



To Close or Not to Close: The Rural School Consolidation Issue Today

A Rural School Innovation Network Webinar

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To Consolidate or Not to Consolidate

Consolidation: Making one where there were two or more before.

Raises issues at the heart of all education policy debate:

- Equity
- Efficiency
- Control

Value Questions in the School Consolidation Issue

- Are rural students entitled to an equitable and adequate education in a good school close to home?
- Do rural communities have a right to operate inefficient small schools?
- Do responsible public authorities have to “educate kids where they find them?”
- Do adult decisions about where to live compromise a child’s right to an education within a reasonable distance of home?
- Can communities – rural or not rural -- choose to have small schools, or are small schools only acceptable when there is no practical alternative?
- Are such choices limited to communities that can independently afford them?
- What responsibilities do those choices carry with them?
- If small schools are effective, should they be denied to urban areas just because they have enough population density to easily and economically assemble large student bodies?

Outline of Today's Discussion

1. The issue and its history
2. The current landscape and arguments
3. The consolidators' dilemmas
4. Political take-homes
5. Standards for reorganization

1. The Issue and Its History

Began in 1920's

Based among educational professionals

Focus on school improvement

Bigger would be better, more professional staff, more curriculum.

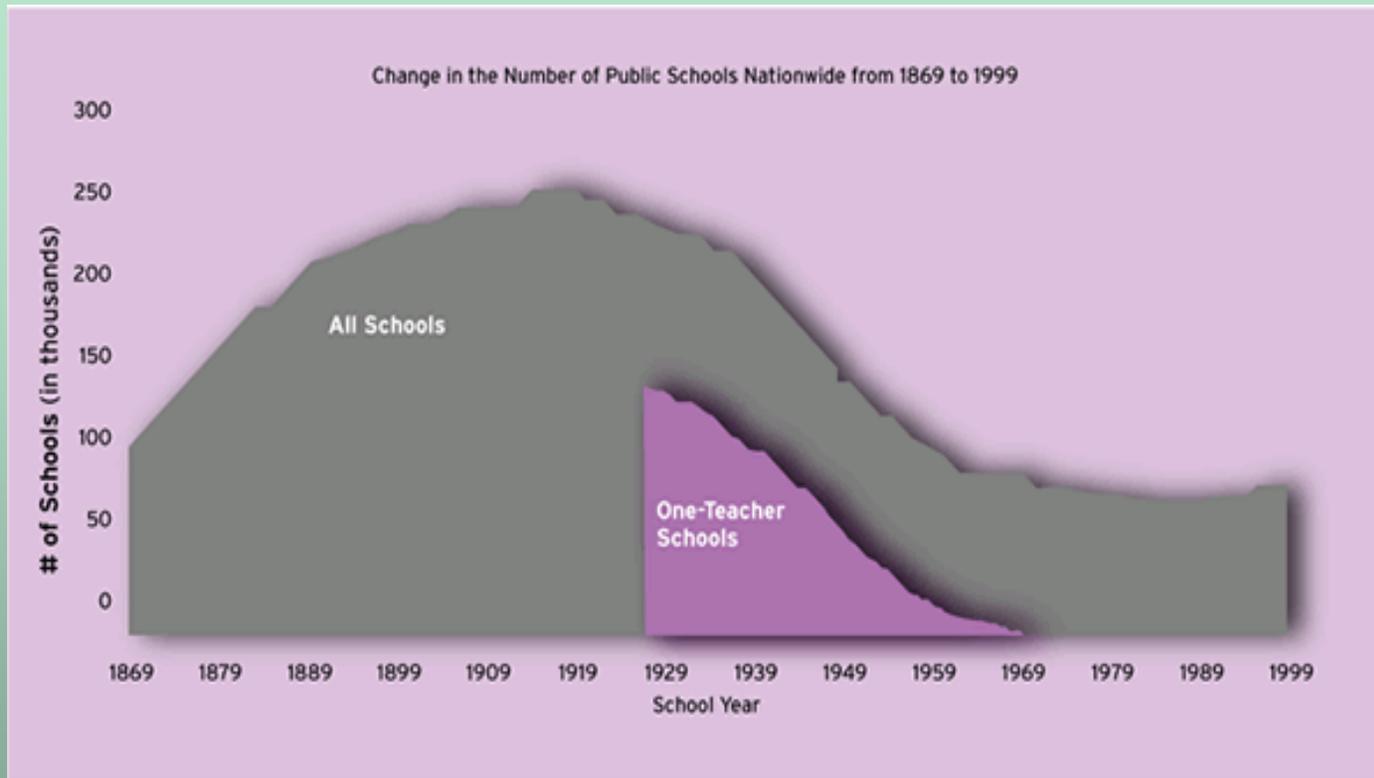
An attack on backwardness, localism, provincialism.

