



## Too Many School Districts In Illinois? What You Should Know About School Consolidation

### Description

It is no secret that Illinois is home to the greatest number of government units in the nation, nearly 7,000. Following the passage of Senate Bill 3 in the summer of 2017, which made the process of consolidating units of local government easier, there has been renewed interest in streamlining government. That includes school districts. With 852 separate districts, Illinois comes in third, bested only by Texas and California, whose populations are more than double ours.

While SB3 applies to townships and special districts, some legislators are continuing to explore ways to maximize efficiencies. State Sen. Tom Cullerton, a Villa Park Democrat, told the BGA, “We are continuing to look at those options and have expanded that scope to include small school districts. This will be a fluid conversation as we look to get input from many partners throughout the state.” State Rep. Jeanne Ives, a GOP governor candidate, [has suggested](#) Illinois ought to only have unit districts, which combine elementary and high school districts.

Here are some tools you need to be an informed participant in considering school consolidation. We’ve got a review of consolidations since the 1980s, what to consider when weighing consolidation for your community, and how to get the ball rolling.

### District Consolidation Trends

The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) has been tracking [school district consolidations](#) as far back as 1983. Consolidations happen when two or more school districts, either elementary and/or high school districts, merge together to form a new, single school district. Between 1983 and 2017, there were 62 consolidations, mainly in rural communities. The bulk of the consolidations also occurred in the latter half of the 1980s and early part of the 1990s.

Use the map below to see consolidations that occurred near you.

According to the [Classroom First Commission](#) – a state commission established in 2011 to study school spending and district consolidation – smaller districts have the most to gain from

consolidation. Larger districts, with more than 10,000 students, may not gain as much. In some larger district cases, consolidation might hurt the district. [Reporting from the Public Source](#) also found that rural districts in Pennsylvania that were losing population were looking at consolidation to keep up their academic offerings and services. Small districts in Illinois which are losing students may want to consider consolidation, too.

We looked at 2017 student population sizes at all 852 school districts in Illinois. On average, Illinois districts have 2,345 students. As many as 40 districts are made up of only one school with less than 130 students.

Use the map below to explore school districts across the state. You can filter districts by the size of the student population (the smallest districts are red and the largest are blue), search for your address to see the districts around you, and click on the individual dots to see details about any district.

### **The Benefits and Costs of School District Consolidation**

When it comes to school district consolidation, it's important to consider what realities your district is facing and what is important in your community and the surrounding area. Consider some of these potential benefits and costs:

Benefits:

- Consolidation might allow for administrative savings. If there are multiple districts in close proximity, consolidating those districts can allow for a combination of resources and less spending on administration. Those savings could go back into the classroom or back to the taxpayer. The [Metropolitan Planning Council found](#) that on a per pupil basis, collectively, school districts in Illinois spent \$518 per per pupil for general administration â?? the second highest in the nation.â?
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- Consolidation might allow for a pooling of resources for academic needs and education personnel. For example, if two neighboring school districts are struggling to provide for classes and/or extracurricular activities, they might be able to consolidate and combine their resources to bolster their curricula and extracurricular opportunities.

Costs:

- A school district can be a source of identity for a local town. Consolidating a district might change that identity.
- If a consolidation results in the geographic area of the new district becoming a great deal larger than the individual districts, some costs can increase, such as those for transportation.

- In some cases, consolidation can actually create additional administrative costs. For example, teacher salaries may have to be renegotiated to the higher pay scale at one of the two schools. However, the state does provide a four-year financial incentive to cover such increases.

### **State Incentives For Consolidation**

Since the 1980s, the state has provided a series of financial incentives to make it easier for districts to consolidate. According to the [Local Government Consolidation & Unfunded Mandates Task Force](#) there are four incentives available to school districts:

1. If, after consolidation, there is a difference in General State Aid (a decrease), the state covers that difference for four years.
2. If, after consolidation, there is a difference in teacher salaries (an increase), the state covers that difference for four years.
3. If, after consolidation, there is a difference in key fund balances (education, operations & maintenance, transportation, working cash), the state covers that difference for one year.
4. After consolidation, the state will pay \$4,000 per full-time, certified staff, such as teachers and counselors, for up to three years.

