



National School Boards Association

LEADERSHIP Insider

October 2005
www.nsba.org

PRACTICAL PERSPECTIVES ON SCHOOL LAW & POLICY

A Membership Benefit of NSBA National Affiliates

The Crux of Local Control

Questions about consolidation go to the very heart of grassroots democracy

This issue of *Leadership Insider* is about change and local democracy. In a sense, that is the theme of every issue of *Insider*. For that matter, it's arguably the crux of every discussion about the role and future of school boards in America.

Few proposed changes are as painful and challenging for school boards as decisions about school or district consolidations and the possible alternatives. But in few decisions are local school board authority and leadership more crucial to realizing positive outcomes for children.

As instigators of change, school boards can lead communities and districts, rather than adopting a posture of reaction and deference. Handled right, this is neither self-aggrandizement nor micromanagement.

School Boards and Change

In setting forth a framework for considering smaller schools, for example, guest author and former school board member Nancy Lundsgaard of the Small Schools Project points to two key challenges boards must confront: community and employee expectations for "school as we knew it," and the district's reluctance to focus public

scrutiny on its weak spots. Today's boards are tasked with achieving excellent outcomes for all students in a changing democracy, in a postindustrial economy, and at a time when America's gap between haves and have-nots yawns wider.

respectful and meaningful community engagement shows locally accountable school boards at their best.

As shapers of change, school boards are well placed to recognize and reflect local conditions and to identify local impediments. Formulaic approaches to change are likely to hurt more than help, especially when imposed from on high. Marty Strange and Greg Malhoit of the Rural School and Community Trust make the case against state attempts to close small schools serving rural communities, and

“
As shapers of change, school boards are well placed to recognize and reflect local conditions and to identify local impediments.
”

As agents of change, school boards represent the fulcrum of community involvement in school district decisions. Three members of the Cleveland school board who helped lead their community through its recent round of school closings, Margaret Hopkins, Rashidah Abdulhaqq, and Willetta Milam, share their strategies and experience. Even where leadership requires disappointing some advocates,

they condemn the condescension that frequently underlies such efforts.

At the same time, Lundsgaard acknowledges that small is not inherently better. Indeed, consultant and former NSBA Senior Staff Attorney Edwin C. Darden, in exploring interdistrict collaboration as a cost-saving alternative to consolidation,

See *Local Control* on page 8

IN THIS ISSUE

2 Why bigger isn't necessarily better

4 Consider collaboration, not consolidation

6 How you can support small schools

LEADERSHIP Insider

PRACTICAL PERSPECTIVES ON SCHOOL LAW & POLICY

Leadership Insider, is published six times annually by NSBA's National Education Policy Network and its Council of School Attorneys in cooperation with the National Affiliate Program.

Opinions expressed in and by *Insider* do not necessarily reflect positions of the National School Boards Association.

Copyright 2005,
National School Boards Association.

President **Joan E. Schmidt**

Executive Director **Anne L. Bryant**

Co-Editors

Staff Attorney
Thomas Hutton

Manager, Federal and Policy Guidance
Karla Schultz

Director of Publications
Sally Banks Zakariya

Production Manager
Michele Sabatier

Director, National Affiliate Programs
Gene Broderson

About NSBA

The National School Boards Association is the nationwide advocacy organization for public school governance. NSBA's mission is to foster excellence and equity in public elementary and secondary education in the United States through local school board leadership. Founded in 1940, NSBA is a not-for-profit federation of state associations of school boards and the school boards of the District of Columbia, Hawai'i, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

About the National Affiliate Program

The National Affiliate Program extends NSBA's services directly to local school districts. School districts are eligible to join provided they are members in good standing of their state school boards association.

About the National Education Policy Network

The National Education Policy Network (NEPN) helps foster better communication, understanding and management of local school districts through better policy-making. It offers access to a sample policy clearinghouse and current policy-related resources, as well as publications and tools to help districts keep their policy manuals well-organized and up-to-date.

About the Council of School Attorneys

The Council of School Attorneys provides information and practical assistance to attorneys who represent public school districts. It offers legal education, specialized publications, and a forum for exchange of information, and it supports the legal advocacy efforts of the National School Boards Association.

