

State must aid local consolidation studies

Written by

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Forty years of school finance litigation -- and we still can't agree what it means to provide a "thorough and efficient" system of public education.

The latest Abbott v. Burke ruling didn't distinguish between the two parts of New Jersey's most famous constitutional phrase, but it seems unlikely we'll ever get to thoroughness without efficiency. In the real world if not in the courts, there's no separating the two, and it's time for the Legislature to give both their due.

The system for funding and operating our public schools is hopelessly wasteful: a fractured, Byzantine system that allows good money to be wasted on redundant programs and unnecessary bureaucracies. The problem lies with New Jersey's overabundance of local government. With 566 municipalities and 616 school districts, we simply have too many administrative entities trying to do the same thing. New Jersey taxpayers elect mayors to govern towns with fewer than 25 residents and pay superintendants to oversee districts with fewer than 50 students.

The waste is remarkable. Consider Mendham, home of Gov. Chris Christie. It's a single community, but the town is split into two local governments: Mendham Borough and Mendham Township. Each municipality has its own K-8 school district, each with fewer than 1,000 enrolled students and each with a superintendant making more than \$150,000 per year.

The two municipalities are also part of the West Morris Regional High School District, which includes Chester Township, Chester Borough and Washington Township. The regional district pays its superintendant \$192,000 per year to watch over the five towns' high school kids.

It's an elaborate -- and expensive -- mess. It's no surprise that, at a spring 2009 town hall meeting, Christie called the divide between the two Mendhams "crazy."

There's a better way. Representatives from the Mendhams, the Chesters and Washington Township are discussing several cost-saving measures, including a

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consolidation of the various school districts and, more boldly, a consolidation of the five municipalities. A recent study commissioned by Courage to Connect NJ, the only statewide nonpartisan, nonprofit organization devoted to consolidation and shared services, found that multi-town municipal consolidations could lower property taxes by up to 40 percent in some cases.

The real question is whether Christie and the state Legislature are committed to fixing the problem. The state's fiscal 2010 budget eliminated virtually all funding to study consolidating municipalities and other local districts. Now that Trenton must come up with an additional \$500 million to comply with Abbott, it's going to be even harder to convince politicians that consolidation is worthy of additional funding.

But a small increase in state funding for consolidation could save tremendous amounts of money in the future -- and make it easier for New Jersey to provide the "thorough and efficient" system of education that the state constitution requires.

A good first step would be to reform the way that New Jersey funds consolidation studies. Across the state, there are scores of local officials and grassroots community groups that want to know whether their towns could save money and lower taxes by merging local governments or school districts with neighboring communities.

But these studies require towns to shell out

between \$30,000 and \$70,000 for private outside consultants to perform relevant financial analyses. State law obligates Trenton to help towns defray the cost of these studies, but it has long since given up funding these projects. Cash-strapped towns wind up abandoning study proposals because they can't afford the up-front cost.

The solution is simple: Trenton should take over the study process. Remove private "consultants" and assign two or three nonpartisan experts in municipal finance to examine the various proposed consolidations -- which they could do for far less than \$30,000 to \$70,000 per study. At long last, weary taxpayers can finally figure out if consolidation is the answer.

Making it easier to consolidate towns and schools won't magically solve our budget problems. But a short-term investment now will help communities find new ways to fund local services -- including public education -- without bankrupting taxpayers. More money for New Jersey's

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schools won't do any good unless we create a system that is both thorough and efficient. Here's hoping Trenton makes the best of this opportunity.

The author is the co-author of the "Courage to Connect NJ Guidebook," a citizen's guide to municipal consolidation in New Jersey, and "Overruled by Home Rule," a legal and historical overview of consolidation.

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