
School District Reorganization in Illinois: Improving Educational Opportunities for Students



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Robert F. Hall, PhD
Donna S. McCaw, EdD
Susan Philhower, PhD
and
Max E. Pierson, EdD
Western Illinois University



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Stipes Hall 518
Western Illinois University
1 University Circle
Macomb, IL 61455-1390
iira@wiu.edu
www.IIRA.org

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Executive Summary

School district consolidation and reorganization has been around since 1899, with the first consolidation petition in 1903. Although different needs have driven reorganization in the past, the critical areas of concern today are the educational opportunities reorganization provides students and the fiscal viability of school districts to provide the highest quality educational opportunities. In addition to the basic financial motivations for reorganization, research demonstrates that for high school students, school size can make a difference in both achievement and in the number of course offerings available to students. (Illinois State Board of Education 1993)

This study examines four case studies of proposed school consolidations. None of the four proposed consolidations were voted by their constituents into reality. This was not surprising as it reinforced an assumption that school consolidation is more of a process than a product. Few, if any, topics are as divisive to rural America as the loss of its neighborhood schools. Although underfunded financially, few are undersupported emotionally. Strong emotional ties bind these small communities to a way of living and thinking that has worked well for most of them. Funding, teacher shortages in crucial academic areas, state and federal legislation, higher academic standards for university enrollments, decreasing rural populations, and increasing costs are, in some cases, forcing long-standing athletic rivals to discuss mergers.

This report also examines the curricular impact that these variables have upon the secondary course offerings available as well as the lessons learned from 11 Committee of Ten members. These interviews represent three different consolidations and inform the reader about the emotional and financial impact that serving in this capacity can have. The study also shares needed insight into what future Committee of Ten members need to do and how they should do it.

This is a very difficult time for rural America. Most of those not living within these small communities can see the benefits to all effected students when such consolidations do happen. Yet, at the current time, there are no incentives for small unit and dual districts to combine their resources and develop a regional high school that will better meet the needs of their students. Providing incentives and assistance in building/remodeling facilities to house the high school students would encourage collaboration and cooperation between districts.

While Illinois simply can no longer afford the luxury of over 892 separate independent school districts, reorganization by itself, even with financial incentives, is not the solution to the current school finance problems. After the incentive money is spent, reorganized districts can find themselves in financial difficulties like all other districts in Illinois because of the lack of adequate financial support. The state must decide what educational opportunities must be afforded each child in Illinois and then ensure that the organization and fiscal capacity is there to support it. A child's education must not continue to be a function of where they live.



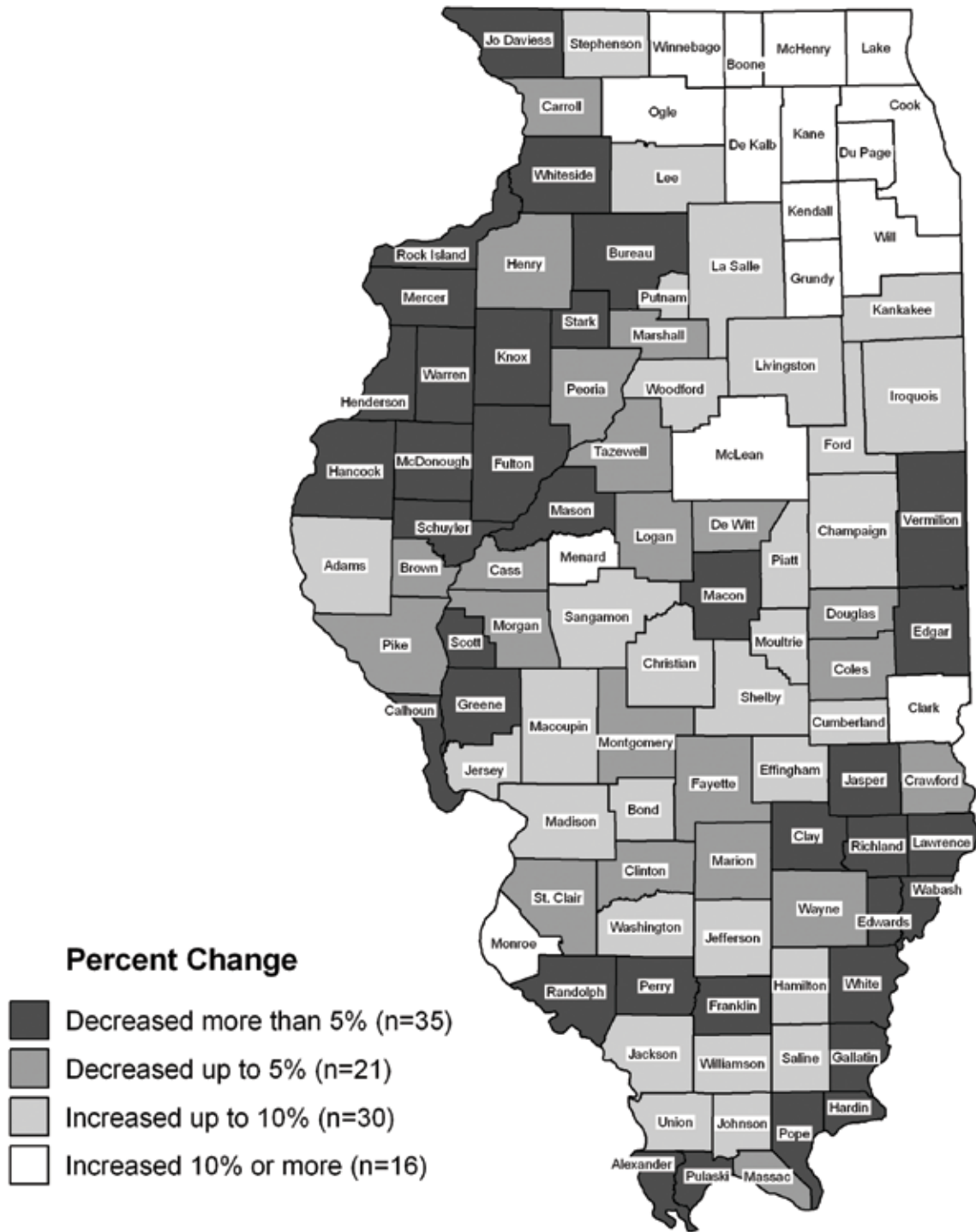
Introduction

School district consolidation and reorganization has been around since 1899, with the first consolidation petition in 1903. Although different needs have driven reorganization in the past, the critical areas of concern today are the educational opportunities reorganization provides students and the fiscal viability of school districts to provide the highest quality educational opportunities. In addition to the basic financial motivations for reorganization, research demonstrates that for high school students, school size can make a difference in both achievement and in the number of course offerings available to students. (Illinois State Board of Education, 1993)

Change may be difficult, painful, and slow. What is difficult about school consolidation or annexation is the change process necessitated at every level—personal, organizational, and societal. What is painful is letting go—in effect, grieving the loss of school mascots, buildings, and other memories. The process is slow as is evidenced by the time that elapses as many districts and communities ignore the evidence and continue to struggle to maintain the status quo. One such example can be found in the *Final Report of the McDonough County School Survey Committee*, dated December 29, 1947. The nine member committee, representing both rural areas and the city, recommended “That all public elementary and public high schools of McDonough County be reorganized into a County Community Unit District” (p. 15).

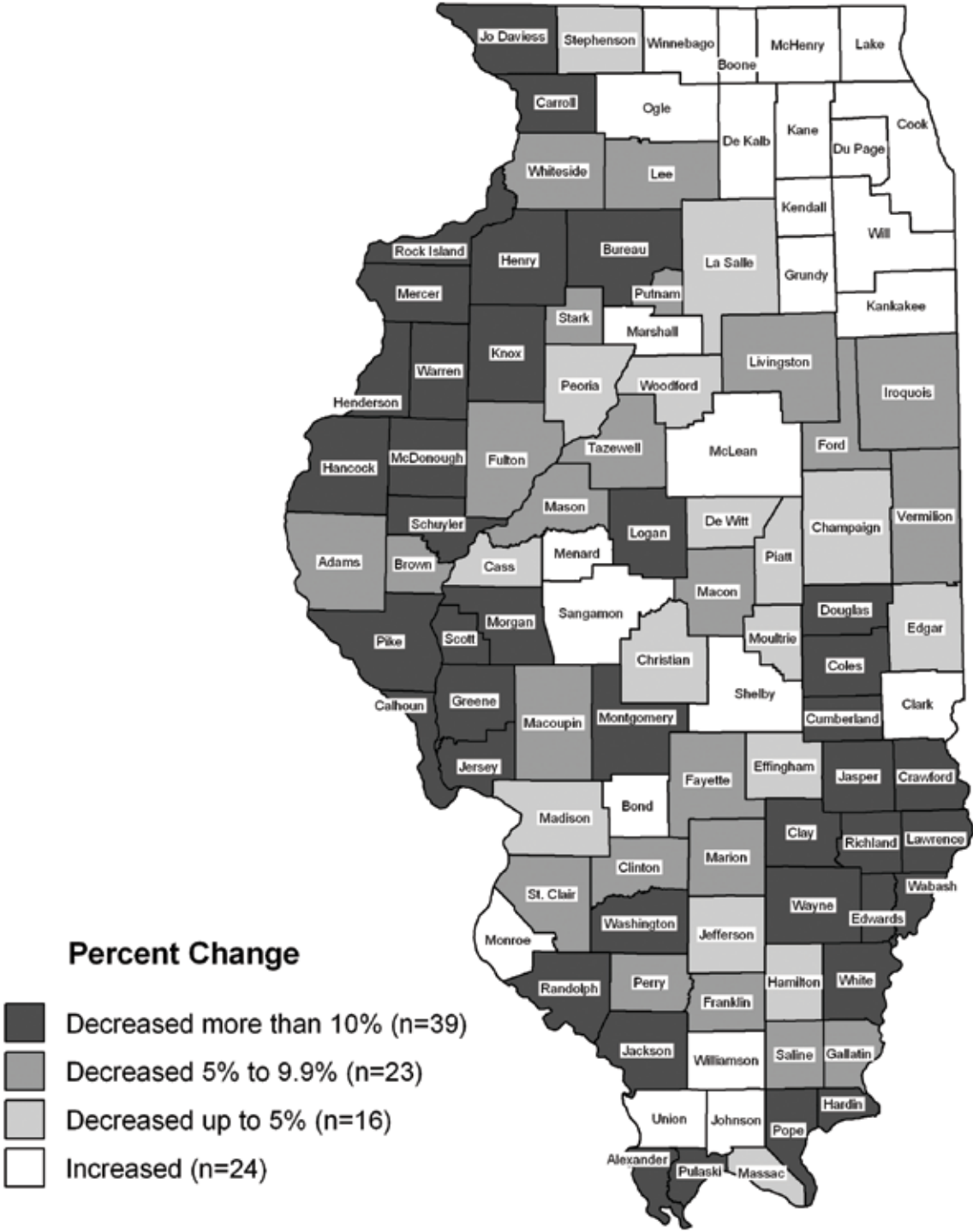
Currently, there are four main reasons why rural school districts in Illinois are under pressure to consolidate or reorganize. The first is declining student enrollment. As is illustrated in Figures 1 and 2, 35 counties in rural Illinois have experienced a drop of more than 5 percent in the number of enrolled 5- to 17-year-olds between 1990 and 2000. Twenty-one counties have experienced drops of student populations of less than 5 percent. Of even greater significance for the longer term, 39 rural counties experienced a decrease of more than 10 percent of persons 5 to 9 years of age, and 23 additional rural counties saw the 5- to 9-year-old population drop between 5 and 9.9 percent. In contrast, 30 counties with relatively large urban centers have seen their student enrollments increase by 10 percent, and 16 counties have seen their enrollments increase by more than 10 percent. Thus, enrollment declines appear to be most symptomatic in rural Illinois counties.

Figure 1. Percent Change in Enrolled 5- to 17-Year-Olds Between 1990 and 2000



Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census. 2001. Available online: <[www2.census.gov/census_2000/datasets/redistricting_file--pl_94-171/Illinois/file names: il00001.upl.zip, il00002.upl.zip and ilgeo.upl.zip](http://www2.census.gov/census_2000/datasets/redistricting_file--pl_94-171/Illinois/file_names:il00001.upl.zip,il00002.upl.zipandilgeo.upl.zip)>. Downloaded: March 15, 2001.

Figure 2. Percent Change in Enrolled 5- to 9-Year-Olds Between 1990 and 2000



Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census. 2001. Available online: <www2.census.gov/census_2000/datasets/redistricting_file--pl_94-171/Illinois/file names: il00001.upl.zip, il00002.upl.zip and ilgeo.upl.zip>. Downloaded: March 15, 2001.