Bigger Isn't Always Better

Why we should preserve small rural schools

By Marty Strange and Greg Malhoit

Many rural schools are small in comparison to urban or suburban schools. Their smallness is sometimes a matter of practical necessity caused by population decline or sparseness, or it is due to community preference, or both. The communities these schools serve vary enormously in their fiscal resources and the amount of state aid they receive. Some can "afford" their smallness, but many struggle financially.

For most of the last century, the consistent public policy toward small rural schools and districts has been to get rid of them through closure, merger, or consolidation. The success of these efforts has been impressive.

In 1938, the United States had 119,000 school districts. Over the next 36 years, the number fell at an annual rate of about 13 percent, down to just over 16,000 by 1975. Over roughly the same period, average district enrollment multiplied tenfold, and average school enrollment quintupled. Since then, the rate of consolidation and enrollment concentration has been slower but continuous.

Consolidation, it should be noted, was not reserved for rural schools alone. It has been the practice, if not always the policy, in urban communities as well. But consolidation has been primarily a rural issue. Indeed, efforts to close rural schools have sparked acrimonious debate and resistance, and many rural education associations were launched on the strength of that resistance.

There is no area of civic life where rural communities have been more routinely ridiculed for their stubborn resistance to what others assume to be progress. Their spirited opposition to consolidation has often been summarily dismissed as based on petty jealousy, competition with rival communities, or support for local sports teams. Rural people have routinely been labeled as "ignorant" or "backward."

Some rural schools have closed for good reasons, as part of systematic efforts to dismantle segregation or to counter nepotism or other forms of corruption that plague those rural communities with weak democratic traditions.

In recent years, however, most school consolidations have occurred because

state policies either force or encourage merger. Policies in some states force consolidation by denying or reducing state financial aid for schools whose enrollment falls below a state-prescribed minimum. Some state policies offer financial incentives for schools to merge, while others economically starve small rural schools to the point that they have no other option. This is especially true in state school finance systems that require local communities to fund a major share of the cost of education, including school facilities.

Forces Driving Consolidation

Critics of small rural schools rest most of their case for consolidation on assumptions about economies of scale. They believe the fixed per-pupil costs to provide students with administrators, essential teachers, and decent facilities are unjustifiably high in small schools.

Consolidation proponents have also relied on the movement for higher standards and accountability, suggesting that students will not perform well on tests or be prepared to attend college unless they are educated in larger schools that offer more courses or an enriched curriculum. In their view, bigger is better and smaller is too expensive.

In some instances, smaller rural schools and districts may be marginally more expensive to operate. Per-pupil annual costs in smaller schools are, on average, between 10 and 20 percent higher than equivalent costs in larger schools.

Supporters of consolidation tend to ignore offsetting costs, however, including student transportation. Consolidating small rural schools has been shown to result in more and longer bus routes that significantly increase transportation costs, offsetting other supposed savings.

A massive transportation system has emerged in American education, most of it rural. Every school day, this nation hauls 24 million students to and from school over about 22 million miles on 450,000 buses. According to the School Bus Information Council, buses make 8.8 billion trips back and forth to school in one year.

The cost (in constant dollars) of transporting public school students has increased every year since 1929, reaching

more than \$16 billion in 2002-03, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. Rural districts spend more than twice as much per pupil on transportation as urban districts and nearly 50 percent more than suburban districts. In some rural areas, transportation costs approach 10 percent of the amount spent on instruction.

But these costs are also realized in human terms. Rural students must travel long distances, frequently over unimproved roads, from home to school. Studies by the Rural School and Community Trust reveal that 85 percent of rural elementary schools bus children more than 30 minutes each way, and that one in four buses children twice that long. In most rural districts, a large percentage of the student population is bused, and in many, a bus ride of an hour or more each way, often with a mid-trip transfer, is common. These long bus rides impose a unique educational disadvantage on rural children, robbing them of time to rest, study, and play.

Research on Student Performance

Consolidation arguments based on simplistic notions of economies of scale also ignore a far more important aspect of education—school performance. Do small schools cost more to deliver the same service, or do they deliver a different, perhaps better, service? Policymakers and school officials must answer this question before pursuing school enlargement.

In fact, a thunderous body of research affirms the superior value and efficacy of small schools, most of which are in rural places. Consider the following benefits found by education researchers:

- Students learn more and better.
- Students drop out less frequently and graduate at higher rates.
- Parents are more involved.
- Students are more satisfied and behave better, resulting in fewer infractions, both minor and serious.

