2013

Improving Educational Opportunity and Equity through School District Consolidation in Maine

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Recommended Citation

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Christine Donis-Keller, Beth O'Hara-Miklavic, and Janet Fairman describe the impacts of Maine's 2007 school district consolidation legislation on educational opportunities and equity within 24 regional school districts. Their findings, based primarily on interviews with district leaders, illustrate the different choices districts made when consolidating their educational programs, the outcomes of these efforts, and the strategies and structures districts used to implement change.

When Maine passed school district consolidation legislation in 2007, the law was to accomplish two primary goals: (1) to improve educational opportunity and equity of Maine students and (2) to reduce costs through increased efficiency in the delivery of education programs and services (Maine Public Law 2007, Chapter 240, Part XXXX). The law required the reduction in the number of Maine school districts from 290 to approximately 80.

In the summer of 2009, 24 newly configured school districts became operational. In this paper, we examine the education-related impacts of reorganization within these districts. Specifically we examine how districts have pursued equity and opportunity for their students and the challenges and supports to that process.

BACKGROUND

Diminishing resources and increased education demands, coupled with declining enrollment in rural systems and increasing education costs, have placed school district consolidation on the policy agenda for many states, including Maine (Howley, Johnson and Petrie 2011; Spradlin et al. 2010). Improvement in the quality or equity of education is a primary rationale for consolidation, but whether consolidation achieves this goal is unresolved (Bard, Gardener and Wieland 2006; Monk and Haller 1986). Studies of the educational impact of consolidation have been largely concerned with the relationship between district size and student performance on standardized tests (Rooney and Augenblick 2009), or adult earnings (Berry 2004).

According to Rooney and Augenblick (2009), while smaller districts may produce higher levels of achievement, larger districts may offer students greater opportunity in course offerings and extracurricular activities. Studying small school districts pursuing consolidation in rural New York State, Monk and Haller (1986) identified a range of educational challenges including limited curricula; outdated equipment and facilities; low educational aspirations; turnover in leadership; and teacher shortages in particular subjects. Yet they concluded that consolidation is not a reliable solution to these problems. However, Leach, Payne and Chan (2010) found that outcomes for children in disadvantaged communities improved 10 years after consolidation. Another study in Arkansas found that teachers in consolidated schools experienced improved working conditions and professional development opportunities, while students experienced broader course offerings and social opportunities (Nitta, Holley and Wrobel 2010).

Few studies have focused on educational impacts broadly, and the majority of research examining the outcomes of consolidation focuses primarily on high schools. Our study broadens the approach by examining the impact of district consolidation on educational opportunities and equity for multiple and diverse school districts in Maine.

TABLE 1: **Selected Demographic Data for 24 Cases**

Consolidated Units that Became Operational 2009–2010[1]	No. Former SAUs[2]	2010 Enrollment
RSU 2—Kennebec Intra-District Schools MSAD 16 (Hallowell)/Monmouth/ Richmond/Dresden[3]	4	2202
RSU 4—Oak Hill CSD/Litchfield/Sabattus/Wales	4	1530
RSU 5—Freeport/MSAD 62 (Pownal)/Durham[3]	3	1911
RSU 10—Western Foothills School District MSAD 21 (Dixfield)/MSAD 43 (Rumford) /MSAD 39 (Buckfield)/Hanover[3]	4	2854
RSU 12—Sheepscot Valley Regional School Unit Alna/Wiscasset/Westport Island/ Palermo/Somerville/ Whitefield/Windsor/Chelsea[3]	8	1876
RSU 13—MSAD 5 (Rockland)/MSAD 50 (Thomaston)[3]	2	2093
RSU 14—Windham/Raymond	2	3350
RSU 16—Poland/Minot/Mechanic Falls	3	1717
RSU 18—MSAD 47 (Oakland)/China[3]	2	3227
RSU 19—MSAD 38 (Etna)/MSAD 48 (Newport)	2	2342
RSU 20—MSAD 34 (Belfast)/MSAD 56 (Searsport)[3]	2	2580
RSU 21—MSAD 71 (Kennebunk/Kennebunkport)/Arundel[3]	2	2699
RSU 23—Saco/OOB/Dayton[3]	3	4046
RSU 24—Ellsworth/Hancock/Lamoine/Mariaville/Steuben/ Franklin/Peninsula CSD/ Schoodic CSD/ Flanders Bay CSD/MSAD 26 (Eastbrook)[3]	10	2611
RSU 25—Bucksport/Orland/MSAD 18 (Prospect)	3	1147
RSU 26—Riverside RSU Glenburn/Orono/Veazie[3]	3	1490
RSU 34—Old Town/Alton/Bradley	3	1306
RSU 38—Maranacook CSD/Readfield/Manchester/Mt. Vernon/Wayne	5	1219
RSU 39—Caribou/Limestone/Stockholm	3	1577
AOS 91—Mount Desert Island Regional School System Southwest Harbor/ Mt Desert/ Bar Harbor/ Tremont/ Mt Desert CSD/Frenchboro/MSAD 76 (Swans Island)/Cranberry Isles/Trenton	9	1529
AOS 92—Kennebec Valley Consolidated Schools Waterville/Vassalboro/Winslow	3	3746
AOS 93—Central Lincoln County School System Great Salt Bay CSD/Bremen/Bristol/ Damariscotta/ Newcastle/Nobleboro/South Bristol/Jefferson	8	1529
AOS 94—SAD 46/Harmony Regional School District MSAD 46 (Dexter)/Harmony	2	1115
AOS 95—MSAD 10 (Allagash)/MSAD 27 (Ft. Kent)	2	1012

