

# K-12 Regionalization in Connecticut: *Pros, Cons and Surprises*

## Executive Summary



School districts in Connecticut often consider regionalizing their K-12 education services as a way to reduce costs. This report provides a comprehensive literature review to help inform those efforts. This review focuses on what is known about the impacts of K-12 regionalization on education expenditures and educational achievement, based on recent empirical studies.

**What is K-12 Regionalization?** K-12 regionalization includes combining school districts, boards of education, and central office staff. This can result in closing schools, eliminating teaching positions, reducing administrative staff, and increasing student-to-teacher ratios, among other consequences.

While K-12 regionalization is often promoted to achieve cost savings, policymakers must also consider the consequences for educational achievement. Many factors affect educational outcomes and school and district size alone do not determine student success.

Generalizations about regionalization oversimplify a complex topic. **K-12 regionalization can increase costs and harm educational outcomes.** There is not a *one-size-fits-all* answer on K-12 regionalization.

**Context for K-12 regionalization:** Connecticut's towns provide the 3rd-highest contribution towards education from property taxes of the 50 states. Expenditures reflect a mix of what a school district can afford and what taxpayers want to spend.

Measures of student success – such as graduation rates – are also fiscal indicators. When students are not successful in school, there are long-term social costs borne by taxpayers. In 2014, high school dropouts in Connecticut could cost taxpayers \$930 million in social services over the dropouts' lifetime.

**Does School District Regionalization Always Reduce Costs?** Both economies of scale (cost reductions) and diseconomies of scale (cost increases) are possible when regionalizing school districts.

Economies of scale might be achieved by:

- reducing central office staff
- employing fewer teachers
- maintaining fewer buildings
- higher volume and lower cost purchasing
- lower wages / salaries

Diseconomies of scale similarly arise through:

- higher transportation costs
- higher wages / salaries
- increasing central office staff

### **Does the Number of Students in a District Affect Educational Achievement?**

There is no definitive answer on optimum school size. Students of all ages have higher educational achievement when they attend small schools in small districts. Large schools may “...create an *impersonal climate that contributes to school failure for some students.*”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Bard, Joe, Clark Gardener, & Regi Wieland, in “Rural School Consolidation: History, Research Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations.” (2006)

Research on Connecticut suggests that a district with 2,500 to 3,000 students may be both cost-effective and foster educational achievement. This roughly matches the range suggested in research from other locations. In at-risk communities, research suggests that elementary school enrollment should not exceed 300 students, and high school enrollment should not exceed 500.<sup>1</sup>

**Risks to Communities:** In rural areas, closing a town’s school can cause the social fabric of a community to unravel. Research also suggests that “*impoverished regions in particular often benefit from smaller schools and districts, and they can suffer irreversible damage if consolidation occurs.*”<sup>2</sup>

“ [S]chool leaders in Connecticut and across the country need to reexamine the assumptions of school consolidation and consider the possibility that small may be the new big. ”

Joseph P Cullen in A Comparison of the Academic Performance of College Bound High School Students in Regional vs. Community High Schools in Connecticut.

**State-Specific Studies:** Results from other states are mixed for large-scale regionalization. In Maine and Vermont, policies supporting K-12 regionalization had limited results because desire for local control outweighed potential cost savings. District regionalization in upstate New York led to a short-term increase in costs, which was balanced out by long-term cost reductions. Connecticut analysis found that shared services (without combining districts) are not always successful and could increase costs.<sup>3,4</sup>

**Deconsolidation:** Findings from across the U.S. suggest that **deconsolidation of large school districts** should be considered an option for cost savings. In **Connecticut, it would take the total savings from the 129 smallest school districts to match the combined equivalent per-pupil savings from the three largest school districts.** Consequently, a significant reduction in statewide education costs requires reducing per-pupil spending in urban areas, not just in small rural districts.

1 Leithwood, Kenneth, and Doris Jantzi, “A Review of Empirical Evidence About School Size Effects: A Policy Perspective.” (2009): 79. Review of Educational Research.

2 Howley, C., Johnson, J., & Petrie, J., in “Consolidation of Schools and Districts: What the Research Says and What It Means.” (2011)

3 Regional Cooperation Between Local Boards of Education.” 2015.

4 CASBO Shared Services Whitepaper 2015.” 2017. Accessed January 16.