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Act 60: The Past, Present, and Future of School Consolidation in Arkansas

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Since its passage in 2004, Arkansas' Act 60 has had a major impact on the smallest school districts in Arkansas. The law requires school districts to be consolidated if their enrollment drops below 350 for two consecutive years.

This policy brief will report on the numbers and types of schools and districts that have closed since the passage of Act 60. Moreover, the brief will evaluate the enrollment trends to predict which school districts are "at-risk" of being consolidated for dropping below the 350 student threshold established by Act 60.

The data for this policy brief is excerpted from a larger OEP Arkansas Education report on the impact of Act 60. The full report is expected to be released in early 2011.

DESCRIPTIVE OVERVIEW OF CONSOLIDATION AND SCHOOL CLOSURES

Since the consolidation legislation was passed in 2004, a total of 118 different school districts have joined together through consolidation or annexation, resulting in 54 consolidated school districts. This reduced the number of districts from 308 in 2003 to 240 as of August 2010 (a decrease of 68 districts).

District consolidations were not uniformly distributed across the five regions of the state. Thirteen consolidation related closures since the passage of Act 60 were located in the southeastern region of the state. This number is approximately one-in-three of the districts which existed in the southeast region when Act 60 was passed in early 2004. This is contrasted by the central region which has had only four districts closed.

Table 1: Act 60 Related District Closures, 2004-2010

Regions	# of Districts in 2004	# of Act 60 Closed Districts	% of 2004 Districts Closed in Region
NW	88	15	17%
NE	91	21	23%
CN	41	4	10%
SW	58	15	26%
SE	36	13	36%

Although no schools were to be closed during the first year of consolidation following Act 60 from the 2003-04 special legislative session, many expected that the

consolidated districts would likely close schools at some time in the future. Indeed, as of May 2010, a total of 81 schools have been closed in the districts affected by consolidation since 2004. Most of these schools were high schools (45), 5 were middle schools, and 31 were elementary schools. Of the high schools that closed, the vast majority were schools that served grades 7 through 12 (41 schools).

In the following sections, we will compare the characteristics of consolidated districts and closed schools. The first set of comparisons is between districts which were required to consolidate under Act 60 and districts not required to consolidate. In the second set of comparisons, we examine the differences between schools in these districts which were closed and schools which remained open.

Changes Since Passage of ACT 60

- 308 - # of districts in 2003
- 68 - # of districts eliminated
- 240 - # of districts in 2010
- 81 - # of campuses closed

Characteristics of Consolidated Districts

There were several demographic and economic differences between the districts which have been consolidated under Act 60 and the other districts in the state. The most obvious difference is size. The districts which have been consolidated under Act 60 since 2004 had an average enrollment of 257 studentsⁱ compared to an average enrollment of 1,833 students for districts not subject to consolidation under Act 60. The consolidated districts had smaller minority populations, 24%, than did the non-consolidated districts, 30%.

Students attending the consolidated districts also tended to be poorer, 64% of the students in consolidated districts were eligible for free or reduced lunch as opposed to 49% in non-consolidated districts. Moreover, in the non-consolidated districts, the median family income was \$39,526 while only \$31,865 in the

ⁱ Figures for demographic comparisons were based on pre-Act 60 data, 2003-04 school year, from the Nation Center for Education Statistics <http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/bat/>.

consolidated districts. Indeed, 38% of students in consolidated districts lived in homes with family

Table 2: Comparison of Student Characteristics in Consolidated and Non-consolidated Districts, 2004

	Districts Consolidated	Districts Not Consolidated
Total Students	Under 350	Over 350
Ethnicity		
<i>White</i>	76%	70%
<i>Black</i>	23%	23%
<i>Other</i>	2%	7%
Median Family Income	\$31,865	\$39,526
Family Income below \$25,000	38%	29%
FRL Eligible	64%	49%

incomes below \$25,000 compared to 29% in the non-consolidated districts.ⁱⁱ

Characteristics of Closed Schools

While Act 60 specified no schools were to be closed the first year, the majority of district consolidations have led to the closing of a school. This section will provide a description of the student characteristics in closed schools in consolidated districts as compared to other schools which remained open within the district. Table 3 provides our preliminary comparison that relies on the Arkansas Department of Education Statewide Information System data on student demographics between the 2003-2004 and 2007-2008 school years.

