

Big or Small?

A Policy Analysis of School Consolidation

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Introduction

Tell most people that you are interested in the issue of school consolidation, and their first assumption is likely to be that this issue has already been played out. School consolidation, which has been encouraged through state and national policies throughout the 20th century, is viewed as being a 'done deal'. Certainly, consolidation in the post-WWII period has reduced the number of schools in the United States from 185,000 in 1945 (Nelson, 1985) to 62,000 in 1990 (Mitchell, 2000). School consolidation has been pursued generally at the state policy level, through a set of policies favoring large schools over small schools both economically and otherwise.

While consolidation has been happening across the United States for years, the issue of small versus large schools is still very current, especially in two very distinct settings. First, many small rural schools are fighting to keep local control and location of schools (for examples, see the Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools [<http://www.ael.org/eric>]). Second, some urban neighborhoods are pushing to establish small community schools in the face of the problems that occur in large urban schools (for instance, see the Small Schools Coalition in the Chicago Public Schools [<http://www.smallschools.org>].)

In this paper, I will discuss the historical and political economy contexts of school consolidation, outline the current school consolidation issues, and then analyze school consolidation from the perspective of the 3-P Model, discussed in more detail below.

Ideological and epistemological preamble

In presenting a policy analysis, it is important to understand the philosophical and epistemological underpinnings of the work and the author. This evaluator asserts that in the modern world in general, and in educational institutions in particular, there has been an overemphasis on large solutions regardless of the nature of the problem being addressed. Whether the issue is electricity needs being met by hydroelectric dams and nuclear power plants, housing needs being filled by large apartment complexes and suburban developments, or educational needs being answered by large schools, international, national and state policies have tended to favor the big over the small. While this perspective has enriched developers, builders, bankers and powerful business interests, it is far less clear whether individual common people have experienced benefits greater than small solutions would have provided.

The preference for large projects is an offshoot of the capitalist economic system that rewards economic growth over all other values. In this worldview, the only sustainable system is one with continuous growth accompanied by decreasing costs. Of course, there are alternative views of sustainability that are more defensible in non-economic terms, but this general worldview is rarely seriously questioned. Nevertheless, a number of studies have made strong cases for the value of a series of small solutions to large problems. Projects such as the Grameen Bank, which provides micro-loans for business startups in the developing world, and efforts to save small family farms both recognize and demonstrate the feasibility and effectiveness of small solutions. In this paper, we will examine some studies that suggest small schools potentially offer some solutions problems facing education.

With this ideological view, the author sees policy choices about the size of projects as not just economic decisions, but also socio-political decisions. In the following analysis, one of the questions that will be addressed is how size affects the various stakeholders in the policy process.

Epistemologically, this author comes from a perspective of the social shaping of policy. In this view, policy processes are socio-cultural political systems that are dialectically shaped through a series of interactions among stakeholders.

This is closely related to the epistemic triangle (Bhola, 2000) formed by systems thinking, dialectical thinking and constructivist thinking, but is also related to the author's background in social informatics and the social shaping of technology and technological systems. Both views predispose investigators to consider the totality of complex interactions and to reject determinism as an explanation for the choices of actors in social systems.

Context

Historical frame

Prior to the twentieth century, the United States was a rural nation, and those schools that existed tended to be small. The one room schoolhouse has a solid place in American lore, with one teacher teaching a small number of children from all grades together. In the twentieth century, however, several demographic changes began to take place. First, with the industrial revolution in full swing and increasing rates of immigration (reaching a high of 10.4 immigrants per 1,000 U.S. population in the period from 1901-1910 compared to the current rate of less than 3 immigrants per 1,000 population (U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1990)), the American population began to shift away from the countryside and

into the large cities. Also, the population was growing inexorably. Between 1850 and 1900, the U.S. population tripled from 23 million to 76 million people, and then tripled again by 1980, to 226 million (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990).

By 1918, rural and small schools were beginning to be perceived as academically weak, and the trend toward consolidation began (Nelson, 1985). School consolidation became even more rapid during the Cold War. The Soviet launching of Sputnik on October 4, 1957:

galvanized a movement to modernize and enlarge America's schools. The best and the brightest agreed that small schools burdened our ability to win the Cold War. The campaign to abolish them was led by Harvard University President James Bryant Conant, who contended that those who resisted school consolidation were 'still living in imagination in a world which knew neither nuclear weapons nor Soviet imperialism' (Mitchell, 2000).

These pressures toward consolidation saw the number of schools decline precipitously as enrollments increased along with the U.S. population. During the Baby Boom and Generation X years from 1945 to 1980, school enrollments increased from 23 million to 40 million, but the number of schools fell from 185,000 to less than 86,000 (Ravitch, 1984). By 1990, there were only 62,000 schools in the U.S. and the average school

enrollment was 653 compared to only 127 in 1940 (Mitchell, 2000). In addition, the number of large schools have increased to such an extent that two in five secondary schools now enroll over 1,000 students, and some have as many as 5,000 enrolled (Mitchell, 2000).

In this frame, it may seem inevitable that schools have increased in size. Certainly the historical evidence suggests that population pressures and political pressures have forced schools to adapt to a world where large schools are a necessity. In later sections, however, we will discuss alternative views of this issue.

