

INPUT ON CREATION OF PIONEER SCHOOL DISTRICT

By petition co-sponsor – Representative David N. Cox

The decision to pursue division of the Alpine School District is one that has had a lot of thought and study given to it. Alpine School District is not the largest district in the state or nation, though it is 4th largest in the state and among the largest 100 out of 14,000 districts nationwide. Alpine is not a “problem” district as compared to many big city districts. However it is growing fast with over 50,000 students. So what compels so many people to want to create their own, community district? Perhaps I cannot speak for all of them, but here are my reasons.

1. Research, of which I have collected some on my website at www.smaller-schools.org, supports the notion *that a smaller structure will give a better product, at a better price long term, while building the citizens* at the same time. While all groupings are benefited, numerous studies particularly point to the fact that lower-income areas are the most benefited by having smaller districts and schools. My own studies of Utah included on my website show this to be the case.
2. Nationally *larger districts* put a smaller percentage of their revenue directly to the classroom. They have a larger bureaucracy. Some have said they *become more of a social agency than an educational agency*. For those willing to read it, there is much research supporting the idea that the best thing we could do for public education is to divide the large districts, reintroducing them to the communities they serve. *The only way to contain the ever-increasing growth in programs and costs for education is to bring it back to the local community level* and schools’

“community councils” don’t do that. They have neither real power nor responsibility. They don’t control budgets, taxes, curriculum, or personnel. They are merely a nice way to get buy-in from the patrons.

3. There is even more research supporting the absolute need to build *smaller schools to bring accountability, safety, academic improvement, parental involvement, connectedness, and even teacher retention*. This is combined with the fact that the most accurate predictor of school size is district size (*i.e. the larger the district, the larger the schools*). This is proving more and more to be true in Alpine School District. I do not believe we will be able to pass the next bond for buildings if we stay together. This will mean even larger schools. In similar growth areas in the country, this has eventually led to schools of three to five thousand students. We already have elementary schools of over 1400.

These are perhaps my biggest reasons for desiring a new district. It will bring more accountability from the educators and the taxpayers toward each other than all the state-imposed accountability or tax-cap schemes devised. Does this guarantee things will be better? No, it only makes it more likely. Freedom is always somewhat of a risk, but it provides much more opportunity. When the United States split off from Britain, it did not appear economically to be a wise choice, at least in the short term, but it sure has been long term.

There are also answers I have to the criticisms of others regarding finances and whether now is the time.

1. The financial study does not change my opinion even if it is accurate, because of the value of local control and involvement and what the studies show of the product of smaller districts. However, I have problems with the value of the study because *it did not research what the revenues really would be*, so no choices can be made from the study. The reports of the study gave the false idea that voting for this division increases taxes. *Dividing the district does NOT raise taxes.* Taxes would not be raised unless people elected board members that were willing to raise them or by a vote of the people. Nationally big districts are more expensive. In Utah there is little difference in administrative cost per student between large and smaller districts unless they have less than 1000 students. *If charter schools can do it effectively with NO tax base why could we not do it WITH our tax base?*
2. Some have said that we need to divide, but that now is not the time. They say wait until we have more tax base or some other reason. Now IS the time. *The window of opportunity is open. If this fails, I believe we will not get another chance.* No one will sacrifice all that time and their reputation again. Much as I hate to mention it, once passed it can be reversed. Districts can be consolidated. However, once citizens get a taste of freedom they will not want to give that up I believe. There is desire nationwide to divide large districts. People have been trying to split Los Angeles and Las Vegas and many other places for years and have not been able to because they are already way too big. The bigger the district gets, the bigger becomes the political network and union to fight the split. While some district divisions have taken place in the last 30

years, they have all been smaller districts that don't have that big network in place to kill the movement. Hence, *the bigger a district is, the harder it is to split it even though the need is greater.* There will always be reasons thought up to oppose it by those fearful their jobs would not be needed. Thus, if we understand the governance issue and agree that it is right and needed at some point in time, *we need to take the chance when it is given or it won't be offered again.*

3. *The district is already starting to be split by means of charter schools.* If trust is not regained toward public education by giving the governance back to the people in local communities (*the real owners of the schools*), these single-school school districts will continue to multiply. If the district is not divided into organized community-by-community districts, it will be done anyway, in a fragmented way; piece by piece, in a more disjointed fashion that will not serve the citizens as well and *will ultimately cost more than dividing the district.*

The tax-base is not the problem in this issue. There is enough if we make good choices. Three-fourths of the funding is not provided that way. The real issue is "Are we willing to let go and sail our own boat?" The research supports it (*if we'll read it!*)