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Rural Majority: School consolidation complex, controversial

Rural residents want consolidation to remain local decision

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REPUBLIC COUNTY — Hillcrest Unified School District 455's decision to consolidate with another district had a lot to do with sports.

It was a decade ago. A neighboring district, North Central, planned to merge with Washington, a larger one directly to its east.

"We wouldn't have been able to do sports," says Kevin Milner, a member at the time of Hillcrest's school board. "We would have just been hung out to dry."

Hillcrest, a one-school district about 80 miles north of Salina on the Nebraska border, had 100 students — 12 in its senior class, according to state enrollment data.

It needed North Central, a similarly sized district that, like Hillcrest, didn't have enough athletes for its teams. For years, the two had competed as one. They also shared a superintendent.

Losing that partnership made the Hillcrest school board look west toward Belleville, the 450-student district based in the county seat.

"It was to the point where we had lower grades combined," Milner said, referring to placing students of more than one grade with a single teacher. "It's better to have a larger group."

Consolidating had been a topic of discussion off and on for about three years, he says, but sports brought the situation to a head.

Milner describes the community's decision to merge with Belleville as difficult, and remembers sitting in front of Hillcrest patrons at a public forum. As he recalls it, some people wept, some yelled. Some wondered aloud how the towns that made up their district had lost so many students over the years.

The fear in many rural communities is that closing a school kills a town. Milner believes Hillcrest experienced the opposite. The towns dwindled, then the school left, too.

School district consolidation is easily the most taboo subject in Kansas K-12 education.

Across the state, Kansans who saw the Legislature compel massive, statewide mergers in the 1960s — and similar pushes in the 1940s and 1950s — remember the anguish and mourning as towns struggled to keep their schools, a fight that many lost.

Since 2000, consolidation has picked up pace again, possibly prodded by a combination of population loss, state incentives to merge and, since the recession, cuts to state aid.

Most of the mergers have occurred along the Nebraska border, where 12 of the 13 counties have lost school districts since 2000.

Seven of Kansas' 10 counties that lost the most population from 1970 to 2010 are here. Republic lost 41 percent, and its neighbors, Jewell and Washington, 50 and 37 percent,

respectively.

Consolidation then and now

The logistics of consolidation are complex.

When the Hillcrest and Belleville school districts decided to merge into a single system called Republic County Unified School District 109, Hillcrest had bond debt, which Belleville then shared. Employees had to reapply for their jobs, and an interim panel of Hillcrest and Belleville representatives spent long hours determining whom to rehire, Milner says.

In terms of transporting students, the town of Belleville was more centrally located within the new boundaries, and two years after the merger, USD 109 shuttered Hillcrest's school, located in the smaller town of Cuba, population 150.

For some of Cuba's residents, this is the enduring regret. Hillcrest had added a new library and gym to its school about a decade earlier, they say, and its patrons were proud of the building.

"I'm not going to resent the fact that we had to consolidate," says former Hillcrest secretary Marilyn Junek. "My big hang-up is that they didn't use our facility."

Junek worked at Hillcrest for 20 years. She is now city clerk for Cuba, a town of Czech heritage best known as a decades-long subject of National Geographic photographer Jim Richardson's work, and for its 40-year-old annual weeklong Rock-A-Thon.

Consolidation today is voluntary. The mandated mergers of the 1960s reflected a national movement to restructure schools that, according to federal tallies, cut the number of districts in half before the decade's end.

This push was fueled partly by research arguing small high schools held students back, denying them the array of classes and activities larger schools offered.

Opponents like Roger Barker, a prominent psychologist at The University of Kansas, disagreed, according to a 2014 biography by Ariel Sabar. Barker, known for his meticulous studies of small-town life, said small schools excelled at engaging students, preventing isolation and offering academic support.

In the end, Kansas went from about 2,800 districts in the late 1950s — primary and secondary schools were separate districts back then — to 311 a decade later, legislative reports indicate.

According to a history of consolidation published by the Kansas Association of School Boards, nine more districts dissolved or merged over the next three decades.

Since 2000, another 30 have made the same choice, almost all of them rural.

Ongoing controversy

The debate over consolidation has never ceased. Fresh studies on the matter — commissioned by the Legislature and the Kansas State Board of Education — came out in 1992, 2001 and 2010.

In 2012, a panel created by Gov. Sam Brownback to study school efficiency recommended developing a state plan to reorganize district-level administration, realign district boundaries for administrative efficiency and potentially regionalize administration.

That idea resurfaced last fall in a draft report by a separate K-12 panel created by the Legislature. It was stripped from the final version, but a minority addendum suggested districts seek savings by outsourcing or consolidating non-instructional functions.

Yet explicit calls for consolidation are rare, and any statements that might be construed as pro-consolidation can become political fodder.

Ahead of last November's election, Brownback assailed his Democratic rival, Paul Davis, based on a 2011 comment by former Sen. John Vratil, Davis' appointee to one of the school efficiency panels.

