

Merge Ahead: What Mandated Consolidation Could Mean for Your District.



BY BRUCE BUCHANAN

Earl Row can't understand why the Arkansas school district he's devoted nearly three decades to will no longer exist in a few weeks.

It's not because of poor academics. The tiny Kingston School District, with 215 students, had the highest eighth-grade math scores in the entire state last year. But Kingston, like 56 other small, rural districts in Arkansas, will disappear in 2004-05, forced by the state to consolidate with neighboring districts.

In Arkansas, school consolidation is taking place at the district level. Other states, such as West Virginia and Kentucky, are closing small, rural schools and sending their former students to larger schools farther away from home. Supporters say consolidation is needed to make the best use of taxpayer dollars and provide the rich, varied curriculum expected from a modern school.

Regardless of the circumstances, most mergers take place despite strong opposition from rural residents, who say that small, tightly knit community schools are the best environments for children. In states such as Nebraska and Kansas, local citizens have managed to fend off consolidation efforts, while parents seceded from a rural Oregon district rather than lose their high school.

For Row, who is Kingston's superintendent, the intangibles far outweigh the tangibles in a consolidation debate.

"When you end districts, you end communities," he says.

The Arkansas merger battle

Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee says he understands why rural educators and parents love their local schools. But he says tiny rural districts like Kingston simply are too expensive for many states to operate—particularly given the growing demands placed on schools and the limited resources with which to meet those needs.

"We don't have the luxury of being able to leave things like they are," says Huckabee, who is pushing for even more mergers than called for by the legislature earlier this year. The current measure, passed in January, eliminates districts smaller than 350 students.

Marty Strange, policy program director for the Rural School and Community Trust, a rural school advocacy group that opposes forced consolidation, says school mergers generally take place when states have budget shortfalls and need to make deep cuts. In many cases, the economic distress comes at the same time courts have ordered states to fix broken schools.

"Unfortunately, those factors are pretty widespread," Strange says, noting that school consolidation efforts are particularly common in many Southern and Appalachian states and "epidemic" in the Great Plains.

Nowhere is school consolidation a bigger issue than in Arkansas, where Huckabee's efforts to merge schools have met with both applause and derision. Most of the state's districts are small: 234 of 310 have fewer than 1,500 students. The smallest district has only 67.

Driven by a 2002 Arkansas Supreme Court decision that declared the state's school funding system inadequate and inequitable, Huckabee and other policy makers looked for ways to redirect school funds and ultimately developed the merger law. Ironically, the 157-student Lake View School District, which successfully sued the state to force the improvements, is being forced to consolidate with the neighboring Barton-Lexa district to comply with the law.

Like Lake View, some small districts will partner to form new, larger districts, while others such as Kingston will simply be absorbed into a neighboring school system. Districts that don't merge on their own will be consolidated by the state Board of Education.

The state's small, rural districts have an average student-teacher ratio of 11-to-1 at the high school level and 14-to-1 in elementary school, Huckabee says. He believes that is not an efficient use of taxpayer dollars and estimates that the state spends about \$220 million more than it should on teacher salaries. For example, a high school chemistry teacher at a small, rural school might have only three or four students per class. But if the course is required for graduation, the school must offer it.

Huckabee says the savings from consolidations are needed to address a variety of school needs, including raising teacher pay, broadening the curriculum, and expanding preschool programs. He also believes consolidation can have educational benefits.

"You just can't offer a broad, rigorous curriculum that includes the arts, Advanced Placement, and a broad array of foreign languages" in a small high school, Huckabee says.

But rural school advocates say money—not academics—drives school mergers. Strange says he has seen little evidence that consolidation improves academics and plenty of evidence that it erodes public support for schools.

"The people who are for consolidation always wrap themselves in the clothing of school improvement," Strange says.

Strange sees school consolidation efforts as a condescending attempt to take away local control from rural residents, who he believes are stereotyped as being too dumb or too poor to run good schools.

"Consolidation often just spits in the face of the reality that although these schools are poor ... they often are doing pretty well," Strange says.

Building support in Kentucky

School consolidation also is on the table in Kentucky, where several districts in the rural eastern mountains are moving to single, countywide high schools.

Harlan County Schools recently received \$13 million from the state to build a single, countywide high school, meaning that three existing high schools will close. Nearby Letcher and Floyd counties also are building countywide high schools.

Anna Craft, superintendent of the Letcher County Schools, says the decision to combine Fleming-Neon, Letcher, and Whitesburg high schools into a single new school wasn't easy. After all, the schools have been athletic rivals and symbols of their respective communities for years.

"No one likes to close their community school," Craft says. "It was hard for them to give up their identity with their school."