All of these results are particularly true for poor and disadvantaged students. Researchers have consistently found that smaller schools mitigate the adverse effects of poverty on student achievement and school performance and narrow the achievement gap between children from more and less affluent communities.

The Cost of Consolidation

Beyond their value to students, rural schools are also essential to their local communities in economic development terms. Researchers have concluded that

when a community loses its school, the local economy suffers from a significant reduction in employment, retail sales, tax collections, and property values. If states want to promote rural economic development, supporting and preserving rural schools may be one of the best investments they can make.

Consolidation advocates sell their proposals by consistently promising both savings and improvements in educational opportunities. But these promises seldom materialize.

West Virginia provides an excellent example. Political leaders in the state assured rural schools that they would see cost savings and greater curriculum offerings by closing and merging into larger schools. But a thorough investigation of West Virginia's massive consolidation program found exactly the opposite. In the aftermath of consolidation, more administrators had been hired, few cost savings were realized, and advanced courses were either never offered or were eliminated from the curriculum. But students were forced to endure long bus rides.

Even when faced with all of this evidence, policymakers continue to propose consolidation. Such evidence has always existed, but now current research has prompted many urban districts to break up

large secondary and middle schools into much smaller units. It is ironic that as states are breaking up their large urban schools, they are simultaneously promoting larger schools in rural places.

While leaders in some states are advocating forced consolidation, there are important exceptions. A study by the Louisiana Department of Education, for example, underscores the importance of maintaining small schools in rural communities. Political leaders in West Virginia have advocated limiting the time students ride school buses and expanding distance education as an alternative to school consolidation.

In Arkansas, where small school and rural advocates have been working to improve and protect small school districts for more than two years, a legislative proposal that would merge all local school districts into county-wide districts was recently defeated. And, in the Kansas school-funding ruling, the court upheld as constitutional the state's system of providing smaller districts with additional funds to reflect their higher costs of operation.

The Partnership Alternative

If small rural schools have genuine educational value, are there cost-effective strategies to keep rural schools in place

LESSONS FOR LEADERS

Decades of experience in responding to consolidation challenges have resulted in a number of valuable lessons that can aid today's rural education leaders and supporters of small schools. Here are seven to consider:

1. Always remain vigilant—rural small schools will inevitably be vulnerable to consolidation threats.
2. Develop and maintain a strong network of community supporters to defend the right of rural small schools to exist.
3. Take proactive steps to keep small schools strong and to educate policymakers and the wider public about the educational advantages of small rural schools to students, their value to communities and states, their value as models of good schooling, and their worth as public investments.
4. Advocate for funding reforms that reflect the unique needs of small schools and the marginally higher costs of educating students in rural and

remote settings. Remember that consolidation efforts are often the result of inadequate and inequitable state education finance systems.

5. Insist that the debate about consolidation begin with a presumption against consolidation rather than an assumption that "bigger is better." Consolidation proponents should be forced to prove that the perceived benefits of consolidation will significantly outweigh the value of students attending smaller schools near their homes and communities.

6. Demand that any analysis of the costs and benefits of consolidation consider how it will affect graduation and dropout rates, discipline and student behavior, student learning and achievement, and parental involvement.

7. Ensure that alternative strategies are considered that may allow schools to remain in place near students' homes, including distance learning and administrative sharing arrangements.

close to student's homes? The answer to this question is a resounding yes.

Today, technology makes it possible for schools to offer students in rural and remote places the same advanced courses and enriched curriculum as provided in larger schools. Moreover, using interactive distance-learning technologies, these courses can be personalized for students and taught by high-quality teachers at a fraction of the cost of offering courses in individual schools or districts.

When appropriately planned, groups of rural schools and districts also can band together to develop interactive television networks that allow them to tap and share their best teacher talent, especially for low-demand classes, thereby addressing diverse student curriculum needs. These networks can also be used for collaborative staff development and for local community purposes.

By creating cross-district partnerships, rural schools and districts can pool

resources and design solutions to common challenges. For example, groups of districts can leverage influence with local colleges and other providers to develop preservice teacher training, certification, and ongoing support suited to the unique opportunities and challenges facing rural schools.

Likewise, rural schools are well positioned to cut costs by jointly hiring superintendents and other administrators to serve more than one district. These arrangements are in place in many states and have substantially reduced the cost of educating students in rural settings.

