



rural new york minute

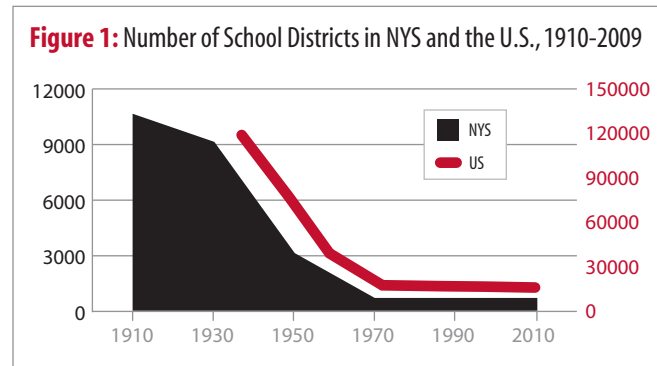
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School Consolidation: What do New Yorkers Think?*

By John W. Sipple and Robin M. Blakely, Cornell University

What is the Issue?

School consolidation is not a new issue in New York State (NYS). A combination of economic, educational, and social forces have reduced the number of school districts across NYS over the past century, from more than 10,000 in 1910 to 697 in 2009 (see Figure 1). While consolidation efforts usually seek to alleviate fiscal stress and/or provide enriched educational opportunities for students, consolidation plans frequently stir much controversy and debate.



Data sources: NCES (nces.ed.gov) and NYSED (nysed.gov), 1910-2009.

Communities across NYS are struggling to improve their public schools to meet local expectations, new state standards and federal requirements, but these efforts are often exacerbated by declining population, declining property values, increasing property tax rates, and increasing healthcare and pension fund costs. Further impacting the financial viability of NYS schools is a proposal to cap school property tax increases to 4% per year and require consolidation of each school district under 1000 students with another district in an effort to reduce the property taxes and requisite costs of operating small school districts.¹ In this *Rural New York Minute*, we examine New Yorkers' opinions regarding local school consolidation, and how levels of support vary across the state.

Support Consolidation? It Depends.

Current legislation in NYS offers "incentive aid" to districts that consolidate. The computed formula operating aid for districts which reorganize is increased by 40 percent for five years, then reduced by four percent each year until it is phased out, thus providing a total of 14 years of additional operating aid.² However, levels of public support for school consolidation may vary depending on the purported benefit. In the most recent Empire State Poll and CaRDI rural survey, we asked 1,000 NYS residents whether they would support merging their local school with the school of a neighboring town if it resulted in benefits such as increased academic and afterschool opportunities, or a decrease in local school property taxes.

More than two-thirds (69.2 percent) of New Yorkers support consolidation if it would lead to an increase in academic and after-school opportunities (see Figure 2). About one in five are not supportive of this idea. People living in rural areas tend to be the least supportive, with one in four opposed. Downstate urban respondents voiced the most support (73.1 percent). Levels of support for consolidation fall when the stated benefit is a decrease in local school property taxes. Only about half of New Yorkers support consolidation for this benefit, and again the level of opposition to this idea is strongest among rural New Yorkers (31.7 percent are not supportive).

Conclusion

Even though New Yorkers pay among the highest property taxes in the nation, they are significantly more supportive of school consolidation if it is expected to result in better academic and after-school opportunities for students than if it were to decrease their local property taxes. While the current policy discussion is focused on consolidating *rural* districts, rural New Yorkers are less supportive of consolidation than urban residents. However, since it is becoming increasingly difficult to improve academic and extracurricular programs while keeping property tax levies in check, pressure to merge programs, services, districts, and schools is growing. Rural schools must explore how they can gain efficiencies in their present configuration, examine alternatives to merger where the costs to merger outweigh the benefits, and engage in mergers where the academic and economic benefits are clear. ▲

Figure 2: Level of support for merging local school with a neighboring town's school if it resulted in either increased academic and afterschool opportunities, or a decrease in local school property tax, by geographic region of NYS.

	NY State		Downstate Urban		Upstate Urban		Rural	
	academic & afterschool	lower taxes	academic & afterschool	lower taxes	academic & afterschool	lower taxes	academic & afterschool	lower taxes
Not Supportive	19.1%	28.5%	15.8%	27.9%	22.0%	27.0%	25.5%	31.7%
Neutral	11.7%	21.8%	11.1%	22.8%	12.9%	21.3%	12.8%	20.3%
Supportive	69.2%	49.6%	73.1%	49.3%	65.1%	51.7%	61.7%	48.0%

Source: 2009 Empire State Poll and CaRDI Rural Survey, Survey Research Institute, Cornell University

¹ http://www.cptr.state.ny.us/reports/CPTRFinalReport_20081201.pdf

² NYS Department of Education. Guide to the Reorganization of School Districts in NYS. Albany, 2009. http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/mgtsevr/sch_dist_org/GuideToReorganizationOfSchoolDistricts.htm.

Further Information: *This issue is a joint publication between CaRDI and the New York State Center for Rural Schools (<http://www.ny ruralschools.org/>).

For examples of organizational, fiscal, and programmatic strategies that encourage or reduce the need to merge school districts, see the website of the New York State Center for Rural Schools.

