

County School Districts: Research and Policy Considerations

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Introduction – National and State Background

Since the days when our country was dotted with one-room schoolhouses, many changes have taken place in school governance and management. In 1940, there were over 117,000 public school districts in the United States. In 2000, there were fewer than 15,000, even though the student population of the country had doubled in that time.¹

While school districts were merging over those six decades, in some states and regions the decision was made to unify school district boundaries with other municipal boundaries, particularly county boundaries. Today, county school systems are the norm in Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Maryland, Nevada, South Carolina, and West Virginia. Additional state data is displayed in *Appendix B*.

In other areas of the country, strong traditions of local control prevailed, and many small, medium and large school districts formed, some rural, some urban, with their own unique boundaries different from county boundaries, and governance by elected school boards not affiliated with county boards.

In Illinois, county superintendents (established in 1865) performed advisement, coordination, and compliance services on behalf of their many and diverse constituent school districts (such as registering teaching certificates). The county superintendents often acted as liaisons between their local districts and the state superintendent of education, and had the authority to make decisions about controversies arising from school law disputes.² Today the state has 45 regional superintendents, with responsibility for one to seven counties each.

Today, Illinois has ten counties (of 102) with county-wide school systems. These are generally rural counties with no large or mid-size cities. The table below lists each county district with the number of students served in the 2007-2008 school year.³

- Brown (783)
- Edwards (990)
- Gallatin (833)
- Hamilton (1185)
- Hardin (641)
- Jasper (1462)
- Jersey (2840)
- Pope (551)
- Putnam (982)
- Schuyler (1345)

¹ Young, E. & Green, H.A. (2005). School system consolidation. *Staff Education Brief Number 8*, Tennessee Advisory Committee on Intergovernmental Relations.

² roe45.org/IARSS/docs/RegSuptsHist.doc

³ Interactive Illinois Report Card: <http://iirc.niu.edu/Default.aspx>

District Consolidation Considerations

Studying county school district formation inevitably involves reviewing research on school consolidation in general.

The reasons most often cited for promoting school consolidation are:

1. To make school districts more efficient by capitalizing on **economies of scale**^{4,5}
 - a. Claim: Smaller districts will be more efficient if merged into a larger district by spreading their costs and pooling resources over the operation resulting in lower:
 - i. Administrative costs
 - ii. Building and operation costs⁶
 - iii. Costs for educational innovations

2. To be able to **enhance educational and social outcomes** for students^{7,8}
 - a. Claim: Larger school districts are able to offer an enhanced curriculum that meets students needs offering specialized programs for college and career preparation⁹, tutorial services, higher quality libraries, technology, etc.
 - b. Claim: Larger school districts are able to provide more extra-curricular activities for their students.
 - c. Claim: larger school districts have a more diverse faculty, staff, and student population
 - d. Claim: larger districts are able to attract higher quality teachers through higher pay and benefits and offer them more opportunities for interaction with colleagues and professional development.
 - e. Claim: Larger school districts are able to equalize educational opportunities for ass students across communities

3. To **overcome small district problems**^{10,11} related to:
 - a. Teacher shortages
 - b. Financial problems (e.g., heavy tax burdens)

Opponents of school consolidation have their own arguments against making the change. For both proponents and opponents, arguments are often based on perceptions and not necessarily on research.

⁴ Young, E. & Green, H. A. (2005)

⁵ Plucker, J. A., Spradlin, T. E., Magaro, M. M., Chien, R. W., & Zapf, J. S. (2007). Assessing the policy environment for school corporation collaboration, cooperation, and consolidation in Indiana. *Education Policy Brief, 5(5)*. Center for Evaluation and Education Policy

⁶ Conant, J. (1959). *The American high school*. New York, NY: McGraw Hill

⁷ Young & Green (2005)

⁸ Timko, M. (1977). *A school district reorganization plan for the state of New Jersey*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Rutgers University, NJ.

⁹ Conant, J. (1959)

¹⁰ Conant, J. (1959)

¹¹ Davison, H. (1951). Trends in school district reorganization. *Phi Delta Kappan, 32(7)*, 302-307.

