

CONCERNED CITIZENS DID YOU KNOW THAT?

- In formal regionalization studies that were conducted by the boards of education of two or more school districts considering consolidation, data revealed that there would be little if any financial savings for the districts. The districts all opted to maintain their home school rather than risk negatively impacting student academic achievement.
- 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.
- 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. Since they are attempting to take more control of the schools and circumvent autonomy, one must ask the question, when has any state-run entity been more efficient and better operating than local entities? Isn't it New Jersey's handling of tax payers' money that has put us to where we are financially today?
- One would assume from the headlines on superintendent retirement packages and contracts that New Jersey spends proportionally much more than other states on administrative costs. We do not. We are ranked 38th out of the 50 states and the District of Columbia. That means that 37 of 51 states (and D.C.) spend more on administrative costs. While it seems politically expedient to say that districts should make cuts that don't affect the kids, it may also be a bit disingenuous to suggest that reining in these administrator contracts will lead to massive tax savings.
- While some believe that bigger is better in education, that's not always true. However, right now the real question is whether bigger is cheaper. While proponents of regionalization push the 'economies of scale' argument, they conveniently forget the other issues that negate the economies of scale, such as merging teacher and administrator contracts, building debt and transportation costs. These are just a few of the roadblocks to regionalization plans.

- Whenever proponents of consolidation and regionalization complain about the number of school districts and municipalities, they say the main stumbling block is New Jersey's infatuation with local control. Changing a government's infrastructure, which is what we are attempting, has a cost. Many school districts have studied regionalization and consolidation over the years, but precious few have made the move-pretty much for the same reason. It was not financially feasible for all parties involved. What our lawmakers and others do not realize is that the major stumbling block is not political but financial! So the regulations deal with false obstacles like Boards of Education, which are not really the obstacles to regionalization, while ignoring the other impediments.

- One of the provisions in the law is that any final plan proposed by the ECS (Executive County Superintendent) will have to be voted on by the affected school districts. Alas, this is where most lawmakers feel that the regionalization proposals will die. It is not, however, because the residents are infatuated with local control. It is more likely that, as we discussed above, the proposals do not benefit their communities. Why should a voter support a proposal that gives him the same teachers and the same buildings but doesn't save him any tax dollars? In fact, in most regionalization proposals, at least one community will see its taxes rise. This is on top of the fact that educationally there is no solid evidence that regionalization will improve academic achievement. For these measures to pass there has to be significant tax savings and proven educational benefits. Otherwise, why do it? Remember many times, the people who live in these school districts moved there for the very reason the state wants to get rid of them: they are small communities.

- The Executive County Superintendents number one purpose and the reason they have been hired is to push and implement this Consolidation agenda. Gone are the days of them being support for educational leadership. The Commissioner of Education and County Superintendents have been given more power that circumvents Boards of Education and even the State Board of Education. The Department of Education has a never ending stream of new commissioners and employees that are growing by the day. Furthermore, the conglomerate school districts they are attempting to create invite cronyism and less oversight. All you have to do is look at the state run school districts like Asbury Park.

- This entire discussion of consolidation is not driven by what is best for the students. The regulations themselves were not derived from any educational plan. They came from the C.O.R.E Bill A-4, which was a property tax relief effort. The gas that fuels this engine is money. But the law most definitely is not about the kids. There are references to education, but they are inserted in almost as an afterthought. If the law is not about education but is about saving money, and it does not actually save money, its reason for existence is open to question.

Questions for the Panel

1. What will be the exact savings if schools consolidate?
2. Will this result in a significant savings to the taxpayer?
3. If a larger district and a smaller district combine, what are the tax implications? Is it financially beneficial to all?
4. Which schools perform higher in the county - small schools or larger schools?
5. Where is the state getting 4 million dollars to pay for feasibility studies?
6. Why are the feasibility studies being limited to universities?
7. Will community members have input into the feasibility studies?
8. How will teaching salaries be affected? Which district's salary guide will be used?
9. If a teacher gets a raise because of the combining of districts - how is that a money savings?
10. Does consolidation result in real savings?
11. Proportionately, isn't it true that NJ is ranked 38th out of 50 states and the District of Columbia on administrative spending? Is it really genuine to suggest that administrative costs are going to lead to massive tax savings? Isn't the administrative savings miniscule?
12. Is bigger cheaper? The economies of scale argument are often touted by proponents of regionalization. But why is it that the big costs of merging teacher contracts, building debt, and transportation costs are not mentioned?
13. Why has New Jersey not considered the NRFL (National Regional Educational Laboratory) Task Force Findings and 40 years of small school research demonstrating the effectiveness of our current structure? Doesn't the research show that larger school districts have the lowest achievement and highest dropout rates?
14. What decision making power would the smaller districts have once merged?
15. Why has the state ignored the findings of New Jersey's Executive Summary of Findings of its own Task Force on School Regionalization when this document clearly states that "school regionalization does not automatically reap major savings or improve the quality of education and that small schools produce excellent results and should not be regionalized simply due to enrollment."