Political economy frame

The political economy of school consolidation has changed over time. As discussed above, during the 1950s a great deal of political pressure was put on schools to consolidate and create "modern" comprehensive high schools as a way to defend American from communist imperialism. Economically, the late 1960s and 1970s, as well as periodic economic downturns in the late 1980s and early 1990s, saw schools facing the same economic pressures as other institutions in the U.S. economy. School consolidation was offered as a way to control increasing costs and stop downward trends in standardized test scores and perceived worsening school performance.

School consolidation has not always been easy. In the local political realm, there has generally been distrust from both the public and school personnel to plans to consolidate schools (Cummins, Chance, & Steinhoff, 1997). Also, in recent years there have been two trends that are starting to make large consolidated schools less palatable politically. First are the widespread popular reports of the dangers students face not only in our large inner-city schools, but also in large suburban and rural school districts. Certainly the Columbine shootings (in a school with 2,000 students) and other highly visible instances of violence in seemingly "safe" schools had an impact on public attitudes toward school safety. In addition, the popular news and media have reported on increasing levels of violence in all types of schools, drug use and abuse in the schools, teenage pregnancies, and poor academic performance of so many students. While some argue that the answer to these problems is to "get tough" and turn our public schools into little more than day-prisons, others have suggested that an alternative is to make schools smaller and, thus, easier to handle.

For instance, in 1999 Vice President Al Gore criticized the practice of "herding all students into overcrowded, factory-style high schools" and Education Secretary Richard Riley suggested reducing school size to address issues of student alienation. Riley told the National Press Club that the nation

needs to "create small, supportive learning environments that give students a sense of connection. That's hard to do when we are building high schools the size of shopping malls. Size matters." (Gore and Riley cited in Mitchell, 2000, p.12). Organizations have been pressing policy makers to understand the benefits of small schools, educationally, economically and politically. Examples include the Small Schools Coalition in Chicago, The Bay Area Coalition of Essential Schools in San Francisco, the Center for Collaborative Education in New York City, and the Rural School and Community Trust based in Washington, D.C. Along with these trends are the increasing amounts of educational and social scientific research that suggests benefits from small schools for educating children. Together, this paints a picture that indicates that the political economy of school consolidation is slowly changing as more and more influential voices question the status quo.

Current situation

The Policy

There is not a single nationwide policy on "school consolidation". There are, however, a broad variety of state policies encouraging school districts toward consolidation.

What follows is a sampling to show the relative uniformity of the general intent of the policies in a number of states.

Minnesota: The Minnesota legislature passed "corporation-cooperation" legislation in 1989 that offers direct revenue compensation and optional levies to school districts that choose to consolidate. In 1993, the state had 411 school districts, and analysts expected that the legislation would result in the loss of approximately ten districts per year, although it is not clear how long this trend was expected to continue. There was consideration of mandatory consolidation legislation in 1990, but it was dropped due to opposition. (Hall & Arnold, 1993)

Iowa: The State Superintendent of Schools in Iowa has suggested that instead of the 418 school districts in the state in 1993, 125 school districts would be more appropriate for the state. Using financial incentives, the state encourages local communities to choose consolidation rather than mandating it. (Hall et al., 1993)

Illinois: Illinois has broad incentives for school districts that choose to consolidate. Among the incentives:

1. If a new district qualifies for less total state aid than the former two districts combined, the state will make up the difference for the first three years of operation as a joint school.

2. In the first year of operation, the state will make a supplemental payment equal to the combined existing deficits of the two school districts, thus paying off their operating debt.
3. For three years, the state will pay the difference in teacher salaries raised to make up differences in earnings between the schools.
4. For three years, the state pays the new school district \$4,000 per FTE employee in the district. (Hall et al., 1993)

Oklahoma: Oklahoma passed H.B. 1017 in 1989 and the current code lists the following inducements to consolidation in the form of one-year allocations of funds:

1. Purchase of uniform textbooks if the districts were not using the same books.
2. Employment of certified teachers for subjects that the personnel from the consolidated districts were not certified to teach.
3. Severance payments of 80% of a terminated employee's previous year's salary.
4. Furnishing and equipping newly required classrooms and laboratories.
5. Purchase of additional transportation equipment.

6. Renovation and construction of school buildings if deemed essential by the State Board of Education. (2000 School Laws of Oklahoma, 2000)

While there are some differences in the examples, they are generally only in the extent of scale. Generally the policies are "carrot" rather than "stick" policies: by offering incentives, in some cases extremely generous incentives, school districts are strongly encouraged to consolidate as a way of fixing their existing infrastructural, supply and personnel issues.

Currency of the Topic

Most educators probably think consolidation is a "done deal." As discussed above, the historical issues influencing schools to consolidate began near the beginning of the twentieth century and accelerated in the 1950s. Many school consolidations took place in the 1960s and 1970s. In reality, though, many states still have small rural schools and are even today grappling with the issue of whether to consolidate. Nebraska, for instance, has the largest number of school districts per capita in the nation, partly as a result of having resisted the national trend toward consolidation in the 1950s and 1960s. This is in contrast to their neighbors Iowa, South Dakota and Missouri,

which embarked on an aggressive reorganization of schools in response to a 1968 report that concluded that the Midwest had too many schools to build an effective educational climate. When Nebraska's state education commissioner endorsed the report, he was ousted from his job (Mitchell, 2000).

