



AN INVESTIGATION OF SCHOOL CLOSURES RESULTING FROM FORCED DISTRICT REORGANIZATION IN ARKANSAS

An analysis prepared for
Advocates for Community and Rural Education by the
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Introduction

“In our candidate interviews over the last few weeks, we’ve noticed a recurrent theme among the prospects: The candidates—like many Arkies, we suspect—still think school district consolidation equals school consolidation. Score one for the superintendents’ lobby, which loves to leave that one word out. They seem to have succeeded in confusing the issue. Consolidating school districts isn’t the same as consolidating schools. Not necessarily. And not, we suspect, all that often.”

Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, May 2, 2006 editorial, “Once more, from the top.”

Some policymakers and other advocates of reorganizing Arkansas’ public education system have insisted that the minimum district size requirements included in Act 60 and the district closings authorized under the Omnibus Education Act are aimed at closing school districts only, for the sake of “administrative” efficiency. They argue that the forced reorganization of districts is not intended to close schools.¹ Some, like the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* editorial quoted above, tease the issue a bit, adding that at the very least it doesn’t have to happen, and in their view, probably will not happen. This analysis of the ways that reorganization has played out over the past two years strongly suggests otherwise.

Most of the district closings have been undertaken under the authority of Act 60. A total of 106 school districts have been reorganized since 2003-2004 under Act 60. Two other districts were annexed under the Omnibus Education Act.

Under Act 60, any school district with an enrollment of fewer than 350 students was forced to either (1) consolidate with one or more other district(s) to create a new district that would meet the minimum size requirements, or (2) be annexed into an existing district meeting those requirements.

A primary difference between consolidation and annexation is the manner in which school governance is reorganized. Under consolidation, the boundaries for school board seats were to be immediately redrawn based on student enrollment numbers and elections for board seats were to be conducted at the next general election. The result, in most consolidation cases, has been a new board with roughly proportional representation from the areas served by the separate districts that formed the new consolidated district.

¹ We use the following terms to describe the status of school districts related to Act 60: (1) “*administrative annexation*” refers to the joining of a smaller school district or part of a school district with a larger one, with the larger district retaining its name, superintendent, and school board; (2) “*administrative consolidation*” refers to the joining of two or more school districts to create a single district with a new name; a superintendent selected from among the superintendents of the former districts, and a school board comprised of board members of the former districts; (3) *receiving* district refers to a school district that annexes a smaller district; (4) *reorganized* is a generic term we use to refer to any district that has been impacted—annexed, consolidated, or receiving.

But in the case of annexations, the “receiving” district had the option of establishing an interim board and foregoing elections for a new board for another year. Although the receiving district was required to provide the annexed district with proportional representation on the interim board, in most cases that meant opening only one seat to the smaller annexed district.

Consolidations occurred usually among districts of somewhat similar size and resulted in an almost immediate realignment of board representation among the consolidating districts. Annexations were more in the nature of a larger district taking over a much smaller district and keeping control of the board. Consolidated districts averaged enrollments of 315. Annexed districts averaged enrollment of 247 while those districts that annexed them averaged enrollment of 1,435.

The reorganized districts that resulted from these consolidations or annexations were prohibited from closing a school for at least one year. But of course, now that the first year has passed and district offices are closed, superintendents dismissed, and community school boards dismantled, anything can happen to the schools. What has happened?

The Communities that were Affected by School Reorganizations

The 44 annexed districts served a higher proportion of African-American students than the 41 districts that received them (55% higher), and a nearly 10 times higher proportion of African-American students than the 23 districts that entered into administrative consolidation.

Districts forced to reorganize were also generally serving communities with higher poverty rates than were the districts that received them. The 44 annexed districts served a student population with about a one-third higher poverty rate than the 41 receiving districts. Consolidated districts served a student population with nearly as high a poverty rate as the annexed districts.