The smaller places in which we educate many rural children have real educational value. Yet these schools will continue to face the threat of closure and consolidation based on blind faith and false assumptions that small is bad and big is better. In the end, it is children who suffer the consequences of misguided policies that take them out of their communities and put them into larger places far from home.

Before the educational value of community, parent involvement, and smallness was well known and appreciated, states might have been forgiven for doing less to ensure that every child receives a high-quality education near home. But the public should be less forgiving today. We must preserve and properly support our small educational treasures for the sake of our children and, indeed, for the future of our entire education system.

Marty Strange (marty.strange@ruraledu.org) is the policy program director for the Rural School and Community Trust, Arlington, Va.

Greg Malhoit is the former director of the Rural Trust's Rural Education Finance Center and is currently a consultant working for the Rural Trust.

The Rural Trust has a host of helpful online articles and resources about the value of small rural schools and the pitfalls of consolidation, including a "Consolidation Fight-Back Toolkit." See www.ruraledu.org.

The Power of Sharing

School districts weigh collaboration instead of consolidation

By Edwin C. Darden

The prospect of consolidating school districts usually brings pain and drama. But some school boards have found a less-intense solution that still achieves efficiencies and saves big bucks—and spares the headaches.

Sharing resources and enacting joint purchasing agreements across regions can have the same advantages as consolidation, while allowing each school community to maintain its own identity. Examples include combining efforts on building use, transportation schedules, personnel, use of technology, and class attendance. Ideally, civic-minded board members are mindful of the need to balance the twin needs of offering an excellent public education and reducing the price tag shouldered by local taxpayers.

Efficiency experts cite economies of scale that result when the scope of an operation is expanded but overhead costs do not change, or change little. Applied to schools, that can mean supplying a service to more students without a corresponding increase in costs. It can also make new learning opportunities possible—stretch-

ing public dollars and accelerating student achievement.

Two Ways to Save

The need to collaborate or combine can arise in any type of district. In urban locations, the decision usually is triggered by plummeting enrollment numbers, struggling academic programs, and scant resources. For rural districts, the problems include sparse populations, long student commutes, and limited resources that cannot support the academic variety available in larger places.

Combining efforts has typically taken two forms: sharing resources (joining personnel, programs, or purchasing for example) and full-fledged merger (melding two or more separate school districts into one).

Sharing has the potential to multiply a district's power to deliver a sound educational program. If your district's goals are better student achievement and modest tax rates, when it comes to exploring collaboration, it might be time to think globally and act locally.

The incentives for both collaboration

and school district mergers include:

- Creating a more cost-effective and operationally efficient organization;
- Providing a wider range of educational programs (for example, offering courses that would be impractical with a smaller student population);
- Stabilizing future tax rates, constructing new buildings, or renovating current facilities with prudent use of cost savings gained by collaboration or merger incentive aid offered by some states; and
- Eliminating duplication of educational services.

Yet, for all the potential benefits, sharing services or erasing district boundary lines is highly controversial. Discussions can get mired in turf issues, local tradition, and feelings among neighbors ranging from superiority to a stubborn desire to keep good things away from others.

The stakes are not small. Public school systems are under challenge from charter schools, vouchers for private schools, and a federal No Child Left Behind law that some say will brand schools as failures in just about every school district in less than a decade.

Shared Services and Collaboration

Unlike a merger, school district collaboration allows each district to retain its strengths and identity while profiting from the resources, expertise, and strengths of a neighbor.

A shared services agreement usually takes one of the following forms:

- Establishing cooperative agreements with other districts to share equipment, facilities, and personnel;
- Reducing costs through cooperative purchasing of goods and services;
- Sharing personnel with other districts and sharing courses through distance learning; or
- Forming consortiums in transportation to improve efficiency and eliminate duplicative services.

School districts can collaborate with many different types of partners, including municipal governments, colleges and universities, and corporations. What garners the most attention, however, is inter-district collaboration.

District to District

Examples from three states suggest the range of inter-district collaboration for teaching and learning.

Nevada is home to one of the fastest-growing school districts in the nation: Clark County, which includes Las Vegas and serves 230,000 youngsters. Clark County is contending with the demand for more school buildings, additional teachers, and greater capacity. Meanwhile, small nearby school districts have diminishing populations and resources and the challenge of trying to deliver quality on shoestring budgets. The solution: collaboration between big and small.

