

**Archive | Archive Portal The Rural School Challenge, Part 1: School mergers  
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RACHEL REABE: There was remarkably little controversy over the consolidation of the Mountain Iron and Buhl school districts three years ago. Public hearings on the matter were attended by only a handful of people. The final vote reflected solid support for the plan. But after all too brief a honeymoon, the two communities have declared war on each other in a battle over school closings. Recently, people from Mountain Iron and Buhl packed the gymnasium at the Buhl school for a public hearing on the proposed closing of the Buhl facility.

**ANGELO POLETTI:** Mr. [INAUDIBLE], board members, and concerned others. My name is Angelo Poletti. And I'm speaking on behalf of myself, my family, the citizens action committee for the preservation of independent school district--

**RACHEL REABE:** For three hours, school board members listened as people on both sides of the issue gave their opinion. Everybody seemed to agree that a building in the district needs to be closed. But the townspeople who testified at the hearing were sharply divided over which school should be closed. Mountain Iron people want the Buhl school closed. Buhl people think the Mountain Iron school should be the one shut down.

**SPEAKER 1:** Quite simply, the high school building provides the greatest amount of educational opportunities for the least amount of money. The Martin Hughes School, from all the information we can gather, is a far superior facility than a Mountain Iron school building.

**SPEAKER 2:** The proposal to close the Martin Hughes School is the proper choice. I support the board's decision as a parent.

**SPEAKER 3:** Only Mountain Iron-Buhl High School juniors and seniors may invite a person to the prom.

**RACHEL REABE:** When Mountain Iron and Buhl consolidated three years ago, every effort was made to unify the former rivals. New school colors and a new mascot were selected. Buses and billboards were repainted to reflect the new consolidated district.

But the optimism trickled away as enrollments continued to drop. When consolidation talks began, the two districts had a combined enrollment of 1,500 students. Now there are just over 1,100 students.

**BOB DUNCAN:** Well, we've been devastated by the impact of the economic decline here on the range. Obviously, not everyone that lives in Mountain Iron-Buhl works at Minntac, which is just located not too far from here. But how Minntac goes and the other taconite plants across the range has a great impact on us.

When the major industries leave, families leave. And when students leave, state aid leaves. We've lost over \$1.5 million since 1982/83 in state aids. That's very difficult for a district of our size to deal with.

**RACHEL REABE:** Superintendent Bob Duncan says they've tried to raise additional money through school referendums. But voters said no in 1986 and 1987. The school district will try again next month with a referendum that would raise about a quarter of a million annually for the next five years. Duncan says he's not optimistic.

**BOB DUNCAN:** For years on the Iron Range, the mining companies paid for a lot of things. And people got used to that. It was comfortable.

That isn't work that way anymore. If you want something now, you have to pay for it. I hate to see the students losing things because people can't accept the fact that they have to pay for it.

**KATHY BERGER:** We had a chance. It's-- but we're poor. And I just wish the taxpayers would say, hey, we've got a damn good thing going here.

Let's put in a few dollars. The sad part of the referendum, it would have cost a majority of the people last year \$2 to \$4 a year increase in their taxes. They spent more money making signs that said vote no.

**RACHEL REABE:** School board member Kathy Berger says if next month's referendum is defeated, they'll have to make some tough choices.

**KATHY BERGER:** This district, without a referendum, cannot survive.

**RACHEL REABE:** Duncan says the money the state gives them is no longer adequate to operate a small rural school district. Without a referendum, he predicts they will have to consider another merger, this time with Virginia. A district of 2,100 students five miles away. Mountain Iron-Buhl High School history teacher Dennis Fermoye says the state is leaving rural school districts to wither on the vine.

**DENNIS FERMOYLE:** I feel like right now, we're being strangled. And, I guess, I'm really, very resentful to the state legislators because my feeling is that they want consolidations, which is fine. That's their right to want that.

But they don't have the guts to come in and say Mountain-Iron Buhl, you consolidate with Virginia. Instead, they've arranged the funding so that we're strangling to death. And in this strangling process, there's a lot of people suffering.

**RACHEL REABE:** Tonight, the Mountain-Iron Buhl school board will decide whether to close the school building in Buhl. With the upcoming referendum and more talk of additional school mergers, it's just the first of a long string of tough decisions they have in front of them. In Buhl, I'm Rachel Reabe.