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THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EMILY
Lessons from Legislative Battles over Forced School Consolidation

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ABSTRACT—Pressure to force or induce the consolidation of rural schools through legislation is common across the United States. Whereas consolidation was once chiefly about school improvement, today it is more likely to be about fiscal savings. Legislative battles have produced many lessons for rural school advocates which are discussed here. Consolidation is also on the agenda of many of the school reform movements at work in the United States, many of which see rural schools as too numerous, too attached to the communities they serve, and too democratically managed to reform from without. As reformers grapple with the resistance to reform in many rural community schools, they assume the haughty and arrogant style of the fading English aristocracy that Oscar Wilde lampooned in The Importance of Being Earnest. The essay closes with a caricature of the “education reform aristocracy” attributing to it some of the sentiments expressed by Wilde’s pompous characters.

Key Words: school consolidation, school district consolidation, Great Plains schools, rural school reform, education reform elites, school consolidation politics, rural school closure, reform and consolidation

INTRODUCTION

The movement to consolidate schools has lost its innocence. It was once led by education professionals genuinely convinced it would improve teaching and learning by establishing specialized instruction and by getting professionals to replace backward and provincial elected school boards as the primary forces controlling schools. It was about reallocating, but not saving money. It was about sheltering educators from democracy.

Now, although a bit of the rhetoric about school improvement still garnishes the call for consolidation, the movement is led not by educators but by state officials—governors, legislators, and chief state school officers—whose driving concern is saving money and exercising greater control over the conduct of the educational process. This control is ostensibly about quality but mostly about the metrics of accountability that separate so-called good schools from bad schools, allowing officials to claim they are giving taxpayers more for their money.

The effort to force consolidation of schools or districts by mandates, incentives, or penalties imposed by state law is tireless and pernicious. Although the intensity of the pressure has varied from time to time, it is never far from the debate in any state with a substantial rural population.

The Great Plains has been a laboratory for the political process of opening and closing schools. While population was growing in the rural areas of the Plains, school districts were created with abandon. The thirst for consolidation emerged in the 1920s and especially the 1930s, when motorized transport and improved roads made busing children within larger catchment areas possible. Federal encouragement followed in the 1960s with funding for the Great Plains School Re-organization Project, an unabashed program of persuasion favoring consolidation. While this met with resistance, the fact is that many rural schools and districts were closed in the Great Plains in the 1960s (Wishart n.d.). But rural resistance stiffened, and by the late 1980s even the state’s own consultant was telling Nebraska that there was little of value to be gained by a policy of consolidation (Sher 1988).

But the pressure to close schools continues unabated. In general, four factors quicken the appetite for political pressure to consolidate: (1) declining enrollment and rising per pupil costs; (2) state fiscal crisis demanding budget cuts; (3) a court finding that the state’s school funding system is inequitable and/or inadequate, requiring more money be spent on education (woe to rural plaintiffs who win such a lawsuit); (4) a “disparity of fortune” where urban and suburban areas are prosperous and rural areas are in distress, prompting resentments toward laggard regions (Strange 2011).

The last decade has seen an almost perfect medium for
incubating the fertile egg of school consolidation. Legislation addressing school consolidation in one form or another has been considered in at least 35 legislatures in the past decade and it has been a leading education issue in many of those states. As these battles have been fought, certain common experiences have unfolded that should serve as political lessons for rural communities trying to resist forced consolidation.1

Lesson 1: It Is Always about Schools, Not Districts

Whether the professed objective is to improve education or to save money through increased efficiency, any assertion that consolidators want only to close districts, not schools, has proven to be disingenuous. Closing districts does not save enough money to make much difference and all hope for improving schools has to take place in classrooms, not administrative offices. In fact, among the greatest challenges rural school leaders face is assembling and retaining a well-qualified teacher corps in the face of budget constraints. To cut costs of rural education more than they already have been cut, the consolidators have to increase school size and class size and fire teachers. The purpose of closing districts has time and again proven to be the elimination of the community-based political apparatus that protects the schools.