Table 1.
Poverty and Race in Districts Affected by Reorganization

Districts	Student Enrollment in '03-04	Percent Poverty '03-04	Percent African-American '03-04
Annexed (n=44)	10,872	66.8%	33.4%
Consolidated (n=23)	7,250	62.9%	3.5%
Receiving (n=41)	58,838	48.8%	21.5%

School Closings in Reorganized Districts

We investigated the status (as of April 1, 2006) of schools operated by the 108 Arkansas school districts impacted by state-mandated reorganization since the 2003-04 school year.² This includes 67 districts that underwent administrative annexation (44) or administrative consolidation (23), and 41 districts that received annexed districts (Table 2).

² We used 2003-04 as a baseline, since Act 60 was passed and implemented during that school year. All data used in the analyses are from the National Center for Education Statistics and the Arkansas Department of Education, and is available to the general public. An appendix lists the schools, their pre- and post-reorganization district, student enrollment, percent students in poverty, and percent African-American students.

Of the 267 schools operating in 2003-04 among the districts that formed reorganized districts, 47 (18%) were either already closed or were designated by the district board and approved by the state board of education to be closed at the end of the 2005-06 school year. None of the closed schools were among the 133 schools operating in the receiving districts. All 47 were among the 134 schools from districts that were forced to enter into these reorganizations through annexation or administrative consolidation.

Most of the closed schools (42 of 47) were in the annexed districts. Of 88 schools operating in the annexed districts prior to annexation, nearly half (42 of 88) have been closed. Of 46 schools operating in districts that entered into administrative consolidation, five (11%) have been closed.

Schools in annexed districts were nearly five times more likely to be closed than schools in consolidated districts. This likely reflects the diluted representation for annexed districts on the school boards of the districts that annexed them. The fact that none of the schools operating in receiving districts was closed underscores that point.

Table 2.
Schools Closed in Districts Reorganized by State Mandate, SY 2003-04 to SY 2005-06

Districts	Schools Operating in '03-04	Schools Closed Post-Reorganization
Annexed (n=44)	88	42 (47.7%)
Consolidated (n=23)	46	5 (10.9%)
Receiving (n=41)	133	0
Total (n=108)	267	47 (17.6%)

Schools Closed in Annexed Districts

Since most school closures occurred in annexed districts, we next looked at the characteristics of schools within the 44 annexed districts (Table 3). The school closures have inordinately impacted high poverty communities and communities with high percentages of African-American students.

As Table 3 indicates, the schools in annexed districts that were closed tended to have higher poverty levels (21% higher) and serve higher percentages of African-American students (nearly three times higher) than the schools still open in those annexed districts. If you were an African American student in an annexed district, the chances of your school being closed within two years was 69%. If you were not African American, your chances were 31%.

Thus, the loss of political power and, with it, the loss of schools has had the greatest impact on impoverished and African-American communities. This reflects both the diluted representation on school boards for annexed districts overall and the acute loss of African-American representation on school boards in reorganized districts. We have reported elsewhere³ that African-American representation fell on school boards in reorganized districts that included at least one district with a majority African-American student enrollment. In the districts closed by those reorganizations, African-American

³ Jimerson, L. (2005). *The Impact of Arkansas Act 60 Consolidation on African American School Leadership and Racial Composition of School Districts*. Prepared for Advocates for Community and Rural Schools by the Rural School and Community Trust. Available online at www.ruraledu.org.

representation on school boards declined by 71%, but it also declined by 22% in receiving districts, many of which had to remove an incumbent board member in order to add at least one from an annexed district. Overall, in these reorganized districts, African-American representation on school boards fell by 55% compared to the level of representation on the annexed and receiving districts that formed these reorganized districts.

Table 3.
Demographic Characteristics of Schools Closed or Still Open in Annexed Districts

Schools (Operating in '03-04)	Student Enrollment '03-04	Percent Poverty '03-04	Percent African-American '03-04
Closed since district annexation (n=42)	4,767	74.2%	52.6%
Still Open as of '05-06 school year (n=46)	6,105	61.0%	18.4%

Majority African-American Schools in Annexed Districts

Within these same 88 annexed school districts, we then investigated the status of schools with majority African-American enrollments (see Table 4). Twenty-six of the 88 schools in annexed districts had African-American majority enrollments; 62 of the schools in these districts had White majority enrollments.