The second source of pressure on rural school districts is declining Equalized Assessed Valuation (EAV). For the past two years, farmland has decreased in value by 10 percent per year. For districts with a relatively large percentage of the total EAV, this loss of farmland value translates into an overall decrease in EAV directly affecting property tax receipts. As an example, two rural districts in western Illinois have approximately 60 percent of their total EAV in farmland. This change has translated into an overall decrease of 4 percent in local property tax revenue.

A third source of pressure on school districts is the impact of the current state school funding. For the past two years, the general state aid support level has remained constant at \$4,560 per student. As a result of not increasing the foundation level, state financial level of support for the past two years, coupled with a declining EAV, has caused overall revenues to school districts to be relatively flat while expenditures continued to increase. Interestingly, in the current year, the foundation level has been raised by \$250 to \$4,810, providing rural school districts with some additional funds.

A fourth pressure on rural schools is a short supply of teachers for secondary level disciplines such as mathematics, science, English, and special education. Recruitment of new teachers is made even more difficult because rural school districts lack the funds to compete with urban school districts capable of offering higher wages and bonuses. Despite this inability to attract teachers, rural schools are forced to compete for “highly qualified teachers” as is required under the *No Child Left Behind* (2002) legislation.

Current Legislative Movement

In October of 2002, the Illinois State Board of Education’s (ISBE’s) Education Funding Advisory Board (n.d.) listed attributes of the elementary/secondary education funding solution in Illinois. The following relate to school district reorganization:

- Illinois has nearly 900 school districts, with many organized under a dual structure necessitating duplication of taxing authority, boards of education, administration, transportation systems, and so on.
- Five percent of high schools outside Chicago have fewer than 100 students, and 33 percent have fewer than 250 students.
- Average school district classroom teacher salaries range from less than \$24,000 to more than \$83,000.
- Superintendents’ salaries range from less than \$45,000 to more than \$200,000.
- The formula foundation level of support is \$4,560, over \$1,000 less than is recommended to ensure adequate funding.

- Tax rates vary from less than 1 percent to over 8 percent.
- Per pupil spending ranges from less than \$4,000 to in excess of \$15,000.
- 61 percent of Illinois school districts spend in excess of revenues.
- ISBE’s budget contains in excess of 50 program lines, which are distributed through nearly 80 different mechanisms, most of which require claims, applications, budgets, and/or expenditure reports.

In addition, Illinois is a low-tax state, lagging far behind in its support of elementary and secondary education. The Voices for Illinois Children (2002) publication, *Illinois Spending In Perspective: The Challenge of Meeting Needs in a Low-Tax State*, reports that Illinois’ total tax burden as a percentage of personal income is 13.9 percent, ranking 49th in the nation. The U.S. Bureau of the Census (n.d.), in its *Annual Survey of Local Government Finances*, reports that Illinois’ state share of public elementary and secondary education revenues is 37.0 percent, ranking 48th in the nation. The Education Funding Advisory Board believes that such a system is not in the State’s best interest and, if allowed to continue, it will do great disservice to Illinois’ public school children. In FY01, there were 892 separate school districts in Illinois (organized in Table 1 by enrollment categories). Unlike most states, Illinois school districts can be a unit district, including prekindergarten through grade twelve; an elementary district; or a high school district. The latter two district types fall into the dual district category instead of unit district designation.

Table 1. School Districts in Illinois/Enrollment by District Type

Enrollment District Type	<500	500-999	1,000-2,999	3,000-5,999	6,000-11,999	12,000+
Elementary (K-8)	145	72	120	37	6	3
High School (9-12)	18	22	35	19	6	1
Unit (K-12)	<u>86</u>	<u>125</u>	<u>137</u>	<u>28</u>	<u>21</u>	<u>11</u>
Total	249	219	292	84	33	15

Source: Illinois Teacher Salary Schedule Survey, 2000-2001.

Also, Illinois policy promulgates two very different initiatives. Financial incentives are used to encourage consolidation; however, at the same time, small districts are being provided funding for building projects through the Capital Development Board. These conflicting policies cause political, emotional, and financial confusion for communities that finish construction on a new building only to discover an incentive or expectation being provided to consolidate. For example, one school district was to receive two million dollars to build a high school for 120 students even though it was pursuing a consolidation study. The lack of policy clarity promotes not only poor planning, but also leads to tax payer frustration and confusion.

Literature Review

Reorganization has been the focus of many studies throughout the United States. A common theme in the literature has been the “strengths of rural schools.” Stephens (1988) lists several commonly accepted attributes of small schools: smaller classes, individual teacher attentiveness, low dropout rates, opportunities to develop student leadership skills, strong family and community support, and good parental interaction.

There are two distinct research strands in the literature on school consolidations. One knowledge base takes a “small by design” perspective, while a second orientation is “small by decline.” These studies, which span a century of our nation’s history, are set in rural and urban contexts, and focus on practice and policy issues of consolidation. The focal point of the research has been on small school administration and instruction.

Studies based on outcomes of achievement, completion rates, and attendance recommend smaller class sizes than do those based on inputs such as teacher salaries, instructional materials, and specialized staffing (Howley, Strange, & Bickel 2000). Raywid (1999) goes so far as to suggest that large-scale quantitative studies and literature syntheses demonstrate that the superiority of small schools has been established “with a clarity and at a level of confidence rare in the annals of education research.”

Driven by concerns of efficiency and economies of scale, early studies attempted to identify an optimal size or enrollment range for elementary, middle, and high schools. None of the studies recommend fewer than 300 or more than 900 students. The potential for curricular adequacy appears to be reached at 400 students. There also appears to be emerging consensus that the upper limit for defining “small” is 350 for elementary schools and 900 for high schools (Cotton 2001). Examination of the research, however, reveals no reliable relationship between school size and curriculum quality. Cotton found that a 100 percent increase in enrollment yields only a 17 percent increase in variety of offerings. “It is possible to offer at the 400 pupil level a curriculum that compares quite favorably in terms of breadth and depth with curriculums offered in much larger settings” (para. 7). Although larger schools may offer greater curricular variety, only a small percentage of students take advantage of these expanded curricula.

Of the 11,000 school districts that existed in Illinois in 1946, by the mid-1950s, approximately 1,000 remained operational (ISBE 1993). Arguments based on economies of scale have been challenged by findings that changing the scale of operation does not necessarily produce greater efficiency. Nevertheless, policymakers and the local constituencies continue to cite evidence of the benefits of small schools with little evidence to support their positions.

Earlier attempts to resolve the question of optimal school size are now regarded as naïve and of little relative value. In today’s climate of high standards for all, the inequities of student achievement on standardized measures have focused attention on school and class size. The

most suitable size may vary from place to place (Howley 1996; Wasley 2002), and the parameters become more operational rather than numerical:

It helps if schools are of a reasonable size, small enough for faculty members to sit around a table and iron things (such as standards) out, for everyone to be known well by everyone else, and for schools and families to collaborate over time. Small enough so that children belong to the same community as the adults in their lives instead of being abandoned in adultless subcultures. Small enough to both feel safe and be safe. Small enough so that phony data can readily be detected by any interested participant. Small enough so that the people most involved can never say they weren't consulted. (Meier 1996, 13)

Downsizing does not guarantee school improvement, but it appears to be one prerequisite for achieving comprehensive high school reform. In addition to dealing with considerations of size, school restructuring must address self-determination, identity, personalization, support for teaching, and functional accountability. Interestingly, the newer research continues to suggest well-run, small learning communities produce superior results on outcomes of achievement, equity, affiliation/belonging, safety, attendance, extracurricular participation, preparation for higher education, parent involvement and satisfaction, teacher attitudes and satisfaction, curriculum quality, and costs per students based on graduation rate (Cotton 2001; Eaton 1994; Grider and Versteegen n.d.; Irmsher 1997).

Monk and Haller (1986), basing their conclusions on a study of rural New York schools, report that substantial problems exist in small schools, and these problems significantly disadvantage students who attend them. Nonetheless, Monk and Haller also reported that small districts provide important educational advantages to pupils and to the communities they serve. The weaknesses identified by Monk and Haller include the following:

- Limited curricula
- Scheduling difficulties that further limit programs
- Shortage of teachers in some subject areas
- Faculty with heavy and nonspecialized teaching loads
- Low educational aspirations by students and community (2)

The following strengths are identified by Monk and Haller (1986):

- Schools are the focal point of the community.
- Schools are devoid of the discipline problems evident in large urban districts.
- Students learn the "basics" as well as other students and sometimes better.
- Schools provide opportunities to develop leadership potential and non-academic skills. (2)

Monk and Haller (1986) noted that some problems appear in only the very smallest of schools (i.e., those schools with fewer than 100 students per grade level). It should be noted that Illinois currently has at least 468 school districts that enroll fewer than 100 students per grade level (Table 1).

Regarding school size, Webb (1979) states,

Studies relating to effective and desirable sizes of school districts indicate that school district size is not an absolute, that the “optimum size” will vary from state to state and that size is but one of many factors related to educational quality and operational efficiency. (365)

It is obvious that in sparsely populated regions of the state, there will of necessity be rural schools with low enrollments. It is also true that some small rural schools have attracted a very competent teaching staff. To focus on school size for indication of school quality would be a mistake. Rather, the focus needs to be on student success and student access to quality education.

Monk and Haller (1986) also noted that students in small rural schools who do not relate well to a teacher have no other choices. Similarly, many students and even teachers are pressured into participating in extracurricular activities in which they have no interest or talent. Additionally, students are unable to avoid incompetent teachers. According to Monk and Haller, while small schools give teachers the opportunity to know their students better, small schools also provide an increased possibility for lost educational opportunity if teachers lack the necessary competencies to be effective teachers.

Hughes and Zelka (1990) studied the 100 smallest schools in Wisconsin from May 1987 through October 1988. The study identified the same small school attributes and disadvantages as Monk and Haller. Hughes found the following advantages in his study: broader student participation, close personal relationships, student leadership opportunities, community support, better school climate and student attitudes, fewer discipline problems, and greater flexibility. The constraints identified by Hughes included limited administrative and supervisory personnel, too few teachers, lack of cultural diversity, limited offerings for students, difficulty in recruiting and keeping staff, restricted facilities, and higher per pupil costs. Hughes did not show that small schools had higher test scores or that small school graduates had a higher rate of college completion.

A recurring problem for small rural schools is the attracting and retaining of a highly qualified teaching staff (Freitas 1992; Hughes and Zelka 1990; Monk and Haller 1986; Webb 1979). One contributing factor appears to be the salaries paid to beginning and veteran teachers in small rural schools. In the *Illinois Teacher Salary Study 2001* (Illinois Association of School Administrators 2001), the average beginning salary for elementary school districts with less than 500 students was \$24,461, while the average starting salary in school districts enrolling between 3,000 and 5,999 students was \$29,120. The range of starting salaries in districts under 500 students was \$19,079 to \$36,310. The highest scheduled salary ranged from \$26,633 to \$75,715. For high school districts,

the average starting salary for school districts enrolling fewer than 500 students was \$25,668, and the range of starting salaries was \$23,087 to \$30,465. The highest scheduled salary for high school districts under 500 enrollment ranged from \$35,092 to \$56,056. In unit districts, starting salaries in districts of under 500 students ranged from \$20,623 to \$28,810, and the average was \$23,690. The highest scheduled salary for unit districts with less than 500 enrollment ranged from \$33,400 to \$52,813. It is clear that small rural schools are at a disadvantage in hiring and retaining new teachers because of low starting salaries and low maximum salaries.

Sher (1986) was commissioned by the North Carolina School Board Association to critique a 1986 report by the State Board of Public Instruction that called for larger school districts. In his analysis, Sher concluded that there is no solid basis for believing that wholesale elimination of school districts would improve educational opportunities. He felt that reorganization should be strictly voluntary. In his report, Sher made the following five points:

1. Merger decisions are too complex and far-reaching in their impact to be made any way other than on a case-by-case basis.
2. Good schools and school districts come in all shapes and sizes (as do poor ones) and, therefore, educational policies which place too much reliance on any rigid size and organizational criteria are likely to be counterproductive.
3. Since directly mandating across-the-board mergers will not advance any compelling state interest, the state should discontinue all backdoor approaches to the same end.
4. There are a variety of alternatives to consolidation that can expand educational opportunities and enhance cost-effectiveness without abolishing existing units.
5. Most important, organizational issues, such as mergers, are rarely the key to enhancing the quality and efficiency of public education. Occasionally, making schools and school districts larger is helpful, but more often it is merely a diversion from the greater task of finding new ways to positively influence the lives of children and to increase the effectiveness of those who work in their service. (9-10)

On March 31, 2003, an editorial in the *Des Moines Register* addressed the issue of consolidation and the Iowa legislature's reluctance to address the issue:

With declining enrollment in nearly two-thirds of Iowa's school districts, budgets will shrink and more consolidation is inevitable. Tiny districts won't have the money to operate unless they merge with other districts. (A10)

Consolidation, however, won't necessarily bring educational equity to rural Iowa. Two districts could reorganize and end up with a combined high school of fewer than 200 students. That could still mean offering a bare-bones curriculum.