One area of that collaboration is professional development. The Education Commission of the States highlighted Nevada's Regional Professional Development Program for joint teacher preparation, saying, "... the resulting dialogue among district leaders has proved to support the belief that staff development needs are borderless and collaboration is possible, practical and politically wise."

In California, five elementary schools from three different school districts have become partners in a literacy project. Three predominantly Caucasian schools from the Hillsborough City School District joined with two predominantly Hispanic schools from the San Bruno Park School District to share teacher training in reading. During the first year, grade K-3 teachers attended training on phonemic awareness, phonics, spelling, and comprehension. Experts also observed classroom lessons, and all five schools adopted a single new literature series.

In New York state, districts often centralize and formalize sharing via BOCES,

or boards of cooperative educational services, which act as state-sanctioned clearinghouses for multiple districts in a region to share costs of goods, services, and technology.

Just as often, however, districts make informal arrangements. For example, districts in Monroe County, N.Y., realized major savings by cooperatively bidding on legal advertising, specification preparation, and postage. And Rochester-area districts share routes for busing special education and private school students.

Collaboration vs. Merger

In her February 2005 State-of-the-State Address, Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm issued a warning to school districts about hard choices: "I will call on school districts across our state to share services to free up funds for our kids. I will ask the Legislature to give me the authority to consolidate districts that refuse to take these kinds of prudent steps to move money out of the bureaucracy and into the classroom."

When districts decline in enrollment, in academics, or in the capacity to sustain themselves financially, merger is usually among the solutions offered. The Center for Policy Research at Syracuse University notes that, between 1929 and 1989, consolidation reduced the total number of districts across the United States by 90 percent. At the same time, the number of students increased by 60 percent.

Iowa is convening an education commission to study whether there should be a minimum size requirement for school districts. The commission's report, which could recommend significantly reducing the state's 367 current districts, is due to the legislature in 2007.

Merger has its downsides, however. Not only is there natural resistance to change, but the savings can be questionable and—depending on any resulting school closures—more time and money can be required for student transportation. What's more, entire communities can lose their identities. Communities may view themselves as incompatible with their neighbors or complain that they benefit less than their neighbors from the merger.

Merger can affect school boards as well. The right to vote for the school board candidate of one's choice is diluted. When school districts merge, some say the smaller community cannot "out-vote" the larger one when selecting the board of education—an outcome that bears on gover-

nance, accountability, and democracy.

Merging individual schools also raises concerns, according to the University of Kentucky's Phillip K. Roeder. In his 2002 study "Resisting the Urge to Merge: Does School Size Matter?" Roeder suggested that the emphasis on size may obscure more important considerations: "Neither keeping smaller schools with large proportions of disadvantaged students nor creating larger schools with large proportions of disadvantaged students is likely to improve school performance. ... Disputes over school mergers or consolidations may be costly diversions from the more important issue of disadvantage and equal opportunity in education."

Research on the topic consistently concludes there is no guarantee that mergers will lead to overall cost savings. For example, to win merger approval, a school district sometimes must guarantee the community few or no layoffs. While this promise is perhaps politically necessary, it negates personnel efficiencies achieved by combining.

Looking Ahead

Shifting enrollment patterns, changing economics, advances in technology, and other factors will no doubt affect decisions about consolidation and collaboration in the future. For example, technology and distance learning will give smaller districts new tools to help them thrive. Instruction by satellite allows an instructor to teach several hundred students simultaneously. Two-way interactive television technology permits teachers and students to see, hear, and interact with each other across all sites at all times.

Charter schools and the need to compete may also bear on the willingness of districts to collaborate or merge.

This much is clear: Changing the way school districts do business is inevitable, and boundary lines are no longer immutable. With rising costs and shrinking student enrollment, more districts around the country will look to their neighbors and begin "what if" discussions.

Edwin C. Darden is a former NSBA senior staff attorney and until recently the director of the Center for Urban Schools Programs for the New York State School Boards Association. He now manages a consulting venture in Springfield, Va., that focuses on current and emerging legal issues and public policy challenges in K-12 education.

This article was adapted with permission from the NYSSBA's Forecast newsletter.

Supporting Small Schools

Your school board's role

By Nancy Lundsgaard

While many districts face declining enrollments and the possibility of consolidation or school closures, others confront overcrowded schools, often too large to effectively provide an education to students. In this situation, it might be useful for board members to consider small schools.

