

An Evaluation of the Impact of Rural School Consolidation

**What challenges may a new round of rural school consolidations have on the
safety, educational performance and social environment
of rural communities?**

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OVERVIEW

At the beginning of the 1900's, there were more than 200,000 one-room schoolhouses in America. This changed rapidly after the middle of the 20th century with the initiation of the first round of school reorganization in the United States. Today there are only a few hundred one-room schools remaining in use and most of the consolidated school districts that once held title to those facilities have sold the land and buildings to private ownership. However, today we are witnessing a re-examination of the practicality for the existence of many small rural community schools. In some states there is an ongoing battle over a new round of small school closings and reconsolidation efforts are underway to once again change or reorganize the educational infrastructure of rural community schools. While this paper addresses some of the considerations necessary to more fully evaluate the impact of rural school consolidation, it is not intended to present a definitive solution to the subject. However, we hope our new focus on the subjects such as student, family and community safety will support a fresh look at justifications for keeping our rural school educational infrastructure intact. This document will also re-address some of the more controversial issues and take another look at a few of the challenges that this new round of school closings may present to not only the safety issue- but the social, political, economic, and educational support environment in our rural communities. Most people would never support the removal of other important primary institutions such as the economic, political, emergency services, religious or media organizations from our communities, and we feel the rural school community support function is equally important to the performance of a viable community. There is an old saying about "eggs in one basket" - a subject we in rural areas know a great deal about, and we would like to emphasize the larger reconsolidated school dangers – "DON'T PUT ALL OUR STUDENTS IN LARGER AND LARGER SCHOOLS."

RATIONALE

There is hardly a person involved in educational administration or holds an elected educational leadership position, who has not been aware of the efforts by some state legislatures to revisit this subject. Unless we live under a rock, most educational leaders are aware that a few state governments have already taken up this controversial challenge presented and have attempted to implement a new round of school closings and consolidations. There are few of us concerned with this approach who would question the fact that the motivating force behind these actions are based on both efforts to deal with rising costs of providing educational services and the continual increase of programs ostensibly designed to enhance the educational performance of both teachers and students. However, our position would argue that the further the educational organization is from the student supply base (local community and family) the greater the pressure for mitigating circumstances to function to disrupt and drain resource dollars through the perceived uncaring independence of a large and more remote school. This is not to argue that litigation is one of the major problems facing education today, but only that the threat of social and economic costs may be more effectively settled through more personal negotiations by families and faculty who know each other and who live and work more closely together in the same community.

The proposed changes to eliminate many of our rural schools may threaten the educational and social environment of rural communities in ways that would not impact the urban environment in the same way – particularly if the rural school is one of the community's primary institutions. A rural farming community for example may lose much of its social

cohesiveness that was previously focused on family-based vocational agricultural production. The loss of our smaller agro business community support infrastructure may soon follow the termination of rural education. Many other factors are impacted when you readjust the social or economic foundations of a fragile rural community's total infrastructure. Using valid considerations and a balanced analysis, organizations such as the National Rural Education Association are fully justified in opposing arbitrary or compulsory school district consolidation at the state or federal levels (NREA, 2004). It is evident the NREA is recognizing that these new efforts at reconsolidation can have a lasting detrimental impact upon the social life of our rural communities, our student academic performance and the overall safety and stability of our rural institutional infrastructure. As we address this subject, let us turn next to the state that has become a lightning rod in the debate over reconsolidation policy changes and has had some considerable experience in efforts to implement a new round of school closings. In doing this, we look first at the West Virginia experience in our focus on: *student safety, educational performance, transportation issues, and economic expenditures, among other considerations that are addressed in this analysis.* The state of West Virginia has spent almost 15 years experimenting with efforts to initiate educational policy and infrastructure changes through redistricting and has spent over \$1,000,000,000.00 (that's correct—over one billion dollars) in their efforts at reconsolidation that has resulted in the closure of more than 300 schools. The Charleston West Virginia Gazette has contributed significantly to the analysis of these topics with an award winning series of investigative articles that have addressed and evaluated many of the issues raised in this writing (Eyre E. and Finn S. 2002).