Table 3: Comparison of Student Demographics in Closed and Non-closed Schools in Consolidated Districts Which Closed Schools, 2004-2008

	Schools Closed	Schools Not Closed
Total Students	5,005	25,055
Ethnicity		
<i>White</i>	65%	77%
<i>Black</i>	33%	20%
<i>Other</i>	2%	3%
Grade		
<i>PreK-5</i>	38%	51%
<i>6th-8th</i>	31%	13%
<i>9th-12th</i>	31%	36%
Special Status		
<i>Title 1</i>	79%	62%
<i>Special Ed</i>	14%	13%
<i>FRL Eligible</i>	71%	54%

ⁱⁱ Data from 2000 Census

Sixth through eighth graders make up a much larger portion of the school closure-affected sample than the intended district sample as the vast majority of schools closed were either K-6 or 7-12. There are some stark differences between closed schools and the schools that remained open. Closing schools tended to serve a much larger percentage of black students, 33% compared to 20% in non-closed schools. Thus, although the districts that have experienced consolidation have served 76% white students, the schools in these districts that have closed served disproportionately high numbers of black students.

Closed schools typically serviced a more disadvantaged subset of the district's population. A larger fraction of closure-affected students were eligible for free or reduced price lunches as well as Title 1 services in almost all years examined. Moreover, closed schools served a larger special education eligible population; although, the differences are in fact quite small (less than 2 percent). Finally, as Table 4 shows, closure-affected schools exhibited poorer academic performance.

Table 4: Comparison of Students Scoring Proficient or Advanced on Benchmark Exams Pre-Closure

	Schools Closed	Schools Not Closed
Proficient or Advanced Math	43%	58%
Proficient or Advanced Lit.	42%	57%

FORECAST OF DISTRICTS AT RISK OF CONSOLIDATION

According to Act 60, school districts whose total student enrollment falls below 350 for two consecutive years must be consolidated. Using trend data based on annual enrollment changes for each school from 2001 - 2008, we find that 21 school districts are at risk for consolidation over the next decade (see Table 6). Of these districts, three have been below the 350 mark for the past two years already. They are Turrell, Delight, and Weiner. All three districts have been consolidated. At the end of the 2010 school year, Delight was annexed by the Murfreesboro School District to be called South Pike County School District, Weiner was annexed by the Harrisburg School District, and the Arkansas Board of Education ordered Turrell to be consolidated with the Marion School District. Twin Rivers was dissolved by the State Board of Education at the end of the 2009-10 year due to accreditation issues.

Nine of the districts at risk for consolidation have already been involved in consolidation in prior years. These districts include: Stephens, Twin Rivers, Deer/Mt. Judea, Mulberry, Augusta, Marvel, Hillcrest, Concord,

and Mineral Springs. Eight of these consolidations took place immediately upon the passage of Act 60 in 2004. One consolidation occurred as recently as 2006. Table 5 below depicts the enrollment trend in the 21 districts that may face consolidation over the next 10 years.

Table 5: Comparison of Student Demographics in “At Risk” and All Other Districts, 2009

	At Risk Districts	Other Districts
Total Students	8,475	453,146
Ethnicity		
<i>White</i>	62%	66%
<i>Black</i>	33%	21%
<i>Other</i>	4%	13%
Special Status		
<i>Special Ed</i>	14%	11%
<i>FRL Eligible</i>	77%	59%

In the 21 districts trending towards consolidation, 77% of students are eligible for free or reduced price lunches. In comparison, the average percentage of students eligible for free or reduced price lunches is 59% at the remaining 223 districts. “At-risk” districts also have a higher percentage of minority students, 38% compared to 34%.

These 21 districts come from four of the five regions in the state of Arkansas. None of the districts “at-risk” for consolidation are in the Central region and only two, Dermott and Marvell, are in the Southeast region. Five districts are in the Northwest region, while five are in the Southwest. The Northeast region has the most, with nine districts facing possible consolidation. While this is a large number for one region, none of the districts are in the same county. Across the state, these school districts come from counties of various sizes. Nearly half of the 21 districts are in counties with fewer than 20,000 people. Over the next ten years, Act 60 may have largest impact on districts in the Northeast region of the state.

