South Dakota Legislative Research Council

Issue Memorandum 96-16

A HISTORY OF THE DECLINE OF THE NUMBER OF SCHOOL DISTRICTS IN SOUTH DAKOTA

Introduction

Government of South Dakota's schools bears very little resemblance to that which existed or was enacted in the very early days of South Dakota's statehood. For example, it has been several years since there was a Governor-appointed State Superintendent of Education. It has been even longer since there was an elected one. Also gone for quite some time are the days of the county board of education and the county superintendent of schools.

Whether reacting to changing times or just keeping pace with the rest of the nation, the Legislature has enacted many statutory reforms of education government over the years. For example, the county superintendent position was created in statute by the Second Session of the South Dakota Legislature (Chapter II of 1891 Session Laws Chapter 56) and repealed in 1973. Likewise, county boards of education were repealed in 1971.

Just as official positions or administrative titles in education in South Dakota have fallen by the wayside over the years, so have the different types of school districts. In fact, government of South Dakota's schools is even considerably different now from what it was in the early 1970s. No other entity of local government in this state has seen such drastic reorganizations, consolidations, and reductions in numbers of entities. The many counties and municipal governments have come nowhere near the attainment of efficiencies of school districts. Schools have achieved considerable coordination of service delivery through consolidating districts or forming service cooperatives. [1]

History and Numbers

It is rather astounding, at least at first glance, how the number of school districts has collapsed. This has occurred on a massive scale, not only because of actions of the Legislature, but also thanks to local initiatives to strengthen--if not save--schools through consolidations. During the 1995-96 school year, there were 177 public school districts in South Dakota. In the 1960-61 school year, though, according to the Department of Education and Cultural Affairs, there were 3,012 school districts. Thus, in the last 35 years, the number of school districts in South Dakota has dropped a whopping 94 percent. However, most of this massive collapse in the number of school districts is because of changes in the legal definitions of school districts made by the Legislature.

There is no way of denying the fact that South Dakota public school enrollments have declined in the last 20 years. In the 1974-75 school year, there were 1,429 students in common schools (grades K-8) and 159,693 students in independent school districts (106,763 in grades K-8, 52,930 in grades 9-

12). Total enrollment that year, therefore, was 161,122. In the 1975-76 school year, common school enrollment was 1,360, and independent district enrollment was 104,791 for K-8 and 52,950 for 9-12. The total for the year was 159,101, a drop of 2,021 students from the previous year. In 1976-77, the first year for the Legislature's redefined school districts, K-8 was 103,697 and grades 9-12 was 52,832, for a total of 156,529. The total K-12 enrollment in the fall of 1994, according to the most recently published data by the Department, was 134,290. (Table 1 at the end of this paper gives a summary of enrollments since the 1974-75 school year to fall of 1994.)

How could the number of school districts decrease so drastically? Locally-initiated consolidations is part of the answer, but the Legislature's rewriting the definitions of school districts is the real reason. Remember that in 1960-61 there were 3,012 school districts, of which 2,760 were "common" and 252 were "independent." According to SDCL 13-5-5, which was repealed in 1974, a common school district was one that operated "less than a full twelve-year school program...[and did]...not operate an accredited high school." SDCL 13-5-3, which was also repealed in 1974, defined an independent school district "as that district which operates a twelve-year school program (with our without a kindergarten) or an accredited high school." Both independent and common school districts had a variation whereby that district might be the only one of its type for a county. Those were known as "county independent school districts" or "county common school districts," respectively. In 1974, the Legislature repealed ***all*** these classifications of school districts, writing a definition of but one type of school district in SDCL 13-5-3. " A school district is defined as that district which operates not less than a twelve-year school program."

The 1974 Act (1974 Session Law Chapter 125 § 1) abolished all "types of school districts existing before July 1, 1976"[2]. By the 1975-76 school year, however, common school districts had already dwindled to 36, and there were 195 independent school districts. Obviously, mergers and consolidations were happening all over the state and had been for years. A lot of common schools closed or began the process. In the 1976-77 school year, the first year for the current definition of a school district, there were actually 196 school districts. Thus, in the last 20 years, the number of school districts has dropped from 196 to 177. This is a decrease of 19 districts or almost 10 percent. (Table 2 gives a history of school district numbers.)

Despite the huge collapse in the overall number of school districts since the early 1960s, the number of full K-12 systems and actual schools operating now is relatively close to that of 1974-75. In that year, which was the year the Legislature rewrote the law, 179 districts operated K-12 schools. This year there are 167. In that year, five districts operated no schools, and 11 contracted with districts out of state. This year five districts still operate no schools (they contract out of state), three districts contract some grade levels in state and another two districts contract out of state.

In 1974 there was a total of 855 schools in independent school districts (gr. K-12), of which 432 were elementary with more than one teacher and 201 were one-teacher. (There were 33 actual schools operating in common school districts, 15 of which were one-teacher.) There were 23 junior high schools (gr. 7-9), 13 senior high schools (10-12), 168 four-year high schools, and 18 junior/senior highs. Now there are: 408

elementary schools, 169 four-year high schools, two senior high schools, 109 junior high schools, and 70 middle schools. The four alternative schools and 12 special education schools bring the current total to 774. Thus, there is 9.5 percent fewer *schools*, overall, now than in 1974.

The picture was grossly different in the 1961-62 school year. Then there were 2,731 common school districts, of which 1,610 operated a total of 1,933 schools. Of those 1,776 were one-teacher schools. There were 246 independent school districts operating for grades K-12, and four operating just high schools. There was a total of 600 schools in independent school districts, of which 36 were one-teacher. Obviously, brevity forbids a detailed discussion of all the school closings over the years, but Attachment 1 at the end of this paper gives a summary of actions since the 1950s.

Conclusion

School districts are the shining example of how fewer units of a type of local government, through consolidation, can effectively serve greater numbers of taxpayers. While South Dakota's population has grown over the years, its school population has dwindled. Clearly, though, South Dakota's school population has not decreased by the massive percentage the number of school districts has.

Battles have been very hardfought and numerous. After all, few issues can rouse a town's folk quicker than talk of closing the local school. Even a move to consolidate it with that of an adjacent school district can generate a lot of anger and debate. Understandably, no one wants their child to have to travel far to attend school. Nor does anyone like the idea of seeing their local school close. Some districts have gone to extraordinary--if not heroic--efforts over the years to keep their schools alive. It has been demonstrated numerous times in South Dakota's history that once the school population of a town diminishes to the point where the school just can't continue, after closing the school there just is not much left to the town.

[1]There is also a new sort of entity, which owes its genesis to efforts of Governor Mickelson's administration. Thanks to the efforts of his Rural Development Telecommunications Network and 1990s' technologies, telecommunication consortiums are forming. The main drivers of these are the school districts (with significant funding and assistance from the Rural Electrification Association).

[2] It is interesting to note that the Sioux Falls ARGUS LEADER, for the months of January, February, and early March of 1974 made very few references to this bill. What few references were made were only in passing. The most significant controversies of that 30-day session were the energy crisis, then-Governor Kneip's proposal for a four-year medical school, a "Beer Can Bill," a bill to allow slot machines, and the single university system concept. There was also the severe drought. Not only did the press somewhat ignore it, but Governor Kneip never mentioned the bill, its concept, or its effect in any of his State of the State speeches.

This issue memorandum was written by Mark Zickrick, Principal Fiscal Analyst for the Legislative Research Council. It is designed to supply background information on the subject and is not a policy statement made by the Legislative Research Council.