As a latecomer, however, Nebraska has been making up lost ground lately. In 1996, the state adopted a series of policies favoring large schools through funding formulae. While the largest districts saw increased state funding, small school districts faced cuts as high as 10%. Even though Nebraska's small schools are among its best (students attending Nebraska high schools with less than 100 students are significantly more likely to graduate and go to college) and the per student costs at Nebraska's small schools are only 7% higher than the costs at the largest schools in the state, legislators looking to make quick cuts in budgets have decided to sacrifice the state's small schools (Mitchell, 2000).

Vermont is another state with a large number of small schools: the average school in Vermont has only 310 students. Unlike Nebraska, however, Vermont has adopted Act 60, which replaced local school taxes with a statewide property tax that pays every school district a basic grant for education. In addition, the state provides additional funds to small schools to cover their higher costs per pupil. Even though legislators

had planned for these funds to be temporary, in 1998 the state department of education concluded in a report that "small schools in Vermont cost more to operate than larger schools but they are worth the investment because of the value they add to student learning and community cohesion" (Mitchell, 2000). As a result, the legislature apportioned additional funds to support small schools, providing an average 5% boost in revenue per school.

Another current trend in the issue of consolidation, and the underlying issue of large versus small schools, is in urban school districts. While most urban school districts have long since consolidated and grown into massive urban structures, some are beginning to question the model of education that favors these large schools. Critics are pointing to the problems in large urban schools—drugs, violence, student and teacher alienation, family decay—and beginning to suggest that one answer to these problems is to have smaller school settings with a stronger connection between school personnel and their students. One example is the Urban Academy in New York City (Raywid, 1994). The Urban Academy is a school-within-a-school, an independent school housed in nine classrooms within the building of a larger school, the High School for the Humanities (HSH). While the HSH has 1,500 students, the Urban Academy operates with only one hundred 10th through 12th graders. It is

not selective in its admission policies, and serves students with a wide variety of abilities, interests, achievements and performance. Even though many of the students are not among the strongest students academically, either before entering the Urban Academy or upon leaving, 95% of the Academy's graduates attend college (and most of the rest enter the military), 100% of students graduate, none drop out, and all students pass all six of the state's required competency tests.

Among the Urban Academy's ingredients for success are the small size, the dedication of teachers and students to success, a coherent pedagogical focus across the school curriculum that seeks to engage students in the learning process, and an ethic of constant revision and improvement enhanced by a collaborative model of problem solving. Successful programs such as the Urban Academy are being pursued in many American cities to address the very problems caused by consolidation in the past.

Main issues

Before moving into the policy analysis portion of this paper, it will help to identify some of the main issues that will be discussed below. Here we will just highlight the topics; specific arguments pro and con will be presented in more detail below.

1. Cost: One of the arguments made in favor of school consolidation is that by employing efficiencies of scale, large schools are able to operate more cheaply than many small schools educating the same number of students. In general, small schools cost more per student than large schools, although the extent to which this is true varies from state to state, and some studies have found relatively small differences. The main sources of the per-pupil savings are in administration and facilities costs. Fewer principals and superintendents are required (and attendant support staff), and fewer buildings result in lower overall costs of operation and maintenance.
2. Effectiveness: Measures of effectiveness are extremely difficult to quantify in the educational realm. Many proxies have been suggested (standardized test scores, completion rates, college attendance rates, etc...) but it is difficult to concretize the school experience for students. How can one measure the benefits that come from attending a school with strong connections among students and between students and faculty and administrators? How can a sense of safety in the school setting be measured, quantitatively or qualitatively?
3. Safety: Violence and anonymity are two major problems identified in large schools. While the public violence of

a Columbine shooting gets a lot of attention, many more schools have violence everyday: fist fights, shootings, assault, drugs, and so on. While these are not absent in small schools, few would disagree that small schools are able to control and prevent these sorts of behaviors much more easily.

4. Alienation and other social costs: In a country where citizen alienation is at disturbing levels, building schools that foster alienation at an early age supports these dysfunctional trends in society. In a school with a caring faculty and administration and fewer than 100 students, it is nearly impossible for a student to withdraw without this being noticed by school personnel. In a school with 5,000 students, it is not only possible, but one would actually be more surprised if their withdrawal was even noticed, let alone that a teacher or counselor would specifically try to help the student. This is particularly true for the quiet, non-disruptive student. They are easy to lose track of.

5. Variety: Large schools can offer a wider variety of programs. For instance in Hall's (1993) study of rural Illinois schools, he found that the larger of two schools in his comparison offered an obviously greater variety of classes. Examples include six business courses compared to

three in the small school, three different languages, two of them offered up to year IV in a large school compared to a single language offered for two years in the small school, seven more English courses at both the remedial and advanced level not offered at the small school, twice as many mathematics classes, an a complete vocational education series not duplicated in the small school at all. Some studies that we will cite below, however, suggest that even with a greater variety of classes and activities, a smaller percentage of students may get to participate in this enhancing programs.