In Arkansas a campaign that began with the objective of closing districts, not schools, succeeded with passage of legislation that resulted in consolidating 67 districts in 2004. Among the 134 schools operating in those 67 districts, 47 (35%) were closed within two years. In the 88 schools operating in small districts that were absorbed into larger districts (annexed) that year, nearly half (42 of 88) were closed within two years (Johnson 2006). It was supposed to be about administrative efficiency. It was about schools.

Lesson 2: The Facts Are Not as Important as the Message and the Messenger

The literature about the efficacy of small schools is vast and substantially conclusive. It has been summarized many times, most recently by the National Education Policy Center (Howley et al. 2011).

But small-school advocates can put all the research in their behalf on the political table to no avail. The consolidators just do not believe it. Having this research distilled to talking points is useful, because it supports small-school advocates’ case, but who delivers this message and how they deliver it are far more important.

In West Virginia, a state crusade to close rural schools went unabated for 10 years and the consolidators worked their will, spending over a billion dollars to build consolidated schools absorbing students from over 300 closed schools. Promises about improved curriculum were made and broken. Costs did not decline but increased. Administrator numbers did not decrease but increased (Eyre and Finn 2002).

None of that mattered until a rural group called Challenge West Virginia got an investigative reporter from the Charleston Gazette to ride a school bus. He waited with the first pupil, a kindergartner, to be picked up in the predawn darkness and get on the bus for a ride of more than an hour. The storyline for his scathing report must have been written in the first ten minutes of that horrific, loud, and bumpy ride to school.

Now this issue came to life for West Virginians, rural and urban. It was no longer about the efficiency or effectiveness of schools. It would not be settled by scholarly research. No one needs a scholar to tell him that it is wrong to put a five-year-old on a bus at 6:30 a.m. for a ride of more than an hour to school. The issue now was official child abuse. On that issue rural West Virginia began to prevail. Corruption in the state bonding authority that financed construction of the consolidated schools was revealed, people went to jail, and a governor opposed to consolidation was elected. The closings slowed to a crawl.

Lesson 3: Don’t Ask for Whom the Bell Tolls

The political strategy of the consolidators almost always involves dividing and conquering potential consolidation targets. This is evident especially in the case of legislation that imposes sanctions or mandates on school districts based on student enrollment or other size measures. In these cases legislators know that those in schools who think they will survive a consolidation battle are willing to throw their neighbors under the consolidation bus.

Nobody talks about it that way, but the political math is unmistakable. A consolidation bill that starts out mandating the closure of districts with fewer than, say, 2,000 students will likely be bid down to lower levels with a keen eye as to which schools in which legislative districts will be chosen to survive and absorb their smaller neighbors. This process is deliciously cynical. Rural legislators are the targets in this game of musical chairs because they are as much hostage to the interests of the potential survivors as they are to the interests of the likely victims. The
computers will find the right number to reach the requisite balance of interests for consolidation in the requisite number of rural districts.

But the reality is that the survivors are safe only for a while. The day will come when what was once big enough to pass the political test is no longer big enough. Those who rely on any compromise that spares them for now can expect to hear the bell tolling for them soon enough.

**Lesson 4: Might Makes Right**

Consolidation is forced by those who have the political power on those who lack the power to stop them.

In Arkansas those schools that were closed within two years of the 2004 forced consolidation had 21% higher student poverty rates and served nearly three times higher percentages of African American students as the schools allowed to remain open in the consolidated districts. If you were an African American student, there was a 69% chance that your school would be closed. If you were not African American, the chance was 31% (Johnson 2006).

But this lesson also applies where race is not an issue. In 2007 legislation was proposed in Maine to require all school districts, without exception, to participate in good-faith negotiations with nearby school districts to reach consolidation plans that would leave no district with fewer than 2,500 students.

As consolidation plans developed they were submitted to the state department of education for an assessment of their impact on, among other factors, local property tax rates. When larger and wealthier districts saw what it would cost them to absorb smaller and poorer districts, especially under a uniform teacher pay schedule, they asked the legislature to exempt them, since they were already above 2,500. The legislature did. Eighty school systems left the consolidation dance floor.

