



Regionalization 2009: The Right Direction for our Schools?

New Jersey citizens have a love/hate relationship with home rule. We love our ability to directly impact local government decision-making by having our say at a local board of education meeting, a planning board committee or a budget hearing. We love the availability of local services and the benefits of belonging to a unique local community, be it a school district or municipality. We hate having to pay high local property taxes to support these choices, however.

This dichotomy typifies the current statewide debate on school regionalization and consolidation, a debate that will be coming to a head in school districts across New Jersey in 2010. With the passage of the CORE legislation in 2007, the State Legislature has established a timeline, process, criteria and oversight for a statewide debate on the consolidation of school districts and the sharing of services. Here are some facts about New Jersey school districts and the new law.

Type of District	Number
Non-operating districts	23
Less than 250 students	63
250-999	207
1,000-2,499	170
2,500 - 7,499	119
7,500 - 14,999	29
15,000 - 24,999	2
25,000 or more	4

Type of District	Number
Non-operating Districts	23
K-6 Districts	62
K-8 Districts	220
7-12 Districts	16
9-12 Districts	31
K-12 Districts	220
Single School Districts	169
County Vocational Districts	21
County Special Services Districts	8
Educational Service Commission Districts	10
Jointure Commission Districts	3
Charter Schools	57

The CORE Statute and related Administrative Code, P.L. 2007, c. 63, N.J.S.A. 18A:7-8, and N.J.A.C. 6A:23A-1, et. seq.

Chapter 63, approved April 3, 2007, made significant changes in the role and authority of the Executive County Superintendent, including enhanced authority over local district finances, the employment contracts of superintendents, assistant superintendents and business officials, and the organizational structure of school districts. Under the law, the Executive County

Superintendents are appointed by the Governor, with the advice and consent of the Senate, and have the power and duty to:

- Promote administrative and operational efficiencies and cost savings,
- Recommend that certain districts consolidate “administrative services” with other districts,
- Recommend the elimination of unnecessary state education mandates,
- Eliminate non-operating school districts within one year,
- Present to the commissioner a school district consolidation plan within three years for all non K-12 districts, to be voted on at a special school election,

- Promote coordination and regionalization of pupil transportation services,
- Review and approve all employment contracts for superintendents, assistant superintendents and school business administrators,
- Request a forensic audit for a school district, if necessary,
- Disapprove a portion of any school budget if it includes “excessive non-instructional expenses,” subject to an appeals process to be created by the commissioner,
- Permit a separate proposal for additional funds to the voters only if certain criteria documenting efforts at sharing services are met,
- Promote cooperative purchasing of textbooks and other instructional materials, and
- Assess the types and capacities of district special education programs, assess the use of out-of-district programs, and work to increase in-district special education programs and sharing services, and the use of inclusive education.

School District Consolidation Plans

A significant new role is the requirement that Executive County Superintendents gather community input from a local Advisory Committee and develop a school district consolidation plan to eliminate all school districts, other than county-based districts and preschool/kindergarten through grade 12 districts in the county. He/she must conduct feasibility studies as appropriate. This process is currently underway in every New Jersey county.

The plan is due to the Commissioner of Education by March 15, 2010. The plan must contain:

- A general description of the proposed all purpose regional school district(s), including the names of the districts, school building and grade levels by district and the total proposed regional district;
- The proposed structure of the new board of education;
- An analysis of administrative staffing, collective bargaining agreements and compensation guides;
- An analysis of the educational program of the proposed district;
- An analysis of potential opportunities for greater effectiveness and efficiency in the areas of special education services, transportation, technology, administrative and finance systems, food services and other operational and curricular areas;
- An analysis of the social-economic and demographic information including enrollment impact, racial composition, food eligibility status, and attendance;
- A summary of the advantages and disadvantages of the proposal; and
- A comparative analysis of tax impact if regionalization/consolidation is recommended.

Once the Commissioner has approved the plan, the Executive County Superintendent is to require each local board of education impacted by the plan to hold a special school election to vote upon the proposed regionalization. In order for the proposal to pass, each impacted community must vote to support the plan. **These elections will be conducted in the fall of 2010.**

Consolidation of Administrative Services, N.J.A.C. 6A: 23A-2.3

The administrative code further requires the Executive County Superintendent, in consultation with the Advisory Committee, to study the potential consolidation of local district **administrative services**. This study is focused on districts that:

- Have less than 1,000 students,
- Have five school buildings or less,
- Are two or more contiguous districts with a combined enrollment of 2,500 or less,
- Are sending-receiving districts with a combined enrollment of 5,000 or less,
- Are limited purpose regional districts with a combined enrollment of 5,000 or less, and
- Have per pupil administrative costs in excess of 125 percent of the county median administrative cost per pupil.

The study must include consideration of shared leadership models, consortiums, cooperative bidding, joint purchasing models, shared technology systems, other consolidated administrative service and non-instructional service arrangements and other alternatives. The Executive County Superintendent may conduct a survey of all local districts within the county to determine the scope of administrative services available and the capacity of administrative service providers to provide these services.

Upon completion of the study, the Executive county Superintendent will make a recommendation to the Commissioner of Education to either:

- Mandate that the impacted districts enter arrangements to consolidate administrative services,
- Utilize the services of an administrative services provider, or
- Expand an existing service provider's level of services.

Timelines

- 2008 - elimination of 23 non-operating school districts, (not yet accomplished)
- Now - meetings of Executive County Superintendents with local Advisory Boards on consolidation and administrative services issues as well as shared services agreements
- March 15, 2009 - Executive County Superintendent Recommendation to the Commissioner on consolidation plan for the county
- Fall 2009 - local elections on proposed plans