As school districts look to merge, they should seek a size large enough to improve the curriculum. The State Board of Education should encourage them to do so by setting higher minimum standards for the number of courses high schools must offer.

Establishing regional high schools is one solution that seems to be getting more consideration. . . . [O]lder students, however, would benefit from being able to choose from a broad variety of core and elective courses to prepare them for work and college. ("Stanton Residents . . ." 2003, A10)

Illinois has established the following fiscal incentives for reorganization in the *2002 Illinois School Code*:

- If, in its first year of existence, a new district qualifies for less state aid than would have been available that same year to the previously existing districts, a supplemental payment equal to the difference will be made for three years.
- In the first year only, a supplementary state aid payment will be made equal to the combined deficits of the previously existing districts; however, if the sum of the fund balances in all districts is positive, no payment will be made.
- For any consolidation, the state will pay, for three years, an amount equal to the differences in salaries earned in the year prior to the formation of the new district and the salaries of employees in the new district (the state pays the increase to place all employees on the best salary schedule).
- For up to three school years following the formation of the new district, the state will pay state aid equal to \$4,000 for each certified full-time employee.

It appears that the financial incentives offered by Illinois that began in 1985 have had some effect. Michelle Henninger of ISBE (personal communication, March 28, 2003) stated that since 1983, the number of school districts in Illinois has dropped from 1,010 to the present 892.

Not addressed in formal fashion in Illinois nor in other states are the advantages of consolidation as well as the disadvantages as viewed by those directly affected—students, teachers, administrators, and parents. Sher (1986) focused only on keeping small schools open. The following case studies involve five school districts that have reorganized since 1983. Extensive on-site interviews were conducted with administrators, board members, teachers, and patrons of the districts to determine the advantages and disadvantages of reorganization. Additionally,

the authors interviewed Committee of Ten members representing three different consolidation studies.

Case Studies

Case Study 1 – District A

District A is a school district located in northwest Illinois. The district was formed on July 1, 1986, by combining two rural school districts. Both districts had a central community, but the assessed valuation was primarily in agricultural land. The larger of the two communities had a population of 1,483, while the smaller town had a population of 938. Both districts faced declining enrollments due to farm consolidations and a general migration of persons from rural to suburban areas. The larger school district experienced an enrollment decline from 774 to 490 students, and the smaller school district had a decline from 450 to 235 students. Further complicating matters was the troubled financial future of both districts. Farmland assessments in Illinois are based on a complicated formula which considers the value of farm commodities, interest rates, and soil type, rather than ad valorem sale values.

Although the farmland in these rural districts was considered of high value, farmland values throughout Illinois plummeted during the 1980s. The farmland in these districts suffered similarly. Assessed values in the one district declined from \$19 million in 1986 to \$14 million in 1992. The other district was less severely impacted by the farmland assessment decline due to a real estate development of vacation homes.

Consolidation of the two districts into one large district resulted in a more stable assessed valuation base than existed for the two former districts. Today's combined assessed valuation is \$58 million. The combined student enrollment (786) is now large enough to continue a wide variety of courses. The combined enrollment, however, is only seven students larger than the larger district had at its peak.

The new consolidated district has expanded the educational program offerings for students over the available curriculum at the time of the merger. One of the major curriculum improvements cited by both administrators and teachers was to allow the junior high school program to be physically relocated from the high school building(s) to a former high school. Junior high teachers were excited about the addition of special purpose classrooms for teaching home economics, shop, art, and computer technology. The separation of junior high school age students from high school students also gave the 7th and 8th graders a feeling of identity and resulted in both a perceived and an actual drop in the number of discipline problems within grades 7-12. Additionally, the reorganized district installed a computer laboratory in the junior high school, added a children-at-risk program, increased academic expectations, reduced duplication, and increased articulation through the adoption of grade specific (K-3, 4-6) attendance centers.

Interviews with elementary level teachers provided information on the curricular aspects of the reorganization. One significant change was to expand the number of classes per grade level. Instead of one classroom for each grade, there are now three and occasionally four, which benefits both students and teachers. The prevailing attitude of upper grade teachers was that the high school curriculum has been improved by either the addition of courses or the enhancement of existing courses. As an example of curriculum improvement, in the smaller high school prior to the reorganization, certain courses were taught in alternating years (i.e., Physics and Chemistry). After consolidation and the establishment of a single high school, classes are now taught every year. Advanced English classes are also now available to students in the high school. Other examples include more science being included in the agriculture curriculum, and there is an increased interest in the concepts of Tech Prep.

The faculty has become so well-integrated that old cliques have virtually disappeared. While a few teachers still have old district loyalties, these are rapidly disappearing. Part of the reason for the perceived low level of staff objection to the consolidation was the board's promise that no teachers would be eliminated during the reorganization. This pledge was kept. Reduction in workforce has been achieved through attrition. Further, the mixing of the staffs through the adoption of the grade centers, a single junior high, and a single high school has assisted the integration effort.

The transition period has been a positive experience for teachers, students, parents, and the community. Teachers reported that changes in their assignments seem to provide them with a new vigor and vitality. Students adapted and excelled throughout the experience. A young female student provided one example when she thanked the crowd assembled at an athletic victory, saying she was very surprised and thrilled that young women from both districts had been able to play together so well so fast. Her words were reported as being therapeutic to nearly everyone who heard her. Evidently, that was the beginning of a healing process for many in the audience. Parent acceptance of the reorganization has also been high. Attendance at parent-teacher conferences approached 100 percent in grades K-6. Attendance at concerts and performances has been excellent. During the 1992 Christmas programs, administrators reported 1,300 attended the K-5 program, 700 attended the junior high program, and 300 attended the high school concert. Also, the new district has passed several tax rate increases and issued short-term bond instruments that were subject to referendum.

The area of greatest concern produced by consolidation was the longer school day because of the time students spent on school buses. Prior to the reorganization, students rode the bus for 45 minutes. After the reorganization, the average commute time increased to 60 minutes. The administration recognized that this was a particular problem for younger children and adopted a split release time, allowing younger students to have a shorter school day by releasing them before the junior/senior high school students were released, resolving most complaints.

Some problems have arisen from the reorganization, however. The agriculture courses have had to adapt to new demands on faculty and available facilities. A second problem has been the cost of removing all signs of the old district and establishing an identity for the new district. Costs of new uniforms, relettering school buses, repainting gymnasiums and locker rooms, buying building signs, designing new letterhead stationary, and generally removing all signs of the two former districts, amounted to between \$75,000-\$100,000.

Another problem was the emotional response of some residents. Some students reported having been affected by the negative feelings experienced in their homes regarding the issues of this consolidation. These hostilities have lessened, but they remain especially noticeable in the smaller district, where the high school closed. Reasons given for negativism ranged from giving up school colors to loss of business in the smaller community.

Although the smaller community had already begun to decline, as shown by school enrollments, some residents, nevertheless, felt strongly that the reorganization effort hastened the decline. This emotion seems to be alive and flourishing, as it was repeatedly reported that the larger school district only wanted the consolidation because "they were in such severe financial straits." The smaller community had been considered to be a somewhat "elite" community, and the consolidation was often blamed for persons with lower economic levels "moving into our area." One teacher reported that while some held this opinion for various reasons, others were "just complainers who have to gripe about something." While several interviewees reported these popular perceptions, the hard evidence contradicted these perceptions. The real estate values in the smaller community have continued to increase. The mayor of one town publicly stated that his was "the fastest growing community in the county." Other residents of the community interviewed stated that the demise of businesses in the community was not a result of consolidation but the expansion of retail facilities in two regional shopping centers, one 25 miles away and the other 15 miles away.

One faculty member related a recent negative incident that occurred in the former smaller district. A school staff member was overheard saying, "That would have never happened in this community before this darn consolidation. It just wouldn't have been allowed." This statement is indicative of an attitude apparent throughout various interview sessions. It was not, however, the predominant attitude observed.

When asked about the possibility of future reorganization/consolidation, teachers interviewed responded that it was a definite possibility. Many small districts were experiencing the same declining enrollments that existed prior to this consolidation. They expressed positive attitudes toward reorganization and even stated support that consolidation improved the quality of education for students. A perusal of the ACT scores of students in this consolidated district substantiated that students were demonstrating high academic performance. The high scores, as well as the colleges and universities admitting recent graduates, reflect excellent educational achievement in this consolidated district. Teacher turnover has been low, demonstrating both

acceptance of the consolidation and the reason for the above-average accomplishments of district students.

Case Study 2 – District B

District B includes three small west-central Illinois communities with populations of 764, 525, and 649. One unit district with a K-12 enrollment of 236 students was annexed to the existing District B Community Unit School District with a K-12 enrollment of 452 students by action of the Regional Board of School Trustees after residents of the district filed a petition. The annexation was bitterly opposed by the Board of Education, which attempted to delay the action of the Regional Board by undertaking a series of court appeals of the administrative action. The Board of Education of District B was notified in June 1992 that annexation was imminent, but the action was not made official until August.

Assuming an official action was in place, the school board acted quickly on many facility and curriculum decisions. An attempt was made to integrate existing personnel, use all existing educational facilities, and provide for program equity throughout the district. To accomplish equity, the facilities were reconfigured so that grades preK to 3 were placed in one community, grades 4 to 8 were housed in the second community, and grades 9 to 12 were housed in the third community. Prior to the reorganization, all three communities had elementary centers and high schools. This reconfiguration of building use required remodeling and equipping of one facility at a cost of \$200,000.

Teachers were reassigned to a building on the basis of their teaching expertise and/or grade level. To ensure a merger of the district curricula, mentor teachers were selected to work with reassigned teachers to review curriculum, order supplies, and to become familiar with facilities and procedures. Also, since teachers from the larger school district outnumbered other teachers by approximately two to one, the smaller group of teachers was quickly integrated. Teachers previously employed by the smaller school district were consistently complimentary about the willingness of the larger school district's teachers to accept them as colleagues and to share their expertise. To quote one teacher, "There was some controversy and divisiveness among the staff members before the decision to annex was approved, but once the decision was made, our only concern was making it work." A further comment was, "We were impressed with the high priority education had in the district. Because one district had struggled to survive for so long, survival, not education, became the goal."

When asked about the positive aspects of the merger, staff members reported that high school students now had access to more course offerings. Also, reorganization permitted an enhanced extracurricular program for women. Elementary teachers reported that the grade center reorganization would not have been possible without the three separate buildings made available by the merger. Teachers also reported that the grade center approach had brought increased vitality and excitement. Persons interviewed felt that the quantity and quality of planning

between teachers of the same grade levels had increased. The teachers also reported that the reorganization provided them access to a greater quantity and quality of teaching supplies and materials. When asked if the loss of the high school had caused decreased property values, staff members reported the exact opposite had occurred. Property values increased because prospective residents now saw the educational system as being both viable and of high quality. When asked if as staff members they would support further reorganization between District B and neighboring districts, some persons expressed reluctance but indicated that they would certainly not oppose such an action.

When asked to identify negative aspects of the reorganization, the staff members interviewed listed only two. First, the loss of the kindergarten graduation tradition in the small district was reported. Also, some individuals identified a reluctance of some parents to accept the new district; however, when asked if any parents wanted to go back to the old boundaries and programs, the response was an emphatic no.

Case Study 3 – District C

In this small central Illinois town, with a population of approximately 12,000 persons, two small school districts were annexed because of financial problems in one district and a condemned building in the other. Students were transported to the larger town's middle school and high school, but the elementary schools were left in both of the original small communities even though these schools may need to be abandoned in the future. Closure of the elementary schools will be a very emotional issue, dreaded by both these former school districts. Parents and community leaders expressed strong feelings against transporting elementary students any distance. Individuals stated that smaller children should remain in their own communities, even if transporting children did not appear detrimental.

The Board of Education of the host school district invited two members of each of the annexed school districts to serve as Advisory Board members until the next Board election. This action made the transition more acceptable.

The merged school district adopted a middle school philosophy in place of the former junior high school structure. This transition was helpful to the transferred teachers. Since all teachers were faced with implementation of the new middle school philosophy, the demands of working in a new operating system were viewed as equitable. Also contributing to a smooth transition was the leadership of a dynamic middle school principal who was sensitive to the needs of the teachers and students. This principal helped teachers through each step of the middle school implementation by providing professional guidance and support. Team efforts ensured that all teachers were involved with planning and implementing the curriculum required to meet the needs of middle school students. As a consequence, the climate of the school is extremely positive, and a spirit of cooperation exists at every level.

Interviews with teachers revealed that both the transferred teachers and those teachers already in place held positive attitudes. Specific curriculum changes caused by annexation are hard to recognize because the entire curriculum was affected by the implementation of the middle school program. The most negative aspect of the annexation was that teachers had to share classrooms after annexation while previously having their own rooms. Even this change seemed to have been taken in stride and was not reported as being a significant hardship.

