

## School Consolidation Will Occur

by John Richard Schrock

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“Somebody get a rope!” is the likely response to any suggestion of school consolidation in Kansas. Therefore a proposal by four veteran school administrators to consolidate the 303 Kansas Unified School Districts (USDs) into about 40 regional educational districts (REDs) would seem a non-starter.

Nevertheless, this plan is getting attention in the Kansas Legislature as a possible way to balance the budget. And the team’s presentation at this month’s State Board of Education meeting drew a sobering picture of Kansas school districts that left little room for shallow knee-jerk reactions.

Before anyone gets riled, they ought to look at the proposal a little bit closer.

In 1945, Kansas had 8,000 little school districts. By 1960, this decreased to 2,600, and a study suggested that 250 was the ultimate best number. In 1963, the Kansas legislature passed KSA 72-6744, which established the USD system and stipulated a minimum of 400 students in first through 12<sup>th</sup> grades, or 200 square miles or a \$2 million base.

In 1984, those minimal requirements were repealed, or we already would have far fewer than the 303 USDs we have in Kansas today.

The regional plan uses a business model that examines the placement of McDonalds restaurants and WalMart stores. Though such cold market models take little consideration of small community needs, an examination of the Kansas Rural Health Network shows how smaller unspecialized community hospitals are hubbed around a few large specialized centers. This provides a model for transporting young students to local elementaries, as secondary students ride farther to more centralized high schools.

Many citizens assume that consolidation automatically means bigger districts and the loss of small local schools that are the primary source of community identity. However, the RED plan suggests optimum sizes (300-400 for elementary schools and 400-599 for middle schools).

The study sketched out the possible reorganization of several of the proposed 40 REDs to estimate how much change might occur. For example, a south-central RED around Pratt might consolidate 17 districts with 7,600 students into one, and 36 attendance centers into 30. A southwest RED with 9,900 students might consolidate 17 districts into one, and 36 attendance centers into 30.

These scenarios are theoretical. Real consolidated REDs would have their own elected school boards and

authorize the reconfiguration best for their constituency. Proponents noted that both rural and urban schools are closing today, and some small rural Kansas towns will die regardless of whether or not they keep their shrinking school.

The touted advantages of regional districts were: higher teacher salaries, better health-care negotiations, uniform (higher) class sizes, and more course offerings including a regional technical school. Savings per RED were roughly calculated at \$3-4 million by cutting duplication of district offices, \$1-2 million in operational costs, and \$4-6 million in reduced instructional staff and support, all of which also ease current shortages in superintendents and teachers.

With 40 REDs, that would save \$240-480 million per year. However, such a plan would require legislation and if approved, a 5-10 year phase in. And much of the initial savings would have to be invested in restructured schools to accommodate students from the closed schools. Ongoing savings would then underwrite the higher teacher salaries, more course offerings, etc.

Ironically, the State BOE action preceding the presentation of this plan was approval of a request from the Herndon and Atwood districts to have a local referendum on consolidating USD 317 and USD 318. Whether giant strides are made toward 40 REDs, or baby steps toward 250 USDs, consolidation will occur in Kansas.

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