



Special Edition
Spring 2009

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PA SCHOOL DISTRICTS CONSOLIDATION by Marilyn Reed

Governor Rendell's recent suggestion that the 500 school districts of Pennsylvania be consolidated to as few as 100 districts raises many issues to consider. The Governor's plan is for the legislature to create a "commission" that would be given one year to develop two "consolidation maps", which would then be voted on by the legislature. If they refuse both plans, authority would be given to the unelected State Board of Education to consolidate districts as they see fit. This plan may be unconstitutional and one must wonder whose purposes are being served. The idea of school district consolidation has been considered for a long time in Pennsylvania and around the country, but that does not mean that it has validity. Sometimes two districts can come to a beneficial agreement as is currently happening right now in Beaver County where two districts are being merged into one. These mergers can work out if both districts volunteer to come together for the best interests of the children and the taxpayers

involved. Even when voluntary, however, it is not an easy process and many conditions need to exist for it to work. Two districts in Dauphin County, PA had considered a merger, but decided against it after they discovered there would be no real cost savings. A few years ago, the PA Legislative Budget and Finance Committee contracted Standard & Poor's (S&P) to do a study on the "cost-effectiveness of consolidating school districts". Standard & Poor's reported when it comes to lowest per pupil costs, 2,500 to 2,999 students is the optimum number per district. If this is the case, what good would it do to consolidate districts only to have them grow above the magic number of 3000 at some point in the future? Also, it would seem important to look at perhaps splitting large districts like the Pittsburgh Public Schools (currently spending \$20,000 on each of their 28,000 pupils) and Philadelphia (spending \$15,000 each on over 167,000 students). If maximizing savings is the main goal, then it would

seem these districts should split into smaller districts to really save money across the state. S&P found there were about 97 pairs of districts that had the potential to be good candidates for consolidation, because they were small and adjacent to each other. Pairing these districts could result in savings of about \$81 million, since their combined numbers would still be below 3000 students. However, S&P further reported there were key factors that had to be analyzed on a case-by-case basis. (Their analysis of this can be seen at <http://lbfc.legis.state.pa.us>) These factors include: 1) Property Taxes: It is most likely that one of the two districts will see a raise in their taxes. 2) Transportation: Most communities are only willing to allow their children a one hour/one way maximum ride to school. 3) Neighborhood School: Parents are usually strongly attached to the schools near their homes &

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New Name but The Same Old Plan—GCA (Keystone Exams) Update by Kim Geyer

Beginning in 2014-2015, all students will be mandated to demonstrate proficiency on the PSSA state assessment, or a validated local assessment in order to graduate from high school. If neither of these two assessments is utilized, then school districts will have the option to utilize the new Keystone Exams to determine eligibility for graduation. Keystone

Exams would be administered in the following core subjects: Mathematics: Demonstrate proficiency on two Math tests; English: Demonstrate proficiency on two English tests; Science: Demonstrate proficiency on one of the two science exams; More exams would be developed beyond the core five series, just as the GCA. In addition, all students

would still be required to take the PSSA to determine Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) under the NCLB Act. The Keystone Exam proposal permits districts to request alternative times of offering the exams to students. Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) will under

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CEO 2009 Essay Contest Results

**This years essay
contest topic:
the
Electoral College**

**We have the
final results of
the students who
participated in
the contest:**

First Place

**James Mullen,
Pine-Richland
Middle School**

Second Place

**Ashley Profozich,
Pine-Richland
Middle School**

Third Place

**Deeksha Sarma,
Dorseyville
Middle School**

**We want to thank
ALL those who
participated as
well as the
Judges who gave
of their valuable
time!**

PA School Districts Consolidation.....continued from page 1

even if cost savings could be guaranteed, consolidations are often very controversial due to issues such as socio-economic and demographic differences, loss of local identity and local control. Lastly, No Child Left Behind could be an obstacle to consolidation even under the Obama administration. Due to the fact districts are accountable for making Adequate Yearly Progress, a higher-performing district might balk at merging with lower-performing ones. On the plus side, S&P noted consolidation may yield better academic opportunities for students, because larger districts can provide a wider variety of Advanced Placement classes in all subject areas, and additional extra-curricular activities. Though it was not mentioned in the S&P report, it is important to keep in mind that large school districts with higher than average per pupil spending have been shown to not do as well academically. A study done by Howley & Bickel found that smaller districts had consistently higher test scores. (Howley, Craig and Bickel, Robert. "The Influence of Scale on School Performance: A Multi-Level Extension of the Matthew Principle" Education Policy Archives, Volume 8, Number 22. May 22, 2000). The Nevada Policy Research Institute further notes "Decreasing the size of school districts has a substantial, statistically significant positive effect on graduation rates."⁽¹⁾ As school districts increase in size, the percentage spent on teachers, books and teaching materials actually

appears to go down.

