



On the Merge:

School Closure in a Rural District

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Setting	
Franklin, a small rural town in the United States	
Primary Characters	
Laura Washington: school board member	Dr. Fields: Penniman principal
Peter: bakery owner, parent of a Penniman student	Christopher: school board member
Myrna: middle-school parent	Will: student at Penniman, Peter's son
Jackie: art teacher at Penniman School	

“Hey, Mom, how did the board meeting go?” Ever since Laura Washington had been elected to the Franklin School Board last year, her son Andrew was excited to hear the ins and outs of each monthly meeting. He was proud of their family’s roots in the small rural town of Franklin, and proud of his mom for giving back to the public schools that had educated three generations of his family. Andrew had graduated from Penniman Secondary last year, just like his mom had twenty-five years before, and was now a freshman at State.

“It was rough, I gotta say,” Laura admitted, putting her cell phone on speaker as she folded laundry. For nearly two years, the board had been exploring a potential merger between Penniman and Clayton High School as a way to address the district’s \$2 million budget shortfall. While exploring the merger, the town had also tried to pass millage increases to raise property taxes—twice. After the second millage increase was voted down, the board’s budget committee put together a formal recommendation for merging the two schools, which they had presented at this evening’s meeting. But rather than easing tensions, the meeting had turned acrimonious.

“If you close down Penniman, I know I am sending *my* kid to Trinity. If I have to pay for a small school close to home, that’s what I have to do,” one irate parent had testified.

“Merging the schools would nearly double the size of the student body at Clayton! Will our class sizes double, too?” a student had asked the board, nearly breaking down in tears.

But other community members had testified in favor of the merger, particularly once the budget committee revealed that because Penniman was a smaller school, its per-pupil spending was about \$2,000 higher than that of Clayton. “It’s about time we rectified the funding disparity here in Franklin,” a Clayton parent had nearly shouted into the microphone as the meeting neared its end. “If Penniman stops pulling so much money, maybe we can finally hire the additional staff Clayton needs so desperately.”

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In some ways, the merger had been years in the making. Penniman had been built in the center of Franklin shortly after the turn of the twentieth century, when Franklin was smaller. As more industries opened factories in the surrounding area, the population grew. By the 1960s, Franklin was a prosperous manufacturing town and included not only Penniman but also Trinity Academy, a private religious school. With the population booming, Clayton was built about fifteen miles up the mountain, near the heart of the logging industry that supplied the lumber for Franklin's renowned furniture factories. Its location had also made it easier for students outside the town center to get to school and provided space for multiple athletic fields.

While Clayton and Penniman reported similar test scores, graduation rates, and college acceptances overall, students and parents at Penniman felt that their small school provided something special: small class sizes and a close-knit community that ensured every kid was heard and seen, not just the high achievers and athletic stars.

Unfortunately, the manufacturing bust had hit all of Franklin hard. While the local hospital remained a steady employer for some, many others struggled to find employment within reasonable commuting distance. By the time the last furniture factory closed its doors in 2011, the town had seen a significant population decline, leading to decreased enrollment across the district despite the county's various efforts to retain students. Both schools had also seen the number of students on free and reduced price lunch double to 90%.

At the same time, the state had been incentivizing school mergers; only schools with at least 300 students enrolled would be eligible for maximum state funding. Penniman, with 215 students, was 146 students below its maximum capacity. Clayton enrolled 341 students and could accommodate 310 more.

"This is a hard one, Mom," Andrew affirmed, knowing how much his mom loved Penniman, and the heat she would face in the next election if she voted to close the school. But Laura had also explained to him that keeping Penniman open would require deep cuts to its current budget; change was coming to Penniman whether or not the merger went through. "I hope you get some clarity before next month's vote. I know you'll do what's right – whatever that is!"

The next morning, Laura swung by Dolly's, her go-to bakery, located downtown just a few blocks from Penniman. The owner, Peter, was another parent and a friend of hers. Parking was usually easy—the storefronts on either side of Dolly's had been boarded up for months.