Interviews with students from all three districts substantiated the positive impact of the annexation. Students reported their initial fears had proven to be unfounded. Students were comfortable and readily adjusted to changes. Some students reported their parents had expressed concerns that never materialized. Students from the smaller school districts stated that the most positive aspects were having more students with whom to interact. These children liked having more friends and more extracurricular activities available to them.

Interviews at the high school revealed a positive climate as well. The administrators stated that the biggest problems were a lack of space and money. Administrators were forced to offer early-bird science classes because the science labs were inadequate for scheduling the required number of classes. Although class sizes increased, enrollments were still not too large for effective teaching practices to occur. Study halls were extremely large, however. Unfortunately, although a main impetus of the annexation had been financial, promised new state monies of approximately \$800,000 had not yet been received. On the other hand, there had been several new expenditures such as \$13,000 for band uniforms and choir robes. The curriculum, expanded to include new classes in German, Algebra III, and Physical Science, also had expenditure implications.

Teachers from the former smaller school districts reported that the district made special efforts to make them feel accepted. There was an opening reception and other social events to welcome them. Annexed teachers were absorbed into the existing bargaining unit without problems.

Interviews with students revealed that students were relieved and surprised that the annexation went so smoothly. The students from the smaller school districts reported they had many fears coming into a larger school district. The annexed students believed the move would be traumatic but were pleasantly surprised to find their fears mostly unfounded. Some said they felt they had lost some of the closeness they experienced in their smaller schools; however, the increase in the number of students provided them with advantages such as having more people like them, more curricular choices, and more extracurricular opportunities. Students specifically mentioned that with more students, their class rankings would be an advantage to them when they applied to college in the future. Students also repeatedly mentioned the availability of new clubs and sports activities as being a positive.

Students reported that parental concerns about their adjustment to a larger school had proven groundless. All students expressed the feeling that the move had been ultimately beneficial. They further stated that had this study been done earlier in the year, the findings might have been

different because their attitudes towards the move had changed significantly with the passage of time.

The seniors from one of the smaller school districts reported having the most difficult adjustment as they still felt a sense of loss of school identity; however, even these students expressed a consensus that it had been a wise move despite a perception that their parents did not agree with them about the benefits.

Case Study 4 – District D

Before it integrated a small contiguous district, District D, a high school district, had a 9th-through 12th-grade enrollment of 700. After consolidation, the enrollment increased to 745. While the impact on District D was not large, low enrollment in the smaller district made it difficult for the district to sustain an accredited program. When the state intimated that financial aid might be discontinued, citizens in the smaller district pressed their board of education to consider consolidation. The smaller district had been sharing a teacher with the larger district and sending its students to the larger district for some courses. The smaller school had not had a full-time mathematics teacher for some time. The board president of the former smaller district said in an interview that the district had been anticipating a substantial tax increase to bring their program back to where it was before the cuts were made to sustain the school; however, it took a trip by these board members to the larger district high school for them to see the educational advantages that were awaiting their students and staff if a positive consolidation action was undertaken.

For the most part, the 45 new students were already familiar with the larger school. Practically no change in transportation resulted from the consolidation because of the unique geography of the two districts. Because of the larger school, the new students were able to enroll in stronger science and technology programs. Conversely, the larger school's athletic and music programs benefited from the addition of new students' skills. Financial conditions for District D improved and have remained good. Due to the financial incentives provided to school districts, the taxpayers in the affected consolidation district have avoided increases in their school taxes. Students did experience some unnecessary difficulty because of parent opposition, but everyone now agrees students are better off in all ways because of the action by the two boards of education.

The impact on tenured teachers and principals was minimal because of the paternalistic policy of the larger district. Two teachers had difficulty adjusting to the larger classes and larger building. The impact on support staff was harsh at first but, in the long run, staff who were released obtained local jobs. Taxes were reduced because of the consolidation, and the loss of local control that every taxpayer feared never became a problem. Perceptions abound that several other small neighboring districts will eventually consolidate because their school buildings have become too expensive to maintain.

A board president suggested gifted students were being handicapped educationally. Moreover, the lack of adequate school programs not only cheats the students, but also cheats society. He said other students were affected by the lack of competition. The board president stated competition is beneficial because among other things it lessens the shock of going to college. A teacher from the smaller school had less definite feelings about the benefits of merger. For example, this individual liked having a student for four years. He now teaches only the first two years of his subject and sees his students for half of the time he used to and is not able to achieve the friendships he formerly was able to develop. Although this teacher recognized his compensation and benefits have improved significantly, he perceived his professional relationships to be difficult because “he is the teacher from the consolidation.” This teacher did acknowledge that while he enjoyed teaching in the small school, the students were better off in the larger high school. He claimed students still get the nurturing he and the other teachers provided but now the students receive support from a variety of sources.

The superintendent allowed us to ask some potentially embarrassing questions about his plans and his decisions concerning consolidation. This administrator did not foresee the additional costs his district might have to incur with an additional 45 students. Existing class sizes easily absorbed the 45 students. Costs are not generally heeded in advance and are often overlooked when considering consolidations. Operating expenditures had gone up to \$274,410, the amount generated by 45 students times the per student allocation of \$6,098. This administrator indicated that the expenses had not. Also, the superintendent indicated there was new revenue—the incentive money and general state aid and taxes—which offset the additional costs. The superintendent was not aware if additional curriculum materials were purchased or if sufficient materials were already on hand. No furniture was needed, and the only equipment cost might have been additional wear and tear on the computers. Driver education costs would spill over into the following summer term and should pose no problem since summer programs are largely self-supported by fees and state reimbursements. The food service program workload increased, but not the overall cost of service. Maintenance and supply costs did increase; however, the building is well maintained and additional wear and tear was anticipated.

If future consolidations occur, this superintendent will pay particular attention to the burden on the administrative and support staff because of the strain now evident on the district’s counselors and building administrators, the secretaries, special education teachers, and aides. The change within an organizational structure must anticipate such stresses, not simply the needs of additional students.

Case Study 5 – District E

The final district in the consolidation study differed in many ways from District D. District E is a unit district containing kindergarten through 12th grade. This district enrolls 2,100 students and was created by the voluntary consolidation of four separate school districts. District E was given

\$1,460,000 in incentives, \$760,000 to wipe out existing debts, and the rest in state aid and salary incentives. The consolidation costs were reported to be between \$100,000 and \$125,000.

Program reductions and financial problems in the original four districts caused some instructors to teach outside their field, impacting the quality of the academic program. One district was on Illinois' financial watch list, meaning that the district was consistently spending more money than it received. Another district was faced with having to pass a referendum for a tax increase or it too would have been on the watch list. One district had passed a tax rate increase, but the increase only temporarily delayed the financial problems it was continually experiencing. The main contributing factor to the financial and programmatic problems of the districts was the decline in farmland value. When the state implemented a new form of valuation that was based on acreage productivity, soil quality, and interest, the yearly drops in assessed value consistently were 10 percent, resulting in a tax base that no longer was capable of sustaining the educational programs.

The merger of districts enabled consolidation of the financial base and merged support for an academic program that everyone agreed was more extensive, enabling more courses in vocational programs, science, social studies, computer science, and math. Consolidation also benefited extracurricular activities. There were additional athletic opportunities for girls and boys, and the same was true for music. In sports, freshmen now compete against freshmen, sophomores against sophomores, a circumstance impossible before because of the small numbers of students of either gender within classes participating in athletics. There is now more breadth and depth to the programs, and content has increased, both primarily because of numbers of students and their diversity. According to the superintendent, pride in program and extracurricular activities has been building every year since the merger.

During the consolidation, the administrators met individually with all of the employees in their own settings to inquire about how to improve the school. Ultimately, however, the course structures were decided by the administrators to guard against the self-preserving instincts of faculty who might have hampered program development. Even so, because of the teacher input, significant changes in course content were achieved.

The academic reputation of the new school district has enhanced property values in the area and has improved the business climate. Several people said that the smaller communities would have atrophied and eventually disappeared had the consolidation not made the area a desirable place to live and raise children. The superintendent regretted only one promise that was made to the communities, namely that a kindergarten through 6th grade building would be left in each of the communities. The promise should have simply been for an elementary school in each community. This would have enabled the administration the flexibility to put a kindergarten through 4th-grade building in a community where the 6th-grade enrollment was not justified.

One of the parents interviewed claimed that there were no drawbacks to the consolidation. The district is much better academically. Children have adjusted well, as have parents. In a recent

meeting, only one parent wanted to go back to the way it was. Since consolidation and the implementation of program changes, higher test scores have been achieved. The consolidation also put off a tax increase for eight years, and now the tax rate is lower than in the surrounding districts. Bus rides for some students had to be made slightly longer. This negative is offset by the belief that families have become members of a larger, more secure community. The consolidation has had many positive outcomes, including a more efficient school system with enriched programs, better-equipped schools, and better teachers, which was made possible without spending more tax money. One parent claimed that her family built a house two years ago, and she was told in a recent reassessment that because the house is now in the new consolidated school district, the home is worth \$20,000 more than it cost to build.

Implications of Reorganization

Curricular Implications

The first step in moving toward a policy of equal education is to determine what constitutes an adequate education. To develop an adequacy model, the Illinois Task Force made several assumptions in order to establish a dollar value capable of supporting an adequate education for all students. Assumptions were made related to class size and to the number of certified and noncertified staff needed for an adequate education. Values such as one full-time classroom teacher per 23 students in kindergarten through 6th grade, one physical education teacher per 250 kindergarten through 6th-grade students, and one art teacher per 500 students were assumed. In 7th and 8th grades, a class size of 24 and a district administration ratio of 1 per 800 students were assumed, while in 9th through 12th grades, class sizes ranged from 21 for science instruction to 60 students for study hall. Given the size of many schools in Illinois, these ratios proved to be too high, since many elementary and high school districts do not have enough students per grade level to reach these ratios.

It is clear that if schools are to be funded on a rational basis, there must first be agreement on what educational opportunities should be afforded all students. As Elwood P. Cubberly wrote in 1905,

Theoretically, all children of the state are equally important and are entitled to the same advantages; practically, this can never be quite true. The duty of the state is to secure for all as high a minimum of good instruction as possible, but not to reduce all to the minimum; to equalize the advantage to all as nearly as can be done with the resources at hand. (17)

We underscore the need for increasing educational opportunities for children, especially at the high school, through the process of reorganization. In studying 22 rural schools in north-central Illinois, the *curricular disadvantages* of small high schools are very obvious. As an example, compare selected curricular offerings in art, business, English, foreign language, mathematics, and vocational education in a suburban high school, a rural high school district, and a small rural unit district. The high school district enrolls 700 students, and the rural unit district high school enrolls 40 students.

Table 2. Course Offering Comparison: Suburban High School, Rural High School District, and Rural Unit District

Art		
<i>Suburban High School</i>	<i>Rural High School District</i>	<i>Rural Unit District</i>
Art 1	Art I	Art I
Art 2	Commercial Art I	Art II
Art 3	Commercial Art II	Art III
Art 4	Fine Art I	Art IV
Design Materials 1	Fine Art II	
Design Materials 2		
Fine Arts Appreciation		
Photography 1		
Photography 2		
Photography 3		
Business		
<i>Suburban High School</i>	<i>Rural High School District</i>	<i>Rural Unit District</i>
Consumer Education	Computer Literacy/Keyboarding	Keyboarding I
Accounting 1	Keyboarding, Typewriting	Keyboarding II
Accounting 2	Advanced Keyboarding	Accounting I
Business Law	Accounting I	
Business Mathematics	Business Law	
Distributive Education	Business Math	
Introduction to Business		
Advertising		
Sales and Retailing		
Office Occupations		
Office Procedures		
Keyboarding and Formatting		
Keyboard Applications		
Word Processing 1		
Word Processing 2		
Computer Courses		
<i>Suburban High School</i>	<i>Rural High School District</i>	<i>Rural Unit District</i>
Understanding Computers		
Computer Applications for College and Business		
BASIC Programming		
Advanced Basic Programming		
Foreign Language		
<i>Suburban High School</i>	<i>Rural High School District</i>	<i>Rural Unit District</i>
French I, II, III, IV, V	German I, II, III, IV	Spanish I, II
German I, II, III, IV, V	Spanish I, II, III, IV	
Italian I, II, III, IV, V		
Spanish I, II, III, IV, V		
Accelerated Program in Foreign Language (All Languages)		
Advanced Placement Spanish		

Table 2 (cont.)