[1] School districts reorganized into two types: Regional School Units (RSU) which consolidate all functions, and Alternative Organizational Structure (AOS) which consolidate central office functions but maintain locally administered schools (Maine Department of Education 2011).

[2] SAU= School administrative unit. Previous units were of several structures: school unions, municipal districts, school administrative districts, and community school districts.

[3] One or more partners petitioned to withdraw since 2012, Maine Department of Education (MDOE).

DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY

This paper presents research describing the early impacts of Maine's policy of school district consoli-dation on educational opportunities and equity within 24 regional school districts, one year after their mergers. Specifically, we asked three questions: (1) What changes in educational programming and opportunities resulted

from the consolidation? (2) How have newly formed districts pursued educational equity? (3) What were the challenges and supports for school districts' efforts to reorganize their educational program?

These findings are part of a larger, multiyear project on the implementation and impact of school district consolidation in Maine (Fairman and Donis-Keller 2012). All 24 reorganized districts that became operational in July 2009 were invited to participate in the study, and all agreed to do so. These districts were geographically dispersed across the state and varied in the number of merging partners, the types of school units, grade spans, and enrollments (Table 1). Total enrollments ranged from 1,000 to 4,000 students, and the number of merging districts ranged from two to ten.

We used a case study research design and qualitative data from interviews, documents, and observations. We conducted confidential interviews in October and November 2010 with 46 superintendents and central administrative staff responsible for educational programming. We also conducted interviews with five state-funded consultants who assisted these regional districts in their first year and with two officials coordinating consolidation efforts from the state Office of Reorganization Management. We collected district documents describing decisions about education programming including minutes of board meetings and original reorganization plans submitted to the Maine Department of Education (MDOE). We observed several statewide meetings of reorganized districts in which district leaders discussed challenges, opportunities, and progress toward reorganization goals.

We systematically organized and analyzed data from the interviews, documents, and observations, and coded interview and observation notes according to themes using NVivo software. To operationalize the concept of "equity," we followed Stone's (2002) usage to indicate distributions regarded as fair, even though they may contain both equalities and inequalities. "Educational opportunity" is understood to mean expanding students' access to particular education programming and improving the quality of these opportunities. We also asked interviewees to describe their definitions and approaches to equity. The research team prepared analytic tables using all data sources to summarize data for each case and conducted systematic cross-case comparative analysis (Yin 2009).

Two important notes about this study: The first is that while we used all three data sources in the analysis, this paper relies extensively on interviews with leadership in the central office and does not include the perspective of school-level personnel (principals, teachers and staff, students) or other community stakeholders. In addition, because we collected data at the beginning of the second year of operations (fall 2010), this paper presents a snapshot of districts' efforts to improve educational opportunities and equity one year into reorganization. With more time, some of these units would have continued their efforts to align and improve education programming, while a few have subsequently pursued deconsolidation.

CHANGES IN EDUCATION PROGRAMMING RELATED TO CONSOLIDATION

The 46 interviews from the 24 newly formed districts create a complex picture of the changes that can occur as a result of consolidation. Our analysis indicates that a majority of the 24 consolidated units, nearly two-thirds, were in the process of changing significant elements of their education programming. Nearly a quarter focused mostly on operations, policies, and bringing school boards together during the first year, while other units pursued operational and organizational work alongside education programming, curricular alignment, and equity.

All but two of the 24 districts reported changes to some aspect of the delivery and content of their education program. These changes included expanded technology; increased gifted and talented programs; added or expanded prekindergarten or kindergarten programming; alignment of special education services; perceived improvements in education programming in certain subject areas; and improved professional development for teachers. About a third of the districts, however, described only modest changes, and typically impacts were not experienced uniformly across partnering towns or schools. Among the districts that described changes to their education program, three-quarters emphasized that the smaller towns or schools experienced a more positive impact than their larger partners. Some districts made changes to their education program right away. Others initially spent more time examining current practices, bringing staff together for a common purpose or to share ideas, and/or focusing on operational concerns. Many district leaders discussed anticipated impacts resulting from groundwork laid within the first year.

