

University of Northern Iowa

College of Education White Paper: School Consolidation

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The debate about school district consolidation rages on in Iowa. To anyone involved in the educational systems in Iowa, that should come as no surprise. Anytime there are districts that range in size from 28 to over 31,000 students, people are going to raise questions regarding their viability and effectiveness. Part of that effectiveness is often determined by the advanced learning opportunities that districts can provide for their students. According to Judy Jeffrey, Iowa's Director of the Department of Education, "more school consolidation may be one of the answers."

Those for consolidation, and those against consolidation, will continue to plead their cases. Undoubtedly they will look for research to prove that their preference is the one chosen for the districts in which they reside. While research exists regarding student and parent perceptions, as well as the availability of courses and extra-curricular activities, little research discusses how student achievement is impacted when districts merge. Both internal and external stakeholders understand the often debated importance of student achievement results on standardized assessments, yet the ability to balance the financial books, offer courses and/or programming, and find highly qualified teachers ultimately drives the push for district consolidation. While all of these are certainly valid reasons for consideration of district mergers, in a time of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) mandates, are these the reasons that should be at the forefront as policy and decision makers consider their next move? School district consolidation has many benefits for students. Those include, increased course offerings; exposure to advanced learning opportunities, as well as a larger variety of extra-curricular activities; and, an increased ability to attract highly qualified teachers. However, if student achievement is really the number one reason why schools operate, any impact that school consolidation may have on this issue ought to be at the top of the list for final justification in support of or against the district decision.

In 1998, Linda Darling-Hammond's research indicated that four factors impact student achievement. Those factors included: smaller school size (300-500); smaller class size, especially in elementary schools; challenging curriculum; and more highly qualified teachers (Picard, 2003). While the factor of a challenging curriculum could certainly be present in districts of any size, the other three factors appear to lend themselves well to those fighting to keep their local districts in tact. In Iowa (and most states), the decision to consolidate has been left to the local districts. While this decision may be localized, as NCLB mandates become more difficult to meet, and as the economics of our time continue to wage war with smaller districts trying to make ends meet, the decision to merge with neighboring districts isn't always left to the local decision makers.

Research alone cannot adequately predict the outcome of any type of change. But without a common understanding of how school district mergers may affect student achievement, the decisions made will continue to be based on economics and outside forces such as NCLB and

other state requirements. Hopefully a current study being conducted between professors within the University of Northern Iowa department of educational leadership, and the Institute for Educational Leadership at UNI, may shed some light on the impact of student achievement in districts that have recently consolidated.