

SMALLER DISTRICTS

by Rep. David N. Cox

"School district size has a consistent negative relation to student performance and is highly significant in three out of four tests." -W. Niskanen & M. Levy, University of California, Berkeley⁴

The main reason taxpayers have not passed more bond elections for more and smaller schools is that our districts are too large. Their suspicions say that their money is going to benefit some other part of the district. The district is no longer their community, but it is rather a larger government entity.

Setting up a way and a criteria for when to split districts, will provide a more sure way of correctly solving problems in the future which will help prevent the malaise affecting us now.

At present we have a situation where problems are allowed to fester and people to be alienated despite the Herculean efforts of current district administrators. Relatively few people are involved. Instead of having a local board member to talk with when problems happen, **we have board members that represent areas which are often larger than that of state legislators.** When problems come up, they get hundreds of calls, overburdening them and making impractical both the serving and educating of the people. As such, the people, who generally don't know their board member, go to their legislator over the problem. Legislators have so many other state issues to worry about, that few really understand the details or the big picture of education, like a board member would. After a while, legislators begin to try to solve the problems

and generally either encumber the system or make enemies of educators with mandates that don't work. The next step is, after being alienated, to attack or refuse to advocate for education.

Public education was set up to function more like a local corporation, with a board of directors and a CEO. **American education was never set up to be a department of state government.** It was set up to be a local, publicly owned, non-profit corporation. This worked well when communities and districts were relatively small because more people were involved per capita and therefore more understood needs, responsibilities, and costs.

Now, where districts have become big, few people per capita are involved, budgets are big and too complicated for most people. The larger the district, the more people believe the district has deep pockets. As such **they ask for more and are less willing to pay the needed taxes for the increasing burden.** When a district is small, the people can and have to make the decisions to either pay up or forget the benefit. They know that their money is going to themselves not to someone else.

Research shows that the same benefits that small **schools** have are the same ones that small **districts** have. There are diseconomies of scale with costs. "...Webb & Ohm (1984) found smaller districts more efficient than larger ones in both dollars per student and numbers of administrators per student...."⁵ Very small districts are expensive and so are large districts. **There seems to be an optimum size for classes, schools, and districts. We need to find that**

size for each and work to keep in line with it, for in the long-run it will be less expensive and provide a better product.

To set up a criteria for splitting districts will require help from district administrators both rural and urban. My observations show

that districts function best at between 2,500 - 5,000 students or roughly one high school and its feeder schools. I am convinced that divisions would have to be instigated at the state board level because no district would bring it upon themselves. However, after the split has occurred, the people will find new freedom to tailor their schools to their needs.

ADDITIONAL NOTES

⁴ Education and Urban Society, Feb 1989, "A District of a Certain Size, An Exploration of the Debate on School District Size" by Florence R. Webb, *University of California, Berkeley*.

The following is a compilation of quotes by researchers on the subject of school district size in relation to their mission. All quotes are from various articles taken from *Education and Urban Society*, Feb 1989.

From "District Size and Student Learning," by Herbert J. Walberg University of Illinois at Chicago.

"But it appears that smaller districts on average may be more effective and efficient: Their students appear to score higher on standardized tests (other things being equal) and they may be more satisfying to parents and citizens."

"...large schools are concentrated in large districts." *Coleman and Laroque (1986)*

"Similarly, Strang (1987) documented the rising power of state bureaucracy and the decline of local autonomy even as districts grew larger. He saw the transformation of U.S. education from informal community

control into large-scale bureaucratic organization stemming in part from the expansionary role of the states."

"Smaller districts (and privately financed schools) can ill afford such specialization but may actually have advantages in maintaining a cohesive general curriculum; adapting to local preferences and conditions; and strengthening ties among school, home, and community. Such districts may do fewer things better and avoid spurious categorization of students and needless administrative complexity."

"If larger districts do worse, then the largest might be expected to do worst. Many citizens and educators, indeed, believe that such cities as Atlanta, Detroit, Los Angeles, and New York are education catastrophes. Some policy analysts have proposed radical schemes that would have received little serious consideration a decade ago. These include...**breaking up large-city districts into free-standing smaller units;**...." (emphasis added.)

"...the consolidation of districts into larger units that has been taking place for the past half century may have been a move in the wrong direction. Generally, it appears that the smaller the district, the higher the

achievement when the socioeconomic status and per-student expenditures are taken into account. Why? Superintendent and central staff awareness of citizen and parent preferences, the absence of bureaucratic layers and administrative complexity, teacher involvement in decision making, and close home-school relations--these may account for the apparent relative efficiency of small districts in North America."

From "Size, The Ultimate Educational Issue?" by Barney M. Berlin, Robert C. Cienkus, Loyola University of Chicago.

"Why does smaller seem to work better? In their own ways, all of the authors have answered this question. The literature on educational change repeats the answer. That is, people seem to learn, to change, and to grow in situations in which they feel that they have some control, some personal influence, some efficacy. Those situations in which parents, teachers, and students are bonded together in the pursuit of learning are likely to be the most productive."

From "School and School District Size Relationships: Costs, Results, Minorities, and Private School Enrollments" by Robert W. Jewell, University of Chicago.

"...a significant number of families may choose to send their children to private schools because they wish to avoid educational associations for their children with large public school districts and/or large public schools."

"Students in states with smaller districts and smaller schools have higher SAT and ACT scores."

"Minority public schools in the United States are concentrated in states that have large school districts and school districts that have large schools." (Could this be one reason why minorities are struggling to improve?)

"Per-pupil expenditure averages ... have no significant statistical relationship ... (to) average school district sizes, proportions of students in large districts, or average school sizes." (Large district size does not appear to be less expensive.)

!!! "...private school enrollment ... has strong positive relationships with district size and school size -- the larger the districts and schools, the higher the proportion of non-Catholic private school enrollments among the states."

From "School Size, The Continuing Controversy" by Kent McGuire, Education Commission of the States.

"Generally, there is agreement that unit costs are higher in the smallest and largest schools. Various studies characterize per-pupil costs as having a U-shaped average cost curve, where costs are high in both the smallest and largest schools."

"The number of school districts was then reduced from approximately 128,000 in 1930 to 36,000 in 1960. There are fewer than 16,000 today."

From "A District of a Certain Size, An Exploration of the Debate on School District Size" by Florence R. Webb, University of California, Berkeley.

"...Webb & Ohm (1984) found smaller districts more efficient than larger ones in both dollars per student and numbers of administrators per student...."

"Real spending on K-12 education in the U.S. increased more than fourfold -- after inflation (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1973, in Guthrie, 1979) -- during the period when district consolidations were increasing district size one hundred and fifty fold."

"...achievement drops as enrollment levels rise."

"I believe splitting districts to optimum size would solve the accountability problem on a local rather than state level and provide happier citizens and teachers."