



## Other Viewpoints

### Consolidation plan stirs school debate

The Kansas Legislature needs all the help it can get to close a \$400 million-plus budget hole, so interest is high in an audit report finding the state could save \$15 million to \$129 million per year by consolidating some of its 293 school districts.

The Legislative Division of Post Audit report, presented last week to a joint House-Senate committee, outlined two scenarios: If the state tried to consolidate districts with fewer than 400 students or 200 square miles, it could eliminate 27 districts and 230 jobs and save \$15 million. If the focus was on districts with fewer than 1,600 students — those which qualify for millions in “low-enrollment” money — the state could eliminate 141 districts and 1,530 jobs and save \$129 million.

But anyone who thinks the report will trigger quick legislative action must have missed the traumatic consolidations in the 1960s or the verbal abuse and even death threats directed at pro-consolidation legislators since. It’s an open question whether Kansas is overstocked with districts at all: True, Colorado has 178 districts, but Oklahoma, Nebraska and Missouri each has more than 500.

The audit makes clear that consolidating districts, closing schools and cutting staff can’t happen just the most rural parts of western Kansas, where long distances limit the possibilities and fiscal benefits. Significant potential savings and efficiencies would come from expanding midsize districts such as Abilene, McPherson, Pratt, Emporia, Pittsburg, Great Bend, Garden City, Hays, Colby, Liberal and Leavenworth. ...

Meanwhile, fierce fights could be expected from the affected districts, where the schools may be the biggest employer in town and a community’s very identity is on the line. And according to the report, the state would save money but “many districts would lose more money in state funding than they save by reducing their operating expenditures.”

With Gov. Mark Parkinson and others predicting that the state’s revenue problems will persist for several more years, though, the audit report does offer leaders an opportunity to show some foresight on behalf of future state budgets.

Because everybody agrees that consolidation is easiest when it starts in the districts, rather than in Topeka, the report also should inspire legislators to explore new ways to encourage districts to consolidate on their own, such as by temporarily lowering property taxes or subsidizing construction needed for a consolidation.

Faced with declining enrollment and budgets, more districts already are gravitating toward merger — including Claffin and Lorraine in central Kansas and Hanston and Pawnee Heights in western Kansas, which won state Board of Education approval last week to put their proposed consolidations to local voters in April. Surely the state can make it easier.

— *The Wichita Eagle, via The Associated Press*

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THE SACRAMENTO BEE REX BABIN

### Simplistic stereotypes play divisive role

The news media in America have a bad habit of describing complex issues in a simplistic “us-versus-them” light. In their efforts to make today’s hot topics understandable to the least informed, they rely more and more on stereotypes that only cater to those trying to divide America.

Today, the common theme is the rivalry between populists and “the elite.” On one side are people from small towns and rural America with their pro-gun, pro-life, anti-government beliefs, and on the other side “the establishment” from the cities with their Ivy League educations, big-government solutions and intellectualism.

In other words, it’s a contest between those championing the vision of Alaska governor Sarah Palin against those who endorse the ideas of President Barack Obama. This simplistic scenario might be pure gold as a movie script, but it’s a disastrous way to view today’s politics.

To characterize American politics as a contest between middle American values and big-city culture suggests that a person’s geography should determine the way they vote or think. This seems about as mindless as accusing people of acting white or black, as if skin color determines the way a person should act. Neither race nor geography should hinder or force people to act a certain way. People should be allowed to form their opinions without having to worry about how they are supposed to think.

Another problem with this big-city-versus-rural-America argument is that it ignores the people who vote in a way that contradicts prevailing political stereotypes. There may be only a handful of them, but there are liberals who grew up in small towns and conservatives



**Andy Heintz**

• Wildcat Ramblings

who live in Boulder, Colo., or San Francisco. Just because a person votes differently than most people in his city doesn’t necessarily mean that he rejects the culture of the town.

Just because a woman from a small town votes for a liberal candidate doesn’t mean that she shares the candidate’s views on every issue. If a man living in a small town votes for a candidate who supports stricter gun control laws, it doesn’t necessarily mean he has a knee-jerk hatred of guns. In fact, he may be an avid hunter who disagrees with the candidate on this issue, but agrees with him or her on other issues such as health care, energy and the environment, and that was enough to convince her to vote for that person anyway.