The Pejorative Tradition

- Rural communities have been routinely ridiculed for their stubborn resistance to what others have assumed to be progress.
- Rural people have been labeled with phrases like these:
 - “penurious or ignorant” (Pugh 1994),
 - “irremediable ignorance or reactionary perniciousness” (Reynolds 1999),
 - a roadblock to progress (Meckley and Hazi 1998),
 - a measure of their “distance” from modernity, defined as a centralizing economy, expanded state power, professional expertise, and urban consumer culture (Barron 1997).
 - motives are mere ideologies of localism and traditionalism (Ward and Rink 1992).

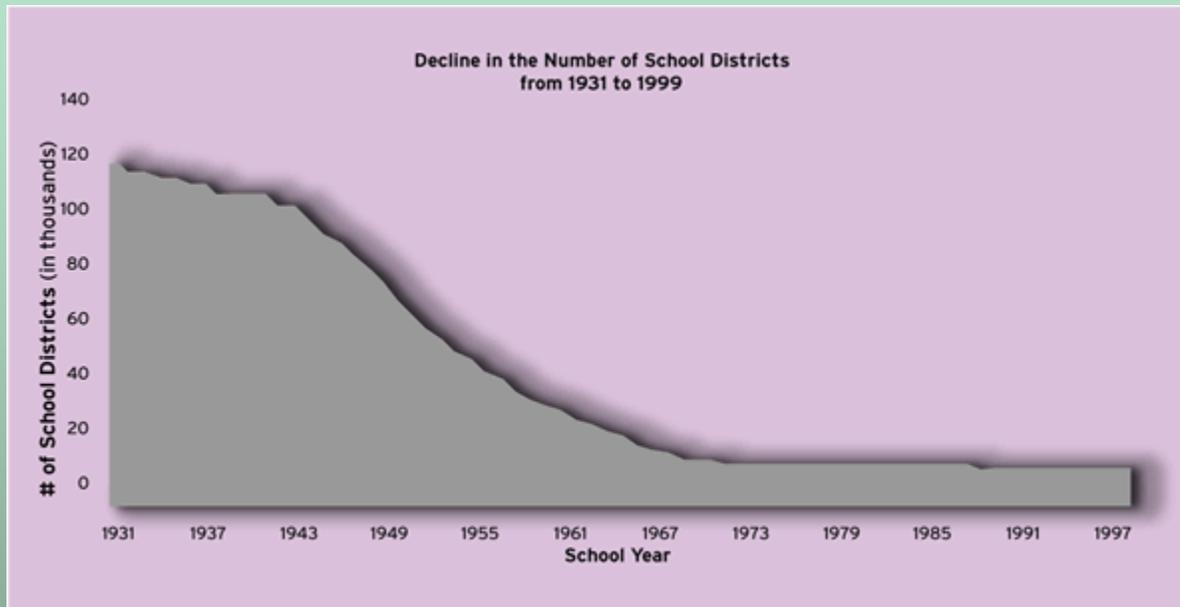
Number of Schools, 1869-1999

Source: Berry, Christopher. 2006. *School Consolidation and Inequality*. University of Chicago, Harris School of Public Policy.



Number of School Districts, 1931-1997

Source: Berry, Christopher. 2006. School Consolidation and Inequality. University of Chicago, Harris School of Public Policy.



Shared History: Busing and Consolidation

In 1920s, rural students walked to school, rode horse, or bicycles.

Primary barrier to consolidation: With fewer and bigger schools longer distance from many homes, parents now had to find a way to transport kids to school.

- Busing was the answer: Sweetness that made bitter pill of consolidation acceptable.
- In 1920s, 45 states either simultaneously passed legislation authorizing school consolidation and the use of public funds or transportation, or passed these laws in rapid succession.

2. The Current Landscape and Arguments Today

- Conditions That Lead to Pressure for Consolidation Today.
- Long-term declining enrollment and rising per pupil cost in rural areas.
- Poor economy and fiscal distress – especially in state budget
- Court order requiring equity and/or adequacy in state aid (especially if plaintiffs are rural)
- Regional divergence of fortunes within the state -- prosperous urban areas, rural areas in distress

It's the money.