Other exemptions soon followed for this reason or that. When all was said and done 57% of Maine’s public school students were in districts that did not have to make more than minimal changes or none at all, and only 27% were in districts forced to consolidate. The remaining 15% of the students were in rebellious districts that refused to comply with the law and were being fiscally penalized with reduced state aid.

The districts forced to consolidate or punished for refusing are mostly Down East, in the far North, and in the rural rim of towns that lie between the Interstate corridor and the Northern Woods, the regions of rural Maine that struggle the most economically.

Opposition to consolidation persists among these districts. After waiting the mandatory 30 months about 40 formerly independent districts exercised their right to petition for removal from the consolidated district.

**Lesson 5: If You Can’t Win in the Legislature, Don’t Bother to Try to Win in the Courts**

One of the drivers of school consolidation is a funding system that deprives small school districts of adequate funding. These districts often defer maintenance and otherwise make damaging fiscal decisions in order to meet operational costs, primarily to pay teachers. Sometimes, but not always, these funding systems are unconstitutional. Many rural school advocates have sought relief from the courts. In fact 35 of the most recent lawsuits over school funding have been brought by rural plaintiffs. They have won complete or partial victories in many of them.

In the case of Vermont, a sweeping court decision declaring both the funding system and the tax system that supported it unconstitutional was followed by a well-organized legislative effort that within months had completely overhauled both the tax system and the funding system. But that is the exception, not the rule.

In the cases of Ohio, West Virginia, Arkansas, and many other states, court victories by rural plaintiffs resulted in prolonged legislative battles they were unable to win, and in each case, rural districts were ultimately punished with consolidation. In the case of Arkansas, the tiny high-poverty school that fought the court battle alone for 10 years, winning a stunning change in the school funding system, was forced to close by the very legislation that implemented its court victory.

**Lesson 6: Organizing Makes a Difference, if Early Enough and if Focused on School Improvement**

Unless rural school supporters are well organized, politically skilled, and united, the pace of forced consolidation will continue to increase.

The biggest barrier to organizing is the tendency to discount the dangers of forced consolidation until legislation is actually moving toward passage. It is often too late to organize, educate, and pressure.

It is important that rural organizing on this issue reach deep into communities, and not just schools, for leadership and support. By far the best strategy is to form statewide or substate regional rural organizations concerned
broadly with school improvement—people who want to improve, not just save, their schools.

A prime example is the Rural Community Alliance (RCA) in Arkansas. Organized in 2003 in response to the legislative school funding and consolidation battle, it had a moderating effect on the legislation that ultimately passed. RCA has local school/community chapters throughout the state and is focused on school improvement, community development, and preventing further consolidations. It has chapters in the poorest regions, both African American and white, and has a deep board and a strong staff of six. It has produced videos of students telling the story of how school closings have affected them and their communities. This organization is a model of what effective rural organizing can do to make good schools close to home in small places.2

THE EDUCATION REFORM ARISTOCRACY

In many school consolidation battles these days, the consolidators in state government are budget hawks wrapped in the sheep’s clothing of reform. They often identify with the rhetoric of a larger reform movement, or a diverse group of reform movements that share an attitude of superiority on the subject of what makes a good school.

This elite education reform aristocracy, is a posse of consultants, academics, interest group lobbyists, philanthropists, and think tank experts, as well as the elected officials who use and are used by them to peddle reforms that serve their purposes, including ideological and political purposes. Their agendas vary, but all parties are dead sure they have the answer to school improvement across all environments. They are busy crafting public relations mantras that all children can do this and no child should be that; preaching accountability (of which they have none themselves); creating assessment systems that induce teaching to the test, cheating, and easing poor test takers out of school; and always trying to get five quarts out of every gallon of teacher compensation.

Many, not all, have a pecuniary motive. They have reform models to sell to the U.S. Department of Education, which has spent billions on various reform models with little to show for it in terms of improved student achievement—the standard they all set for themselves.

But remember the education reform aristocracy is not a unified aristocracy. In fact they compete furiously for policy makers’ attention and often regard each other with open contempt. The only things they have in common are that they each have a reform package to promote, they think schooling is too important to be left to people in schools and communities, and they go catatonic at mention of the word “rural.”

