

An Evidenced-Based Tool for Considering Consequences of District and School Consolidation

Few education policy decisions have more impact on students, families, schools, and communities than district and/or school consolidation. Moreover, these consequential decisions are made based on research that is far from clear in answering the question “what is best for my district?” Writing in the *Journal of Education Finance* in 2002, Jacob Adams and Michael Foster gave this advice: “Assume nothing and analyze much when considering [consolidation] proposals. Purported benefits of larger organizational units do not materialize automatically. Context is important, and issues of efficiency, cost, student performance, educational climate, and community relations must be addressed.” The purpose of this tool is to enable education and community leaders to thoughtfully consider the consequences (i.e., pros and cons) of district and/or school consolidation based on an understanding of the empirical research and experiential evidence in the literature.

Conclusions

A review of the literature reveals:

- The research base is limited, both overall and even more so in terms of rural-focused studies.
- Claims about financial benefits of consolidation are unsubstantiated by contemporary research about cost savings (most particularly, research investigating actual consolidations as opposed to theoretical models).
- Research on consolidation using theoretical models tends to oversimplify or lack contextual considerations, which leads to underestimation of costs and overestimation of savings to be achieved.
- Research on financial savings from consolidation show that savings are predicted only among the smallest districts—and so will have limited impact on the overall financial picture in the state.
- One-size-fits-all approaches to maximizing district size produce differential effects, with historically disadvantaged communities experiencing the greatest harm.
- Though larger schools may offer more courses and co-curricular activities, claims about academic benefits of consolidation are unsubstantiated by contemporary research on consolidation (i.e., research on actual consolidations finds little or no positive impact on student performance); on the contrary, related research on school and district size consistently finds that making schools or districts larger (as consolidation does) compounds challenges for economically disadvantaged students, students of color, and students with special learning needs.

- Schools, particularly those in rural communities, serve cultural, social and economic roles that contribute to community vitality and resident well-being for which closure of the school can have substantial negative community consequences.

Recommendations for Using this Tool:

- Conduct activities that engage broad representation of educational policymakers and stakeholders in understanding the pros and cons evidence related to school district and/or school consolidation. (Note: References cited in answering each of the four questions in the tool are found on the Appalachia Intermediate Unit 8 web site at _____)
- Identify the consolidation pros and cons most likely to materialize in the specific district and/or school context.
- Avoid conclusions based on the “ecological fallacy”; that is, avoid the application of statistical results to incorrectly make assumptions about the nature of individuals (or school districts) based on inferences about the group to which those individuals belong (e.g., assuming that one particular small rural school is inefficient or low performing based upon large-scale research suggesting that small rural schools, on average, tend to be inefficient or low performing).
- Practice the “show me” approach (i.e., demand district-specific understandings of the potential impacts on consolidation in your context), with particular attention to equity issues associated with deprivations in educational quality and disparities in educational opportunity as they manifest in a particular district context.

Evidenced-Based Tool for Considering Consequences of District/School Consolidation

<p>Q1: What happens when districts consolidate?</p>	<p><u>Research evidence indicating positive outcomes/opportunities created (pros):</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • States tend to offer financial incentives to encourage consolidation, including construction funds for new schools. • Schools in consolidated districts may offer additional courses (e.g., more higher-level academic courses, more CTE courses). 	<p><u>Research evidence base indicating undesirable outcomes resulting from consolidation (cons):</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • District consolidation tends to be followed by school closures, most often the schools located in the smaller of the consolidating districts and in the poorest/most racially diverse communities. • Additional courses offered by schools in consolidated district tend to impact few students (and in the case of
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		<p>higher-level courses, only the most advantaged students).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Superintendents in regional (e.g., multi-district) school districts tend to spend more time on political responsibilities (e.g., school board tasks, preparing for and travelling to meetings) diverting time from other responsibilities (e.g., instructional leadership, managing operations).
	<p><u>Experiential evidence regarding positive outcomes/opportunities created (pros):</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NA – there is however some evidence that sharing of administrative services among school districts and expanded state-sponsored virtual school offerings can “manufacture economies of scale” and produce some savings without consolidating school districts. 	<p><u>Experiential evidence regarding undesirable outcomes resulting from consolidation (cons):</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consolidation disproportionately impacts rural schools and school districts. • Challenges not related to consolidation (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic) are compounded in consolidated districts. • Consolidation leads to alienation of community members and increases divisiveness.
My context	Pros:	Cons:
Q2: What are the financial impacts of district consolidation?	<p><u>Research evidence indicating positive outcomes/opportunities created (pros):</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In statewide studies of hypothesized consolidations, cost savings/enhanced efficiency tend to result (e.g., cost savings of \$1000 per pupil or more are predicted to result from consolidation of PA’s smallest districts); savings are most likely to occur in 	<p><u>Research evidence base indicating undesirable outcomes resulting from consolidation (cons):</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In post-consolidation studies of actual impact, total budgetary spending reductions anticipated from economies of scale tend not to have materialized or to be far less than expected.