While educational quality is still an issue, today consolidation is more about the per pupil cost.

Consolidation is an issue in many states where small rural schools are known to be high performing.

Eight Arguments For

- Administrative efficiency at district level
- Lower per pupil cost at school level
- Broader/deeper curriculum
- More specialized faculty
- More support services
- More co-curricular offerings
- Less building maintenance cost; lower construction cost
- Schools can be focused on narrower age levels and grade configurations.

There are many more arguments for consolidation.

Eight Arguments Against

- Less demand for student participation – in curricular and co-curricular activities
- Less individual attention to students
- Longer bus rides
- Weaker school community relationship; less local control
- Harder for parents to be involved in child's education
- More bureaucratic decision-making
- Weakens economic base of community
- Kids have to make more school-to-school transitions

There are many more arguments against consolidation.

School vs. District Consolidation

- **School Consolidation**
 - Usually a local policy issue, especially with declining enrollment
 - May become a state issue when facilities are state funded
 - More likely in states with countywide districts with multiple high schools
 - Often involves curriculum or other “standards” issues – especially in high schools.

- **District Consolidation**
 - Often a state policy issue -- almost always about “administrative efficiency.”
 - Often a “shoehorn” for school consolidation – eliminates the political apparatus that protects schools
 - Unless schools are closed, not much money saved
 - No apparent curricular benefits

State Policy Strategies to Achieve Consolidation

- Arbitrary enrollment minimums
- Operating subsidies or “hold harmless” promises.
- Capital construction subsidies
- Curriculum Mandates
- Fiscal asphyxiation (leading to deferred maintenance, coupled with tax lids or levy limits).
- Academic distress sanctions.
- Fiscal distress sanctions.

Policy Alternatives to Consolidation

1. Cooperative purchasing
2. Larger role for regional service agencies
3. Shared Superintendent
4. Grade Sharing
5. Union districts
6. Distance learning
7. “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” Focus on quality

3. The Consolidators' Dilemmas

- Small works, especially in high poverty schools
- Busing hurts
- Efficiency eludes

The Research: Small Works

- Learn more and better in small schools
- Make more rapid progress toward graduation
- Are more satisfied
- Are less likely to drop out
- Behave better in smaller schools

“All of these things we have confirmed with a clarity and at a level of confidence rare in the annals of education research.”

-- Mary Ann Raywid

Curriculum Offerings and Enrollment in Nebraska High Schools

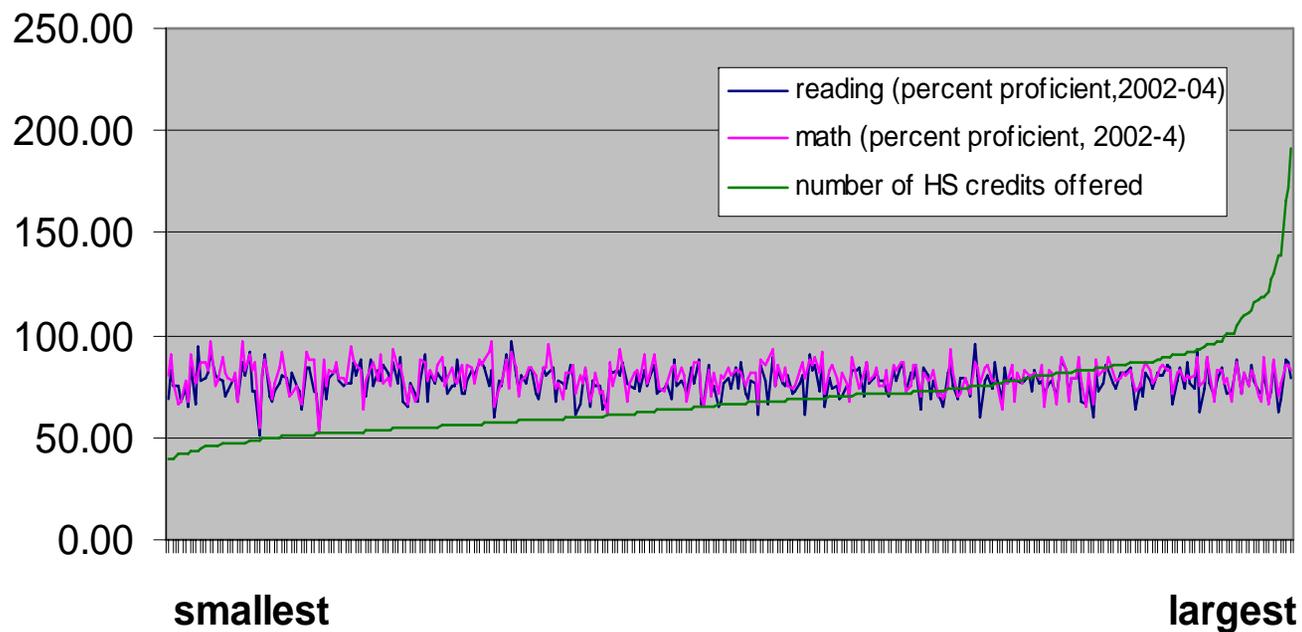
Table prepared by Marty Strange, Rural school and Community Trust, based on data from Uerling, Donald F. and Larry L. Dlugosh, August, 2003, presented at the 8th annual National Conference on Creating the Quality School, Memphis, TN, 1999, and revised for the Nebraska Legislature, pursuant to Legislative Study Resolution L.R. 180.

