



# Thinking About School District Consolidation in Ohio

*Dr. Craig Howley*

In the summer of 2011, Governor John Kasich announced his intent to pursue school district consolidation. Consolidation was a commercial and industrial marvel in the late 19th and early 20th centuries; this same approach, applied to education, has resulted in closure of more than 95% of the districts that

operated in 1900. But does this approach still make sense in education? Is it a good idea, according to available research? This short document lists some key facts and makes recommendations based on those facts. A number of recent publications, however, provide much more detail (see below).

## Key Facts According to Research

- Across the decades, educators, including those in Ohio, have not recommended district consolidation as an economizing measure (e.g., Cubberley, 1914; Shibler, 1957).
- Before-and-after studies show that consolidation does not save money (e.g., Andrews, Duncombe, & Yinger, 2002; Cox & Cox, 2010; Streifel, Foldes, & Holman, 1991).
- Consolidation damages not only student achievement but also adult earnings (e.g., Kuziemko, 2006; Berry, 2004).
- Consolidation has improved school inputs, and perhaps as a result, schooling has become much, much more expensive (e.g., Hanushek & Rivkin, 1997).
- Small district size helps close the achievement gap by weakening the connection between poverty and achievement (e.g., Friedkin & Necochea, 1989; Howley, 1999, 2002).
- Larger districts and schools impose high achievement costs on the most disadvantaged students, but in some cases they do confer modest achievement benefits to advantaged students (e.g., Friedkin & Necochea, 1989; Howley, 1999, 2002).
- When districts merge, school closures follow: the loss of a school in a community depresses housing prices and undermines overall economic health (Brasington, 2004; Lyson, 2002).
- School districts with an enrollment larger than 3,000, and especially those larger than 15,000, are predictably inefficient and ineffective (Duncombe & Yinger, 2005; Walberg & Fowler, 1987).
- Districts of 3,000 may be fiscally optimal (Andrews et al., 2002), but in Ohio this means that deconsolidation seems a more fiscally and more educationally productive strategy than consolidation, especially since many of the largest Ohio districts enroll large proportions of disadvantaged students.

**About the Author:** Dr. Craig Howley holds the B.A. in English and Comparative Literature from Columbia College, the M.A. in Gifted Education from Marshall University Graduate College, and the Ed.D. in Education Administration from West Virginia University. Dr. Howley currently teaches for the Educational Administration program at Ohio University's Patton College of Education. His primary research interests include educational scale, rural education and talent development.



## Think About It

As is the case with deconsolidation, consolidation can make sense in some places. But in other places, it has hidden costs and inflicts unintended consequences that no one would want (lower achievement for impoverished students, fiscal diseconomies of scale, and a shove towards community decline). Such damage amounts to a legacy of failure imposed especially on the children, families, homeowners, and businesses of poor, rural communities. Early in the 20th century, consolidation seems to have helped improve the inputs of schooling (including enhanced school funding). The opportunities for improving efficiency through additional consolidations in Ohio seem negligible—history has moved on. The danger of making things worse, both fiscally and educationally, is still with us.

## Brief Recommendations

- Retain small districts currently serving a substantial minority (e.g., 30%) of impoverished students in Ohio.
- Retain small districts in Ohio's rural areas.
- Make consolidation a local option; let affected residents vote on the issue.
- Investigate other methods to improve educational outputs and reduce costs (e.g., cooperative purchasing agreements, combined financial services, enhanced roles for Educational Service Centers).

## For More Information

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