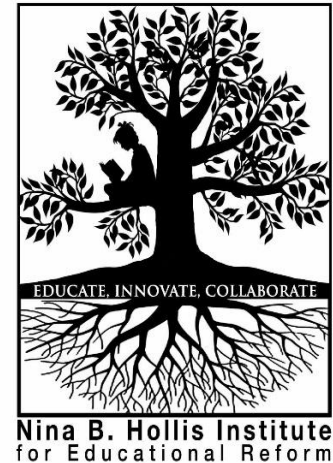


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*Voices of Reform: Educational Research to  
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**Volume 2 • Issue 1 • Article 3**



September 2019

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### Recommended Citation

Machell, J. & Evans, C. (2019). “Right-sizing” Oklahoma school districts: Examining district size, enrollment, and superintendent compensation in Oklahoma school districts. *Voices of Reform*, 2(1), 45-58. Retrieved from <https://www.voicesofreform.com/article/10609-right-sizing-oklahoma-school-districts-examining-district-size-enrollment-and-superintendent-compensation-in-oklahoma-school-districts> \_doi: 10.32623/2.00005

<http://dx.doi.org/10.32623/2.00005>

### Revisions

Submission date: December 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2018

1<sup>st</sup> Revision: March 19<sup>th</sup>, 2019

Acceptance: April 27<sup>th</sup>, 2019

Publication date: September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2019

# “Right-sizing” Oklahoma School Districts: Examining District Size, Enrollment, and Superintendent Compensation in Oklahoma School Districts

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## Abstract

This paper includes data related to the number and size of school districts and superintendent salaries in the state of Oklahoma. It is intended to encourage dialogue among elected state leaders and citizens about the need to consider cost savings that could result in badly needed additional funding being directed to classrooms across the state through cost savings that could be realized through the reorganization of many of the small school districts across Oklahoma.

## Keywords

superintendent, salaries, policy, program administration

*Note: The information contained in this paper is not intended to embarrass or harm anyone including those associated with the school districts identified or leaders of those communities. It is also not the author’s intention to harm the many small, outlying communities located throughout the state of Oklahoma. Our state has evolved over time to meet the needs of individual citizens and the overall good of the state. Rather than accept past practices, our future (and the children in our state who will lead us in the future) will be better served by reexamining our practices based upon a dynamic and quickly changing environment.*

## **Introduction**

Oklahoma faces major funding challenges related to providing basic services for its citizens in the areas of education, health care, corrections, and public safety, including transportation. Over the past year, numerous local, state, national, and international reports have portrayed Oklahoma in a terribly negative light (Cobb, 2017). The causes for Oklahoma’s current funding challenges vary depending upon one’s ideology and political leaning. On one side, some argue that wasteful spending and an “oversized” government are to blame; while on the other side it is posited that the combination of an extended economic downturn culminating in the Great Recession combined with ill-advised excessive tax breaks for corporations and the wealthy is the cause.

Arguably, adequate funding for Oklahoma’s students could be considered the state’s number one public policy issue. It has been widely reported that Oklahoma has experienced the deepest cuts in education funding since the start of the recession in 2008 (Perry, 2014). At the same time, the number of students being served by Oklahoma’s PK12 schools continues to increase (Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2017). A prolonged and severe teacher shortage has led to state schools relying on 1,975 emergency certified teaching in 2018 (Personal communication, Dr. Robyn Miller, May 24, 2018). Nearly 100 school districts, primarily on the eastern and southern borders of the state, have moved to a four-day school week. Leaders of some of these districts have indicated the cause for this shift is to more effectively recruit and retain qualified teachers, while others claim cost-savings as the reason. The 2018 teacher walkout and related school closings which, for some, spanned nearly two weeks seemed to raise public concern to new heights. During the most recent legislative session, the Oklahoma legislature passed the largest funding increase for common education in Oklahoma in over 20 years, including legislation to increase teacher salaries on average by \$6,000 each year. Even though further legal challenges to this legislation are being developed, it seems clear that the majority of citizens recognize the need to increase general education funding to improve learning conditions including reducing what have become overly large classes in many schools along with ongoing efforts to address teacher compensation.