Three-quarters of the districts noted improved educational opportunities for students linked to consolidation. Some superintendents noted that being in a larger district made resources available, which enabled them to offer more opportunities to all students. For example, comparing programming two years before the merger, one superintendent described the impact of consolidation across the region: "looking at kids regionally now…are they better off than they were before? I don't think anybody can argue that they're not…[given] the strength of programming." Many, however, described greater benefits for certain schools and partners, typically the smaller schools and towns that were perceived as having more limited resources prior to the merger. A superintendent stated, "This is going to sound negative, but it has increased the opportunities for [smaller partner] but has not changed the opportunities for [larger partner]."

A handful of administrators noted the difficulty of determining whether changes in the education program actually constituted improvement at the student level, particularly given the short time frame, but shared positive perceptions about trends and the potential impact on student learning opportunities and achievement. A curriculum director stated, "when you come to do a follow up in three years there's going to be a lot more that I can say that we [have] put in place."

In Pursuit of Equity

In each merged system, differences in education program and resources existed between partnering units. About two-thirds of the districts noted improved or increased equity of educational opportunity in some aspect of their programming, but the breadth, scope, and extent of these impacts varied across units. While a handful of districts were laying the groundwork to move toward equity, a few described not having addressed equity issues at all during the first year. District leaders voiced diverse perceptions about and definitions of educational equity. Further, districts' pursuit of equity varied along a broad continuum from a commitment to equality in programming, to a focus on parity or consistency in programming, to continuing in the same trajectory as before consolidation with minor modifications. Given the diversity of definitions, many districts struggled to define what equity should look like across their new district. Two districts took an explicit position that they would not promote equity in a way that would diminish programming for some partners; characterized

by one administrator as "equity without going backwards." A superintendent described the school board confronting the issue in its earliest days:

> The first thing we asked the new school board to do… [was to] make a proclamation that we would move toward equity in programming across the entire RSU. [We knew] we would find inequities that we would, over the course of the next several years…try to remedy. That we wouldn't be able to make a commitment of equalizing everything right off. We would do it more on the positive side and that would take a little more time….But in the effort to equalize things, we were not going to destroy programs.

> # Three-quarters of the districts noted improved educational opportunities linked to consolidation.

Other districts conceded that compromises would be necessary. Several described setting a per pupil funding amount for particular resources as a strategy to promote equity. A superintendent explained:

> When we prepared the…budget we did everything through the lens of equity. Some schools had only been spending $2.50 per student and others had been spending $25.00 [on library books]. There was concern that we were taking away from people who had consistently been funding their libraries, but we needed to come to equity…have that be our baseline. So we established baselines and said we will grow from here. And people really like the concept. We were very public about that so that everybody at each of the schools and in each of the communities knew that we were being fair about it.

Finally, approximately one-quarter of the districts chose to maintain the status quo in education programming after consolidation, despite identified differences, arguing that more time was needed to build consensus around change.

In difficult budget times, moving toward greater equity and improving programming for a less-resourced partner resulted in sharing existing programs, resources, or personnel across the broader school unit, or investing

in one partner more heavily in the short-term. This shift in resources resulted in perceptions that there were winners and losers among merging partners. A superintendent in a system that merged partners of varied size, structure, capacity and resources, observed that "one person's equity is another person's inequity."

As they began the second year of consolidation, improved equity remained a goal for many districts. Administrators described their movement toward greater equity as a work in progress. They discussed a variety of ways in which their current work will lead to future impacts, desired improvements, and in many cases, enhanced equity.

Districts that had enhanced technology as a result of reorganization also anticipated educational benefits of greater classroom resources or expanded class offerings using videoconferencing technology. Others predicted that investments in education programming that resulted from reorganization, such as expanding kindergarten and pre-kindergarten programming, would build greater equity and improve the quality of their education program over time.

Changing the education landscape within the new units was not seamless. Virtually all districts that indicated improved equity noted numerous challenges to realizing their goals. Within reorganized districts, equity conversations were driven by budgeting and planning, and by formal and informal audits of current practices and programs in combining units. The pathways toward greater equity were as varied as the districts.

We identified seven primary strategies that consolidated districts used to address educational disparities and inequities within their systems.

- Taking stock of existing programming and resources

- Establishing district-level structures and processes to address programming concerns and setting priorities

- Aligning technology; broadening offerings, curriculum, and programs

- Enhancing professional development

- Increasing the use of data to inform decisions

- Reconfiguring schools and grade levels to increase parallel opportunities and practices

- Many districts employed one or more of the strategies to bring together divergent education programs.