Table 6: School Districts at Risk for Consolidation in the Next Decade

	School District	2008-2009 ADA	8 year Growth Rate	Predicted Year below 350 twice	Region	% FRL
1	Weiner♦	336	-2%	2008-2009	NE	56%
2	Delight♦	332	-2%	2008-2009	SW	68%
3	Turrell♦	332	-3%	2008-2009	NE	100%
4	Stephens*	372	-7%	2010-2011	SW	85%
5	Twin Rivers*♦	357	-5%	2010-2011	NE	78%
6	Deer/Mt. Judea*	387	-3%	2012-2013	NW	73%
7	Mulberry*	420	-5%	2013-2014	NW	70%
8	Hughes	466	-7%	2013-2014	NE	100%
9	Hartford	385	-3%	2013-2014	NE	65%
10	Calico Rock	430	-4%	2014-2015	NE	55%
11	Wonderview	406	-3%	2015-2016	NW	49%
12	Dermott	473	-6%	2015-2016	SE	100%
13	Bradley	366	-1%	2018-2019	SW	75%
14	Viola	395	-2%	2016-2017	NE	53%
15	Augusta*	500	-6%	2015-2016	NE	100%
16	Marvell*	630	-7%	2018-2019	SE	96%
17	Hillcrest*	440	-3%	2016-2017	NE	67%
18	Concord*	479	-4%	2018-2019	NE	56%
19	Mineral Springs*	518	-4%	2018-2019	SW	79%
20	Norfork	419	-4%	2018-2019	NW	76%
21	Nevada	422	-2%	2019-2020	SW	77%

*Previously Consolidated District

♦ Consolidated for the 2010-11 school year.

Test Performance of “At-Risk” Districts

One concern voiced by critics of consolidation is that the policy is leading to the closure of academically successful schools. A major question many people ask

is, “Should schools be closed based on size instead of performance?” Tables 7 and 8 show the performance of “at-risk” districts on the state exams. On average, the “at-risk” schools performed below the state average on all areas of the benchmark and the EOC.

Table 7: Comparison on Benchmark Scores of “At-Risk” Schools with Region and State Averages, 2009-10

District	Enrollment	% Minority	% FRL	Math	Literacy	Science
Hartford	365	14.0	75.9	66	58	38
Deer/Mt. Judea*	374	15.0	76.7	76	70	36
Mulberry*	399	3.5	71.9	62	63	39
Wonderview	416	5.3	49.8	70	75	46
Norfolk	465	4.7	80.4	77	86	51
Region 1	159,386	26.8	54.5	79	77	49
Turrell♦	256	91.0	100.0	40	41	2
Weiner♦	323	4.6	52.6	80	76	51
Twin Rivers*♦	327	2.4	81.0	58	50	20
Calico Rock	409	1.7	58.2	87	83	54
Viola	410	3.9	56.8	81	79	52
Hughes	419	84.2	100.0	48	56	7
Hillcrest*	435	0.9	69.2	73	74	44
Concord*	448	0.7	62.3	84	81	73
Augusta*	484	67.6	87.0	48	51	13
Region 2	96,077	27.5	66.2	75	72	41
Region 3	134,408	42.8	55.0	73	71	38
Delight♦	296	25.0	67.9	67	76	46
Stephens*	349	88.8	86.5	53	58	18
Nevada	399	46.6	72.7	78	72	27
Bradley	411	42.3	46.9	73	67	32
Mineral Springs*	504	77.2	87.3	54	58	13
Region 4	48,033	42.0	65.3	71	69	36
Dermott	441	92.7	100.0	49	52	20
Marvell*	545	94.1	97.1	46	44	11
Region 5	29,157	47.6	70.0	69	66	32
Average "At-Risk"	8475	37.6	75.6	65	65	33
Arkansas	467,061	47.6	70.0	75	73	42

*Previously Consolidated District

♦ Consolidated for the 2010-11 school year.

Five districts had boasted better proficiency rates in all three subjects of the benchmark. The five districts are Calico Rock, Concord, Norfolk, Weiner, and Viola. Of these five high-performing “at-risk” districts, only Norfolk and Viola also outperformed Arkansas on the four EOC subjects.

