



Op/Ed

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## **Kansas needs more fragmentation, not consolidation**

My Opinion

John R. LaPlante

[Flint Hills Center for Public Policy](#)

Does Kansas need fewer school districts? The idea has been discussed over the years. In the current political environment, interest in consolidation may increase again. But lawmakers ought to resist the urge.

The case for consolidation has some obvious appeal. One attraction is the “warehouse club” argument: large organizations can buy in bulk. Another idea is that in larger districts students might benefit from having specialized staff.

But there are other arguments that suggest that consolidation is not the way to go. First, Kansas has already seen a lot of consolidation. From more than 8,000 districts during World War II to around 300 today. That’s a shrinkage of more than 95 percent. If consolidation produces gains, we would have achieved them by now.

Further, consolidation carries academic and social costs. Researchers at Louisiana State, the University of Chicago, and other institutions have found that increasing the size of schools tends to depress student test scores. G. Edward Mills of Fort Hays State University notes that higher levels of achievement, attendance, discipline and parental satisfaction are found in smaller schools. While school size and school district size are two separate issues, the logic of consolidation favors both larger districts and larger schools.

Why is smaller better? One reason is that it fosters competition. Carolyn Hoxby, a professor at Harvard, has found that schools are like other organizations: they respond to competition by becoming better. By reducing the number of districts that vie for the trust of families, consolidation reduces competition.

In light of this research, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and other organizations are spending millions of dollars to produce smaller, not larger schools. More than \$475 million in the case of the Gates Foundation.

But what about those cost savings promised by consolidation? When the idea was recently proposed in Arizona, one independent report found that “Decades of empirical evidence show consolidation leads to administrative bloat, not streamlining.”

In a competitive environment, consolidation can make economic sense. Driven by its need to make a profit in order to survive, a company can use consolidation as a way to focus on the core mission.

But a school district is not an ordinary company. Unlike customers of a normal company, its customers face an unusually difficult challenge: if they want to select a new provider, they must move. They can't simply drive a few miles to another store, or switch to a different insurance company with a phone call. Instead, they must pay the emotional costs of moving, as well as closing costs, real estate fees, and perhaps a moving company. Renters face fewer, but still real costs.

One result, too often, of ever-larger school systems is that parents get disconnected from their student's school. As Dr. John T. Wenders of the University of Idaho observes, “Schools tend to become larger and more remote from parents.” This, in turn, causes academic and financial harm to students and taxpayers.

There are several alternatives to consolidation, which can bring economic benefit to taxpayers and academic benefits to students. The first alternative is simply to not consolidate. Keep schools and districts smaller, and students will have more opportunities to gain leadership skills. They will learn in a more conducive environment, and study in schools where parents are more connected with the staff.

Distance learning, now more readily available than ever thanks to technological advances, can be used to provide specialized course offerings. New methods of teaching, some in use and others still in the experimental phase, can offer students opportunities as good as or better than those promised by consolidation.

If cost savings are the desired goal, districts also have various options. Some districts hire other firms to provide non-instructional services. The core skills of a school lie in teaching, not in transporting students or running HR departments. These and other services can be performed by firms that can offer lower costs and specialized expertise.

Rather than reduce competition through consolidation, lawmakers should increase it, through implementing vouchers or tuition tax credits. They can also loosen the grip that local school districts have over the creation of new charter schools. Loosening the grip that state regulations have over all schools would help, too.

Kansas has seen a lot of consolidation, and as a result, less competition among school districts. It needs more competition and more choice, and perhaps more schools and districts. It doesn't need a state policy to produce fewer.

*John R. LaPlante is an education policy fellow with the Kansas-based Flint Hills Center for Public Policy.*