More than three-fourths of all majority African-American schools (20 of 26) were closed following annexation, compared with 36% (22 of 62) of schools with less than 50% African-American students.

Table 4.
Schools in Annexed Districts, by Percent African-American

Schools (Operating in '03-04)	Number (%) of Schools Closed	Student Enrollment '03-04
Majority African-American Enrollment (n=26)	20 (77%)	2,378
Majority White Enrollment (n=62)	22 (36%)	7,493

School Closure in the Mississippi Delta Region

Lastly, we looked to see whether the extent of school closures following district reorganization varied among regions (Table 5). Nearly three-fourths of all Delta schools that were operating in annexed districts (23 out of 32, or 72%) were closed within two years following annexation. The 23 schools that were closed represent over 9% of all schools in the Delta, whether part of reorganizations or not. More than half (23 of 42, or 55%) of all Arkansas schools closed following annexation were in the Delta.

Table 5.
Schools in Annexed Districts, Delta Region vs. Rest of State

Schools (Operating in '03-04)	Number (%) of Schools Closed in Annexed Districts	Percent African- American '03-04
In Delta Counties	23 (72%)	64%
In other Arkansas Counties	19 (34%)	12%

Conclusions

We come to four conclusions:

1. Rhetoric to the contrary notwithstanding, Act 60 resulted in school closings as well as district consolidation and annexation. Together, the fact that all school closures were in districts forced to reorganize and none were in receiving districts, the extent of the closures (nearly half the schools in these districts), as well as the rapidity with which these results have occurred, all make it difficult to believe they were not intended results.
2. Annexation was the reorganization method of choice when larger districts absorbed smaller districts, and especially in communities that were predominately African-American. In annexations, the loss of political influence for the annexed district at the school board level assured quick closure of many schools serving these communities. Schools in annexed districts were five times as likely to be closed as schools in administratively consolidated districts, where the balance of power between the formerly separate districts was much more even.
3. Annexation and school closure have been disproportionately forced on poor and African-American communities. Over two-thirds of African-American students in annexed districts lost their school within two years, a rate over twice that for non-African-American students. The closures were most likely to occur in schools with African American majority enrollments. More than three in four of these schools were closed, while only one-third of White majority schools in annexed districts closed.
4. Annexation and school closure have disproportionately affected communities in the Mississippi Delta region of the state. Nearly half (49%) of all schools closed following annexation were in the Delta, and nearly three-fourths of all Delta schools in annexed districts have been closed since 2003.

School district reorganization through annexation has been but a prelude to closing schools, a shoehorn that eases into place the heavy foot of school closure. Where district reorganization results in the dilution of the political representation, especially in poor and African American communities, school closures are almost certain to follow. These decisions are sometimes described as necessary to comply with federal civil rights laws. But they represent the dismantling of rural education in the poorest communities in Arkansas, and nothing in civil rights law mandates that.