	<p>the smallest districts (in PA, those with fewer than 1,000 students).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Studies of actual school closures tend to show cost savings (as much as \$300 per pupil), primarily from decreasing number of total teaching positions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Per pupil spending tends to increase (note: not necessarily a bad thing, but does not support promises of cost-savings). • Increased funding tends to be temporary (e.g., tied to consolidation incentives). • State-level savings from consolidation tend to be negligible, since the districts from which savings can be obtained are such a small proportion of overall state spending.
	<p>Experiential evidence regarding positive outcomes/opportunities created (pros):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Redirection in use of existing funds. • Increased availability of state “incentive” funds (e.g., construction of new school facilities). 	<p>Experiential evidence regarding undesirable outcomes resulting from consolidation (cons):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased transportation costs in some districts. • Increased technology costs in some districts.
My context	Pros:	Cons:

Q3: What are the academic impacts of district consolidation?	<p>Research evidence indicating positive outcomes/opportunities created (pros):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student achievement tends to stay flat or show modest increases following district consolidation. • Educators may experience some professional benefits from consolidation (e.g., enhanced professional learning opportunities, increased pay). 	<p>Research evidence indicating undesirable outcomes resulting from consolidation (cons):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student achievement tends to decrease following district consolidation. • Students experiencing poverty, students of color, and students with special needs tend to be most negatively affected by larger school and district size resulting from consolidation. • Additional courses offered by schools in consolidated district tend to impact few students (and in the case of
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Schools in consolidated districts may offer additional courses (e.g., more higher-level academic courses, more CTE courses). 	<p>higher-level courses, only the most advantaged students).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Study of enrollment “shocks” (dramatic increases or decreases in enrollment) indicate significant learning loss when school size increases through consolidation. Achievement declines are most extreme in the year immediately following consolidation or school closure, but persist for at least 4 years after. Educators may also experience increased stress, loss of confidence, and heavier reliance on support networks following consolidation.
	<p>Experiential evidence regarding positive outcomes/opportunities created (pros):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> NA 	<p>Experiential evidence regarding undesirable outcomes resulting from consolidation (cons):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Delays in existing district/school educational priorities during organizational restructuring. Longer travel distance to school may limit participation of parents/family members in academic-related meetings or activities at school. If school closed, fewer opportunities or increased competition for students to gain learning experiences in curriculum-related clubs (e.g., Honor Society or CTE club officer) and co-curricular activities (e.g., band, choir) or opportunities to participate in athletic activities that develop “soft skills” (e.g., collaboration, cooperation, civic responsibility).
My context	Pros:	Cons:

Q4: What are the community impacts of district consolidation?	Research evidence indicating positive outcomes/opportunities created (pros): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community members tend to have a more positive experience with consolidation when they are meaningfully involved in the process. 	Research evidence base indicating undesirable outcomes resulting from consolidation (cons): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Economic indicators (e.g., home values, income) are negatively associated with the lack of a school in the community. Population decreases tend to be greater following a school closure. School closures reduce children’s and adults’ access to an important educational and community institution (e.g., limits community capacity for building mental health resilience in children and families). Loss of school role in community development.
	Experiential evidence regarding positive outcomes/opportunities created (pros): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Renovated or new school may have increased spaces or technology designated for use by community. 	Experiential evidence regarding undesirable outcomes resulting from consolidation (cons): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community members have less opportunity after consolidation to participate in democratic processes related to education (e.g., school board membership). Families have less opportunity to participate informally in their children’s education (e.g., travel time limits, volunteer opportunities on PTOs or STEM projects). Loss of essential community services schools provide related to health disparities, extreme poverty, food insecurity, and major employer.
My context	Pros:	Cons:

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