But the district has lost enrollment during the past decade and district leaders felt a combined school could provide students with a broader curriculum. District officials invited parents, students, and community members from the three schools to help in the planning for the new school, which opens in 2005. Craft says that input made a big difference in calming fears and building support.

"We've made it a real community project," Craft says.

Heartland consolidation

In Nebraska, school consolidation foes recently staved off a bill that would have forced many of the state's smallest schools to close. But another bill, which pays incentives to small districts that merge, still might force many small school districts out of business.

The incentive package would pay \$1,000 to \$3,500 per student to districts with fewer than 390 students that agree to merge with larger districts. The incentive money would be in addition to existing state funding.

"It is a high incentive, so I think it's going to be something a lot of districts look at," says Jon Bailey, rural research and analysis program director for the Nebraska-based Center for Rural Affairs, an organization that opposes school consolidation.

Bailey says the incentive offer comes at the same time as an overall state education budget cut. Many cash-strapped districts may feel they have no choice but to merge, he says.

Nebraska has 501 school districts today. About 400 school districts have closed since 1981, but that was the result of voluntary mergers.

Last year, some Nebraska legislators wanted to mandate mergers for the first time in state history. A bill in the state legislature would have forced many elementary-only districts, called Class I districts, to merge with high school districts. The state has 260 Class I systems. Some of these tiny districts consist of just a one-room schoolhouse.

"Fifty percent of the school districts serve about 3 percent of the students," says state Sen. Ron Raikes, who favors consolidation.

Like Huckabee in Arkansas, he believes consolidation would bring about savings that could be redirected to areas of need, such as teacher pay.

"Far and away the lowest-paid teachers are the ones who teach in these elementary-only districts," Raikes says.

Raikes' bill would not have closed any schools, at least not directly, but would have put all elementary schools under the control of K-12 school boards. The boards would have had the authority to decide which schools to close.

But school boards are often the only line of defense for keeping small schools open, says Strange, of the Rural School and Community Trust. Once those boards disappear, it is easy to close the schools.

Bailey says most of the schools likely to have been affected by the bill would have been in the relatively populous eastern part of the state, since many schools in the central and western regions are too far away from a neighboring district to merge.

Still, rural education supporters rallied to defeat the proposal to close the Class I school districts. Bailey says about 1,000 merger opponents attended public hearings on the proposal last year.

"It's going to be very much an emotional issue," says John Bonaiuto, executive director of the Nebraska Association of School Boards. "Many people in their communities are comfortable with Class I schools."

The association has not taken a position on the debate. But Raikes says he will continue to press for consolidation, and rural parents promise to fight his efforts.

An ongoing fight

Randy Wiegand is a parent at Oak Valley School, a Class I school with 30 students. For the past seven years, he has been on the school board. Wiegand strongly supports efforts to keep the Class I schools open.

Once a month, he says, an Oak Valley family prepares a hot homemade lunch for the entire school. After harvest, students build forts using discarded husks from nearby cornfields.

"It's hard to explain, but I think just having a smaller school makes it easier for the parents to get involved in the education of their children, having a closer relationship with the teachers and just an overall feeling of being a part of what goes on at the school," Wiegand says.

Rural school supporters also successfully fended off school consolidation efforts in Kansas last year.

"I haven't gotten very far," says state Rep. Bill Mason, perhaps Kansas' biggest proponent of school consolidation. He plans to retire from the legislature this year.

Mason had to hire two full-time secretaries to handle the 3,000 phone calls he received when he proposed his first school merger bill in 1996. He also got several death threats from angry merger foes.

Like Nebraska, Kansas has many small, rural school districts—50 of the state's 303 districts have fewer than 250 students. The state legislature considered

several bills that would have reduced the number of districts to 105 (one per county) or even to as few as 40. Supporters say consolidation could save the state up to \$480 million.

About two-thirds of the state's districts are losing enrollment, Mason says, and he believes attendance lines need to be adjusted accordingly.

"I think we have one of the most inefficient delivery systems I've ever seen," Mason says. "In one county, for instance, we have nine public school districts."

He has introduced bills to merge schools nearly every year for the past eight years, but none has been approved, and he sees little hope that will change anytime soon. The state has created some economic incentives for consolidation in recent years, but Mason says only four districts have merged voluntarily.

A radical solution to merger

Perhaps the most extreme example of parents fighting school consolidation took place in tiny Lone, Ore., last year.

At the time, Lone (pronounced "Eye-own") was part of the Morrow County School District, a system of fewer than 2,200 students spread over more than 2,000 square miles. When district officials threatened to close Lone High School due to budget constraints, residents of the 350-person town seceded from the Morrow County district.

Lone, with approval of the state Legislature, formed its own school district last year. The fledgling district has two schools, which share a common campus, and 152 students.

