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Dimensions of Public School District Consolidation

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Abstract

Public school district consolidation is investigated in this paper, with a focus on the ramifications of consolidation for rural districts in particular. A general review of the current state of public education provides the backdrop for a discussion that includes defining consolidation and its history and exploring the modern context, as viewed through two lenses: 1) federalism and competition, and 2) the interests of rural communities. The heart of the paper outlines the benefits and concessions of consolidation, with an emphasis on factors such as economies of scale, efficiency, cost, and student performance. Finally, the paper concludes with an analysis of consolidation tradeoffs, a consideration of mitigating factors that might affect consolidation going forward, as well as a brief look at public charter schools to frame the concept of consolidation in a modern, everyday policy dilemma.

Introduction

Public school consolidation has been a part of the intergovernmental picture in the states since the mid-1800s. Although opinion on the merits and drawbacks of consolidation is plentiful, conclusive research is difficult to find–consolidation, it seems, is a policy of tradeoffs. The objective of this paper is to expose the various dimensions of public school consolidation. First, a general background regarding the current state of public education is presented. Second, consolidation is defined and its history and the modern backdrop are discussed, as viewed through two lenses: 1) federalism and competition, and 2) the interests of rural communities. Next, the heart of the paper will outline the benefits and concessions of consolidation, with an emphasis on factors such as economies of scale, efficiency, cost, and student performance. Finally, the paper concludes with an analysis of consolidation tradeoffs, a consideration of mitigating factors that might affect consolidation going forward, as well as a brief look at public charter schools, by way of contrast, to frame the concept of consolidation in a modern, everyday policy dilemma. This paper attempts to outline district consolidation broadly; variation around the country no doubt changes the picture, place by place.

The State of Public Education in the United States

While not possible to exhaustively detail the current status of public education in America, it is critical to understand the relevance and impact of three overarching elements connected to the education system: education spending, educational performance, and education and the economy. First, spending on public education, though fairly minimal at the federal level, is the largest portion of state and local budgets at nearly one-fifth of the total (Moser and Rubenstein 2002, 63). In fiscal year 2005, over $487 billion in revenue was collected for K-12 public education; state and local governments provided nearly 92% of this funding (National Center for Education Statistics). Second, educational performance, particularly for minority students, is not strong. According to the 2005 results of the National Assessment for Educational Progress, reading scores for eighth graders, which have risen slightly at the fourth grade level over the last decade, indicate that black and Hispanic students are lagging behind their white peers (National Center for Education Statistics). While 82% of white eighth graders perform at or above the basic level in reading, only 52% and 56% of black and Hispanic students, respectively, score at or above the basic level; the gap that had narrowed slightly at the fourth-grade level is widening again by eighth grade (National Center for Education Statistics).

This is particularly distressing given projected demographic trends: the U.S. Census Bureau predicts that percentages of blacks and Hispanics between the ages of 18 and 44 will increase by 30% in the next 20 years, while the white population declines (Reindl 2007, 4). Third, as the historical section below will reveal in more detail, America's public education system and the strength of the American economy have long been linked. The Bureau of Labor Statistics anticipates that high skill jobs requiring advanced education will comprise almost 50% of job growth; additionally, "high educational attainment correlates with state economic growth and high income" (Reindl 2007, 4). With global competitiveness on the agenda of the business community, the role of public education in preparing the workforce is under a microscope. Consolidation and its relationship to spending, performance, and the economy will be explicitly and implicitly addressed throughout the paper.

Consolidation Defined, History, Modern Issues

Consolidation can refer to either the consolidation of individual schools, in the instance of a K-5 merging with a middle school to form a K-8 school, or the consolidation of school districts (each typically composed of more than one school, although this varies throughout the country). In the first instance, consolidation has been defined as "the merging of two or more attendance areas to form a larger school," while school district consolidation is "combining two or more previously independent school districts in one new and larger school system" (Bard et al. 2005, 5). While terminology varies around the country–in Kansas, consolidation was called "unification"–it always refers to a merger or reorganization (Bard et al. 2005). Generally, this paper will discuss district consolidation, exceptions will be noted.

