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School districts have been growing in size as their numbers shrink over the years, but now a new study questions whether bigger is always better, and what may be lost in the constant drive for economic savings. Courtesy photos

Forward To The Past... Or What?

Looking Into The Proper Sizing Of School Districts

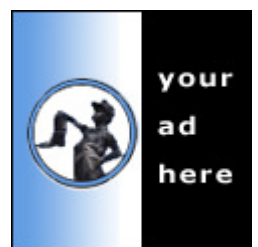
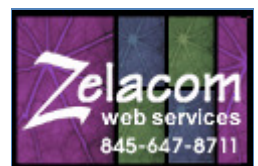
By Chris Rowley

REGIONAL – Caught between the rock of rising costs and the hard place of the 2 percent tax cap mandate, our school districts are trapped in a vise. With [enrollment](#) declining across the region — and in [New York](#) state it's no [secret](#) that Albany wants more consolidation of school districts.

Fiscal efficiency, in a time when every dollar counts, is the cry... even as schools struggle to adapt to the new federal Common Core standards.

Last week, the Center for Research Regional Education and Outreach at SUNY New Paltz released a report, authored by Robin Jacobowitz, Ph.D, CRREO's interim associate director, entitled "Public Education in Ulster County: Finding the Right Scale," that discusses the pros and cons of further consolidation and finds that not every problem can be solved by creating ever larger school districts.

The idea of consolidation is not new. Public education has been in operation for a long time in New York, but it was only organized by the state in the latter part of the 19th century. There were 12,000 school districts then, mostly tiny and set up around local schools. The numbers peaked around 1870, and during the 1930s began to decline rapidly, going from 10,000 in 1930 to half that by World War II, to 694 in 1975.



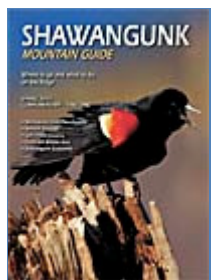
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Shawangunk Mountain Guide

The BOCES program, begun in 1948, has been a way of [sharing services](#), such as special education, across larger areas.

The Hudson Valley's nine counties have 113 school districts at present, with 354,000 students and a total annual budget of \$8.3 billion. But, as noted before, enrollments are in decline.

Ulster County has nine high schools currently, each centering a district. In addition, the county shares five other districts that are centered in neighboring counties — Margaretville, Tri-Valley, Livingston Manor, Fallsburg and Pine Bush. The county has 24,866 students.

Historical legacy is the reason for this. As the CRREO report says, education was initially provided on a very local basis. When consolidation came along, the resulting school districts were not made in accordance with all the other government boundaries, such as towns and counties, and often sprawled over those lines with little concern for geography.

So what cost savings might come from more mergers and larger districts? How far might students eventually end up riding in a yellow school bus?

The report notes a number of assumed [benefits](#). The one most likely to move legislators and those who build budgets would be the price benefits of scale. The bigger something is in this economy, the better the price it can obtain from suppliers. We might call this the [Walmart](#) factor.

Then there's a specialization bonus — bigger districts can hire and use more specialists on a staff, an important consideration in light of the heavy costs of special education services.

Another potential cost saving would be a wider use of certain teachers' talents. Bigger districts could share teachers across more students.

Dr. Jacobowitz's report, however, also notes there are dis-economies of scale to consider as well. Transportation costs, for example, will mean that not only will some students sit longer on the bus, but the cost of transporting those students will rise.

When districts consolidate, due to union contractual rules, it will be the most recently hired, younger, less well paid teachers who get let go. The average salary will rise, therefore. And, to bring in a human factor, bigger districts with perhaps fifteen or twenty thousand students will end up with less a personal feel to its education, and more formalized procedures... things that can lower teacher motivation. Indeed, the very same things can alienate students. Call it the "widgets" factor.

The report noted that education history in New York saw the powerful influence of racial tensions in shaping school consolidation. In the 1960s,

whites fled newly integrated urban centers for the suburbs where their children would be educated in non-diverse surroundings. As groups grew ever farther apart, consolidation — especially in the areas close to the cities — came to be seen as part of forced racial integration, and was resisted accordingly. An opposing view grew up supporting small districts, increasingly popular in recent times. This view holds that small schools can promote better outcomes for students because there is less of the "widgets" factor, and academic instruction can be more easily shaped to students' perceived needs.

