

Multiple Perspectives of Educational Issues

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Abstract

As education continues to be in the forefront of all political agendas, many critical issues face educators today. Impending budget cuts promise to be the worst the nation has faced in 30 years. Although education cuts will be motivated by economic times, decisions don't always have to result in detrimental outcomes. There are key educational issues, that when looked at from various perspectives, do not necessarily negatively affect education budgets. They have the potential to positively influence the impact education has on society as a whole. School district consolidation, quality after-school programs in the most struggling schools and an amended school calendar for all students are among the issues that can restructure and reform education in the country to better meet the needs of the growing diverse population. Each of these specific issues, when examined from varying view points, has the potential to improve the quality of education for all students.

Keywords: school district consolidation, quality after-school programs, community-based organizations, at-risk students

School District Consolidation

As school district officials across the United States face extremely difficult financial futures, discussion of school district consolidation becomes more prevalent in the minds of state legislators as they search for creative ways to save money without compromising the education of the students they are entrusted to educate. According to Dodson and Garrett (2004), a consolidated school district can produce an equivalent level of output at a lower cost per student by avoiding redundant expenditures.

The topic of school district consolidation evokes strong opinions from those in favor and those against who are directly and indirectly involved. In addition, to the gain of financial resources by eliminating duplicated roles at the central office level, some students would be afforded the opportunity to increase curricula and extra-curricula activities. When a smaller district combines with a larger one, the advantages for students become greater. Course offerings are extended, improved facilities become available, and broader social networks are formed. In a study of eight North Dakota communities affected by school consolidation, Sell, Leistriz, and Thompson (1996) found that community residents believed that students were better off socially after consolidation because they were able to make a larger and more diverse network of friends.

Researchers conducting studies approved by the Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, Kentucky, Indiana, and Michigan Departments of Education have recommended that the

advantages of consolidation greatly outweigh the disadvantages (Self, 2001). Advocates for consolidation have found that faculty also benefit from the policy. According to Self (2001), in one Ohio school district, Mendon Union, teachers indicated they grew professionally and benefited financially from the consolidation of their small school district with the larger Parkway School District in 1992.

Political arguments against consolidation have hindered more districts from moving forward with the process. Proponents against school district consolidation argue that students will be spending more time on school buses traveling to schools that are farther away from their homes (Lewis, 2003), that greater academic, social, and emotional support is given to students in smaller schools (Nitta, Holley, & Wrobel, 2008), that home values will decrease because some communities base their reputation on their identities which include small schools (Warner & Lindle, 2009; Cronin, 2010), and according to Nitta et al., (2008), that teacher stress will increase and parent involvement will decrease. Furthermore, Nitta et al., (2008) found that very few studies have included conversations with students who have been part of a consolidation process. During their research throughout six regions in Arkansas in 2007, they concluded that students fare much better than their parents during the process and appreciate the increased academic and social opportunities.

Economic Perspective

School district consolidation exemplifies the concept of “economies of scale” - production costs are decreased when the size of the operation increases

(Duncombe, Miner, & Ruggiero, 1995). The following are examples of increased savings that have resulted from school district consolidations in rural, suburban, and urban locales (Nitta et al., 2008):

- Significant savings in personnel costs at the central office level. Key district-wide leadership positions are eliminated when two or more districts merge. Two or more superintendents are no longer necessary and secondary administrative roles such as assistant or deputy superintendents can be scaled down to meet the needs of the combined district.
- Consolidation of services such as transportation and food services also provide significant savings.
- More students would benefit from advanced academic and elective courses with low enrollment. Such classes would not have to be eliminated due to low registers if they were available to more students.
- Students would also benefit from increased college opportunities usually unavailable in small, rural schools, for example, earning college credit through classes available in conjunction with local colleges and universities. Availability of college courses might lead students to post-high school education who might not originally have considered it (developing a more educated workforce).
- All students have access to better facilities including better instructional technology. Under-utilized buildings can be closed.

The financial impact of school district consolidation can be felt strongly when a combined district has fewer than 500 students. Larger districts will experience savings, but the economic benefits are significant in very small school districts (Duncombe et al., 1995; Dodson & Garrett, 2004). So why aren't more school districts consolidating?