The history of school consolidation is one marked by practicality, politics, and progress. As early as the mid-nineteenth century, one-room schools in rural areas were being closed and students began traveling longer distances to larger schools, made possible in many areas of the country by the advent of automobiles, public transportation, and paved roads (Bard et al. 2005, 5). As the Industrial Revolution expanded urban areas, it also brought with it the idea that the order of industry should be imposed on schools to achieve an "optimal social order" (Bard et al. 2005, 3). Not unlike a production line, schools of the early twentieth century were designed according to one model, pushed by Progressives (Beadie 2000, 112), and this model demanded larger schools to deliver more competitive, college preparation programs (Bard et al. 2005, 3). According to this rubric, rural schools and small schools were not desirable. The business community, too, contributed

to the consolidation movement–bussing companies began turning profits on the new system, and builders, needing to construct larger schools, formed a strong lobby (Bard et al. 2005, 3). In West Virginia, for example, a School Building Authority was formed in 1931 to set enrollment measures necessary to obtain capital funding for new schools or remodeled buildings; it is not a surprise that many rural and small schools were forced to consolidate simply to improve school buildings (Bard et al. 2005, 3).

Concerns about American competitiveness, noted above, were stoked by the Cold War and the space program. It was not uncommon for rural and small schools to be the targets of critics concerned that the United States was "not developing the kind of human capital needed to promote national security" (Bard et al. 2005, 4). Economic dips that spurred demographic changes, particularly in rural areas, contributed to consolidation, too (Bard et al. 2005, 4). During the 1970s and '80s, as many family farms were subsumed by corporate agriculture, rural economies declined; between 1933 and 1970, "the net migration from farms was more than 30 million people" (Bard et al. 2005, 4). Logically, many rural schools closed or consolidated during this time. Concomitantly, during the 1950s and '60s, and often driven by court decisions of the later decades of the 20th century, consolidation was one policy tool used by legislators and judges seeking to desegregate racially based districts (Henderson 2004, 272).

All told, the largest consolidation efforts came just after World War II, with districts falling from 108,579 to 34,678 between 1942 and 1962; by 1997, the United States had just 13,726 public school districts (Berman 2003, 132).

The Modern Debate: Federalism and Rural Interests

In terms of the modern debate surrounding school consolidation, two main issue areas, which sometimes dovetail, appear frequently in both scholarly and popular literature: the role of competition and choice in a federalist system and the interests of rural communities. Each will be reviewed in this section, and parts of the discussion will be revisited in the benefits and disadvantages section, as well.

Controversy over the effects of school consolidation on the federalist system is largely a high-level, theoretical debate, but a useful backdrop for exploring the potential effects of consolidation. Underpinning the concept of federalism is the notion that citizens, through their mobility, are able to make choices; uniformity, therefore, "is antithetical to federalism"

(Wildavsky 1990, 41). School consolidation, it is theorized, extracts a certain level of diversity and experimentation within schools because a central administration is making the rules. If the public education sector is one in which parents make conscious choices to send their children to schools evaluated on their merits (e.g. that schools compete for parents and students), then consolidation, in theory, limits not only new schools but the offerings of existing schools (Merrifield and Salisbury 2005, 184). It stands to reason, then, that:

> when parents pick from a menu of schools with largely uniform policies, there will be oversubscribed, better schools, and unpopular schools that contain the children excluded from the better schools. Genuine opportunity to specialize allows every school to be the most popular with a subset of families large enough to generate financial support. (Merrifield and Salisbury 2005, 184)

While the scholars that forwarded this idea also acknowledge that parents are drawn to uniformity because it eliminates the "potential for error inherent in a diverse school menu," (Merrifield and Salisbury 2005, 192) they also emphasize that the consolidation of power leaves many parents with diminished voices, all while the education lobby is able to affect larger groups of children (Merrifield and Salisbury 2005, 190). Along this same line, anti-consolidation advocates often invoke Tiebout's theory, "that local governments compete for taxpayers through their offerings of services and taxes, and that taxpayers demonstrate their demand for public goods through their residential location decisions," and suggest that making public education fully competitive, through the use of a full voucher system, is necessary to preserving it (Chubb 1985, 995).

