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Trends and Options in the Reorganization or Closure of Small or Rural Schools and Districts.

ERIC Digest.

This Digest focuses on the trends and policy options that affect the reorganization of small, rural school districts. It considers the slowed pace of reorganization and the expanded role of State Education Agencies (SEAs). It reports trends that influence attention to the various forms of reorganization, and those that shape a continued interest in reorganization as a policy option. Finally, it considers the framework in which policy options may take shape in the future.

The near-extinction of the one-room school (over the last 50 years) reflects the history of American education. In 1940, there were approximately 200,000 one-room schools in the United States. Today, there are fewer than 800. We now have a national system that, in comparison with schooling in an earlier era, exhibits a professional consensus about how to organize schools.

TRENDS IN THE REORGANIZATION OF SCHOOL DISTRICTS

In 1931-32, there were 127,531 school districts in the United States. Taking the 1931-32 figure as a base year, this number declined by:
10 percent in 1941-42 (to 115,493);

45 percent in 1951-52 (to 71,094);

73 percent in 1961-62 (to 35,676);

86 percent in 1970-71 (to 17,995); and

88 percent in 1981-82 (to 15,912).

The decades from 1940 to 1970 show the largest declines, most of which can be accounted for by the reorganization of small and rural school districts. Since 1970, however, the pace of district-level reorganization has slowed. Of the 15,912 districts in existence in 1981-82, 97 percent (15,577) remained in 1987-88 (U.S. Department of Education, 1989).

Many small or rural school districts, however, continue to exist. In 1987-88, about 29 percent of the 15,577 school districts in the United States enrolled fewer than 300 pupils, and about 78 percent enrolled fewer than 2,500 pupils. Most school districts in the United States, therefore, are still small; many are, in fact, very small. School districts

with fewer than 2,500 pupils were serving 22.1 percent of the total pupil population of the U.S. in 1987-88.

Analysis of schools, rather than districts, also shows that small schools continue to exist. There were 83,248 public schools operating in 1987-88. Of these, approximately 42 percent had enrollments of fewer than 300 students (U.S. Department of Education, 1989). Moreover, according to Johnson (1989), approximately 53 percent of all schools were located in nonmetropolitan areas. About 27 percent were located in places with total populations under 2,500 (one narrow definition of "rural"). The schools in this latter group had the smallest median enrollments for any of the seven types of locale defined by Johnson.

Declining enrollments in recent decades complicate the statistical picture. From a high of nearly 45 million in 1970, public elementary and secondary enrollments had declined by 5 million as of 1986. These declines were doubtless reflected at the school level, as well. The U.S. Department of Education, however, projects enrollments to increase to approximately 45 million by 1997 (Baker & Ogle, 1989).

THE INFLUENCE OF SEAS

This analysis suggests that the significant drop in the pace of reorganization cannot be attributed to the absence of small educational units. The slowed pace of reorganization, moreover, seems not to be caused by any reduction in the power of the various SEAs. Several trends in the 1970s and 1980s have tended, in fact, to increase the power of SEAs with respect to small and rural schools. First, the shift from categorical aid to block grants has given SEAs greater discretion in the use of a variety of human and fiscal resources. Second, this greater discretion has tended to increase SEAs' influence in rural, small, and impoverished school districts. Finally, the reforms of the 1980s have been state- rather than locally- or federally-driven. This circumstance has also tended to enhance state (and SEA) influence over locally operated schools (Lutz, 1989).

The trends of the 1970s and 1980s give SEAs greater power to consolidate small and rural schools. In financially hard-pressed areas, SEAs would have a compelling incentive to pursue reorganization. The preceding data, however, may suggest that state interest in reorganization has waned. On the other hand, these data may suggest that resistance to reorganization (for example, from community groups) may have become stronger during this time. Yet another possibility is that reorganization has proceeded to such an extent that it is physically difficult to combine the remaining schools or districts.

