

III. Smaller Districts Work

The results are in and studies show small districts provide students with a better educational foundation. By deconsolidating large districts, students are better prepared for higher education and the workforce. Advantages of smaller districts include community input, fiscal and administrative efficiency, school effectiveness, and student achievement.

SMALLER DISTRICTS GIVE COMMUNITY IDENTITY AND PROVIDE INFLUENCE AND CHOICE:

“If the WSD is approved, it will immediately become the 3rd largest school district in the state, behind APS and Las Cruces.”

Family participation is key for student success. Smaller districts allow families to get involved and stayed involved throughout their children’s educational career. According to Florence Webb, author of “A District of a Certain Size: An Exploration of the Debate on School District Size,” possibilities for contact between community members and their elected school board members can be substantially greater in small districts. This improved access to schools and school administration allows parents’ voices to be heard. An ad hoc committee reported in its 1995 Deconsolidation of APS Report that smaller districts provide greater community control and influence. Likewise, David N. Cox, author of “Big Trouble: Solving Education Problems Means Rethinking Super-Sized Schools and Districts,” reports smaller districts give community members a sense of ownership and a degree a responsiveness in the educational process.

Conversely, supersized districts alienate residents from their community’s educational goals and limit community involvement. The Manhattan Institute recently published “The Effect of Residential School Choice on Public High School Graduation Rates,” outlining advantages to deconsolidation of large school districts. One of the advantages is the creation of (1) competition for students and resources and (2) choice between multiple districts. “The larger a district is, the harder it is for families to leave it,” said the report’s primary author Jay P. Greene. “When you have a lot of smaller districts, they’re competing for students and tax revenue.” In fact, empirical evidence shows increasing parental choice contributes to higher public high school graduation rates.

With multiple districts, families within the community have choice. “The more choices parents have in the school systems that educate their children, the more the school systems are motivated to compete for their enrollment,” said Manhattan Institute researcher Marcus Winters. “This competition is leading to higher educational outcomes. Large school districts ... can afford to take those kids for granted because those parents don’t have anywhere else to go.”

In addition to competition and choice, smaller districts provide additional funding opportunities for the schools because of the influence of the community. Cox purports smaller districts may be more likely to pass bonds because the community as a whole would see the need and feel the benefit of the bond. Residents would not have to fight other communities for political power or tax dollars and would not have to take resources from another community for their benefit, resulting in negative feelings toward the community. According to Webb, in large districts administrations have a more difficult time securing positive votes for

bonds in areas that do not need new schools. When bonds do not pass, administrations are forced to build fewer schools.

SMALLER DISTRICTS IMPROVE DISTRICT FISCAL EFFICIENCY:

School districts allocate thousands of dollars to administrative and operating costs and expenses. Establishing budgets and appropriating funds correctly and efficiently is a primary concern for any district. By deconsolidating a district, fiscal efficiency is improved. A study by J. Guthrie notes administrative costs are inversely related to district enrollment. Therefore, smaller districts would incur fewer expenses than a large district.

“Economies of scale” is a term generally associated with large school districts. Typically, the consensus is larger districts provide more efficient delivery of education. Nearly 24 districts in the United States enroll more than 100,000 students; however the theory of economies of scale is not holding up. School district spending on instruction is not increasing as “a share of the total as district size increases.” According to the Nevada Policy Research

“Smaller districts are more effective in integrating with their communities than larger districts.”

Institute study, as school district size increases, the percentage of the budget spent on teachers, books, and materials actually tends to decline. Similar research from Webb and Ohm found smaller districts are more efficient than larger districts in both dollars per student and numbers of administrators per student. Diseconomies of scale, where per-pupil costs increase as the district extends beyond its optimal size, begin to occur as district size expands. More specifically, the larger the district gets, the more resources it devotes to secondary or even non-essential activities. Another drawback to large districts is their contribution to excessive transportation costs and traffic problems.

