SCHOOL DISTRICT ORGANIZATION: STATUS AND RESEARCH

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CSFP Interest in School District Organization

- Interested in how education services are delivered
- Recognizes that services can be organized in numerous ways
- Believes the issue of organization is extremely complex given:
  - Distribution of people in states
  - Existing geographical/political boundaries
  - Changes in technology
  - Multitude of roles played by schools

What CSFP Asked APA to DO

- Asked APA to examine the issue of school district consolidation
- Told us that CSFP had no specific objective in mind and that we should not reach a specific conclusion…
- … particularly about Colorado
- Wanted us to focus on what research says about the impacts of organization structure and change in structure

Objectives of the Work

- Review the historical development of school districts
- Examine how the number of schools and school districts has changed over time
- Examine the research about school district consolidation:
  - Cost savings
  - Program scope
  - Impact on community
  - Alternative delivery approaches

How We Went About the Work

- Gathered and organized information about school districts
- Reviewed the literature (research and "research")
- Interviewed several people:
  - Tom Bilodeaux, Dir. Of Research, Montana Education Association
  - Jim Buckheit, Exec. Dir. of Pennsylvania State Board of Education
  - David Conley, CEO of Education Policy Improvement Center (Oregon)
  - Edward Eiler, Supt. of Lafayette School Corporation (Indiana)
  - Russ Inbody, Director of School Finance, Nebraska Dept. of Ed.
  - Michael Kirst, Stanford University
  - Marty Strange, Policy Dir., Rural Education and Community Trust

History

- 350 years ago, colonial towns were required to provide primary education; soon thereafter, towns were given the authority to collect taxes to support primary education.
- 150 years ago, states formed school districts (towns in North, counties in South), gave them authority to tax, provided state support, abolished tuition, and required compulsory attendance.
- 60 years ago, the consolidation movement dramatically reduced the number of districts.

Table 1: Change Over Time in Numbers of Students, School Districts and Schools in the United States

	Students		School Districts			One-Teacher Schools		Elementary Schools		Secondary Schools	
Year	Number (In millions)	% Change from Prior Period	Number	% Change from Prior Period	Average Size	Number	% Change from Prior Period	Number	% Change from Prior Period	Number	% Change from Prior Period
1919-20	21.6		--			187,948		--		--	
1939-40	25.7	19.0%	117,108		190	113,600	-39.6%	--		24,542	
1959-60	36.1	40.5%	40,520	-65.4%	640	20,213	-82.2%	71,640		25,784	5.1%
1970-71	45.9	27.1%	17,995	-55.6%	2,010	1,815	-91.0%	63,985	-10.7%	25,352	-1.7%
1980-81	40.9	-10.9%	15,912	-11.6%	2,890	921	-49.3%	60,148	-6.0%	24,362	-3.9%
1990-91	41.2	0.7%	15,358	-3.5%	2,670	617	-33.0%	60,723	1.0%	23,460	-3.7%
1995-96	44.4	7.8%	14,766	-3.9%	2,800	474	-23.2%	63,487	4.6%	23,793	1.4%
2000-01	46.6	5.0%	14,859	0.6%	2,990	411	-13.3%	65,286	2.8%	27,090	13.9%
2005-06	48.0	3.0%	14,166	-4.7%	3,290	335	-18.5%	72,663	11.3%	29,507	8.9%

Table 2: Distribution of All Districts in the United States (with Reported Size) and Students by District Size Group in 2005-06

	District Enrollment Size Group							
	>25,000	10,000-24,999	5,000-9,999	2,500-4,999	1,000-2,499	600-999	300-599	<300
Number of Districts	269	594	1,066	2,015	3,335	1,768	1,895	2,857
Percentage of All Districts	1.9%	4.3%	7.7%	14.6%	24.2%	12.8%	13.7%	20.7%
Number of Students	16,376,213	9,055,547	7,349,010	7,114,942	5,442,588	1,391,314	835,430	403,887
Percentage of All Students	34.1%	18.9%	15.3%	14.8%	11.3%	2.9%	1.7%	0.8%
Average Size of Districts	60,878	15,245	6,894	3,531	1,632	787	441	141

Table 3: Comparison of States in Terms of Number of School Districts, Number of Other Governmental Districts, Size of School Districts and Land Area of School Districts

- See Table 3 Handout

School District Consolidation

- Primary reasons
  - Achieve economies of scale
  - Improve academic offerings
  - Indirectly, close small schools
- Recent state activity
  - Arkansas (make all districts of a certain minimum size)
  - Maine (make all districts of a certain minimum size)
  - Nebraska (eliminate all elementary districts)
  - However, there are examples of an expanding number of districts (Colorado, Louisiana, New Mexico)

Research on Consolidation

- Research vs. advocacy for or against
- Overview
  - Optimal size of school districts
  - Costs and efficiency
  - Academic quality
  - Community impacts and governance

Optimal District Size

- Depends on goals and student needs
- Most studies identify a U-shaped cost (per student) optimization curve
- Recommended “optimal” size varies greatly among studies and among rural and urban communities
- The effects of district size are mitigated by a host of other factors, such as school size

Costs and Efficiency

- District size research provides some support for economies of scale
- Efficiency research (cost of achieving an outcome) suggests that costs per high school graduate are similar between large and small districts
- Research on costs before & after consolidation is mixed
- Long-term savings may be possible in some cases
- Potential economies of scale are often offset by post-consolidation increases in transportation, capital outlay, and average salaries

Academic Quality

- Studies of district size find that students in smaller districts often outperform students in larger districts
- Low-income students tend to benefit more than high-income students from small district size
- Academic and extracurricular opportunities are generally more extensive in larger districts
- Small remote districts can have trouble recruiting high quality teachers
- Larger districts tend to offer more opportunities for teacher professional development and collaboration

Community Impacts and Governance

- District consolidation often leads to school closure(s)
- Communities with schools tend to have notable economic advantages over those without schools
- School closures frequently have negative economic impacts on rural communities
- It does not appear that school closures have significant negative impacts on property values or tax rates
- School closures tend to decrease parent and civic participation
- Large or consolidated districts may be more bureaucratic and less responsive to citizens

Alternatives to Consolidation

- Intermediate Units
  - BOCS, BOCES, IUs, etc.
  - Providing services on an "as needed" basis with reimbursement by users of services
  - Academic, particularly for high-need students
  - Academic support (specialists, professional development, etc.)
  - Administrative support (accounting, purchasing, etc.)

Alternatives to Consolidation

- Technology
  - Delivery of services using virtual courses
- Regionalization
  - Multiple elementary districts belonging to a single secondary district
  - Multiple districts forming a technology service area

Conclusions

- Don't use a "one size fits all" approach; develop a process and provide support (e.g., analysis, incentives).
- The use of intermediate units can provide better service and reduce expenditures in a variety of areas from low-enrollment courses, to serving high-cost student populations, to administrative support; interviewees universally noted the value IUs in staff development.