National and global implications

The debate over consolidation and school size is part of a larger debate on the purpose of education. Should schools do everything possible to make sure that all students are helped to achieve their potential to as great an extent as possible? Or is education a zero sum game with limited resources—must some students lose and others win, while we try to minimize the disadvantages for the losers? If we engage our utopian imaginations, the former possibility is far more palatable even if we do not necessarily believe that it is a very realistic likelihood at this time. Unless we seek higher goals, we are unlikely to reach them.

These issues do not just affect Americans. The Western model of education is exported around the world, and this model is rapidly becoming, or has become, the model for the world. If our underlying policy preferences remain the same, this preference for large schools will have large consequences in the more rural countries of the world. In a country with poor rural roads and limited transportation systems, it is not just a matter of riding a safe and modern school bus an extra 20 minutes to school, but it becomes an issue of whether students will be able to get to school at all over long distances on foot or in unsafe and expensive vehicles.

Analysis

In a policy analysis, it is necessary to select an analytic frame as a tool for understanding policy issues. In the policy realm, there are a number of alternative frames available. For this paper, I will use the triple perspective (3-P) model of policy analysis (Bhola, 2000b). Bhola defines policy analysis as:

a thinking process for separating parts of a whole to understand the nature and function of things... Policy analysis should be seen as a self-conscious, systemic and systematic examination of a policy in regard to its

antecedent values, on the one hand; and, on the other hand, its implications and consequences for the society at a particular historical time (Bhola, 2000b).

In order to accomplish this set of tasks, Bhola offers the triple-perspective (3-P) model as a practical tool using "systemic-dialectical insightful construction rather than a systematic-deductive theoretical formulation" (p.6).

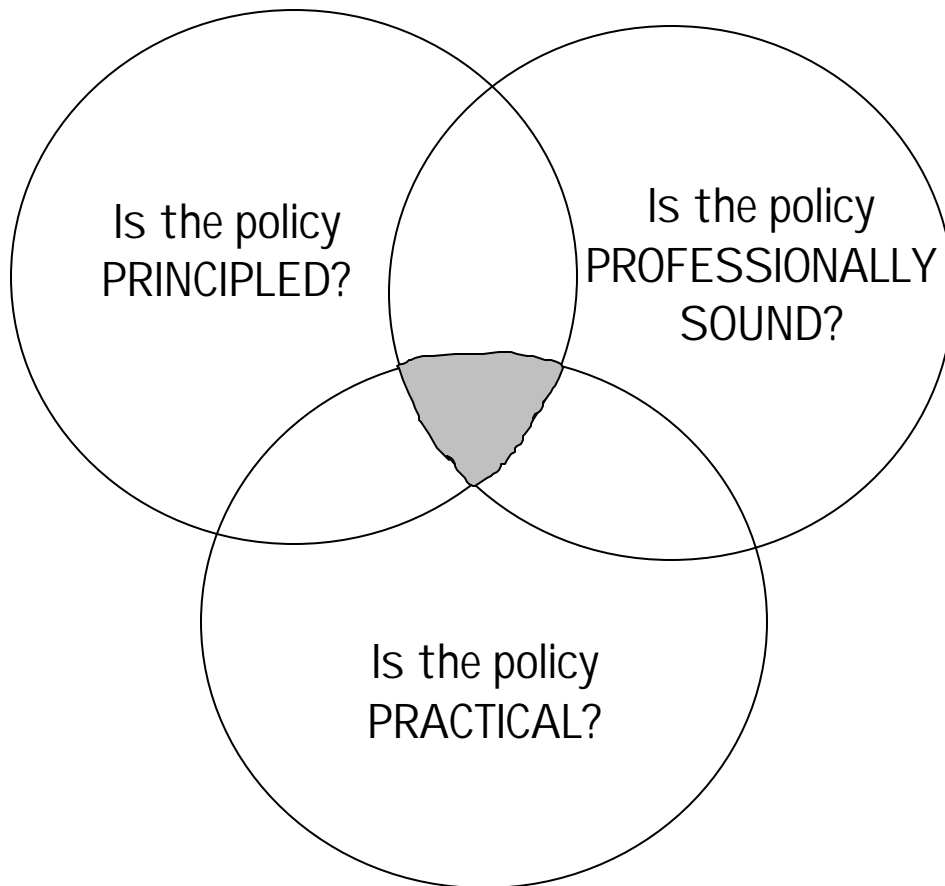


Figure 1: Triple Perspective (3-P) Model of Policy Analysis

The three aspects of the 3-P model are illustrated in figure 1. The 3-P model asks three inter-related sets of questions, as

seen in the illustration. First, is the policy *principled*? Second, is the policy *professionally sound*? Third, is the policy *practical*? The answers to these questions should be pursued in as broad a manner as possible, using a variety of tools, perspectives, data, narratives, and sociological imagination to reach an understanding of the policy issue that is as fully rounded as possible.

