

Myths and realities of school consolidation in Washington state



Myth: Each of our 295 districts functions as a silo with no cooperation between entities.

- Washington's school districts have a deep history of innovative cooperatives, offering AP courses, college in high school, outdoor and alternative learning experiences, and sharing administrative, operations, transportation and other services. They continue to seek new ways to collaborate and save scarce resources.

Myth: We can save millions of dollars by consolidating schools.

- State dollars fund only 52 percent of the cost of administrative salaries in districts under 1000 students; 48 percent is paid through local levies and other sources. These superintendents often wear additional hats such as principal and teacher.
- The 61 smallest districts are funded by the state for less than one full-time administrator. The smallest 27 districts are funded for less than one-third of an administrator.
- Current consolidation efforts target medium to large districts such as Olympia, Tumwater and North Thurston, and East, West, and Central Valley in Spokane as well as small remote districts. Consolidating larger districts would necessitate creating assistant administrator positions due to the sheer numbers of students and buildings involved.
- Education is the largest economic driver/source of jobs in some communities, where school buildings are the economic, social and cultural centers of community life, day and evening, year-round.
- Washington's loss of income from just one year's dropouts statewide, over their lifetimes, totals \$5,963,880,000. Washington's rural and remote schools last year reported the highest on-time graduation rates—some at 100 percent—and the lowest dropout rates.
- Studies of legislatively mandated consolidation consistently show that savings do not materialize. Indiana University researchers crunched testing and budget data to conclude that of the Hoosier state's 292 districts, the 49 with fewer than 1000 students are, on average, the top-performing *and* the most efficient.

- Potential savings through consolidation are offset by increases in transportation costs, the cost of enlarging the receiving districts' buildings to accommodate additional students, and increased salaries of teachers moving to larger districts with higher contract rates.

Myth: Educating kids in small districts costs significantly more than in larger, more efficient districts.

- The 2010 JLARC study revealed that it costs 6.5 percent of Washington's education budget to educate 5.3 percent of its students who attend the smallest schools, a difference of only 1.2%.

Myth: Legislatively mandating a specific number of districts will not negatively impact student achievement.

- Any change to the governance of a school district will be disruptive to students, parents, teachers and the learning environment. Indiana's experience showed that all gains being made in student achievement came to screeching halt when consolidation was mandated, and it took years to regain student achievement levels.
- Rather than focusing on student achievement, districts undergoing forced consolidation spend precious time and energy on the bureaucratic and legal challenges of closing schools, transferring levies and bonded indebtedness, renegotiating employee contracts, and managing cultural shifts.

Myth: Small schools don't offer the educational opportunities students need in today's global economy.

- Small schools send a higher percentage of students to college. They have been pioneers in the use of education technology to provide online learning opportunities in remote locales.

Myth: "We're not talking about closing schools, just eliminating costly administrative structures."

- Significant portions of administrative salaries are supported locally, so little savings will accrue to the state. And once you consolidate a district, the receiving district—not the Legislature—determines whether schools stay open.

The experience of Castle Rock School District, into which Vader schools were consolidated in 2007, confirms that reconfiguring Washington's public schools into fewer districts could become the ultimate distraction from our primary goal of providing a world class education for all children.