The education reform aristocracy has a big house, and in nearly every room in that house there is a fondness for school and district consolidation. That is largely because they do not have a clue about what to do with struggling rural schools other than close them.

The reformers are themselves almost entirely focused on the problems of urban education, but the idea that their reforms might not be suitable in a rural context is alien to them. In the first round of competition for one of the U.S. Department of Education’s Investing in Innovation grants (a feed bunk for reformers trying to develop, validate, and move their reforms to scale), applicants were given extra points if their proposed project would serve high-needs rural schools. Among the many proposals that included token rural participation was one from the Board of Education of the City of New York. The proposal made no pretense that it would actually serve rural schools—all activities would be in the five boroughs of New York City. But the proposal writers reasoned that if an innovation could make it in New York, it could make it anywhere. Rural schools would therefore ultimately benefit (Strange et al. 2011). It was on its face a presumptuous argument. But the decision by two of three proposal readers to award them rural bonus points was an outrage.

But if they know nothing about rural education, the education reform aristocracy will not admit it. In fact they are downright certain they know one thing about rural education: there are too many schools. One cannot get reform to scale with all those administrators and teachers and democratically elected school boards. Consolidate them so they can be reformed.

THE TRIVIAL AND THE IMPORTANT

The penultimate reform to emerge from the education reform aristocracy is the No Child Left Behind Act, a hideously flawed set of mandates, punitive accountability measures, and obsessive standardized tests—all couched in uncouth politically correct platitudes. Although it might have been launched from the visionary platform of standards-based reform, it had to come to grips with congressional politics, and by the time the law was passed in 2002 it had descended from vision to ideology and dogma.

In the wake of this descent schools have become battlegrounds of hostility and blame. Teachers take early retirement or simply leave the profession rather than endure the relentless criticism and teaching to the test. Ir-
rational and punitive accountability systems have induced shameful cheating. Many schools have become shallow test preparation centers devoted to math and English. Conforming to “drill and kill” rote pedagogy and keeping score is all that matters. No Child Left Behind is an education reform aristocracy catastrophe.

And it is now politically correct manners to say so. Indeed the education reform aristocracy barely recognizes its firstborn. The reform argument often now has nothing to do with what is best for the kids, which is what drove No Child Left Behind. Now, likely as not, the case for reform is made on the basis of what is best for the country and its competitive position in a global economy that apparently requires skills we were not going to get from No Child Left Behind.

Small schools and small school districts are regarded by reformers as no better suited to preparing people for the global economy than they were suited to preparing them for standardized tests. In states with large rural areas that are struggling economically, the arguments for school consolidation have now been artfully focused on competitiveness, access to costly technology, and educational efficiency. It is still about the money.

These school consolidation arguments are made by the education reform aristocracy and their political agents with the same superficially earnest arrogance exhibited by the wasting English aristocracy that Oscar Wilde lampoons in his best-known play, The Importance of Being Earnest. Like the play, the staged implementation of reform and the drive for rural school consolidation have become a comedy of manners. In the polite company of reformers one never admits that all children cannot learn to the same high standards, that standardized tests are among the least valuable of all assessment methods, or that—in schooling—bigger is not better. But reformers always understand the importance of being earnest, especially when it is for show. Wilde summed up the aristocratic state of mind he parodies in The Importance of Being Earnest thus: “We should treat all the trivial things of life seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincerity and studied triviality” (McKenna 2005).

The English aristocracy was, in Wilde’s time, cascading toward irrelevance, stubbornly entrenched in its pompous manners, social customs, and standards. The same is happening to the education reform aristocracy. Among its most earnest crusades is the campaign to close schools that resist their dubious reforms. With Wilde’s help, we look again at the school consolidators, sorting out the trivial from the important.

FIVE FLAWS IN THE EDUCATION REFORM ARISTOCRACY’S PENCHANT FOR RURAL SCHOOL CONSOLIDATION

In Their Hearts, They Know They Are Wrong

It is a terrible thing for a man to find out suddenly that all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth.

—Jack, in The Importance of Being Earnest

The education reform aristocracy does not share Jack’s worry. They will more likely have come to terms with the reality that, notwithstanding their earnestness, they have filtered the truth through a lot of noise they do not believe themselves.

