

SCHOOL DISTRICT SIZE MATTERS

As the Legislature continues to consider a pilot-countywide school district, it is important that you communicate to your legislators, board members, parents and staff, the importance that school district size has on academic achievement. Recent studies support the proposition that small schools and school districts have a positive impact on the quality of education, particularly for children who are from economically disadvantaged households.

This body of research shows that when socio-economic factors are controlled, students who attend smaller schools are more likely to graduate and to participate in extracurricular activities.² Smaller schools have lower incidents of crime and violence, and greater parental involvement.³ These results are corroborated by the conclusions of NJASA's Small Schools Committee report from 1996 entitled "Small School Districts Succeed in Passing Budgets and Meeting Educational Standards." Certainly, a move to a countywide system would bring with it larger schools with larger student populations.

The Legislature has held up Florida and Maryland as examples of states with countywide districts that New Jersey should emulate based solely on comparisons of administrative costs. Consider, however, as indicated in the following chart, that New Jersey school students outperformed their peers in both Florida and Maryland on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

	Florida	Maryland	New Jersey	U.S. (average)
Scale Score, Grade 4 Math	239	238	244	237
Scale Score, Grade 8 Math	274	278	284	278
Scale Score, Grade 4 Reading	219	220	223	217
Scale Score, Grade 8 Reading	256	261	269	260

*Source: NAEP - Math & Reading 2005

As reported by Education Week in June 2006, consider that New Jersey also has the highest high school graduation rate in the country. On the other hand, Florida's graduation rate was ranked at the bottom in 47th place, and Maryland was only slightly above the national average. Graduation rates are an important indicator of whether or not a public school system is fulfilling its purpose, namely to educate youth to be productive members of society, and New Jersey public schools are accomplishing that purpose.

As research indicates, consolidation and/or a move to a countywide system will not necessarily result in cost savings. Since cost savings cannot be guaranteed and a move to a countywide system will likely negatively impact student achievement, one must question the logic of moving to a countywide system for experimental purposes. I encourage you to share this information with members of your school community and your local legislators. Please be advised that an appropriate version of this letter will be sent to legislators.

¹ *Does School District Size Matter?*, Robert Schmidt, Ph.D. and Alan Schlottmann, Ph.D., citing *The Influence of Scale on School Performance: A Multi-Level Extension of the Matthew Principle*, Craig Howley and Robert Bickel, Education Policy Archives, Vol. 8, No. 22 (May 10, 2000).

² *Anything But Research-Based: State Initiatives to Consolidate Schools and Districts*, Rural Policy Matters (March 2006).

³ *Id.*