As you can see in the illustration of the 3-P model in figure 1, these three questions do not stand alone in isolation from one another. There are substantial overlaps, and the extent of the overlap may vary from issue to issue. Certain professional considerations also help to understand the practicality of a policy issue. Likewise, professional standards include a definition of that profession's principles; asking if a policy is consistent with meta-principles will also include consideration of professional specific principles. Using this tool, however, allows policy analysts to place a policy within a framework for understanding. If a policy is found to be strongly consistent with principled stands, is clearly professionally sound, and is able to be practically implemented, it would fall in the area of overlap in figure 1 indicated in gray. This ideal represents a policy that is strongly defensible and sound.

In the next section of this paper, we will apply the 3-P model to the question of school consolidation.

Is consolidation principled?

Using the 3-P model, one of the three questions asks, "Are policies favoring school consolidation principled?" To answer this question, it is necessary to set a standard for principled action. Some would argue that this is difficult, since different actors will have different standards by which to judge the actions of others. However, recognizing that a certain level of relativity exists in human values does not preclude an analyst from analyzing whether policies are principled. As long as the perspective of the analyst is clear (see the ideological preamble of this paper, for instance) and the analyst attempts to document their reasons for their determination, readers will in turn be able to resolve for themselves their own level of comfort with the analyst's interpretation.

In the case of schools, it is not difficult to argue that schools should have as one organizing principle reducing inequality of opportunity in society. Public schools in the United States can be understood as a mechanism for leveling the playing field in a utopian view. If all children have access to public schools, and if we can posit a perfect world in which these schools help all children reach their full potential, then

accidents of birth can be somewhat minimized. The advantage of wealth would not, of course, be eliminated by education, but people with the advantage of a solid educational background could at least overcome some of the disadvantages of not being wealthy. Of course, we all know that in reality public schools do not fulfill this ideal, but few in education would argue that this ideal is misguided.

If, then, one principle in question is whether school consolidation is a principled policy, we can then look at the issue from at least two different levels of abstraction. On one hand, school consolidation could be argued to be principled at the macro level; by eliminating small schools with inadequate facilities and under-trained teachers and replacing them with more modern facilities staffed by a better faculty, the school may be a better school. On the other hand, at the individual level there is clear evidence that large schools disproportionately benefit gifted and talented students who are able to take advantage of better classes and expanded extracurricular activities. For the less advantaged student, their likelihood of participation in enriching experiences actually decreases with school size. Finally, for the most disadvantaged student there is a much higher risk of "falling through the cracks" and becoming disenfranchised and marginalized.

Looking first at the macro level, some studies exist that have indicated that consolidating schools into one larger district can give students more programs and access to better facilities (Nelson, 1985). McCreight (1998), for instance, describes a small school district in Texas with a deteriorating 30 year old infrastructure, leaking roofs, unsafe wiring, lack of teaching space, lack of housing for teachers and taxpayer resistance to funding increases, and overworked personnel where school consolidation offered and option for improving a failing rural school. Nelson (1985) argues that consolidated schools are able to share courses and facilities, that sharing results in a more varied curriculum, and capital improvements costs are reduced due to the elimination of duplicate facilities. Likewise, Hall & Arnold (1993) present data from Illinois that suggests that the advantages of consolidation in terms of broader curriculum, increased teacher salaries, and taxpayer savings far outweigh the disadvantages they identified, such as increased travel time for students. These sorts of arguments are generally the ones offered by policy makers who favor school consolidation; unfortunately few qualitative or quantitative substantive studies have been made to document these claims. In the articles discussed above, for instance, McCreight offers more of an advocacy article with no data, and Nelson is only discussing the benefits in a short paragraph before discussing

in greater detail the liabilities of school consolidation. Only Hall & Arnold (1993) present fairly convincing data in four case studies of Illinois schools that had clear curricular advantages for consolidation, and even then the districts in question were very small (under 100 students per grade) and consolidated into small- to moderate-sized schools ranging in size from 675 to 2100 students in K-12. In other research, the only two samples of unqualified successes for larger schools over small schools that I was able to find comes from two small and specialized studies. One found that both males and females at larger schools exercised more, were less shy, were less insecure about their body self-image and had lower body mass (Page & Hammermeister, 1996). The other found, using a regression model, that students from larger high schools had higher wages in later jobs, on an average of 2% more per 100 students in the high school population (Ewing, 1995). The authors suggest that this is partially explained by the fact that students at larger high schools are more used to dealing with stress and complex situations, a scenario likely to be repeated in the workplace. These two examples hardly seem sufficiently principled reasons to consolidate schools.

This author suspects that these principled benefits are possible, but only in a constrained set of circumstances. To make this point, I will draw upon undocumented personal

experience. As a child, I attended a recently consolidated school in northern Ohio. Elmore Schools and Woodville Schools were both small school districts (with fewer than 600 students in grades K-12 each, an average of 50 students per grade) facing difficult tax bases and state pressures to consolidate. Both schools were being pressured to join with large school districts in their prospective counties which would have resulted in long school bus rides (40 minutes or more) for students at the schools. Instead, the two schools, located in different counties, chose to consolidate with each other into the new Woodmore School District in 1969. In doing this, rather than both towns losing their schools and the concomitant loss of the community resource of a school, both towns were able to keep their schools. Elmore housed an elementary and the high school, while Woodville housed an elementary and a middle school. High school plays and basketball games were held in Woodville, football games and band concerts in Elmore. The resulting school was still on the smallish side by many measures (with approximately 100 students per grade), but had a stronger combined tax base, some reduction in administrative costs, and satisfied state pressures to consolidate. The reason I give this example is that it shows how in this one limited circumstance, two schools were able to reap the benefits of consolidation without the losses identified in much of the

literature (see below). Indeed, some examples in the literature support the argument that only the smallest schools (defined as those with less than one hundred students per grade) suffer from some of the problems identified in small schools: limited curricula, scheduling difficulties, shortage of teachers in some subject areas, heavy faculty loads, and low educational aspirations (Monk & Haller, 1986). It is possible that school consolidation, done properly as two small schools combine into a moderately sized school, can satisfy the question "Is the policy principled?"