A second layer of this issue, connected to federalism and school consolidation, is cost. According to this model, which builds on the notion of competition mentioned above, consolidation of schools decreases alternatives for parents. As competition is removed from the system, costs rise because "weakened intergovernmental competition allows policy makers to promote their own utility, rather than that of constituents" (Marlow 1997, 617). Teachers unions are also highly criticized for raising costs and contributing to consolidation; as unions have demanded smaller class sizes, leading to increased personnel costs, they have also been accused of using consolidation "as a means of lowering costs of organizing their membership" (Marlow 1997, 619). Right or wrong, unions have been lumped into the centralized education lobby, a group often blamed for a variety of costly mandates, ranging from teacher certification to school

accreditation (Wenders 2005, 224). Finally, the role of size economies in consolidation is a large topic, and one that will be covered in the next section. In brief, the potential of costs savings is theoretically high when smaller jurisdictions are consolidated into larger, but more efficient and robust, jurisdictions.

The second prong of the modern debate around school consolidation is much more grounded in reality–that is, the state of rural education in the United States. As outlined above in the history of consolidation, rural areas have struggled to maintain student levels needed to sustain community schools. Population decline has been paralleled by the shifting of school financing from the local level to the state level in many parts of the country, often a result of resistance to the property tax. Most salient in the American West following California's successes through Proposition 13, state revenue streams have become more diverse, and in turn, the power of local governments has decreased (Sokolow 2000, 85). In essence, as the financing scheme has shifted, the power of rural communities to make decisions about local schools has eroded. On one side, state legislators and education officials "point to the inefficiencies and more limited curricula common to small schools," while rural communities argue that losing the community school means losing the community altogether (Bard et al. 2005).

A more recent challenge affecting rural public education has been the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001, as well as trends in the states to raise high school graduation standards. Recruitment of highly qualified teachers (particularly in special education and math and science), meeting Annual Yearly Progress, retaining teachers, accessing high level staff development, and providing supplemental services and choices, as per NCLB guidelines, are just some of the complications faced by rural educators (Mitchem et al. 2006, 13). While few criticize the overall goal of NCLB, to educate all students, rural critics claim: "The definition of a rural teacher is someone that can teach everything to everyone. NCLB denies that this type of flexibility is important" (Mitchem et al. 2006, 20). In sum, accountability systems like NCLB appear to be threatening rural schools, and consolidation, closings, and takeovers are imminent (Mitchem et al. 2006, 22).

Benefits and Disadvantages of Consolidation

Before delving into the multitude of benefits and disadvantages of school consolidation, it is important to note that the literature on the issue is somewhat scattered. Often one can find articles about other issues that touch on school consolidation, that discuss a different type of consolidation

(such as municipal consolidation), or that are highly theoretical. Additionally, much of the substantive research has been conducted by economists, which is somewhat limiting from a social science perspective. As with many policy areas, the tradeoffs of consolidation are often viewed by one constituency as a benefit and by another as a drawback. When possible, that tension is exposed to demonstrate the complexity of consolidation.

Benefits of Consolidation: Equity, Economies of Scale, and Efficiency

Several potential benefits could be realized by states that encourage school district consolidation. First, there is some evidence that "states with fewer districts relative to students tended to have a more equal distribution of education dollars than states with more districts" (Moser and Rubenstein 2002, 63). In a study that measured horizontal equity (defined as "the equal treatment of equals"), the distribution of per pupil funding across districts was found to be more equitable when fewer districts were present (Moser and Rubenstein 2002, 65). That is, the consolidation of districts could benefit students, particularly students who had previously been enrolled in underfunded districts. Equity, at least in terms of funding, might be promoted by district consolidation.

