



## Erie County as a Metro-Wide School District

Gabriella Agostinelli

SUNY Buffalo Law School Student

### Executive Summary

Studies show that the quality of a child's education is largely dependent on her family's wealth, race, and residence.<sup>1</sup> When a child living in deep poverty is educated in a poor school district, she has little exposure to the opportunities and experiences enjoyed by children in wealthier districts. Metro-wide school districts attempt to equalize educational opportunities for all students, raise regional academic achievement levels, and generate better relations across economic, ethnic, and racial lines.<sup>2</sup> These districts often form by consolidating urban and suburban school districts within a region into one centralized unit, often on a county-wide scale.<sup>3</sup>

Despite its potential for success, a metro-wide school district in Erie County faces several obstacles. While studies indicate that district mergers can cut operating and administrative costs by millions, higher transportation costs and pressure to raise teachers'

*"Metro schools are the Rust Belt's unfinished business . . . [We need to] get serious about ending the inefficient, expensive, and suicidal isolation of the poor."*

— Bruce Fisher, Director of the Center for Economic and Policy Studies at Buffalo State College

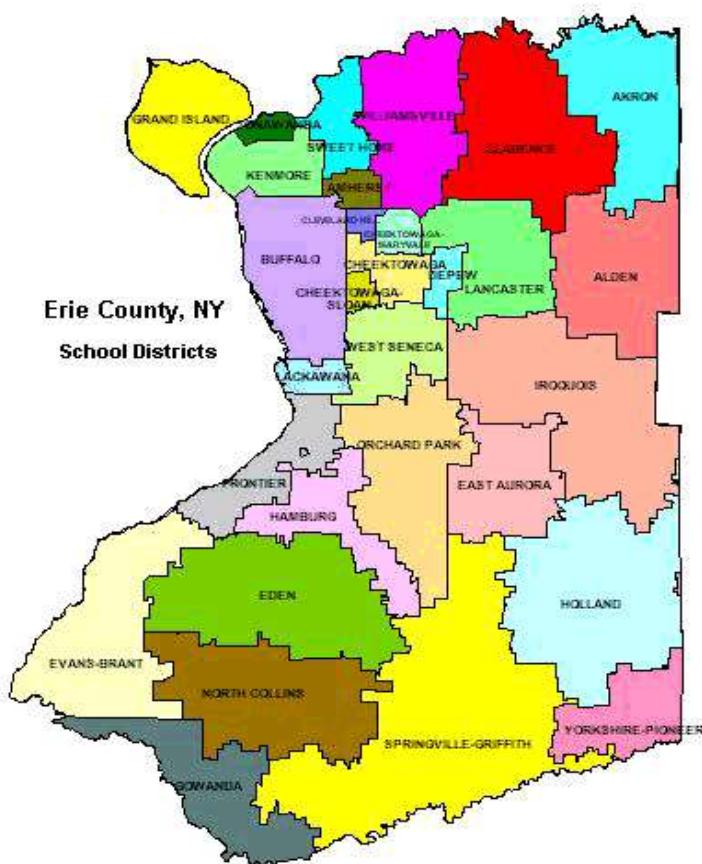
salaries could limit potential savings.<sup>4</sup> Political concerns could also prevent a merger, as it is unlikely that the administrators and bureaucracy of our current school districts would be willing to relinquish control without a fight. Parents, students, and teachers from higher-achieving districts and schools may also be resistant to change when they are content with the status quo.

### Is Erie County Ready for a Metro-Wide School District?

Currently, Erie County is comprised of 29 independent school districts.<sup>5</sup> In theory, Erie County is a prime candidate for a metro-wide school district due to the critical levels of poverty, segregation, and low educational performance in many of its districts. In the City of Buffalo, 37% of school-age children live below the poverty line.<sup>6</sup> In the Lackawanna School District, 35% of the children live below the line.<sup>7</sup> In Cheektowaga, approximately 1 in 6 children live in poverty.<sup>8</sup> Consider the following additional facts:

- Buffalo-Niagara is the 5th most segregated large metro in the U.S.<sup>9</sup>
- Erie County's minority population is 15%, while minority groups make up 54% of the population in the City of Buffalo.<sup>10</sup>

- In the City of Buffalo, 88% of children qualify for free or reduced price lunch.<sup>11</sup>
  - The four-year graduation rate in the City of Buffalo is 47.4%<sup>12</sup>
  - Of the top ten local high schools ranked by Buffalo Business First in 2012, only one, City Honors, was a Buffalo public school. Each of the bottom ten schools was a Buffalo City School.<sup>13</sup>