No one believes that everyone can learn to the same high standards, as beautiful as the notion is. Not many believe that teachers should be judged on whether they can overcome the evil and frightening world society creates for too many children. And most people do not believe that closing a small school and putting a child on a bus for two hours a day makes any sense at all.

But many education reform aristocrats say they do believe these ideas. They say it because they want to believe it and because they have invested too much of their credibility in these fictions.

When it comes to closing rural schools, they say it because they want to reallocate the money spent on small rural schools to higher-priority and, in their view, more troubled urban schools badly in need of money to implement reforms.

Unfortunately the arguments long used to close rural schools—declining enrollment, rising per pupil costs, and inefficiency—are now being hurled at those most troubled urban schools.

It seems that inner-city populations are declining as fast as rural populations, and with declining population comes declining school enrollment. So tough-minded reform mayors and superintendents are closing urban schools in droves. Detroit has closed 184 schools. Kansas City closed almost half its schools in 2010 alone. Philadelphia plans to close 37 schools—15% of its total—by September 2013. In February 2012 Chicago said 129 schools were being considered for closure (Maxwell 2013).

Most of these schools will be in the poorest neighborhoods of these urban districts. Community activists say poor and minority students will be disproportionately affected. Might makes right.

But the urban people served by these schools are fighting to save them, using many of the same arguments rural people have used for years. Will the education re-
form aristocrats defend these vulnerable neighborhoods, or stand behind the reform minded public officials who are closing their schools rather than downsize the urban schools that were too big to be effective? Mostly they are looking the other way.

**Getting to Scale Means Less than They Think**

He has nothing, but looks everything.

What more can one desire?

—Lady Bracknell, in *The Importance of Being Earnest*

Big schools are about more—more curricula, more technology, more co-curricular activity, more specialists, more services, more sports, more of everything. Getting to scale is what reform is all about. And there are no two ways about it. When you enter a modern, 3,000-student high school, you are in a state-of-the-art instructional facility.

Indeed it is a place where you can get lost, and they will not come looking for you if you fail to sign up for physics.

The odd thing about big schools is that they do not necessarily end up costing less, even on a per-pupil basis. The bigger institutions are, the more complicated they are. The more complicated they are, the more management they require. Costs of communication increase, time absorbed in meetings increases, and decision making slows down and is farther removed from the people whose input is critical.

That is why beyond a certain point per-pupil costs actually increase. Michigan researchers calculated the optimal size for school district efficiency in the state, then calculated the theoretical cost savings if all students attending smaller, higher-cost districts were placed in districts of optimally efficient size. They concluded taxpayers might save about $31 million per year through this consolidation. But they found that 70% of Michigan students attend a district that is larger—and less efficient—than the most cost effective-sized district. If these inefficiently large districts could be broken up into smaller, optimum-sized districts, $363 million might be saved (Coulson 2007). Where money is concerned, there is more to gain from deconsolidation than from consolidation.

Small schools are not about more, they are about better, for all the reasons noted above. Big schools look everything, but offer less than appearances, to Lady Bracknell’s delight.

**The Hidden Efficiency in Small Schools: Economies of Scope**

I hope you have not been leading a double life, pretending to be wicked and being really good all the time.

—Cecily, in *The Importance of Being Earnest*

When it comes to small schools, consolidators and reformers could stare at a bowl of cherries and see nothing but the pits.

What small schools lack in low costs, they more than make up for in the efficiency of operating at a human scale. Rather than do one thing well—operate cheaply—small schools do many things well. They keep track of kids, provide more individualized instruction and opportunities for participation, they have teachers who know their students and their parents, and they know when kids need help. The cost disadvantage of a small scale is offset by advantages in the scope of its effectiveness.

The Rural School and Community Trust identified ten research-based reasons why small works: (1) students participate more, both in curricular and co-curricular activities participation (2) small schools are safer; (3) students feel they belong; (4) there is more individualized instruction; (5) good teaching methods are easier to use; (6) teachers feel better about their work; (7) there is less ability grouping and higher expectations for all children; (8) multiage classes promote personalized learning and encourage positive social interactions; (9) smaller districts mean less bureaucracy; and (10) wider grade span configurations mean fewer transitions to new schools. (Jimerson 2006).

