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School Consolidation in Pennsylvania: An Analysis of Governor Rendell's Policy Proposal

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Introduction

School consolidation has been an issue affecting America's schools since the 1800s. Though consolidation has affected schools of all types, it has most often concentrated on small rural schools (Strange & Malhoit, 2005). In Cubberly's (1922) study of the rural-life problem, he concluded that the "...reorganization and redirection of rural education, is...the main key to the solution of the rural-life problem, and the sooner it can be accomplished the better it will be for rural life" (p. 106).

The American trend toward small school consolidation (often of rural schools) continued, largely unabated after Cubberly's call, throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century. The number of public school districts dropped from 117,108 in 1939-1940 to 14,166 in 2005-2006 (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2007a). There were 248,000 public schools in the 1929-1930 academic year; by 2005-2006 97,000 remained (USDOE, NCES, 2008). During the same period, from 1929-1930 to 2004-2005 (the most recent year of available data), enrollment in public schools increased by approximately 2.3 million from 25,678,000 to 48,795,000 students (USDOE, NCES, 2007b).

Like the rest of the country, Pennsylvania's educational history is also marked by school consolidation. School consolidation increased after World War II and accelerated with the passage of two statewide pro-consolidation laws in the 1960s, resulting in a decline from well over 2,000 districts pre-war to 742 by 1968 and a continual decline to 501 districts today (Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 2008; Post & Stambach, 1999). Consolidation in the Commonwealth has a history of sparking polarizing and acrimonious debate (Post & Stambach, 1999), so it should come as no surprise that Governor Edward

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Rendell's recent call for the consolidation of the remaining 501 school districts in Pennsylvania to one-fifth the current number is a controversial policy plan.

Policy Under Consideration

Following waves of state school consolidation policies and policy proposals across the country, including those in Arkansas, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Maine, Nebraska, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas, and, most notably, West Virginia (The Rural School and Community Trust, 2006), Pennsylvania has entered the politically-tenuous move toward school consolidation. The unexpected proposed policy appeared in the Governor's 2009-2010 state budget.

The Governor argues that Pennsylvania has one of the highest numbers of school districts in the nation; 80% of the Commonwealth's schools serve student populations under 5,000, and 40% serve less than 2,000. This results in too much bureaucracy and not enough course diversity (Rendell & Soderberg, 2009). His solution: small school consolidation.

Gov. Rendell's proposal calls for a fourteen-member appointed commission (twelve voting and two non-voting members) to develop a plan in one year's time for the reorganization, or consolidation, of 500 school districts (as of July, 2009) to 100. The Governor is requiring that the commission write two alternative consolidation plans, which the General Assembly will either approve or reject within six months time. If the legislature fails to approve either plan, the authority for consolidation will shift to the State Board of Education (Rendell & Soderberg, 2009).

Reaction to the Governor's proposed policy by the education community has been swift and largely negative, appearing in newspapers across the state. However, much of the discussion, thus far, has centered on opinion, rather than strengths and weaknesses specific to the Governor's proposal. The following sections discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the proposed policy for school consolidation in Pennsylvania.

Policy Strengths

While it is virtually impossible to find contemporary educational research that supports small school consolidation, in general, proponents of small school consolidation point to a number of strengths associated with larger districts, including: cost effectiveness (economies of scale argument); greater diversity in course offerings; increased variety in extracurricular activities; and reduced administrative and operations costs (Plucker, Spradlin, Magaro, Chien, & Zapf, 2007; Strange & Malhoit, 2005). Proponents of small school consolidation in Pennsylvania promote similar arguments. Gov. Rendell's justifications for this massive wave of school consolidation include: property tax relief, decreased administrative costs, improved school effectiveness and efficiency, and improved delivery of educational services (Rendell & Soderberg, 2009). Strengths specific to consolidation in Pennsylvania come from a Standard & Poor's (2007) cost-effective study of consolidation in the Commonwealth, commissioned by the Legislative Budget and Finance Committee, which formed the basis for Gov. Rendell's policy proposal.

Cost Effectiveness

According to the study, smaller districts (those serving student populations under 500) spend an average of \$9,674 per pupil. Districts with 2,500-2,999 students spend an average of \$8,057. This per pupil expenditure increases again once enrollments surpass 3,000 students (Standard & Poor's, 2007, p. 4). In other words, small districts cost more to run than larger districts. Thus, consolidated districts serving combined populations between 2,000 and 2,999 students have the potential to save the state money.

