

**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

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**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

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**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

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**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

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**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.

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**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)

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**Research on Consolidation**

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

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**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

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### 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

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### 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

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### 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

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**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.)

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**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

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**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.

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