English

<i>Suburban High School</i>	<i>Rural High School District</i>	<i>Rural Unit District</i>
English 1	Basic English I, II, III	English I
English 1 Accelerated	Reading	English II
English 1 Remedial	English I, II, III, IV	English III
English II	AP English	English IV
English II Accelerated	Media Communications	Life Skills
English II Remedial	Accelerated English I	
English III		
American Studies		
English III Accelerated		
English III Remedial		
English IV Advanced Placement		
English IV Remedial		
Composition		
American Literature		
Readings in American Studies		
English Literature		
World Literature		
Speech and Drama		
Oral Communications		
Drama I, II		
Broadcasting I, II		
Public Speaking		
Oral Interpretation		
Competitive Speech		
Debate		
Technical Theatre		
History of the Theatre		
Dramatic Literature		
Creative Drama		

Math

<i>Suburban High School</i>	<i>Rural High School District</i>	<i>Rural Unit District</i>
Fundamentals of Mathematics	General Math	Algebra I
Pre-Algebra	Vocational Math	Geometry
Introduction to Algebra	Business Math	Algebra II
Algebra I	Elementary Algebra A	Pre-Algebra I
Algebra II Freshman	Elementary Algebra B	Pre-Algebra II
Accelerated Algebra II	Algebra I	Analysis
Applications of Mathematics Remedial	Geometry	
Sophomore Algebra	Algebra II	
Plane Geometry	Trigonometry	
Geometry	Analytic Geometry	
Accelerated Geometry and Trigonometry	Pre-Calculus	
Algebra II		
Advanced Algebra and Geometry		
College Algebra and Trigonometry		
Accelerated Math Analysis		
Mathematics and Technology		

Table 2 (cont.)

Math (cont.)		
<i>Suburban High School</i>	<i>Rural High School District</i>	<i>Rural Unit District</i>
Trigonometry		
College Algebra		
Pre-Calculus		
Calculus AP (Analytic Geometry and Calculus)		
Calculus BC and Differential Equations		
Probability and Statistics		
Computer Science 1		
Computer Science 2		
Computer Science 3 AP		
(Structured Programming Using Pascal)		
Computer Science 4 AP (Continuation of CS 3 AP)		
Vocational-Technical		
<i>Suburban High School</i>	<i>Rural High School District</i>	<i>Rural Unit District</i>
Drafting/Communications	Introduction to Technology	
Computer Aided Design (CAD)	Drafting/CAD I	
Industrial Drawing	Drafting/CAD II	
Advanced Drafting	Orientation to Power Technology	
Transportation	Orientation to Construction Occupations	
Auto Fundamentals	Auto Care and Maintenance	
Auto Service	I.C.E. Program	
Cooperative Work Training Program Conservation		
Diversified Occupations		
Electronics/Energy		
Electronics Technology		
Advanced Electronics		
Home Maintenance		
Metals/Production		
Metals Technology		
Advanced Machine Shop		
Printing/Communications		
Graphic Arts Processes		
Advanced Printing		
Woods/Production		
Wood Products and Processes		
Advanced Woodworking		

While a simple comparison of course offerings does not tell the whole story, it is obvious that students in suburban high schools have a wider variety of opportunities in all curricular areas than do students in rural schools. Also, it is obvious that students in the rural high school district had greater educational opportunities than did students in the rural unit district. Educational opportunities for students in small high schools are limited by their size. Assuming a pupil/teacher ratio of 10:1, a 50-student high school could only hire five professional staff, which would result in severely restricted course offerings.

In 1993, another Education Funding Task Force issued recommendations for overhauling the school finance system in Illinois (ISBE 1993). That the Task Force did *not* adequately address the issue of school reorganization is evident in several dissenting opinions by Task Force members:

What is badly needed is the courage to deal with the fact that Illinois has far too many school districts (each with a superintendent, board, business manager, etc.) costing the public unnecessary resources and adversely affecting the education delivered to our children. The Task Force needed to deal boldly with that. It is time for reform. (ISBE 1993, 16)

The need to organize school districts into more educationally viable and financially sound entities is a critical component for any lasting solution to school finance and educational accountability. . . . To expedite the work of the Task Force, enabling legislation should call for it to use as its basic resource the “*Opportunities for Excellence*”: *Findings, Conclusions and Recommendations of Illinois School District Organization, Final Report of the Committee on School Organization, Organization and Structure Task Force, Governor’s Commission on the Schools*, March 1973. Much of the work conducted by that Task Force is just as valid today as it was in 1973. (17)

As I look back on our discussion, it is obvious that we did not take advantage of an opportunity we had to address school size, especially as it relates to high schools. Before additional money is poured into small high schools, we should either demand consolidation or develop a plan for interactive electronic and video instruction if sparsity of students restricts the ability to consolidate. (21)

Committee of Ten Implications

The Illinois legislature recognized the need for a representative system of moving two or more school districts through the legal, emotional, and academic consolidation processes. Thus, the *Illinois School Code* (2002) clearly defines the role and responsibilities of a representative committee of ten citizens from the school districts and communities working toward a consolidation or annexation. The Illinois State Board of Education’s Web page summarizes the definition of this committee:

The Committee of Ten is a committee of ten individuals designated in the petition to act on behalf of all petitioners. These individuals may be school board members, people who work in the school system, or any other resident voter of the affected districts. (ISBE n.d.)

The topic of consolidation can be examined from a quantitative perspective: enrollment projections, budget numbers, bus routes, transportation costs, additional building space, more desks, and fewer faculty—endless numbers. More important to the issue of consolidation than numbers, however, are the people. Eleven members representing three different Committees of Ten were interviewed via the telephone or face-to-face. These individuals were selected because

they responded affirmatively to being interviewed (see Appendix A). There were no individuals who refused to be interviewed.

One individual interviewed gave the following analogy:

It's like being taken to a deep pool, thrown in, and told to swim or drown. The first thing you do is struggle to the surface. Once your head is above water you look around to see how far you are from the edge of the pool or if there are people around that can help you. Then you start working your way, with great fatigue, and little skill or knowledge about swimming, toward safety. Others can tell you how you could have done it differently, even more efficiently, but their advice often comes too late to help you.

Interestingly, this same person strongly believed in the process, had no recommendations for improving it, and would do it again. Why? "It's all about the kids. Even when ours failed we said as a Committee of Ten that we wouldn't say, 'I told you so,' when the budget cuts started happening. We were committed to being as professional as possible before, during, and after the vote."

The following were tips and warnings given by individuals who served on a Committee of Ten:

- *Don't venture into the waters of consolidation without the "enthusiastic support of the Board of Education AND all of the district administrators."* One consolidation died a miserable defeat due to the superficial support and outright sabotage of the school administration. Board members and school administrators should be willing to invest their time in marketing the idea to the communities.
- *A consolidation effort requires a tremendous commitment of time.* One individual interviewed estimated that the main Committee of Ten probably spent over 10,000 hours on the process. Others didn't want to speculate or even want to know how much time they had sacrificed.
- *The development of subcommittees helps broaden the base of people involved.* One individual felt that the subcommittees were crucial. She felt that their involvement not only broadened their support base but also added some other perspectives to the discussion. There was richness to the meetings because of the diversity of perspectives.
- *It is critical to establish early in the process a clear purpose in order to identify responsibilities and to define the Committee of Ten AND the subcommittees.* One group brainstormed each subcommittee's objectives, gave the list to the subcommittee, and left it up to the subcommittee to determine a clear purpose. The purpose was then listed on the Web page. Some suitable subcommittees might include the following:
 - Buildings
 - Finance
 - Transportation

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- Curriculum
 - Transition
 - Marketing
 - Extracurricular
 - Legislative
- *Involve the kids.* Having high school students involved using a teen advisory group or by membership on subcommittees can be positive and enriching. One committee created a teen advisory committee, but the administration did not allow the teen group to meet. This serves as a negative example of why district administration must actively support the consolidation process.
 - *Involve the teachers, especially the elementary teachers.* Seven of those interviewed noted the strong influence that the teachers had on the success of their campaign. Parents and community members viewed these individuals as knowledgeable, and their view on the consolidation was to be key to the outcome. One subcommittee met monthly with the teachers to keep them completely informed.
 - *Committee members are always being watched.* Several participants seemed to be unaware of how visible they would become. Their families could not go out to eat without someone stopping by their table to discuss the consolidation.
 - *Learn to agree to disagree.* Listening and conflict resolution skills are important to the overall success of the process. One committee member stated, “When people are yelling at you in the parking lot of the grocery store because you are messing up the football career of their son, you need to understand that the person is not really angry with you but with the proposed changes.” Committee members are the messenger and as such are a face to the consolidation enterprise. If committee members take such challenges personally, they suffer much stress.”
 - *Some issues are more important than others and need to be decided early in the process.* The building subcommittee needs to meet and begin making decisions as early as possible. This then leads to decisions about grade configurations, transportation, staffing patterns, and costs. It was noted by two participants that the work of the building committee was deemed by the membership as the most difficult committee on which to serve. No one wanted to recommend to a community that a school would be lost. Nevertheless, the determination of which buildings would stay open and which would be closed is probably the most critical committee responsibility in preparing for implementation of a school consolidation.

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- *Establish operational rules:*
 - *Personal agendas must be left at the committee room door.* Individuals asked to serve, or selected to serve, on a committee must not have any personal agenda other than putting kids first. The process is not about making teachers, parents, businesspeople, administrators, or anyone else happy. *The central issue must focus on what is best for the kids.*
 - *Always be honest and truthful.* One committee member noted, “People may not like, understand, or want the truth, but that is a significant part of our responsibility.” Another stated, “One thing that took courage was the fact that we didn’t say things to appease certain groups. In other words, we didn’t tell people in town A that their school was not being recommended for closure, just to make them happy. We didn’t tell people what they wanted to hear.”
 - *Determine to use closed sessions with great caution.* “In hindsight, one of the things that we would do differently would be to not have any closed sessions. We only had two, and at the time we thought it was necessary to do so. I now realize that there was nothing discussed in those sessions that everyone could not have heard. Closed sessions lead people to misunderstand, mistrust, and miscommunicate.”
 - *Seek first to understand and then to be understood* (Covey 1990). “When people question the source of the data or information, agree to listen and be prepared to continuously seek better information.” This is a process whereby new information and data are constantly being created. It is essential that committee members keep abreast of the data and the facts.
 - *The need for a common vision was stated.* One individual shared that the committee was accused of only worrying about sports when, in fact, no one on the committee had even discussed sports at the meetings. The subcommittee on extracurricular activities had certainly talked about sports but did so from the first meeting. The Committee of Ten only talked about the impact the broader curriculum would have on students. As information on the finances of the districts involved unfolded, the topic switched from curriculum to school finance.
 - *The leadership of the committee works well if shared.* Co-chairs allow for flexibility of attendance at important meetings. One Committee of Ten had the foresight to not schedule the co-chairs onto any subcommittees. They felt it was easier for the co-chairs to concentrate on the process when not immersed in the details of a single piece.
 - A common source of frustration for the committee persons was related to the fact that the opposition could say what they wanted, with no evidence or documentation, while committee members could not do this. Even with documentation, committee-provided data was often questioned or held suspect. In one situation, enrollment projections were questioned. The co-chair informed the accuser that the data came from the 2000 U.S. Census results. The accuser quickly chided that he “didn’t trust the government either.”

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- *The importance of “one-voice” was emphasized over and over again.* The Committee of Ten could not speculate or respond at meetings with, “I think.” Members either knew or they did not, and if they did not, they were obligated to so state.
 - *Committee persons who own a business should have a serious discussion with their employees related to the impact of spending time and resources while at work on consolidation topics.* A frequent response was the reality that “there was nowhere to go that someone did not want to talk with committee members about the topic.” One business owner said that clients would state, “Well what can you tell me about this consolidation topic?” The frustration came with not knowing what the individual already knew and the reality that the topic was too big to cover during business hours. Torn between viewing an inquiry as an opportunity to share information and needing to run a business caused minor frustrations for some persons.
 - *All interviewed persons were amazed at how differently individuals processed information and how often some needed to hear the same information to understand it.* Two participants acknowledged that some people work hard at finding something to be against. School consolidation or annexation appeared as good as anything to be against.
 - *Several committee persons thought that once the consolidation study was presented to the Boards of Education and the public, their work was almost complete.* In fact, “The consolidation study actually was just beginning.”
 - *The marketing subcommittee needs to start early in the process.* One participant acknowledged the crucial aspect of getting the message out to everyone as quickly as possible. This individual reported his Committee of Ten waited until it had been functioning for awhile and realized too late the significance of getting information out sooner.
 - *Get the information out—quickly, honestly, and through all media.* One Committee of Ten had an extraordinary Web page, posting all minutes to all meetings of the Committee of Ten and all subcommittees. Contact information was posted for all positions. All meetings were advertised, and the public was invited to attend.
 - *One group allowed the public open forum time at the beginning of all meetings.* Questions and statements were welcomed. Committee members felt that the open forum promoted respect and permitted information to be shared, helping to win over some who might have been adamantly opposed. Only once did the committee need to “shut down” a person whose personal agenda fell outside the purpose of the meeting.
 - *Leadership needs to plan for the “morning after.”* Whether successful or a failure, committee members will need to have some closure on their experience. Two of the three groups studied for this report gathered after the election and had a party. One held the party several weeks later, which allowed for individual processing time; the other held it within a week of the vote.

