



# North Dakota Small Organized Schools

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School Funding Task Force  
Senator Schaible - Chairman  
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Chairman Schaible and member of the School Funding Task Force Committee

School consolidation in North Dakota, has had a significant impact on our state's education landscape over the past 30 years. School district consolidation refers to the merging of smaller, often rural, school districts into larger ones in an effort to improve efficiency, reduce costs, and address declining student populations. North Dakota, a largely rural state, has seen numerous consolidations, driven by various economic, demographic, and educational factors. These changes have had far-reaching effects on the quality of education, the structure of communities, and the allocation of resources.

In the 1990s, North Dakota had over 300 school districts, many of which served small, rural populations. At the time, many districts faced financial struggles due to shrinking tax bases and declining student enrollment. The state began to encourage consolidations as a solution to these challenges, offering incentives to districts that voluntarily merged. The goal was to create more sustainable districts that could provide a wider range of academic and extracurricular opportunities. As a result, a series of consolidations began in the mid-1990s, as school boards, communities, and state officials worked together to reshape the education system.

The 2000s saw the acceleration of this process, driven by both financial necessity and state policy. Rural depopulation, particularly in the western and central regions of the state, exacerbated the challenges faced by small districts. Larger consolidated districts were often better able to manage the costs of maintaining infrastructure, transportation, and staffing. By the mid-2000s, the number of school districts in North Dakota had decreased to fewer than 200. While many of these consolidations were successful in stabilizing district finances, they also created concerns about the impact on community identity, local control, and the distance students needed to travel to attend school.

Over the past decade, consolidation efforts have continued, with North Dakota now having fewer than 170 school districts. Although financial stability has improved for many districts, some rural areas have

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expressed concerns about the loss of local representation and the potential decline in educational quality due to longer bus routes and less personalized attention in larger schools. Despite these challenges, consolidation has generally allowed districts to offer a broader curriculum, more advanced classes, and enhanced extracurricular opportunities, benefiting students in the long run.

In conclusion, the history of school district consolidation in North Dakota over the past 30 years is a reflection of the broader demographic and economic changes in our state. While it has brought financial benefits and expanded educational opportunities, it has also posed challenges for rural communities. As we move forward, it is essential for state policymakers to continue working with local districts to ensure that the benefits of consolidation are balanced with the preservation of community identity and access to high-quality education for all students across North Dakota. Thank you.

Below are some of the major obstacles to public school consolidation in the state:

### **1. Community Identity and Local Control**

One of the most prominent obstacles to consolidation is the strong attachment many communities have to their local schools. Schools often serve as the heart of small, rural communities, fostering a sense of identity and pride. The prospect of closing or merging schools can lead to resistance from residents, who fear losing their community's sense of cohesion. Additionally, communities worry about losing local control over educational decisions, as consolidated districts often have centralized administrations located far from the smaller towns, making it harder for local voices to influence decisions.

### **2. Distance and Transportation Issues**

North Dakota's rural geography presents another significant challenge. In sparsely populated areas, consolidating districts can lead to longer bus routes and increased travel time for students, sometimes requiring them to travel over an hour each way. This has raised concerns about student fatigue, safety, and participation in after-school activities. Parents and educators are often worried that these long commutes could have a negative impact on student well-being and performance.

### **3. Loss of Extracurricular Opportunities**

In smaller schools, students often have more opportunities to participate in a wide range of extracurricular activities because the student body is smaller, and more positions are available on sports teams, in band, theater, and other clubs. Consolidation, while providing more academic resources, can lead to a greater concentration of students vying for these opportunities. This can result in fewer leadership opportunities for students in areas like sports and extracurriculars, which can affect student engagement and personal development.

### **4. Economic Concerns for Local Communities**

When a school closes or consolidates with a district in a neighboring town, the local economy can suffer. Schools are often major employers in rural communities, and their closure can lead to job losses for teachers, staff, and support workers. Additionally, local businesses that rely on the school for regular

patronage, such as gas stations, restaurants, and retail stores, may see a decline in business, further contributing to economic decline in the area.

## **5. Emotional and Political Resistance**

Public school consolidation often stirs strong emotions, making it a politically sensitive issue. Families who have attended the same school for generations are reluctant to see it disappear, and consolidations can be framed as an erosion of tradition and heritage. This resistance can lead to heated debates at the local and state level, with school boards and legislators facing pressure from constituents. Political leaders, especially those representing rural areas, may be hesitant to support consolidation efforts due to the potential backlash from voters.

## **Conclusion**

While school district consolidation in North Dakota can offer financial and academic benefits, the process is often fraught with obstacles tied to geography, local pride, community well-being, and the logistics of student transportation. Policymakers must carefully balance these challenges with the need to provide sustainable, high-quality education across the state. Engaging communities in open dialogue and offering solutions that mitigate the downsides of consolidation—such as improved transportation infrastructure or shared services models—could help ease the process where necessary.

Thank you Senator Schaible and member of the School Funding Task.

I will stand for questions.

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