

The Seattle Times

Friday, March 19, 2010 - Page updated at 05:01 PM

Permission to reprint or copy this article or photo, other than personal use, must be obtained from The Seattle Times. Call 206-464-3113 or e-mail resale@seattletimes.com with your request.

Rural school districts are effective and don't need consolidation

By Jim Kowalkowski
Special to The Times



WITH tight budgets and shrinking revenues, consolidation of school districts is being touted by some Washington state legislators as a way to save dollars.

The March 12 Seattle Times editorial titled, "State Should Consider Consolidating School Districts" was misleading. It called for a "thoughtful consolidation plan." However, it neglected to mention some key points about our small school districts.

Our small and rural districts serve the students of the communities in which they're located. If all communities in our state are valued â€” large or small â€” we must value the schools that serve them.

The editorial's reference to the Vader School District did not mention that Vader in Lewis County had a condemned building and that the community did not support passage of a construction bond. The Vader situation is an anomaly. Other examples of a small community in our state failing to financially support its schools and allowing their school district to be dissolved cannot be found.

Washington's small and rural districts are successful. Perhaps the most compelling example of this is graduation rates. Most of the rural school districts in Washington state are small (less than 1,000 students). According to recent research conducted by the Center for Research and Data Analysis at Educational Service District No. 113 in Olympia, these small and rural districts have the highest average on-time graduation rates and the lowest dropout rates.

According to research conducted by the Rural Schools and Community Trust, the costs per graduate at small schools are lower than larger schools. The Knowledge Works Foundation 2002 report "Dollars & Sense, the Cost Effectiveness of Small Schools," concluded that they have significantly less crime and violence than large schools.

The editorial stated that money would be saved by eliminating duplicate positions, starting with the \$129,600 salary of the average school superintendent. However, small school-district superintendents don't make anywhere near the "average" superintendent salary.

Many of our small districts are served by a "super-principal." This is one person serving as principal and superintendent. Often, this person also serves as the special-education director, the transportation director, the Title 1 director and even in some cases, the band director!

Of our 295 school districts, 45 employ a part-time superintendent. Many of our smaller districts share superintendents between districts. Visit any small school district in Washington to see if there really is "bureaucratic overhead and duplicate administration."

Further, small and rural districts often form cooperatives to cut expenses and provide quality services to students. Our Educational Service Districts provide many cost-saving programs for small districts.

The editorial mentioned special-education services, stating "... more-intensive student needs often go unserved." Are you saying that small districts do a poor job of providing services to special-education students? To assume that just because a school district is small, its students will be shortchanged is wrong. In fact, many special-needs students thrive in small districts.

To put the issue of consolidation in context, the total state funding for enhanced support of small school districts amounts to less than one percent of the total K-12 budget.

Tax dollars are precious and every school district, large and small, has an obligation to use these dollars wisely. Small districts in Washington take this responsibility seriously and are, in fact, a darn good bargain and a wise investment.

Jim Kowalkowski is superintendent of the Davenport School District, which serves 585 students in Northeast Washington's Lincoln County. He is also director of the Rural Education Center, a cooperative of more than 55 small and rural school districts and education organizations that is affiliated with Washington State University's College of Education.

Copyright © The Seattle Times Company