

Under attack: New Jersey has laid out a plan of attack against small districts.

IN NEARLY 20 YEARS AS A SMALL district administrator, I have participated in two formal regionalization studies, conducted by the boards of education of two or more school districts considering consolidation. In each of these studies data revealed that there would be little if any financial savings for the districts.

When weighed against the research supporting the educational benefits of small schools, the districts all opted to maintain the status quo rather than risk negatively impacting student academic achievement. The main concern was that in consolidating districts, local small school's would close and the students would merge into larger regional schools. Deeply rooted in the tradition of "home rule," many of New Jersey's school districts have fewer than 500 students in only one or two schools. Many of these districts serve students in the elementary grades only, then send middle and high school students on a tuition basis to a neighboring district. There are 593 operating school districts in New Jersey--but not for long.

Almost 40 years of research and literature indicate that small schools compared to larger schools have higher attendance and graduation rates, fewer dropouts, equal or better levels of academic achievement (standardized test scores, course failure rates, grade point averages), higher levels of extracurricular participation and parent involvement, and fewer incidences of discipline and violence. But New Jersey's smallest districts are under attack. Daily headlines prove that war has been declared: "New Law: No School, No District"; "School Consolidation in New Jersey: Why Not Do This? Better Schools, Lower Taxes: What This Could Mean to You."

The fiscal accountability, efficiency and budgeting procedures recently signed into law by Gov. Jon S. Corzine promise a new executive county superintendent with expanded powers to promote school consolidation. The Uniform Shared Services and Consolidation Act Chapter 63, P.L. 2007, was passed to encourage "the financial accountability of local units of government through empowering citizens, reducing waste and duplicative services, clearing legal hurdles to shared services and consolidation, and supplementing, amending, and repealing sections of statutory law." The perception is that through consolidating small school districts, tax dollars will be saved by reducing administrative and instructional costs. What about academic standards? What about student performance? What about doing what is best for kids? At what point will the political consolidation and regionalization conversation acknowledge the wealth of research supporting small schools and admit that the district structure in New Jersey is meeting the needs of students in the most effective way?

New Jersey has laid out a plan of attack against small districts, ignoring overwhelming research, including that of the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NREL), which has repeatedly found small schools to be superior to large schools on most measures and equal to them on the rest. NREL researchers found that states with the largest schools and districts have the lowest school achievement, highest dropout rates, and least favorable teacher-student ratios.

New Jersey is even disregarding its own research and is ignoring the "Executive Summary of Findings" of its own Assembly Task Force on School District Regionalization (1999). This document clearly states that school regionalization does not automatically reap major savings or improve the quality of education. Furthermore, it indicates that small districts can produce excellent results and should not be regionalized simply because their enrollment falls below a certain number.

Counter to the consolidation movement in New Jersey, large metropolitan districts are actively creating small schools as a districtwide school improvement strategy. In their report *Small Schools Get Results*, they update the research with snapshots of factors including higher GPA, increased graduation rates, decreased dropout rates, improved attendance, decreased disciplinary problems, and higher levels of extracurricular participation, all reasons for sustaining small schools. When large metropolitan districts like Chicago, New York, Cincinnati, Philadelphia, Oakland, Portland and Tacoma are seeking ways to create smaller schools, why then is New Jersey ignoring the research and moving toward consolidation and regionalization? It would appear that although the preponderance of professional literature indicates that educational researchers support the concept of small school effectiveness, the determinants of school size are seldom the result of research. More often, school size is the result of other factors--political, economic, social and demographic.

Educate Your Communities

Small districts nationwide should watch the events unfolding in New Jersey. Is this a trend that could spread? What can other small districts learn from New Jersey as they watch this political process play out? Clearly, the first lesson is the need to educate your community about the value of small school educational programs. Residents need to know that research supports small schools as effective and efficient for delivering quality education. Use the media to spread the word that bigger is not always better. Second, don't be afraid to brag a little. Let your community know the good things that are happening in small schools. When communities see that their tax dollars are supporting a high quality product, they will be less likely to relinquish control of that program in the false pursuit of cost efficiency.

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RESOURCES

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