

[The Consolidation Cha-Cha](#)

Now that Executive County Superintendents have been ordered by the DOE to issue reports by March 2010 for consolidation of school districts, there's lots of chatter regarding these threats to home rule. Over the last few days, we've seen reports about potential mergers in Somerset Hills and Bedminster in Somerset County; Bradley Beach, Lake Como, Interlaken and Allenhurst in Monmouth County; and Seaside Heights, Seaside Park and Island Heights in Ocean County.

There's a stylized dance that all officials seem to adhere to: let's call it the consolidation cha-cha. **First step: make nice and acknowledge that it's not a terrible idea.** For instance, the [Asbury Park Press reports](#) that Bradley Beach Superintendent Wayne Turner told the local Board of Education that "the district fits all three criteria set by the state for districts that probably face regionalization."

Somerset Hills superintendent Peter Miller gushed to the [Star-Ledger](#) that "(o)ur two districts have had a really nice working relationship for decades... it (regionalization) is something that always gets talked about here."

Trudy Doyle, Somerset County's executive superintendent of schools, commiserated, "(e)veryone is beginning to really feel the fiscal squeeze right now. So districts and communities may say, 'You know what, this is really the time to look at this. We cannot maintain these programs all by ourselves.'"

And Toms River Regional Schools Superintendent Michael J. Ritacco conceded with a graceful swoop in [another piece in the Asbury Park Press](#), "I think today because the economic conditions are so bad . . . there might be more of an inclination to Toms River to make some things work that may be able to save dollars across the board."

Next step: point out the long tiresome process involved in moving forward. Plans aren't even due for a year and a half, feasibility studies must be ordered and paid for (at local taxpayers' expense), and then the district residents put it all to a vote. For example, Superintendent Turner of Bradley Beach bemoaned the fact that "he didn't believe any real planning would begin until at least the spring" and noted that he "first will contract out feasibility studies of targeted districts." Superintendent Miller of Somerset Hills "estimated the process of merging school districts would take two to three years."

And ECS Doyle of Somerset County, in a deft pas de deux, "acknowledged New Jersey's strong schools and long history of wanting local control."

Last lunge in our cha-cha: admit that consolidation will result in at least one of the targeted towns paying higher property taxes, which would doom any vote since all it takes to axe the idea is a "nay" from one town. Turner of Bradley Beach: "One looming problem... there is not yet a plan to deal with proposals that are voted down by residents." Mike Yaple, spokesman for NJSBA: "No town will vote for regionalization if their taxes are going to go up." And Monmouth County ECS Carole K. Morris: "It does raise the question of whether or not, truly, districts would ever vote to move forward."

So, where does that leave us on the dance floor? Back in the endless loop of conceding efficiencies inherent in regionalization, lamenting long circuitous procedures, and, for a final flourish, underlining the obvious flaw in the DOE's plan: that one town or more in any consolidation plan will end up paying higher taxes and will inevitably veto the whole thing. Why has New Jersey and its 611 school districts approved only three regionalizations in the last 23 years? Duh.

But could we make this work? Possibly. First, the State must compensate any district that has to shoulder higher local property taxes through extra State aid. Yes, the State is broke, but if the efficiencies are truly there than we'll all come out ahead. Let's say we have the opportunity to merge five small districts, and two of the three will pay slightly higher property taxes due to varying teacher contracts, debt service, and rateables. New Jersey can help out the losing districts by adding additional state aid, a win-win since at first the added efficiencies will make it all no worse than a wash. In a short time we'll get the financial benefit and, for another bonus, increase educational opportunities for kids in tiny districts and take a few baby steps towards desegregating the most segregated school system in the country.

Second, Corzine has to find his balls, along with the State Legislature, to change the State law that mandates that during a school consolidation the school district's teachers contract with the highest salaries becomes the governing collective bargaining agreement. Mike Yaple of the NJSBA notes in the Star-Ledger piece that "any savings in administrator costs could quickly evaporate if you have scores of teachers reaping a more generous contract."

So, let's change the law. One of the most grievous inefficiencies in our state school system is that each of our 600+ school districts negotiates its own contract with its own branch of the NJEA. In other words, taxpayers foot the bill for doing something 600 times when, at the very least, we could do it 21 times. **County-wide teacher contracts, anyone?** The NJEA still maintains control, but we go at least a little way towards thinking of our schools just a little more globally.

We're stuck in the endless loop of a doleful dance, another circular motion that leaves us right back where we started. Isn't it time to change our tune?