

The Issue

A number of studies of school consolidation in rural areas¹ suggest that mergers may not necessarily reduce costs, depending on the size of the school districts. Rather, a recent NYSED report notes that “one argument in favor of regional and thus larger high school districts is a widely held perception that rural high schools lack the vast array of enriched courses offered by other districts”. The same report indicates that “rural pupils have thirty-percent fewer enriched course offerings than their urban or suburban counterparts”. Finally, another study concluded that the more effective secondary schools enrolled between 600-900 pupils.

Nevertheless, a number of reports to the Governor and the New York State School Boards Association have determined that costs for rural school districts do need to decrease to ease the tax burden on property owners. Accordingly, two studies of regional high schools (RHS)² were undertaken and reached similar conclusions: unlike mergers, RHS have the potential to increase educational opportunity and programming for students and provide savings to local districts. Statewide, consolidation efforts currently have little momentum since communities do not want to lose their schools, thus the RHS concept creates an opportunity.

In addition, regional high schools offer a potential advantage over traditional “tuitioning-out” arrangements in allowing the sending districts to have a voice in governance, either through BOCES (if the RHS is located there) or in a new governance model.

While these RHS studies have focused primarily on rural schools, these recommendations likely apply to small schools statewide.

The Solution

Legislation is necessary to resolve the following organizational issues:

- What would be the legal governing body (Board of Education) for the RHS? How would it be selected? What would be the relationship to the BOCES Board of Education?
- Who would be the administrative/executive head for the RHS?
- What would be the financing structure of the entity and how would local and state funding be raised?
- What body would be given the authority to grant credit and award diplomas to the students?

¹ “Organizational Alternatives for Small/Rural Schools” conducted by Cornell University and “Does School Consolidation Cut Costs?” conducted by the Center for Policy Research at Syracuse University.

² In 2009, Wayne-Finger Lakes BOCES secured NY Department of State funding to conduct a feasibility study for the 11 districts in Wayne County using the education consulting firm of Castallo and Silky from Syracuse. In 2010, all 18 component school districts and the St. Lawrence-Lewis BOCES contracted the NYS Rural Schools Association and Organizational Leadership Services, LLC, to conduct a Regional Consolidation, Reorganization, and Shared Services Feasibility Study.

Specific Proposals

As the potential for school district insolvency becomes more likely and immediate, regional means to provide courses for graduation though BOCES may preserve educational capacity as an intermediate step to developing new regional entities.

The Board of Regents should consider the following in its Legislative/State Aid Proposal:

1. Legislation which authorizes and describes multiple RHS models. A Regional High School Task Force (Erie 2 BOCES) analyzed S.5184-B (Young). The bill and the analysis completed this month should provide helpful guidance.
2. State legislation should provide financial incentives for school districts to consider the RHS model.
3. Among the models to consider would be BOCES administered RHS as an innovative and cost effective strategy. Regionalizing would increase the student population for each of the schools so that the delivery of programs and services are more cost effective and efficient, and would provide greater access of programs and services to all students.

These recommendations may preserve educational capacity while reacting to the fiscal crisis created by state aid freezes and reductions, inequitable state aid distribution, the enactment of the tax cap, and the rising costs of health insurance, employee pension systems and the wage guarantees provided in law.