

Legislative Council Study Committee on Shared Services

Request for Additional Information

1. Identify any barriers to the successful implementation of shared services by your school districts (*examples could include – statutory barriers, financial uncertainty, community relationships*)?

Most small districts have been engaging in shared services for a number of years. HNR School District shared and IT Director, a Special Ed Director, and had multiple part-time teachers that were also employed on a part-time basis with another school. Our School Lunch was prepared by a neighboring school district and transported to our site for serving. Shared services are already happening.

Consolidating districts is a different story. School districts and communities fear losing their identity, their sports teams, and in some cases their communities all together. Right now there are restrictions in place to prevent a common school district moving to a unionized district. This might be a step in the right direction. Communities could still have local control in a K-8 setting while combining districts for high school. This move would allow for communities to bridge the hurdle of losing their identity rather than losing their entire school district. Some communities will cease to exist without a school in town.

A consolidation must be more than financial also. In HNRs case, those communities wanted to maintain the small school feel with class sizes and connected community members. There was a financial component but it was more than just financial concerns. It also takes total commitment by the Boards and communities. The end result was a new organization that grew from like interests. Consolidation must be mutually beneficial and thoroughly vetted.

2. In your experience, have you tried to share services that proved not to be beneficial, if so please explain?

The only time that a shared service agreement became interesting is when the agent school district sees a different level of service than the contracting school district. We shared a staff member through three districts and the fiscal agent district held the staff member in high regard. The other two districts received a different level of service which is something that we all had to discuss and set clear expectations. We worked well together so we were able to work through the situation. Had those relationships been different, the outcome would have been different as well in terms of evaluation and retention of the shared services staff member.

3. Can you identify any solutions that could address barriers to or incentivize greater use of shared services?

Many districts using a shared services model are doing so for financial reasons alone. If there were a financial incentive to each district to assist in the extra planning associated with one person working for two different districts, this would help districts to entertain the idea. Each district may have a different philosophy to IT or Special Ed. The staff member that fills a singular role for multiple districts has to be very organized and flexible. If both school districts utilize the same curriculum or protocols that would also help districts entertain the idea of shared services.

4. Provide examples of barriers that currently prevent school districts from moving forward with consolidation?

From my viewpoint, consolidation is hampered by the fear of losing a community's identity. There is also a fear of losing local control or voice as it relates to the education of students. Most districts who are in the consolidation conversation are small, rural areas which fuels these concerns. The stakeholders do not want to be consumed by a larger district. Nor do they want to lose their school and break up the current district into 3 or 4 neighboring districts. That is the conundrum. What options exist for school districts that, from an overhead view, should consider consolidation. The options are to keep moving forward and face a financial decision to dissolve the district, to pass a referendum to help keep the district afloat, or to consolidate and lose their identity or even school district/building. None of these are appealing so which is the lesser evil. Many administrators would defend the position of referendum as the least evil option. With a referendum, schools are able to maintain their identity, keep their local school operational, keep the families and communities together, and continue a known path for students in terms of curriculum, policies and procedures.

5. In what ways could the state incentivize school district consolidation:

The current per pupil formula for consolidation would not have been beneficial for HNR. We only had 450 students after consolidation which would not have covered our costs associated with consolidation. If there was a way for guaranteed support (financial, policy, handbooks, regulations, procedural assistance) that would help local Boards talk through all of those things and get on the same page, so to speak, with other districts. Because consolidation is easier when districts are using the same student and financial management software. It is easier when districts are already using the same curriculum as another district. This is where the financial assistance would come in. District's need incentives to move from where they are to a new place, not only with purchasing new systems but training for those new systems as well. I see that as a major hurdle to consolidation.