The large number of school districts in the state and costs associated with operating them have, for decades, led many to believe there is a need for school district reorganization in Oklahoma. It could be said that the need for school district reorganization in Oklahoma is one of the “elephants in the room” with respect to state policy and funding efforts. Henderson and Robson (2016) examined Oklahoma school superintendent salaries and found that over half were earning more than \$100,000 at that time. Even though administrative rules related to state school accreditation (O. S. Title 70 Section 18-124) require that no more than 5–8% of total district expenditures may be spent on administrative expenses without penalty, there are still some who believe there is administrative waste that interferes with districts’ ability to provide additional funding for classrooms including teacher compensation. Several candidates for governor made this issue a plank of their platform for the office.

The vast majority of school districts in Oklahoma are located in rural areas. Local citizens fear that losing their local school district will further erode the vitality of the many struggling rural communities that exist in the state. Legislators and other elected leaders are reluctant to make decisions related to school reorganization out of concern for the negative impact on local communities and the related negative impact on constituent support in future re-election efforts.

In 2017 the Oklahoma Senate passed Senate Bill 514 that called for the creation of a task force to study school districts operational expenses and created an incentive for school districts to voluntarily share superintendents with neighboring districts. While it may be too early to know with certainty it appears that this incentive has had very little effect.

Increasing funding to serve Oklahoma’s PK-12 students is recognized as a state policy priority. However, continued reliance on increasing taxes in order to generate additional school revenue is not viewed favorably by many citizens and elected leaders. One possible solution to this funding problem is to reduce the amount of administrative expense across the state’s school districts to provide a funding source for additional revenues to be put directly into instructional expenses including reducing class sizes, increasing instructional resources, and providing additional compensation for teachers and other school personnel.

What follows are sections that include an overview of past research and best thinking related to school district consolidation and possible savings; an examination of the number of students served, the number of schools and school districts, the number of students per district in Oklahoma, and a comparison to those to states of similar size; as well as an overview of Oklahoma school district superintendent salaries in context of district size. That is followed by some general observations, a few very broad recommendations, and an example of how reorganization might be implemented. It is hoped that the ideas contained within this paper will compel Oklahoma’s leaders and other stakeholders to generate additional dialogue relative to funding solutions for Oklahoma’s public schools. Additional study and analyses will be required in order for Oklahoma’s elected and appointed leaders to arrive at practical solutions and improvements in how to serve Oklahoma’s children.

### **Overview of Past Research and Best Current Thinking**

The idea of consolidation of school districts has been examined for many years in the majority of states across the United States. The northeast region of the United States has publicly supported education in an effort to promote economic and political growth in their state since the 1790s (Parkerson & Parkerson, 2015; Beadie, 2014). New York State’s Department of Public Instruction, the forerunner to the New York State Education Department, provided funding for operations and textbook expenses in conjunction with local tax levy or subscription support for the school (Parkerson & Parkerson, 2015; Beadie, 2014). In the 1800s and the early 1900s, state departments of education began to increase their supervision of schools, especially in rural areas as the perception emerged that the rural schools were facing “problems” (Justice, 2009; Steffes, 2008; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). It was at this time that urban education experts began to push for centralization of small, one-room school houses into village-based centralized schools that would

then offer students greater curricular options and higher-quality facilities (Parkerson & Parkerson, 2015; Tyack & Cuban, 1995).

The New York State Education Department has officially promoted the policy of consolidating schools since 1958. This policy was part of the Master Plan for School Reorganization, in the effort to reduce the number of local districts under the State Education Department’s jurisdiction (NYSED, 1958). To date, the state has successfully centralized most small rural K-8 schools into consolidated school districts (NYSED, 1958).

Consolidation of school districts continues to remain a policy recommendation for state governments that would like to improve the outlook for public school success, while being cost-effective. While the issue is extremely important to consider, it remains a politically divisive matter for many. The movement of school district consolidation has been moving at a somewhat slower pace since the early 1970’s. States still offer and provide incentives for district consolidation through separate aid programs and generous building and transportation aid (Gold, Smith, & Lawton, 1995). There are many state governments which have provided mixed incentives to their school districts with regard to scale. Close to one-half of the states adjust their operating aid for formulas for sparsity or small scale, and in some cases the adjustment is sizable (Gold et al., 1995).

Andrews, Duncombe, and Yinger (2000) point out that as state governments continue to raise student performance standards and take over an increasing share of the financing of education, pressure will mount on local school officials for both improved productive efficiency and student performance. This pressure brings a call of reform and recommendations for future research: “Some common findings exist that are suggestive of what may emerge in future research. Cost function results indicate potentially sizeable cost savings up to district enrollment levels between 2000 and 4000 students, and that sizeable diseconomies of size may begin to emerge for districts above 15,000 students” (Andrews, et. al., 2000).

