

December 7, 2018

Jill Mullen and Julie Woods

jmullen@ecs.org, jwoods@ecs.org

This response was prepared for Tammy Grissom, Tennessee School Boards Association

Your Question:

You requested information on school consolidations.

Our Response:

Much of the available research on consolidations centers on the consolidation of districts rather than schools. Below are several resources addressing policy considerations for school consolidation.

- For a quick overview of the research and background on school district consolidation, a [policy brief](#) by the Southern Regional Education Board includes information on states working on school consolidation and questions for policymakers to consider.
- The National Education Policy Center produced a [report](#) on the research and arguments around consolidation. This report explains that the presumed benefits of consolidation are fiscal efficiency and higher educational quality and makes recommendations for policymakers considering consolidation.
- A [policy brief](#) from the Center for Evaluation and Education Policy summarizes research on school and district consolidation and, in particular, highlights the struggle to find the optimal district size for cost-savings. Using **Indiana** as a case study, the brief presents research from feasibility studies and analysis of reorganization as proposed by Indiana bills.
- The **Arizona** Joint Legislative Study Committee on School District Unification and Consolidation produced a [report](#) in December 2011 that includes testimony from a variety of stakeholders. Travel time for students was among the issues the committee was charged with studying. The state has been [working on](#) district reorganization for several decades.
- A report from 2013, [Size Matters: A Look at School-District Consolidation](#), from a more progressive organization, Center for American Progress, looks at states with a large percentage of small districts and the costs associated with maintaining these small districts. The paper highlights policy recommendations for lawmakers to ensure consolidation does not harm schools.
 - “Many states have large percentages of small, nonremote districts that may represent hundreds of millions of dollars in lost potential capacity” (i.e., money that may not have been spent if the district was larger). However, “states should generally avoid one-size-fits-all approaches to maximizing district size,” and when making policy decisions, states “should take into account the context of local districts and their needs and do more to improve overall systems of education management.”

- After Maine reduced the number of districts by nearly half to decrease costs and increase efficiency, researchers conducted a [study](#) reviewing the state’s consolidation process. The report details policy lessons and process lessons learned from policymakers, state education officials and other school district leaders who implemented the reorganization from 2007-2009.

School Size

School size is a corollary issue to consolidation, as smaller schools are often consolidated to create single, larger schools. A 2018 US News and World Report [article](#) notes that “very small schools are common in most states.” It is estimated that about, “46 percent of the nation’s public-school districts have fewer than 1,000 students.”

- A [report](#) from the OECD summarizes the research on the influence of school size on student outcomes and on economic efficiency, finding mixed results.
- Similarly, a [study](#) from the University of South Carolina compared the size of public schools to academic performance and school climate. The results were varied. The authors concluded that finding the ideal school size is complex and influenced by many factors.