States other than Pennsylvania have also been considering consolidation. In Arizona, the idea prompted a report published by the Goldwater Institute in 2004. This report showed that consolidation usually means increases in class size and administrative costs, while simultaneously decreasing student achievement.⁽²⁾

Indiana, also weighing the pros and cons, discovered through a recent poll done by Indiana University that most people (66%) oppose consolidation as proposed by Governor Daniels. At the same time, Governor Rendell is pushing this idea, his neighbors in New Jersey have decided that consolidation does not really save money. Frank Belluscio of the New Jersey School Boards Association states, "What we've found invariably is that somebody's property taxes do go up." Why is that? According to Mr. Belluscio, there are usually differences in property wealth and enrollment between the combining districts and ultimately, "labor law requires the consolidated district to adopt the contract of whichever district was highest paid..."⁽³⁾

Maine is forcing the state's 290 school districts to consolidate into approximately 80 in an effort to cut school administration costs. "Bringing teacher salaries to the same level in a combined district, according to University of Maine education professor Gordon Donaldson, amounts to a hidden cost of consolidating." Other costs

often not considered include: 1) Who would buy unused facilities in the current economy? 2) Will they really be able to eliminate extra teachers/administrators due to contract restraints? 3) What is the cost of rebranding—signage, stationary, web pages, even band uniforms?

One concern overriding all of this is the loss of local control. As the districts get larger, local school boards and indirectly the average parent/taxpayer lose their ability to have their schools be what they want as compared to what the administrators, state and ultimately the federal government want in our schools. "As David Reynolds observes, in the pre-consolidation era, the local school 'was typically the key neighborhood institution binding neighbors and linking them to the larger social and cultural worlds around them.' Thus, consolidation of the local school district... threatened a community's social cohesion and economic vitality."⁽⁵⁾

If one can assume consolidation is not good for a community, can it really be good for children in the long haul? Fewer students in each school can create a more nurturing environment where all students can receive the attention they need and none will "fall through the cracks" as might happen in a larger school or in a larger district.⁽⁶⁾

(1) <http://www.smalldistricts.com/nevadastudy.pdf>

(2) <http://www.goldwaterinstitute.org/AboutUs/ArticleView.aspx?id=401>

(3) <http://www.nj.com/news/times/reginal/index.ssf?/base/news-16/1234155903151590.xm&coll=5>

(4) <http://www.kennebecjournal.maintoday.com/news/local/5843344.html>

(5) Reynolds, David, There Goes the Neighborhood, University of Iowa Press, 1999

(6) School Inflation by Christopher Berry <http://www.hoover.org/publications/ednext/3259475.html>

New Name but The Same Old Plan.... Continued from page 1

the Keystone Exam proposal require student remediation that will be a costly unfunded mandate. The cost of development of the exams alone is \$210 million over the next seven years.

The new Chapter 4 regulations will establish a Local Assessment Validation Committee with Revalidation of local assessments being every six years consistent with the strategic plan cycle. The cost of validation of local assessments will be evenly divided between the district and PDE.

Two recent news articles put in question the need for Pennsylvania to move forward with this plan. In an April, 2009 Los Angeles Times article, the results of a study on the California gradua-

tion testing was released. The study done by Stanford University and UC Davis indicated since its inception in 2007 over 22,500 students failed to graduate due to the testing. The students had fulfilled all of their graduation requirements effectively except for passing the test. The two groups hardest hit when it came to passing the exams were girls and non-whites. Texas also showed a higher increase in drop out rates due to students not passing the test. The question is whether exit exams, no matter what name is used for the tests, are a good indicator of what students are mastering. Also, in the April 2009 edition of Education Week, they reported on 41 state representatives

participating in discussions related to the first steps toward the development of grade-by-grade guidelines/standards in math and language arts. The National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers co-sponsored the event with a time frame that a prototype of high school graduation standards will be put together by this summer.