As New York State has struggled in the past five years to adequately fund schools (Rebell, 2001; 2012), rural schools and their communities have become increasingly hard-pressed to maintain an adequate level of education for their students. Jakubowski & Kulka (2016) provide three main drivers of this anxiety within the state’s milieu: increased educational accountability, political pressures, and staff recruitment pressures. These tensions between the local school district and the state in New York are not unique, but are similar to many other states’ issues with implementing the rightsizing of school districts.

According to Andrews, Duncombe, & Yinger (2000) there still appears to be significant variation in the results of the cost studies of school districts. Sizable potential cost savings may exist by moving from a very small district (500 or less pupils) to a district with a 2000-4000 pupils, both in instructional and administrative costs.

There are multiple reasons that consolidation advocates believe this is the best route for school districts to take. Nitta, Holley, and Wrobel (2008) examined these reasons that includes consolidation provides a diverse, comprehensive curriculum, better facilities, better-trained and

better-prepared teachers, a broader set of extracurricular activities for students, and a broader, more-diverse social experience for students, along with benefit of saving costs.

Nitta, Holley, and Wrobel (2008), in discussing studies endorsed by the Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, Kentucky, Indiana, and Michigan Departments of Education, have suggested that the advantages of consolidation greatly outweigh the disadvantages (Self, 2001). The basic logic in favor of consolidation concerns economies of scale (Duncombe & Yinger, 2007). Economies of scale also called economies of size, occur in education when fixed costs, such as the cost to keep a physical plant operational, are spread among a larger student population. Advocates of consolidation argue that, in addition to, or perhaps because of cost savings, consolidated districts can provide students, especially at the secondary level, with a broader curriculum, more opportunities, and improved educational quality. Larger schools can enjoy greater flexibility and can have more specialized facilities and instructors, and teachers can benefit from increased salaries and more opportunities for professional development (Nitta, et. al., 2008).

**Student Enrollment and the Number of Schools and School Districts in Oklahoma** Over time, the number of school districts in the United States has declined drastically. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, 117,108 school districts operated between 1930 and 1940. By 2006-07 this number had declined to 13,862 (an 88% decrease). While the rate of change has slowed drastically, further school district reorganization continues throughout many states (Duncombe & Yinger, 2010). Many states have a large number of small school districts in what the U. S. Census considers “non-remote” rural areas. Some have estimated that, combined, the extra costs associated with so many small districts could add up to one billion dollars annually in additional revenue that could be saved through reorganization (Center for American Progress, 2013).

It is common to use benchmarking (the process of comparing a particular local practice, policy, or current level of performance with what other organizations with a similar mission and function do) to gain a better sense of the current condition or quality of an operation. Education is a state function, so each state has its own way of governing schools including the number of schools and school districts that exist. While differences in geography, culture, and the needs of students to be served must be kept in mind, it makes sense to inform a conversation on the desired number of school districts in Oklahoma by examining the number of school districts in other states.

The first step in this analysis is to examine the number of students served by schools (enrollment), the number of schools, the number of school districts, and the number of students per district in Oklahoma and to compare this with states of comparable size with respect to student enrollment. Table 1 includes 2015-16 data related to total enrollment, the number of schools, the number of districts and the average number of students per district for Oklahoma and the four states serving the most similar number of students as Oklahoma (KY, LA, AL and UT). While the total number of students and number of schools are similar across these five states, Oklahoma has a disproportionately large number of districts which serve a disproportionately small number of students.

**Table 1:** Total number of students, schools, districts, and average number of students per district (by selected states)

State	Students	Schools	Districts	Students per district
AL	742,444	1,473	137	5,419
LA	691,924	1,274	70	9,885
OK	691,137	1,795	<b>512</b>	<b>1,350</b>
KY	656,588	1,220	173	3,795
UT	646,078	1,060	43	15,025
Average*	684,259	1,257	106	8,531
*not including Oklahoma				
US	50,700,000	132,853	13,584	2,694

Data retrieved from: <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=372>

Table 2 provides a breakdown of Oklahoma school districts by size. A review of Table 2 reveals that there are very few large districts and many very small districts in the state. Overall, there are only 64 districts with 2,000 or more students and 391 with fewer than 1,000 students. Perhaps more noteworthy, there are 29 with fewer than 100 students and almost 300 with fewer than 500 students.