In the face of such concentrated poverty, a metro-wide district could provide relief for poor students through county-wide integration. Instead of isolating poor students, we could enhance their learning experience by allowing them to form relationships with students from socio-economically diverse backgrounds. In Erie County, where racial divisions are stark, this integration would greatly benefit students.<sup>14</sup>

Other factors supporting a metro-wide school district in Erie County include declining enrollment in many districts, cuts in state aid, low-functioning school boards in some districts, and the state's new tax cap, which prevents budgets from growing by more than two percent a year.<sup>15</sup>

# Why Do Metro-Wide Districts Work?

In the City of Buffalo in 2011, only 26% of eighth graders passed their state math tests, and only 27% their state English tests. In Erie County, some 57% passed in math and English.<sup>16</sup> However, in Raleigh, NC, where the city and its suburbs have formed one county-wide school district, 91% of eight graders are passing their math and English achievement requirements.<sup>17</sup>

How is this possible?

In 1976, Raleigh city and county schools merged to create the Wake County School System (“WCSS”). Raleigh’s success is largely attributed to the substantial economic and racial integration produced through district-wide expansion of two-way busing. The district allows no school to have more than 40% low-income students. Over the years, this has meant more white children traveling to formerly

black schools and vice versa. Throughout this process, no downtown schools have closed, the quality of administrators and teachers has increased, and higher academic standards have been met.<sup>18</sup>

To incentivize participation in Raleigh's consolidation, the district turned 27 schools into magnet schools with distinctive educational programs that any district parent could choose.<sup>19</sup> The idea was that the attractiveness of these programs would override parents' concerns about sending their children to more diverse schools. Students who apply to these programs today are chosen through a computer selection model using a weighted lottery system.<sup>20</sup> Diversity is among the weighted criterion, measured primarily by a student's socioeconomic status. The last 10% of available seats in a school are then chosen at random.<sup>21</sup>



Wake County knew that the success of a school was not necessarily dependent on the resources, buildings, and teachers so much as on the diversity of the students who attend a school. Where schools have a core of middle class children, there will generally be greater parent advocacy.<sup>22</sup> With a balance of students along socio-economic lines, teachers can have higher expectations regarding a child's behavior. Academic performance and learning curves will increase where poor children are held to the same academic standards of wealthier children.<sup>23</sup>

Providing a racially and economically integrated district also raises the caliber of teaching. With a wider spectrum of students, teachers do not "burn out" so quickly and are able to spend more time with students who need the attention. Working for one integrated district also allows teachers to learn from each other more easily.

### **Beyond Raleigh: Other Success Stories**

Lee County, FL (home to Fort Meyers) also has a metro-wide school district that has led the county to be more efficient with its funds while also offering parents more choices and specialized programs for their children.<sup>24</sup> Lee's superintendent notes that the district makes better use of taxpayers' funds to aid the children and their education because it is not hampered by a surplus of "administrative infrastructure."<sup>25</sup>

The Madison Metropolitan School District of Wisconsin also uses a metro-wide approach and has seen positive results. Madison's students surpass their state peers on almost every state test on basic skills (reading, ELA, math, science, social studies).<sup>26</sup> Advanced-course enrollment rates in Madison schools are about 20% higher than the state-wide average, and Madison's students pass Advanced Placement exams about 29% more often than other students in Wisconsin.<sup>27</sup> Madison's students also significantly outperform other students on the ACT college entrance exam.<sup>28</sup>

## **What are the Drawbacks?**

While studies show that merging smaller school districts provides economies of scale, there is far more economic uncertainty with metro-wide consolidation.<sup>29</sup> Merger costs can be significant, especially if they require more busing.<sup>30</sup> Where future New York State aid levels remain uncertain, metro-wide school district mergers may present additional risks. Further, forming this district could drive up personnel costs. Merging all employees could generate a demand to “level up” salaries and benefits to meet the highest levels of any former district.<sup>31</sup>

Aside from financial concerns, some administrators and teachers simply may not want to work in a larger district. They may prefer to work for their smaller districts, which may offer more flexible policies or procedures. Similarly, students may feel more comfortable going to school in familiar surroundings. Parents already pleased with their children’s schools may be hesitant about disrupting an existing balance.<sup>32</sup>

## **How Do We Generate Political Will?**

While several factors make Erie County eligible for a metro-wide school district, political factors undoubtedly will impede consolidation. The eradication of 29 school districts would disturb balances of power among districts and their governance structures. Parents might band together to voice their approval of a metro-wide school district, but there is little chance that they alone can convince their districts to unite.

