



Opinion

Legislators think fewer districts would be better

Would Kansas be better off with just 40 school districts rather than nearly 300?

Some legislators and educators think so, including columnist John Richard Schrock, whose view appears elsewhere on this page.

The 40-district plan was proposed a few years ago, supposedly to save money under the state's school finance plan. With the state facing a budget shortfall of up to \$1 billion next year — and public education taking half the budget — the Legislature undoubtedly will be looking at this and other plans again.

But is consolidation a good idea? And is forcing consolidation on rural districts — destroying the economic underpinnings of dozens of small towns — something the state ought to do?

Dr. Schrock rather cavalierly says yes, noting that consolidations is inevitable to some extent. He seems to think nothing of putting students on a bus for an hour or more each morning, and again each night, to save the state some money.

Our view is that consolidation, while in fact inevitable, should not be forced on rural Kansas. What makes sense in Topeka, or Emporia or Salina, may not be what western Kansas wants or needs.

Recent events have shown that small school districts with no hope of attracting more students will realize their plight. Several in this area — including Jennings, Herndon and Bogue — have called it quits in the last few years. Other "out-county" districts, which tend to be smaller than those in county seats, are looking at mergers, consolidation, working agreements, whatever it takes to either keep things going or get out of business.

Consolidation will continue, driven by the decline in farm population. It's a fact, whether we like it or not.

But should the state force consolidation? And is it likely to save any money?

Dr. Schrock's home county, Lyon, holds three "unified" school districts from the 1960 round of consolidation: Emporia, Northern Heights and Olpe.

Both the smaller districts are less than 30 miles from Emporia, and it'd be possible to consolidate them into Emporia. All three districts include smaller former districts "unified" to form them in the 1960s.

It's likely the consolidated school board would promise to keep the outlying grade schools open, but the high schools probably would close. However, Emporia High already is a Class 5A school with more than 1,000 students in the top three grades. That makes it larger than the "optimum" size for a high school set out by consultants hired by the Legislature a few years ago.

Will adding 250 more — and a lot of bus time — improve anyone's education?

Then there's the devastating impact of losing a high school in small towns. And later, when the budget is tight and the school board dominated by the larger town, does anyone think the buildings in Olpe (population 500) and Allen (209) would be kept open?

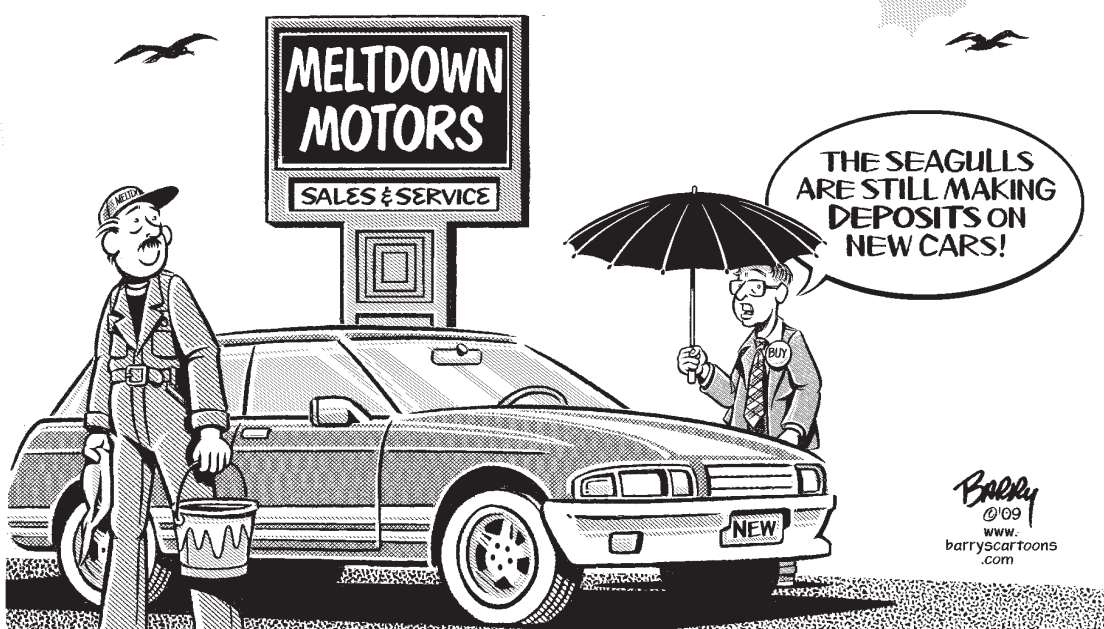
Out here in western Kansas, you could envision — for efficiency — high schools serving three or four counties, maybe even one or two serving six or seven. But some students would have to ride the bus well over an hour. It's done in other western states, but is that a good thing?