Taking Stock

Districts assessed the education programming within each partnering unit in different ways, ranging from a formal audit to informal observation. The strategies to identify existing programming included administering a district-wide teacher survey; developing a template to lay out information from each school and previous system; and establishing (or expanding membership of existing) curriculum teams to gather and analyze information in particular content areas.

Before the merger, one-fifth of the districts had established education-focused subcommittees to research the similarities and differences in programs and resources among the partnering districts. For many districts, however, the first step toward taking stock of staffing and programs took place as part of developing a first district budget in the early months of consolidation. Many districts reported at the beginning of their second year that they were still in the process of establishing a committee to oversee and execute district-wide education programming. Yet, others relied on central office staff to compile the information. In addition, some district partners were accessing the expertise of a curriculum director for the first time, to lead the education programming and professional development in the district.

The strategy employed to assess resources and needs varied based on the climate and familiarity among partners entering the reorganization. Units that included only one new partner, or a smaller partner, tended toward a more informal approach, whereas mergers comprising larger units and/or districts that had not previously collaborated used a more formalized process.

Structures and Processes

Faced with bringing disparate education programs, cultures, and structures together, superintendents and other district leaders described convening two types of special purpose groups: (1) groups focused on big-picture issues including setting district priorities and performance goals; and (2) groups focused on particular components of the education program, such as content areas, vertical integration of curriculum, or district oversight of the education program.

Big-picture groups included community events such as a Future Search, a large-scale meeting to bring community members together for structured discussions to establish collective priorities. Nearly half of the districts had conducted a goal-setting activity with community stakeholders to establish a new mission and vision within the first year. These community-wide processes were credited with bringing together divergent views to set priorities and a district work plan. Other districts held board retreats to consider similar issues.

Groups focused on components of the education program included district-wide or building-level curriculum teams, education subcommittees of boards, and study groups. Larger partners often had more existing structures in place and expanded them to incorporate new participants. A curriculum director described the benefit of being able to rely on structures established within one merging partner that were extended across new districts:

> I…think that the structures that we've had…in place for [our former unit] in decision-making, we were very fortunate….Because even though you have to come right down to another district buying into those structures, they have … guided us into some of the decisions that we [made]. Having [a] decision-making curriculum…it's already there, and they come to the table and talk things out together. We didn't have to start those structures.

Other districts developed new structures to meet new needs. Two-thirds of the districts described changes in curriculum committees and structures that had resulted from reorganization. Approximately half described establishing district-level content area or grade-level curriculum teams. Another half described some kind of district-level curriculum oversight, which included design teams, administrative teams, and advisory councils. Half of the districts also described other types of district-wide groups focused on education programming, which included school board education subcommittees; task forces focused on specific initiatives; and curriculum groups that included citizen participation.

The majority of reorganized units had at least one structure in place to work on curriculum and instruction issues, but many had multiple groups. While the structures served the practical purpose of advancing alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment in selected content areas, district leaders also highlighted the important community-building role this type of committee work played. Committees that spanned schools and former district boundaries helped foster an increased sense of professional community and shared ownership of district work.

Aligning Technology

Many districts needed to address technology across the reorganized unit early on and at multiple levels. Often, smaller units had more limited resources for technology than their larger partners. Nearly three-quarters of the districts noted enhancements to their technology due to reorganization. About a third of all districts noted benefits to all regional partners. A little more than half reported enhancements for only certain district partners. Just a few saw no enhanced technology due to reorganization.

Nearly half of districts noted that they had changed technology infrastructure (email, network, systems) and were moving toward greater commonality or equity in this area. At least four districts reported expanded use of videoconferencing to offer classes for students or meetings among teachers and to overcome distances between schools and communities. Others discussed a renewed focus on using existing videoconferencing technology for school business (for example, administrative team meetings) or to begin to share classes.

About one-third of districts reported changing to a common student information system (MDOE supported conversion to Infinite Campus, a web-based student information system). Some districts noted a greater consistency of software, others noted expanding availability of tools such as Smart Boards, and nearly half viewed recent investments in laptops for secondary students or teachers (in most cases to equalize resources across the district), as related to reorganization. One district specifically designated funds derived from reorganization-related savings in central office expenses to upgrade its technology resources with a specific focus on the high school.

Technology instruction also changed as a result of reorganization. Slightly more than one-third of districts reported moving at least one merging partner to a new model integrating technology into classroom instruction rather than sending students to a technology lab. Changes to staffing levels were mixed. Some schools benefitted from increased staffing while others experienced a reduction or loss.

Shifts in Curriculum and Assessment, Programs, and Personnel

Many reorganized units had made changes to their education programming, particularly in curriculum and assessment (notably math and language arts). Other changes included expanded or new gifted and talented, and kindergarten and pre-kindergarten programs. Personnel changes involved shifting or consolidating staff. These included positions such as subject area coaches or specialists, technology integrators, and data analysts.