As a result, advocates of creating a metro-wide school district predict we will need state intervention to implement such a system.<sup>33</sup> The Buffalo City School District receives 82% of its funding from the state, more than any other city school district in Upstate New York.<sup>34</sup> If advocates can show the state that it could save funds if Erie County had a more economically-efficient school district, there may be a chance of change.

---

<sup>1</sup> Gerald Grant, *Hope and Despair in the American City*, Harvard University Press: 2009, 157.

<sup>2</sup> Glen Coin, “Syracuse University professor asks: Should we tear down the walls between school districts?” Syracuse.com, Dec. 14, 2009 [http://www.syracuse.com/news/index.ssf/2009/12/syracuse\\_university\\_professor\\_2.html](http://www.syracuse.com/news/index.ssf/2009/12/syracuse_university_professor_2.html)

<sup>3</sup> Gerald Grant, *Hope and Despair in the American City*, Harvard University Press: 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Id.

<sup>5</sup> Bruce Fisher, “The Rust Belt’s Unfinished Business” Artvoice (Jan. 6, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> G. Scott Thomas, *Poverty Rates for Upstate New York School Districts*, Buffalo Business First, (Nov. 29, 2011). 2010 figures used

<sup>7</sup> Id.

<sup>8</sup> Id.

<sup>9</sup> PPG Buffalo Brief *Poverty in Buffalo-Niagara* (April 16, 2012).

<sup>10</sup> Ramon Garcia *Buffalo Brief: Population Trends in Buffalo-Niagara*, PPG (Oct. 2, 2012).

<sup>11</sup> Assunta Ventresca, *Impact of Poverty: Buffalo School District Health Related Services*, March 1, 2013, available at <http://www.ppgbuffalo.org/issues/poverty/poverty-research-workshop/issuespovertypoverty-research-workshop2013->

---

workshop/2011.

<sup>12</sup> 2010 figure. See PPG Buffalo Brief *Education Data for Buffalo*, August 18, 2011.

<sup>13</sup> G. Scott Thomas, “Western New York High School Database” Buffalo Business First, (June 13, 2012) <http://www.bizjournals.com/buffalo/feature/schools/2012-wnyschools/2012/06/13/western-new-york-high-school-database.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Personal Communication with New York State Education Regent Robert Bennett

<sup>15</sup> Scott Brown, *School District Consolidations May Be Coming, Like it or Not*, WGRZ Channel 2 News, (Sept. 7, 2012).

<sup>16</sup> School Test Scores by County 2011 (averaged 8<sup>th</sup> grade math and ELA scores)

[http://data.lohud.com/school/tests\\_county.php?frm\\_county=Erie&frm\\_subject=Grade+8+Math](http://data.lohud.com/school/tests_county.php?frm_county=Erie&frm_subject=Grade+8+Math)

<sup>17</sup> Gerald Grant, *Hope and Despair in the American City*, Harvard University Press: 2009 at 91. It is also worth noting that the City of Raleigh’s median income is twice Buffalo’s, which doubtless explains much of the difference in educational outcomes.

<sup>18</sup> Id.

<sup>19</sup> Id. at 97.

<sup>20</sup> “Innovations in Education: Creating Successful Magnet School Programs” U.S. Department of Education. Last modified Aug. 8, 2006. [http://www2.ed.gov/admins/comm/choice/magnet/report\\_pg16.html](http://www2.ed.gov/admins/comm/choice/magnet/report_pg16.html)

<sup>21</sup> Id.

<sup>22</sup> Id at 159.

<sup>23</sup> See id.

<sup>24</sup> Dave Murray, “Efficiencies of a countywide school district in Florida: one superintendent to Kent County’s 20” Michigan Live, August 16, 2010 [http://www.mlive.com/news/index.ssf/2010/08/efficiencies\\_of\\_a\\_countywide\\_s.html](http://www.mlive.com/news/index.ssf/2010/08/efficiencies_of_a_countywide_s.html)

<sup>25</sup> Id.

<sup>26</sup> “Introduction to the District” Madison Metropolitan School District. <https://www.madison.k12.wi.us/mmsdfact>

<sup>27</sup> Id.

<sup>28</sup> Id

<sup>29</sup> U.B. Regional Institute, “School Limits: Probing the Boundaries of Public Education,” June 2009, 3.

<sup>30</sup> Id.

<sup>31</sup> Id.

<sup>32</sup> Id.

<sup>33</sup> Personal Communication with New York State Education Regent Robert Bennett

<sup>34</sup> Id.

---

Partnership for the Public Good

[www.ppgbuffalo.org](http://www.ppgbuffalo.org)

237 Main St., Suite 1200, Buffalo NY 14203