

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.