

WORKING TOGETHER

Editorial: Ohio's many school districts ought to expand money-saving cooperation

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As state and local budgets shrink, school districts unquestionably should be looking for ways to save money in order to put as much as possible into teaching students. "Restoring Prosperity," a report by the Brookings Institution and the Greater Ohio Policy Center, offers some food for thought on the issue, even if its recommendation for wholesale consolidation of districts may be too radical.

The report includes some statistics that, if valid, are troubling: Ohio ranks high among U.S. states in the percentage of its budget spent on administration, and is near the bottom in the percentage of elementary and secondary spending that goes to the classroom.

That argues in favor of districts, especially small ones that lack efficiency of scale, working together to share in the expenses that aren't part of classroom instruction. Some of this occurs already, with programs to pool buying power for buses and supplies. Many districts could do more, such as combining transportation, food service and other support operations.

Two northeastern Ohio districts, Orrville and Rittman, have gone about as far as possible without actually merging. By consolidating their central offices so that the two districts are served by only one superintendent and one treasurer, the Orrville district is saving \$170,000 per year and Rittman has saved \$100,000 per year.

The districts still have separate school boards, tax rates, budgets, test scores, athletic teams and student clubs. They split the superintendent's and treasurer's salaries according to enrollment.

True consolidation would pose many hurdles, starting with the fact that Ohioans place a high value on local control of schools. Paying for superintendents, curriculum experts and operations chiefs for hundreds of small districts adds to the cost of education, and probability dictates that not all of those stand-alone operations are the most efficient. Local control, however, does give taxpayers a sense that those officials have to be responsive to their concerns.

Beyond the philosophical attraction of local control, school districts considering consolidation would have to figure out how to even out different property-tax rates and budgets.

Sharing support services is a much easier way to start, and the Educational Service Center of Central Ohio offers an excellent model. The center's work in providing special-education teachers, professional development, purchasing and consulting on a variety of other services has proved itself: Through voluntary contracts with member school districts, the center's annual operating budget has grown from \$5 million to \$85 million in recent years.

Member districts and their families have access to more-sophisticated programs than they could afford on their own and at a lower cost.

The fact that districts associate and contract with the center voluntarily also is a good example for broader school-district cooperation and consolidation. Pride in local schools runs deep, so any effort by the state to eliminate wasteful duplication will be doomed to fail if it tries to force consolidation.

Creating incentives that encourage cooperation to build from the ground up ultimately will serve Ohio students best.

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