Another prototype of standards for the remaining grades in math and language arts are projected to be completed by the end of this year.

Above and beyond the debate as to whether nationalized standards should be a goal in general, it does bring to the surface

the question as to why Pennsylvania wants to spend millions on developing exit exams, or Keystone exams when the standards may well change shortly.

We want to again thank Kim Geyer of Mars Research & Retrieval Services for her continued vigilance, and updates on the Graduation Competency Assessments (GCA).

**Legislative Updates: current educational legislation now in committee in Harrisburg.****HOUSE BILLS: No. 1223**

(Referred into the Education committee 4/7/09) - No teacher or administrator in a public school entity shall be prohibited from reading from, during the courses of education instruction, or from posting in a public school building, classroom or event, any of the following or any excerpts or portions of the following: The national motto, the national anthem, The Pledge of Allegiance, The U.S. Constitution.....

No. 705 (Referred to the Education Committee on 3/25/09) - Parent Involvement programs and policies-the board of school

directors in a school district shall establish a parent involvement program, parent involvement policy and parent involvement committee. No school entity shall be required to establish a new program or policy if one already exists and fulfills the requirements of this bill.

No. 794 (Referred to Committee, 3/9/09) - This act provides for payment of fees for teachers in public, parochial, and private to receive their National Teacher Certification.

No. 731 (Referred to Committee, 3/5/09) - No school district may distribute any form of contracep-

tion to a student unless a parent or guardian of the student has provided prior written consent.

STATE BILL OR RESOLUTION:

Resolution No. 35 (Sent to Education Committee on 3/6/09) - The number of young people voting and their knowledge of their civil rights is rapidly declining every year...this Commonwealth needs to promote civic education and engagement in civic activities in public, private and parochial school...

Bill No. 56 (Introduced 1/20/09 and amended/sent to Committee, 3/24/09) an act relating to the public school system, including certain provisions applicable as well to private and parochial schools pertaining to positive steps towards strengthening school violence reporting, memoranda of understanding, coordination of efforts by school administrators and law enforcement, and on the over all safety of public school entities across the state. Changes will also be required to create an effective Office of Safe Schools with the PA. Dept. of Education to make school safer.

GED AND/OR EDUCATIONAL ADVOCACY

On a regular basis we receive phone calls pertaining to two issues. People are seeking information related to either taking the GED, or are seeking a copy of their certificate. Parents also call looking for an educational advocate for their child. If you know of anyone seeking this type of information, please pass along the following contacts. If they need a copy of their GED transcript, please contact:

**Pennsylvania (GED) Office, Commonwealth Diploma Program, Department of Education
333 Market Street, 12th Floor, Harrisburg, PA 17126 Phone: (717) 787-6747**

In all areas of the state the local intermediates units can be contacted for GED preparation courses, and testing. In Western Pennsylvania, the community College of Allegheny County can be contacted at (412) 469-6258 or (412) 394-6989. Information may also be found at www.ccac.edu/GED

For educational advocacy, and questions on issues affecting children's education, please call:

**The Pennsylvania Department of Education
Special Education Students: 1-800-879-2301
Regular Education/School Advisors: (717)-787-4860**



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information you need in a
way that meets your needs.**



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Save the Date



Mark your calendars– the Commonwealth Education Organization (CEO) will be holding a second Women of Character Conference on Tuesday, October 27, 2009 at the Carnegie Museum of Art Auditorium at 7PM.

Guest Speaker

**Dr. Miriam Grossman, author of *Unprotected*,
with a new book being released this summer.**

As a physician working on a university campus, Dr. Grossman was concerned that “college campuses have long been centers of the country’s culture wars, and most expect competing ideologies and agendas to be openly debated in classrooms and throughout campus life. Few expect, however, to find agendas in the offices of their campus doctor or therapist. Yet a culture war of sorts exists there as well, with alarming psychological and biological consequences, particularly for young women, What this involves is, **“The other side of sexual health: what you aren’t being told might hurt you.”**”