According to the task force, about \$165 million in incentives have been paid out for district consolidations and other reorganizations from 1986 to 2015.

As a result of these incentives, the [Classrooms First Commission](#) found the state would bear significant cost if school district consolidation took place en masse. They found, in 2012, that merging 868 separate elementary and high school districts to a maximum of 300 at once, â??would cost the state at least \$3 billion under current law. That price tag is more than half the stateâ??s annual education budget.â?•

### **Consolidation Process**

Communities interested in consolidation need to go through the following process:

1. A petition is filed with the regional superintendent who oversees the district with the highest equalized assessed valuation â?? the [wealthier district](#). The petition must be either from the boards of education of each school district looking to consolidate (each respective board must sign off on a petition), or contain the signatures of 50 registered voters or 10 percent of registered voters (whichever is less) from each district (no board involvement needed).

2. A local public hearing is held to discuss the issue.
3. The regional superintendent approves or disapproves the initiative. Then, the superintendent forwards the decision and relevant information about the districts to the state superintendent.
4. The state superintendent approves or disapproves the initiative. If approved, a question is put to a referendum vote (step 5). If it is not approved, petitioners and anyone who showed up at the public hearing (step two), have the option for a judicial review within 35 days of the state superintendent's decision. If a court agrees with petitioners, the referendum may proceed, if a court agrees with the state superintendent, no referendum can take place.
5. A referendum is put on the ballot for voters to approve or disapprove of the initiative to consolidate. The referendum requires a majority of those voting in each respective school district to cast ballots in support of consolidation for it to be approved.

The details of this process are further explained at the [Illinois State Board of Education](#)'s website.

#### **What do Superintendents Think About Consolidation?**

Superintendents are an important part of the consolidation process, and while they are not unbiased, they have the authority and experience to comment. So, the BGA reached out to superintendents in districts that consolidated in the past decade to get their thoughts on the consolidation effort and its effect on education in their communities. Superintendent Jeffrey Humes of Odin Public School District (301 students), Superintendent Dale Hastings of Milford Area District (650 students), and former superintendent Ron Graham of North Mac District (1,477 students) shared their thoughts. All three of their districts are in rural Illinois. Specifically, Odin is located in southern Illinois, Milford in east central Illinois, and North Mac in central Illinois.

While decreased administrative costs are often pointed to as being one of the benefits of consolidation, they are not a given. None of the superintendents we spoke with experienced a decrease in administrative costs in their districts after consolidation. In fact, Humes noted, "administrative costs didn't change" nor did tax rates, when Odin's elementary and high school districts consolidated. Rather than dollar savings, a common benefit in the three consolidations was the preservation of academic programs.

Hastings of the Milford Area District, located in east central Illinois, said that "combining two district resources into one organization [allows for] better funding" and fewer board members. He said he believed that consolidation of his elementary and high school districts made it easier to "establish continuity in decision making for the whole district."

Former superintendent Graham of North Mac District explained that, prior to consolidation, his area districts (two elementary school districts in neighboring communities) were losing students and the state was cutting back on payments. School district consolidation allowed for additional programs and classrooms. He said that "usually you consolidate to keep programs" and therefore "don't

have to cut anything.â?•

Humes encouraged district officials and residents to do their homework. â??If a district is going to consolidate,â?• he said, â??they really need to do their homework because while it may benefit some regions; it will not benefit every area of the state.â?• But, Hastings said, itâ??s important to, â??stay kid-focused in the decision making.â?• He said people should ask, â??Is the consolidation better for the education of the children? If it is, then do it!â?•