



The Mechanics of School Consolidation

During the last thirty years, key aspects of school reorganization, or district consolidation, have been studied not only at the state level by the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) but also nationwide. In that period, many school districts in Illinois have changed both the size of the geographic area served and the manner in which they are organized. Although today Illinois seems to have an extremely large number of districts, it should be remembered that a few decades ago, the number was even greater. Before the end of the Second World War, nearly 12,000 school districts served this state's communities. Through an evolutionary process, that number has decreased to the current total of 862. This article suggests strategies to consider when consolidation of districts becomes necessary and a summary of current reorganization options/procedures and incentives for districts to consider.

in any discussion of the variety of methods available in illinois, these methods continue to be supported by the isBE and general assembly as they encourage school districts to consolidate. over the last twenty years, several task forces have discussed reorganization, culminating with Education finding advisory Board (EfaB) of 2003 in which sweeping changes were recommended. currently there is commission that is studying this issue and their report is pending to the general assembly in 2012. notwithstanding this renewed interest, there exists a veritable potpourri of allowable methods for all three kinds of school districts to reorganize; the list below details choices for reorganization in illinois since 1983.

Deactivation

districts utilizing the deactivation method essentially tuition their high school or junior high students to a neighboring district(s) there is no formation of a new district and the deactivating district must approve with a referendum and the receiving district must approve with a board resolution. districts utilizing this method are eligible for only two of the four incentives: \$4,000 per certified staff and salary differential. the deactivating district remains responsible for transportation of students and may renew the deactivation for a one or two year period.

Cooperative High School

high school or unit districts utilizing this method are unchanged except that they agree to cooperatively administer a high school with a newly formed Board of control made up of 6-10 board members from the cooperating districts. cooperative high schools are also only eligible for two of the four financial incentives, salary differential and \$4,000 per certified staff. two of the major issues concerning cooperative high schools are the requirements that they cooperate for a period of not less than twenty years and the teachers manning the cooperative high school are paid from the salary schedules of their original districts.

Annexation

annexations are fundamentally different from other procedures in that a new district is not formed and districts that are annexed are dissolved and become a part of an existing district. as such, the teachers utilize the annexing districts salary schedule and collective bargaining agreement and the taxpayers pay the tax rates of the annexing district except for the Bond and interest fund these reorganization petitions are heard by the regional Board of school trustees and not the regional superintendent.

Dissolution

districts that dissolve also utilize the regional Board of school trustees and when petitions are received for dissolution, the regional Board automatically takes control of the annexation of the district and places them with district (s) as they determine. the only way to stop a dissolution petition is with a counter petition given to the regional Board with a majority of signatures from district constituents. this is the only reorganization method in which there is no vote of approval by districts.

High School – Unit Conversion

a unit district may convert to an elementary district and annex its high school students to a neighboring high school district. this conversion allows communities to maintain control of its elementary students and send the high school students to a larger more comprehensive high school. the boundaries of the elementary district are the same as the original unit district. the new elementary district must vote upon a new elementary tax rate and will also pay the current tax rates of the annexing high school district except for bond and interest rates.

Unit District Formation

two or more existing unit districts may consolidate and form a new unit district. in this procedure all districts must approve the referendum, a new board of education is formed, and new tax rates are voted upon.

School boards were able to focus their energies on how the merger would benefit their children and used the study results to carefully develop tools for convincing their community.

Combined School District

Either elementary or high school districts utilize this method with essentially the same guidelines as a unit district formation other than they combine with a like district (elementary or high school districts) creating an enlarged elementary or high school district. a new district is created with a new board of education and new tax rates.

Unit to Dual Conversion

two or more unit districts may change their district formation to a dual district by changing all of the unit districts to elementary districts and creating a new overlapping high school district. this is the only reorganization method in which you can end up with more districts than you had previously. all new boards, tax rates are created for the participating districts. incentives, staff, buildings, equipment are split between the districts utilizing a process monitored by the regional office of Education.

Optional Elementary Unit District

dual districts including elementary and high schools can switch to a unit district. in this method an existing dual district can form a new unit from less than its entire elementary feeder district (need not be coterminous). in this scenario one or more of the elementary

districts along with the high school district must vote in the affirmative to form a new unit. therefore a new unit may be formed from less than all of the existing elementary feeder districts. remaining feeder districts may remain elementary or vote later to enter the new unit. the new unit board sets the tax rates for the new unit district as well as the high school rates for the non participating elementary districts.

Combined High School-Unit District

a high school district may combine with a contiguous unit district. the newly enlarged unit district serves the entire former territory for 9-12 purposes and residents of the original elementary feeder district(s) remain elementary districts. a new unit district is not formed and the newly enlarged unit district sets the tax rates for entire new territory for both 9-12 of the former elementary feeder districts and K-12 rates for the original unit district.

Multi-Unit Conversion

two or more unit districts dissolve to form a new combined high school-unit district and new elementary district(s) based on the boundaries of the dissolved unit district(s) electing to join the combined high school-unit district for high school purposes only.

The number of districts utilizing the aforementioned methods is as follows:

annexation (includes dissolutions) – 69, consolidation (includes all kinds of districts) – 56, deactivation -13, cooperative high school -1, unit district conversion 1, optional Elementary unit district -1 the remainder of the methods have not as yet been utilized.

While all of the procedures are inherently different in nature there are some commonalities. most of the reorganizations begin with either a board of education resolution or a citizen petition. hearings are required by either the regional superintendent or regional Board of trustees. reorganization petitions must be approved by the roE, state supt. and or/ regional Board of school trustees,

article

depending upon the method utilized. While many if not most districts utilize the information and services of feasibility studies that are funded by isBE, they are not required. Bond & interest payments will continue to be made by the original districts until they are paid unless it is determined differently in the referendum. all board elections are made "at large" unless changed in the referendum process. collectively bargained contracts are void yet other multi-year agreements (administrators, transportation, etc.) must be honored. tenure is transferred to the new district by certified employees. non-certificated personnel only have their seniority lists merged for any reductions in staff.

While consolidation or reorganization can experience many pitfalls, success stories have been seen with districts that previously had some form of constructive relationship with the school boards from neighboring communities. most had a successful sports or educational cooperative program already in place, while others had already spent considerable time over the years discussing reorganization for the future. these school boards were very proactive in their approach and their emphasis centered on what was best for children. successful school boards were able to focus their energies on how the merger would benefit their children and used the study results to carefully develop tools for convincing their community. in these situations, the communities understood the importance of acting before the district was completely insolvent.

From an instructional perspective, if the community believes it is their responsibility to provide the best educational programs they can provide, the decision is much easier to sell. some have an easier time recognizing that they are preparing their children to be successful in a world much different than the one the previous generation prepared for, and create plans accordingly.

in most cases where reorganization options were discussed, the most influential deciding factor for community members and boards of education was the location of the high school. unfortunately, community decisions seldom reflect knowledge of academic programs and curriculum offerings. yet one of the most successful mergers that i have seen ran in direct contrast to the desire to preserve a local high school; this occurred when one community had a new high school facility which the smaller community recognized as a better, positive option for the future of all their children. the districts were able to maintain elementary centers in their communities. there are cases when communities believe that facilities and programs far outweigh the hardship of moving their children to a different school. While planning, keep in mind this key observation: decisions to support or reject a proposed merger tend to be based on perceptions, which can be influenced by how well the local school board(s) had communicated with the public from the beginning of the process.

References

illinois state Board of Education (1985). school district reorganization in illinois. unpublished report. springfield, il.

phillips, W. h. & day, s. I. (2002). reorganization feasibility study. unpublished report. springfield, il.