When asked if an orientation would have helped, the responses were mixed. Six of the eleven persons interviewed felt that an orientation would have helped:

The first meetings were awkward, and little was accomplished. It might have helped to have spent some time getting to know each other. I'm not a big game person, but something needed to happen to help us get comfortable with each other. Of course, by the end, we were all very close. As a matter-of-fact, one of the best things to come out of the experience were the new friends that I made—people who I would never have met otherwise.

One participant didn't feel that an orientation would have helped:

It was a work in progress. To plan an orientation presupposes that the group has clarity of purpose. We "knew," but we didn't really "know."

Ten of those interviewed thought that they would be interested in helping on another consolidation; several had stipulations to the next time that they didn't have the first time. All had no regrets, other than the failure of some of their attempts. All were committed to kids and to improving the academic, social, and interpersonal opportunities of their children and their neighbors' children.

Financial Implications

As mentioned in the introduction, rural school districts in Illinois continue to be under financial pressure from four main sources: (1) declining enrollment, (2) declining equalized assessed valuation, (3) limited state funding, and (4) the shortage of teachers in some secondary and specialized areas. The first is declining enrollment. In reviewing reorganization studies commissioned by the Illinois State Board of Education, almost all of the studies reflected a steady decline in the number of students. In one study conducted by the authors, the kindergarten enrollment in one district had decreased from 60 students to 20 students in a five-year period. In a second study, the total high school enrollment for each of two participating districts was projected to decrease from approximately 120 to 80 students. The Illinois school funding formula is driven by the number of students in average daily attendance; the loss of one student can cost the district over \$4,800 in state aid.

A review of the reorganization studies also revealed that in many rural school districts, overall revenues have been "flat," but expenditures have typically continued to increase. School district budgets are under continuous pressure from steadily rising teacher salaries and constantly rising costs of goods and services purchased by the districts—health insurance, in particular.

One financial benefit of reorganization is that districts can operate more efficiently at the central office and within the high school. Most of the consolidation studies reviewed by the authors proposed little or no change at the elementary level. Efficiencies were to be achieved

through central office and high school staffing. In two studies conducted by the authors, each involving five rural school districts, a review of the annual financial reports revealed that the combined school districts were spending, in each case, about \$1,000,000 for central office services. Consolidating five central offices into one has the potential to save at least \$500,000 per year. When the high school staffing patterns were studied, it was obvious that combining the high schools would require fewer teachers. In one case, the combined high school would require 20 fewer teachers, and in the second case, 25 fewer teachers would be needed. The reduction of 20 teachers could easily save the district \$500,000 per year if you assume that a “new teacher” costs a district \$25,000 in salary and benefits. Thus, while finances should not be the driving force behind consolidation, there are some obvious financial advantages to combining districts.

Implications for Recruitment and Retention of Teachers

Many school districts throughout Illinois are reporting difficulty in recruiting secondary mathematics, science, English, foreign language, and vocational education teachers. There appears to be a sufficient supply of elementary education teachers for the foreseeable future but there is increasing competition for highly qualified teachers. One problem that rural middle schools and high schools face in competing for teachers is that in rural areas a teacher may have several different preparations each day (five or six) compared to two or three preparations at larger schools. A second problem is in the area of teacher pay. Even if a school district is successful in recruiting a new teacher to the district, they may not be able to “hold on to them” because larger school districts, particularly in the suburbs, are offering higher starting salaries. Salaries at the top end of the salary schedule are frequently over twice as high in larger school districts compared to rural school districts. At the last WIU teacher recruitment fair, one district offered signing bonuses of \$6,500. Another district offered a signing bonus each year for four years if the teacher would stay in the district. Many school districts have an aging teaching staff, and as they retire in the next few years, the problem of recruiting and retaining staff is only going to increase.

Facilities Implications

Reorganization studies conducted by the authors have shown that many rural districts underutilize their facilities. As an example, one western Illinois district has a high school building that could comfortably accommodate 550-600 students but has a current enrollment of only 120. Projections are that enrollment will continue to decrease to below 100 students. The building is in excellent condition and is fully handicapped accessible.

A study conducted by the authors in northwest Illinois revealed that there was enough building space countywide for over 6,500 students, and the total student population in the county was 2,500. If the five districts in the county had consolidated, four of the buildings could have been closed, with resulting savings on maintenance and facilities upkeep. Most of the buildings were in good repair and were handicapped accessible; however, buildings that had a capacity of over 700 students were housing less than 350.

In September 1999, ISBE released a report entitled *School Infrastructure Needs: Survey II Results*. The report revealed that in downstate Illinois there are 2,875 elementary buildings that needed \$1.5 billion of work to bring them up to code. There were 814 junior high/middle school buildings downstate that needed \$374 million in repairs, and 1,141 high school buildings that needed \$1 billion in repairs. Before the taxpayers of Illinois invest billions of dollars in needed repairs and upgrades to current school buildings it would seem prudent to examine the need for all of the facilities given the current realities of declining enrollment.

Reorganization Study

In FY02, ISBE provided grant money to encourage school districts to consider consolidation. Grants of up to \$10,000 were provided through the Regional Offices of Education to participating districts to conduct reorganization feasibility studies. Approximately 20 studies were funded. The authors reviewed all of the studies and selected the following to reflect the types of data communities require in making informed decisions. Each consolidation study should be customized to the needs of the communities involved, but core elements should be found in all completed studies. Selection criteria for the following example included reader interest and the diversity of this particular study.

Consolidation Study

This example of a consolidation report involved a feasibility study of five school districts in one county. District B included the county seat, and the other four districts were rural districts. The primary concern of this study was how schools might best meet the needs of students, particularly at the secondary level. The report included data on the five districts' enrollment and enrollment projections, finances, tax rates, general state aid, curriculum, student academic performance, and a needs assessment. The report concludes with recommendations for each reported area.

Enrollment

A review of Table 3 shows that the enrollment in all five districts has declined steadily since 1997. District A student enrollment declined from 364 in FY98 to 300 in FY02, representing a loss of 18 percent or about 2.5 percent per year. District B enrollment declined about 100 students or about 6 percent since FY98. Enrollments in District C dropped by 25 in the same period or about 7 percent. In District D, the enrollment declined from 426 in FY98 to 366 in FY02. This is a loss of 60 students or 14 percent of the FY98 enrollment. In District E, the enrollment declined from 442 in FY98 to 381 in FY02. This is a loss of 61 students or 14 percent of the FY98 enrollment. Overall, enrollments in the five districts have dropped from 3,068 in FY98 to 2,759 in FY02. This represents a decrease in enrollment of 309 students or 10 percent of the FY98 enrollment. When you consider that each student enrolled in a district was worth \$4,560 in state aid for FY02, the loss of enrollment reduced overall state aid by \$1,400,000.

Table 3. School District Enrollments, 1997-2002

District A Enrollment Summary						District B Enrollment Summary					
	'97-'98	'98-'99	'99-'00	'00-'01	'01-'02		'97-'98	'98-'99	'99-'00	'00-'01	'01-'02
K	21	20	18	22	15	K	105	117	125	108	100
1	22	22	20	20	20	1	119	109	139	116	120
2	24	18	23	19	19	2	101	108	99	114	101
3	24	23	17	20	21	3	100	110	119	91	119
4	35	20	20	17	21	4	111	102	112	110	91
5	32	30	23	22	19	5	99	118	112	107	100
6	32	29	32	22	20	6	120	103	120	111	99
7	28	31	32	29	23	7	109	131	109	120	111
8	27	25	36	32	29	8	119	98	121	106	106
9	29	28	28	38	34	9	116	115	113	122	114
10	26	24	26	26	36	10	116	115	106	116	113
11	26	24	24	22	23	11	127	112	104	99	99
12	38	25	27	20	20	12	120	119	102	97	90
	364	319	326	309	300		1,462	1,457	1,481	1,417	1,363

District C Enrollment Summary						District D Enrollment Summary					
	'97-'98	'98-'99	'99-'00	'00-'01	'01-'02		'97-'98	'98-'99	'99-'00	'00-'01	'01-'02
K	30	35	30	24	20	K	25	18	26	30	16
1	32	24	31	29	27	1	20	20	17	23	38
2	25	30	28	31	28	2	27	21	21	15	18
3	28	24	29	23	30	3	29	26	22	25	13
4	23	30	25	29	26	4	32	25	25	23	24
5	27	28	27	26	27	5	36	27	28	24	23
6	22	23	27	25	26	6	42	36	36	24	24
7	36	24	25	25	24	7	46	40	33	33	23
8	35	35	24	23	25	8	32	42	41	35	33
9	30	40	40	24	24	9	43	34	54	42	42
10	27	29	36	36	25	10	30	42	33	49	39
11	27	29	27	40	31	11	36	27	37	29	46
12	32	32	26	29	36	12	28	34	29	38	27
	374	383	375	364	349		426	392	402	390	366

Table 3 (cont.)

District E Enrollment Summary						Total Enrollment Summary					
	'97-'98	'98-'99	'99-'00	'00-'01	'01-'02		'97-'98	'98-'99	'99-'00	'00-'01	'01-'02
K	21	25	39	24	23	K	202	215	238	208	174
1	27	19	21	36	25	1	220	194	228	224	230
2	27	23	23	19	29	2	204	200	194	198	195
3	29	28	27	23	24	3	210	211	214	182	207
4	27	31	29	28	23	4	228	208	211	207	185
5	34	28	31	32	26	5	228	231	221	211	195
6	29	33	29	33	35	6	245	224	244	215	204
7	41	27	33	34	30	7	260	253	232	241	211
8	38	43	29	34	30	8	251	243	251	230	223
9	30	41	44	26	36	9	248	258	275	252	250
10	41	29	40	42	25	10	240	239	245	269	238
11	43	36	25	38	39	11	259	228	217	228	238
12	55	42	33	22	36	12	273	252	217	206	209
	442	405	403	391	381		3,068	2,956	2,987	2,871	2,759

Finance

One area that schools considering reorganization must address is finance. The consultants on the study used the last three school district audits, financial reports, and information from the central office staffs to compile a “financial snapshot” of the five districts. There are three “operating funds” for school districts: (1) the Education Fund, (2) the Operation and Maintenance Fund, and (3) the Transportation Fund. Table 4 shows the total operating fund balances on June 30, 1999, and the anticipated fund balances on June 30, 2002. Four of the districts—District A, District B, District C, and District D—were able to increase the overall balances in the three operating funds while there was a slight decrease in the District E balances.

Table 4. Operating Funds Balance

District	June 30, 1999	June 30, 2002
	Operating Fund Balance	Operating Fund Balance
District A	\$182,535	\$455,661
District B	\$1,488,896	\$1,745,587
District C	(\$446,616)	\$231,508
District D	\$434,526	\$558,554
District E	\$1,333,530	\$1,266,372

Source: June 30, 1999, 2000, and 2001 Audit Reports and district FY02 ending year balances.

As reflected in Table 4, the five districts have been well-managed for the past three years. For the past several years, the equalized assessed valuation (EAV) in the five districts had been increasing; however, that has changed over the past two years with the decrease in farmland assessment. Table 5 compares the EAVs for the five districts over the past two years. It is clear that the reduction in farmland EAV is affecting the four rural districts.

Table 5. Equalized Assessed Valuation (EAV)

	2000 EAV	2001 EAV	Gain/(Loss)
District A	\$31,524,722	\$30,298,061	(\$1,226,661)
District B	46,900,846	50,822,405	\$3,921,559
District C	45,886,025	44,075,874	(\$1,810,151)
District D	49,152,868	48,860,881	(\$291,987)
District E	37,791,767	36,503,000	(\$1,288,767)

Source: County Clerk's Office, July 29, 2002.

According to figures from the County Clerk's office, the four rural school districts will lose \$4,617,566 in total EAV for next year while District B district will gain \$3,921,559 in EAV.

Tax Rates

Table 6 lists tax rates for the five districts from the most recent audit. Using the maximum permissible tax rates in the three operating funds (Education, O&M, and Transportation) and the above EAV gains and losses, the five districts will experience the following changes in tax revenue for FY03.

Table 6. Operating Tax Rates and Income Gain/(Loss)

District	Tax Rate	Gain
District A	\$3.400/\$100 EAV	(\$41,706)
District B	\$2.775/\$100 EAV	\$108,823
District C	\$2.950/\$100 EAV	(\$53,399)
District D	\$3.200/\$100 EAV	(\$9,344)
District E	\$3.200/\$100 EAV	(\$41,241)

Source: Each district's most recent financial audit.

While the amounts of money are not large, four of the districts will be under constant financial pressure when the decrease in revenue is coupled with constantly increasing personnel costs and general inflationary costs for materials purchased by the school districts.

State Aid

Table 7 lists the General State Aid for each district in FY02. It should be noted from the table that the total “hold harmless” money for the four rural districts (District A, District C, District D, and District E) is \$812,906. If this provision of the law changes, there will be a very large reduction in receipts for the four rural districts.