Second, as was pointed out earlier in the paper, school consolidation advocates suggest that economies of scale can be achieved through consolidation–there would be a reduction in cost if smaller units were grouped together to share the cost of certain common resources. In fact, there is some evidence from economic literature that "cost reduction may be achieved by further consolidation of either school districts or schools" with the evidence for districts less contested than that of individual schools (Chakraborty et al. 2000, 244). In essence, the fewer schools there are, the smaller the cost per pupil will be (Chakraborty et al. 2000, 244). This notion will be challenged explicitly in the disadvantages section. Please note that the author did not research the effect of consolidation on funding formulas.

Third, although it has been suggested that the larger the size of the district the more inefficient and costly, there is evidence to the contrary. In fact, "larger school districts and districts with larger elementary schools tend to be more technically efficient" (Ruggiero et al. 1995, 421). The authors behind these results suggest that greater costs associated with school oversight in larger districts might be incorrect, and also that larger districts allow for more powerful parent groups that better leverage their collective influence (Ruggiero et al. 1995, 422).

Fourth, and tangentially related to the point elucidated in the previous paragraph, bureaucracies, while perceived to be inefficient and bloated, might offer benefits. It is thought that consolidation of school districts will lead to bigger bureaucracies. According to researchers, "bureaucracies develop because school systems need administrators and administrative capacity to function effectively," and in their absence, teachers ("street level personnel") will be forced to take on more administrative work (Smith and Meier 1994, 551). It stands to reason, then, that the "reduction of bureaucracy might be at the price of depressing educational performance" (Smith and Meier 1994, 556). In addition, there is some evidence that high administrative expenditures, connected with a bigger bureaucracy, "are associated with less rather than more inefficiency in school districts" (Ruggiero et al. 1995, 423). The growth of a centralized administration, therefore, might produce certain benefits and certainly is more complicated than simplistic assessments that bureaucracy is bad (Ruggiero et al. 1995, 423).

Finally, benefits could be realized at the managerial level because it has been suggested that consolidation is "a means of promoting professionalism" (Deller and Rudnicki 1992, 223). More specifically, smaller units, such as those described in rural areas, lack the ability at times to recruit and retain administrative and teaching professionals. It has even been suggested that management officials in smaller governments are not able to focus on their public service work full-time, leading to inefficiencies (Deller and Rudnicki 1992, 223). When considered against the rising demands for evaluation and accountability systems under NCLB, coupled with the already burdensome tasks of budgeting and human resources, district consolidation could reallocate certain managerial duties to a more robust and capable administrative body.

Disadvantages of Consolidation: Educational Outcomes, Cost, Size, and Effects on Students

The disadvantages of school consolidation are varied, like the benefits, and many of the disadvantages have connections to the benefits. First, it is possible that the number of school districts is related to student performance. In the same study that suggested that fewer districts encouraged more funding equity, it was found that "states with a greater number of districts had somewhat larger improvements across the two years" (Moser and Rubenstein 2002, 64). Another study concluded that, despite higher costs, "greater numbers of schools and school districts promote higher student achievement as evidenced by higher math and

verbal SAT scores, math proficiency of 8th graders, and lower high-school drop rates" (Marlow 1997, 617). The underlying theory at work in both instances is that greater competition spurs achievement and that consolidation would diminish this advantage (Marlow 1997, 625).

Second, while economies of scale appear to be a benefit of consolidation, economies of scope, or "the sharing of complementary resources," are not (Callan and Santerre 1990, 478). Economies of scope are troubled because they combine somewhat unlike entities, such as elementary and secondary school districts, whose needs differ substantially. When considering consolidation, therefore, the distinction between scope and scale should be analyzed closely to avoid cost overruns.