This said; our report will now explore a few of the more complex challenges and concerns of the small rural school consolidation issue. Let us begin by looking for an operational framework that may be used in the analysis of rural schools. While it may be argued that the U.S. Department of Education’s definition of a rural school may favor decentralized school districts, their definition is based on a very limiting view being employed in the allocation of resources under the Small Rural School Achievement (SRSA) program. The SRSA program allocates extra resources to rural school districts and allows them more flexibility in combining federal educational grants. According to this viewpoint, a rural school district is required to have an average daily attendance of less than 600 students or otherwise it must have all of the schools located in counties with a population density of less than 10 persons per square mile. When a district satisfies one of these requirements, it must then have all of its schools in a locale code area that contains a population of less than 2,500. Under this complex and somewhat confusing definition, West Virginia which has closed more than 300 schools would have only one rural school district out of 56 and the state of Missouri that has not yet felt the full force of reconsolidation efforts would have 255 out of 522 districts. Other examples find that Alabama had no schools and Tennessee had only 3 schools eligible for SRSA during the 2003-4 school year. The national average of roughly 14,190 U.S. school districts shows that only about 34 percent were eligible for SRSA as rural districts. This has prompted such notable educational leaders as Bob Mooneyham, the executive director of the National Rural Education Association, to say that “when we see rural states that have no rural schools, that raises some red flags” (Mooneyham, 2004).

Safety takes on a new meaning

It does not come as a surprise that there is a potential for the increase in student conflict during longer bus trips. We may also recognize the increased risks from increased highway speed and additional miles traveled. The still controversial issues of psychological harm from uninterrupted one- way bus rides of up to two hours may be very stressful for some students. The earlier home departure times and later arrival back may compound the problems of student sleep deprivation and needed periods of uninterrupted study.

In addition, some researchers are concerned about the possible increased exposure to physiological hazards brought about by increased inhalation of dangerous diesel fumes and carbon dioxide gases and their effect on young and still developing bodies.

The issues of social disruptions brought about by students living and going to school in two separate environments have made some to question the important issues of a loss in community- based institutional social stability. Today, these - and other even more critical dangers – are taking on new meanings in the brave new world of bio-terrorism. Our schools are increasingly being designed around our emerging homeland security threats and other community emergency response needs.

These new safety issues also include the ability to combat the impact of a potential terrorism event and support a community's response. The larger reconsolidated school districts may become a significantly greater danger by offering a target-rich environment to terrorists and hold the potential to increase mass casualties. We have an example of this potential in the Russian School Hostage Crisis that claimed over 350 lives and more than 700 people wounded (CNN World News, September 5, 2004).

Rural school districts are increasingly being identified and prepared as community-based Emergency Response Centers (SEMA – Dent County Missouri - Emergency Operation Plan (EOP), January 2004). This is occurring because our schools offer locations for responses to a whole host of both natural and man-made hazards such as terrorism, earthquakes, floods and other weather-related emergencies. Schools are rapidly being identified as locations where command, control and communication centers can quickly be established for community warning and the distribution of medicines needed for rapid dissemination during a Chemical, Biological, Nuclear or Explosives (CBNRE) terrorist event. The Missouri School Boards' Association (MSBA) held the first live teleconference on Bio-Terrorism: Recognition, Response, and Reporting for the identification of public health contagions, establishment of protocols designed to slow their spread and the required emergency and non-emergency reporting standards for schools (MSBA, November 2004). There exists an ever-increasing focus on the prepositioning of needed emergency response supplies such as: antidote drugs, monitoring equipment, and personal protective clothing, plus other decontamination materials and other emergency provisions to name but a few. The seldom emphasized fact is that local school buildings, with their unitized classrooms configuration, are listed right there along with hospitals, clinics and nursing homes as locations that may be called on for the distribution of emergency response supplies and services. (Missouri SEMA 2004). The loss of these facilities may have a very harmful impact on the smaller community's emergency response capabilities.

The Cost of School Reconsolidation

“COST” may mean different things to different people and is only referenced briefly in this writing. However, for a more detailed analysis the reader is directed to the previously important listed source of information for a more down-to-earth view from the West Virginia Gazette at <http://www.wvgazette.com/section/Series/Closing+Costs/2002092811>.

When West Virginia closed hundreds of schools, there was talk about the benefits of millions of dollars in savings from reductions in operational costs, new advanced classes to be offered and without much longer bus rides for students. The West Virginia Gazette and other researchers have found the following abbreviated list of facts to be closer to what occurred- after more than 80 interviews and thousands of pages of school closing documents, bus schedules and internal education department records - were reviewed. In addition to the hazards to students from the longer bus rides and the social disruptions previously outlined, school transportation costs have nearly doubled in West Virginia during the past decade, even though the state buses 25,000 fewer students. In addition, school consolidation, claiming to save taxpayers millions of dollars through school closings and personnel cuts, never occurred even though it is said the state has spent more than a billion dollars on school consolidation. The executive Director of the School Building Authority, Clacy Williams acknowledged in September 2002 that the closings did not save the taxpayers any money. Despite consolidation, the state is spending a higher percentage on maintenance and utilities now than it did five years previous to consolidation. In addition, the number of local school administrators has increased by 16 percent despite a 13 percent drop in student enrollment with a corresponding increase in salaries.

