

## A SNAPSHOT OF RURAL NORTHWEST OKLAHOMA SCHOOL DISTRICTS

	Area of District in Square Miles	District Enrollment (ADM)	Number of Students Per Square Mile	Number of Districts Per County	Academic Perform. Index	Per Pupil State Aid*	Number of Dependent Districts
<i>Average of Rural Northwest Oklahoma Districts</i>	296	452	2	4	1154	\$1820	2 (Total)
<i>Average of Remainder of Oklahoma Districts</i>	109	1317	23	8	1070	\$2693	102 (Total)

### School Consolidations: A Rural Northwest Oklahoma Perspective

With *new normals* and massive fiscal cliffs facing our economy, our state leadership must look closely at all options. Unfortunately this includes school consolidations – a topic which concerns every rural and small school parent. Rural Northwest Oklahoma is the perfect example of how Oklahoma can balance geography, efficiency, and student achievement without sacrificing local control.

Rural NW Oklahoma has been consolidating on its own for decades. Our 15 counties have already consolidated to an average of 4 districts per county. This means that the 61 districts in rural NW Oklahoma cover 3x the area of other school districts in the state.

Our busses cover vast areas to pick up an average of 2 students per square while the rest of the districts in the state serve an average of 23 students per square mile – more than 11x fewer students per square mile. Simply put, we cannot consolidate much more without sentencing students to marathon bus routes. Many of our bus routes already approach 3 hours each day.

Despite the challenges of being so isolated, rural NW Oklahoma school districts' average Academic Performance Indices (API scores) are 87 points higher than our counterparts. It is hard to find a school in our quadrant that is on the school improvement list. Our schools also operate on 33% less state aid per pupil. We are doing more with less, in almost every case.

The table above offers a snapshot of rural NW Oklahoma schools as compared to the other three quadrants of the state. A more detailed report that provides more insight into rural NW Oklahoma districts, including a statewide analysis of all 77 counties is available by request via e-mail: [tomdeighan@yahoo.com](mailto:tomdeighan@yahoo.com) .

District State Funding Data is based on FY 2013 and was obtained from the OKSDE (<http://www.ok.gov/sde/state-aid>). All other data used in this report was obtained from the Office of Accountability ([www.schoolreportcard.org](http://www.schoolreportcard.org)) and represents the 2012 school year except for the district area estimates (2009). For the purpose of this report, Rural NW Oklahoma includes ALFALFA, BEAVER, BLAINE, CIMARRON, CUSTER, DEWEY, ELLIS, GRANT, HARPER, KINGFISHER, MAJOR, ROGER MILLS, TEXAS, WOODS, AND WOODWARD counties. Canadian County and Garfield counties were excluded due to their non-rural designations. By Tom Deighan, Ph.D.



# School Consolidations: A Rural Northwest Oklahoma Perspective

*If Tulsa Public Schools  
were as sparsely  
populated as Freedom  
Oklahoma, its 40,000  
students would be spread  
out in a district larger  
than Oklahoma and  
Kansas combined.*

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# School Consolidations: A Rural Northwest Oklahoma Perspective

## *Introduction*

Parents are not camping out in tents for days outside of charter schools because big schools work better. These schools limit enrollment. Strangely enough, Oklahoma's premier high school, the Oklahoma School of Science and Mathematics, limits enrollment as well. The reason is obvious: small schools work. Study after study support their efficiency and their effectiveness. In fact, the evidence supporting small schools is simply overwhelming.

Recent discussions of school consolidation seem to overlook such evidence. Such discussions also seem to overlook an entire region of our state that has consolidated on its own: Rural Northwest Oklahoma. Its schools are small and effective without turning away kids as charter schools do. Its communities have worked hard and sacrificed to maximize educational dollars and academic achievement. Our state leadership and Oklahoma legislature would not be doing their duty if they did not consider every possible option as our state faces financial shortfalls. As this process unfolds, Rural Northwest Oklahoma should be considered as an example of efficiency and effectiveness. When it comes to school consolidation, we have already done our part.

