

## In defense of small school districts

By Columbian Staff

Sunday, September 5, 2010



John Laird is The Columbian's editorial page editor.

Significant savings of tax dollars are available through consolidation of government services and programs. A good local example is the Vancouver-Clark Parks and Recreation Department, which combines city and county operations. At the regional level, the Fort Vancouver Regional Library District serves parts or all of Clark, Skamania and Klickitat counties and Woodland in Cowlitz County.

Wouldn't it make sense, then, to consolidate many of the state's 295 school districts? Not necessarily. Such an effort bubbled up in the Legislature this year with a bill that would have established a commission to reorganize and reduce school districts to 150 around the state. A legislative study in June provided data that supports that idea: In 85 school districts that each have fewer than 1,000 students, the average expenditure per pupil in 2007-2008 was \$14,694. That's 57 percent higher than the statewide average of \$9,380. But the report also revealed that those 85 school districts represent only 2.5 percent of the state's education budget, so would the savings be worth the turmoil of forced consolidation?

This debate often revolves around numbers, but a more responsible examination would be based on people. Yes, 295 is a large number of school districts, but that's down from 2,414 school districts in 1910 and 1,609 districts in 1937. Clearly, substantial consolidation already has occurred on the districts' own volition, as circumstances have warranted.

Yes, the Vader School District closed in 2007 and students were sent to the Castle Rock School District. But that was Vader's choice, driven by a condemned building and voter rejection of bond issues.

### Merge everyone else

The big question is whether the Legislature should *mandate* consolidation of school districts, which takes us to my point that this argument should be based on people, not numbers. Let's all agree, consolidating school districts sounds like a great idea ... until we start talking about *your* school district. What, for example, would parents and teachers in the Green Mountain School District think about a monolithic, legislatively empowered commission forcing the tiny district in north Clark County to consolidate with La Center schools? Likely, they'd be aghast.

If school districts *want* to consolidate, fine. Let 'em. But forcing that action upon sovereign, high-achieving districts is downright socialistic.

Jim Kowalkowski, superintendent of Davenport School District near Spokane, has done extensive research as an advocate for small school districts. He is quick to point out: Average on-time graduation rates are higher in small school districts. Why risk cutting into that success? Transportation costs often increase greatly when districts merge and trips to schools get longer.

Potential savings are exaggerated, Kowalkowski argues. Granted, the average salary for superintendents is \$129,600 statewide, but 45 small school districts have part-time superintendents. Many districts share superintendents. Kowalkowski is paid by local dollars; eliminating his job would save no state dollars.

One of the more popular contentions is that school districts these days are top heavy. But according to the Washington Association of School Administrators, since the 1970s, student population has grown 30 percent and teacher staffing has increased almost 64 percent, yet "we have fewer central office administrators today than we did in the 1970s." Furthermore, district-wide administration accounts for only 6.7 percent of the state's general fund expenditures.

There's a reason everyone is happy in Mayberry. Community spirit is enhanced by small school districts. Erode that spirit, and how difficult would it be to pass a school bond issue? Considerably more difficult, I would argue.

In many areas of government, bigger is better, as parks and libraries are proving in Southwest Washington. But be careful not to carelessly transfer that theory to public schools.

Here's one final irony to ponder: Many people who now clamor for consolidation of school districts have been the most vocal advocates for local autonomy in public education.

John Laird is The Columbian's editorial page editor. His column of personal opinion appears each Sunday. Reach him at [john.laird@columbian.com](mailto:john.laird@columbian.com).