That said, many small schools between the county seats may find it impossible to hang on. If that happens, though, shouldn't the people of those towns, and not Dr. Schrock or the Legislature, make the decision?

It's apparent that school boards facing the end and will recognize their situation. Others are trying to avoid closing, some — with a little help from creative economic development — are succeeding.

In our view, the state should enable and encourage district closings or mergers — especially where there's money to be saved or kids would get a better education — but put the meat cleaver away and let local school boards make local decisions. — Steve Haynes

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN TODAY'S CONSUMERS AND SEAGULLS?



Is consolidation inevitable?

By John Richard Schrock

A new Legislature has just been elected. But will the members have the guts to tackle the biggest educational and economic challenge facing Kansas — school consolidation?

With both a growing shortage of rural teachers and a state economic crisis (63 percent of our state taxes go to education), the dreaded "C" word may have to be spoken.

In 1945, Kansas had 8,000 mostly small school districts. By 1960, the number had dropped to 2,600. In 1963, the Legislature set up a unified school district system that gave us 303 districts. Then earlier this decade, a plan was proposed for just 40 Regional School Districts. It was rapidly dismissed.

I visit both large city schools and small rural schools in Kansas. Rural schools are a comfortable place for students to grow up. Classes are small and everyone knows everyone. Each student is a big fish in a small pond, and in sports, most get to play.

Often one person teaches English from the freshman to senior level. And one teaches middle school science through biology and chemistry and senior physics.

Most small-school teachers have from four to six different classes to prepare for each day, and that means that there is usually less science equipment. Some teachers are teaching some topics "at arm's length," if not exactly out-of-field. Personal attention is high, but small class size makes efficiency low. Rural schools need more state aid per pupil.

Politically and socially, small towns center around their school. It is part of their identity. When a school is lost, it can leave a ghost town.

In contrast, teachers in larger high schools have only one or two "preps" a day. Class sizes are closer to 24 or more. Larger schools offer more advanced courses. "Local option" money often supplements budgets so facilities can be substantially better.

With rural schools unable to replace retiring teachers in more and more fields, and with state tax revenues likely to fall for some time, consolidation may now have legitimacy.

The proposed "regional district model" is based on businesses. It looks at McDonalds and Wal-Mart stores, where a 60 mile radius in the west or a 30-minute travel rule in the east determines the minimal popula-

tion necessary to support a store.

An administrator might say, "if we have a McDonalds, we can keep our school." Regional school district also resemble the Kansas Rural Health Network, where smaller community hospitals are hubbed around a few large, specialized hospitals. This model would transport young students to nearby elementary school and have secondary students ride the bus on to a few larger high schools.

Several of the 40 proposed regional districts were examined in detail to estimate how much change might occur. A South Central Regional District around Pratt could consolidate 17 current districts into one and 36 schools into 30, a net loss of six, although there would be some reconfiguring of the schools involved.

A Manhattan Regional District could consolidate nine districts into one and 45 schools into 30, a loss of 15. And a Southwest Regional District consolidates 17 districts into one and 36 schools into 30, a loss of six.

This last case preserves one "necessary small school." If the travel distance is over one hour on the bus, a small local school would not automatically be closed. The regional plan uses optimum sizes; while some rural schools are too small, and some current schools in Salina and Manhattan are considered too large.

Those models are theoretical. The regional districts would have their own elected school boards to determine the consolidation.

Consolidation would address a small part of the teacher shortage. If one small school has a qualified teacher teaching a class of 10 and a second has an out-of-field teacher doing the same, a consolidated school could teach the 20 students with the one qualified teacher.

