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[At Cross Purposes? Making Small School Districts Bigger and Big Districts Smaller](#)

November 14th, 2008 by Ray Pinney

*All my friends are so small town
My parents live in the same small town
My job is so small town
Provides little opportunity Educated in a small town
Taught the fear of Jesus in a small town
Used to daydream in that small town
Another boring romantic that's me* John Mellencamp, *Small Town*, 1985

Like John Mellencamp, many people who grew up or now live in a small town are “romantic” about these places. While the 1985 hit is a ballad for many “small town” residents, I suspect that it is not on Gov. Corzine’s or most legislators’ iPods. I say that because in the recent push to regionalize and consolidate school districts (all in the name of property tax relief), small school districts are portrayed as the problem. Before I go any further, I should state that I am a bit biased on this topic since I live in a small town and my children attend school in a one-building district.

The State of New Jersey would like to reduce the number of school districts in New Jersey, particularly the small districts, with the idea that doing so will reduce costs. This is not only the wish of the Department of Education, but also of the legislature, which passed the law establishing the Executive County Superintendent. As Assemblyman David Wolfe said at NJSBA’s Legislative Update session at Workshop 2008, “*The reason to consolidate is to save money.*”

I am not going to revisit the entire regionalization issue now. You can read a past blog entry, [Regionalization: Is the Wrong Solution Better than No Solution?](#) or -better yet - you can attend NJSBA’s [Delegate Assembly](#) on Saturday, Nov. 22, 2008 to hear a panel discussion, *The Challenges, Opportunities and Future of School District*

Regionalization. This forum, which includes time for audience participation in the discussion, is very timely and should be very informative.

What I do want to discuss is this: on one hand New Jersey is pushing to create larger districts in the name of saving money. (Which I might add is very unlikely and is the reason consolidation hasn't happened, it does not usually lead to cost savings.) However, at the same time, there is also a movement around the nation that looks at small schools and smaller learning communities as part of the solution to closing the achievement gap.

The City of Chicago has had a small school movement since 2001 and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in 2005 created a \$28.8 billion endowment to create "small" urban high schools. Academic researchers such as Craig Howeley (Ohio University) have indicated that "*dropout rates are lower in smaller schools*" and "*the link between poverty and low achievement is less in smaller schools.*" While small schools are not a magic pill, there are many who believe they are part of the formula for success. So many experts believe in the value of small schools, but apparently the New Jersey DOE is not one of them.

Here's where things really get interesting. The NJDOE, in its Secondary Education Initiative, which was created to help improve student achievement in Abbott school districts, has stated the following goal: *To break up large middle and high schools into smaller schools or "learning communities."* So, in fact, the NJDOE believes that creating smaller learning environments is one step in improving student achievement. It is true that in our urban districts some of the best academic achievement is in small schools.

This now leads me to this perplexing question: if the NJDOE believes that "smaller schools" are helpful in creating student achievement then why are they attempting to consolidate smaller school districts in most of New Jersey and hence create "larger learning environments?" It seems to me to be a bit of a contradiction that in urban areas we are pushing small schools while in suburban and rural areas we seem to be pushing larger schools. This is the case, despite the fact that some of the highest academic achievement in the suburban and rural schools comes from our smallest districts.

Is New Jersey willing to trade proven academic success for the possibility, but not the certainty, of saving money? Before we proceed with changing our small school districts we should make sure we protect our students' academic achievement.

Maybe I am being a bit "*romantic*" about the small schools but I just can't recall a ballad singing the praises of a large school. If you know one, send it to me. I'll be sure to put it in my iPod.

Tags: [Assemblyman David Wolfe](#), [Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation](#), [iPod](#), [John Mellencamp](#), [Secondary Education Initiative](#)