SMALLER DISTRICTS INCREASE EFFICIENCY FOR ADMINISTRATIVE PERSONNEL:

Besides fiscal efficiency, smaller districts contribute to better efficiency for administrative personnel. The ad hoc committee studying the deconsolidation of APS reported that smaller districts mean reduced administrative bureaucracy. The size of the district’s bureaucracy dictates the productivity of the administration. According to Webb, increasing the size of bureaucracies to increase their efficiency is counterintuitive. Instead, enlarging bureaucracy actually increases quantities of paperwork at all levels, decreases efficiency in communications, and affects teacher functioning, instructional quality, and morale. The ad hoc committee also found that a smaller district allows for quicker response by a district to address changing needs and issues for students, faculty, and the community.

SMALLER DISTRICTS ENHANCE SCHOOL EFFECTIVENESS:

School effectiveness is paramount in providing opportunities for communication and understanding among all educational stakeholders – parents, students, teachers, and administration. According to Lareau, organizational intimacy offers good communication, regular interaction, and values in common among students, parents, and teachers that can contribute to a more responsive and committed approach to education. This can be achieved

in a small district. Organizational intimacy creates a platform for improved accountability for all involved parties.

It is often noted that large districts can provide more diverse course offerings; however, what is less clear is the extent to which those offerings are valued or needed by the community according to Webb. The California School Board Association reported that smaller districts have less competing interests. Small districts provide greater encouragement of innovation and more input from the community to establish curricula that is in the best interest for those students.



From a functional perspective, district and school size influence student attendance and behavior. According to Cox, large schools size hurts attendance and dampens enthusiasm for involvement in school activities. At the high school level, faltering attendance leads to repeated truancy and a decrease in the likelihood of graduation. Behavioral problems are greater in large schools. The difficulties of maintaining an orderly learning environment are so great that they outweigh any possible virtue of a large sized school.

SMALLER DISTRICTS PROMOTE BETTER STUDENT PERFORMANCE AND ACHIEVEMENT:

At the crux of deconsolidation is the commitment to student achievement and performance. Research supports that student achievement improves when large districts are deconsolidated. According to Nevada Policy Research Group, there is a strong, consistent negative correlation between district size and student achievement in (low-income) population. In other words, the more a district size decreases, the greater the chances are for a student to excel. Consolidation of school districts into larger units leads to more high school dropouts according to Webb. Related to drop out rates are graduation rates. Decreasing the size of school districts has a substantial and statistically significant positive effect on graduation rates. As school size gets smaller, graduation rates will increase substantially. The Manhattan Institute's survey reports that decreasing the district's average size by 200 square miles would yield a 1.7% improvement in graduation rates. (The national median size for a school district is 260 square miles.)

In addition to failing dropout and graduation rates, research has shown that district size impacts students' test performance. According to the Nevada Policy and Research Group, there is a negative relationship between test results and states with large district size, meaning large districts have below average test results. According to David Cox, smaller district and smaller school students have higher SAT and ACT scores. Cox postulates

that smaller districts bring problems and opportunities back to the local level. In fact, large schools have lower grade averages and standardized-test scores. Cox purports these low achievements are coupled with more problems with violence, security, and drug abuse in large districts.

PARADIGM SHIFT – SCHOOLS ACROSS THE NATION LOOKING TO DECONSOLIDATE DISTRICTS:

The movement to consolidate schools between 1930 and 1970 is over. Christopher R. Berry and Martin West agree larger districts provided modest gains to the educational system, yet “these gains were outweighed by the harmful effects of larger schools.” In 1999, the U.S. Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley sought to downsize school districts. “We need to find ways to create small, supportive learning environments that give students a sense of connection to each other,” said Riley. “That’s hard to do when we are building high schools the size of shopping malls.” Antonucci reports that time and energy is shifted from core activities in large systems and also increases in school district size does not lead to higher student output and achievement.

“By deconsolidating large districts, students are better prepared for higher education and the workforce.”


Large cities and counties around the nation are exploring options to deconsolidate. The Nevada legislature approved \$250,000 for a feasibility study to deconsolidate the nation’s fifth-largest school district – Clark County School District, home to 290,000 students. Geographically Clark County is the second largest district in the nation, covering 7,910 square miles. Nevada’s graduation rate is three points below the national average.

