

# Why Regionalization Can Improve Education

*New Jersey's Commissioner of Education tells why it's not just about saving money.*

**By Lucille E. Davy**

One of the key components of the CORE act, signed into law in April of 2007, was a directive to the 21 executive county superintendents to present by March of 2010 a plan to regionalize and consolidate school districts within their respective counties into K-12 districts.

This is obviously a complex assignment, and the executive county superintendents have established advisory committees, consisting of various stakeholders, to help them work through the many options available for their individual districts and in their individual counties.

Over the next year, I expect that there will be numerous community dialogues about creating options that promote efficiencies while enriching educational opportunities. Our expectation is that the ultimate result will meet the legislative intent and produce the best solution for every county, for the individual districts and for the students they are charged with educating.

Regionalization has always been an unsettling word for New Jersey's smaller school districts and communities. Some say the opposition is based on the fear that the people in the community will no longer have a say in how their children are educated. Some say that those who serve on local boards are reluctant to give up the power they hold, while others suggest that regionalizing "is just not the way we do things here" or that it won't save any money in the end.

It is very important to begin these community conversations because there is a lot to talk about. While the Legislature's intent in requiring this process was to lower education costs and reduce property taxes, there are other significant reasons why communities should consider regionalization, consolidation and shared services options.

The first key reason is to expand educational opportunities. Many of our smaller school districts point out that they operate very efficiently, and in some cases, they do. But because they have such a small student base, they cannot provide the broad and varied curriculum that children need in order to acquire the knowledge and skills required in the 21st century world. It's also very difficult for a small district to provide the broader, richer curricular and extracurricular activities to which children in larger, neighboring districts have access.

Another reason to consider a merger arrangement is consistency in instruction. Let's say, as a hypothetical example, that six small K-8 districts send their children to a regional high school. Unless all of those districts are communicating frequently and have closely aligned curricula, those students arrive in the ninth grade with six different levels of preparation in math, science and language arts skills. These incongruent levels of mastery produce costly challenges for school boards, administrators and teachers; it can take a year or more to get everyone moving ahead on the same page. Since students only pass through ninth grade once, that can mean a lot of wasted time on everyone's part.

Ironically, it is usually financial reasons – specifically, the resulting effect of higher property taxes in one of the regionalization partners – that cause voter rejection of regionalization plans that do make it to the ballot.

That is why another component of these county dialogues is to identify obstacles to regionalization and craft legislative or regulatory solutions to those problems. We know that we cannot have a system that allows districts to switch partners every year, but we also know that district leaders are very reluctant to enter into relationships that are, under our current laws and rules, virtually impossible to dissolve.

There are also many long-held myths and misperceptions about regionalization and our plans that need to be dispelled during these discussions.

First, calling what we are doing under the CORE Act “forced” regionalization is inaccurate and misleading. Plans developed in accordance with the law that requires the formation of all K-12 districts will not be implemented without a vote of the local residents in the communities involved. So an important responsibility of each executive county superintendent and his or her advisory committees is to develop proposals that provide real efficiencies and better educational opportunities for the children who live in the affected districts.

A second misperception is that the state will only accept plans that call for mega-districts of 5,000 students or more. While a number of studies have indicated that districts of 4,000 to 6,000 students offer the best economies of scale, there is no requirement for a minimum number of students in a consolidation district. However, K-12 districts generally provide the best fiscal efficiencies and instructional continuity.

Another myth that needs dispelling is the idea that a regionalized district will close local schools and require the busing of small children all over the county. This is highly unlikely and not preferable unless the costs are exorbitant or excessive. In most cases, the same number of classrooms will be required to house the children to be educated. So, unless the new plan calls for a large expenditure of funds to build new facilities, the children will probably be going to the same school that they currently attend. It will still be a “local” school, but there will be a centralized administration.

Impediments to school district consolidation are different in every situation, which is why I am not expecting cookie-cutter proposals from our executive county superintendents. Each county must find its own balance of local control, fiscal efficiency and educational continuity. Taxation issues, debt service issues, personnel retention issues, governance issues and educational continuity issues all must be viewed through each individual district’s or region’s perspective, and individual plans must be thoughtfully crafted and analyzed.

We can address these issues, but we need people to begin to take off their home rule blinders and have frank and honest discussions about school district consolidation solutions that will not only save everyone money, but more importantly, provide better educational opportunities for students throughout the state to ensure that they are prepared to compete in the global economy of the 21st century.

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