Sorting It Out: Perceptions and Reality

In reviewing school consolidation studies over the past decades, researchers have identified the perceived benefits and liabilities of consolidated districts versus independent districts.

Perceived Benefits	Perceived Liabilities
Consolidated Districts	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More efficient use of public funds through economies of scale • Lower per-pupil costs • Expanded curriculum • Expanded extra-curricular activities • Higher salaries/benefits for teachers • More specialized teachers and staff • Better instructional materials and equipment • More resources for advanced and special needs students • Greater cultural diversity • Lower teacher turnover • State consolidation funding incentives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Higher transportation costs • Time lost to busing • Less parent-teacher interaction • Less community support for schools and education bond issues • Adverse community economic consequences: lower housing values, more pressure on property tax base • Declines in enrollment over time • Failure to achieve significant long-term savings from economies of scale • Increase power of teacher unions • Significant one-time costs: signage, uniforms, stationary, websites • Diseconomies if consolidated district is too large
Independent Districts	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community pride and identity • More responsive to needs of individual students • Closer relationships among students, teachers and staff • More family-teacher interaction • Less bureaucracy/fewer management problems • Less transportation costs and time • Local control over policies and curriculum • Greater sense of loyalty and belonging, with more positive student attitudes • Greater opportunity for students to develop leadership skills • Fewer disciplinary problems • Higher graduation rates; lower dropout rates 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Higher per-pupil costs • Limited curriculum offerings • Limited extracurricular offerings • Less scheduling flexibility for students and teachers • Fewer opportunities for professional development and interactions among teachers • Fewer/lower quality instructional supplies and equipment • Lower expectations for student learning • Heavier teaching loads and more non-teaching assignments • Too few students in grade levels for healthy competition

Adapted from Young & Green (2005)

When research is conducted to determine the reality of these perceptions, the following findings emerge:

- **Economies of Scale**

- When student performance is held constant, research indicates that consolidation will be likely to lower costs of two 300-pupil districts by slightly more than 20%; lower costs of two 900-pupil districts by about 8%; and have little impact on costs of two 1500-pupil districts¹².
- Capital costs are lowered only when consolidating relatively small districts; capital costs increase when consolidating districts of 1500 pupils or more.¹²
- Two inefficient districts combined do not necessarily create one efficient district.¹³
- Expenditure per student rises when district size falls below 750 students.¹³
- The larger the school district, the more resources devoted to secondary and non-essential activities.¹³
- While consolidation reduces costs in small districts in the short term, these reductions are replaced in the long term with new expenditures, such as expanded administrative, supervisory and specialized staff.¹⁴
- For high schools, as enrollments increase, cost per student decreases; however, in very large high schools, costs per student rise again due the need for more supervisory staff.
- Costs for elementary student remain unchanged with increased enrollments.¹⁵

- **Student Performance**

- A strong *negative* correlation exists between district size and student achievement for low-income populations.¹³
- Research indicates that student achievement in smaller schools is equal or better to that of students in large schools. None of the research finds large school achievement to be superior to small school achievement.¹⁶
- Student in smaller schools show lower rates of negative social behaviors.¹⁶
- Dropout rates are lower and graduation rates higher in smaller schools.¹⁶
- Achievement effects are especially strong for minority and low-income students, who score higher on standardized tests when they attend small schools.¹⁷

¹² Duncombe, W. & Yonger, J. (2003). *Does school district consolidation cut costs?* Syracuse: Syracuse University Center for Policy Research.

¹³ Louisiana Department of Education (2003). *Small school districts and economies of scale*. Presented to the State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education Strategic Planning Study Group Committee, May.

¹⁴ Bard, J., Gardener, C. & Wieland, R. (2005). *Rural school consolidation report*. Norman, OK: National Rural Education Association.

¹⁵ Boex, L.F.J. & Martinez-Vasques, J. (1998) Structure of school districts in Georgia: Economies of scale and determinants of consolidation. *Fiscal Research Program Report No. 16*. Atlanta: Georgia State university

¹⁶ Cotton, K. (1996). *School size, school climate, and student performance*. Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Education Laboratory.