Cultural Perspective

The cultural perspective of school district consolidation is probably the most political and the single most emotional issue that has prevented more school districts from serious consideration. Emotions may run high when the perceived character or identity of a community is at stake. Community residents, especially in small towns, embed themselves in the culture of their schools (Warner & Lindle, 2009; Cronin, 2010). Nitta et al., (2008) discovered through their fieldwork that consolidation leads to reduced parental participation in school events and school-wide organizations, primarily caused by transportation challenges.

Studies have also shown that there tends to be a higher instance of negative impact on communities where schools have closed (Self, 2001; Lewis, 2003). Researchers have found less involvement in community organizations and loss of businesses (Sell et al., 1996). Receiving school communities tend to report more positive experiences and less anxiety within the school environment. Politics is a feature of community identity and rezoning attendance areas and building or closing schools all call attention to community identity (Warner & Lindle, 2009). Often there is

little understanding of the global picture of an entire community. Parents, teachers and even administrators advocate for their own schools without understanding the larger context of decisions that must be made. In these extremely difficult economic times, it will not be surprising to see rising tensions between community adults' concerns about their history and the educational needs of current and future generations (Warner & Lindle, 2009).

Mandated After-School Programs for At-Risk Students

The majority of disadvantaged, at-risk students face challenges such as dangerous neighborhoods, poverty, poor health and nutrition, language difficulties, and boredom which can lead to risky behaviors such as drug and alcohol use, criminal activity, and dropping out of school, to name a few (Afterschool Alliance, 2010). Federal education legislation assumes that K-12 schools could operate alone to level the learning field for poor children (Anderson-Butcher, 2010). Research suggests that economically and otherwise disadvantaged children are less likely than their more-advantaged peers to have access to out-of-school or complementary learning opportunities and that this inequity undermines their development and chances for school success (Weiss, Little, Bouffard, Deschenes, & Malone, 2009).

In the 1990s, the country saw an increase in the number of federally- and privately-funded after-school programs. Impoverished communities saw a rise in crime after 3:00 PM and local government agencies realized drug and alcohol use among school-age children was increasing. Too many children were left on their own after

formal school hours and their time was being used unproductively. After-school programs began to take on a sense of urgency to keep children safe and well cared for (Neuman, 2010).

Today, more than eight million children in the United States are enrolled in after-school programs (Afterschool Alliance, 2010). Schools are the largest providers of these after-school programs, followed by YMCAs, Boys and Girls Clubs, religious organizations, and private schools (Neuman, 2010). Such programs include simple after-school care services to support working parents, programs specifically structured to help reduce problem behaviors, programs that reinforce academic achievement, and programs that offer access to sports, arts, crafts, and other activities. Local service providers may be a combination of community-based organizations, city agencies, and intermediary organizations (Bodilly, McCombs, Orr, Scherer, Constant, & Gershwin, 2010). The concern is that these programs are not available to all students who need and would benefit from them.

Economic Perspective

Quality after-school programs are costly. There are many cost factors that impact the effectiveness of good programs. First and foremost is personnel. When certified teachers are recruited and paid wages similar to their contractual per-hour rate, costs are driven up. Many programs also include a snack and dinner. In addition, materials, off-site experiences and transportation, when needed, can also greatly impact the cost of funding these programs (Bodilly et al., 2010).

After-school programs should be encouraged and supported through public funding. However, in these uncertain financial times there are other options. A successful and viable solution for funding the resources needed to implement quality after-school programs has been the inclusion of not-for-profit business partnerships and charitable foundations. Presently, both large- and small-scale programs are run by community-based organizations (CBO's) which are financed through inducements and/or grants by these large investors. In addition, the inclusion of Title 1 funds can offset costs and can be used to help sustain the costs of quality programs. When low-performing schools receive their share of Race to the Top (RttT) funds, the money can be used in lieu of Title 1 funded initiatives so Title 1 funds can be freed up to offset costs or enhance after-school programs. For example, Title 1 funding can pay for small group or one-to-one tutoring in an after-school program, which has already resulted in positive student outcomes. RttT funds are not identified for after-school use and, therefore, could possibly supplant Title 1 funds that are used during the formal school day. The biggest challenge will be capacity-building so these programs can be sustained for as long as necessary.

Social Perspective

Overall, if mandated after-school programs are implemented with integrity and adhere to the established research-based guidelines, the long-term effects can help to turn around the lowest performing schools. Ultimately, the results can address the needs of

at-risk families and those students living in poverty (Weiss et al., 2009). Parents can work without worrying about the whereabouts of their children after 3:00 PM. Students will gain better attitudes about school and improve upon their goals for the future. Students will also gain exposure to non-academic experiences which have been proven to increase academic achievement (Anderson-Butcher, 2010).