K-12 Enrollment Size	Course Units	Enrollment Units	Enrollment Units Per Student	Percent of Enrollment Units – Academic	Academic Enrollment Units Per Student
0-300	444.8	4,920.4	71.4	60.4	43.1
300-600	494.9	10,419.8	67.0	62.6	41.9
600-900	519.9	15,247.9	62.1	65.3	40.6
900-1200	608.1	23,280.3	63.6	66.0	42.0
1200-1500	579.5	28,971.8	59.2	66.2	39.2

More curriculum does not necessarily boost achievement.

Jerry Johnson, Ed.D., MORE DOESN'T MEAN BETTER: Larger high schools and more courses do not boost student achievement in Iowa high schools. Rural School and Community Trust. Arlington, VA. March 2006.

Does the Number of Credits Offered Affect Student Achievement?



Why Small Works

What the Research Says

1. Greater participation
2. Small schools are safer.
3. Kids feel they belong.
4. More individualized instruction.
5. Good teaching methods are easier to use.
6. Teachers feel better about their work.
7. Less tracking and higher expectations.
8. Multiage classes promote personalized learning and encourage positive social interactions.
9. Smaller districts mean less bureaucracy.
10. Wider grade spans mean fewer transitions to new schools.

Source: Jimerson, Lorna, Ed.D. The Hobbit Effect: Why Small Works in Public Schools. Rural School and Community Trust. August 2006.

If Small Works, Arbitrary Size Standards Don't Make Sense.

Dilemma: Either close some very good schools or grant exceptions:

- Remote (necessarily small)
- High performing academically
- Efficient -- Low cost per pupil

Exceptions often overlay race, class, and social variables that make them politically and legally suspect.

Busing Hurts

Every school day, public schools transport

- 25 million students
- Over 21 million miles
- On 450,000 buses
- Totaling over 8.8 billion student trips a year
- At a cost of \$17.5 billion per year – and growing.

Consolidation Means Longer Bus Rides

Survey comparing WV districts that did and did not consolidate high schools.

- Bus rides in consolidated districts 43% longer than in non-consolidated districts.
- In consolidated districts, students who ride the bus spend 49 minutes more each day in transit than those who have other means of transportation.
- 31% of students who ride the bus in consolidated districts ride an hour or more each way.

Source: Jimerson, Lorna, Ed.D. *Slow Motion: Traveling by School Bus in Consolidated Districts in West Virginia*. Rural School and Community Trust. Arlington, VA. March 2007.

Elusive Efficiency

Reasons Why Consolidation May Cost More than Expected

- Moving personnel from salary schedules of smaller schools and districts to higher salary schedules of larger schools and districts, increasing bargaining power of teachers.
- More specialized staff
- Higher costs of having to transport more kids longer distances.
- Higher rates of vandalism
- Lower support for bond levies
- Need for new and larger facilities

Some of these changes may result in improved school performance.

Some clearly do not.

Charleston Gazette Award Winning Investigative Report: “Closing Costs.” (Eric Eyre and Scott Finn)

- 1990 - 2000, West Virginia closed well over 300 schools.
- Has spent more than \$1 billion on school consolidation.
- School Building Authority acknowledged in September 2002 that school closings didn't save taxpayers money.
- West Virginia districts statewide spend higher percentage of their budgets on maintenance and utilities now than five years ago, despite consolidation.
- Number of local administrators *increased by 16%* -- despite a 13% decrease in student enrollment and more than 300 fewer schools.
- The number of state-level administrators increased and their salaries nearly doubled.
- West Virginia spends more of its education dollar on transportation than any other state.