In the vast majority of cases, however, a very different scenario occurs. Instead of two small towns keeping schools, generally a large school envelops one small school. The small school's students are bussed to the large school, and the small town loses its school and all attendant community functions and employment. Fanning (1995), for instance, argues that school consolidation may worsen a number of problems with education, including violent student behavior, family disintegration, loss of stable communities, and loss of clarification in the teaching of values and morals (p.3). Cherryholmes (1988) also argues that large school districts are more likely to emphasize a standard sequenced curricula and narrowly focused evaluation.

Study after study gives examples of how students and communities are hurt in ways that suggest school consolidation

violates the principle that schools should act to reduce inequalities. Rogers (1992), for instance, argues that small schools meet three essential conditions for providing high-quality education better than large schools: 1) students are well-known by their teachers, 2) students are actively engaged in learning and in school activities, and 3) the school provides a secure and caring environment. Rogers goes on to argue that the limited curriculum of a small school can be turned into an advantage if the school develops a focused and coherent academic program, and further contends that educators and policy makers must shed their ties to images of the comprehensive high school developed during the 1950s but out-of-date and nostalgic today.

Other studies that argue that small schools are either equal to or superior than their larger counterparts at the educational goal of enhancing access to education include Alspaugh (1994), Cotton (2000), Mitchell (2000), and Zars (2000) are just a few of the many studies available. In general, these studies find that small schools foster a greater sense of belonging, parental involvement, lower dropout rates and higher attendance (Mitchell, 2000), shorter bus rides (Zars, 2000), less social disruption, and better administrator and teacher attitudes (Cotton, 2000).

Probably the most damning study from the perspective of principles is Irmsher (1997). Irmsher argues that while

students with high socioeconomic status perform better in larger schools, students from minority and low-income families perform much better in small schools. The middle-class students do not show clear evidence either way. Irmsher argues that the argument for greater curricular variety, too, only benefits a small percentage of students: the affluent students in advanced educational tracks. Large schools have higher dropout rates, more drug abuse, and a higher likelihood that disadvantaged students will "fall through the cracks" as their are ignored or missed in the sea of faces in a large school.

To conclude the discussion on the issues of principles, it is relatively clear that except in the case of consolidations of very small schools with each other or into moderately sized schools, the evidence is that school consolidation is not principled. The decision to consolidate schools is primarily economic, not educational, and puts the interests of the students behind those of administrators. There appears to be fairly broad evidence that very large schools increase inequality rather than reduce it. In addition, it appears that the primary student beneficiaries of school consolidation are the talented and gifted students, and the primary losers are students from disadvantaged situations. Since educators cannot afford to institutionalize a view of any proportion of

individual students as expendable, they risk their principles when accepting school consolidation policies.

Is consolidation professionally sound?

Professional soundness in the area of school consolidation requires that we examine the issue through the lens of education professionals. A confounding aspect of all research into educational policies that affect entire school districts, or even in the case of school consolidation multiple school districts simultaneously, is that there are a great many stakeholders with potentially differing interests. Educators seeking professionally sound policies would, in principle, try to find solutions that benefit stakeholders in ways that do not detract in significant ways from other stakeholders as much as possible. In this analysis, I will attempt to identify several of the key stakeholders, and illustrate ways in which their educational interests are affected by policies that favor school consolidation.

Education writ large involves a large number of aspects of student and community life. There are the obvious aspects of educational quality, such as class size, teacher experience, test scores, class opportunities, and school infrastructure. There are also non-academic areas related to the quality of an education, such as extra-curricular activities and non-school

activities held in school facilities. These non-academic areas bring additional stakeholders into the education, as football games, school plays and dinners held in the school cafeteria involve not just students, but their parents and community members without children in the schools. The loss of a school can affect a community far beyond the classroom.

One of the most commonly cited educational advantages to larger consolidated schools over their smaller brethren are the availability of a broader variety of classes and new opportunities such as advanced placement courses that smaller schools may not be able to offer. These have been discussed above in the section on principles. In summary, larger schools do, in general, offer more courses representing a broader variety of topics, but the advantage to this wider selection generally benefits the best students differentially. Put simply, for a student taking basic math and basic English, a wider selection of courses would have little, if any, impact. For an advanced student interested in calculus, physics, literature or other specialty topics, attending a school that is able to offer these courses obviously confers an advantage. This illustrates one of the challenges when identifying stakeholders in attempting to evaluate the professional soundness of a policy. If we define our stakeholders as "students in academic classes," there is no way to determine

whether their interests are served by a consolidation plan that offers more course offerings. We must sub-divide this particular stakeholder category into *at least* two categories: students in advanced courses and students in basic courses. It is likely that our analysis would be even better if instead of two categories for the academic paths of students, we identified more (possibly remedial, special education, gifted and talented, etc...) and attempt to see how they are affected by large school size.