It is also useful to compare the “at-risk” districts with the performance of other districts in their regions as we do below in Table 8. With the exception of the five high performing districts already identified, the “at-risk” schools performed less well than their respective region

averages on both the benchmark and EOC tests. These results are consistent with overall performance trends in Arkansas.

While the small schools have not done as well on average, it should not be assumed all of them are performing less well than the larger districts. Some small schools do quite well. One of the five high performing districts, Weiner was consolidated with Harrisburg starting in the 2010-2011 school year. On the 2010 benchmark, more Weiner students scored proficient or advanced than Harrisburg students in all three subject

areas of the benchmark; however, on the End of Course exams, more Harrisburg students scored proficient or

advanced in three of the four subjects tested.

Table 8: Comparison on EOC Scores of "At-Risk" Schools with Region and State Averages, 2009-10

District	Enrollment	% Minority	% FRL	Algebra	Geometry	Literacy	Biology
Hartford	365	14	75.9	57	63	46	17
Deer/Mt. Judea*	374	15	76.7	59	48	54	40
Mulberry*	399	3.5	71.9	87	71	64	37
Wonderview	416	5.3	49.8	70	72	74	42
Norfolk	465	4.7	80.4	86	82	61	52
Region 1	159,386	26.8	54.5	79	75	64	40
Turrell♦	256	91	100.0	33	8	24	0
Weiner♦	323	4.6	52.6	63	64	70	18
Twin Rivers*♦	327	2.4	81.0	56	32	45	12
Calico Rock	409	1.7	58.2	70	77	59	62
Viola	410	3.9	56.8	80	91	67	75
Hughes	419	84.2	100.0	40	24	26	0
Hillcrest*	435	0.9	69.2	79	60	59	26
Concord*	448	0.7	62.3	88	80	62	40
Augusta*	484	67.6	87.0	59	29	34	17
Region 2	96,077	27.5	66.2	73	66	56	32
Region 3	134,408	42.8	55.0	73	70	51	36
Delight♦	296	25	67.9	56	43	50	45
Stephens*	349	88.8	86.5	43	40	35	12
Nevada	399	46.6	72.7	70	39	38	26
Bradley	411	42.3	46.9	82	48	55	22
Mineral Springs*	504	77.2	87.3	85	60	36	18
Region 4	48,033	42	65.3	72	63	53	29
Dermott	441	92.7	100.0	58	32	26	3
Marvell*	545	94.1	97.1	29	48	27	10
Region 5	29,157	47.6	70.0	64	63	49	24
Average "At-Risk"	8475	37.6	75.6	65	54	48	28
Arkansas	467,061	47.6	70.0	76	70	60	40

*Previously Consolidated District

♦ Consolidated for the 2010-11 school year.

CONCLUSION

If Act 60 remains unchanged, district consolidation and school closure will continue to shape Arkansas' educational landscape in the coming years not for all districts but for smaller districts. As the enrollment trends indicated, the schools trending towards consolidation share similar characteristics. Typically, these schools are in rural locations.

If consolidations continue, eventually issues related to the geographic size of a district will become a limiting factor. This problem is already being confronted in rural districts such as Deer/Mt. Judea. Within the next five years, Deer/Mt. Judea may once again find themselves below 350 students two years in a row. Deer/Mt. Judea hosted a meeting of the Arkansas State Legislature's Education Committee to discuss this very issue. The district currently covers almost 400 square miles. If

Deer/Mt. Judea consolidated with the neighboring Jasper School District the new district would cover 1,058 square miles. Currently, the largest district by area is Dewitt at 900 square miles followed by Hamburg at 772. Whether or not districts such as Deer/Mt. Judea are required to consolidate, practices need to be implemented to aide isolated districts in educating students.

While many people argue for the social advantages of small school districts to both students and the community, there is little doubt smaller schools have a higher cost per child yet still may pay lower teacher salaries. In Act 60, the Arkansas Legislature made clear that the efficiency of education is a factor which must be considered in establishing a general, suitable, and efficient free system of public schools in the state.

For more information on this policy brief, please contact the Office for Education Policy at (oeop@uark.edu).