**Table 2:** Overview of Oklahoma school districts (by size) (SDE, 2017-18)

Number of districts	Enrollment
2 (OKC and Tulsa)	40,000 - 45,000
4	20,000 - 25,000
7	10,000 - 20,000
9	6,000 - 9,000
11	3,500 - 5,200
15	2,500 - 3,500
16	2,000 - 2,500
64	2,000 or more
69	1,000 - 2000
391*	< 1000

\*included in the 391 less than 1,000 enrollment districts are 282 districts with fewer than 500 and 29 districts with fewer than 100 students

Data retrieved from: Oklahoma State Department of Education at <http://sde.ok.gov/sde/documents/2017-12-12/2017-2018-district-enrollment-sorted-size>

### Oklahoma School Superintendent Salaries

It should be noted that the number of school districts and superintendent salary data included here do not align perfectly. The Oklahoma State Department of Education *2017-18 District Enrollment*

*Sorted by Size* database includes 524 school districts. The Oklahoma State Department of Education *2017-18 Superintendent Salary* database includes a total of 538 entries with some districts including more than one individual. It should also be noted that it is common in small districts for superintendents to hold numerous positions in addition to the superintendent position.

Combined salary data for all state school superintendents reveal that the total compensation in 2017-18 was \$57,624,613 with an average of \$107,109 per superintendent. Over half (310) earned \$100,000 or more. Eight earned \$200,000 or more, and one earned \$319,291. The lowest superintendent salary was \$20,000.

Table 3 contains the enrollment, superintendent salary and superintendent salary per student for the five largest districts in the state. Rather than include all districts and superintendent salaries as was done in the Henderson and Robson (2016) report, this small sample was used to point out the vast difference in superintendent salary per student in the largest districts compared with the out-of-alignment (districts with small enrollments and high superintendent salaries) districts shown in Table 4.

**Table 3:** *Enrollment, superintendent salary and superintendent salary per student in Oklahoma’s five largest districts*

<b>District</b>	<b>Enrollment</b>	<b>Superintendent Salary</b>	<b>Superintendent Salary Per Student</b>
Oklahoma City	45,034	\$248,412	\$6
Tulsa	39,596	\$319,291	\$8
Edmond	24,892	\$174,111	\$7
Moore	24,687	\$173,876	\$7
Putnam City	19,515	\$193,249	\$10
<b>Average</b>	<b>30,745</b>	<b>\$221,788</b>	<b>\$7</b>

Data retrieved from: Oklahoma State Department of Education <http://sde.ok.gov/sde/documents/2018-04-12/2017-2018-superintendent-salaries>

There are various factors affecting the ever-increasing complexities of the roles and responsibilities of school superintendents. These include the educational attainment of adults in the community including parents and guardians; socio-economic factors of the community and families served; the diversity of culture, language and traditions of community members; the overall economic conditions of the community including local property value; overall level of engagement and support for the schools; and many others. However, district size (as measured by enrollment) is a reasonable single measure to use when comparing school superintendent salaries for a number of reasons including the fact that the state school funding formula also uses average daily membership (or student enrollment) as the basis upon which state funds are appropriated to individual districts.

A basic review of Table 3 reveals that the five largest districts in Oklahoma range from 19,515 to roughly 45,034 students with an average enrollment of 30,745. In these districts, salaries range



from \$173,876 to \$319,291 with an average of \$221,788. The superintendent salary per student ranges from \$6 to \$10 with an average of \$7.

Table 4 includes the enrollment, superintendent salary and superintendent salary per student in the state’s five most out-of-alignment districts. These districts have very small enrollments, relatively high superintendent salaries and the highest costs in terms of superintendent salary per student. It should be noted that the 29 smallest school districts in the state, all with enrollments of less than 100 students, were not included. It is also worth noting that of the 29 school districts in the state enrolling fewer than 100 students, the superintendent salary per student ratio is more than \$1,000 in 12 of those districts, between \$700 and \$996 in 12 of those districts and between \$374 and \$697 in five of those districts.