Another common claim made of large schools is that they increase extra-curricular opportunities. For instance, while a small school may have a band and a choir, a large school may have several bands, orchestras, show choirs, concert choirs and other performing groups available to students. Likewise, the small school's sports teams are likely to have a difficult time against the more powerful teams of the larger schools. However, the fact that the larger schools have more powerful sports teams indicates one area where the picture is not so clear that students' interests are better served by large schools. In a paper looking at school size and its effects on student participation rates, Morgan & Alwin describe the structural inducements to participation in a school's extracurricular activities (Morgan & Alwin, 1980). Their study found that school size has strong and consistently negative effects on the

rate of student participation in extra-curricular activities due to Barker's "manning" phenomenon (Barker, 1968). Essentially, in small schools the extra-curricular behavioral settings are "under-manned," meaning that there are more openings for students than students available and/or interested in participation, so a larger proportion of students participate in a larger number of activities per student. At large schools, on the other hand, activities are "over-manned," with more interested participants than available spots, resulting in lowered participation rates. In other words, while Big Oak High may have a powerhouse football team manned by 6 foot, 275-pound behemoths and win the state title, many students who would be able to make a less competitive squad are locked out of participation.

Is this educationally sound? What is wrong, many would say, with going to a school that wins the state championship? Don't all students share in the victory? Possibly, but they do not share equally. It is a different experience to play on a sports team than to attend a sporting event as a spectator. Taking as an assumption that participation on sports teams has potential educational advantages for students in terms of building teamwork skills and an ability to follow through on projects, one can posit no such parallel advantage to sitting in the bleachers on a Friday night. Training a greater number of

students to passively observe the behavior of others, in fact, is potentially destructive both to the students and to society in general, which faces a population less likely to engage in civic joining in later life.

Another aspect of schools is that schools are a setting where children continually develop their sense of self and build their self-perception in relation to the world around them. "Through their relationships with adults and peers in the school setting, youths negotiate a sense of identity, discover their interests and skills, and prepare for adult roles" (Garbarino, 1995). A positive social environment at school appears to affirm adolescent development, but some scholars (Garbarino, 1995) have argued the large schools with enrollments over 500 students are "categorically incapable of establishing a social environment that is supportive of adolescent development" (Bowen, Bowen, & Richman, 2000). Bowen et. al. (2000) found that measures of school satisfaction, teacher support and school safety were all higher at schools with less than 800 students when compared with larger schools.

What about the professional concerns of administrators? Although the general claim is that large schools are easier to administer than a series of small schools, it is likely that this is only really true at the state-level. If a state must administer programs and paperwork for 125 different school

corporations instead of 430 schools, it is easy to see how administration decreases. Likewise, it is possible that the sheer numbers of administrators required may be lessened somewhat (although probably offset by the general increases in school administrative costs as a percentage of school budgets in recent years). But at the micro-level, for the individual administrator it is clearly more work to administer a school of 5,000 students and hundreds of personnel with all the attendant student, faculty, and staff issues that arise than it would be to administer a school with only 800 students and a few dozen faculty. New problems such as complicated bus routes and room scheduling arise. Problems such as frequent contacts with police and parole officers, dealing with violence, drugs and alcohol in the halls, and trying to maintain order take away from an administrator's ability to deal with purely academic issues. Does it serve the professional interests of this front-line administrator, then, to be responsible for more problems? We must answer that it is not.

In summary, while there are certain educational advantages to large schools (more resources and programs, for instance), there are also serious and severe drawbacks (e.g., larger classrooms with less individual attention). Is consolidation professionally sound? Again, our answer appears to be a qualified "no".

Is consolidation practical?

The third and final question in the 3-P model asks "Is school consolidation practical?" Again, this question depends on the perspective of the stakeholders. From a strictly economic perspective for school administrators, school consolidation definitely has practical aspects. Instead of several superintendents overseeing small schools, one set of administrators can run a single, large school with less money per pupil. Teacher contract negotiations, bus schedule coordination and even sports schedules can all be negotiated once rather than many times.

From the perspective of a different stakeholder, on the other hand, the view may be altered. For the small business located next to the soon-to-be-closed local school, consolidation is very unpractical, since their business is threatened by the loss of revenue from students, parents and community members attending the school. Even in the case of the administrators, practicality can be threatened if the superintendents and principals must spend increasing portions of their time dealing with school violence, security, personnel problems, and drug violations.

To focus our discussion of practicality, I want to temporarily set aside strictly pragmatic issues of school

governance. Large schools have managed to operate, for better or worse, for many years and it can be assumed that at least at some levels large schools can prove practical operations.

Instead, I want to focus on a meta-issue of the role of schools in their communities.

