured interviews and formal speeches, as well as informal discussions and observations. And while the descriptions recorded as much detail as possible, “there is in fact no one ‘natural’ or ‘correct’ way to write about what one observes. Rather, because descriptions involve issues of perception and interpretation, different descriptions...are both possible and valuable” (Emerson, et. al., 2011). The researcher’s descriptions aided her in situating the collected data into a theoretical framework.

Early on the researcher saw the usefulness of Michael Agar’s theoretical framework of Cultural Rich Points to reconcile often-conflicting viewpoints as they related to the levy. The researcher also drew upon the theoretical traditions of social interaction and ethnomethodology. In the process, new theories emerged for what she observed while participating in the levy group. One such theory was that voters were voting against their community’s interests. While the researcher thought this practice was counterintuitive,
research has shown that this is much more prevalent in America today than one would think.

The description of the levy campaign, combined with the theory it both reflected and generated, provided a much greater sense of understanding of the campaign than would otherwise be possible of obtaining. Fieldwork is an excellent tool to help provide understanding of a situation because it “is often used as a way of providing information about daily life in ways that convey the context, depth and the ‘true’ nature behind what can often become meaningless statistics” (Peterson, 2002, p. 186). The researcher approached the study as a way to understand and describe social worlds, and her methods and theoretical frameworks provided an understanding of the levy campaign as an interpreted world that is always under symbolic construction.

**Limitations of the Study**

The researcher is aware that the nature of the study created several limitations for its findings. The first limitation was a personal concern that studying the anti-levy campaign committee would have created ethical dilemmas because of conflicting interests as a result of the researcher’s subject position. While the dangerousness of some research—including this study—could be minimized for its lack of
immediate physical risk, utilizing an ethnographic approach to research presents multiple types of risks that should be calculated before beginning (Nilan, 2002; Palmer and Thompson, 2010). Sometimes the stakes are less physical and more professional or personal. As one ethnographer noted, "the consequences of carrying out the research may affect familial relationships, individual relationships with members of the community that is being researched, and professional and academic relations” (Peterson, 200, p. 186).

A second limitation is that this research explored only one side of one levy committee in one school district during one campaign season. Obviously a lack of multiple sites and committees—and the limited information obtained from the anti-levy campaign—prevents any kind of comparative analysis. Therefore this work cannot make generalized conclusions. Instead, the objective was to immerse the researcher in the culture of one campaign in order to best arrive at some sort of understanding, which she could relay through “thick description.” This lies in direct contrast with empirical data that can be collected through surveys and then analyzed. Studies like these have been done on levy campaigns, usually with the intent of providing strategies for future campaign committees (Whitman and Pittner, 1990; Theobald and Meier, 2002). However, this specific research was designed to explore and document the daily life of one pro-levy campaign, with the hopes
of providing one “for instance” to help illuminate an understanding of the complex situation of school funding in many public schools across the country.

Conclusions

Because Mathisburg had successfully passed levy campaigns every three years for the past two decades, during the study the researcher—like everyone else in the pro-levy camp—proceeded as if the levy would pass. Even with organized opposition there was little feeling inside the pro-levy camp that the levy would be defeated. After all, the research was on their side: The higher a voter’s educational attainment the more likely s/he is to vote for a school levy (Tebutt, 1968; Gallup, 1969; Hatley, 1970); the less a voter’s income the less likely s/he will be to support the local school levy (Fish, 1964; Hatley, 1970; Gallup, 1969; Wilson and Banfield, 1971, Berkman and Plutzer, 2005); and voters who have lived in a community for more than three years are more likely to vote in school budget elections (Parnell, 1964).

What happened as the research progressed, however, was that the questions and issues to be investigated evolved and changed, as the dynamics of the campaign evolved and changed. The initial research questions focused on the following: How does the group
organize itself? Were there assigned leaders, or did leaders emerge organically? What message do they want to convey to others? And how do they proclaim that message? While the researcher initially looked for answers to these questions as she participated in and observed the pro-levy group, her focus shifted or evolved somewhat as the interesting leads took turns that the researcher did not necessarily anticipate. And then on election night when the results were in and the levy failed, the research took yet another turn. The data would now need to be analyzed through a different lens, one the research participants—including the researcher herself—could not have predicted. As a teacher herself, the researcher wanted to understand what had happened. Subsequent research focused on the following question: How could the levy have been voted down by such a large margin when the campaign committee was so sure it would pass? Because the researcher’s “assumptions about how the world works...[we]re inadequate to understand something that had happened” (Agar, 1996, p. 31), she turned to Michael Agar’s theory of “cultural rich points” to help in analyzing the data. The researcher also used additional frameworks to analyze and make sense of the collected data.

