



Other Viewpoints

Tight budget make consolidation real

Consolidation remains a very unpopular word in school districts across the state, but officials in two northeast Kansas districts have embraced the word and the concept.

Whether they can actually pull it off remains to be seen – voters in the two districts will decide that in a May 25 election – but they deserve a lot of credit for making the attempt.

Schools are near and dear to the hearts of their patrons in rural communities and it's a brave superintendent or board member who dares suggest consolidation, even in the worst of times, as these certainly are for school districts. A lot of voters would opt to pay higher property taxes rather than watch one of their schools close, or enter into a consolidation agreement under which that might happen.

Superintendents Dennis Stones and Bob Bartkoski, however, are optimistic about the chances of consolidation for their districts. Stones leads Sabetha Wetmore Unified School District 441. Bartkoski is superintendent of Axtel Bern Summerfield Unified School District 488, the smaller of the two and the one that initiated consolidation discussions.

Stones says consolidation will save the school districts about \$600,000, which is a lot of money to rural districts. USD 488 has about 290 students and USD 441 about 970. If voters approve the merger, it will go into effect July 1 for the 2010-2011 school year and there will be no major changes during that first year.

It sounds as though the school board members and superintendents have made a wise choice for their patrons and students, who should embrace the plan.

Given the state's budget and repeated funding cuts for public education, consolidation may be the only way some districts can avoid laying off teachers, reducing class offerings or cutting other programs.

Further funding cuts may be in the offering, as Gov. Mark Parkinson and legislators in the House are nowhere close to an agreement on how to best deal with a budget deficit for the state's 2011 fiscal year, which begins July 1. Parkinson and some state senators are ready to raise taxes to avoid further reductions in aid to schools and funding for social services programs, but the House leadership is insisting on closing the budget gap by paring expenditures.

Regardless of how that battle comes out, the financial picture for school districts won't improve for some time.

It would behoove other districts to look around for willing consolidation partners and negotiate agreements that are in the best interests of their patrons and students. Failing that, there's certainly money to be saved by sharing services – such as purchasing, payroll and maintenance – with their neighbors.

The worst option would be to insist on going it alone and cutting teachers and programs essential to the quality education students deserve and need.

— *The Topeka Capital-Journal, via The Associated Press*

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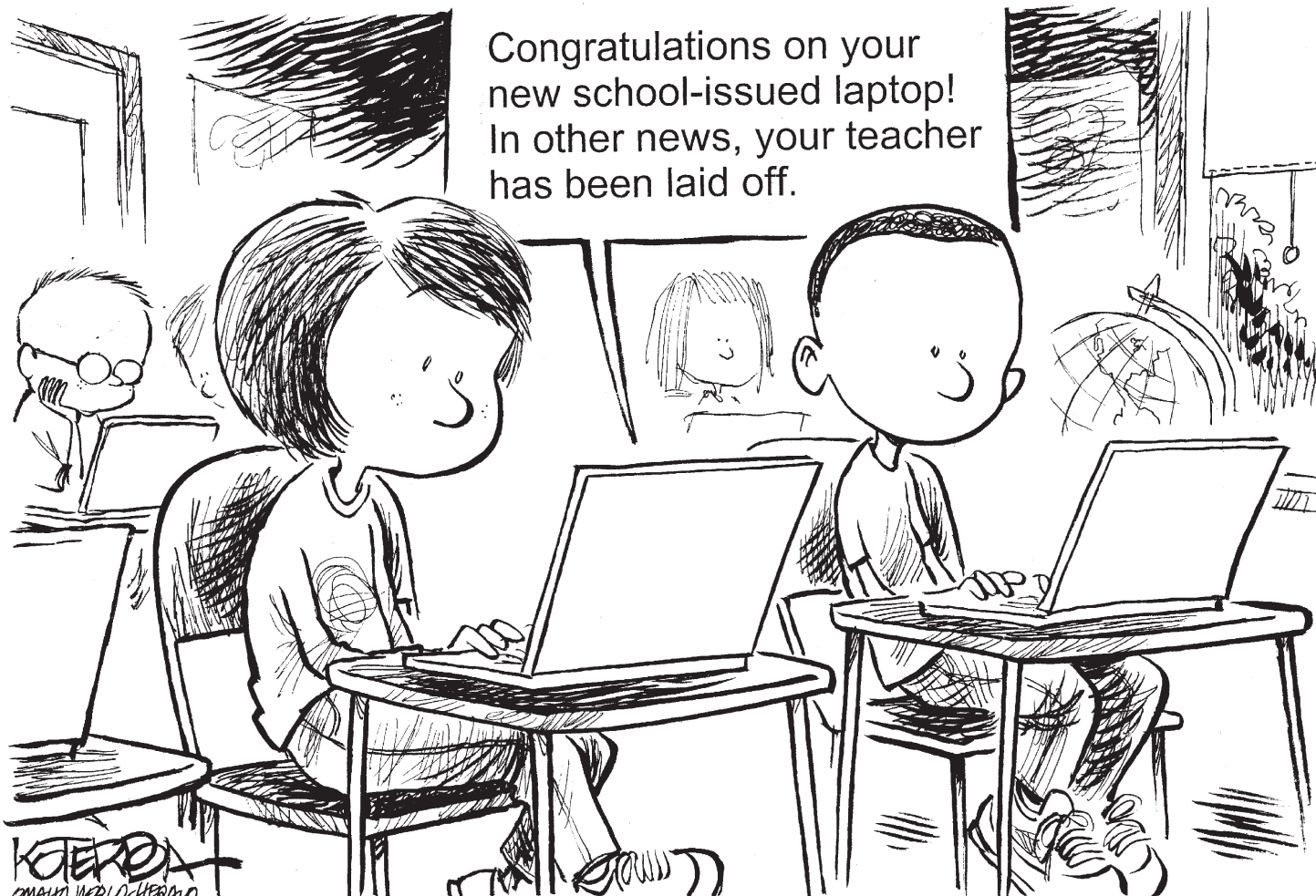
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Cuts have lasting consequences

The Kansas Legislature is faced with extraordinary challenges in balancing the state budget. The result has been major cuts in funding to schools, agencies and programs across the state.

