

State Representative

Don Hineman

Don's Legislative Update
September 17, 2014

Consolidation by Starvation

I am sitting at my home office in my nine-county legislative district and pondering the recent controversy about forced school consolidation and who might or might not be in favor of such a policy. That is an issue of utmost concern to me and my constituents.

My legislative district contains all of eleven school districts and parts of nine more. The three smallest of them each have current enrollments of less than 100 students in grades K-12. So it will come as no surprise that we care a great deal about this subject here in the 118th District. In fact, advocating for and protecting the future of rural school districts has been my number one priority throughout my legislative career.

But I'm going to let you in on a little secret. Forced consolidation of Kansas public schools is not going to happen any time soon. We tried that back in the 1960s when nearly 2800 school districts were consolidated into just 311. That thrust many Kansas communities into turmoil and numerous legislators were booted from office.

And now, 50 years later, many rural Kansas towns bear the scars of the forced consolidation that closed their schools and doomed those communities to a future of decline and decay. I doubt that we do that again. And I know of no one who is openly advocating for another round of forced school consolidation. Not John Vratil, not Dave Trabert, and not Mike O'Neal. It is simply too politically unpopular, and all three of those individuals and essentially all current legislators understand that.

But rural Kansas school districts and the students they serve face a very real and immediate threat from a different form of consolidation. Let's call it consolidation by starvation. It is one of the consequences of tight state budgets, and it can happen when overall funding for schools is reduced or when the school funding formula is changed in ways which produce fewer dollars for small rural districts.

As state funding declines small rural districts scramble to save money any way they can. Eventually that isn't enough and they have to reduce course offerings and curtail programs. And finally the inevitable day arrives: the school board finds it is out of options and votes to merge with a neighbor or disband entirely. Since the start of the great recession in 2008, ten Kansas school districts have ceased to exist, and it is highly likely that more will face the same fate very soon.

Several of my legislative colleagues are claiming that retired Senator John Vratil favors forced consolidation. And they charge that he is not fit to be a member of the K-12 Student Performance and Efficiency Commission, based on a statement he made in 2011. Senator Vratil now resides in



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Useful Phone Numbers

Department On Aging
800-432-3535

Child/Adult Abuse Hotline
800-922-5330

Child & Family Services
888-369-4777

Consumer Protection
800-423-2310

Crime Tip Hotline
800-252-8477

Crime Victim Assistance
800-828-9745

Gov- Brownback
800-748-4408

Highway Road Conditions
511 (in Kansas)

Housing Hotline

Johnson County but he was raised in Pawnee County, and I know he understands very well the plight of rural Kansas schools. When he made his remarks in 2011, he wasn't talking about forced consolidation. Rather, he was pointing out that austere budgets make it hard for all school districts to continue to provide services, and the most vulnerable and least able to survive are small rural school districts. In other words, he was talking about consolidation by starvation, brought on by budget cuts at the state level.

But don't think for a moment that this is always an unintended consequence of tight budgets. Those who perennially advocate for less funding for public education must surely understand that some rural school districts will be squeezed out of existence. So while they publicly voice their opposition to forced consolidation, their actions reveal that the disappearance of small rural Kansas school districts is not a concern to them and in fact they are hoping for that outcome. But of course they prefer the subtle consolidation by starvation over the more open and obvious forced consolidation.

And when that happens, students in my district and rural districts throughout the state are the losers.

This message by Representative Don Hineman of the 118th Kansas House District was [published on September 15th in the Hays Post](#).

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Cowboy Logic

"If you think you are a person of influence, try ordering someone else's dog around" - **Will Rogers**

Quote of the week

"When you find yourself on the side of the majority it is time to pause and reflect" - **Mark Twain**

Sermon in a sentence

"If you manage to be happy some people will be jealous. Be happy anyway" - **Mother Teresa**

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800-752-4422

**KanCare Assistance
866-305-5147**

**Kansas Lottery
800-544-9467**

**Legislative Hotline
800-432-3924**

**Mental Health Services
888-582-3759**

**School Safety Hotline
877-626-8203**

**Social Security
800-772-1213**

**Taxpayer Assistance
785-368-8222**

**Tax Refund Status
800-894-0318**

**Unclaimed Property
800-432-0386**

**Unemployment Insurance
800-292-6333**

**Vital Statistics
785-296-1400**

**Voter Registration
800-262-8683**

**Welfare Fraud Hotline
800-432-3913**

**Worker's Comp
800-332-0353**