Had the high school closed, students would have been bused 17 miles to the nearest school. Perhaps more important, the small farming community would have lost its center. Fans pack the gym for high school basketball games every winter, and the whole town turns out for the school's potluck dinners.

"When there's something going on there, whether you have kids at school or not, you go," says Anne Morter, a parent and member of the newly formed Lone Board of Education.

Lone residents fought hard to keep their schools. They raised \$65,000 to hire a lobbyist and a lawyer and flooded state legislators' offices with messages. Despite opposition from the state's Coalition of School Administrators, state legislators sided with the Lone parents.

Morter says that initially, citizens considered alternative budget cuts that could keep their school open. But they realized the idea of closing the school would probably come up again the next time Oregon's schools had financial troubles. So they decided to take the only step that would ensure their school survived.

"This town has always been very protective of the school," Morter says.

Residents didn't doubt Lone could run its own school district, she says. After all, Oregon's rural northeast is dotted with extremely small school districts. Lone received assistance from the state, which provides some specialized services for small districts.

Morter says lone residents have no doubt they did the right thing.

"It has been great," she says. "I'm not sure, from the kids' point of view, that they notice any difference."

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www.asbj.com/current/coverstory.html

FIGHTING BACK IN WEST VIRGINIA

SCHOOL MERGER OPPONENTS in Arkansas often point to West Virginia as evidence that the benefits of consolidation can be exaggerated.

The Mountain State closed 202 schools in the 1990s. At the time, state officials believed consolidation would save money. But a January 2004 report by Challenge West Virginia, a group supporting small, rural schools, claims that spending increased 16 percent between 1990 and 2000 despite the consolidation push. Even though West Virginia lost more than 34,000 students during that decade, the report's authors found sizable increases in busing costs and administrative expenses.

"The state promised citizens they would save a lot of money and students would have a broader curriculum," says Linda Martin, Challenge West Virginia's executive director. "Neither has happened."

But Michael Hicks, a researcher for Marshall University's Center for Business and Economic Development, says a school's size does not negatively impact student achievement on standardized tests. In fact, Hicks told the *Charleston Gazette*, students in larger high schools are more likely to take Advanced Placement courses and college entrance exams.

"We didn't find that bigger schools were performing less well," says Hicks, who studied high school size for the School Building Authority, a state agency that controls most of the funding for school construction and repairs. "Our biggest challenge is overcoming low educational attainment and high rates of poverty."

Martin, however, says that the state's merger mania "has been a disaster for our children." As a result of consolidation, she notes, many students now spend up to four hours a day riding school buses on winding mountain roads. The long rides also dissuade them from participating in extracurricular activities.

Small high schools still can serve students appropriately, Martin says, noting that distance-learning technology can be a cost-effective way to bring a variety of classes to rural areas. She says that Hicks' research "contradicts all the studies that have been done" on small schools.

Martin and other rural school advocates blame members of the School Building Authority for using their broad powers to force districts to consolidate. The authority's strict funding criteria require high schools, for example, to have at least 800 students to qualify for state money.

"We build a new school and put three schools into it and still have a small school," says Clacy Williams, the authority's executive director. "Our charge is to continue moving forward."

The state still plans to close an additional 151 schools, but rural parents are fighting back. A group of parents in Lincoln County have sued the West Virginia State Board of Education to keep four small high schools open.

The Lincoln County school board, acting on the state's advice, decided four years ago to close the high schools that serve the 4,000-student district and replace them with a new countywide high school. The state board later took over the district, and local officials recently boycotted the groundbreaking for the new high school, which is scheduled to open in 2006.

"What we saw happen across the state is [consolidation supporters] promise a better curriculum," said Thomas Ramey, a leader of the movement to overturn the Lincoln County consolidation. "Actually, what happens is more students drop out, there's less parental involvement, and less opportunity for extracurricular activities."

Rural school advocates hope a victory in the Lincoln County lawsuit will set a legal precedent to end the consolidation movement. But they face an uphill battle: Kanawha Circuit Judge Charles King dismissed the lawsuit in May, in part because the state has spent so much money on the school. The case has been appealed to the state Supreme Court.

"Economics of scale might be a good concept if you're making widgets," Martin says. "It's not a good concept if you're developing human beings." -- *B.B.*

RESOURCES

[The Rural School and Community Trust](#) offers state-level information on school consolidation efforts across the country and research on small, community-based schools.

[The Center for Rural Affairs](#) focuses on rural issues, including school consolidation, in Nebraska. The organization opposes forced school consolidation.

Arkansas Gov. [Mike Huckabee's](#) home page explains his support for the merger of many of the state's smallest school districts. Huckabee believes consolidation will lead to expanded course offerings and better use of taxpayer dollars.

[Challenge West Virginia](#), formed to fight consolidation of the state's rural schools, has completed a comprehensive study on the effects of school mergers in West Virginia.

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