In an early article on this topic, Sanderson (1941) argued that in decisions about school consolidation, the importance of preserving and strengthening community life should be considered equally with factors of cost and efficiency. "The education of the individual is not the sole objective of the school; it must also aid in creating a fine social environment, for otherwise the school will be unable to achieve its primary function of giving the individual the best sort of education...the importance of the school as a community center will increase" (p. 410). He argues that school administrators have a responsibility to their communities as well as to their students and school boards.

The literature recognizes that in small communities, the schools are a hub of activities and a major resource to the community (Fanning, 1995; Lauzon & Leahy, 2000; Nachtigal, 1994). Salant (1998) points out that school consolidation has shifted control of the schools away from local citizens and to state departments and professional administrators. This divestiture removed local oversight on matters of curriculum, school location and teacher qualifications, resulting in the

loss of the school as a locally controlled community institution. Kretzman & McKnight (1993) also argue this cuts both ways:

As schools become more professionalized and centralized, they have tended to distance themselves from their local communities. The vital links between experience, work, and education have been weakened. As a result, public and private schools in many urban and rural communities have lost their power as a valuable community resource (p. 209). Schools in small communities serve a wide variety of community functions. The following list identifies just some of these functions.

1. School districts provide between 5-10% of the local payroll in small rural counties.
2. Realtors report that property values decline when schools close.
3. Schools promote a community identity.
4. Schools host large numbers of community events, both school and non-school.
5. The quality of life in vacated communities declines.
6. Community organization participation decreases when a school vacates a community.
7. In a nutshell, schools unite communities. (Lauzon et al., 2000)

Given these arguments, I must conclude that school consolidation, particularly when it results in the loss of schools as community institutions through the closing of buildings, is not a practical policy for the continued long-term health of communities and their residents. In a few cases, where two very small schools combine and create ways of maintaining community ties, consolidation is practical for communities, as in the Woodmore example above. Thus, it is important to consider context when discussing the practicability of school consolidation.

Conclusion

In determining policy goodness for as diverse a set as "America's schools", clearly no single model could possibly hope to fit all situations. Just as we have argued that contrary to common knowledge, big is not always best, neither are small schools the answer in all situations. It is extremely important to consider the local socio-political, historical and geographic context. The value of policy analysis is in determining the situations where one choice is at an advantage over others. This paper has taken a macro view of school consolidation policy to discuss the possible benefits for very small schools but the dangers inherent in forming extremely large schools.

I would like to suggest for schools considering implementing a program to consolidate schools that at the formation stage, they utilize tools to determine the potential stakeholders and the possible alternatives. Weimer (1998) offers one possible model that this author has found useful. Weimer relies on the use of goals/alternatives matrices as a tool for policy formation. In a goals/alternatives matrix, there are three main features. The labels for the rows in the matrix represent the formulations of policy goals. The specification of policy alternatives makes up the labels for the columns. Finally, prediction is used for filling in the cells of the matrix. One of the ways in which Weimer's use of the goals/alternatives matrix framework differs from standard policy visions is that he values the role of post positivism in helping to "discover relevant values and goals...in helping to discover potentially desirable policy alternatives."

Table 1. Weimer's Goals/Alternatives Matrix

	Policy Alternative 1	Policy Alternative 2	Policy Alternative 3
Policy Goal 1	Predicted outcome 1-1	Predicted outcome 1-2	Predicted outcome 1-3
Policy Goal 2	Predicted outcome 2-1	Predicted outcome 2-2	Predicted outcome 2-3
Policy Goal 3	Predicted outcome 3-1	Predicted outcome 3-2	Predicted outcome 3-3

Weimer argues that post positivist discourse is particularly valuable as the policy analyst seeks to identify the stakeholders and the relevant values at stake in the policy area in question. This is because the analyst is unlikely to be given a list of relevant values when asked to provide a policy analysis. Instead, the policy analyst must "discover and justify values and their related goals" as an integral part of the policy analysis process. Since the values and goals for policy are multiple and conflicting, the analyst must identify as many as possible and seek policy recommendations that accommodate as many of the multiple value sets as possible. In particular, it is incumbent on the analyst to identify the "silent losers," those who otherwise have no voice in the policy making process, and ensure that their values and goals are considered as part of the general analysis. Weimer goes so far as to argue "analysts have a moral obligation to raise the full range of values in their consensual relationships with their clients."

In the case of school consolidation, using this model would allow school districts to identify their policy goals (such as cost savings and ease of administration, but also strong student-teacher relationships, opportunities for students, best educational strategies possible in classrooms, building good relationships in the community, etc...). Next the school can

identify policy alternatives (consolidation with a large school district, consolidation with a small nearby school, use of newly available tools such as distance education tools and information technology to bring share specialty classes among a consortium of schools, raising taxes, etc...). For the intersection of each of this goals and alternatives, then, the district can predict, given their unique local knowledge about their schools, history and communities, possible outcomes. In many cases, this would allow the decision makers to focus less on strictly economic concerns and began to consider other aspects of the decision as well. In many cases, they may determine that the educational and social costs of consolidation outweigh the potential economic benefits.

School consolidation is not an easy issue. There are strong feelings that surface when a school considers reorganization. This policy analysis has suggested that in many cases, the rush to consolidate has proven ill chosen and had unforeseen negative results. Small can be beautiful.

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