Research has clearly shown the benefits of small schools for student achievement and parent, student, and teacher satisfaction. Your district may be planning to use those research findings to provide (or protect) personalization for your students in a number of ways. But whatever your situation, you will discover—or may have already encountered—a myriad of challenges.

In Washington state, the Small Schools Project has been working for five years with small, medium, and large districts that are implementing small schools. We've learned a lot from school boards and from educators at every level about what supports—and what strangles—this work. So we've developed a short list of suggestions for boards to consider:

1. Focus first on your expectations around student learning and equity.

Small schools may be all the buzz now, but plenty of small schools are mediocre (or worse). These schools have not yet taken advantage of their smaller size to build strong relationships with students and provide rigorous, personalized instruction for them, to build a cohesive team of teachers, or to develop strong partnerships with parents.

So don't start with a "small equals good" equation. Instead, begin with board discussions about values. Ask yourselves, "What do we mean by equity? What are our expectations for every student? For every teacher? Do we truly believe we *can* provide the kind of education that prepares every student for further education, work, and citizenship? Do we believe we *should*?"

Then ask your administrators, "What do our students need to meet those expectations? What do our teachers need? What type of structure, what kind of teacher practices, will get us where we want to go?"

Once you've asked these questions, you might end up close to where you started—with plans to implement small schools—but you will be crystal clear about why you are doing so. And that will be critical when times get tough.

2. Educate your community.

Times likely *will* get tough, as the schools we've worked with know well. You will face strong adult allegiances to "school as we knew it." The pull of tradition, the power of privileged parents, the preferences of teachers, the valuing of choice over personalization—these and other adult issues can easily sidetrack school redesign.

That's why you must be committed to the "why" before tackling the "how." And you will need to involve everyone—students, families, teachers, and community members—in honest discussions early and often. A Washington state school board member whose district has converted its large high school into seven smaller ones says, "When you think you've done enough community engagement, do more!"

You will need to articulate to your community why your schools have to be different to be substantially better, and that can be tricky. After all, as board members, one of your responsibilities is PR—letting people know what's good about your schools.

But helping people recognize how the world has changed—and how the rules have changed—will be more productive. Today we are expected to educate every child. This will mean getting clear about who loses in your schools now. One large high school in our state put together a PowerPoint presentation that showed student achievement disaggregated by ethnicity, gender, income, and grade levels. Numerous community groups saw this presentation—with its disturbing and inescapable implications. Make sure your administration provides you with this kind of data, and discuss it openly at board meetings and with your community.

3. Review your policies and make changes to allow for more flexibility.

If schools are going to look different, districts will have to look different in some

substantial ways as well. Across the country, new small schools and small learning communities are struggling to fit into policies and guidelines that were developed for very different kinds of institutions. In fact, many small school educators find district-level policies and procedures to be their most significant obstacles.

Here are some steps your board can take to support small schools development and sustainability:

- Challenge the assumption that every school has to look the same to be "equal." Look at your funding formulas, and work with your union on teacher placement issues.

- With every policy or procedure, ask administrators and teachers, "How does this support—or inhibit—our small schools? What do your schools need? What obstacles are they running into?"

- Be explicit about expecting the central office to see its mission as being a support system with the goal of removing roadblocks. Question responses like, "We've never done it that way," or "We can't do it that way." Often it is doable—just not under rules or practices that were designed for a very different structure.

- In larger districts, consider hiring a central office person as an ombudsman for your small schools and learning communities. These new entities need someone at the highest level to speak for them.

4. Support continuing, on-site, teacher-driven professional development.

While the ultimate goal is improved student learning, this often depends on adult learning. Here are some things boards can do to support that learning:

- Make it possible for your administrators and teachers to visit good small schools, and send a board member along, too. We're so used to what we know that it's hard to visualize how things could look dramatically different.

- Give teachers on-site collaboration time and set expectations for that time. This means expecting the central office to minimize district-level professional development requirements.

- Help your community understand that teachers need collaboration time, not only when they are designing small schools but on an ongoing basis to integrate curriculum and talk in an organized, deep way about their students' needs.

- Expect your central office to provide teachers with data at the small school or small learning community level. Teachers

must have this information to know if what they are doing is working for “their” kids and if not, where and how they need to change their practice.

