

# SOME IMPORTANT PUBLIC SCHOOL PROBLEMS

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The kind of educational opportunities being provided vary widely from one school district to the next. These variations may be due to a number of factors. Among those of importance are the following:

1. The attitude of the citizens of the district toward education. To what extent are they willing to employ competent administrators and teachers? To what extent are they willing to exercise individual initiative in exceeding the minimum standards prescribed by state law? Do they understand what kind of an education is needed in this day and age? Are they willing to put forth the effort required to provide good educational opportunities? Are the children motivated by community leaders and parents to attend school?
2. The organizational structure or school district pattern of the state. The population of some districts is so small that it is impossible to assemble enough pupils in one group to make a good school. The kinds of educational opportunities that can be efficiently provided are often associated with and closely related to the number of pupils residing in the district.
3. The financial strength of the district. How large is the tax base per pupil? A school district with a tax base per pupil two to five times larger than that of its adjoining neighbor is not unusual. These variations can be offset by state aid or state distribution programs.
4. The latitude or "elbow room" given the officials of the district, by state law, to exercise individual initiative in going beyond prescribed minimums required of all districts. In most states a substantial amount of "elbow room" is provided.

## SCHOOL DISTRICT REORGANIZATION

### Background Information

Under our system of government, public education is a state function. It is the responsibility of the people of each state as a whole, acting through their state legislature. The constitution of each state spells this out, e.g., the constitution of the state of Indiana says:

Knowledge and learning, generally diffused throughout a community being essential to the preservation of a free government, it shall be the duty of the General Assembly to encourage by all suitable means, moral, intellectual and agricultural improvement and to provide by law for a general and uniform system of schools, wherein tuition shall be without charge and equally open to all.

But the states do not operate the schools. Instead, this function is delegated to local government units, created for that specific purpose. In most states, these local units are called school districts. In some states, they are called school corporations.

Representing the people as a whole, each state legislative body has the power to subdivide the areas of the state into local administrative units of such size and types as it sees fit, to alter such boundaries, or to abolish existing units or to create new ones to replace them. Thus, the state legislative body's power includes the function of re-organizing school districts or corporations as they may be called.

A school district possesses no inherent powers to perpetuate itself, to change its boundaries, or to cease to exist as a school administrative unit. All these changes must be authorized by the state legislative body.

In the early days, the number one job was to get schools established. No improved roads as we know them today existed; transportation was by foot or horse and buggy. The kind of an educational opportunity considered adequate was limited to reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic. The school term was generally of three to four months' duration, and teachers were often selected on the basis of their ability to "lick" the toughest boy in school.

Consequently, in most states the school district was usually a small geographic area—small enough so that the pupils could conveniently walk to school. Frequently the district contained only one elementary school, usually one room for all eight grades.

### **Social and Economic Conditions Have Changed**

Since then times have changed. Population has shifted — with a decided decline in many rural areas. In one Midwest state, for example, the school population ranges from a low of 5 to a high of 80,000. Furthermore, the kind of educational opportunity provided in the horse and buggy days is not generally considered adequate today. In order to prepare youngsters for a livelihood and citizenship responsibilities, a kind of educational opportunity is needed that cannot be provided in districts with a small pupil population.

## How Many Pupils Are Needed to Make a Good School District?

Some reliable authorities say that the number of pupils in a district should be not less than 2,500, while others say 1,200 pupils are sufficient. In California, wherever possible, 10,000 pupils are included in a district. Many lay and educational authorities agree that an elementary school should enroll not less than 25 pupils per grade. For a school with grades one to six, this means a minimum of 150 pupils. For high schools with grades nine to twelve, the minimum enrollment suggested ranges from 300 to 500. Dr. Conant in his recent study recommended a graduating class of not less than 100. As previously mentioned, much depends upon density of population, road conditions, and other factors. (See Tables 1 and 2 for relationship between enrollment and curriculum.)

TABLE 1. CARNEGIE UNITS OFFERED IN SELECTED INDIANA HIGH SCHOOLS  
BY SUBJECT, 1953-54

Subject	Number of Carnegie Units	
	Schools Enrolling 100 or Less	Schools Enrolling 400 or More
English	3.80	5.33
Social studies	3.00	3.67
Science	2.00	3.33
Mathematics	2.20	4.17
Foreign language	1.00	4.67
Business education	3.20	7.33
Distributive education		1.00
Health	2.00	3.00
Home economics	3.00	4.00
Agriculture	2.20	4.00
Industrial arts		5.00
Trade and industry		1.30
Diversified occupations		1.30
Music	1.20	6.17
Art	.20	3.33

### The Problem

What kind of legislation ought to be enacted to facilitate or encourage school district reorganization? Alternative solutions include:

1. NONE. Maintain the status quo. Under this alternative the kinds of educational opportunities provided in one district as compared with another will vary widely. Over a period of time this range or disparity will grow even wider.

