

School District Consolidation in Other States

The scale at which school services are provided varies across the country. Some states, including Maryland, Virginia and many other southern states, have countywide school districts. Other states, like New York, operate on a district or municipal scale. Research has indicated that there may be cost savings and improved services if small school districts were consolidated. As a result, many states with school districts operating at a sub-county level are looking at school district consolidation as a means to save money and improve the amount of services offered to students. Maine is in the midst of a dramatic reform and changes have been made in Arkansas. Proposals are also being considered in New Jersey, Indiana and Vermont.

Maine

At the end of 2006, three different reports came out on high per pupil spending in Maine schools being driven by administrative costs. The Governor proposed and the Legislature enacted a massive restructuring program for schools in June 2007. This law requires all school districts to work together to reorganize into larger, more efficient units. Where consolidation would be impractical, these units would have to look for internal administrative efficiencies to reduce costs.

By December 2007 school districts had to submit a reorganization plan for approval by the Education Commissioner. These plans had to reorganize school districts to contain at least 2,500 students with a few exceptions, including if surrounding districts would not merge with them or if they were highly efficiently and high performing. The goal was to reduce the number of school districts from 290 to no more than 80 school districts. 85% of school districts were in reorganization plans that complied with the requirements.

Once approved by the Commissioner, these plans are to be submitted to referendum and approved by November 4, 2008. If a school district fails to adopt the reorganization, it would face strong aid punishments, including a 50% reduction in some aid streams and less favorable consideration for school building aid. All school districts are to be reorganized by July 1, 2009.

More information on this restructuring is available at:
<http://www.maine.gov/education/reorg/lawsummary.html>.

Arkansas

In November 2002, the Arkansas Supreme Court ruled that the education provided to students was inadequate and ordered that reforms be in place by January 2004. In response to this, Governor Huckabee proposed legislation consolidating all school districts with fewer than 1,500 students – two-thirds of Arkansas' school districts. In 2004, the Legislature instead enacted legislation that consolidated school districts below 350 students. This legislation along with other funding reforms went into effect, and the



State was found to be in compliance with the ruling for that year. In October 2005, the special Supreme Court masters overseeing the reforms reported that the State was no longer in compliance with the ruling and suggested further consolidation.

New Jersey

As part of the New Jersey Legislature's 2006 Special Session on Property Taxes, the Joint Committee on Government Consolidation and Shared Services issued recommendations on school districts. They recommended a pilot program for a countywide school district. This would allow the State to get a sense of the advantages and disadvantages of countywide administration. A bill to enact this change was introduced and passed in one house, but it is unlikely to be enacted due to local opposition in the pilot county.

In addition, the Legislature also recommended and enacted a bill giving county school superintendents (a position that is appointed by the Governor in each county to oversee school districts) more authority including: eliminating non-operating school districts; creating K-12 school districts; providing administrative services to school districts; and approving certain expenditures of school districts. A recommendation was also made to move school board elections to November but was not acted upon.

The full report is available at:

http://www.njleg.state.nj.us/PropertyTaxSession/OPI/jcgo_final_report.pdf with the schools recommendations on pp 55-63 and 80-84.

Indiana

Indiana's Commission on Local Government Reform offered four recommendations on schools in the report they issued in December. They called for school districts to be reorganized so that all have a minimum student population of 2,000 and a process for this reorganization that sets straightforward state achievement standards, creates local plans for reorganization, and gains approval from the State Board of Education.

They also recommended: requiring all purchasing be done through their BOCES-like entity, unless additional savings through independent purchasing can be documented; holding all school elections at either the primary or general elections; and requiring the municipal government in which the school district primarily resides approve any bonding.

The full report is available at:

http://indianalocalgovreform.iu.edu/assets/docs/Report_12-10-07.pdf with the schools recommendations on pp. 27-31.



Vermont

In December, the Vermont Education Commissioner issued a report called for by the Vermont Legislature on recommended changes to the current structure of the education system. The Commissioner recommended requiring school districts with fewer than 1,500 students to collaborate with other school districts to become part of a larger school district. If the school districts did not comply by a certain date, the State would force a merger.

The report also called for funding to pay for transitional costs of mergers, polling Vermonters on the need for educational governance change, allowing school choice for all high school students, and allowing new school districts to decide how to best engage citizens.

The full report is available at:

http://education.vermont.gov/new/pdfdoc/dept/ed_governance/act_82_governance/report_act82_sec19.pdf

