

School consolidation by state not way to go

By Jim Nowlan

Illinois Gov. Pat Quinn sent shock waves through much of the school world with his proposal to eliminate more than 500 of the state's 876 school districts. A state legislator has even introduced a bill to consolidate all schools into one district per each of the 102 counties. These proposals will likely be watered down to a new study commission, yet deserve some discussion.

Nothing arouses passions like the state dictating the consolidation of community schools. In the 1980s, a legislator proposed that all school districts with fewer than 1500 students, I think it was, be consolidated. Literally overnight, a statewide network called "Save Our Schools" (SOS) came together and flooded the state capitol with objectors. The lawmaker, a sincere teacher himself and respected expert on education policy, withdrew the bill in haste.

Actually, Illinois has been consolidating its schools since World War II, when the state had 13,000 mostly one-room school districts. After the war, the Illinois Farm Bureau took a lead role in massive consolidation of these schools into 2,000 or so community school districts.

Every year a small number of consolidations occur, often of sparsely populated, small enrollment districts. My home district has gone from Toulon to Toulon-LaFayette to Stark County in the past couple of decades. Some schools have consolidated when a

district alone could no longer field a football team. Others do so for lack of financial resources.

But based on talking with school superintendents in several parts of the state, I think voluntary consolidation is about at an end. That is, the 876 remaining school districts generally feel comfortable as they are, either financially or because of emotional ties to their communities and neighborhoods.

Illinois has a somewhat complicated set of school organizations. There are “unit districts” that operate kindergarten through high school programs. Then there are also many underlying elementary (K-8) school districts that feed into separate high school districts, known as “dual districts.”

Because of our tradition of community-based schools, rather than county-unit school organizations of some states such as Indiana, we have more school districts today than most states. Virginia, for example, also a big state, has just 138 school districts.

The state does provide financial incentives to consolidate, such as help to lift salary schedules to that of the highest-paying school district in a new configuration. On the other hand, there are disincentives to consolidation, as elementary and high school districts can in total levy more in taxes than they would be able to as a consolidated unit.

Some small school districts have great property tax wealth, from nuclear power plants, for example, and they resist sharing the wealth with other districts

Other districts that might logically, to an outsider’s mind anyway, consolidate resist emotionally. For example, the small city of Kewanee has two unit school districts within its boundaries and never the twain shall meet, for historic reasons that separate the school district communities along, fittingly, Division Street. Kewanee Wethersfield even

has cooperative agreements for some sports, but not with the other Kewanee district, instead leap-frogging to another small district.

Until now, the state has used the carrot rather than the stick approach to consolidation. Kewanee cannot be forced to consolidate its districts.

A recent study published by the National Education Policy Center concluded that forced consolidation is generally not a good idea, that the expected savings are illusory. Indeed, in urban areas there is a strong movement to small high schools as opposed to gargantuan ones.

I still think that it makes sense to consider consolidating elementary districts into the high school districts. That way, all the elementary schools provide the same pedagogical approaches and the youngsters enter high school with the same instructional backgrounds. In addition, there should be savings in top administrative personnel.

(By the way, more important than the organization of schools is the school program, which I think should include more math and foreign languages, with longer school days and school years. We should strongly consider year-round schools, with three shorter breaks rather than one long vacation in the summer.)

I think forced consolidation is not likely to occur in Illinois this year, and that instead a study commission will be convened and asked to report back with specific proposals for consolidation of dual and very small districts. This will put pressure on those districts to consolidate of their own volition in the future.