

This response was prepared for Pad McCracken, Montana Legislative Services

Your Question:

Generally, you asked about school district consolidation. Specifically you asked about incentives for voluntary consolidation, research on student achievement following consolidation or based on district size, and bus ride duration.

Our Response:

Recommended Research

The following are reports relating to school and district consolidation that ECS recommends:

- 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. This report touches on the issue of longer bus rides in **West Virginia** after consolidations there (see page 7) and on the issue of increased transportation costs as a diseconomy of scale resulting from consolidation (see pages 8 and 11).
- This [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. This brief also highlights introduced and enacted legislation relating to district consolidation from a number of states between 2007 and 2010 (see page 5 for a chart of legislation, including **Arkansas** legislation requiring a study of bus ride duration issues). 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.

District Consolidation in the States

Our [state policy database](#) on district consolidation and deconsolidation, updated regularly, provides summaries of enacted legislation on the topic dating back to 2000. In that database you can find, for example:

- **Vermont** passed a [bill](#) in its 2015 session creating incentives for consolidation. There's been a good deal of [news coverage](#) of the topic.
- **Arkansas** recently adopted two policies relating to the consolidation of school districts: [H.B. 1263](#) in 2015, which provides the requirements for a school district submitting a petition for a waiver from an administrative consolidation or reorganization, and [regulations](#) in 2014 that establish the requirements and procedures concerning the consolidation and annexation of school districts.

- In 2012, **Louisiana** passed [legislation](#) requiring an election to be called before consolidating two or more school systems and providing that consolidation is subject to approval by a majority of voters in each of the affected school systems.

Changing District Boundaries: A Contentious Issue

A 2005 look at state attempts at school district reconfiguration by ECS turned up a number of examples that are illustrative of challenges inherent in these efforts. For example, several years ago in **South Dakota**, the Rapid City Journal reported that legislators would be discussing eliminating the 20 percent small school bonus that has allowed many small school districts to survive. If that were to happen, many districts would need to consolidate or die. The Journal quoted a state representative who said, “You’re turning tigers loose out of the cage. You’ll have blood all over the hallways.”

In 2005, in **Nebraska**, state policymakers were presented with a bill consolidating elementary-only districts – which represent 47 percent of the districts in Nebraska – even though they educate fewer than 3 percent of the state’s students – with K-12 districts. The bill was not popular with some rural educators and communities, but the legislature passed it. Governor Dave Heineman vetoed it, writing:

“I am returning LB 126 and LB 126A without my signature and with my objections. Almost without exception in Nebraska’s history, decisions regarding the mandatory merger or closure of our local school districts are permeated with strong emotion. You and I have received immeasurable public input from both supporters and opponents of this significant legislation... I firmly believe that the forced consolidation presented by the bill will, in the long run, alienate parents from their schools rather than involving them even more in the decisions affecting the management and structure of their children’s public education. Voluntary school district consolidation is already occurring without government intervention. Voluntary consolidation implemented by local decision-making rather than a state mandate has a better opportunity of uniting communities.”

The legislature overrode the governor’s veto with two more votes than it needed – so there must have been a high level of consensus that these elementary school districts would be better served if they were integrated into K-12 districts. But the governor’s point about alienating parents from their schools rather than involving them is key.

In **Arkansas**, the issue of district reorganization emerged after the Arkansas Supreme Court ruled that the state’s funding formula was unconstitutional – because of the inequities between low-income and wealthier districts – and required the legislature to fix it. Legislators met in the longest special session in the state’s history, where much of the discussion centered around setting a size threshold beneath which districts would need to merge. It was a highly contentious session. Eventually, the legislature passed a bill forcing mergers in districts with enrollments below 350. Governor Mike Huckabee had proposed mergers in districts with fewer than 1,500 students, but he let the bill become law without his signature. Subsequently, a lawsuit was filed that claimed the law was unconstitutional and discriminated against poor rural areas.