Third, also related to costs, is the role that transportation plays in consolidation. It is logical that as school districts are consolidated some schools might be closed, thus forcing some students to travel to larger schools and increasing transportation costs. Through the massive consolidation efforts of the twentieth century, bussing grew from serving fewer than 10% of public school students to nearly 60% today (The Rural School and Community Trust). With increased demand, costs have skyrocketed:

> remaining below $2 billion until the mid-1950s, (all figures adjusted for inflation), then doubling by 1970 and doubling again by the early 80s. By the mid-1990s, total US spending on student transportation had reached over $10 billion. (The Rural School and Community Trust)

Fourth, school size, a political issue addressed in the history section, might be best when small. It has been suggested that consolidation leads to larger schools, and that larger schools are impersonal, inflexible, and not cohesive (Merrifield and Salisbury 2005, 185). Small schools, on the other hand, like those enjoying the support of such generous philanthropies as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, are thought to provide more individualized instruction and attention, engaging students in a more direct manner. In particular, "students from less affluent communities appear to have better achievement in small schools," while dropout rates, attendance, success in college, and other factors are also theorized to improve under the small school model (Bard et al. 2005, 12).

Fifth, a peculiar, vague effect of consolidation could be the proliferation of private schools, as parents seek "exit" options from a system no longer serving their needs (Merrifield and Salisbury 2005, 185). As more parents

choose to remove their students from public schools, it is theorized that the loss of this collective voice leads to inefficiency in the public system (Ruggiero et al. 1995, 417). That is, the very parents that are likely to remove their students from the public system could be the same parents who would leverage the most collective power to ensure more adequate services. If true, it is important to note that parents might not consider the well-being of the entire district when attempting to find the best educational option for their children. This potential effect is an unintended consequence.

Finally, the effects of district consolidation on students are important to understand. Bussing, particularly for elementary school students, is correlated with decreased student achievement; according to a 1973 study, "achievement scores were reduced by 2.6 points for fourth-grade students for every hour spent riding a bus" (Bard et al. 2005). Anonymity as a result of enrolling in a larger school was observed to contribute to behavior problems, as well as academic declines; and consolidation has made it difficult for students traveling long distances to participate in after school activities, which is considered a factor in overall attachment to school (Bard et al. 2005, 11).

Conclusion: Analysis, the Digital Age, Reflecting on Charter Schools

School district consolidation will probably, in the very least, have supporters and critics for the foreseeable future. Consolidation advocates will point to benefits such as greater equity through redistribution, economies of scale, technical efficiencies, the safeguards of bureaucracies, and the ability to employ a talented, well-trained administration. As indicated earlier in the paper, it is increasingly common for states to wield more control over education as resistance to the property tax shifts financing from the local level to the state level. States, perhaps much more so than local school districts, might utilize district consolidation to improve overall administration. Along those same lines, NCLB, for better or worse, has pushed the notion of uniform standards, particularly within a given state, but also with the hope of raising educational performance nationally. Laws like NCLB demand administrative oversight and other elements, such as highly qualified teachers and educational choice, which are all very difficult to comply with for isolated rural schools. To execute the law and receive federal funding for NCLB or laws sure to follow, rural and small school districts might be forced to consolidate to ensure that students are being adequately served.

Of course, while consolidation might offer these benefits, there are potential drawbacks as well. Critics believe that consolidation hurts student performance, and that potential financial savings are mitigated by enormous transportation costs. Additionally, average school size typically increases when consolidation occurs, a factor that is believed to lead to a variety of negative effects for students (and teachers and administrators alike), including disciplinary problems and increased dropout rates. Finally, it is not clear that students benefit from consolidated schools, particularly given the large distances many travel; the loss of extracurricular activities for some students is highly detrimental.