5. Know your dollars and cents.

Understand and be able to describe the “dis-economies of scale” and expect your administrators to be able to do so as well. Two publications available from www.dollarsandsense.org can help: *Dollars & Sense: The Cost Effectiveness of Small Schools*; and *Dollars and Sense II: Lessons from Good, Cost-Effective Small Schools*.

The latter includes excellent examples of resource sharing and funding avenues.

Through your state school boards association, work to influence your state legislature on issues that affect small schools—from broadening waiver requirements to repealing school construction regulations that reward districts for building big.

6. Give change time.

Whether your district is opening new small urban schools, fighting consolidation in rural districts, or “converting” giant schools into smaller learning communities,

be sure to give the process time. As one board member in a Washington district with a large “conversion” high school says, “We’ve been trying some things that haven’t worked for 100 years. Surely we can give this some time.”

Nancy Lundsgaard serves as school board liaison and writer/editor for the Small Schools Project in Seattle and is a former school board member from Federal Way, Wash.

Funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Small Schools Project is part of the Coalition of Essential Schools Northwest.

Closing Schools

A school board’s toughest decision

By Margaret Hopkins, Rashidah Abdulhaqq, and Willetta Milam

A growing number of school boards have had to face the difficult decision of closing a school. Whether the reason is declining enrollment, financial constraints, or simply that the time has come to replace an obsolete building, the decision will have a dramatic impact on students, teachers, parents, and neighbors.

In Cleveland, our school board faced this challenge last spring. As the board has done when facing other decisions that would have an impact on children and their families, we decided early on that soliciting public input would be an invaluable part of our decision-making process.

A Financial Necessity

In 2004, our board was forced to meet a projected budget deficit by cutting nearly \$100 million from the school district’s budget. This fiscal situation was caused by a combination of factors, including reductions in state education funding, decreased revenue from local property tax collections, and rising employee health care costs. We made substantial cuts to administrative positions, employee overtime, student transportation, textbook purchases, extracurricular activities, and teaching positions.

Despite our reduced spending, however, continued cuts in state funding—caused in part by the state’s increased financial support of charter schools and vouchers—had us looking at a projected budget deficit of \$36 million for the next fiscal

year.

Even after making additional cuts in administrative and teaching positions, we had to face the fact that the need to balance our budget, combined with declining enrollment, made closing a number of our 121 school buildings a realistic and responsible, albeit painful, option.

Determining Criteria

This past March, the board began discussing the possibility of school closings, based on facts and data gathered by district administrators. At a public meeting, the board reviewed the reasons behind our projected budget deficit and explained why it was necessary to consider school closings.

At that meeting, the board also discussed criteria to consider in deciding whether a school should close. We determined that our decisions would be guided by the following eight criteria:

1. Neighborhood student enrollment;
2. Current school building capacity;
3. Nearby schools and special academic programs;
4. Student impact;
5. The board’s Facilities Master Plan for rebuilding, repairing, and renovating school buildings, which the board had adopted and the state approved following voter approval of a facilities bond issue in 2001;
6. Cost savings;
7. Academic performance; and
8. Legal obligations, including those set

forth in the No Child Left Behind Act, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, and state law.

We also decided that nonacademic factors, such as the marketable value of a school property, would not enter into our decision-making process.

At that same meeting, we asked Barbara Byrd-Bennett, the district’s chief executive officer, to propose a list of schools for the board to consider for possible closing. That list was presented to us at our April meeting. It included 13 schools to be considered for possible permanent closing; nine schools to be considered for possible temporary closing during renovation or addition under our school construction program; and eight schools to be considered for possible use as swing sites to house students during construction.

Involving the Public

Before making any final decisions, the board wanted to hear from the school communities affected by these decisions. Toward that end, with the assistance of the district administration, we established a number of ways for people to communicate with the board.

We held a separate public forum for each of the schools on the list. At these meetings, board members and district administrators explained the reasons that each school was under consideration for temporary or permanent closing or for use as a swing site. To ensure that all concerned citizens had an opportunity to be heard, we broke large crowds into smaller discussion groups. We used neutral facilitators, who were not school district employees, to lead these small group discussions, where participants were encouraged to make specific suggestions as to

how we might avoid closing their school.

We also set up a school closing hotline and an e-mail address to provide ways for people to express their views. In addition, comment cards were available at each public forum. A special link on the home page of the board's website allowed people to check the latest information.

