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**Proposal to Consolidate School Districts is a Distraction**

The Governor's recent budget message had a proposal that is cause for concern. He wants to explore the possibility of consolidating the state's 500 school districts to something he thinks is more manageable, say 100. The Governor claims this will achieve efficiency and reduce the tax burden on property owners.

Some background: Currently there are more than 1.7 million public school students in the Commonwealth's 500 districts. If the number of districts were to be reduced to 100, that would mean each district would have more than 17,000 students on average. As of 2007, the Department of Education showed that only seven districts contain more than 13,000 students—Philadelphia has over 200,000 and Pittsburgh's enrollment is just above 26,000. There are 78 districts that enroll more than 5,000 students, while the vast majority of districts (432) have fewer than that. Thus, the consolidation proposal will increase the average district size enormously.

If the Philadelphia and Pittsburgh districts are any indication of the effects of creating larger districts, taxpayers and parents of students should be wary. The Pittsburgh Public School District currently spends approximately \$20,000 per student with district-wide reading and math proficiencies around 50 percent and several high schools with proficiency scores under 20 percent. Meanwhile, the Philadelphia District spends \$15,000 per pupil and has district-wide proficiency levels under 50 percent. The notion that bigger districts will mean lower costs and better performance is not supported by the state's two largest districts.

Beyond the questionable assertion that bigger is better, there are a number of interest groups that are likely to create serious obstacles; first the teachers' unions. If, for example, five districts are to be merged and they have teacher contracts with widely different pay scales and benefit packages, it could be very expensive to bring the lower paid teachers to the level of the higher paid district's teachers. And, it is certain that the higher paid teachers will never agree to pay cuts. The equalization of pay rates will undoubtedly raise costs to taxpayers. Moreover, teachers will be strongly opposed to any plan that calls for reducing the number of teachers. And how will the new district deal with seniority issues? Not well if the airline experience is any guide. Add to the salary cost the need to equalize benefits, time off rules, etc., and the costs begin to become prohibitive. Indeed, it is the advent of strong teacher unions since the 1960s that have forever changed the landscape in terms of further consolidation such as had occurred previously.

The Governor will also likely find resistance in many if not most communities across the state. Consolidating small rural districts so that the new district has a much larger number of students will likely require students, especially high school students who will be concentrated in perhaps just two or three locations, to travel very long distances each school day. Parents will rightly be concerned over the busing of their children such large distances and away from familiar surroundings. Thus, they are potentially strong opponents of consolidation on the vast scale contemplated by the Governor.

There are several Pennsylvania counties with fewer than 2,000 students. A consolidation to get to a district of just 6,000 to 7,000 would of necessity cover a huge geographic area. Local governance would be extraordinarily difficult.

Then too, many existing districts are very proud of their schools, sports teams, bands, etc. and will not look favorably on having their identity taken away in a massive consolidation.

In those school districts where the ability to provide adequate local financial support is simply not there, it might make sense for the state to look for consolidation opportunities. But the notion that a massive, widespread and far-reaching consolidation of school districts is the right answer is simply misguided.

If the Governor and his education experts want to do something truly meaningful to save money and produce better education results, why not introduce real change? Create a voucher program that would give parents the choice of where to send their children, including private schools. The voucher would be funded by the state and the local district at 75 percent of the instructional cost reported by the district. Poorly performing schools would have to do better or lose students to the point of being forced to close. Bear in mind that the Pennsylvania Constitution requires the state to provide a system of thorough and efficient education. It does not require the state to operate a public school monopoly.

The proposal to reduce the number of school districts in the Commonwealth by 80 percent to cut expenses will undoubtedly meet with substantial resistance. Some of it based on valid argument, some not. But the important point is that the consolidation proposal is a distraction intended to prevent policy makers from dealing meaningfully with the costs of education and the extremely poor performance in many districts. Introducing competition and choice into the system makes enormous sense. Unfortunately, the powerful groups who dictate education policy in the state are committed to making sure reasonable reforms never happen.

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