TABLE 2. CARNEGIE UNITS OFFERED IN SELECTED INDIANA HIGH SCHOOLS, 1953-54, ACCORDING TO SIZE OF SCHOOL

Enrollment in Grades 9-12	Average Number of Units	Percent of Increase
Fewer than 100	23.80	
100-199	32.52	36.64
200-299	39.71	66.85
300-399	48.76	104.87
400 and over	56.66	138.07

2. **PERMISSIVE.** Legislation of this type enables or permits local districts to combine or consolidate on their own motion. Combinations are usually subject to approval of the voters. Some authorities say permissive legislation is worse than no legislation because it permits the fast or aggressive to run faster, thus creating wider disparity. This alternative often results in a crazy quilt pattern with the wealthy districts getting together and leaving isolated or stranded islands with no potential combination possibilities. But this alternative does get the ball rolling, gives the people of the state some experience, and establishes so-called "demonstration plots." This enables others to observe some of the advantages and disadvantages of reorganizing and lays the groundwork for future legislation.
3. **SEMI-PERMISSIVE.** Legislation of this type usually creates a state-wide administrative body to oversee or supervise locally created committees. Usually these committees are mandated to prepare reorganization plans which include all of the area of a county, to follow certain procedures, and to submit such plans to a vote. No reorganization takes place without approval of the voters.

This alternative usually results in the formation of adequate size districts (at least by state standards) and leaves no stranded or isolated areas without future combination or reorganization potential. It stimulates local people to study the situation. They at least become more familiar with what kind of an educational opportunity is being provided in their district, to compare it with what is being provided elsewhere, and to evaluate alternative reorganization proposals. This alternative also speeds up the reorganization process and gives some indication of what, if any, additional legislation is needed to stimulate and encourage unreorganized districts to reorganize.

Although reorganization is not mandatory, the state legislature sometimes uses both the stick and the carrot to stimulate people to act. Reorganized districts are sometimes given a bonus in the state

aid distribution formula. Unreorganized districts are sometimes penalized.

4. **MANDATORY.** As the name implies, legislation of this type mandates districts to reorganize. It usually goes into effect at some future date after enactment with districts being given ample opportunity to reorganize under permissive statutes. Mandatory legislation gets the job finished. It insures an organizational pattern consistent with present-day notions of what constitutes an adequate size administrative unit.

No doubt future generations may find it necessary to repeat the reorganization process.

### SCHOOL FINANCE

The amount of taxable wealth per pupil varies widely from one school district to another (e.g., in Indiana from \$1,500 to \$85,000). If these districts have to depend entirely upon local sources of revenue, the amount that can be raised in many districts is very meager, sometimes barely enough to buy fuel—let alone pay the teacher.

Because of this kind of a situation most states have developed what is generally known as a state aid distribution formula or minimum foundation support program. In other words, local school districts have available some state funds in addition to the amount of money raised locally. In practically every state the amount or proportion of money that should be raised on a state-wide basis and the formula to be used in making such distribution is a matter of controversy.

#### The Problem

For what purpose ought state funds be distributed to local school districts? Alternative types of grants are:

1. **STIMULATION OR SPECIAL PURPOSE GRANTS.** These are given to stimulate local units to undertake certain actions or programs, e.g., increase length of term, employ teachers with more training and experience, establish vocational departments, etc. Grants of this type make the rich richer, and the poor poorer, unless the grant is sufficient to cover the cost of the activity. Actually, much of the money goes to those who would have done what was required anyway. All the things accomplished by stimulation grants could be accomplished by minimum standards legislation.
2. **EQUALIZATION GRANTS.** Under this alternative grants are distributed in inverse relationship to wealth. Money is transferred from the wealthy to the poor. Equalization grants enable districts with

below-average wealth to maintain or provide educational programs up to some predetermined minimum standard.

3. **TAX BASE BROADENING GRANTS.** Under this alternative a state tax system, such as net income tax, sales tax, or the like is used to collect taxes for the local unit. Distributions are proportional to collections. A taxpayer indicates in what school district he resides on the tax report form and then adds a surtax which is earmarked for the school district in which the taxpayer resides.
4. **FLAT PER-PUPIL DISTRIBUTION.** Under this alternative, distributions are made on the basis of so much per pupil, per teacher, or per classroom. Flat distributions result in some equalization.
5. Various combinations of 1, 2, 3, and 4.