## *Can Rural Northwest Oklahoma Consolidate Further?*

Rural Northwest Oklahoma communities have fought for years to maintain local identities while still providing the best academic opportunities for their students. In most cases, this has meant voluntary consolidation. The average Rural Northwest Oklahoma county contains only 4 school districts while the remaining counties average double that with 8 districts each. Our 15 counties host only 61 school districts and represent the lowest district-densities in the state. For perspective, the 15 highest district-density counties in the state host 207 districts – an average of 14 districts per county. Rural Northwest Oklahoma districts have been pro-active; our communities have already combined districts in practical ways. Our districts are as geographically large and sparse as can be practicable. Just imagine that Tulsa shared our student sparsity (students per square mile):

*Oklahoma's 15 most district-crowded counties host 207 districts. The 15 counties in Rural Northwest Oklahoma: 61*

- At the Rural Northwest Oklahoma average, Tulsa public schools' 40,000 students would cover 1/3 of the entire state of Oklahoma.
- At Freedom schools' sparsity levels, Tulsa Public Schools would cover an area larger than Kansas and Oklahoma combined!

## *The Harmful Effects of Long Bus Rides*

Such a comparison may help illustrate why district sparsity levels concern Rural Northwest Oklahoma residents so much. The average district in our quadrant contains only 2 students per square mile. No district in Rural Northwest Oklahoma even approaches the state's average student density. Most of our districts have one or fewer students per square mile while the average for the remainder of the state is 23 students. In fact, Felt averages only one student for every five square miles. In such cases, bus routes routinely exceed an

*Students Per Square Mile*  
Rural NW Okla: 2  
Remainder of the state: 23

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hour one-way and some are 3 hours long round-trip. Rural Northwest Oklahoma parents fear that further consolidation would lead to even longer bus routes for the most isolated children. No one wants his or her child on a school bus for 3 hours each day.

Research not only agrees but also cites the harmful effects of extended school bus routes on children. The 2005 study (Ramage and Howley) investigated rural bus routes in Ohio and concluded that long bus rides negatively affected student achievement, focus, and even health issues. The parents and communities of Rural Northwest Oklahoma have been pro-active and fiscally responsible, reducing our average district-per-county to almost half of the remainder of Oklahoma. Further consolidation in Rural Northwest Oklahoma would only worsen the bussing situations for our children. There has to be another answer.

Many students in Rural NW Oklahoma already face 3- hour bus routes, roundtrip.

### *Rural Northwest Oklahoma and Dependent Districts*

A prime example of Rural Northwest Oklahoma's inability to consolidate further is the predominance of independent school districts in our area. *Only 2 of the 104 dependent (elementary-only) school districts are located in our quadrant, and both of these districts are extremely isolated and could not consolidate easily.* The average dependent school district serves only 1/7 of the students and covers only 1/3 of the area of the average independent Oklahoma school district. This does not indicate a reason to close dependent districts in other parts of the state, especially since dependent districts share the high academic performance levels of NW Oklahoma districts. Our quadrant may have fewer dependent districts, but the dependent districts we do have serve the same vital function as they do in other parts of the state. Our lack of dependent districts simply illustrates our inability to consolidate further.

*Consolidating our small Oklahoma districts would lower the state's overall academic performance.*

### *Isolation Factors to Consider Before Consolidation*

In the final analysis, Rural Northwest Oklahoma has done its part in maximizing its ability to serve students. Any further consolidation would be punitive to Rural Northwest Oklahoma children and our individual counties. Any fair discussion of district consolidations must include student sparsity and county district-density. Every single district in rural Northwest Oklahoma exceeds reasonable expectations for isolation. Average Daily Student Membership should not be the only deciding factor in considering school effectiveness. No discussion of district consolidation should occur without considering these four isolation factors:

1. *How many districts in the county?*
2. *How large is the district geographically?*
3. *How sparsely populated is the district?*
4. *How many dependent districts in the county?*

Rural Northwest Oklahoma schools already stand on their own academically and financially. The most serious care must be taken to ensure that our students are not isolated even further, sentenced to endless bus rides. Rural Northwest Oklahoma cannot consolidate any further and still maintain effective academic institutions.