State aid to school districts is a function of three variables. First, the state sets a foundation level per student that guarantees a certain amount of money per student if the district has an operating tax rate of at least \$3.00/\$100 EAV. For the FY03 school year, the state aid foundation level was again set at \$4,560/student. The second variable is the number of students attending school during the past year. The school district is allowed to average the best three months Average Daily Attendance (ADA) for the past year, and this figure is used to calculate state aid. The third variable is the local school district’s EAV. The formula multiplies ADA by the foundation level and subtracts local revenues (mainly property tax). This calculation produces each district’s state aid entitlement.

Table 7. General State Aid – FY02

	District A	District B	District C	District D	District E
'99 EAV	\$30,525,666	\$44,450,014	\$47,008,656	\$43,943,077	\$36,678,938
Calculation Rate	.03	.03	.03	.03	.03
Property Tax	\$915,770	\$1,333,500	\$1,410,260	\$1,318,292	\$1,100,368
CPPRT	\$100,136	\$203,856	\$53,064	\$38,454	\$55,878
Total Local	\$1,015,906	\$1,537,356	\$1,463,324	\$1,356,746	\$1,156,246
Foundation	\$4,560	\$4,560	\$4,560	\$4,560	\$4,560
X ADA	314.68	1,459.00	382.56	363.48	388.20
	\$1,434,941	\$6,653,040	\$1,744,474	\$1,657,469	\$1,770,192
- Local	1,015,906	1,537,356	1,463,324	1,356,746	1,156,246
State Aid	\$419,035	\$5,115,683	\$281,150	\$300,723	\$613,945
Hold Harmless	\$124,355	-0-	\$243,840	\$144,217	\$300,494
Total State Aid	\$543,390	\$5,115,683	\$524,990	\$444,940	\$914,439
EAVPP	\$97,005	\$30,456	\$122,879	\$121,055	\$94,485
Low Income Concentration	.0617	.2445	.1122	.2005	.3669
Poverty Guarantee	\$355	\$1,190	\$675	\$1,190	\$1,333
Poverty Grant	\$6,745	\$410,550	\$29,025	\$84,900	\$185,287
Total GSA*	\$425,780	\$5,539,640	\$310,175	\$385,623	\$799,232

*State Aid + Poverty Grant – Excluding Hold Harmless

Total State Aid for all five districts – \$7,460,450

It should be noted that while the state guaranteed each district \$4,560 per pupil for this fiscal year, in reality each district spends about \$1,000 more than that figure for each enrolled student. Specifically, in FY00, the operating expenditure per pupil for the five districts was the following: District A, \$6,030; District B, \$5,646; District C, \$7,348; District D, \$6,716; and District E, \$6,920.

It is clear that the larger district, District B, was able to operate at a lower cost per student, probably due to economies of scale. District B spent between \$500 and \$1,300 less per student than the other four districts. There was a difference of \$1,702 between the high and low spending districts.

Curriculum

A comparison of the current curriculum in the five districts is presented in Table 8. A function of the District B size is the curricular offerings at the high school level; they are more extensive than what's offered in the four rural districts. Because it is a larger school, District B students have access to a wider range of course offerings in all disciplines. The course offerings of the Area Vocational Center are also listed, and all schools have access to the center, although few schools are taking advantage of this resource. Districts need to consider *what curricular opportunities should children be able to access*. Students in small rural schools do not have access to the same types of classes as do students in the larger schools, particularly those in the suburban areas. This is particularly true in the areas of Advanced Placement, college preparatory / college credit classes, and vocational education.

Table 8. Comparative Study of the Five Districts' Curriculum Offerings BEFORE Consolidation

Content	District A HS	District B	District C	District D HS	District E HS
Agriculture	Intro to Ag Ag MT Ag BM Ag Science ALPD		Intro to Ag BSAA Horticulture Ag Mechanics	Basic Ag Ag II Ag Tech Coop Ed	Ag I Ag II Ag III Horticulture
Applied Life Skills		Nutrition and Foods Food Service Child Development Parenting Child Care Adult Living Living Environments			
Business	Accounting I Comp Lit Comp II Consumer Ed	Business Orientation Keyboarding I Keyboarding II Recordkeeping Accounting I Accounting II Sales Advertising and Retailing Computer Concepts Information Processing	Keyboarding General Business Accounting Computer App. Word Process Tech. Coord.	Intro to Bus Comp Lit Accounting Cons Ed Keyboarding Comp Prog – HTML Comp Prog – Basic	Intro to Bus Comp Keyboarding Multimedia Consumer Ed

Table 8 (cont.)

Content	District A HS	District B	District C	District D HS	District E HS
Drivers Education	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
English	English I English II English III English IV Speech	English I English I Honors Study Skills English II English II Honors English Fund Consumer English Speech Debate Drama Journalism Creative Writing Expository Writing Amer Lit Contemp Adol Lit Mod Novels Publications	English I English II English III English IV Journalism	Basic English English I Basic English II Basic English III English II English III English IV Speech Elective English	Intro to English English I English II English III English IV Speech Bus English
Family Consumer Science				Foods Clothing Parenting Living Environ Adult Living Child Development	Home Economics Ad. Living
Fine Arts	Art I Art II Band Chorus	Foundations in Art Studio I Studio II Band I Mixed Chorus Art – Independent Study	Band Chorus Speech/Drama Art Chorus	Art I Art II Art III Art IV Band	Art Band Chorus
Foreign Language	French I French II French III	Latin I Latin II Latin III Latin IV Spanish I Spanish II Spanish III Spanish IV	Spanish I Spanish II Spanish III Spanish IV	Spanish I Spanish II Spanish III Spanish IV	Spanish I Spanish II Spanish III/IV
Health	No	No	First Aid	No	No
Industrial Arts	Industrial Orientation Intro to Drafting Advanced Drafting (CAD) Intro to Woodworking Advanced Woodworking Intro to Metals/Electr Small Gas Engines Building Trades AVC Home Maintenance				Intro Tech Tech Drafting Wood Working Construction

Table 8 (cont.)

Content	District A HS	District B	District C	District D HS	District E HS
Math	Pre-Algebra Algebra I Algebra II Geometry Senior Math	Pre-Algebra Algebra IA Algebra IB Algebra IAB Geometry Algebra II Pre-Calculus Calculus Trig Computer Programming I Computer Programming II Advanced Algebra II Integrated Alg/Geom II	Pre-Algebra Algebra I Algebra II Math IV Geometry	Pre-Algebra Algebra I Algebra II Geometry General Math Pre-Calc	Algebra I Algebra II Geometry Intro Geo Intro Algebra Adv Math
Physical Education	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Science	Biology Chemistry Physical Science Physics	Concepts in Science Earth Science Biology Botany Zoology Ecology Human Anatomy Chemistry Physics Organic Chem Advanced Earth Sci Human Genetics Physics	Physical Science Earth Science Physics Biology I Biology II Chemistry	General Science Biology I Biology II Chemistry Physics	Physical Science Chemistry Biology I Biology II Anat & Phys Biology III Chemistry II Micro Physics
Social Studies	Civics/Govt Psychology U.S. History World History Current History Geography	Social Studies World History Current Affairs Psychology U.S. History I U.S. History II U.S. History III U.S. History IV Civics Consumer Economics	U.S. History Sociology Amer. Gov. World History Current Events	U.S. History I U.S. History II U.S. History III World History Political Science Current Problems Sociology	Civics Government American History World History Social Studies
Vocational		WECEP I WECEP II Aid Cooperative Library Media Center Aid or Office Vocational Ed			

Needs Assessment

The consultants conducted a needs assessment for three of the districts—District A, District B, and District E—through the *Mapping the Future of Your School District* program offered by the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs. All three communities placed a high priority on improving educational opportunities for their children, and consolidation was viewed as one possible means for achieving that commitment.

Pupil/Teacher Ratios and Pupil Administrator Ratios

Table 9 reveals that all five districts are operating with relatively low pupil/teacher ratios (PTR) and, as expected, the pupil/administrator ratio (PAR) in District B is higher than in the other four.

Table 9. Pupil/Teacher Ratios and Pupil/Administrator Ratios

	PTR	PAR
District A	10.6	102.7
District B	12.0	229.1
District C	12.3	126.3
District D	11.8	141.8
District E	9.9	136.7

Source: Illinois School Report Cards.

Full-Time Faculty Equivalence

A review of the junior/senior high school schedules of the five districts revealed how intertwined the faculty is at the two levels in the smaller schools. For example, in District A, the Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) faculty at the junior high level is 4.02; however, it takes ten different teachers to make up this full-time equivalency. Many teachers only teach one class at the junior high level. The following table contains the FTE for both the junior and senior high for all five districts. The actual number of teachers making up the FTE is in parentheses. In many cases, high school teachers wind up teaching only one section at the junior high (e.g., 8th-grade English), and this can lead to a fragmented curriculum.

Table 10. Junior and Senior High FTE

School District	Junior High FTE	Senior High FTE
District A	4.02 (10)	9.66 (15)
District B	18 (20)	33 (35)
District C	5.25 (9)	12.75 (16)
District D	4.875 (14)	14.625 (22)
District E	5.875 (18)	13.6 (20)
Total	38.02	83.635

Source: Illinois School Report Cards.

The above table illustrates why it could be difficult to recruit staff to fill positions when vacancies occur at the secondary level.

Expenditures Per Pupil

As shown in Table 11, average teacher salaries range from \$31,941 in District A to \$35,537 in District E, and average administrator salaries range from \$61,856 in District B to \$73,568 in District D.

Table 11. Average Teacher and Administrator Salaries

	District A	District B	District C	District D	District E
Teacher Salary	\$31,941	\$35,450	\$32,982	\$34,265	\$35,547
Administrator Salary	\$64,353	\$61,856	\$64,994	\$73,568	\$66,203

Source: Illinois School Report Cards.

Salary Schedule Comparison

Table 12 compares the 2001-2002 salary schedules in the five districts at five points: (1) Beginning BA Salary, (2) Maximum BA Salary, (3) Beginning MA Salary, (4) Maximum MA Salary, and (5) Maximum Scheduled Salary. The data were gathered from salary schedules supplied by the five districts. The highest scheduled salary in each area is boldfaced.

Table 12. Salary Schedule Comparison for the Five Districts FY 2002

District	BA	BA Max	MA	MA Max	Maximum
District A	\$24,000	\$33,990	\$25,000	\$37,355	\$39,720
District B	25,500	36,116	27,000	41,737	45,600
District C	23,881	35,474	25,040	38,952	39,590
District D	23,766	37,604	25,850	40,901	45,348
District E	25,300	35,060	27,440	40,930	42,835

Source: District Salary Schedules

It is clear that the District B salary schedule is superior in terms of overall teacher salaries. For most of the selected points, District B has the highest scheduled salary (BA, BA Max, MA Max and Maximum). District B has the highest Maximum Scheduled Salary, \$45,600, which exceeds District A by over \$5,880, District C by \$6,010, District D by \$252, and District E by \$2,765. One area that consolidation might influence is the ability of a new district to recruit and retain new teachers with a more competitive salary schedule.

Student Performance

Another area that the consultants investigated was that of student performance as measured by test scores (Table 13). Specifically, performance on the ACT was examined. A review of the test scores for all five districts indicated that students were performing at acceptable levels. District C exceeded the state average in reading and science, and District D exceeded the standard in four of the five areas. Interestingly, neither of these schools had the strongest curricular offerings yet they ranked first and third in per pupil expenditures.

Table 13. District ACT Scores

	Composite	English	Math	Reading	Science
District A	20.4	19.2	20.2	20.4	21.1
District B	21.4	20.2	21.5	21.8	21.6
District C	21.3	20.4	20.7	21.9	22.0
District D	22.0	21.9	22.0	22.0	21.6
District E	20.6	20.5	20.2	20.8	20.3
State	21.7	21.0	21.7	21.8	21.7

Note: Scores above the state average are boldfaced.

Source: Illinois School Report Cards.

Proposed New District

Enrollment and Projections

A review of Table 14 indicates that the total enrollment in the combined district will drop from 2,871 to 2,587 by FY06. At the high school level, the total enrollment will drop from 955 to 787 by FY06.

Table 14. Enrollment Projections

Grade	FY01	FY02	FY03	FY04	FY05	FY06
K	208	174	194	234	193	224
1	224	230	178	198	238	197
2	198	195	211	162	181	217
3	182	207	200	216	166	185
4	207	185	207	200	215	166
5	211	195	187	209	202	217
6	215	204	194	186	20-7	201
7	241	211	207	197	189	212
8	230	223	202	198	188	181
9	252	250	237	214	210	199
10	269	238	240	227	205	202
11	228	238	218	219	208	188
12	206	209	227	207	208	198
Total	2,871	2,759	2,701	2,668	2,611	2,587

Note: Calculations by IIRA staff member

Source: Illinois State Board of Education

Proposed Curriculum

Since the most important part of any school district reorganization is to improve educational opportunities for children, the high school curriculum illustrated in Table 15 is proposed for a single high school.