These mutually reinforcing success factors lead to better outcomes by multiple measures. According to education scholar Mary Ann Raywid, children learn more and better in small schools, make more rapid progress toward graduation, are more satisfied, less likely to drop out, and behave better in small schools. “All of these things we have confirmed with a clarity and at a level of confidence rare in the annals of education research” (Raywid 1999).

Reformers may pretend these schools are wicked, but they are really good all the time.

**The Curse of Being Plain, and Plainly Working**

The only way to behave to a woman is to make love to her, if she is pretty, and to make love to someone else, if she is plain.

—Algernon, in *The Importance of Being Earnest*
It bothers the education reform aristocracy that small schools work despite their indifference to any heralded reforms.

The Rural School and Community Trust looked at rural high schools in nine southern states that were below median size and above median student poverty rates, scored above the mean on all state mandatory assessments, and met federal standards for adequate yearly progress at the school level and for all student subgroups.

One common denominator among these schools was that they made little or no use of the packaged and approved comprehensive school reform models. Instead, they used “diverse proven practices widely recognized as effective pedagogy, blended together to suit local needs.”

What was unmistakable among these schools was the quality of human relationships within them. They exuded a sense of pride and a determination to beat the odds against high academic performance. Students said they felt they belonged, were needed, and got attention. They wanted to “do better than they expect us to,” and to “do good so they can’t close our school.” At one school they were asked what would happen if a student failed to appear for detention. They were baffled and could not imagine that ever happening. These small schools were about relationships, attitudes, and respect (Rural School and Community Trust 2004).

None of the attributes that make small work in schools bears any reformer’s imprimatur. There is nothing to copyright, trademark, brand, or package for sale. Rural schools and the communities they serve have taught children problem-solving skills, real-world—especially natural-world—relationships, and how to get along with people. That is what small schools in small communities do, not by script but by habit, not as a matter of induced reform, but as a matter of making your way in the world.

The Importance of Being Emily

The scene was a small rural elementary school on its last day. Next year the kids would be bused to a larger school where they would have more, do more, and hopefully achieve more—but certainly cost less.

To ease the children’s anxieties the teachers gathered them for a farewell in the small lunchroom/library/assembly room. They hoped to get some closure by asking each child to say what she or he would miss about their school. The kids were having some fun with it: one would miss the clock on the wall that always read 10:27; another the drinking fountain that squirted people in the face; and another the merry-go-round that barely went round.

Then they came to one little girl with a slightly furrowed brow who was not having fun with it. So they gently prompted her to tell what she would miss about their old school.

She said, “I will miss being the only Emily.”

Well, there it was: the truth. In the lean and muscular words of a child—seven small words—Emily had summed up the findings of scores of scholarly research papers: kids do better in schools that are their size. In speaking the truth she had spoken the sorrows of every child in that school.

Emily almost certainly did not know why her school was being closed. But she was probably pretty sure it
was not for her sake. It was for some adult reason. Adults sometimes do things that make no sense.

Emily likely did just fine in her new school. She adjusted. She probably put on a little protective edge. Kids are tough. The move may have cost her only a month or two of educational gain. Not much of a price to pay for reform.

Reformers loathe the small schools Emily craves because those schools are humble and effective. They are not readily bent to reformers’ ambitions. There are too many of them to tame. They are too wedded to the communities they serve. They are too idiosyncratic, too unique, too precious to those they serve.

So reformers will continue to push for the elixir of consolidation. Doing so, they embrace another apt and better known observation of Oscar Wilde: “Nowadays, people know the price of everything and the value of nothing” (Wilde 1891). In schools where adults are preoccupied with the importance of being earnestly in pursuit of achievement through standardized curricula and assessments, punitive accountability systems, and monolithic superschools, there is no room left to understand the importance of being the only Emily.

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NOTES

1. I have posed several iterations of these lessons in various PowerPoint presentations I made for the benefit of rural organizations while serving as policy director for the Rural School and Community Trust.


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