Savings for each regional district could come by eliminating all those small school boards and district offices, reducing the associated operational costs, and most of all, reducing the teaching staff and support costs. In normal economic times, this could translate into higher teacher salaries and better health coverage. And with more course offerings, including a regional technical school and more qualified teachers, there should be less need for remedial courses at state colleges.

A drawdown from nearly 300 unified districts to 40 regional districts

might solve the shortage of superintendents and other administrators. However, such a plan would require action by the Legislature. And if approved, it would take five to 10 years to accomplish. Forty regional districts might save Kansas from \$240 to \$480 million per year, but there would be up-front costs for reconfiguring some buildings. And the higher cost of fuel for busses is a development not considered when these districts were first proposed.

Consolidation is definitely a "gray" issue, balancing the community pain of losing many local high schools with the benefits of better facilities, utilizing a smaller staff, and improving curricula.

However, some legislators could look at the possible saving of \$480 million per year as a tax cut. That would mean the pain of consolidation and no educational improvements, a clear no-win situation for both communities and schoolchildren.

When the regional plan was proposed several years ago, there was not a rural teacher shortage and our economy was not in crisis. No one would take the political risk to promote a statewide consolidation plan.

Meanwhile, rural Kansas is shrinking. Some small districts are holding out. One northwest Kansas district shrank from 360 to 240 students but had enough teacher retirements that they did not have to let any teachers go. The superintendent retired and continued on for \$1 a year in salary. Such tactics are desperate. They attest to the commitment to small-town culture, but delay the inevitable.

Since the regional proposal was ignored, eight school districts have found their shrinking student enrollment too expensive to maintain and disbanded or merged. Kansas has dropped from 303 districts to 295.

Whether the newly elected legislators move toward the politically difficult decision to establish 40 regional districts in a quick and organized fashion, though, or whether Kansas slowly combines districts in a haphazard order, the answer is yes: school consolidation is going to occur in Kansas.

John Richard Schrock

Emporia
Schrock, a professor of biology and department chair at a leading teacher's college, lives in Emporia. He emphasizes that his opinions are strictly his own.

Hangin' With Marge

Christmas

By Margaret Bucholtz



margeb@cityofstfrancis.net
This was another great year at Christmas time. Three of our six children were here along with their spouses and eight grandchildren and each brought a friend. There is nothing like family for the holidays.

Then everyone left and Kurt and I spent our New Year like each year before just watching TV. There was only one thing different I had a cold.

On New Year's day I told Kurt that I thought we should make a

New Year's resolution that we were not going to have anymore parties on New Year's Eve. That way we could keep the resolution and not worry about breaking it.

I am sure he was happy with me just laying there in my big chair with my eyes swollen, Kleenex stuffed up my nose and coughing my head off. What more could he want?

The sad thing is that I am still in the same condition only I have moved from the chair. I had to as

we have run out of cups and dishes and they needed to be washed.

As a kid I always wanted to know what that feeling of something crawling around in your nose and causing it to run was. Now, thanks to TV I know what the little infectious critters look like.

TV gives us good mental pictures to remember.

Casey's Comments

By Casey McCormick



scmcormick@nwkansans.com
We made it through another holiday season and now life is returning to its regular, measured pace again. But we are left with some wonderful memories.

This year marked my 48th Christmas. Some are more memorable than others. For instance, the first few are a blur. And then there were the ones when I was still drinking, which also are a blur. But, for the most part, I can wax nostalgic with warm and cherished thoughts of gatherings

with family and friends during the Christmases I do remember.

I received a special gift this year from my dad. This took a little doing since he hasn't been with us since St. Patrick's Day of 1988.

But somehow one of Santa's helpers managed to bring me a small wrapped bundle with the tag saying it came from him. And the gift? A small, green, scuff-worn yo-yo.

Even as an adult, my dad had a lot of kid in him. He never forgot growing up in the Great Depression and having simple play

things. His favorites were marbles and yo-yos. As a grownup he still kept a jar of colorful marbles on the dresser and a yo-yo in one of the drawers.

It's funny how even when a loved one is no longer with us we still have memories of the good times to keep them close. Oh, and watching my son play with my dad's yo-yo was the next best thing to having him there.

