

# Merger/consolidation of school districts

*By David W. Davare PhD, director of research services*

Increasing school taxes, student test score debates, political action/taxpayer groups, declining enrollments and communities in transition, along with many other elements, are combining to generate considerable debate about reducing the number of school districts in Pennsylvania. In some areas of the state, the debate is becoming a centerpiece of the public discussion about education.

## **Is the term merger or consolidation?**

The words merger and consolidation often are used interchangeably in the debate. And, like any other debate, the terms being used can mask the intent of those pushing for merger and, therefore, require clear definition. Will districts be merged or consolidated? Does proposed merger include the consolidation of buildings? Under municipal law in Pennsylvania (Act 90 of 1994), consolidation means the elimination of existing governmental entities and creation of a new governmental entity, while merger means one of the governmental entities from the original group remains. In school terms, merger implies the combining of two or more districts with the intent of eliminating an administrative group and/or duplicate programs. Consolidation implies the combining and closure of buildings and reduction of staff through elimination of duplication within the resulting district. Unfortunately, the history of school merger shows that there is little difference in outcomes. This may be a case of a difference without distinction.

## **History of merger/consolidation**

The National Center for Education Statistics began keeping track of the number of U.S. districts and buildings beginning with the 1937-38 school year. The Pennsylvania Department of Education also has maintained data on the number of districts dating to the 1900s. More than 117,000 school districts existed in the U.S. in 1937-38, operating about 250,000 public school buildings including one-room schools. Over the ensuing 60-plus years, the number of districts declined to less than 15,000. During this same 60-year period, the number of school buildings declined by almost 158,000, to a little more than 92,000 buildings. While this decline represents the elimination of one-room schools, many older and smaller buildings also were combined. As district and building reductions occurred, the number of public school students almost doubled from more than 25 million to almost 50 million.

This change has been characterized as moving from an era of one-room schools to consolidated schools. A smaller number of administrative structures support the smaller number of consolidated schools. This does not necessarily mean fewer administrators.

Pennsylvania forced the merger of school districts beginning in 1966. There is little available factual data concerning the financial, political and educational aspects of this mandate. What is known is that during the 1960s, there was a decline in the number of districts from 2,277 to 669. This was followed by a second decline in the 1970s from 669 to 505 districts. The 505 were reduced to 501 as the result of federal antidiscrimination litigation that lasted from 1970 to 1981.

### **The debate**

The school district merger debate has centered around two primary arguments that support the merger of districts. One reason is that merger saves money; the other is improvement in student achievement through expanded access to educational resources.

There are merger/consolidation initiatives currently active in 12 states. Four states clearly are targeting merger to eliminate smaller schools with the goal of saving money. Only one state is providing financial incentives to the local districts.

A review of the available research indicates that neither of the key arguments in support of school district merger actually occurs.

There are no studies that document cost savings as resulted of school district merger. While there are a number of pre-merger studies that point to potential savings from merger, there are no follow-up studies documenting any savings.

### **The second argument used to justify school**

merger suggests improvement in student achievement would result. The key to this position is that through improved access to educational resources that results from merger, there will be improvements in student achievement. A review of the literature on student achievement and merger presents results that are contrary to the argument in support of merger.

In 2005, the Nevada Policy Research Institute reported that as school size increased, "the percent of budgets spent on teachers, books and materials declined." When districts are merged, the total dollars expended do not increase proportionally when students are added. Resources tend to remain constant and are spread across more students.

The literature states that as merger of districts occurs, buildings usually are consolidated, producing larger student enrollments per building. The literature consistently reports that as building size increases, poverty influences increase and students can "fall through the cracks." This often results in the need to shift resources from educational programs for programs such as "drop-out prevention" and discipline.

Merger of districts typically results in the reduction in the number of buildings. A couple of studies of merger/consolidation have reported that, in a community where the school is the economic center of the community, a

closure will have an adverse economic impact on that specific community.

**What does this mean for school boards in Pennsylvania ?**

Merger of school districts is a politically charged issue focusing on the claims of savings to taxpayers and improvements in student achievement. As consolidation of buildings occurs, power tends to move away from parents, students and the local community. If merger is merely for the purpose of saving money, then there is little evidence that this actually occurs. If improved student achievement is the intended purpose, the available evidence shows an opposite result.

To be successful at merger, policymakers need to do extensive study of all aspects of the proposed merger. Because merger shifts the political dynamics of a community by shifting political power away from the parents and schools, proposed mergers need to involve the citizens as part of the decision process.

**Number of School Districts in Pennsylvania (10-year intervals)**

School Year	Number of Districts	Change in Districts
1899-00	2,510	--
1909-10	2,599	89
1919-20	2,590	(9)
1929-30	2,585	(5)
1939-40	2,552	(33)
1949-50	2,530	(22)
1959-60	2,277	(286)
1969-70	669	(1,894)
1979-80	505	(164)
1989-90	501	(4)
1999-00	501	--

Source: PA Department of Education, Division of Educational Statistics