Vratil said rural schools faced budget restraints that would force them out of existence, and should realize it sooner rather than later.

Rep. Don Hineman, a Republican from Dighton who represents parts of nine western Kansas counties, says the unpopularity of consolidation means even lawmakers who support it won't say so publicly.

But he sees consolidation as a threat through less overt means.

"It's probably easier to achieve some consolidation, in the minds of some folks, by adjusting the funding for small school districts," Hineman said, "and thereby starving them to the point where they're forced to consolidate."

He pointed to this year's legislative session. Last week lawmakers voted to scrap the state's 23-year-old law for funding K-12 schools.

"The talk all session has been about revising the school finance formula," Hineman said. "What that says to me is that some folks don't want to send as many dollars to low-enrollment districts as we're sending now."

Ken Willard, a Hutchinson Republican on the Kansas State Board of Education, disagrees. Willard said he trusts Kansas' lawmakers to craft a new formula that won't harm rural schools.

"Nobody that I know wants to put kids or schools in a bad way," he said.

Statewide studies

The 2001 report, conducted by a Denver consulting firm, recommended giving the state board power to redraw districts and potentially forcing consolidation in 28 of them that either had fewer than 100 students or a combination of high per-pupil spending and low test scores. It urged mergers for another 39.

It also suggested 25 districts were too large, and at least two, Wichita and Shawnee Mission, might need to be split.

The 2010 study, by legislative auditors, explored the potential for savings through consolidation. It offered two scenarios:

- Eliminating 32 districts that no longer met 1960s criteria. (In the 1960s, the Legislature had required schools to merge into districts with least 400 students or at least 200 square miles.); or
- Restructuring about 240 districts and closing more than a fifth of Kansas schools.

The auditors found the first scenario would save the state \$15 million a year — adjusting for cost increases such as busing more students — and the second, \$111 million. (These figures would be different today because of changes in state aid and because some of the districts have merged.)

The savings came with caveats. Most districts would lose more state aid than they would save locally in costs. Many would have to issue bonds to expand schools or build new ones. Hence, both scenarios were expected to cost dollars locally — about \$50 million annually in the latter case.

Additionally, the state savings weren't expected in the short term, because Kansas offers incentives for districts to merge — budget benefits that last two to five years depending on the

size of the districts.

Willard, who has supported studying the matter of consolidation over the years and chaired Brownback's efficiency panel in 2012, said the results of such studies haven't convinced him action is needed.

"I don't think we know enough about what the effects of that would be," he said, adding that the higher per-pupil costs of rural education may not be a reason to merge districts. "The fact of the matter is, geography affects it a lot."

The median rural district spent \$14,107 per student last year, compared to \$12,699 for towns, \$11,724 for suburbs and \$12,941 for cities. The higher transportation costs and lower staff-to-student ratios that accompany education in sparsely populated areas contribute to this.

Pike Valley

Jenny Russell is unapologetically pro-rural.

It shows in the young businesswoman's enthusiasm for discussing rural economic development, and on the sign perched outside her office in Courtland, population 285.

"Rural by choice," it reads.

Russell owns JenRus Freelance, a marketing and community development firm. She has regional and international clients and could locate in cities, but chose this one-story building on Courtland's well-kept Main Street, across from the Swedish-American State Bank that hints at the town's heritage, and catty-corner from the eye-catching mural of corn, wheat and pastures that honors its agrarian economy.

"Pike Valley is where we want to be," said Russell, who moved here in 2010 with her husband, Jay. "We specifically moved here before our kids were in school so they could go here."

Jenny and Jay attended small schools. They chose his hometown, and its 216-student district, Pike Valley USD 426, to give their children the same experience.

Pike Valley covers the southwest 195 square miles of Republic County that aren't part of USD 109, the merged Belleville-Hillcrest district. Ten years ago it had 270 students. Five years ago, 250. It was targeted in the 2010 consolidation report as a district that no longer met 1960s requirements.

Russell isn't discouraged.

"I'm not fazed by the population loss anymore," she said. "It's been the story forever. I grew up in it. I don't take that as gold. I don't take that as a deterrent."

For Russell, Republic County's former economic development director, and Luke Mahin, its current one, rural economic development is a puzzle requiring creativity and determination. They tackle this challenge with zest, and say there are signs the county's population is stabilizing.

"The outlook in national media on 'rural' is, 'Man, you guys are just sitting out there with nooses around your neck, waiting for your town or county to die,'" says Mahin, who graduated from Pike Valley in 2005 and returned to the area after college. "We would have growth potential if housing were fixed."

He points to a 2012 survey by Fort Hays State University of local employers that predicted 100 new jobs for Republic County within two years, and the expansion since then of a manufacturer that brought dozens not included in the report.

Yet Mahin and Russell say prospective renters and homeowners find few options in Republic County, and they believe based on conversations with employers that dozens of new workers commute from elsewhere as a result. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, half of Republic's

housing units were built before 1939.