¹⁷ Rural School and Community Trust (2006). *State initiatives to consolidate schools and districts*. Rural Policy Matters. <http://www.ruraledu.org/articles.php?lid=2034>.

- **Curriculum, Instruction and Extracurricular Activities**

- There is no reliable relationship between school size and curriculum *quality*. However, curriculum *variety* increases slightly (17%) with a doubling of high school enrollment.¹⁸
- Claims that larger schools prepare students better for college have been disproved; research shows that small schools are equal or superior to large schools in their ability to prepare students for college admission and completion.¹⁸
- Students in large schools are more polarized, with a group of active extracurricular participants at one end of the continuum and a large group of students not participating in any extracurricular activities at the other. In small schools, very few students do not participate in any extracurriculars.¹⁹

Overall, the research can be summarized as follows:

1. **Economies of scale are greatest when small districts merge; as districts get larger, at some point the economies plateau, and then expenses rise with greater district complexity. In other words, there is a “point of diminishing returns.”**
2. **Student performance is equal or better in smaller schools.**
3. **Other considerations besides finances should be part of the consolidation deliberation.**

In reality, each county and each case is different. Policy recommendations in many research studies state that each case should be reviewed on its own merits.

Appendix A includes two brief case studies, one from Tennessee and one from Indiana, which came to different conclusions regarding county-wide district consolidation. Each is instructive regarding the reasons that each decision was made. More detailed information about these cases is available from the original sources.

¹⁸ Cotton, K. (1996)

¹⁹ Cawelti, G. (1993). Restructuring large high schools to personalize learning for all. *ERS Spectrum (Summer)*:17-21.

Appendix A: Sample Case Studies—County Consolidation

Hamilton County (Chattanooga), TN²⁰: A successful county merger

The Chattanooga school system merged with the Hamilton County school district in 1997. The impetus for the decision was a trend of rising costs and declining enrollments in the city system. Area civic and educational leaders saw an opportunity to rethink and redesign the entire county educational system.



Proponents of the merger put forth two main arguments:

- The merger would be fairer for city taxpayers, whose property taxes supported both systems; and
- A redesigned school system would better serve all the area's students.

The opposition listed their objections:

- African-American advocacy groups warned that the mainly white county school system would not properly educate low-income black students; and
- School closings, massive teacher reassignments, and massive busing would occur, eventually costing more per student.

Voters eventually approved the measure, leading to a redesigned system based on the following principles:

- An un-tracked curriculum
- Active learning and academic coaching
- High expectations for student achievement
- Parent/family involvement in decision-making
- Extensive use of technology

Two foundations and the Chattanooga community donated a combined \$7.5 million to plan and engineer the new design. The system consists of both neighborhood schools and clusters of theme-oriented schools. Busing is provided to the themed schools from all over the county.

Hamilton County Schools Achievement & Reform²¹

Elementary Schools

Average student-teacher ratio of 18.87 to 1 in Kindergarten through third grades and 22.8 to 1 in the upper grades.

Three Hamilton County elementary schools and one K-8 school have been honored as National Schools of Excellence.

²⁰ Bradley, A. (1996) Beyond city limits. *Education Week* 14(41) p. 32-39.

²¹ http://www.hcde.org/site/schools/reform_efforts.aspx

Through the nationally acclaimed Benwood Initiative, a \$9 million reform initiative from the Benwood Foundation and the Public Education Foundation, Hamilton County Schools dramatically increased student achievement at the eight elementary schools with the greatest challenges in the county, while closing the achievement gap.

In 2007, the District partnered again with the Benwood Foundation and PEF for Benwood II, expanding this successful initiative to an additional eight elementary schools located across the county. The expansion initiative will continue to target literacy and teacher effectiveness along with math instruction and staff development. The goal of the expansion grant is to spread the reform work to all elementary schools.

All Hamilton County, elementary schools continue to make great gains in student achievement with more than 90% of students scoring proficient or advanced in reading and math. Seven elementary schools scored straight As in Academic Achievement and Academic Growth on the 2007 Tennessee Schools Report Card. Another 24 elementary schools received straight As in Academic Growth, indicating exceptional student progress from one year to the next.