"How're you doing, Laura?" Peter asked sympathetically. He had also been at the school board meeting the night before—his youngest son was a junior at Penniman.

"I'm going to need extra strong coffee this morning, Peter," Laura responded. As Peter poured her coffee, a pair of customers walked in, mid-conversation. Laura immediately recognized them: Myrna attended Laura's church and was the mother of a middle schooler, and Jackie had been Andrew's art teacher at Penniman.

"I know you might feel different, but I'm actually in favor of the merger," Myrna said. "Did you know that Clayton offers 12 different AP classes? And they had three students get into State last year."

"For what it's worth, Laura and I went to Penniman, and we came out fine—mostly," Peter joked as he started working on his new customers' usual morning drinks. "Now I'm just wondering how I'd make it to parent-teacher conferences over at Clayton. By the time I get there and back, that's an extra 45 minutes added to my day."

“Oh, come on now—you drive that far to Walmart to get groceries. I’m sure you can drive to a parent-teacher conference a couple times a year,” Myrna joked back. “Besides, isn’t that all on Zoom now?”

“Just like Penniman now offers virtual AP classes,” Laura added proudly. She had pushed for this initiative at the beginning of her term on the school board.

“It just feels like people are abandoning this town, Myrna. What will downtown look like if we close Penniman?” Jackie frowned. “Besides, plenty of Penniman kids get into good schools, too. Andrew’s at State right now! I’m more worried that our kids will never come back *after* they graduate from college.”

Laura nodded her head; she hated seeing so many vacant buildings in town. But she also worried that keeping Penniman open might hurt teachers like Jackie. The arts program could be on the chopping block if the school stayed open.

“I have to agree,” Peter said. “Ever since the feed store closed down next door, business has been slow. I’m not sure we’ll make it if we lose the school as well.” The walls of Dolly’s were adorned with pictures from Penniman: basketball teams and chess clubs and charity drives that had all been sponsored by Dolly’s.

“Look, Peter,” Myrna stated matter-of-factly, “It’s unfortunate your bakery might be hurt, but the district has a responsibility to the taxpayers. Are schools for helping businesses—or helping students?”

An uncomfortable silence ensued. Laura tried to ease the tension: “Well, I for one know I’d be lost without Dolly’s coffee and cinnamon buns! But speaking of taxes, what about property values? If Penniman closes down, won’t everyone’s homes lose value? What happens to our taxes then? And if more families pull out of Franklin schools, won’t the district be even worse off? The new voucher system the legislature just passed will make it easier for families to send their kids to Trinity.”

“I think focusing our resources on Clayton will strengthen our schools—and having a great high school will help our property values,” Myrna insisted. “I mean, Clayton already has so much: all the after-school clubs, that big track. Cassie’s a runner, right, Jackie? My daughter is thrilled at the idea of going there.”

“I know a lot of teachers there; it’s hardly perfect. And what does the track matter if Cassie can’t stay after school to attend?” Jackie asked. “Right now, she walks to Penniman; going to Clayton will easily mean an extra 45 minutes on the bus. Even if I do get transferred over there, I can’t hang around waiting for her to finish practice. And I don’t want her coming home in the dark.”

“And that’s assuming she wakes up early enough to make it to the bus on time! Will only makes it to school some days because he can walk,” Peter said. “And y’all know as well as I do how those switchback roads get when it snows. I’m not sure I would want any kids on that school bus in January.”

“Oh, Peter,” Jackie said, taking her coffee cup with a smile. “Don’t forget about the art show at Penniman next week. Will’s got two photographs and a painting that he’s showing!”

One of Laura’s favorite parts about serving on the school board was staying involved in student events. The following night, she headed to the varsity basketball game at Penniman. Walking down the hallway, she caught sight of her fellow board member Christopher talking with Penniman’s principal, Dr. Fields. Christopher had long been a proponent of the merger. From the look on Christopher’s face, Dr. Fields seemed to be trying to convince him he was wrong.

“Ah, Laura,” Christopher welcomed her eagerly as she approached. “Dr. Fields and I were chatting about the merger.”