Appendix: Schools closed in reorganized Arkansas school districts since 2003

School	District before reorganization	Nature of reorganization	Percent Poverty (03-04)	Percent African-American (03-04)
ALREAD ES	ALREAD	Annexed into Clinton under Act 60	79%	0%
ALREAD HS	ALREAD	Annexed into Clinton under Act 60	67%	0%
ALTUS-DENNING HS	ALTUS-DENNING	Annexed into Ozark under Act 60	56%	0%
ARKANSAS CITY ES	ARKANSAS CITY	Annexed into McGeehee under Act 60	69%	48%
ARKANSAS CITY HS	ARKANSAS CITY	Annexed into McGeehee under Act 60	71%	67%
BIGGERS-REYNO ES	BIGGERS-REYNO	Annexed into Corning under Act 60	73%	2%
BIGGERS-REYNO HS	BIGGERS-REYNO	Annexed into Corning under Act 60	63%	1%
BRIGHT STAR ES	BRIGHT STAR	Annexed into Fouke under Act 60	71%	8%
BRIGHT STAR HS	BRIGHT STAR	Annexed into Fouke under Act 60	49%	16%
C.V. WHITE HS	LAKE VIEW	Annexed into Barton-Lexa under Act 60	97%	100%
CARTHAGE HS	CARTHAGE	Annexed into Malvern under Act 60	71%	98%
CORD-CHARLOTTE ES	CORD-CHARLOTTE	consolidated to form Cedar Ridge under Act 60	55%	0%
CORD-CHARLOTTE HS	CORD-CHARLOTTE	consolidated to form Cedar Ridge under Act 60	49%	0%
COTTON PLANT ES	COTTON PLANT	Annexed into Augusta under Act 60	97%	91%
COTTON PLANT HS	COTTON PLANT	Annexed into Augusta under Act 60	97%	91%
CRAWFORDSVILLE ES	CRAWFORDSVILLE	Annexed into Marion under Act 60	98%	91%
CRAWFORDSVILLE HS	CRAWFORDSVILLE	Annexed into Marion under Act 60	97%	95%
DELTA HS	DELTA SPECIAL	Annexed into McGeehee under Act 60	56%	17%
ELAINE HS	ELAINE	Annexed into Marvell under Act 60	95%	86%
EUDORA HS	EUDORA	Annexed into Lake Side under Omnibus Act	76%	98%
EVENING SHADE HS	EVENING SHADE	Annexed into Cave City under Act 60	49%	0%
FOUNTAIN HILL HS	FOUNTAIN HILL	Annexed into Hamburg under Act 60	32%	9%
GOULD ES	GOULD	Annexed into Dumas under Act 60	96%	100%
GOULD HS	GOULD	Annexed into Dumas under Act 60	97%	99%
GRADY ES	GRADY	Annexed into StarCity under Act 60	76%	86%
GRADY HS	GRADY	Annexed into StarCity under Act 60	79%	87%
HOLLY GROVE ES	HOLLY GROVE	Annexed into Clarendon under Act 60	93%	97%
HOLLY GROVE HS	HOLLY GROVE	Annexed into Clarendon under Act 60	97%	97%
HUMPHREY ES	HUMPHREY	Annexed into DeWitt under Act 60	57%	32%
HUMPHREY HS	HUMPHREY	Annexed into DeWitt under Act 60	56%	38%
HUTTIG HS	HUTTIG	Annexed into Strong under Act 60	57%	40%
KINGSLAND HS	KINGSLAND	consolidated to form Cleveland Co. under Act 60	63%	29%
LAKE VIEW ES	LAKE VIEW	Annexed into Barton-Lexa under Act 60	96%	99%
LESLIE ES	LESLIE	consolidated to form Searcy Co. under Act 60	79%	0%
MCNEIL ES	MCNEIL	Annexed into Stephens under Act 60	86%	77%
MCNEIL HS	MCNEIL	Annexed into Stephens under Act 60	84%	85%
MCRAE HS	MCRAE	Annexed into Beebe under Act 60	47%	0%
MOUNT HOLLY HS	MOUNT HOLLY	Annexed into Smackover under Act 60	48%	23%
MOUNT PLEASANT HS	MOUNT PLEASANT	Annexed into Melbourne under Act 60	49%	0%
PARKIN ES	PARKIN	Annexed into Wynn under Omnibus Act	97%	90%
PARKIN HS	PARKIN	Annexed into Wynn under Omnibus Act	93%	96%
SWIFTON ES	SWIFTON	Annexed into Jackson Co. under Act 60	57%	0%
SWIFTON HS	SWIFTON	Annexed into Jackson Co. under Act 60	51%	0%
WILBURN ES	WILBURN	Annexed into Concord under Act 60	70%	0%
WILBURN HS	WILBURN	Annexed into Concord under Act 60	61%	0%
WINSLOW ES	WINSLOW	Annexed into Greenland under Act 60	71%	1%
WINSLOW HS	WINSLOW	Annexed into Greenland under Act 60	71%	0%