February 14, 2025

Chair Conlon and members of the House Education Committee:

Good morning and Happy Valentine's Day, and thank you for the opportunity to speak with you about my experience with district consolidation. I have forwarded a severely consolidated version of the Erie, PA consolidation plan, which I presented to the Erie community almost exactly 13 years ago. Though on a smaller scale, the challenges we faced in Erie were quite similar to those facing our state right now.

For a quick background, when I took over as superintendent in Erie in 2010 I found myself facing a long-developing but previously unacknowledged cumulative budget deficit of what turned out to be $26 million. There were many contributing factors, not the least of which were the board's understandable but short sighted unwillingness to ever raise taxes, a terribly unfair state funding model, unrestrained spending, growing charter school enrollment, and a yearly reliance on one-time money to balance budgets. During my first year I immediately set up advisory committees for finance, education and community relations and embarked on a very public and transparent effort to right the ship. It was clear that there would be no choice but to cut our way out of this deficit and prove that we were lean and frugal before we could pursue equitable funding and seek additional revenue.

The most obvious reductions would be staff. In 2011, we reduced more than 300 positions, beginning with central office. That year, we also began a facility study, because we knew that our buildings had far more seats than we had students. We also knew that the staffing cuts and other budget balancing measures were straining our system, so we held off on some obvious school closures until we could complete a thorough study and bring the community with us to a consensus on which buildings should stay, and which should be repurposed. I have shared an excerpt from the presentation we gave at our first of many townhall meetings during that intervening year.

The heart of our study was a GIS project that used our student database to plot the location of every child in our system. This data was overlaid on a map of our city, with each of our schools identified. Lines were then projected from each child to their respective schools. I understand that this technology has become even more sophisticated now, to use actual road distance instead of straight lines, which yields information that can inform calculations for bus routes or walking distances. In any event, subsequent GIS data analysis identified ideal school locations based on the residential data. What emerged was a graphic depiction of the way our city had changed over time. Many of our buildings were built many decades earlier as "neighborhood schools," but over time, many of those neighborhoods had become industrial zones, major roadways, and even college campuses. Additionally, student enrollment had dropped dramatically, largely due to the all-too-typical rust belt manufacturing decline and white flight to the suburbs. Yet, there was a firm insistence that the four iconic city high schools were a third rail that could not be considered for consolidation.

Now, any data element can be linked to each student or school: per-pupil cost, Federal Programs eligibility, race and ethnicity, home language, and any other data we already maintain.

As I consider the Governor's proposal for consolidation, I'm suffering flashbacks to 2011. In order to execute a wise and sustainable consolidation I am convinced that there should be a transparent and logical process. With GIS data, we can answer the inevitable questions about which schools should close and why. We may find that the answer to the vexing reality that for many of our students who live in more sparsely populated areas, consolidation would mean intolerable bus rides, is a new ideally-located school. We may also find that there are a number of unsustainable schools that are already situated near others with ample capacity. As I've experienced firsthand, many of those treasured facilities can be repurposed for affordable housing, community centers, health clinics, or commercial enterprises.

Such a study would also be of great use as we consider the BOCES, or intermediate unit model of shared school support services. Once the ideal number and locations of districts and schools is determined and agreed upon, the same technology can identify optimal sites for these enterprises. Also, as we contemplate school construction funding, we already have recent facility condition assessments, but I would argue that we shouldn't even consider funding projects until we've determined whether it makes sense to invest in our existing building stock when it may make more sense to consolidate or even to build a new generation of schools designed to be sustainable and optimally located.

Respectfully,

Jay Badams
Superintendent
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