Impacts to curriculum and assessment were most notable in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics. Approximately two-thirds of the districts described changes in ELA including the addition of a literacy coach, implementing a new district-wide reading curriculum, adopting common writing assessments, and adding a reading workshop. In math, one-half of the districts noted changes including implementing a common curriculum district-wide or implementing it within new partners, and implementing new professional development to accompany the new curriculum. In some mergers, partners were using the same curriculum, but some had out-of-date materials. Reorganization provided a context in which districts decided to update those materials and use teachers from one partnering unit to offer professional development to teachers in another.

Though approximately one-third of the districts changed their world language programming to address inequities, the expansion of world language programming in some schools was accompanied by a change in the delivery mode or a reduction in programming elsewhere in the district. Some districts acknowledged inequities in this area that they wished to address, but they also described budgetary concerns that inhibited expanded world language programming in the short term.

Nearly half of the districts noted impacts to specials programming, particularly in music. Almost all of these units characterized the changes as a move toward equity. For example, all schools adopting the music curriculum of one partner or expanding programming to schools that did not have music before reorganization.

Gifted and talented, kindergarten, and prekindergarten were other programs addressed by multiple districts. About half of the reorganized districts made changes to their gifted and talented programming, in most cases increasing opportunities for district students through improved coordination and added staffing. Approximately one-third of the districts made changes

either to kindergarten or prekindergarten programs, mostly by offering prekindergarten programs in communities where none had existed previously or by expanding program hours in existing programs.

Districts also collected information about the alignment of their assessment practices. The majority of districts reported that they had made some progress toward alignment, and several reported significant progress. Many of the reorganized units found overlap in the use of particular assessments (for example, all partners were already using NWEA assessments). In others, introducing and implementing particular assessments across the district became a priority. At least one-quarter of the districts were in the planning stages of aligning report cards, but a few had done so in the first year. Similarly, many of the districts that had more than one high school after reorganization were discussing the alignment of graduation requirements.

About one-third of districts either added personnel or equalized staff serving in specialist, coach, or data analyst roles. Typically, math or literacy specialists, coaches or data analysts were new to at least one partner in the district. In some cases, these resources had been used in one partner and now were shared across multiple sites

By drawing on the expertise of teachers and sharing them across schools in the new unit, districts were able to expand programming. In many of these units, the ability to share a teacher meant bringing that subject into schools that had terminated programs due to past budget cuts. The most commonly shared staffing was in art, music, technology, world language, and in the gifted and talented program. Within the first 18 months of operation, seven units reported sharing an art teacher, a music teacher, or both across their regional unit. World language teachers worked across buildings in a handful of districts. Other shared staff included literacy specialists, guidance counselors, special education specialists, and technology staff. In four districts, administrators were also transferred into new buildings to enact changes in climate or performance. A superintendent described the benefit, "I have people taking care of the needs and we're not worried about boundaries." Another noted that in an environment with declining enrollments "We've been able to transfer people to better utilize them and benefit kids."

Sharing resources also had a downside. Administrators described several cases where equalizing staffing meant a reduction within schools that previously enjoyed higher levels of service. Some districts made a clear

choice to leave the distribution of personnel and programs as they were prior to the merger to avoid controversy.

Administrators in one-third of districts identified disparities in teacher contracts as the biggest obstacle to increased staff sharing. One district found a short-term solution by establishing district-level teaching positions that were not linked to a particular school or community. All districts anticipated greater sharing once unified contracts were negotiated.

Enhancing Professional Development

The majority of reorganized districts in our study described enhanced professional development in their districts that they attributed to consolidation. This included expanded professional development opportunities or resources; greater opportunity for sharing and collaboration across education professionals; and/or a greater coordination of professional development.

Slightly more than half of the districts noted enhanced professional development for staff after reorganization, but almost all of those districts noted greater benefit for certain district partners. In addition, approximately one-fourth of districts reported changes to professional development that benefitted only some district partners. The remaining one-fourth saw no notable improvements to professional development after reorganization.

Sharing staff expertise across a larger unit was identified as a major benefit of reorganization in three-fourths of the reorganized districts. For example, a curriculum director described,

> Getting all the teachers together from all the districts has created a much better environment for creating assessment, for creating curriculum materials. You have more resources. So you don't just have the one science teacher…figuring out what to do next. You've got an actual professional learning community.

Additionally, about one-third of the districts noted a change in internal trainings in which staff from one partner which had expertise regarding a particular curriculum, assessment tool, initiative, or software system shared practices and information with staff from another partner. In about half of the new districts, a program or initiative that had been in place within one partnering unit was expanded to other partners.

In more than one-third of districts, administrators noted that professional development was more unified since reorganization. New initiatives that brought staff together with a common focus were successful in merging separate staffs, reducing professional isolation, and advancing collaboration. About half of the districts also noted improved access to external professional development opportunities or support from external consultants.