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### *Academic Achievement*

Rural Northwest Oklahoma school districts, on average, score 84 points higher (1154 vs. 1070) than the remaining schools in the state on the API. Rural Northwest Oklahoma schools simply do better, on average, than bigger schools. For example, a 2000 study in *The Journal of Agricultural and Applied Economics* (Brorsen and Richter) examined the impact of school consolidation in Oklahoma. One of the few academic studies targeting Oklahoma consolidation, it concluded that school consolidation would negatively affect Oklahoma's academic performance. *In other words, combining small schools would drop our entire state's test scores.* This complements other research which actually indicates that big schools begin to lose their effectiveness as they grow (Bard & Garner, 2005, Silvernail and Sloan, 2004). Small schools, such as those in Rural Northwest Oklahoma, simply teach children better.

The reason for this is, again, obvious. Teachers, parents, and administration form a community. Our parents simply show up at the superintendent's house if there is a problem. Parents know where their teachers and administrators live and shop. Students form mentoring relationships, routinely calling teachers at home for help with homework. School leadership is familiar with needs at the classroom level and can respond quickly. Big schools work tirelessly to involve parents and students and to create a sense of community – to be smaller. Small schools just concentrate on learning.

*Rural NW Oklahoma schools  
receive 33% less state aid – over  
\$870 per student less.*

### *Two Task Forces Look at Cost Savings*

Calls for consolidation almost always hinge on savings, especially in areas of administration. Curiously enough, a 2006 study commissioned by Oklahoma State Legislature concluded the following:

*"As the state average is well below the statutory limit for any size district, we feel the public school districts in this state should be praised for their efforts in keeping administrative costs low and believe that the current limits and penalties for exceeding the limits are sufficient."* (Emphasis added; State of Oklahoma, 2006, p. 10)

This report comes just short of saying that school consolidations would actually cost the state *more* money in all but a handful of counties. No school in Rural Northwest Oklahoma came close to its maximum administrative burden, which is 10% for small schools. The Rural Northwest Oklahoma average administrative costs, according to OKSDE 2011 data: 5.49%. This is ½ of what is allowable in a small school and further illustrates our efficiency.

The most telling financial statistic about Rural Northwest Oklahoma schools: *we receive 33% less state aid than the remainder of the state.* Rural Northwest Oklahoma schools cost the state less money, per student, than the remaining schools in the state. Rural Northwest Oklahoma Schools are efficient and effective, pure and simple.

Another State Task Force led by the OKSDE (2003) looked at the benefits of varying aspects of school consolidation of administrators. The two most telling conclusions:

- Replacing all superintendents in schools under 1000 ADM with a county superintendent would save the state only \$264,485 statewide (p.6).

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- The two counties which would save most from administrative consolidation: Oklahoma and Tulsa Counties (p.7).

Neither the 2003 report nor the 2006 report recommended school consolidations as viable alternatives for cost-savings. Two separate task-forces comprised of leading public officials could not find any benefits to consolidation. The reports did, however, praise Oklahoma schools for effectiveness and efficiency.

### *Models of Administrative Efficiency and Effectiveness*

Few people may realize that at least 25% of superintendents in Rural Northwest Oklahoma also serve as site principal. This is astounding, considering that each district has the same reporting requirements, regardless of size. Large districts employ directors, coordinators, assistant superintendents, and support staff to assist with federal programs, transportation, and state reporting. Rural Northwest Oklahoma superintendents are managing most of these programs on their own, without large staffs. Small school superintendents simply provide the biggest bang for the buck.

Rural Northwest Oklahoma Districts' administrative expenses are less than 5.5% but are allowed 10% by law.
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Small school superintendents simply provide the biggest bang for the buck. The multi-tasking performance of rural superintendents is so well established that research into the issue is hardly necessary in recent years. Studies in the 1990's solidified the jack-of-all-trades nature of small, rural superintendents (Decker & Talbot, 1991; Jacobson & Woodworth, 1990 ). About the only issue more established regarding small, rural schools is the overall academic efficacy of those schools. The concept is common sense and applies to all strata of education, from classrooms to districts to parents to administration: bigger is simply not better.

