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Coming Together: The Pros and Cons of School Consolidation

The viability and acceptability of consolidation—combining two or more school buildings or districts into a single entity—have ebbed and flowed over the years. In the early 1900s, the main targets of school consolidation were the rural schools. The education leaders and policy makers of the time believed that a centralized model in which all schools looked alike would prove to be the best approach for educating youth to be productive citizens (Kay, Hargood, and Russell 1982).

In addition to providing an expanded curriculum, they believed, consolidated schools could be operated more efficiently and economically—an idea that has continued to appeal to policy makers and school business officials.

I surveyed several superintendents and a school district treasurer in southwestern Ohio to get their perceptions about school consolidation. They shared their thoughts about the perceived advantages of consolidation, the disadvantages, and approaches to reduce or mitigate the negative effect of school consolidation. Their perceptions are included here.

The Positives of Consolidation

One of the primary benefits of school consolidation is that school boards can provide more—and more enriched—curricular offerings to students by combining resources. Also, more flexibility is possible when scheduling courses,



By David A. Dolph, Ph.D.

particularly at the high school level, because more students take the classes.

Another advantage of consolidation focuses on staffing. Most school business officials would agree that staffing in certain areas can be challenging, particularly in the costly area of special education. Larger schools formed through consolidation can provide more student services, such as occupational therapy, physical therapy, and speech therapy. Having all the students in one location could help alleviate the challenging staffing issue for many school districts. In a similar vein, larger schools can provide expanded counseling services for students.

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School consolidations may improve the quality of the teaching staff in general. A merged staff that has opportunities to share expertise and experience can positively influence the quality of instruction offered to all students.

A third benefit of consolidation is the ability to offer an expanded extracurricular program. One midwestern superintendent shares: “Increased enrollment from combining school districts would enable districts to expand their extracurricular and academic offerings. Smaller districts often do not have enough students to offer comprehensive athletic programs. The potential to improve the quality and variety of academic competition, the music program, and athletics could be a positive result of school district consolidations.”

Because of limited student enrollment, smaller school districts cannot offer the variety of extracurricular activities that larger school districts can provide. There are not enough students to go around. A corollary that pertains to extracurricular activities and staffing is the ability to find qualified coaches and activity advisers. The pool of interested and qualified personnel is limited in this area. Many smaller school districts have difficulty attracting personnel who are willing to serve as coaches or advisers for sports and other student activities.

A fourth advantage of consolidation is a more diversified student enrollment and increased opportunities for social stimulation. Daily interaction of students from different communities enriches the school environment, resulting in a more informed and culturally aware student body.

A fifth advantage pertains to school finance. As most school business officials will attest, school districts are typ-

ically strapped for fiscal resources. Therefore, any strategy that appears to assist in this area is worth examining.

School consolidation is often touted as a method for saving money through economy of scale. As the school district treasurer whom surveyed shares: “Consolidation of school districts could provide the opportunity to reduce operational costs. Assuming fewer school facilities would be needed to house student enrollment of the combined districts, administrative, instructional, and classified staff positions could be reduced, which could result in considerable financial savings.”

Operating fewer school buildings should also decrease the number of capital dollars being spent for facility maintenance and upgrades. School district consolidation could also give rise to a larger tax base for the school district to access. That may mean fewer or reduced tax levies.

The school district treasurer explains, “School district consolidation could provide additional resources for a poorer district because of the way a new tax rate would be developed for a consolidated district.”

Another school business official notes, “Consolidating the support of the communities involved so that merchants and residents are not being asked for support for the many fund-raisers from numerous school districts would be perceived as a positive aspect of school district consolidation.”

School Consolidation Concerns

Opponents of school consolidations also have an array of valid arguments.

For example, one midwestern superintendent shares that in smaller school districts in rural areas, communities are often built around schools. People know one another and friendships are formed within the boundaries of the school district. In short, the school district is the glue that holds the community together.

Many smaller school districts have difficulty attracting personnel who are willing to serve as coaches or advisers for sports and other student activities.

If the affected communities and school districts are not convinced of the viability of consolidation, they may lose the pride and passion so often typical of smaller districts that serve specific towns and communities. That outlook certainly has potential implications for school finance. Given the importance of passing levies to finance school districts, should the consolidated district be unable to garner support from the constituents, the levies might not pass. Failure to generate funds through tax levies

could negatively affect every facet of the school district.

Students have more opportunity to participate in all aspects of school life in smaller schools.

A second concern regarding larger school districts formed through consolidation takes the idea that larger schools can better provide quality instruction and turns it upon itself. Considerable evidence supports the notion that small schools are more conducive to optimum student learning.

For example, in their study of Kansas school districts, Augenblick, Myers, and Silverstein (2001) suggest that a school district should have a student

enrollment of no less than 260 and no more than 2,925 in order to provide a positive school environment, an appropriate curriculum, and sufficient extracurricular activities. Further, the National Rural Education Association reports that elementary schools should have approximately 300–400 students and secondary schools should have no more than 500 students (Bard, Gardener, and Wieland 2005).

Smaller class sizes and close teacher-student relationships are often touted as justification for supporting smaller school districts. Students have more opportunity to participate in all aspects of school life in smaller schools. This seems to support the notion that smaller schools have the potential to provide greater social and emotional support for students than larger schools in which students can get “lost” by virtue of sheer numbers.

Other arguments voiced against school district consolidation should be considered. Some of those include the potential loss of local control, a more impersonal

atmosphere, and decreased individual attention for students. As one school business official says, “I think in the smaller districts the parents are in closer touch with the staff and better able to communicate with a teacher if there are issues that need to be addressed.”

Conclusion

Consolidation may not be the answer for every situation. Each potential consolidation must be examined as its own case. Demographic, geographic, social, and economic factors should all be considered and evaluated before a decision is made. As in most things, open communication among all parties involved is necessary for school consolidation to succeed. School business officials and others must concentrate on what is best for students and what is the best possible plan to ensure student success. ■

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