Small: Efficient in the Big Picture

Source: Funk, Patricia E. and Jon Bailey. Small Schools, Big results: Nebraska High School Completion Rates by Size of School District. Nebraska Alliance for Rural Education. September 1999.

Table 1. Median Average High School Completion Rates and Annual Cost Per Pupil Likely to Graduate by School District, High School Size, Nebraska 1991-92 to 1994-95

High School Students in District	Number of K-12 School Districts	High School Completion Rate	Annual Total Expenditure Per Pupil	Annual Expenditure Per Pupil Likely to Graduate
1000 and over	12	84%	\$5,306	\$6,397
600 - 999	10	80%	\$4,907	\$6,093
300 - 599	19	89%	\$5,266	\$5,790
200 - 299	25	92%	\$5,648	\$6,252
100 - 199	76	94%	\$5,709	\$6,101
70 - 99	63	97%	\$6,361	\$6,734
below 70	63	97%	\$7,417	\$7,616

Small Schools Competitive Even on Capital Costs

School Construction Costs, 1999-2003

Analysis of 168 grade 9-12 high schools built for 1,000 or fewer students in data base provided by *School Planning and Management's Annual Construction Report*.

- Smaller schools cost the same per student as larger schools.
- Smaller schools cost less per square foot than larger schools.
- Smaller schools allocated 26% more space to each student than the larger schools.
- Every increment of 100 students of planned enrollment increased average cost by \$2.70 per square foot.

Source: Howley, Craig B. Don't Supersize Me: The Relationship of Construction Cost to School Enrollment in the U.S. Ohio University. February 2008

4. Political Take Homes I

1. The consolidation issue attracts fundamentalism – both progressive and reactionary.
2. Small school districts can be a shield for nepotism, cronyism, political patronage, and racial segregation...and keeping football rivalries. But most efforts to save schools are based on what people think best for kids.
3. Pro-consolidation can be about quality, but it's more often about the money.
4. The change in motivation for closing schools (from ending backwardness to saving money) reflects the change from a rural majority to an urban-suburban majority.

Political Take Homes II

1. Closing districts is but a prelude to closing schools.
2. School closings are the fate of the politically vulnerable.
3. Where schools are bad, consolidation substitutes abandonment for fixing.

The Arkansas Case: Closing Districts Leads to Closing Schools in the Politically Most Vulnerable Communities

- Among the 134 schools operating in the 67 districts that were forced to consolidate after 2004, 47 (35%) were closed within two years.
- Of 88 schools operating in small districts absorbed into larger districts in 2004, nearly half (42 of 88) were closed within two years
- Schools that were closed had 21% higher student poverty rates and served nearly three times higher percentages of African-American students than the schools allowed to remain open.
- If you were an African American student in an annexed district, the chances of your school being closed was 69%. If you were not African American, your chances were 31%.

Arkansas: Minority Leadership Loss

In 27 African American majority districts affected by consolidation (either closed or receiving districts), the number of elected African-American school board members has been decreased:

- By 55% overall
- By 71% in closed districts
- By 22% in receiving districts

Five of six African-American administrators in the 27 affected districts lost their position as a result of forced consolidation. The number of African-American superintendents in Arkansas has fallen by 23% as a result (from 22 to 17).

5. Standards for Reorganization

Rural School District Reorganization Standards

1. Maintains and improves small schools, including small high schools, making them more cost-effective.
2. Provides funding for each school sufficient to meet program and outcome standards as defined by the state and to provide each child with an equal opportunity to achieve.
3. Retains or places schools within communities and avoids placing them in isolated open country.
4. Provides maximum participation in school governance by communities served by the school and the school district and requires local community approval of school closings.

Rural School District Reorganization Standards

5. Honors and reinforces a policy of racial desegregation.
6. Makes best use of appropriate distance learning technologies to share students and faculty enriching curriculum and instruction without enlarging schools or transporting students.
7. Reduces disparity between districts in local tax capacity and effort.
8. Protects children from bus rides exceeding 30 minutes each way for elementary students and one hour each way for high school students.

Rural School District Reorganization Standards

9. Maximizes regional cooperation between districts, such as regional education service centers, to provide high-cost, low-demand services efficiently to schools and/or students who require them.
10. Strengthens local economic and community development and supports and is supported by community patterns of work and commerce.
11. Keeps as many grades as possible in one school center.
12. Recognizes and respects family work and commuting patterns to avoid fragmentation of family life.



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