### *Oklahoma School Consolidation Does Not Add Up – Anywhere*

The legislature and OKSDE, who studied aspects of school consolidation twice in recent years, know it. Charter school parents know it; Oklahoma School of Science and Mathematics parents know it; and small town parents know it – small schools just work better, no matter where you are in our state. Consolidation cannot be justified based on cost savings because small schools are more efficient. It can never be justified based on educational performance either, because small schools simply document higher educational performance, year after year.

If we are to consider school consolidation, the decision should be based on data that considers the educational performance of schools first and foremost. It is the thinking behind charter schools, which limit enrollment in order to ensure success. Economic efficiency is not a prime factor in the charter school movement; the priority is academics. Academic performance should be the prime consideration in school consolidations as well.

It would be disingenuous, however, to eliminate financial factors. The challenge for consolidation advocates again is the data. Once again, small school districts are simply more efficient than large school districts which are saddled with overlapping layers of bureaucracy that choke off parental access to decision-makers. In a nutshell, there are no empirical data to support large-scale school consolidation in Oklahoma, even more true in rural NW Oklahoma.

# School Consolidations: A Rural Northwest Oklahoma Perspective

## Conclusion

People in rural Northwest Oklahoma are tough, smart, and self-reliant. Our schools are as well. We receive less state aid per pupil. We cover more square miles. We have fewer students per square mile.

We do more with less.

Over the years, Rural Northwest Oklahoma communities have self-assessed and self-consolidated whenever possible and whenever practical. The facts are plain. Yes, we have fewer students per district, but that cannot be the only criteria for district consolidation.

No one in rural Northwest Oklahoma wishes consolidation on any community anywhere in the state. Rural Northwest Oklahoma parents and children know that pain better than anyone else. We simply ask that state leadership and legislature consider all of the facts before deciding to consolidate schools any further. God willing, we can avoid such a path for our state. But if we cannot, please recognize that rural Northwest Oklahoma communities have already done their part.

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*Rural Northwest Oklahoma Counties:* Alfalfa, Beaver, Blaine, Cimarron, Custer, Dewey, Ellis, Grant, Harper, Kingfisher, Major, Roger Mills, Texas, Woods, Woodward.

## SUMMARY/KEY POINTS OF 2011 CONSOLIDATION STUDY BY ORGANIZATION OF RURAL OK SCHOOLS (OROS)

### Oklahoma District Size Facts:

- 399 of our 527 Districts have fewer than 1000 students – that is 76% of our districts.
- 297 of our 527 Districts have fewer than 500 students – that is 56% of our districts.
- Only 5% of our districts (25) have more than 4000 students.

### Academic Facts Relating to schools with under 500 ADM (Average Daily Membership):

- Eleven (11) of the top twenty (20) schools with highest ACT scores were in districts with under 500 students.
- Graduation rates in districts with under 500 ADM were significantly higher than in larger districts – 7% higher overall and a 21% higher than the largest districts in the state.
- Of the 297 Districts with under 500 ADM, only 5 sites were on the *Needs Improvement List*.
- Of the 87 sites on *Needs Improvement*, 82 sites were from districts with more than 500 ADM.
- Only 1% of small schools were on the *Needs Improvement List* as compared to 11% of larger schools – that is 11 times greater *Needs Improvement* rate than small schools.

### Financial Facts Relating to Oklahoma Schools:

- Non-instructional costs can reflect administrative burdens more fairly than administrative costs since larger districts have several layers of full-time directors, coordinators, and supervisors that do not reflect in the administrative burden.
- Non-instructional costs in Oklahoma's smallest schools are \$266.69 less per pupil than in the largest schools -- \$1895.25 versus \$2161.94.
- All superintendents' salaries combined only account for 1.14% of the total revenue available for the general fund for all schools in the state.
- Average assistant superintendents' salaries are higher on average than superintendents' salaries in districts with under 500 ADM.
- The state would save more educational dollars by restructuring the largest districts' administrations than the 297 smaller ones.

*Florence, Vernon (2011); A study of the issues involved in the consolidation and/or combining of administrative units in rural schools in Oklahoma. Organization of Rural Oklahoma Schools.*

Hickman