Florida legislators are discussing giving districts such as the Miami-Dade County, which has more than 360,000 students, the option to deconsolidate.

In 2000, Los Angeles Unified School District deconsolidated by reorganizing itself into eleven semiautonomous subdistricts. At the time, the L.A. district was the nation’s second-largest public school system. Increasing local control of education and improving student performance were the two primary motivations behind the division of power. Under the supervision of one general superintendent, each district received its own local parent-community advisory council, while the elected citywide board set overall policy for the subdistricts.

UTAH JORDAN SCHOOL DISTRICT SUCCESSFULLY SPLITS DISTRICT:

The Canyons School District in Sandy, Utah is one of several school districts that has successfully deconsolidated its district. The district was projected to grow from 78,000 students to 103,000 students within a nine year span. In 2007, the district’s surrounding studies conducted a feasibility study and concluded, “A new school district would have more resources to dedicate toward educational and school remodeling needs.” The feasibility study stated educational quality and achievement, school finances, and local responsiveness would improve as a result of creating a new district. With respect to education, the new district would be able to provide programs similar to the existing district, while allowing similar academic achievement and test score results. In terms of school finances, the cre-



ation of a district would not cause taxes to go up in the effected cities. Additionally local tax resources would be directed to the new district to meet local school facility needs. Lastly, the new district would offer more local control and responsiveness from the community.

The process to create the new district, Canyons School District, was smooth and effective. Two transition teams representing the new district and remaining district facilitated the process by meeting regularly for six months to determine how to divide the existing district's assets. Residents ran in an open election to fill the school board seats. The new district began offering services one year after the school board took office. The new district had enough resources to continue to offer the same programs from the Jordan School District.

COMMON KEY FACTORS FOR A SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL DISTRICT:

- **An effective school board** that focuses on policy-level decisions, rather than day-to-day operations;
- **Strong leadership** at the district level and at each school, with systems that empower teachers to contribute to key decisions;
- **A shared vision** between the superintendent and the school board regarding key goals and strategies;
- **High academic standards** for each child;
- **District-wide curricula** that are aligned with instruction and assessment;
- **An accountability system** that holds district leadership, principals, and teachers responsible for producing results;
- **Highly qualified, collaborative teachers** that communicate with one another across grade levels and curriculum areas to invest in each student;
- **Ongoing professional development** for all staff;
- **Family and community participation** that enables parents to meaningfully participate in district decisions and in their children's educations;
- **School reforms that begin in the elementary grades**, rather than reforming all grades at once;
- **Reliance on empirical data – not instinct or anecdote – to gauge success**, with data including information on students, programs, and staff.

“Westside students are suffering most at the high school level. ACT and SAT scores are key indicators for student preparedness for higher education. Westside schools have lower scores for both standardized tests than the rest of the APS district.”

RIO RANCHO PUBLIC SCHOOLS IS OUR MODEL

Rio Rancho Public Schools (RRPS) is a model of how a school district can successfully break away from APS and establish its own viable, thriving school district. RRPS's program quality and student output are so noteworthy that the state of New Mexico uses it as an example of how a school district should operate.

The city of Rio Rancho was incorporated in 1981 with a population of 9,985. Today, the city has grown to over 75,000 residents. Originally the city was divided into two school districts: students living south of Northern Boulevard were in APS and students living north of Northern were in Jemez Valley Schools.

By 1994, schools serving Rio Rancho students were overcrowded. At that time, APS had five schools in Rio Rancho, with high school students attending Cibola High School on Albuquerque's Westside.



As the city began to grow, residents felt the current education system was not adequately providing the proper education or facilities for their students. A referendum to create a new district separate from APS failed in 1986. Strides to secede from APS and establish a new district reconvened in 1992 when a study commissioned by local businesses and parent-teacher associations concluded that the city could support its own school district and advised necessary steps to do so.