The pair can rattle off recent projects they and others have facilitated to address this and similar challenges, from attracting new employers and an apartment developer to fundraising that helped the county join a state program granting loan assistance for people new to rural areas.

Russell also helped raise donations to launch an independently financed preschool program at Pike Valley. The first group of preschoolers became kindergarteners this year — the district's largest kindergarten class in five years.

For Russell and Mahin, consolidating USD 109 and Pike Valley and closing more schools here would undercut local and state efforts to stave population loss by making the area less attractive to families.

Nor, in all likelihood, would Pike Valley residents support it. Several years ago a USD 109 superintendent raised the possibility of merging. When his quotes appeared in the Belleville Telescope suggesting the two districts tap into state consolidation incentives, it upset Pike Valley patrons who feared USD 109 would close their schools, bus their children farther and make other decisions disadvantageous to their children and towns.

That sentiment didn't change after the Legislature's 2010 report. Then-representative Clay Aurand, who chaired the House's education committee and represented the Pike Valley area, designed a bill based on it to trim funding for districts that didn't meet the 1960s size criteria.

He believes doing so cost him re-election in 2012, putting an end to his 18-year tenure.

"I'm pretty sure I lost that last race because of that bill," says Aurand, himself a Pike Valley graduate. "The fact that I couldn't carry my hometown."

The bill failed, even after amendments that he says left most districts in the clear, including Pike Valley.

Kansas offers low-enrollment funding to districts with fewer than 1,622 students, and this aid gradually rises for smaller enrollments, with a steeper climb under 300 students. In a district with 1,000 students, a student counts for funding purposes as about 11/4 students in a large district. At 300, he counts as about 11/2 students, and at 200, a little less than 13/4.

"My idea was instead to basically say, we're not going to keep giving you extra dollars once you drop below a threshold," Aurand said. "That would be the right thing to do. And this didn't even mandate consolidation."

Critics of his idea argue this aid is needed because rural schools face higher per-pupil costs, and limiting it could effectively mandate consolidation, when consolidation is supposed to be a decision determined by local school boards.

Last week, the Legislature scrapped the low-enrollment aid scale when they voted to undo the state's school finance formula, causing alarm among rural educators who fear it might not be restored.

Community hub

On a Tuesday in February, Republic County High School, a 2A school, faced 3A rival Minneapolis on the basketball court.

The girls team had just won its game, and the boys were about to finish off Senior Night with a second victory.

Marti Wilber, a para-educator and bus driver at USD 109 who graduated from Hillcrest and whose children previously attended it, watched from the stands. It has been nearly a decade since Hillcrest joined Belleville, and the students, she said, have meshed into a single community, Republic County Schools.

“When you come to a game,” Wilber said, “I think you’re going to see Republic County kids.”

Also in the stands, 11-year-old Paige Waite, a Belleville fifth-grader, said she went to a Cuba classmate’s birthday party a few days earlier. For children her age, the former Hillcrest-Belleville boundary holds no meaning.

“They’re all my friends,” she said.

Hillcrest and Belleville patrons see this as a positive, even if it doesn’t erase the tragedy of closing a school.

“No town wants to lose their school,” says Tom Lesovsky, a farmer who lives near Cuba, the town that lost the Hillcrest school. “That’s a major, major loss.”

The school offered employment, was a social hub and brought business to town. Teachers stopped at the now closed café. Families bought groceries and the school district purchased gas and lunch items like meat and milk. This happens to a lesser extent now.

Knowing that Cuba lost its school discourages Pike Valley patrons from wanting to take the same step of consolidation, several of them said. The families of Pike Valley stand by their schools as high quality and economical.

“This is not a spendthrift school district,” said Regine Thompson, who runs a law office in Scandia, east of Courtland.

As evidence, she cited Pike Valley’s decision to employ a part-time superintendent, Mary Treaster, who earns \$36,000.

Thompson moved here 18 years ago from Washington, D.C., where she worked for a Utah senator, after meeting her husband, Jeff, a Republic County native. Though she attended a large high school herself, she argues Pike Valley offers her two children the skills they will need to succeed in college and careers.

“I think that a child who takes advantage of what’s available in a small school can compete against anybody anywhere,” she said. “The idea that a school can have a small population and still thrive, why is that so hard for people to understand?”

Pike Valley’s graduation rates have ranged between 90 and 100 percent for the past decade, compared to the state’s 86 percent. Its student-teacher ratio, which includes general and specialized teachers, is 9-to-1, compared to Kansas’ median of 13.

In May, Thompson’s eldest son, Jack, will finish high school with college credits already under his belt. Like many Pike Valley students, he took dual-enrollment classes accredited through a community college in a neighboring county.

Schools like these, Thompson says, are worth keeping, though she questioned the willingness of state politicians and policymakers to fund them.

“They want that lifestyle to exist somewhere,” she said, “but they don’t want to pay for what that lifestyle would entail.”

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