Table 15. Proposed High School Curriculum

Agriculture	English	Mathematics	Science	Social Studies	Foreign Languages
Ag Intro	Basic Vocational	Math Connections	Earth Science	World Geography	French I
Ag Science	English 1	Applied Math	Honors Earth Science	World History	French II
Ag Tech	Reading	Algebra I	Biology	Sociology	French III
Mechanics	Vocational English	Basic Geometry	Honors Biology	Psychology	French IV
Ag Business Management	1, 2, 3 English I English II American Lit Popular Lit Creative Writing Journalism Mass Communications Public Speaking Rhetoric Senior Composition World Lit AP Lit College English Honors English	Modern Geometry Basic Algebra II & Trig Modern Algebra II & Trig Advanced Algebra Pre-Calculus AP Calculus College Calculus Consumer Math I Consumer Math II	Biology I Biology II Chemistry Physics AP Chemistry Biology Studies Voc Earth Science Voc Biology	American History Civics Modern World	German I German II German III German IV Spanish I Spanish II Spanish III Spanish IV
Physical Education	Business Education	Applied Life Skills	Industrial Arts	Fine Arts	
PE	Business Technology	Child Care	Technology I	Art I	
Strength Training	Business Law	Introduction to Health Occupations	Construction Technology	Painting	
Early Bird PE	Career Pathways	Health Occupations	Construction I	2D Design	
	Keyboarding	Home Ec I	Construction II	3D Design	
	Accounting I	Home Ec II	Communications Technology	AP Art	
	Accounting II	Clothing	CAD	Intro to Graphic Design	
	Comp C&A	Foods/Nutrition	Production Technology	Advanced Graphic Design	
	Technology and Telecommunications	Parenting	Machine Tools I	Marching Band	
	Office Management/Procedures	Resource Mgmt	Machine Tools II	Symphonic Band	
	Economics	Adult Living	Transformational Technology	Freshman Band	
		Living Environment	Physics of Tech	Concert Band	
		Food Service	Small Engines	Jazz Band	
		Prac Educ	Machine Tools I	Chorus	
		I.C.E. Class	Machine Tools II	Music Appreciation	
		I.C.E. Job	Electronics	Music Fundamentals	
		Orientation to Voc Ed	Cosmetology	Color Guard	
			Computer Networking		
			Automotive Technology		
			Welding I		
			Welding II		
			Business Technology		
Health Education	Drivers Education				

It is clear that the proposed curriculum for a countywide district would afford broader curricular offerings for those students in the four rural high schools. One of the districts presently does not offer any Family/Consumer Science classes and only two years of one foreign language.

Economies of Scale in Administration

One of the possible savings that can be achieved through reorganization is the area of economies of operating expenses. Specifically, reorganization would allow the consolidation of the five central offices. The following is a summary of the central office expenses as were reflected in the financial statements of June 30, 2001.

Table 16. FY01 Board of Education, Executive Administration, and Fiscal Services Expenses

Board of Education Expenses

District A	District B	District C	District D	District E	Total
\$38,699	\$114,152	\$48,944	\$44,602	\$48,339	\$294,736

Executive Administration Expenses

District A	District B	District C	District D	District E	Total
\$87,166	\$168,284	\$102,138	\$83,687	\$85,924	\$527,199

Fiscal Services

District A	District B	District C	District D	District E	Total
\$25,105	\$17,408	\$35,818	\$34,010	\$34,771	\$147,112

Source: June 30, 2001, Financial Reports.

During FY01, the five districts spent a total of \$17,429,987 in the Education Fund. The \$969,047 that was spent in the five central office areas listed above amounted to 5.6 percent of total expenditures. If the five districts were consolidated, the amount could easily be reduced by \$600,000 per year. This amount could be redirected toward instruction.

Economies of Scale in Staffing

At the present time, the five districts employ 83.635 FTE teachers at the high school level, not counting counselors, social workers, and psychologists. The current average starting salary in the five districts is \$24,500. If you add an additional 20 percent for benefits, the total cost to the district for a beginning teacher is about \$29,400. In a reorganized district with one high school, the consultants estimate that the district will need no more than 58 FTE teaching faculty to adequately serve the current high school enrollment. The reduction of 25 teachers at \$29,400 would amount to \$735,000 compared to current expenditures. This reduction is calculated as if all of the reductions would come from nontenured teachers.

In ten years, the high school enrollment is projected to drop to about 724 students. If you assume a pupil/teacher ratio of 16:1, the district will only require 45 FTE teachers. It is not anticipated that there would be any immediate reduction in the number of elementary or middle school teachers.

Incentives

If the five districts were to reorganize into a unit district, the state would provide an incentive of \$4,000/teacher for one year. Based on 224 teachers, this would amount to \$896,000. Additionally, the state would guarantee that the new district would receive at least the same amount of state aid for the next four years as they received in the year prior to reorganization. Additionally, if the five districts reorganized next year, the state would also include the hold harmless money in the state aid guarantee. Given the current hold harmless amount of \$800,000 each for the four districts, this would be an additional \$3,200,000 in incentive money. The amount of the state aid guarantee will depend on the total state aid the five districts received the year prior to reorganization.

Conclusion

The reorganization offered many advantages to everyone—the students, teachers, and citizens of the county. For students from the rural areas, there would have been a wider range of course offerings, and their teachers would have been teaching in their major areas. For teachers at the secondary level, they would have had fewer preparations. The citizens of the county would have benefited from increased efficiency and being able to reduce central office overhead by \$600,000. The expenditure of \$1,000,000 for central office administration for a district of \$2,500 seems to be indefensible.

Summary and Conclusions

It is impractical to assume that school districts in rural areas can match the course offerings of large suburban schools. Consequently, what rural districts need to investigate is “How can they best meet the needs of the students in their districts?” One of the maxims of school consolidation is that to greatly improve course offerings you need economies of scale. That is, you need a large enough student body so that you will be able to offer advanced math, science, English, social studies, foreign language, and vocational classes. This translates to a high school of at least 450 to 500 students. If you put two small districts together, what you often wind up with is a similar curriculum, but the pupil/teacher ratio has been increased. Another consideration that districts must address if they are consolidating their high schools into one unit is do you build a curriculum for the current enrollment or do you build a sustainable curriculum that perhaps offers fewer courses but more sections of the courses?

Current educational finance policy in Illinois is somewhat contradictory. While there was a push to reorganize the Chicago Public Schools into smaller, more manageable units, the State is not funding small rural schools to the extent that they are able to offer adequate educational

programs. In effect, the State is pushing school districts to reorganize. The current school finance system makes it very difficult for small rural districts to continue their existence since the only way they can access additional State funds is to reorganize with one or more neighboring districts. The current upswing in the number of schools opting for reorganization was one of the factors that prompted this research project.

Data from the in-depth study of the five school district consolidations revealed that the advantages of reorganization/consolidation greatly outweigh the disadvantages. Examination of the districts has revealed that students have been afforded a better educational program, teachers have seen their salaries and benefits increase and are able to concentrate on their fields of interest, and taxpayers have been spared further tax rate increases to support inefficient schools. Small town homeowners in reorganized districts have seen their equity increase since people are willing to locate in a school district that offers a viable educational program. Students have quickly adjusted to the new school and benefited from the increased educational opportunities and competition. In reviewing the data, it is hard to find the disadvantages other than a modest increase in travel time for some students.

Meaningful reform of school finance in Illinois cannot be realized until the State addresses the key issue of school district reorganization. The authors endorse the following recommendations concerning reorganization incentives based on the Education Funding Advisory Board (ISBE n.d.).

Reorganization Incentives

1. *School designation.* Since school reorganization tends to be a temporary disruption to the educational process, when two or more districts reorganize into one K-12 district, it is recommended that the new district be excluded from any State designation system for a period of five years.
2. *Continue current incentives.* It is recommended that all current reorganization incentives remain in place, some with modification. The current incentives are as follows:
 - a. *\$4,000 per certified employee for three years.* This incentive should be modified so that a \$2,000 per classified employee is added, the quintile system is eliminated, and each district gets the incentive for four years. These grants should be increased by the CPI each year; however, no district may begin receiving this grant while receiving a similar grant from a prior reorganization.
 - b. *Salary differential grant for four years.* This grant should be modified to include fringe benefits and be continued for an additional four years at a decreasing percentage. The grant would apply to full-time certified and full-time educational support personnel.

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- c. *Deficit fund balances.* This incentive should be modified to pay off all negative operating fund balances effective with the final audit.
 - d. *General state aid differential.* No change recommended.

If additional consolidation/annexation occurs within the eight year timeframe, Incentives 2a and 2c will be granted for the employees and fund balances of the districts not involved in the prior consolidation/annexation.

- 3. *Implementation grant.* It is recommended that a new reorganization incentive be created to provide districts with the additional funding necessary to implement the reorganization. This grant should be a formula based on the number of teachers, students, and area of the newly created district. This should be a one-time grant and used for purposes which may include but not be limited to curriculum articulation, handbook revisions, extracurricular activities, staff development, Board training, alignment of State standards, mentoring, school structure, and assessment.
- 4. *Feasibility studies.* It is recommended that funding for feasibility studies continue to be made available from State sources. Each Regional Superintendent will serve as the Executive Secretary of a required consolidation feasibility study in the counties within their Regional Office of Education. These studies should be fairly standard in statewide scope so that they may be submitted to legislators of affected districts. Each Regional Superintendent will appoint a steering committee and the committee should have the following responsibilities:
 - a. Prepare a plan for the reorganization of school districts in the region into administrative units that meet the minimal requirements recommended in this report.
 - b. Take the leadership in submitting the proposals to the administration and boards of education of the affected districts.
 - c. If the original plan is rejected, facilitate the completion of additional proposals.
- 5. *Levy authority.* When two or more districts reorganize into one K-12 district, it is recommended that the newly organized district be given permissive taxing authority of \$.24 for transportation purposes and \$.10 each for life safety, working cash, and lease purposes.
- 6. *Reorganization votes.* Currently, Articles 11A (unit districts) and 11B (dual districts) differ with regard to requirements for passage of reorganization referenda. Article 11A requires a majority of voters in each reorganizing district, while Article 11B requires only a majority of those voting on the issue. It is recommended that both articles require a majority of those voting on the reorganization issue for passage. In addition, in order to prevent the “hostile takeover” of smaller districts by larger districts, it is recommended that before the reorganization question can be put to referendum, either (1) each Board of Education approve the reorganization

vote or (2) petitions requesting the reorganization vote be presented with signatures from 30 percent of the registered voters in each district.

7. *Annexations.* Article 7 was recently changed from requiring approval by the Regional Board of Trustees to requiring a majority vote in all “affected areas.” This change has all but eliminated school district annexations. It is recommended that Article 7 be restored to its original requirements.
8. *Dual to unit conversions.* Currently, a high school district and its coterminous elementary districts cannot form a unit district if one “affected” elementary district objects to the consolidation. It is therefore recommended that provision be made to allow the unit district formation of those districts wishing to consolidate. The geographic area of the unit district would be the area of the elementary districts wishing to consolidate. The geographic area of the elementary district wishing not to consolidate would be designated a non-high school district pursuant to Article 12.

The authors would suggest additional incentives relating to regional high schools. If two or more unit or dual districts develop a regional high school enrolling at least 500 students, the state should provide the following:

- The \$4,000 per high school teacher and \$2,000 per high school classified employee incentives for a period of four years
- 75 percent of the cost of building a new high school or remodeling/adding on to current facilities if the present facilities in the affected districts are not capable of adequately and safely housing the high school students
- Curriculum implementation grants for the new regional high school to ensure a smooth transition

At the current time, there are no incentives for small unit and dual districts to combine their resources and develop a regional high school that will better meet the needs of their students. Providing incentives and assistance in building/remodeling facilities to house the high school students would encourage collaboration and cooperation between districts.

While Illinois simply can no longer afford the luxury of over 892 separate independent school districts, reorganization by itself, even with financial incentives, is not the solution to the current school finance problems. After the incentive money is spent, reorganized districts can find themselves in financial difficulties like all other districts in Illinois because of the lack of adequate financial support. The State must decide what educational opportunities will be afforded each child in Illinois and then ensure that the organization and fiscal capacity is there to support it. A child’s education must not continue to be a function of where they live.



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Appendix A

Committee of Ten Interview Questions

Districts involved:

Person interviewed:

Date:

1. Why did you decide to be on the committee?
2. What was the most difficult moment?
3. What was the best experience you had?
4. Who offered you the most support?
 - a. If family named, who else?
5. If you could say one thing to those who voted against the referendum, what would it be?
6. What group (if any) did you feel supported you the most? (i.e., faculty, Rotary, religious organizations)
Why?
7. How involved were the district leaders?
8. What, if anything, needs to be changed in this process?
9. Do you have any stories to tell?
10. What closure did you experience?
11. What advice would you give to someone considering participating on a Committee of Ten?
12. On a scale of 1 (Never) to 4 (Absolutely), would you do it again?
Why or why not?

Is there anything else that you would like to add or comment on that these questions have not allowed you to share?



