

A Comprehensive Study on the Organization of Kansas School Districts

**Prepared for
The Kansas State Board of Education**

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by

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In October 1999, Augenblick & Myers, Inc. (A&M), a Denver-based consulting firm that works with state policy makers on education finance and governance issues, was selected by the Kansas State Board of Education to conduct a study of school district organization. The study was mandated by the Kansas Legislature in Section 10, 1999 Senate Bill 171.

A&M created an advisory panel for the study, consisting of Dr. Richard King of the University of Northern Colorado, Dr. Chris Pipho, formerly with the Education Commission of the States, Dr. Paul Nachtigal, former director of the Rural Challenge, and Mr. Terry Whitney, formerly with the National Conference of State Legislatures. We then undertook five key tasks.

1. We completed a review of the literature related to school district reorganization.
2. We developed two approaches to selecting “target” districts that might benefit from reorganization.
3. We conducted on-site visits and interviews with representatives of 64 school districts located throughout the state.
4. We developed three alternative ways to reorganize school districts.
5. We identified areas where statutory changes would be needed to implement our recommendations.

School districts are important governmental entities in this country. At the discretion of the states, most of them have been delegated the authority to levy taxes, incur bonded indebtedness, hire key employees, and set curriculum. Kansas, like the other states, determines how many school districts shall exist and where their boundaries shall be. Over time, the number of school districts has decreased dramatically from over 120,000 nationally, to fewer than 15,000, and from over 9,000 in Kansas, to 304. The importance of their boundaries has also diminished somewhat, particularly in states such as Kansas that have modified their school finance procedures so that the wealth of each district is far less critical in determining that district’s total revenue and property tax rates. This is also true in states that have promoted open enrollment (so that pupils can enroll in schools in districts other than the one in which they reside). Kansas currently has 1.00% of the nation’s pupils, 1.62% of the nation’s schools, and 2.10% of the nation’s school districts.

While the states have delegated certain powers to school districts, they maintain both a constitutional responsibility to provide adequate and equitable education services and an interest in assuring that pupils achieve certain education objectives. A state’s economic and democratic future hinges on whether such objectives are met. Because

the state pays for a significant portion of educational services, it also has an interest in assuring that the cost of providing these services is reasonable. These days, a state's interest in elementary and secondary education primarily reflects its interest in pupil performance and per pupil spending. Little else justifies changing school district boundaries.

The literature about school district reorganization is rather thin, consisting mostly of economic studies of school and school district optimum size, and the arguments that are made for and against changing the numbers of school districts in a state. While the literature is less than definitive about school and school district size, there has long been the view that schools, particularly high schools, need to be large enough to provide an adequate array of academic services and extra-curricular activities. More recently, there are those who advise that schools be small enough to assure a safe, nurturing environment and that school districts are not so large that they become unmanageable. While technology facilitates the provision of broader opportunities in small, isolated schools, there is little evidence that it can fully substitute for the hands-on presence of well-trained adults. And while evidence exists that some graduates of small high schools go on to become very successful, that evidence tends to focus on very few people, much the same way large schools publicize a small number of pupils who become Merit Scholars.

A&M used two basic approaches to identify "target" school districts that might benefit from reorganization. The first approach focuses on districts with relatively low levels of pupil performance and relatively high levels of per pupil spending. We used a statistical technique, regression analysis, to predict both expected levels of pupil performance (based on combining 1998 composite reading, math, and writing scores for Kansas statewide achievement tests) and expected levels of per pupil spending (for instruction, administration, and plant maintenance and operation). Some people suggested that the use of the tests was inappropriate. Because our purpose was to focus only on some districts, the tests provide the only basis for evaluating the relative performance of school districts, and the information is already being used to hold districts accountable, we feel that it is appropriate to use them as the basis of identifying those school districts where state action might be required. While there are many other kinds of information that individual districts use to evaluate their own performance, none provide comparable information for all districts. We used per pupil spending as the basis for evaluating relative spending levels. Some people suggested that, since the state controls the level of spending of school districts, and no district exceeds the level specified by the state, it is logically impossible to identify high spending districts. Our feeling is that, given the variation in spending that exists, some districts may be spending more than necessary relative to the spending of other districts. The state's formula for distributing state aid may also permit higher spending than is necessary.