**Table 4:** *Oklahoma’s five most out-of-alignment districts\**

<b>District</b>	<b>Enrollment</b>	<b>Superintendent Salary</b>	<b>Superintendent Salary Per Student</b>
Sweetwater	129	\$135,128	\$1,048
Oklahoma Youth Academy	114	\$108,658	\$953
Reydon	130	\$116,123	\$894
Aline-Cleo	143	\$109,520	\$766
Forgan	150	\$108,956	\$726
<b>Average</b>	<b>133</b>	<b>\$115,677</b>	<b>\$877</b>

\*does not include 29 smallest districts with enrollments less than 100 students

Data retrieved from: Oklahoma State Department of Education  
<http://sde.ok.gov/sde/documents/2018-04-12/2017-2018-superintendent-salaries>

A basic review of Table 4 reveals that the five most out-of-alignment districts in Oklahoma range from 114 to 150 students with an average enrollment of 133. In these districts, salaries range from \$108,658 to \$135,128 with an average of \$115,677. The superintendent salary per student ranges from \$726 to \$1,048 with an average of \$834. It should be noted that, in most cases, superintendents of very small districts have multiple roles often including principal duties in addition to superintendent duties and these salaries are often calculated as a combination of compensation for various roles.

### **Observations**

Based on a review of selected data presented on enrollment, the number of school districts, superintendent salaries, and superintendent salary per student, what observations might be made? It seems quite clear that Oklahoma has too many school districts. Other states that serve a similar number of students have many fewer school districts (ranging from 166-223 with an average of 189 - see Table 1). The number of students per districts in the four comparable states range from 3,220 to 4,133 with an average of 3,736 – see Table 1). If rounded up to 200, Oklahoma could conceivably serve 693,000 in 200 school districts which would equate to an average district

enrollment of 3,465. Currently, there are only 33 districts in Oklahoma of at least this size. Naturally, some would be larger (especially those in more populated areas of the state including Oklahoma City and Tulsa) and some would be smaller.

One approach to achieving school district reorganization would be to begin with the 391 school districts that have enrollments of 1,000 or fewer students. The goal would be to combine these smaller districts based on factors such as proximity and distance between districts, facility condition and capacity and associated additional costs related to student transportation and other factors. The next phase would be to examine the 164 districts with enrollments between 1,000 – 3,500 students with a goal of reorganizing any of those where deemed feasible considering the same factors. The 33 districts enrolling 3,500 students or more would not be affected.

Historically, there were good reasons for the large number of districts in our state including a very large number of very small districts which, in some cases, are in very close proximity to one another. In a technologically based 21st century world, it is difficult to understand how such a situation could be justified, especially in a time of such great strain on funding for state services including education.

With respect to superintendent salaries, a large number of small and very small school districts exist in which superintendents earn relatively high salaries (\$100,000 or more) when compared to other wage earners in those communities. To be clear, superintendents have enormous responsibilities and these positions are some of the most challenging in the education profession. Nothing here should be interpreted to be a criticism of superintendents or the importance of their work. To follow the earlier line of thought, if Oklahoma consolidated districts to achieve a total of 200 total districts with an average enrollment of 3,465 and if the average salary of a superintendent in the state was \$150,000, the total ratio (or cost per student –  $\$150,000 / 3465$ ) would be \$43. Other administrative costs including compensation for other central office administrative staff is not included in this calculation.

Using the same scenario outlined above, superintendent salary ranges could be determined by the Oklahoma State Department of Education in collaboration with the Cooperative Council for Oklahoma School Administrators and the Oklahoma State School Board Association using national superintendent salary data as a benchmark. With approximately 200 school districts and superintendent salaries averaging approximately \$150,000 except in the largest districts (which would obviously be higher) the total cost would be reduced from over \$57 million to about \$30 million. This would result in approximately \$27 million in savings that could be used to provide additional funding for classrooms and teachers across the state.

## **Recommendations**

Oklahoma has many small school districts with associated operational expenses including superintendent salaries. Considerable cost savings could be achieved through reorganization of small school districts with an overall goal of creating a total of 200 school districts in the state.

Savings from such consolidations could be used to increase needed funding for classrooms across the state. In order to achieve this, more detailed study will be needed to develop a coherent plan

for school reorganization. Since this topic has been discussed in our state for decades, past studies (including interim studies commissioned by the Oklahoma Senate and House of Representatives and those from the Oklahoma State Department of Education, the Cooperative Council for Oklahoma School Administrators, the Oklahoma Education Association, or the Oklahoma State School Boards Association) should be found and reviewed. Oklahoma already has approximately 20 school districts that have been reorganized and combined with others, though most remain quite small. The process used in those districts should be studied to learn what worked well and what didn't. Studies of other state reorganization processes including those used in Kansas and Arkansas in recent years should also be studied.