“I was just telling Christopher that we simply can’t close this place down,” Dr. Fields said; a Penniman alum, she had served as principal there for fifteen years. “I’ve already begun talking with my teachers about getting rid of our school leadership team and cutting back on overtime for clubs. But the board must meet us halfway with more funding.”

“I wish that were possible,” Laura said gently. “I worry it will take more cuts than that to keep Penniman open.”

“I worry that the school would be unrecognizable after all the cuts we’d need to make,” Christopher sighed. “In addition to the leadership team and overtime for clubs, we’d need to keep the building closed on weekends when there’s no official school functions and fire at least three teachers. But if we merge the schools, we’ve pledged to keep all staff.”

“How much money are you *really* saving, though, if you’re keeping all of the staff? How much more money are you spending on transportation going up and down the mountain?” Dr. Fields asked.

“We’ll keep all *teaching* staff,” Laura clarified. “We can’t make any promises about administration or support staff.”

“Well, we can move the teachers, but the culture at Penniman isn’t easily transferable,” Dr. Fields argued. “When I was a student here, what really changed my life was having teachers who showed up. And not just to basketball games—I mean to your home. I remember one time, I had failed a math test, and Mr. Espy showed up that night to talk with my mom. But he wasn’t there to scold—he wanted to come up with a plan. And I am proud that our teachers still carry on that tradition.”

“Times are changing now,” Christopher said. “Do parents really want teachers showing up at their house to talk about math tests? Just call them! Besides, this is about equity—about giving every student access to honors and AP classes, to band and basketball and art. It’s how we can best prepare kids to get into college.”

“You make it sound so simple,” Dr. Fields pushed back. “Plenty of studies show that students experience learning loss in the short-term during a merger—and that’s the best-case scenario. There’s a lot more to merging schools than just moving people around.”

Much to Laura’s relief, the sound of a buzzer indicated the start of the game, and they rushed to the gym to catch tipoff.

Nearly every person in the crowd was wearing a Penniman shirt, made locally at the Jackson Family Print Shop. The walls of the gym were painted with murals of notable alumni—a Major League Baseball player from the 1960s, a pilot who had been shot down in the Vietnam War, and Dr. Fields’s predecessor, who had served as the principal for nearly 25 years. The stands were filled with familiar faces. Laura couldn’t help but feel they’d be losing more than just a building if Penniman closed.

At halftime, Laura wandered over to the refreshment table for a soda. Once there, she noticed a small folding table next to the refreshments, with a large handmade sign that read “SAVE OUR HOME: KEEP PENNIMAN OPEN.” Peter’s son Will sat there with a friend.

“Ms. Washington,” Will called out. “Come sign our petition.”

Smiling, Laura moved over. “As a school board member, I can’t sign the petition, unfortunately. But I would love to read it.”

“Penniman is the heart of our town,” Will told her. “Our small size doesn’t make us weak; it makes us strong.”

Laura nodded, skimming the petition as Will spoke. Then she looked to Will's friend. "And have you signed the petition, too?"

"Honestly, I'm kind of torn," the friend said. "I love Penniman: the teachers are amazing, and we get lots of attention. But my friends at Clayton like their teachers, too. And there are some things at Clayton that would be pretty great. Did you know there's a photo lab there? I mean, it was built, like, fifty years ago, but maybe with the merger they could afford some upgrades. Will, think about having access to a space like that every day."

"We're already doing photography here at Penniman," Will countered, "and I have my whole life to keep studying it. I want to graduate from the same place my dad and grandparents did. Some things are just worth saving."

Laura smiled somewhat sadly, knowing that if Penniman stayed open, the photography club might be cut. "You've both given me a lot to think about. Good luck with the petition."

As Laura returned to her seat, she considered her own position. The school board planned to vote on whether to move forward with the merger at the next meeting. Could she really vote to close Penniman, knowing how much it meant to the community? At the same time, would Penniman remain the same school once all the cuts that would be required to fix the budget problems took effect? Would students across the district in fact be better served by making Clayton the only high school in Franklin? How should she vote?

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