West Virginia spent more of its education money on transportation than any other state in America. Even though the state guidelines are that students endure no more than 30 minute bus rides for elementary, 45 minutes for middle school and 60 minutes for high school, the number of children who ride buses more than two hours a day doubled from 3,908 students in 1992 to 7,938 in 1996. For comparative purposes it is noted the average adult American commutes only 26 minutes. The president of the Rural School and Community Trust, a nonprofit group focused on improving the quality of rural education and community life, is quoted saying “If you look around the country, there are a number of states that think consolidation is the way to save money. But if any money is saved, it’s very short term.” (Rachel Tompkins with RSCT) and the organization’s policy director, Marty Strange indicates that the biggest offset to savings is transportation. When a school closes, more kids must travel farther to get to their new school. When a student becomes just another face in the crowd, it takes more adults – principals, vice-principals, counselors, and security guards – to deal with their alienation and the troubles that ensue. (See University of Nebraska Medical Center (UNMC) for further information at: http://www.unmc.edu/Community/ruralmeded/fedstloc/closing_and_consolidation_costs.htm.)

Conclusion

We have known for many years that there are several beneficial results by retaining our small school environments. Many of the latest studies have shown a strong correlation between academic achievement and small school environment (Eckman and Howley 1997). Even the U. S. Department of Education is now aware of these research findings. The Department has explicitly recognized the importance of the small school environment to

increase academic success, student satisfaction, increased graduation rates, and at the same time decreasing a school's discipline problems by establishing these facts "with a clarity and a level of confidence rare in the annals of education research" (Raywid 1999: 1). The Center for School Improvement at the University of Chicago has also analyzed several studies from across the United States and has found the same significant relationship between a school's quality of education and cost of operation. Professor Anthony Bryk in the School of Education, University of Wisconsin-Madison has noted that the findings confirm the following position:

These findings complement and extend a now-large body of research evidence that smaller schools are more productive work places for both adults and students. In these more intimate environments, teachers are more likely to report greater satisfaction with their work, higher levels of morale and greater commitment. Problems of student misconduct, class cutting, absenteeism, and dropping out are all less prevalent (Bryk 1994: 67).

Researchers also found that by supporting the existence of small schools, those with fewer than 350 students in elementary classes, that the following important strengths of small schools were identified:

- student performance and test scores improved,
 - violence occurred less frequently,
 - conditions were more conducive for students to learn and for teachers to develop professionally and
 - parents and community members were more satisfied with the school
- (Wasley, et. Al.).

Today, there are few who question that a small school environment leads to greater student satisfaction and individual student performance. When this happens, our students are more satisfied in their school environment (Lindsay 1982 & Burke 1987). . Thus, the more contented our students are - with a better satisfying environment normally found in small schools - the more academically productive, better behaved and likelihood that students will participate in after- school activities and less likely that they are to drop out of school (Nathan and Febey 2001).

Another positive issue relating to satisfaction with the school's environment is the question of attracting and retaining highly qualified and motivated teachers. This issue is very important to our schools, taxpayers, Board of Education and superintendents because retaining good teachers will play such a key role in the small school's environment. Several research studies have concluded that teachers in small schools are more satisfied than are teachers in larger schools (Wasley et. al. and Raywid). In research with more than 2,400 Mid-western superintendents, it was shown that they know the importance of small school contentment in retaining high-quality faculty and enthusiastic students. We find that urban, rural, and suburban superintendents whose school districts have restructured to make them smaller rate this action as the single most effective way to retain teachers (Hare and Heap, 2001).

It is obvious that schools cost money to operate and there is a limit to what can be funded from property taxes and state or federal governments. Schools also change over time in size, quality of education provided and their importance in the community's infrastructure. This is mostly in keeping with the social, political and economic changes of

our culture. As our society has shifted to urban living, we have seen schools and other organizations disappear from the small community's landscape. When small schools have closed and dollars migrated to other priorities or locations in our culture, there has normally been a corresponding loss in dollars to local businesses and other social institutions. It is now the time for America's rural schools and communities to reconsider a much related old saying about hanging together or *closing* separately.

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