Because of the inequities that exist between advantaged and disadvantaged students during non-formal school hours, the failure to redefine learning and where and when it takes place will prevent the country from truly educating all children. Good after-school programs provide experiences that are distinctive from the formal school day. They enable students to use their skills and talents in the practice of interesting activities (Neuman, 2010).

In addition, after-school programs administered by CBO's help to increase community and business involvement. Not-for-profit organizations rely on large corporations and/or foundations for funding, and, therefore, can increase career awareness and work opportunities (Bodilly et al., 2010). The investment will assist in facilitating a shared accountability within the community resulting in greater interest.

In order for all students to be college and career ready and globally competitive, the outcomes may eventually lead to a longer school day for all students – one that provides academic, social, and emotional equity for all.

Modifying the School Calendar

As the nation's economy, society, and demographics shift, the standard six and one-half hour school day and ten month school year no longer meets the needs of the students, their families, and the country. Today's standard school calendar was developed based on the fact that the livelihood of most Americans was tied into the farming cycle. This is no longer the case. The enormous variations of American families and their occupations have created the need for a modified school calendar. As Farbman (2010) states:

Fifteen years ago, the National Education Commission on Time and Learning explained that the American school calendar of 180 six-hour days stands as the 'design flaw' of our education system, for schools could not be expected to enable children to achieve high standards within the confines of the antiquated schedule. (p.17)

As the United States falls further behind in international academic rankings, shifts in the way the students are educated must be examined. In Japan and China, students presently attend school about 222 days a year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2008). According to the 2009 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results, American students scored significantly below the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) average in mathematics and average in reading and science, whereas Japanese students and students from the regions in China who participated in the testing performed

higher than the OECD average (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2010). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2008), school enrollment is projected to increase again beginning in the 2012 school year. The status quo is no longer good enough. If systemic changes are not made within the educational system, the United States will continue to fall further behind in international rankings and the students will not be ready to compete in a global economy.

Increasing the school day and school year for all students is necessary to meet the greater demands and expectations that are being placed on students and teachers. Studies have shown that the long summer vacation that follows the typical school year has been associated with a decline in achievement test scores and has been implicated as a major source of the gap in learning between students from different economic backgrounds, due to students' differential access to learning opportunities in the summer (Cooper, Valentine, Charlton, & Melson, 2003).

The most prominent argument for increasing the number of school days is the potential to increase the amount learned by students. In the era of national standards and increased accountability, it is imperative that students have the greatest opportunities to be successful. It is also argued that an extended school year provides a closer fit with the needs of today's American families, which often are headed by a single parent or by two working parents, both of whom work outside the home (Patall, Cooper, & Batts-Allen, 2010).

Union Perspective

A significant change to the formal school calendar will certainly cause unions concern. School personnel including teachers, administrators, and support staff will expect compensation for the longer work day and/or year. In addition, arguments against modifying the school calendar also include increased teacher burnout. However, having school personnel work longer days and/or school year could also become an important chip during collective bargaining. Pay increases could result from increasing the school day and/or school year.

Since teachers unions now have a voice in creating and implementing school policy, including them in decisions that increase or modify learning time would be important for successful calendar-related transitions to take place. Complete buy-in by all constituents can take place when ideas and concerns are heard, valued, and addressed.

Social Perspective

Many societal issues would be addressed with a longer school day and school year. According to Patall et al. (2010), many studies have confirmed that increased learning time produced significantly increased academic achievement in all subject areas for students living in poverty. Learning opportunities for low-income students becomes greatly increased which levels the educational playing field for advantaged and disadvantaged children. In addition, a longer school day keeps students, especially in secondary school, off the street in the afternoons. This would result in less crime and

reduced funding for programs which revolve around retention, remediation, and rehabilitation.

An increased school calendar would also lower the cost of childcare because students would need less. It would also ease scheduling for parents. Overall, the long-term effects can increase the quality of the future workforce which includes increased earnings and future productivity.

However, concern is also expressed by parents of children who are active in extracurricular activities. They fear that sports teams, bands, and other clubs that compete with or travel to schools on the traditional calendar will be adversely affected because some team members could be on school breaks at varying times. Two organizations, The International Association of Amusement Parks and The American Camping Association, also fear that their interests will be negatively affected by an increased school year or modification of a school schedule (Cooper et al., 2003).

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