Standard & Poor's created hypothetical pairings of bordering districts serving small student populations with higher than average per pupil expenditures. According to the study, consolidation of the net of thirty-four optimal pairs has the potential to result in savings of \$81 million to the state, as long as the pairs can reduce their spending to match the state average per pupil for districts serving 2,000 to 2,999 students. A number of superintendents agree with this cost effectiveness argument. In a survey of superintendents of small

districts, 42% of the 49 respondents stated that they thought consolidation would save money even without school closings (Standard & Poor's, 2007, p. 6).

The cost effectiveness study found that consolidated districts could further increase savings through school closings. Of the superintendents who responded to the study, 57% agreed that consolidation accompanied by school closure could save money. The study further found that two or more school consolidations per district could result in savings in the areas of "school administration, classroom instruction, instructional staff support, pupil services, food services, and/or operations and maintenance" (p. 24). In some scenarios, according to the study, whole districts may be able to absorb entire neighboring districts, an effective cost saving measure.

Increased Services

The study found that larger districts are more likely than smaller districts to offer Advanced Placement (AP) courses (92% with student enrollments over 3,000 compared to 51% with enrollments under 3,000) (2007, p. 7). Of the 49 survey respondents, over half thought that consolidating would allow their districts to offer more academic services, especially academic enrichment (i.e. higher level courses) as well as extracurricular programs. Some of the advantages to consolidation include academic enrichment opportunities and increased extracurricular activities, such as fine arts and athletics programs.

Transportation Costs

School districts serving fewer than 750 students spend more per pupil on transportation than districts serving more students. Consolidation has the potential to reduce these costs by increasing student enrollment per district. Transportation cost savings would be dependent on a number of specific local factors, including redistricting, school closure, new geographic area served, etc (Standard & Poor's, 2007). This is the most tenuous argument that supports consolidation, as illustrated in the Weaknesses section.

Student Achievement

According to the Standard & Poor's study, larger school districts would have no negative effects on student achievement as measured by the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA). Through regression analysis of all Pennsylvania districts, the study found "virtually no predictive relationship between size of district enrollment and reading and math proficiency rates on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment" (Standard & Poor's, 2007, p. 12), provided that a higher-performing district does not consolidate with a lower-performing district.

Because consolidation is a politically charged policy, vast disagreement exists between the benefits and disadvantages of state-ordered consolidation of small schools. The following section explores the policy's weaknesses as reported by the cost effectiveness study, educational researchers, rural advocates, and administrators.

Policy Weaknesses

Those who oppose small school consolidation promote a number of arguments for keeping small schools, including: lack of cost efficiency (Eyre & Finn, 2002; Purcell & Shackelford, 2005); negative impacts on student achievement (Plucker, Spradlin, Magaro, Chien, & Zapf, 2007) and attendance (Jones, Toma, & Zimmer, 2008); increases in transportation costs and average bus ride durations (Jimerson, 2007); and detrimental economic and social effects on the community (Lyson, 2002). In Pennsylvania, superintendents interviewed as part of the cost effectiveness study, expressed concern that

...consolidation would be an extremely controversial issue that would face considerable opposition in their communities. Reasons cited include socio-economic and demographic differences between school districts, the potential for longer bus routes for schoolchildren, less local control, and a loss of local identity due to different community cultures and traditions. (Standard & Poor's, 2007, p. 6)

Some superintendents also argued that because they had recently spent taxpayer dollars on new facilities or

building renovations, their communities would be unlikely to support any school closings associated with consolidation.

Lack of Cost Effectiveness

Though superintendent respondents to the cost effectiveness study felt that consolidation would result in some cost savings, Intermediate Unit (IU) officials were not so optimistic. They argued that IU-wide consolidations would result in greater costs to their regions (Standard & Poor's, 2007). More generally, Joe Bard, Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Association of Rural and Small Schools (PARSS), argues that states that have already engaged in state-ordered district consolidation have not enjoyed their expected cost savings. According to Bard, Arkansas' consolidation plan was implemented for the same purpose as Gov. Rendell's proposed policy: to reduce costs. Of the 88 schools affected by Arkansas' state-ordered consolidation policy, 37% have resulted in closings, with the end result of more administrators (and administrative costs) post-consolidation than pre-consolidation (Pennsylvania State University, EDLDR 597A lecture, Feb. 19, 2009).

Bard also argues that the only way statewide district consolidation has the potential to save money is through the closure of school buildings. In many cases, however, these savings would be negated by the increased resultant transportation costs (Pennsylvania State University, EDLDR 597A lecture, Feb. 19, 2009). Other policy weaknesses centered on transportation are addressed in an upcoming section.