Community input was shared with all board members and proved to be of great use to us as we considered the disposition of each school building in question. We were encouraged that so many people took time to share their ideas and concerns with us. Their passionate participation only served to underscore our belief that our schools are the cornerstone of our community.

We heard a number of common themes from the public:

- People love their schools and do not want to see them closed;
- If a school must be closed, school communities wish to stay together at their newly assigned school;
- People were concerned about neighborhood safety in walking longer distances to and from a new school;
- People wanted assurance that unique programs and grants would follow the students to their new school;
- Neighbors were concerned about the impact of a school closing on their neighborhood;
- Students, parents, and teachers wanted an appropriate orientation and orderly transition into their new school; and
- People expressed concern that class sizes could grow as a result of consolidations.

Making the Decision

At the end of this process of public engagement, and following a period of public deliberation at additional board meetings, our board voted in May to close 11 schools permanently. We also voted to close another 11 schools temporarily due to construction. We designated eight schools as temporary swing sites for the temporarily closed schools and three schools as the permanent homes of some worthy academic programs, such as Montessori programs and year-round programs that had been based at schools that were to be closed. We determined that our current enrollment would not require us to close any high schools.

While we were deliberating on this difficult issue, we were also considering how we could most effectively implement a

decision to close 22 schools in a matter of months. We felt it was important to send timely and thorough communication to parents, informing them of the closing of their child's school and the options available to their child for next school year.

Throughout this past summer, following our board's decision, we proceeded to move needed furniture and equipment from schools that were closing to other schools and then secured and closed the empty buildings.

For the past five years, Cleveland had been in the process of converting K-5 elementary schools and 6-8 middle schools into K-8 schools. With the school closings at the beginning of this school year, this conversion process was complete.

As a result of this focus on the necessary transition steps involved in the closing of school buildings, we had a successful opening of the new school year in August. The headline in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* the morning after the first day of school said it all: "Return to school goes smoothly in Cleveland."

Next Steps and Lessons Learned

The board is now moving forward with the district's school construction plan and will be demolishing a number of these schools and building new schools on those sites over the next few years.

We are also engaged in the process of determining what to do with the school facilities that we have permanently closed. That process, which will continue over many months, includes determining if the district has any future need for the buildings—perhaps as swing space for students during subsequent phases of our construction program or as district administrative space. If we determine that a particular building can be of no future use to the district, we may then consider a variety of options that Ohio law provides for the disposition of school property, such as selling, leasing, or exchanging.

Our board learned an important lesson

LEARN MORE ONLINE

Once again with this issue, in the interest of space, we have posted the helpful references provided by our guest contributors and additional resources from NSBA online at the *Leadership Insider* section of your National Affiliate website, www.nsba.org/na.

from this difficult experience: Most students, parents, and teachers love their schools so much that, without a very compelling case to close their school, they will fight hard to keep it open. A public process that fully explains the necessity for school closings—and that makes stakeholders meaningful partners in the process—will go a long way toward making such a difficult decision more acceptable to the community.

Margaret Hopkins is the immediate past chair of the Board of Education of the Cleveland Municipal School District.

Rashidah Abdulhaqq serves on that board and on the Steering Committee of NSBA's Council of Urban Boards of Education.

Fellow board member Willetta Milam is a member of the CUBE Communications Task Force's Executive Group.

The Facilities Plan section of the district's website is available at <http://web04.cmsdnet.net/facilities>.

LOCAL CONTROL

Continued from page 1

notes that school size, like so many educational variables, may be less significant to outcomes than more fundamental factors such as student disadvantage.

Encroaching on Local Control

Whether the issue is closing schools, opening charter schools, dictating how funds are spent, setting school calendars, or making curricular calls, distant politicians and other officials evince a growing inclination to try their hand at what used to be local community decisions.

In part this reflects lack of confidence in school boards. Of course, there's no guarantee that state or federal officials, or the advocacy groups urging them on, will make matters any better for children. Many observers would say there's abundant evidence to the contrary.

At some level, communities and their school boards concerned about loss of local autonomy need to be more assertive and strategic about exercising their latent political muscle. But even more effective will be demonstrating credible and proactive school board leadership in seeking and finding new answers to vexing problems—and pointing out that this is not the same thing as agreeing with particular federal and state proposals.—*Thomas Hutton, NSBA Staff Attorney*