Changing Use of Data

Among the newly reorganized districts, many described increased attention to, and proactive use of, student data to make programmatic and instructional decisions. Though many administrators reported using data effectively before reorganization, for others reorganization had provided a catalyst to do so. As districts sought to compare the relative effectiveness of programs, outcome data became an obvious metric.

Administrators reported data-use practices that varied at the district, school, and classroom level and between partnering units. Two-thirds of the districts reported some change in practice with regard to the use of data within at least one merging partner. Several districts noted plans to increase their capacity in the use of data. Meanwhile, one-third of districts noted that reorganization had not had any impact in this area.

To facilitate greater data use, districts needed to align data systems, but few merging units had the same student data system in place. Many districts faced a choice of adopting an existing system or acquiring a new one to meet new needs. Administrators noted that reorganization made costly system updates possible, updates that would have been prohibitive to implement if they had stood alone. Not all districts attributed acquiring a new system to the reorganization, but they saw benefit in doing so simultaneously with reorganization.

A number of districts increased support for teachers' use of data by providing access to a full-time curriculum person or a staff person assigned to data analysis. Districts facilitated examination of student data in different ways including district-level data teams and formal and informal professional development activities. In a handful of reorganized units, superintendents identified curricular decisions influenced by data. Looking at student performance data, they evaluated what was working well and expanded the use of practices or materials based on that information.

Reconfiguration/Restructuring of Schools

One of the most aggressive strategies used to address disparities in programming and resources was to reconfigure the grade span of schools in the district.

Within the first year after reorganization, six districts (one-quarter) chose to move students from one building or community to another. An additional district had concrete plans to do so in the next year, and several others had brought such proposals to their board and community.

The rationale for making significant structural changes to existing schools was to address disparities in educational preparation and performance and to offer students additional programming and opportunities. In many cases, most students within a reorganized unit would ultimately enroll in the same high school. By consolidating particular grade levels, districts also saw

> Administrators identified change-related anxiety as one of the top challenges they faced.

the opportunity for greater economies of scale without closing schools. A superintendent described how moving middle school students within the district created greater equity:

> It's creating equity in all [the] towns. One of the best examples is if you look at [the new] middle school… all the kids have the same access to…the exact same number of teaching minutes, the exact same program, the exact same opportunities…the full-time guidance counselor, the full-time social worker—things that all the towns didn't have access to.

The districts that reconfigured schools focused predominantly on the middle grades (primarily grades six through eight). Two moved all students in middle grades into an existing middle school. One changed the structure of all schools, creating four school levels (K–2, 3–4, middle school, and high school). Another introduced school choice for seventh and eighth-grade students who could attend either a K–8 or middle school in the district. Finally, one district described plans to restructure their secondary program wherein two 9–12 schools would be reorganized into an 8–9 school and a 10–12 school, to equalize programming, offerings, and resources. In most cases, administrators

viewed these changes as improvements for students that came with an added bonus of savings in teaching positions and other costs. This kind of organizational change happened more often in districts with a previous collaborative relationship.

Changes of this sort were not without detractors, and an administrator characterized the decision to move students as "incredibly painful." Administrators described communities resistant to these reconfigurations, some because of the added burden on students to be educated farther from home, others because they worried that moving students portended school closures in the future. Communities also lamented the loss of middle-school sports and tradition in the sending communities. As a result, administrators noted the need to tread lightly in attempts to move students out of their local schools and to cross town lines, or to initiate discussions of possible school closures. Additionally, public feedback caused some districts to rethink, recast, or slow plans to make these sorts of organizational changes. These districts, however, favored educating students at the same grade level in the same building to ensure greater equity for students.

Challenges and Supports

District leaders described many challenges and supports to bridging disparities in education programming. Although each district had unique circumstances, we heard consistent themes with regard to the challenges and supports encountered in many of the reorganized units.

Challenges

Administrators identified change-related anxiety as one of the top challenges they faced. As districts pursued equity goals, other challenges included limited financial resources; resource allocation; workload and time constraints; concern among smaller partners of being "swallowed up" by larger partners; significant differences in education programs and policies; and differences in teacher contracts.

To differing degrees, anxiety around the change in district structure led to some mistrust between partners and between school staff and district leadership. It also led to some resistance to enacting new initiatives and policies. As one superintendent put it, "they still want things to be the way they always have been." Administrators also described lingering resentment

from community members opposed to consolidation who continued to ask, "why are we together?"

Reorganized districts found budget constraints created particular difficulties as they tried to align education programs, especially as they sought to address inequities. Some districts were able to establish greater equity during their first year of operations only to have budget cuts undo it at the beginning of the second year. Others postponed plans to address disparities due to resource limitations. Budget issues also affected professional development, by reducing districts' ability to send teachers to outside training. Additionally, district leaders noted difficulties in unwinding the complex relationship between reorganization-related and recession-related impacts to the district budget. A number of superintendents noted that the public often conflated the two.

