



## **An Investigation of School Closures Resulting from Forced District Reorganization in Arkansas**

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*"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. 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.

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?