As an educator, I understand the problems facing our state and do not expect the Legislature to honor prior school finance commitments to the detriment of other programs. While we must all do our part to help Kansas solve this problem, it is equally important to understand the lasting effects these legislative decisions will have on our educational framework.

Colby Public Schools has experienced more than half a million dollars in cuts, nearly 20 percent of the general fund. To withstand this loss, the school board:

- Nonrenewed 7.5 licensed staff and 11 classified staff.
- Froze salaries.
- Reduced vocational education programs.
- Discontinued in-town busing.
- Closed a school (Thomas County Academy).
- Reduced instructional materials and textbooks.
- Increased student fees.
- Reduced athletic and activity programs.
- Reduced food service, maintenance, custodial and transportation expenses.



Terrell Harrison

• From the super's desk

- Combined the grade school and middle school cafeterias.
- Shortened the school year (2009-10).
- Reduced the number of days and lengthened time in class each day for the 2010-11 school year.
- Reduced the number of administrators for the 2010-11 school year.

With more cuts in school funding, the district will be forced to make further reductions involving:

- Licensed, classified and administrative staff.
- Activities, art, at-risk, athletics, career and tech programs (vocational), counseling, driver education, music, physical education, special education and technology.

As Superintendent, I am concerned with the quality of education Kansas students will receive with continued funding cuts. Our chil-

dren did not create this budget crisis, and solving the budget problem should not come at the expense of their education.

Two Salina educators, Pam Evans and Nedra Elbl, educators, wrote in *The Salina Journal*: "Adequate funding in 1960 looked very different from adequate funding today. If we think it is OK to drop education funding back to that decade, we must ask ourselves if we are willing to live in a world where medicine, automobiles, roads, etc., are what they were in the '60s. Do we want our future medical personnel, engineers, educators, etc., to be educated at the '60s level?"

Education is vital to the economic prosperity and quality of life in Kansas. Tax dollars spent on schools stay in our community, allowing us to grow and prosper. The loss of jobs and programs in education will have a negative economic impact on communities in western Kansas.

Children in Thomas County and across the state deserve an education that prepares them for the future. Our children are the future of Kansas.

Terrell Harrison is the superintendent and assistant curriculum director for Colby Public Schools.

Taking time to learn

The financial crisis for Kansas education is causing some big schools to drop "block scheduling" and some small rural schools to move to a four-day school week. One of these is a good idea academically. The other is bad.

"Block scheduling" is an education "reform" that came to many Kansas high schools in the early 1990s. Instead of each class meeting each day, students attended classes every other day for two-period blocks.

Some teachers appreciated the longer time for lab work or theater practice, but the system was intended to force supposedly old-fashioned teachers to get away from lecturing. A double period was just too long for a teacher to talk, and this would supposedly force more cooperative learning and other group learning. And it was supposed to save the beginning-of-class housekeeping that would occur only two or three times a week, not every day.

But, according to research by Kansas teacher Timothy Johnson, who surveyed Kansas educators' actual use of block periods in the midst of its popularity a decade ago, "only 27.1 percent of teachers agreed that student motivation increased and only 37.5 percent of teachers felt students became more responsible for learning."

And science teachers did not agree (only 16.7 percent) with block schedule advocates that it increased opportunities to team teach



John Richard Schrock

• Education Frontlines

or spend more time with colleagues. A solid majority of teachers (68.7 percent) disagreed with the statement, "I complete more units of instruction."

Today, mathematics and language teachers can tell you that students in schools with block scheduling fall behind nearly a month per year. The reason is simple: It takes time to learn. Daily reinforcement is valuable.

Math and foreign language rely on everyday practice to nibble a slightly bigger problem or vocabulary, practice it, check it, and then nibble a little more. Block scheduling requires the student to take two bites at once every other day. It doesn't work as well.

Students need "incubation time" for concepts to sink in. Teachers need to correct the math or refine the accent and vocabulary each day. Students cannot run at double speed and bridge the missing days for these lock-step skills that build.

Schools that move back to old-fashioned

classes every day to save money will also see their student's performance rise, other factors kept equal.

However, some small rural Kansas schools under financial stress are considering moving to a four-day week. By lengthening the school day Monday through Thursday, the school can shut down the building on Friday. This saves heating and air conditioning and some bus costs. It does not save salaries, and that is the big expense.

The four-day school week is not new. Some rural western Kansas schools have been on a four-day schedule for years. Those administrators and teachers will tell you that the students do not learn as much. It is the same problem as block-scheduling: the gap across the longer weekend means more forgetting time.

It is too long a break from the daily progress made by study and practice each day. Like the big "fall-back" in learning that occurs each summer, the four-day week is a series of little "fall-backs" each long weekend.

It just takes time to learn.

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