Districts encountered difficulties in correcting inequities among partners without diminishing programming for some. When a district that felt it had fewer needs joined with one perceived as having many needs, many people raised concerns about potential resource drain from one partner to another. In some districts, this was experienced as a negative impact. Administrators described doing a "constant double-check" on decisions to mitigate or address equity concerns.

The increased workload associated with reorganization was noted by two-thirds of district leaders as a particular challenge; the activities of reorganizing were added responsibilities that needed to be integrated with other ongoing work. Closely related to this was an acknowledgement that time was a particular challenge—time to tackle a complex agenda and to develop as a team. An administrator described underestimating the workload, noting "the sheer volume of what has to happen and how long that can take, and the feeling like there are so few of us to do it. Everyone is working at more than maximum capacity."

Nearly half the districts discussed the fear among the smaller partners of being overshadowed or dominated by the larger units. This issue surfaced in initial conversations about consolidation and permeated almost all aspects of consolidation work in districts that had an imbalance in the relative size of merging partners. Some administrators acknowledged that the smaller partners' fear of having policy, practice, and programming imposed upon them by the larger partner had become a reality. A superintendent in one district observed:

> A lot of what has happened is the new RSU has simply assumed the structures that existed in [the larger partner]. If there are hard feelings, between [smaller partner] and the other towns, part of it lingers because of that. Because of [smaller partner's] feeling that they were absorbed by the bigger fish.

Even in mergers that did not involve significant differences in district size, some noted "territorial" issues or community suspicion. Administrators also highlighted the difficulty of honoring differences and past experience while simultaneously working towards change. A superintendent described trying to initiate a more participatory process, but that a smaller partner still felt that reorganization had "happened to us."

One of the main challenges to bringing education programming into alignment has been the variability in practices and programs across the consolidated units. An administrator described his belief going into the merger that the partnering systems shared many similarities, but when they began to work together, "every time we took a lid off a pot we found a different soup in there." Even among districts that had done extensive comparisons of education programming, curriculum leaders noted differences were still coming to light.

Finally, differences in teacher contracts posed significant challenges to many new districts specifically as they pertained to working conditions. By contract, some teachers were required to engage in curriculum work. Others in the same district, working under a different contract, did curriculum work voluntarily. Within the same working group, stipends differed depending on the staff members' contract and prior district. Teacher contracts also prevented more active sharing of personnel across school buildings. Until contracts could be renegotiated, establishing a common calendar and similar contractual expectations around staff responsibilities and professional development remained an obstacle within many units.

Supports

District leaders described supports that fell into roughly two categories: those that supported reorganization as a whole and those that particularly supported creating greater quality and/or equity in education programming. Although they were not observed in all cases, administrators described these supports as providing scaffolding for the process to bring about changes to education programs after consolidation. Many of these actions resonate more broadly with school change literature and are not specific to reorganization. While leaders identified

these supports as significant, they made few claims to having mastered the process.

Supports included establishing structures and opportunities for staff from separate schools and units to come together to focus on education programming; creating time and allocating resources to support establishing relationships and trust; engaging the district and communities in a strategic planning to establish priorities and timeframes; attending to workload issues and time constraints and augmenting with external resources as needed; communicating with teachers staff and community stakeholders to promote transparency; leveraging existing structures and processes operating with success in a strong partner; setting realistic timeframes and expectations as the districts come together; and having strong leadership to guide districts' efforts.

A majority of the district leaders noted the importance of providing structures and opportunities for teachers, administrators, and combined committees to work together. Coming together for common purpose yielded several benefits. It created the opportunity to share expertise across a larger group of professionals and to incorporate complementary pockets of expertise among staff. Multiple leaders described this as a key benefit of consolidation, and these meetings were credited with breaking down barriers between former units, school buildings, and even grade levels. Establishing representation from all schools and grade levels also lent credibility to the work done under their aegis.

Districts identified activities that promoted trust-building as another critical support. Districts cultivated relationships in a number of ways: through committees, decision-making processes, and working toward common goals. Without trust, partner schools and systems were unlikely to advocate for the initiatives of the new unit. Many administrators stressed the importance of honoring different cultures that came together in the mergers. For example, a superintendent explained:

> To me it's all about culture building [and] the melding of those two cultures. It's the institutional history that I don't have about [new partner district]. How they made decisions? Why they made those decisions? You've really got to pay attention to the relationships, and the community values, and people feeling hurt, and that they're not being swallowed up by the [the bigger] district….You just can't do it overnight….You really have to pay attention to that culture piece.