Increased Services, Decreased Participation

While surveyed superintendents reported that consolidation may create the opportunity for increased services and extracurricular opportunities, they expressed concern that "additional programs offered through a larger, consolidated district could come at the expense of the individualized attention many students receive in smaller districts" (2007, p. 33). This is an issue that affected students across the Commonwealth half a century ago. When schools that once housed 50 students per grade closed through consolidation with a neighboring district that housed 500 students per grade, individual student attention was lost, as was the opportunity for many students to participate in extracurricular activities.

Increased Transportation Costs

64% of superintendent respondents in the Standard & Poor's cost effectiveness study argued that transportation costs would increase if one or more schools closed because of consolidation (2007, p. 11). Currently, the average reported time spent on the bus in Pennsylvania is 30 minutes, or 32 miles each way (p. 43); the longest reported time students spend on the school bus is 97 minutes and 72 miles each way (p. 12). Even without closing any schools, 42% of the superintendents reported that bus rides would increase in length as a result of district consolidation; 75% reported that they would increase if any schools closed during a potential consolidation (p. 11). This is a worrisome possibility for the superintendents who participated in this study; they posit that the increased length of time spent on the bus would be detrimental to students and unpopular with parents.

If Benton Area School District consolidated with Millville Area School District, one of its potential consolidation pairs, the biggest issue, according to its superintendent, would be the amount of time students would have to spend on the bus. Benton serves a 98 mile radius; Millville serves a 92 mile radius. Students currently ride the bus for 50 minutes. To bring students from Millville to Benton would easily expand that ride to over an hour, potentially placing these students at a disadvantage (Powlus, PowerPoint Presentation, Benton Area School District, 2009).

Superintendents also contend that consolidation with neighboring districts would be not be feasible because mountainous roads that connect some districts close in poor weather conditions, making timely student transportation impossible (Standard & Poor's, 2007, p. 43). Bard expresses a similar concern. One cost effectiveness study proposal and, thus a component of the Governor's proposed policy initiative, is the consolidation of the Austin and Galetton School Districts. According to Bard, this possible district consolidation is virtually impossible: there are no roads that join the two districts (Pennsylvania State University, EDLDR 597A lecture, Feb. 19, 2009).

Student Achievement

Consolidation of small schools and districts into larger schools and districts has the potential to negatively impact student achievement (Bard, Gardener, & Wieland, 2006; Lyson, 2002). Research suggests that

the factors which affect student achievement to the greatest extent appear to include the following characteristics: smaller school size (300-500 students); smaller class size, primarily at elementary schools; a challenging curriculum; and, highly qualified teachers in every classroom. It has also been shown that states with larger schools and school districts tend to have lower student achievement and social outcomes. This trend is also apparent for larger schools in low SES [socioeconomic] communities. (Plucker, Spradlin, Magaro, Chien, & Zapf, 2007, p. 2)

Though this research is not specific to Pennsylvania, it illuminates some negative potential consequences of the proposed policy on student achievement in the Commonwealth.

Though the Pennsylvania cost effective study reported that school size was not a predictor of student achievement, the authors also reported that if higher and lower scoring districts consolidated, the PSSA scores of the higher-scoring district would be negatively impacted, which may make it more difficult for the newly consolidated district to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (p. 12), prevalent concern given the current No Child Left Behind legislation.

Consolidation negatively impacts student attendance as well as student achievement. In a 2008 study of school attendance and district size in Texas, a consolidation state, researchers found that the number of schools per district, school size, and class size were each significant and negatively related to student attendance (Jones, Toma, and Zimmer).

Many researchers, educators, and community members who oppose school consolidation are those who study or live in rural communities. While the Governor's proposed policy does not explicitly target small *rural* schools, over 75% of those school districts targeted as potential sites of consolidation are designated with a locale code between six and eight (small town and isolated/non isolated rural communities). One policy weakness particularly pertinent to rural districts is the negative impact of consolidation on the rural community.

Community

Lyson's (2002) study of New York communities with and without schools found some striking correlations between the absence of a school (one frequent result of consolidation) and certain community factors. He found that communities without schools were more likely to have lower housing values, less developed physical infrastructure, larger income gaps, higher levels of income assistance, higher poverty rates (in small rural villages), and fewer workers in the professional and managerial classes (2002). This is cause for concern for educators and community members in rural communities slated for district consolidation and subsequent school closings.

Perhaps more importantly, the loss of a small community school equates to the loss of the community's economic and social center. Joe Bard contends that "rural communities are an endangered species." State-ordered consolidation would further endanger these communities because "schools are the physical, social centers" of many of our small communities (Pennsylvania State University, EDLDR 597A lecture, Feb. 19, 2009).

Alternative Cost Saving Measures to Consolidation for Small Districts

If the impetus for statewide small school consolidations is financial, as purported by Governor Rendell, a number of alternative cost saving measures have been implemented by districts across the nation and within the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania that have the potential to alleviate a portion of the costs associated with small public schools, including cost and service sharing, without the negative effects associated with school consolidation.