The current array of Hudson Valley school districts might be seen to epitomize this thinking. Half of them, (56) have less than 2,000 students. Meanwhile, more general research has shown that cost savings can be obtained from increasing school district size up to about 6,500 students. Beyond that size, however, the savings diminish and the dis-economies of scale come into play.

In November 2013, a group of education stakeholders from eight of Ulster's nine school districts met to discuss these issues at a symposium titled "A 2020 Vision for Public Education in Ulster County." The CRREO report summarizes the discussion.

A couple of interesting concepts were floated there, and also rise in this report. While elementary and middle schools might remain as they are, with a local focus, high schools might be consolidated to either a regional level, or even a county-wide level. Some participants also proposed that the regional high schools could be "theme-based," allowing students to choose a high school based on its particular academic theme rather than its location. Each high school could focus on a different area — the arts say, or natural science, business studies, or technology.

Of course, given the size of Ulster County, and the existence of topological constraints such as the Catskills or the Shawangunk Ridge, it was also suggested that the county be divided east and west, and the theme-based schools replicated on both sides of the county.

There are precedents for this kind of thinking. There are three central high school districts in Nassau County, for instance, that were created in the 1920s. In Albany, the Capital Region BOCES and Questar III have collaborated to create the Tech Valley High School, which focuses on math, science and technology.

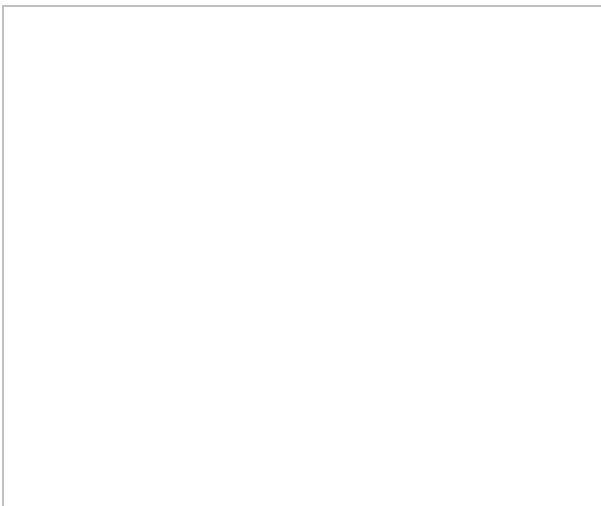
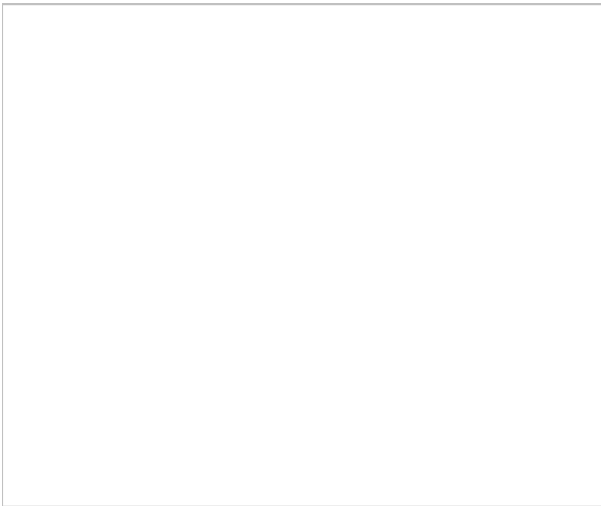
Elsewhere in the country there are some relatively enormous districts, and some that are countywide. The Union County Public Schools of North Carolina, for one, have 42,000 students in 53 schools administered from one center. Still, a study of Pennsylvania school districts showed that some countywide districts had higher expenditures than small districts, per pupil.


The conclusion has been that the degree to which economies of scale are actually realized depends on the structure of the countywide model, and also on the structures that it might replace.

Dr. Jacobowitz's report concludes by noting that consolidation as currently envisaged is a "blunt tool" for promoting efficiency and equalizing educational opportunity among school districts. Indeed, consolidation — or any "one size fits all" policy — may not be the best for achieving regional goals. More imaginative options are required.

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