



Matt Evans: Questions to ask before moving forward with school merger talks

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One of the things I love most about our community is that we are always trying to improve. Recent conversations about merging our two public school systems certainly fall into this category. However, before this discussion moves forward perhaps we should pause and ask two important questions.

The first question deals with what merger proponents cite most frequently: cost savings. Would a merger actually reduce costs?

The second, and perhaps most important question, is would a merger of school systems improve educational outcomes?

Concerning potential merger produced savings, the facts are less promising than we might hope. Research shows that savings from a merger may only materialize for school systems of about 1,500 students or less. Both of our local systems are significantly larger than this. The New York State Association of School Business Officials could only recognize "potential" savings for systems smaller than 1,500 students and even then the Association cautions that "actual savings have been difficult to identify." The Center for Policy Research at Syracuse University found that for systems with over 1,500 students, school "consolidation has little impact on cost effectiveness." Another report found on Education Northwest's website states that in some areas consolidation could even raise costs for a "more than a decade."

With little evidence that a merger would produce costs savings, we then should ask would it improve educational outcomes?

We must consider the amount of operational "energy" that would be required to merge two systems as large as ours. Instead of focusing on educational outcomes, our school leaders could become largely focused on bureaucratic reorganization.

This could potentially rob energy from actually educating our community's children. We know many of our children come from difficult poverty situations and, as documented in Robert

Putnam's book "Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis," need more educational and community attention, not less.

Before talk of a merger continues, studies of a merger are authorized, or any actual merger occurs, parents of our kids need to be reassured that these efforts will not be a distraction from education. This is why research cited in a 2009 Boston Globe article should raise concerns about a merger. The article states that studies from around our country demonstrate that "consolidation does not improve schools or lead to better academic results." In the same article, former Director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the CATO Institute, Andrew Coulson, said that there is actually a "disadvantage" in making larger school districts, leading him to conclude after conducting two major consolidation studies that mergers "just don't help kids."

As citizens and parents, let's continue to ask tough questions in search of improvement.

For example, our school systems can and should work together. A 2009 study conducted by the Office of Performance Evaluations for the Idaho Legislature indicated that school systems could see cost savings by consolidating three types of services: supply purchasing, transportation and staff development.

Let's not be satisfied with where we are -- that's not the Dalton-Whitfield way -- but let's not get overly enthusiastic about promises of merger savings that most likely would not be delivered, and let's not get distracted from what matters most -- educating and improving educational outcomes for our kids.