Specific factors requiring additional consideration and study include the following for districts being considered for reorganization:

- Proximity and distance between districts
- Building capacity and condition of facilities of districts
- Additional costs required for student transportation and those associated with change of permanent signage of districts
- Options for program delivery and associated costs via distance technologies including use of existing and emerging virtual school options
- Projections of current versus future operational costs of districts

For reorganization efforts to be successful will require involvement of various stakeholders. The Oklahoma legislature and the Oklahoma State Department of Education will play the key role in determining how school reorganization planning should proceed. It is recommended that the following organizations also be included:

- Oklahoma Education Association
- Cooperative Council of Oklahoma School Administrators
- Oklahoma School Board Association

For various reasons associated with politics and geography it could be useful to consider school district reorganization on a county-by-county basis. At one time Oklahoma employed a dual system of both school district superintendents and county superintendents. Over time, county superintendent positions were eliminated. As recently as 2015, legislation was proposed to eliminate district superintendents and go back to the use of county superintendents (KGOU, 2015).

### **An Example**

Oklahoma's school districts are scattered across the 77 counties in uneven fashion.

Harmon County in far southwestern Oklahoma has only one school district. LeFlore County in east central Oklahoma has the most (17). Seventeen counties have 10 or more, eleven being in areas not connected to the two major metropolitan areas (Oklahoma City and Tulsa) of the state. Of these 11, three are in the western half, one (Osage, a geographically very large county) in north central, and nine in southeastern Oklahoma.

Since LeFlore County has the most districts of any county and is in a rural, isolated part of the state including many very small districts it serves as a good example of how the proposed process of reorganization might be initiated. The 17 districts of LeFlore County range in enrollment from 89 in Fanshawe to 2,360 in Poteau. Two districts have approximately 1,000 students (Spiro with 1,065 and Heavener with 996). Of the 14 with enrollments under 1,000, 10 have 500 students or fewer. The population of LeFlore County is approximately 50,000 and the county spans approximately 1,600 square miles.

Total enrollment for the 17 districts in LeFlore County is 9,664. Since there are three districts of nearly 1,000 students or more (Poteau with 2,360, Spiro with 1,065 and Heavener with 996) these districts could become the hub districts with other smaller districts surrounding them being reorganized with them. The Spiro hub would include Spiro (1,065), Arkoma (403), Pocola (871), Bokoshe (206) and Panama (734) for a total combined enrollment of 3,279. The Poteau hub would include Poteau (2,360), Fanshawe (89), Shady Point (165), Cameron (266) and Monroe (106) for a total combined enrollment of 2,986. The Heavener hub would include Heavener (996), Howe (618), Wister (492), LeFlore (227), Talihina (576), Whitesboro (228) and Hogden (262) for a total enrollment of 3,399. In these examples, the only distances beyond 20 miles between two current school sites would be 40 miles from Whitesboro and Talihina to Heavener and 28 miles from LeFlore to Heavener. As indicated earlier, care would need to be taken in exploring the capacity and condition of facilities and other related factors.

What has been presented here was intended to provoke thought and dialogue about how to reduce the large number of very small school districts in Oklahoma and the associated administrative expenses related to superintendent salaries. This idea is not new; however, state leaders have been hesitant to make decisions in this area out of concern for the viability of fragile rural communities. Oklahoma’s leaders need solutions for properly funding classrooms in light of a steady pattern of reduced school funding which has led to a severe teacher shortage and degraded classroom conditions for students including class sizes that have become unmanageable. Something must be done through additional revenues that could come from tax increases and through savings in other areas including the reduction of administrative costs due to an excessive number of school districts in the state.

### **Suggestions for Reform**

There are a number of reasons why the approach suggested here may not work. These include the difficulty politically and practically in reorganizing school districts. Legislators are not motivated to promote such efforts and the details associated with the practical details of managing such a change is complicated and messy. State leaders have considered various approaches to school district reorganization and some officials have studied efforts in other states with little to show in

terms of results. Some have found that school district reorganization actually does little to save money and increase efficiencies. The purpose behind this paper is to encourage state leaders to continue to explore various ways of providing additional badly needed funding into classrooms across the state. Whether school district reorganization is a viable option in accomplishing that will be one of many vexing challenges facing state leaders over the next several years.

There is now an urgent need for researchers in school consolidation to develop the extremely valuable evaluative research and make it a supreme priority. The evaluative research will provide the convincing evidence needed on the true effects of consolidation on school districts. This research is imperative to analyze costs, size, inputs, outputs, and would provide agreement on the best plan of action for each state.

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