

**Testimony Before the  
New York State Commission on Local Government Efficiency and  
Competitiveness  
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Members of the Commission, I appreciate the opportunity to testify before you today and more importantly, to offer ourselves as a resource and a partner in the important work before you. In the time available, I will attempt to briefly address a few issues pertinent to your deliberations.

There has been some degree of concern regarding local school budget voting and school board member elections. This concern relates to the percentage of voters participating in these elections in comparison to general elections held in the fall of the year. The question posed is whether combining the two events might be more efficient, as well as provide for greater public participation. We believe that such a change would be unwise. Though spring school elections are poorly attended, they remain a statistically valid representation of the community. There is a procedure in place to challenge the validity of school elections and despite the low participation rate, such elections are virtually never challenged on the basis that the will of the community has been subverted by lack of participation. Recent statistics compiled by the New York State Council of School Superintendents shows that negative votes in these elections are declining at the same rates as supportive votes. Given the complex nature of the timing of school voting, with its public notices, public hearings, required budget informational mailings, passage of the state budget (which allows schools to know state aid levels prior to public budget presentation) and the possibility of putting budgets and other propositions up for more than one vote, a change to the fall would require a dramatic reorientation of school fiscal planning. A change to two year state funding would minimize the disruption, but beyond the impracticality, there are a number of public policy implications that would appear to preclude such a change. These include the lower priority placement of school issues on the ballot below national, state and other local governmental elections and ballot propositions, the propensity of political parties to insert themselves into school board elections and run candidates as part of a state, county, town and school board slate of candidates. Given the volunteer nature of the school board member position and the relative insulation of schools from political patronage pressure to date, simultaneous elections would serve neither the schools nor the communities that support them.

New York State currently has approximately 740 school districts, including BOCES and special act school districts. This is a significant historical reduction from the over 5000 formerly designated in our state just 60 years ago. Consolidation has been a natural tendency over time, recognizing the broader range of educational opportunities available and economies of scale resulting from achieving a requisite critical enrollment mass. While it is true that there remain some very lightly populated school districts, mergers and consolidations have of late become much more difficult to justify, particularly when accounting for significant increases in transportation time for small children, geographic barriers and other impediments. Despite significant state aid available to study and implement such consolidations, few districts have found it to be in their best interest; even recognizing the potential tax savings. Those tax savings

largely revolve around the increased state aid however and not from operational savings from improved efficiency. Most mergers and consolidations have been elementary school districts that have seen fit to align themselves with traditional K-12 districts in order to obtain state aid building and operational incentives. These districts see little if any change in their actual operation. K-12 districts on the other hand have seldom combined, as transportation and programmatic alterations have frequently made such moves impractical. Furthermore, what limited research is available tends to question the likelihood of savings derived from centralized services in large, consolidated districts. New York State already has the leanest administrative structure and the highest classroom allocation of total resources of any state in the nation. While some functions, such as payroll, grade calculation, scheduling, textbook distribution and state testing have the potential for regional administration, the responsibilities of district and building level administrators are steadily increasing, leaving little if any possibility for savings. In addition, merger of districts inevitably leads to an increase in staff salaries to meet the higher of the two payrolls, a pattern that also applies to other benefits, such as health care. Greater efficiencies are more readily attainable in cooperative ventures, either through BOCES or between school districts and the surrounding municipal entities.

In the Adirondack region, I have had the privilege of participating in a collaborative effort between school districts, other local municipal governments and their elected state representatives. This region has been in the forefront of sharing information on existing shared services, such as joint fueling stations, jointly owned and operated athletic fields, joint ownership of specialized equipment, shared transportation for students and senior citizens, joint assessing of real property, joint building and transportation maintenance and many others. They have begun to explore the concept of “functional consolidation”, leaving existing attendance patterns intact, but combining board, management and administrative functions. They have also met to explore the possibility of instituting joint projects attempted in other states, such as privatization of entire school operations, consolidation into “super districts” based on the equivalent of BOCES districts, institution of a lengthened school day, combined with a four day school week, resulting in lower heating and transportation costs.

Our state’s Boards of Cooperative Educational Services should serve as models in this effort. Combining and centralizing efforts to achieve what could not be done independently, they are well established systems that can be expanded for school use and serve as a model for other municipalities. I would encourage you to contact the BOCES district superintendents, who serve as the Commissioner of Education’s field representatives and are a tremendous resource, well versed in the providing of collaborative services.

Finally, I would stridently urge you to explore the many legal impediments to local governmental efficiency in our state. Schools seeking to create cooperative health care pools have been told that collaboration by more than 4 schools constitutes an insurance company. We are the only state in the union that does not allow our municipal governments to piggyback on other municipal contracts. This deprives our governments of the lowest national price for a host of standard products, while depriving our businesses of participating in a national municipal market. We do not exempt our governmental entities from utility systems costs and we do not allow reverse auctions (where governments post bid requirements and then allow pre-qualified national and international vendors to compete to lower the price.)

Over the past two years, our association has initiated several intense studies of impediments to school district efficiency, including a Task Force on Retirement Benefits for the 21st Century, Real Property Tax Reform, reform of the costly and time consuming teacher disciplinary process and the federal mandates imbedded in the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). We will shortly begin new efforts to specifically address cost containment, which will likely include the issues of energy, health care and school construction.

I am grateful for this opportunity to participate at the outset of your deliberations and encourage you to seek us out whenever you believe we can assist you in this important undertaking.

Respectfully submitted,

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