In 1993, after endorsements from the Albuquerque and Jemez Valley school boards, the NM Board of Education approved the creation of an independent Rio Rancho school district and appointed an interim board. The

following year, the first school board election was held and the district's first permanent board took office. The district conducted a national search to fill the position of superintendent. All hiring and transition planning was complete within one year. RRPS began its operations in July 1994 as an independent school district.

RRPS was initially created as a kindergarten through 8th grade system since no high school existed within city limits at the time the district was created. Students living south of Northern continued to attend Cibola, while many students previously in the Jemez Valley school district boundaries attended Del Norte High School. This was the only Albuquerque high school that could accommodate the volume of Rio Rancho students. A small population of students attended other APS high schools across Albuquerque.

The state Board of Education believed Rio Rancho would be in the position to build a high school within ten years of establishing the district due to limited tax dollars. Instead of building a high school, the Board advised focusing funding on easing overcrowding in the el-

elementary and middle schools. Bond assistance from 1994 and 1997 elections facilitated an aggressive building program that created two elementary schools – Colinas del Norte and Puesta del Sol – an addition to Rio Rancho Elementary, and two middle schools – Eagle Ridge and Mountain View.

In 1995, the city focused its attention on creating a high school. As a result of a unique community and business partnership between Sandoval County and Intel, Intel received \$8 billion in industrial revenue bonds and agreed to provide \$30 million for construction of Rio Rancho High School. The facility was leased to RRPS for one dollar per year. The partnership allowed Intel to build the core facility and the district to provide furnishings, technology, and equipment. The school opened in 1997 with a freshman, sophomore, and junior class.

Voter-approved bond issues have financed improvements to the school. A second high school will open in the fall of 2009.

“This WSD district will have appropriate diversity in ethnicity and socio-economic levels.”

RRPS received full accreditation from the NM Department of Education and the North Central Association in 1995. Since then, the district has been audited annually and has continually received unqualified, or “clean,” audits. The Legislative Finance Committee audited the district in 2008 due to its “experience with school construction and positive reputation for student performance.” The committee report stated: “Overall, the Rio Rancho Public School district is well run and appropriately focuses efforts and resources on the classroom, which has helped produce positive student outcomes.”

As RRPS has grown in student population, the district has constantly met standards of excellence in student achievement, school efficiency and effectiveness, and community involvement. Rio Rancho became the third-largest district with more than 14,800 enrolled students in 2006. Also in 2006, 66% of RRPS schools earned “Meets AYP” ratings, including all eight elementary schools and two of its three middle schools. RRPS has become one of New Mexico’s top school districts and is the model for educational success for creating a Westside school district.

KEY FINDINGS FROM THE NM LEGISLATIVE FINANCE COMMITTEE REPORT:

- **Overall, the Rio Rancho Public School district is well run and appropriately focuses efforts and resources on the classroom, which has helped produce positive student outcomes.**
- **RRPS provides an enriched learning environment to students, including an impressive array of technology, facilities and capable educators working with a common vision, while relying almost entirely on state equalization guarantee funding for operations.**
- **RRPS exhibits many of the best practice qualities for successful districts.**
- Public education is a core state responsibility and accounts for over 43% of all state spending.
- Students in Rio Rancho classrooms with teachers who had completed the professional development dossier showed growth in test scores that exceeded district and statewide average gains.
- Economically disadvantaged students in RRPS score high when compared to the state averages, but struggle when compared to peers in their own district.
- The current funding formula does not under compensate Rio Rancho Public Schools for student population growth.
- Student population growth creates challenges; however better budget planning could ease financial pressures of opening new schools.
- High expectations and stable leadership have contributed to quality educational programming and high levels of student achievement.
- The three-tiered teacher licensing system has shown progress in boosting compensation and, based on a small exploratory study, student achievement at Rio Rancho public schools.
- RRPS student achievement exceeds average state scores and most peer schools in Albuquerque, but more progress is needed to improve student achievement levels for low-income students.
- RRPS special education population is similar to state averages, though growth in ancillary services raises concerns.
- RRPS has a well run, but expensive, student transportation program.