

Consolidation of schools would be rural downfall

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 can 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



Are school mergers 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 district. 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 you English from the freshman to senior level. And one Mr. or Mrs. Science 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 communities center around their school. It is a big 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 the budget and 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 restaurants and Wal-Mart stores, where a 60 mile radius in the west or a 30-minute travel rule in the east determines the minimal population necessary to support a store.

Opinion

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 net loss of six schools.

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 for each area.

Consolidation would address a small part of the teacher shortage. If one small school has a qualified teacher teaching a class of 10 students 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 possible 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, we did not have a severe 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 they only delay the inevitable.

Since the regional proposal was ignored, eight school districts have found their shrinking student enrollment too expensive to maintain. They disbanded or merged with adjacent districts. 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, 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.

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From the Bible

The things which are impossible with men are possible with God.

Luke, 19:27

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We were awake at midnight!

For the first time in years, Jim and I were awake to watch the ball drop in Times Square and welcome the New Year.

Normally, we go out for dinner, then come home early to watch a good movie. We might wake up and tell each other, "Happy New Year." But, we're usually in bed, long before midnight.

Thanks to an invitation from my brother Dick and his wife Donna to share a soup supper on New Year's Eve with them and our cousins, Barb and Art, we were away from home and the cocoon of our recliners. The food was great. It was midnight before we knew it.

"Why not stay all night?" was Donna's question.

Why not, indeed? Show us a bed and we're there. We were assigned to "The Pink Room," and after borrowing a nightgown from Donna, I settled in for the night.

The next morning, we even managed to sleep in a little. Donna introduced us to a new breakfast dish called something like, "Egg-



Out Back

By Carolyn Sue Kelley-Plotts

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A-Laga." Basically, it's hard-boiled egg whites chopped up into a white sauce, served over buttered toast. It was delicious.

As we were leaving, I told Dick and Donna the next "slumber party" would be at our house.

-ob-

I love to receive "newsy" Christmas letters. Emily Post "poo-poo's" them, but I love 'em. A letter tells me my friends have put a lot of thought into sending their yearly greetings. It catches me up on the happenings, good and bad, in their families.

I never get a Christmas letter done, so this year, we are working on a New Year's letter. While we were in the car on the way to church,

we jotted down some of our year's highlights. There were a lot. The hard job will be to pare them down. I understand not everyone thinks our lives are as exciting as we do.

-ob-

Jim is earning some major brownie points. He announced we were ready to lay the tile in our bathroom, utility room and back hallway. Say no more. I was already on my way to the lumber yard. After a friendly "debate" regarding the color, the order was placed. Oo-o-h! I can hardly wait.

-ob-

A new year is like a clean piece of paper. It is waiting for you to write your life on it. Make it a good one.