

Talking Consolidation: Part 1 - William Phillips

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SPRINGFIELD - With the conflict of consolidation fast approach for the November ballots of everyone living within the **East Alton Wood River High School District**, the thought of consolidation is resting on a lot of minds.

The measure for consolidation of the **East Alton, Wood River/Hartford** and East Alton Wood River High School Districts was pushed by a **Committee of 10** who collected signatures from registered voters within the East Alton Wood River High School District. Once those signatures were approved by **Madison County Regional Superintendent Robert Daiber**, there was a public hearing held at the **Madison County Administrative Building**. Testimonies from that hearing were then sent to the **Illinois State Board of Education** for approval to be placed on that ballot. After their approval was returned to Daiber, the measure was placed on the November ballot for voters within the district.

Each side in the argument has a reason for their choice. People for consolidation often cite the need for a coming together of curriculum. People against believe it is not properly researched or funded. If consolidation is chosen, however, it will be next to impossible to reverse that process.



Associate Professor of Educational Leadership William Phillips, of the **University of Illinois in Springfield**, literally finished a book on the concept of school district consolidation. He has conducted 58 studies regarding school district consolidation over the last two decades. He and his colleagues have written as many as 40 articles concerning the concept of consolidation.

In 2011, Phillips was asked to conduct a study regarding consolidation of the East Alton, Wood River/Hartford and East Alton Wood River High School Districts. The matter was about to come to a ballot at that time as well. In fact, this year will be the third attempt since 2010 for this exact measure to come to a public vote. At that time, Phillips recommended against consolidation.

"I did the study in 2011," he said. "When we looked at the issue of making a unit district, we did not recommend they do it. We recommended against it due to the financial issues that precluded it. In Illinois, it is an extremely rare occurrence to make a unit school district. We recently did not recommend the creation of a unit school district in **Rochelle, Illinois.**"

Phillips said the measure continued to ballot after his study did not recommend it take place. He said he has not been contacted since that study for another. When asked why so few districts in Illinois make the decision to consolidate into unit school districts, Phillips said a "host of issues" require immediate action once the decision is made, and incentives given by the state are temporary or not paid in full.

"Normally, the high school offers better salaries and benefits than feeder districts, which is normally universally true," Phillips said.

If consolidation passes, new collective bargaining agreements must be struck for the new district created. Phillips said, while there is no law dictating it, most unions will attempt to bargain from the highest-paid in the district. This practice alone may cost the new district as much as an additional \$1 million.

"The State of Illinois has a salary incentive to cover the difference between the feeder districts and the high school," Phillips said. "The difference will be paid by the state for four years. After four years, the district will require new revenue to cover that. Usually, that is significant revenue, usually in the neighborhood of \$1 million. It is a significant issue with consolidation."

While Phillips has not been contacted for an additional study on this consolidation movement, he said he has not been made aware of any of the districts involved with proposed consolidation inquiring about state incentives. He also said the new proposed district said there would be a lower proposed tax rate after consolidation. While this sounds good to taxpayers, it may spell problems for a future consolidated district, Phillips said.

"I don't think anyone has asked for the incentives Illinois offers," he said. "I cannot conceive a push for consolidation when they haven't even asked the state for incentives. A lower tax rate will bring in less revenue, which will result in cutting programs."

Phillips and his consulting team do as much as 50 percent of the consolidation studies in the state. He said he has yet to find a situation in which creating a unit school district from duals is beneficial. He said the benefits of consolidation may include a better coordinated curriculum and state incentives, but added the curriculum matching will cost money and incentives could get prorated.

"I was consulted when they were thinking about doing it before, but I'm not sure they liked to hear what we recommended. They went ahead and pushed for it and lost. If they get it this time, they will get extra money from incentives. No one knows what that is, because no one has asked for it. I cannot believe no one has asked for these."

Incentives have previously been prorated by the state. Last year Phillips said districts in the State of Illinois, which chose to consolidate, were given 76 percent of those promised incentives. This year, however, Phillips said the state is paying the full amount.

"To not even know what these numbers are is crucial, and not knowing the tax rate is crucial," Phillips said. "The central office may get savings. The high school will not change at all. Elementary districts may change. I doubt buildings will close or staff will be let go. These are all things you look at and put the whole package together."

School boards have to be convinced consolidation is a positive move for students in their districts, Phillips said.

"I think the people involved in voting on this need a lot of information for an informed decision because this is forever," he said. "Without all the information, it will be difficult for them to make an informed decision."

The push for consolidation was beaten by less than a dozen votes when put to ballot in April 2015.