Regardless of the framework used, however, there was clearly a level of disengagement in the community among certain groups of
people, and these individuals felt as if they were not being heard by the school district. The impetus behind this disengagement was a belief that community members were paying for a promise that was not being delivered. Most conversations surrounding the levy and schools—including those the researcher had with people who identified as levy supporters—had a negative tone. The pro-levy conversations were very isolated and usually existed within the levy campaign committee, or at general informational meetings of the schools’ Parent Teacher Organizations.

Of course, there was continued discussion and analysis of the levy campaign throughout the spring and summer of 2013. In April the district announced that it was laying off 29 teachers, most of them through non-renewals of contracts with teachers employed less than two years. The superintendent cited high per-pupil costs, and significant labor costs, as some of the reasons residents voted no. He reported the only way to address those concerns was to cut staff positions, since the district’s cost per pupil is largely driven by labor costs that make up 80 to 85 percent of the budget.

One of the 29 teachers laid off was the first-year kindergarten teacher of an informant’s child. This teacher left her job in another suburban district to take the Mathisburg position, only to find herself without a job at the end of her first year. She was young, talented,
and full of the kind of enthusiasm parents wants their children to encounter every day. When the researcher discussed her non-renewal status with other parents of kindergarteners, though, instead of recognizing this as a negative side effect of failing the levy, many used it as an opportunity to complain about the “last hired, first fired” policy they saw as driven by the unions. “That’s what’s wrong with unions,” one mother told the researcher. “They fire the best and protect the worst.” This sentiment was repeated over and over again, both during and after the levy campaign.

However, since levies have no immediate effect on changing union practices, it is unclear as to whether or not the community will see the need to pass any future levy until they perceive the teachers’ union is reformed to their standards. While the next contract negotiation is in 2014, the district was not able to wait that long to begin generating revenue, and in May of 2013 the district officially announced it would return to the voters in November of 2013 and once again ask for a property tax increase for an operating levy.

Interestingly enough, in August of 2013, an influential rather prestigious publication named Mathisburg the third best town in the United States in which to raise a family. In the article, the school district was described as “first rate” and scored a perfect score of ten (most of the top ten cities did not score a perfect ten for education).
Ironically, such accolades came at a time when the community voted down its levy for the first time in decades. While outsiders may judge Mathisburg as having something special in terms of education, its residents felt differently in November 2012.

The issues explored throughout this ethnographic research are perennial and are not going away anytime soon. If anything, they will become more prevalent in our communities. Not too long ago the Mathisburg school district and the community had a trusting relationship, one in which the district provided well-educated, productive graduates to a community who returned the favor by financing the endeavor. According to one scholar, “Once upon a time any school funding issue placed on the ballot would pass—and by a healthy margin—you could take it to the bank. Supporting public schools was considered almost as much of a moral obligation as tithing for one’s religion. No longer” (Freeman, 1990).

But good test scores and college acceptance rates are no longer good enough outcomes for the Mathisburg community to agree to increased taxes. In fact, one recent study suggests “that components from the local school district report cards and school district typology do not serve as a good predictor of school district tax levy passage” (Wheatley, 2012). Increasingly, communities—even those labeled with the state’s highest rating—want more and more control over the
teachers’ and administrators’ salaries and benefits, as well as more accountability and transparency of the revenue generated by property tax levies. As shown earlier, a community’s desire for control over its schools is not new and can even be traced back to the post-war 1950s (Church and Sedlak). This longstanding expectation of control can create anxiety when parents feel their voices are no longer being heard. What was once a given in the Mathisburg community is longer the case, and the eroding trust between parties will no doubt most affect the people in the middle: the children enrolled in the community’s schools.

Implications for Future Research
The research findings on this one school district’s school levy campaign should be seen as representing a jumping off point for further research. The three themes that emerged—

- contradictions in parents’ and teachers’ behavior;
- the fight for control in schools, and
- vested-interest voting—remind us that these battles of school levies are only getting tougher. Whether in suburban, urban or rural school districts, there are many more investigations that need to be undertaken, especially on-the-ground, real time qualitative inquiries that illuminate the day-to-day
experiences, insights, and details of levy campaigns. Understanding a
pro-levy campaign can yield greater insight into what a community
values. Furthermore, highlighting the cultural rich points one
encounters throughout the research is one way to get at this
understanding. In addition to the above mentioned themes, there at
least three additional areas that may warrant future investigations.