Personally, I support “concealed carry” and I’m wary of most forms of gun control. But I would be willing to vote for someone who supported stricter gun control if I agreed with her position on health care. The media should show voters that opposition to gun control is not solely confined to small-town America or the Republican party. I know many moderate and liberal Democrats who are not advocates of stricter gun control.

I had a conversation with a nice man named Ralph De Zago on Monday morning. De Zago is seeking the Republican nomination for Kansas Attorney General. We had good conversation and I agreed with his views on the proper

role of an attorney general. De Zago said attorneys general should be in the business of enforcing laws, not creating them. But just as I was starting to think I had found a Republican who I generally agreed with on most issues, he said something that made me cringe.

De Zago said he was a Republican because he believed in control from the bottom and not from the top. His statement reflects a common misunderstanding about liberals. This isn’t an insult aimed at Ralph, who I really liked; I just think his views are misguided. In many ways, authentic liberals are just as anti-government as the majority of small-town America. There anti-government stances are just aimed at different policies.

Many prominent liberals have been strident critics of President Barack Obama’s and former President George W. Bush’s support of “Big Brother” policies such as warrantless wiretapping, increased military spending, the alleged “War on Drugs,” torture and indefinite detentions without a fair trial.

Many liberals also hold libertarian views about the role of religion in government and equal marriage rights for every American, no matter their sexual orientation. So while some liberals can be legitimately accused of being in favor of big government in terms of intervention in the economy and gun control, they hold libertarian positions on social and national-security issues. In other words, liberals can be just as suspicious of those at top when it comes to certain subjects.

*Andy Heintz, a K-State journalism graduate, is sports reporter for the Colby Free Press. He says he loves K-State athletics and fishing, sports and opinion writing.*

### School consolidation analyzed again

The Legislative Division of Post Audit reviewed potential cost savings from reorganization of Kansas school districts, analyzing how districts could be reorganized, and costs associated with reorganization.

The agency developed two scenarios to illustrate school-district consolidation:

• Consolidate districts that don’t meet the original consolidation requirements of the 1960s, with a reduction from 293 to 266.

• Consolidate districts with fewer than 1,600 students, with a reduction to 152.

Scenario 1 had potential savings of \$18 million, would close 50 schools, and have 230 fewer teachers and administration. The second scenario had costs savings of \$138 million, resulting in 1,532 fewer teachers and administrators.

Potential cost savings to the state were \$15 million for scenario one and \$129 million for scenario two, mostly due to less low-enrollment funding. Students transported under scenario 1 would be 900 and under scenario 2, 7,000. Both plans would most likely involve paying for new or expanded buildings, and bond and interest aid.

The agency recommended the Legislature should consider limiting or eliminating a law allowing districts to enter into long-term contracts to share entire grades, and consider strengthening the incentives for encouraging districts to instead consolidate.

I would encourage school districts to take



**Ralph Ostmeyer**

• State Senator

advantage of the division’s services to have your district audited, checking for cuts that could be made and getting their recommendations on how any problems could be resolved.

I will support policies that educate and prepare our children for the next level. Our rural schools are second to none, and I plan to keep it that way.

The state Board of Education has made it clear that they hope legislators make decisions based on accurate information, protecting the future of all students. There is plenty of information for or against these issues, and I agree that we, as legislators, should keep an open mind and have a good debate.

The stated conclusion of the audit was: “Like the rest of the country, Kansas currently is facing its worst budget crisis in decades. The Legislature has made significant budget cuts in all areas of government, including the K-12 education system.

“The analyses we performed in this audit showed that reorganizing the system with fewer school districts has the potential to signifi-

cantly reduce the cost overall. Equally significant issues would need to be addressed before any widespread reorganization could happen, including the impact on students, individual districts and communities.”

“The state’s current policy is to let school districts, school boards and communities be the ones making the very difficult and divisive decisions about consolidating districts, closing schools and reducing staff, never losing sight of the goal of providing high-quality education to their students. While the state offers some incentives to encourage voluntary consolidation, adopting stronger incentives could encourage many more districts to consolidate voluntarily — especially those that are struggling financially.”

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### Mallard Fillmore

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