Using regression analysis allows us to see how pupil performance and per pupil spending are influenced by the proportion of pupils eligible for free and reduced price lunches and the wealth or enrollment level of a school district. The regression equations accounted for 73 percent of the variation in per pupil performance and 80

percent of the variation in per pupil spending. Given that those levels are high but not perfect, we established confidence intervals around predicted levels of performance and spending to be sure that appropriate districts were identified as being low in performance or high in spending. Based on our analysis, we identified 28 districts that had a combination of low pupil performance and high per pupil spending. They are listed below in three categories.

Districts that have low pupil performance and high per pupil spending based on regression results: Moscow Public Schools (209), West Solomon Valley Public Schools (213), Elkhart (218), Washington Schools (222), Hanston (228), Nes Tre La Go (301), Belle Plaine (357), Chase-Raymond (401), Hillcrest Rural Schools (455), and Udall (463).

Districts with higher than expected per pupil spending and lower than average pupil performance for two years: Fowler (225), Triplains (275), Elk Valley (283), Cedar Vale (285), Herndon (317), Eastern Heights (324), Wathena (406), and Chetopa (505).

Districts with lower than expected pupil performance in 1998, lower than average performance in 1997, and per pupil spending above the predicted level excluding the use of the confidence interval: Turner-Kansas City (202), Bonner Springs (204), Mankato (278), Pleasanton (344), Oxford (358), Caldwell (360), Marysville (364), Madison-Virgil (386), Neodesha (461), and South Haven (509).

The second approach to identify districts that might benefit from reorganization focuses on districts that are either too small or too large, given what researchers and practitioners believe, to offer an appropriate curriculum, extra-curricular opportunities, and a safe, nurturing environment. This approach assumes that a high school should serve between 100 and 900 pupils and that a district should have an enrollment of at least 260 pupils per high school but no more than 2,925 pupils per high school in order to be at those levels. Looking at the total enrollment of school districts and the number of high schools they operate, we found 50 districts that are too small and 24 districts that are too large based on these guidelines. We also identified two districts as being so large that they might need to be reorganized by breaking them into smaller, more manageable districts. These 76 districts have been grouped into four categories and listed below.

Districts that are too small with only one high school: Cheylin (103), White Rock (104), Moscow Public Schools (209), Northern Valley (212), West Solomon Valley Schools (213), Rolla (217), Ashland (220), North Central (221), Fowler (225), Hanston (228), West Smith County (238), Weskan (242), Palco (269), Triplains (275), Jewell (279), West Graham-Morland (280), Elk Valley (283), Cedar Vale (286), Grinnell Public Schools (291), Wheatland (292), Prairie Heights (295), Sylvan Grove (299), Nes Tre La Go (301), Smoky Hill (302), Bazine (304), Brewster (314), Golden Plains (316), Herndon (317), Eastern

Heights (324), Logan (326), Burrton (369), Montezuma (371), Hamilton (390), Paradise (399), Chase-Raymond (401), Mullinville (424), Midway Schools (433), Hillcrest Public Schools (455), Healy Public Schools (468), Dexter (471), Haviland (474), Copeland (476), Pawnee Heights (496), Lewis (502), and Attica (511).

Districts that are too small with more than one high school: Barnes (223), Leroy-Gridley (245), Southern Cloud (334), Rural Vista (481), and Axtell (488).

Districts that are too large relative to the number of high schools they operate: Turner-Kansas City (202), Blue Valley (229), Olathe (233), Emporia (253), Derby (260), Haysville (261), Goddard (265), Maize (266), Salina (305), Hutchinson Public Schools (308), Seaman (345), Newton (373), Manhattan (383), Great Bend (428), Auburn Washburn (437), Dodge City (443), Leavenworth (453), Garden City (457), Geary County Schools (475), Liberal (480), Hays (489), Lawrence (497), and Kansas City (500).