Many districts asserted that establishing priorities through a strategic planning process was essential due to the limited timeframe and resources districts were facing. Through these processes, districts gained community support and established clearer directives for school leaders. Establishing priorities enabled districts to focus on a particular set of activities. New priorities also served as a rallying point for staff and faculty. Some administrators emphasized the importance and effectiveness of setting a common goal for staff to work toward that was *new to all* district partners.

The majority of districts engaged external consultants to support and facilitate strategic- planning activities, work with the administrative team, or look at particular program areas. A team of consultants was contracted by the MDOE to specifically support education planning within reorganized districts. The majority of districts took advantage of these free services, and some contacted with additional consultants to support further work. Administrators highlighted the value of having an impartial external party facilitate discussions.

Providing sufficient time to pursue the work of reorganizing was also a pervasive thread throughout almost all district interviews. Time was necessary for meetings and strategic planning to occur, relationships and trust to form, and for providing opportunities for reflection and communication. Administrators were emphatic that the increased workload not be underestimated and that expectations and timelines needed to be managed realistically. District leaders recommended retaining staff that seem duplicative in the initial stages of consolidation until farther along in the process, or hiring external consultants to support the administration through the transition. Reflecting on the lessons learned through this process, one superintendent commented that the skill set required to lead changes in the education program of this magnitude might require additional support: "Just because you've been in education all your life, doesn't mean you're the right person to lead educational change….Bring in people [consultants] that can help."

District leaders cited communication and transparency about proposed changes as critical both internally and to external stakeholders. District leaders needed to provide opportunities to hear from teachers and principals from merging partners. A superintendent described holding focus groups with building staff in each partnering unit. He stated, "I'm not there

to talk them out of how they're feeling or tell them 'that's not true.' My goal is just to listen, take notes… and share that."

Rather than reinvent strategies to accomplish new work, district leaders advocated leveraging existing structures and processes. In some districts this meant relying on a "strong dance partner" who had an established structure in place coming into the merger. Districts that had a functioning preexisting structure were able to assimilate additional members rather than create structures from scratch, which enabled work to get underway quickly.

A number of administrators and the consultants who supported districts' planning efforts emphasized the importance of leadership. Having the right people in place was noted as significant to making progress, but the necessary characteristics of that person varied. In some cases, experience was important, but in the few instances where the superintendent was completely new to the reorganization and its partners, administrators commented that after the tumult of planning for consolidation, new leaders arrived without baggage or ties to any particular partner.

OBSERVATIONS

Although our study examines the education impacts of school district consolidation at an early point in the implementation process (at the beginning of the second year of the mergers), there is evidence that a majority of the districts did implement changes to increase educational opportunities and equity. Changes included impacts to professional development; the use of technology resources and personnel; education program offerings and delivery in newly configured schools and grade spans; changes to curriculum and assessment; changes in data use practices; and movement of personnel. Additionally, some districts were changing the structures and processes that they used to drive both district operations and education programming. Moreover, many districts pointed to explicit curriculum change, expansion of program offerings in certain schools or towns, and ways in which certain partners and schools are benefitting from greater staff expertise or material resources.

Yet, not all districts made changes or improvements, and improvements were not always of equal magnitude across the partnering schools and towns in the new

districts. Overall, in consolidations that had a size imbalance between partners, larger systems could point to fewer education equity benefits accrued to them through the process. While many of the new units identified the goal of increasing equity, it was hard to measure equity impacts within only a year of implementing changes. In addition, some districts had not yet made anticipated changes. Finally, a few had not identified equity as a top goal. Some challenges that districts faced in bringing about equity included aversion or resistance to change; limited financial resources; resource allocation; workload and time concerns; concerns about smaller units being overpowered by larger partners; perceptions around winners and losers; significant differences in programs and practice; and disparities in teacher contracts.

Administrators in reorganized districts noted a number of supports that helped advance their work despite these challenges. A major supporting factor was the decision to bring staff together from the partnering units to focus on education programming, alignment quality, and equity. This strategy allowed districts to promote relationships and trust across the larger unit and benefit from the deeper expertise now available to

> …not all districts made changes or improvements, and improvements were not always of equal magnitude across the partnering schools and towns….

the new district. Other supports included engaging the enlarged district and communities in strategic planning to help establish priorities and timeframes; attending to workload issues and time constraints; prioritizing communication and transparency with teachers, staff, and community; leveraging existing structures and processes deemed successful; and setting realistic timeframes and expectations as the reorganization evolved.

Ultimately, districts described many ways in which their education programs, opportunities, and equity have changed as a result of school district reorganization.

Districts continued to grapple with the difficulty of achieving equity, what it means and what it should look like in their newly formed districts. Still, many continued to move forward in pursuit of increased equity and opportunity, sometimes by unique and creative solutions dictated by necessity. 🐌

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