- Unions and Public Education

One potential area for future research is the ongoing “assault”
on public school teachers, and public education as well. The call for
breaking up teachers’ unions is only getting stronger—despite the fact
that a recent USA Today/Gallup survey found that nearly two-thirds of
Americans oppose restricting collective bargaining for public sector
employees (Cauchon, 2011). Part of this wish to break up unions may
stem from a desire to bring in a style of corporate education reform,
the premises of which align with the following:

the main impediments to improving public schools are teachers' unions because they rigidly defend bad teachers; schools need to be run like businesses to make them less bureaucratic and more dynamic; educational experience is not required to be a teacher, principal, or chancellor; the corporate education reform model is the only way public education can be transformed; and success can be measured through data-driven outcomes, with the most important data being student test scores (Sylvia, 2011).
Many districts have responded to this call for union elimination and corporate reform by privatizing small segments of their public schools initially, and gradually subcontracting out more and more elements to the private sector (Watkins, 2012). This has had the dual effect of saving these districts money in the short term, while at the same time eliminating union members and weakening the bargaining power of the group as a whole. Not surprisingly, some have argued that this movement is led and funded by think tanks with an agenda that promotes the privatization of public schools. The deep pockets that are bankrolling all aspects of corporate education reform are from foundations headed by mostly white, male billionaires who put their own children in elite private schools that treat teachers with dignity and respect (Sylvia, 2011).

Educators are trying to relay this message to the public, despite the promises and allure of the corporate reform movement.

• The Political Money Trail

One similar thread that was only slightly unraveled during this study was the actual funding of the opposition group. Campaign strategist George Pardee told the researcher, “If you follow the money, you’ll get closer to understanding whose interests are being served by voting down this levy.” (One could use this argument for the corporate reform movement as well.) Pardee went on to say, “Money
is the number one variable of any campaign, and this campaign was no different.” He believed the money trail would eventually lead to the Koch brothers, whose influence over even the most local policy decisions has been well-documented (Scola, 2012). This is certainly a line of future research that could provide meaningful analysis.

• Lexicon of Reform

In addition to the themes that the researcher identified and discussed, analysis of the data highlighted the following recurring phrases/words (from many different members of the community): “cost per pupil;” “drain on resources;” “hard work;” “community;” “support;” and “criticism.” As Hazel Carby notes, the terrain of language is the terrain of power (1987, p. 17). This language, or “lexicon of reform,” could be the focus of still another study exploring the ins and outs of a levy campaign, detailing its effects on the community and its schools.
Epilogue

As of August 1, 2013, all but one of the major positions at the Mathisburg School District’s Central Office were vacated and filled by new hires. This included the superintendent, assistant superintendent, communications director, and business services director. The only remaining district employee from the 2012 levy campaign was the district treasurer. With this incredible turnover in personnel, the staff and community seemed excited with the possibility for change and new leadership. People told the researcher they were glad “they cleaned house” at Central Office, and that it was “time for a new direction” for the district.

The district did place the levy back on the ballot for the voters to decide in November of 2013. While the researcher did not embed in that levy committee, there were interesting differences in the two campaigns that were noted from afar. Just like the campaign the researcher observed during the 2012 election, the 2013 campaign also faced opposition, creating another battle between the community and its schools. What was different about the 2013 levy campaign, however, was the commitment shown by the administrators at Central
Office. The newly-hired superintendent almost immediately arranged for community members all over town to open their homes for “coffee talks,” at which neighbors and CO personnel gathered to discuss the levy and its implications. The new campaign also had a new slogan plastered on signs and in newspapers: “Excellence Matters.” This, among other actions taken by the new administrators at CO, ultimately led to the levy’s passage; 57% voted for the levy, while 43% voted against it. Perhaps the researcher’s theory of the community’s desire to have their voices heard was correct; perhaps this desire was satiated through the new process of reaching out to the community to hear their concerns. Future studies could try to substantiate these claims.

Immediately after the victory, the superintendent was careful to contextualize the win: “‘I want to thank every community member for your confidence in us and I want to tell you that we won’t let you down...We are committed to accountability, efficiency and results’” (November 6, 2013). The superintendent also said the district’s leaders will “focus on continued excellence and accountability by creating an efficiency project that will implement budget reductions expected to save a cumulative $4.5 million over the next four years” (November 6, 2013).
The levy opposition group was undeterred by the levy’s passage. Susan, the group’s leader and a former teacher, said,

‘We will watch closely over the next few months in hopes that the school district will live up to their promise to save $4.5 million over the next four years through their efficiency project. And we will watch the union negotiations in 2014 in hopes that the increased revenue stream of $6.3 million does not end up entirely in compensation’ (November 6, 2013).

From her response, one thing is clear: issues of public school funding are not going away. In fact, at the time of publication the researcher has learned of several nontraditional ways the district is trying to be fiscally responsible for the sake of the community, including hiring out positions that were formally contractual positions in the district. With the rapid changes in the way public schools are funded, perhaps this ethnography will one day be viewed as a snapshot of one group trying to hold on to its excellent schools amidst a shifting landscape.
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