

---

# Wisconsin Legislative Council

## MINUTES

---



### STUDY COMMITTEE ON SHARED SCHOOL DISTRICT SERVICES

Room 412 East, State Capitol  
Madison, WI  
August 22, 2022  
10:00 a.m. – 3:40 p.m.

#### CALL TO ORDER AND ROLL CALL

Chair Brooks called the meeting to order and determined that a quorum was present.

COMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT: Rep. Robert Brooks, Chair; Sen. Daniel Feyen, Vice Chair; Rep. Dave Considine; and Public Members Lance Bagstad, Jeffrey Dellutri, Bobbie Guyette, Ted Neitzke, Ben Niehaus, and Tara Villalobos.

COMMITTEE MEMBER ABSENT: Sen. Janet Bewley.

COUNCIL STAFF PRESENT: Rachel Letzing, Deputy Director; and Emily Hicks and Raine Black, Staff Attorneys.

APPEARANCES: Deven Scott, Assistant Director of State Relations, Education Commission of the States (ECS); Matt Weyer, Principal, ECS; Eric Syverson, Policy Analyst, ECS; Dr. Michael Grego, Former Superintendent, Pinellas County School District, Florida; Tara Villalobos, District Administrator, Holy Hill Area School District; Dennis Kaczor, District Administrator, Rosholt Area School District; Ryan Bargender, District Administrator, School District of Abbotsford; Steven Kolden, Superintendent, Colby School District; George Steffen, Former Superintendent, Trevor-Wilmot School District.

#### APPROVAL OF THE MINUTES FROM THE JULY 20, 2022 MEETING

*Representative Considine moved, seconded by Public Member Neitzke, to approve the minutes from the July 20, 2022 meeting of the committee. The motion was approved by unanimous consent.*

#### DESCRIPTION OF DISTRIBUTED MATERIALS BY LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL COMMITTEE STAFF

Emily Hicks, Staff Attorney, provided an overview of information included in Legislative Council Memo No. 1, [School District Consolidation](#) (August 15, 2022). A copy of her PowerPoint presentation is available on the committee's [website](#).

Ms. Hicks described the factors school boards are statutorily required to consider when making decisions regarding school district consolidation and the process that school boards must follow to

accomplish district consolidation. She also provided an overview of current state aid for districts that consolidate.

## **PRESENTATIONS ON SCHOOL DISTRICT MODELS IN OTHER STATES**

The committee heard presentations from the Education Commission of the States (ECS) on school district boundaries and reorganization in other states and from Dr. Michael Grego on Florida's county-wide school district organization model.

### **Education Commission of the States:**

**Deven Scott, Assistant Director of State Relations**, explained that ECS is a national, state-serving, educational policy organization that provides non-partisan information and personalized support to education leaders throughout the United States. ECS supports to states through research, reporting, hosting meetings, and providing counsel.

**Matt Weyer, Principal, and Eric Syverson, Policy Analyst**, described public school boundary creation and district reorganization processes in other states, highlighting Arizona, Indiana, Michigan, and Minnesota. Mr. Weyer explained that in most states, including those highlighted, school district boundaries are determined at the state level. According to Mr. Weyer, throughout the nation, there are five types of school district reorganization: consolidation, district subdivision, transfer of territory, annexation, and annexation and transfer.

Mr. Syverson explained the general process of school district reorganization and identified four steps common in most states: initiation of reorganization, creation of a reorganization plan, holding a local election, and, finally, commencement of reorganization. Hyperlinks to the highlighted state laws and legislation are embedded in ECS's report and [PowerPoint](#), both of which are available on the committee's website.

ECS responded to questions from committee members on various topics, including: the amount of state funding provided to school districts in other states; the frequency with which district consolidation occurs nationwide; how feasibility studies and reorganization plans are funded in other states; financial incentives for consolidation in other states; Minnesota's history with consolidation; changes districts experienced with expanded remote options; and how Arizona's school funding model works.

### **Dr. Michael Grego, Former Superintendent, Pinellas County School District, Florida**

Dr. Grego began by explaining that Florida's state constitution mandates county-wide school districts. He noted that Florida is one of the most populated and diverse states, with school district enrollment ranging from 350,000 to 1,800. For the smaller districts, Dr. Grego explained that Florida law provides support through education consortia, as well as by breaking the state into regions so superintendents in certain areas of the state can focus on issues of special importance to that region.

Dr. Grego commented on certain benefits afforded by the county-wide model, including efficiencies in instruction, purchasing, and communications. He also highlighted the ability to consolidate certain services, specifically school safety, across the multiple municipalities within a single district.

Dr. Grego responded to questions from committee members on various topics, including: how Florida funds its education consortia and school districts; community identity in large districts; differences in working as an elected versus an appointed superintendent; meetings between superintendents and the head of education in Florida; transportation and facilities, especially in less densely populated districts; how the county-wide model affects community eligibility for free or reduced-priced lunch and general

food service efficiencies; administrative costs per student in Florida; experience closing or consolidating high schools; athletics; and funding differences between districts.