Sharing can take any of multiple forms, including:

Establishing cooperative agreements with other districts to share equipment, facilities, and personnel; Reducing costs through cooperative purchasing of goods and services; Sharing personnel with other districts and sharing courses through distance learning; or Forming consortiums in transportation to improve efficiency and eliminate duplicative services. (Darden, 2005)

A number of small Pennsylvania districts already participate in cost and service sharing measures, according to Standard & Poor's cost effectiveness study. 53% of superintendent respondents reported engaging in cost and service sharing practices with at least one other district, including: "special education, athletics, occupational programs, alternative education, distance learning, purchased services, shared personnel, technology, coaching, transportation, health care, food services, and student support" (2007, p. 9). Of those that did not already participate in cost and service sharing programs, only three superintendents expressed resistance to such practices. In addition to service sharing with other districts, it is also possible for districts to share services with their local municipalities, participation in procurement programs, and collective purchasing programs coordinated by local Intermediate Units (Standard & Poor's, 2007).

Cost and service sharing can create more cost efficient small schools, provide increased educational opportunities, and keep future tax rates stable. Most importantly collaboration, as opposed to consolidation, allows each district to retain its distinct identity (Darden, 2005).

Conclusions

Statewide consolidation policies have been shown to have negative effects on student achievement (Plucker, Spradlin, Magaro, Chien, and Zapf, 2007), student transportation time (Jimerson, 2007), and small rural communities (Lyson, 2002). Additionally, research on statewide consolidation policies illustrates that states with enacted consolidation policies have not seen their projected savings (Purcell & Shackelford, 2005). While Governor Rendell's proposed policy to consolidate the state's 500 student-serving districts to 100 appears to be a cost saving measure for the Commonwealth, research conducted outside the state, in conjunction with the findings of the commissioned Standard & Poor's cost effectiveness study, indicate that this assumption is problematic.

Policy Recommendations

In light of these findings, this analysis makes the following recommendations regarding Governor Rendell's proposed state-ordered school consolidation policy:

- Consolidation should not be a state-ordered or state-induced policy. Instead, decisions about the necessity of consolidation should be left to local districts and their communities, who can take into consideration the advantages and disadvantages of consolidation specific to their local contexts.
- The state-appointed commission should seriously consider the disadvantages as well as the benefits of school consolidation based on research and examination of other statewide consolidation policies before making recommendations to the Governor and legislature.
- Governor Rendell should encourage cost and service sharing programs between neighboring districts and/or encourage Intermediate Units to offer cost sharing or procurement services to reduce costs through incentive programs.

Implications for School Leaders

This analysis has shown that the Governor's state-ordered school consolidation policy can have serious negative effects on schools and communities across the Commonwealth, including: controversy within the school district's community, loss of local control, potential increases in school district costs, especially transportation costs, decreased opportunities for student participation and individual attention, increased student bus ride durations, decreased student achievement, and disastrous implications for the local community's social and economic infrastructure.

What are the implications, then, for school leaders who have responsibilities to both the state and their local communities? School leaders first need to educate their school boards and communities about the Governor's plan and how it will impact their particular contexts. They should prepare easily comprehensible reports and presentations to the school board and community in order to gain control over public relations within their specific contexts and to direct and facilitate local discussions.

Using the Standard & Poor's study, school leaders can easily find their specific consolidation pairs. With this information, administrators can determine the impact consolidation would have on school district costs, school closure (i.e. Who will be affected? What will change for the community? How will tax rates be impacted?), students bus ride durations, changes to bus routes and resultant transportation costs, changes to academic and extracurricular opportunities and participation rates, influence of combined community demographics, and potential changes to standardized test scores in the consolidated district.

Second, school leaders should work proactively with neighboring districts, municipalities, and Intermediate Units to create cost and service sharing partnerships. These partnerships have the potential to save districts money, reduce per pupil expenditures, stabilize future tax rates, and provide the opportunity for increased educational opportunities. Ideas for such partnerships can be found through myriad sources, including the local Intermediate Unit and state and national organizations. The Center on Rural Education and Communities website provides a number of examples of small, rural districts across Pennsylvania that have engaged with their communities and outside organizations to create increased opportunities for students and reduce district costs.

Finally, school leaders need to work with their school boards and communities to engage with elected representatives and the State Board of Education in order to make clear the impact consolidation would have on their specific schools and communities. Coordination with neighboring districts and communities to advance local positions on consolidation has the potential to provide greater influence over the decisions made by the legislature and the State Board regarding the Governor's state-ordered consolidation policy.

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