At the more theoretical level, critics of consolidation claim that competition is reduced, as was outlined in detail in the second section. To add another layer to the issue, the concept of competition for public services such as education is somewhat difficult to gauge. It presumes that parents view themselves as consumers of education for their children, and that they make conscious decisions about which education to purchase with their tax dollars. In reality, and from the author's own experience working with parents and students in a Washington DC charter school, while it cannot be disputed that many parents make choices in this manner, many do not. If the effect of the consumer is not clear in a market, it seems that the market might not be operating functionally. In sum, analyzing consolidation in terms of its effect on the education market is not without problems.

Rural interests, also outlined in the second section, provide an emotional and quite real anti-consolidation lobby. While their cause is certainly a sympathetic one, particularly given the propensity of some small towns to practically shut down when a school closes, it deserves careful consideration (McGreevy 2005). In many instances, industry is long departed and the school remains the last vestige of the town that was. For town members, the school then takes on more importance than it might if the economy there were more diverse; this distortion of sorts, though difficult to criticize, arguably is not be the best reason for keeping rural schools open.

Clearly, the consolidation problem is one that often pits states versus local jurisdictions, particularly rural towns. The mixture of research makes things more complicated, and of course, the variation around the country is substantial. Looking forward, though, the role of technology is important to consider for its potential to change and reform this debate. A recent article profiled the creative efforts of a Vanderbilt professor (The Chronicle of Higher Education). Realizing that students from his hometown of Grapevine, Arkansas, were spending as many as three hours a day traveling to school

south of Little Rock, the professor had an idea. The bus, he said, is like a one-room school house, and if equipped with the right technology, specifically 15 laptops and an Internet connection, students could spend that time using web-based applications to continue learning.

The concept of distance education, like that being practiced on the bus from Grapevine to Little Rock, is on the rise across the country, particularly in rural areas (McGreevy 2005). As defined by the National Center for Education Statistics, distance education is "credit-granting courses offered to elementary and secondary school students enrolled in the district in which the teacher and students were in different locations;" technologies used include the Internet and two-way interactive video (McGreevy 2005). For rural and small schools facing consolidation, the use of distance education to deliver courses previously unavailable, employ highly qualified teachers, and change the definition of the school day, help bolster local efforts to thwart consolidation by demonstrating that standards are being met. Factoring the role of technology into the debate about consolidation is important now and should continue to be in the future, most importantly for rural schools. Additionally, new figures from the National Conference of State Legislatures indicate that rural America is growing again, with the largest growth in North Carolina, Florida, Georgia, and Texas, all large states that should be useful to monitor (National Conference of State Legislatures).

Finally, the author was interested in writing about district consolidation after her experience working with a DC public charter school from its inception through its eventual expansion to three schools, with more on the way. In some aspects, the process was like consolidation, but inverted: a deliberately small school was forced to open several other small schools to meet the needs of its students by growing the revenue base, and in the process, the character of the entire operation changed. Charter school law in DC establishes "Local Education Agencies" (LEAs); in essence, each charter school is its own district, responsible for everything from hiring teachers to paying rent to keeping finances solvent. In a way, charter schools seek to deconsolidate a system, forming small independent units in the same geographic area as another district, but one with no jurisdiction over that charter district (again, one school). Because many are designed to be small (between 250 and 500 students), per pupil funding often will not be enough to fund extracurricular activities, arts, music, or permanent school buildings. Forced to compete or get out of the market, many charters with strong records are applying to replicate their models, open new schools, and streamline administrative services. The parallels to the consolidation process are striking, and also not simple. In some ways, it is one of the

ironies of the charter school movement–one that started very small, with the smallest possible units in place, and now is forced to grow to bigger 'districts' to satisfy parent, student, logistical, and financial burdens, and of course, to respond to the education market. In sum, charters can provide an interesting study within the study of consolidation, as they weigh similar tradeoffs and evolve over time.

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