## **PRESENTATIONS BY WISCONSIN SCHOOL DISTRICT ADMINISTRATORS ON CONSOLIDATION**

Following a lunch break, the committee heard presentations from school district administrators with experience in district consolidation.

**Tara Villalobos, District Administrator, Holy Hill Area School District (HHASD)**, described the path to consolidation for her school district, including the reasons for the consolidation, the benefits, and the challenges. HHASD was created in 2018 upon the consolidation of the Friess Lake and Richfield School Districts. In describing HHASD's journey to consolidation, Dr. Villalobos highlighted the lengthiness of the consolidation process, as well as the other options the districts considered, including shared services, budget reduction, and whole grade sharing.

Dr. Villalobos identified several benefits to consolidation for her district, including increased educational and extracurricular opportunities for students, staff professional development and collaboration, and unification of the community. Dr. Villalobos emphasized that at the time of the consolidation, both districts were high performing and generally "healthy," which was key to the ultimate decision to consolidate. Dr. Villalobos clarified that the cost savings that resulted from the consolidation were largely due to the decision to close one of the district buildings upon consolidation.

The barriers and challenges to consolidation that Dr. Villalobos identified included merging different student and staff information systems, loss of staff, communicating changes to the community, increased reporting requirements, and wrestling with a complicated and volatile aid formula. She also highlighted that the transfer to a new school board posed a particular challenge.

### **Dennis Kaczor, District Administrator, Rosholt School District**

Mr. Kaczor became the superintendent of the Herman-Neosho-Rubicon School District shortly after it consolidated from the parent districts of Herman #22, Neosho J3, and Rubicon J6 School Districts in July 2016. Prior to consolidating, each parent district had been experiencing declining enrollment and were already sharing services, including administrative services.

Mr. Kaczor detailed several challenges the consolidation caused, including difficulties navigating the funding formula and the logistics of bringing three separate school districts together. Specifically, Mr. Kaczor noted that bringing three sets of staff, resources, policies, and processes together was a particular challenge.

### **Ryan Bargender, District Administrator, School District of Abbotsford, and Steven Kolden, Superintendent, Colby School District**

Mr. Bargender and Dr. Kolden spoke about the formal consideration of consolidation of their two districts, which ultimately did not result in consolidation. Dr. Kolden explained the districts did not consolidate because the financial study indicated that consolidation would be financially detrimental to the School District of Abbotsford and would have no benefit to the Colby School District. Mr. Bargender noted that the Abbotsford and Colby School Districts share many services currently, including a school resource officer, athletics teams, custodial services, and professional development. Mr. Bargender explained that though the two districts are very close geographically, they serve communities with divergent needs.

### **George Steffen, Former Superintendent, Trevor-Wilmot School District**

Dr. Steffen was the superintendent of the Trevor School District and then the superintendent of the Trevor-Wilmot Consolidated Grade School District (TWSD) when the Trevor School District consolidated with the Wilmot School District in July 2006. The reasons Dr. Steffen cited for the consolidation were concerns about enrollment, financial feasibility, and general logistics. Dr. Steffen described the funding decisions related to consolidation as “necessary, but not sufficient.” Finally, he emphasized the importance of respecting and honoring the traditions of each parent district when consolidating.

The district administrators responded to questions from the committee on various topics, including: the school funding formula; where school districts can turn to for assistance working out the details of consolidation; hiring and retention challenges; and the workability of regional incentives for shared systems, such as student information systems.

### **DISCUSSION OF COMMITTEE ASSIGNMENT**

Mr. Neitzke provided the committee with a handout on the challenges school districts encounter with grant writing. The committee discussed the handout and deliberated recommendations related to providing additional funding to pay for grant writing, as well as easing the process of applying for grants. Dr. Villalobos suggested reexamining grant programs to evaluate whether they really need to be administered as grants, or could be administered in a simpler manner.

The committee then discussed the information received from the invited speakers. On the matter of shared services, committee members discussed incentives for regional health care cooperatives, regional IT services and student information systems, cooperative food and textbook purchasing, virtual learning opportunities, and transportation. Members indicated interest in reexamining the legislation introduced in response to the Blue Ribbon Commission on School Funding in the 2017-18 session.

On the topic of consolidation, the committee discussed the fiscal challenges faced by consolidating districts and how state law could be changed to ease these challenges. The committee also discussed other consolidation-related challenges, including teacher licensing, school board composition, school report cards, and feasibility studies.

Committee members requested additional information in the following areas: Wisconsin public school enrollment and graduation data, student information systems, the number of K-8 districts in Wisconsin, and a historical overview of Wisconsin’s school district models, specifically, the transition away from the county-wide school district model.

### **ADJOURNMENT**

The committee adjourned at 3:40 p.m.

EH:jal