TRENDS THAT INFLUENCE ATTENTION TO SCHOOL DISTRICT REORGANIZATION

Several trends influence the various forms of reorganization that affect small and rural school districts. First, in the 1970s and 1980s, states faced litigation over the issue of fiscal equity. This issue inevitably follows the evolution of state funding formulas. Of course, existing formulas in many cases reflect earlier attempts to resolve fiscal inequities. On the one hand, creating larger units may tend to reduce the variation in funding (and, hence, one measure of inequity) among all schools and districts. On the other hand, creating some larger units--and leaving many small units--could actually increase inequity.

Second, the achievement of equity may depend on consensus about what the principles of adequate support for education might be. Without such a consensus, some observers believe that the issue of equity cannot be resolved (for example, Honeyman, Thompson, & Wood, 1989). One recent nationally publicized court case illustrates this point. Edgewood v Kirby relied on the argument that the Texas funding plan made inadequate funds available to property-poor (mostly rural and small) districts for the construction and repair of school buildings. Honeyman and colleagues (1989) concluded that the argument applied to many small, rural districts across the nation.

Third, concern in the research community about the possible effects of the scale of educational organizations is substantial. Emerging research suggests that, particularly for at-risk students, large educational units may produce negative effects on achievement and attitudes (Howley, 1989). Moreover, some researchers have noted that evidence of the benefits ascribed to the various forms of reorganization (for example, improvements in effectiveness, efficiency, and equity) is scanty (Valencia, 1984). Whether or not such findings will influence the actions of policymakers is open to question. Such work, however, may already have begun to influence the thinking of some rural educators and community members.

INCENTIVES FOR A CONTINUING INTEREST IN REORGANIZATION

Education reform in the 1980s emerged largely as a set of individual state provisions. At the same time, the state reforms are attentive to the national market economy. For this reason, they tend to reflect a national (often urban-based) consensus. They are virtually silent about the context of education in rural areas (Lutz, 1989).

While the reforms reflect national priorities, the individual states have also undertaken to share (with local districts) the cost of such reforms. Because the reforms seem to reflect a drive for greater efficiency within each state, it is logical for the states to hold districts accountable. Rural and small districts, however, may be held accountable for efficiencies they cannot achieve because of the comparatively higher costs of doing business in rural areas (Smith & DeYoung, 1988). Accountability, for example, will doubtless include state reviews of school operations. Rural and small schools, especially in impoverished districts, are more likely than other districts to be found "ineffective" and "inefficient" in meeting standards set by the state (Stephens, 1988).

The traditional challenges that small, rural, and poor school districts face combine with the recent press for state-mandated, but inadequately funded, requirements (see Honeyman et al., 1989). This combination often presses administrators and boards of small and rural local districts into seeking reorganization as a last resort (Smith & DeYoung, 1988). Haller and Monk (1988) believe that it is this "dead weight" of tradition that will, in fact, maintain interest in the various forms of reorganization.

BALANCING POLICY OPTIONS

Solutions, it seems, will address the new national and state goals for education. And yet, if new policies are to be responsive to the needs of rural students and communities, they should also take into account the changing context of rural education and new knowledge about the advantages of small-scale organization.
Research suggests that what happens in the classroom is the ultimate measure of the effectiveness of school reform. Evidence is accumulating that suggests that small-scale organization (both at the district and school levels) brings with it opportunities for positive results in the classroom. In the future, policy options should address ways to capitalize on such a link.

Perhaps the most difficult challenge facing states will be to establish an adequate funding level and to work toward that level on an equitable basis (Honeyman et al., 1989). Policymakers concerned with rural education will have to balance the inevitably higher costs of maintaining small schools with the advantages that small schools seem to offer for improving instruction, especially among at-risk students. Such a difficult balancing act, of course, takes place in the arena of statewide concern for equity, effectiveness, and efficiency in all school districts and solutions will not emerge easily.

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