

Washington State House Education Committee
Study Session on School Organization
Dr. Bill Keim, Superintendent ESD 113

Policy Considerations

Washington State has a long tradition of local control of its public schools. Given that fact, there should be a clear and compelling state interest before any decision is reached to force two or more communities to consolidate their schools. The case should not only be clear and compelling, but there must also be strong evidence that the consolidation solution offers real and measurable improvement in the lives of the students and communities affected by the decision. The Hippocratic Oath of "Do No Harm" seems particularly relevant to such policy considerations.

The list provided below under Sample Research Findings includes some of the more common arguments that have been used to promote the forced consolidation of schools, along with a small sample of research that would argue against consolidation for that particular reason. And while research studies can reach conflicting conclusions, the 2009 study by Leithwood and Jantzi is especially helpful since it is based on the review of 57 empirical studies that were conducted since 1990 examining the effects of school size on a variety of student outcomes.

If after a thorough analysis of relevant research, there appears to be both a compelling state interest and strong evidence of positive outcomes to be achieved through forced consolidation, policy makers should also consider both the scope and short term impact of the change. Based on my personal experience, the merger of school districts will absorb all of the available staff and school board capacity to manage change. As a result, other reform priorities such as improved curriculum, instruction and/or assessment strategies would be delayed while the district comes to terms with the new organizational structure.

Given the urgency of educational priorities such as increasing math and science achievement, improving graduation rates, closing the achievement gap, and preparing more students for college, one could legitimately question whether consolidation is the focus needed for the State's current policy considerations. And while the case for consolidation might be made on a limited basis related to a few specific situations, a statewide implementation plan would sidetrack the consistent progress toward improved student achievement that has been achieved since HB 1209 was passed.

It is also worth noting that it had been nearly 25 years since a district consolidation had occurred in Washington prior to the closure of Vader School District in 2007. Based on the recent experience of ESD 113 working through that issue, and in the words of John Molohon (2009) who provided key leadership in that process:

There was no guide showing the way; the authorizing statutes either never existed or had changed with the rewriting of Chapter 28A.315 Revised Code of Washington (RCW) in 1999... In some cases existing law was completely lacking in guidance on how to proceed. In other instances existing law served to force choices that hindered success of the district dissolution and annexation (p. 5).

Addressing this statutory deficiency is probably the most urgent consolidation policy issue facing the legislature. Because if school districts voluntarily decide to consolidate, or if as with Vader, a district is forced to close due to inadequate funding, the legal framework needs to support, not inhibit such actions.

School Consolidation Research

Sample of Research Findings

Cost-Effectiveness

- Leithwood & Jantzi (2009) – “Cost-efficiency is no longer a justification for large schools. Most contemporary studies have concluded... that small schools are more efficient or cost-effective.”
- Raywid (1999) – based on cost per graduate small schools are more cost-effective than medium or large schools.
- Rural Schools and Community Trust (2006) – cost per graduate at small schools was lower than larger schools.
- Lee & Smith (1994), Cotton (1996) – the increased cost of salaries, workspace, transportation and other operational expenses offsets expected savings from consolidating.

Student Achievement

- Cotton (1996) – half the research finds no difference, other half finds higher achievement in small schools.
- Leithwood & Jantzi (2009) – strong negative correlation between district size and student achievement for low-income populations.
- Leithwood & Jantzi (2009) – dropout rates lower and graduation rates higher in smaller schools.
- Leithwood & Jantzi (2009) – minority and low-income students score higher on standardized tests when they attend small schools.
- Funk (1999) – higher college enrollment rates in small schools.
- Lawrence, B. K., et. al. (2002) – small schools have graduation rates and more of their graduates go on to post-secondary education than students from large schools.

Program Quality

- Cotton (1996) – no relationship between school size and curriculum quality.
- Cotton (1996) – no support for better college preparation in large schools.
- Funk (1999) – higher college enrollment rates in small schools.
- Bard & Wieland (2005) – small schools are equal or superior to large schools in their ability to prepare students for college admission and completion.
- Leithwood & Jantzi (2009) – breadth of curriculum is no longer a justification for large schools.
- Lee & Smith (1994) – small schools increased teacher collaboration and team teaching.

Related Social and Community Impacts

- Lyson (2002) – towns that lost their school had a lower social and fiscal capacity compared to towns that maintained their schools.
- Dreier & Goudy (1991) – towns that had lost their schools to consolidation were losing population at a faster rate than those towns that had maintained their local school.
- Driscoll (2008) – small and rural schools are significant employers and consolidation can create a significant loss of jobs and negative economic impact to their communities.
- Leithwood & Jantzi (2009) – smaller schools are associated with greater student engagement.
- Beaumont & Pianca (2000); Howley & Howley (2001) – small schools increase student involvement with families and communities which helps students connect with their school.
- Lawrence, B. K., et. al. (2002) – small schools are safer schools and better places for students to work with adults who know them and whom they trust.
- Bard & Wieland (2005) – lower rates of negative social behaviors in small schools.
- U.S. Department of Education (1999) – compared with small schools (less than 300) large schools (over 1000) have:
 - 825% more violent crime
 - 270% percent more vandalism
 - 378% percent more theft and larceny
 - 394% percent more physical fights or attacks
 - 3,200% more robberies
 - 1,000% more weapons incidents

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