The District's third grade proficiency reading scores, a benchmark identified by a community literacy initiative that seeks to have 95% of all third graders reading at or above grade level by 2010, are also increasing. This progress gives rise to a generation of students with a greater chance for success, indicating elementary reform efforts are paying off.

Middle Schools

Hamilton County has 21 middle school sites serving about 9,500 students in grades 6-8. Students are assigned to interdisciplinary teams with 3 to 5 teachers. Hamilton County Schools is continuing reform efforts at the middle school level supported by grants from the Lyndhurst Foundation, the National Education Association Foundation and the Public Education Foundation. These efforts, patterned after successful high school reform work, have allowed each school to create a plan for achievement that is unique to their students, faculty and campus. The 2007 Tennessee Schools Report Card indicates that middle school students are making progress in both reading and math under these reform initiatives.

High Schools

Secondary education is provided to nearly 12,000 students at 16 school sites. Approximately 65% of Hamilton County high schools are accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. Three high schools have been recognized as National Schools of Excellence. The District offers dual enrollment, virtual courses and an Adult High School for credit recovery. Students meet graduation requirements for a Single Path Curriculum designed to prepare all students to attend a 2 or 4-year college or effectively enter the workforce. Hamilton County Schools is continuing reform efforts at the high school level with support from the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Public Education Foundation.

Tippecanoe County, IN: Merger rejected, cooperation and collaboration as the new strategy²²



In 2005, the three city school districts in the county examined consolidation advantages and disadvantages. Studies were undertaken in the areas of curriculum, facilities, financial and governance implications, and technology. The results of the studies provided a basis for informed discussion among the respective school boards.

Curriculum: the study found that the three districts already offered comprehensive programs, and that a merger would not improve these offerings.

Facilities: the study found that a merger would have minimal effect on the need for facilities.

Finance and Governance: the study found that savings on central office administrative staffing would be less than a fraction of one percent of the merged district's operating expenses. Combined staffing tables indicated similar class sizes and teaching assignments as in the individual districts. A merger would require renegotiation of the three district labor agreements.

Technology: the study found that technology infrastructures in the three districts were not fully compatible and would incur expenses in order to be successfully merged.

The overall review of these studies suggested that there was a district size beyond which economies of scale had already been realized, and it did not make sense to consolidate. The three districts reached the conclusion that any potential gains in funding did not offset the loss of local control that would result from a merger.

The three district school boards have created a joint committee that meets annually to explore ways that the districts can cooperate and collaborate. Areas of potential collaboration include:

- Inter-district student mobility issues
- Consistent curricular scope and sequence to assure that students transferring across districts can maintain their courses of study
- Implementing an International Baccalaureate Program
- Coordinating dual enrollment/dual credit with Purdue University and the local community college
- Coordinating summer school program offerings
- Extracurricular activity/sports coordination, including transportation, officiating, coaching, facilities and purchasing
- Special education and other special student services

²² Plucker, J.A., Spradlin, T.E., Magaro, M.M., Chien, R.W. & Zapf, J.S. Assessing the policy environment for school corporation collaboration, cooperation and consolidation in Indiana. *Education Policy Brief 5(5)*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University School of Education.

Appendix B: County School Organization by State

100% to 90% County Structure	89% to 25% County Structure	24% to 1% County Structure	No County Structure (or Negligible)*
Florida	Alabama	Alaska	Arizona
Georgia	Kentucky	Colorado	Arkansas
Louisiana	Tennessee	Idaho	California
Maryland	Utah	Illinois	Connecticut
Nevada	Virginia	Indiana	Delaware
South Carolina		Kansas	Iowa
West Virginia		Mississippi	Maine
		Missouri	Massachusetts
		Nebraska	Michigan
		North Carolina	Minnesota
		Ohio	Montana
		Pennsylvania	New Hampshire
		South Dakota	New Jersey
		Wyoming	New Mexico
			New York
			North Dakota
			Oklahoma
			Oregon
			Rhode Island
			Texas
			Vermont
			Washington
			Wisconsin

*Note: Hawaii has a single, all-encompassing state structure.

Source: <http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/14/30/1430.htm>