Honor Roll

New and renewed Herald subscriptions: Travis Kechter, Cheyenne, Wyo.; Prairie Land Electric, Bird City; Mrs. B. Bartholoma, Prescott Valley, Ariz.; Kenneth Bandel, Arvada, Colo.; Zina Nelsen, Larned; Kerry Hammeke, Topeka; Dorla Mae Rose, St. Francis; Jack Maupin, Haigler, Neb.; Don and Elaine Topping, Springfield, Mo.;

GOD SAYS
The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, and the lion shall eat straw like the bullock: and dust shall be the serpent's meat. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain, saith the Lord.
Isaiah 65:25

The Saint Francis Herald
(USPS 475-960)
A Century of Service to Cheyenne County
P.O. Box 1050, St. Francis, Kan. 67756-1050
Published each Thursday by Haynes Publishing Co., 310 W. Washington, St. Francis, Kan. 67756-1050. Entered as periodicals matter at the post office at St. Francis, Kan. 67756-1050, and at additional offices.
Official newspaper of Cheyenne County. Member of the Kansas Press Association, National Newspaper Association, Colorado Press Association and Inland Press Association.
Subscriptions: One year \$33 (tax included) in Cheyenne and adjacent counties; \$38 (tax included) elsewhere in Kansas; \$42 elsewhere in the U.S. Foreign subscriptions, \$25 extra per year (except APO/FPO). POSTMASTER: Send change of address to Box 1050, St. Francis, Kan. 67756-1050

Nor'West Newspapers
8:30 a.m. - 5:00 p.m. Mon.-Fri.
(785) 332-3162 Fax - (785) 332-3001
E-mail - sf.herald@nwkansans.com

STAFF
Karen Krien Editor/Publisher
Betty Winston Sports Editor
Casey McCormick Advertising Manager
Lezlie McCormick Production
Peggy Horinek Office Manager
Margaret Bucholtz Columnist

Church of Christ
332-2380, Pars. 332-3424
502 W. Spencer
Norman Morrow - Minister
Bible Class 11 a.m.
Morning Worship 10 a.m.
Wed. Bible Study 7 p.m.

St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church
625 S. River • 332-2680
Fr. Roger Meitl
Sunday Mass 11:00 a.m.
Weekday Mass 8 a.m.
Confessions Sat. 4-4:30

United Methodist
Church Office 332-2292,
Church 332-2254,
512 S. Scott
Pastor Morita Truman
Early Bird Service 8:30 a.m.
Sunday School 9:30 a.m.
Worship 10:30 a.m.

Seventh-Day Adventist Church
785-890-5718 • 3rd & Adams
Pastor Jerry Nowack
Sabbath School 9:30
Morning Worship 10:45

Salem Lutheran Church
332-3002
Pastor Chris Farmer
Sunday School 10 a.m.
Morning Worship 11 a.m.

Solid Rock Baptist Church
412 S. Denison
Welcomes You!
Pastor Allen Coon
Sunday School 9:30 a.m.
Worship 10:30
Prayer Meeting, Wed 7:30 p.m.

First Christian Church
Pastor Jeff Landers
332-2956 • 118 E. Webster
Bible Fellowship 9:20 a.m.
Church Service 10:30 a.m.

First Baptist Church
2nd & Scott • 332-3921
J.W. Glidewell, Pastor
Sunday School 9:30 a.m.
Worship 10:30 a.m.
Sunday Evening 6:30 p.m.,
Wed. AWANA Club 6:30 - 8:00 p.m.

St. Francis Community Church
332-3150
204 N. Quincy Street
www.sfccfamily.com
Pastor: David Butler
Sunday School 9:15 a.m.
Worship Service 10:30 a.m.
Potluck & Communion - Every 2nd Sunday
Wednesday Bible Study 7 p.m.

Peace Lutheran Church, AFLC
202 N. College
Pastor Ken Hart
332-2928 Pars. 332-2312
Sunday School 9:30 a.m.
Worship 10:30 a.m.
Sunday Eve. Bible Study 7 p.m.
Communion 1st Sunday of the Month

Knodel Funeral Home
202 S. Benton • St. Francis
785-332-3131

St. Francis Equity