Districts that are too large: Wichita (259) and Shawnee Mission Public Schools (512).

Some of the most important activities we undertook in this study were the on-site visits to a large number of school districts where we interviewed many district representatives. We did this not only because it was required by contract, but also to better understand the dynamics within the districts we identified as targets and in their neighboring districts, which might also be involved in reorganization. We used several criteria to select districts for on-site visits or interviews. First, every one of the 28 districts we identified using the first approach described above was placed on the list. Second, we selected some neighboring districts of those 28 target districts. Third, we obtained additional information about 90 school districts, including the age of their buildings and enrollment projections, and selected some districts based on those factors. Finally, we selected some districts based on being too large, using the second approach to identify target districts described above. In all, we had contact with 64 districts.

We learned a number of things from our on-site visits and interviews: (1) there is substantial resistance to consolidation because of historical, cultural and financial reasons; (2) there is support for state reorganization in extreme cases, where there are declining enrollments and high spending; (3) district officials justified and defended low student performance and high spending; and (4) technology, distance learning, building projects and innovative superintendents were considered essential for surviving consolidation.

Once the on-site visits and interviews were completed, we began to develop reorganization scenarios, ultimately creating three alternative approaches: (1) an approach based on pupil performance and per pupil spending; (2) an approach based on enrollment levels relative to number of high schools; and (3) an approach that took

into consideration both of the first two approaches and resolved differences between them based on a variety of practical considerations, including distance between schools, school capacity (which we obtained through a survey carried out by the Department of Education), and the information we obtained through the on-site visits and interviews.

Tables in the report show the characteristics of target school districts and their neighboring districts, as well as the mergers of districts associated with the three alternative approaches to reorganization. The figures below summarize the results of each approach for the entire state.

- (1) For the approach based on pupil performance and per pupil spending, we identified 28 target districts. We examined all neighbors of those districts for possible reorganization with target districts based on their pupil performance, their per pupil spending, and their distance from the target districts. We were unable to reorganize eight of the target districts using those criteria. We found 20 neighboring districts that could be merged with the 20 remaining target districts to create 20 new districts. The result is 284 districts statewide.
- (2) For the approach based on school district size, we identified 76 target districts. We examined all neighbor districts for the 74 districts that we felt had high schools that were either too small or too large based on enrollment relative to number of high schools, excess capacity of schools, and distance between schools. We were able to reconfigure 45 of the 50 districts with high schools that are too small by merging them with 29 neighbor districts and creating 34 new districts. We were able to reconfigure six of the 24 districts with high schools that are too large by merging them with seven neighbor districts and creating five new districts. In total, 51 target districts are merged with 36 neighbor districts to create 39 new districts and a total of 256 districts in the state. Some other approach would need to be taken to address the issue in 20 of the 26 districts with large high schools and in the two large districts.
- (3) For the combined approach, we were able to reconfigure 56 target districts with 36 neighboring districts to create 43 new districts and a total of 255 districts statewide. As with the second approach, we were unable to resolve concerns in 21 districts by reorganization, which would require other approaches to be taken.

In order to facilitate reorganizing school districts in Kansas, a number of changes need to be made to the state's statutes. A&M recommends that the legislature delegate to the State Board of Education the power to change school district boundaries more easily than is currently allowed. The State Board should consider boundary changes by using three processes to assess alternative: (1) Emergency dissolution, (2) Required boundary change planning, and (3) Review of boundary options. The emergency

dissolution is required for those districts that are less than 80 students in 2000, or less than 100 students in 2001 and have declining enrollment. Those districts are required to have a public hearing and report the results to the State Board. The State Board shall take action to accept the district report or implement one of their own. The required boundary change planning is for all of the other districts identified as part of the 28 original targets on Map 1 in this report. Districts would have three years to work on improvements or recommendations, then if they are still targets would follow the emergency dissolution process. The review of boundary options would be for all of the other districts identified as targets in this report. They would follow the same process as the required boundary change planning districts without the final requirement of dissolution.