

# **Talking Consolidation: Part 3 - East Alton Wood River High School Superintendent John Pearson**

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[Talking Consolidation: Part One](#)

[Talking Consolidation: Part Two](#)

## **WOOD RIVER - East Alton Wood River High School Superintendent John**

**Pearson** said many of the fears about consolidation being voiced over social media are untrue.

The **East Alton Wood River High School Board of Education** announced it was for the consolidation of **East Alton Wood River High School, East Alton and Wood River /Hartford** Districts over the summer. The East Alton and Wood River/Hartford Boards of Education have both voted to state their opinions against it. Pearson said, if the move for consolidation is chosen by district residents on the Nov. 8 ballot, all three districts must work together to proceed ahead toward the new district.

"We will all have to work together if it passes," Pearson said.

The first items of business will take place prior to the April 2017 election of an entirely new school board. Pearson said the three existing school boards will work together with the assistance of **Madison County Regional Superintendent Robert Daiber** to build the groundwork for the new district. Pearson said the new board will have the responsibility of hiring a new superintendent and building a new administrative structure before the new unit school district would start on July 1, 2017.

Before that hiring and administrative structure can be done, work must begin on consolidation. Pearson said the three districts must put together a lot of data, materials, policy suggestions and salary schedules before the new school district comes into being. He said the teachers must also pick a union representative as well.

"A lot of groundwork must get laid before the new board takes over," he said.

"Hopefully, if the yes votes win, that sort of stuff will start to happen and the three districts will put stuff together and lay groundwork."

Pearson said the first year of the new district will work as a transition year, but said not much will change as far as the day-to-day lives of students and teachers will change - at least at first.

"When the new district would open for business on July 1, 2017, it will still be in transition," he said. "There will still be things that need to be done. There will be a transition period in the first year of the new district. They're not going to happen overnight, but school will go on as usual. A lot of things going on in 2016-17 as far as things as far as curriculum will continue status quo, until the new school board, superintendent, administration and teachers got together and worked for the new district."

Curriculum is one of the most popular arguments in favor of consolidation. Proponents of the measure argue a unified curriculum being put in place at the elementary and junior high levels of the feeder districts going toward East Alton Wood River High School would amount to a better education for its students.

Opponents of consolidation say such a measure would not be necessary for unified curriculum, citing the current **Illinois State Learning Standards** as a method to ensure students receive the same standards of education. Pearson said the standards are just that - standards - and said curriculum and standards are very different things.

"People who write curriculum, whether they are professional textbook or software makers, or at the district level, certainly use the standards as a guide to put students where they need to be at high school graduation," Pearson said. "The Illinois Learning Standards are not a curriculum, they are a set of standards."

Tax rates are another concern for voters within the district. **William Phillips** of the **University of Illinois Springfield**, who literally wrote the book on consolidation of school districts, said the lowered tax rate proposed by the new school district would be bad for revenue in the new district. Pearson, however, said the lower tax rate could still generate enough revenue.

"The reason this can be possible is because the tax base of the high school district, which would be used as the boundaries for the new district, is a higher tax base," he said. "When you have a higher tax base, it doesn't take the same tax rate to raise the same amount of money as a lower tax base. You can use a larger tax base to get the same amount of revenue to the funds, which don't have restrictive rates."

State incentives will also help the new district have what Pearson describes as "breathing room" during the first four years of the new district. As much as \$4,000 per teacher may be given by the state to the new district for the first four years to ensure personnel cuts will not be at the forefront of consolidation, while such cuts may be possible in the future, Pearson said retirements and resignations not being filled upon a staff member's departure may ensure cuts will be at least be limited.

Pearson warned, however, state incentives could not be entirely guaranteed.

"The trouble with state incentives is how much money the legislature is appropriating for it," he said. "Last year, there was only enough to issue a prorated amount."

The amount of school districts moving toward consolidation in the state will dictate how much money the new district will receive upon consolidation.

"The fewer consolidations there are, the more money there is for consolidation," Pearson said.

Pearson said consolidated districts are the norm within Madison County.

"If they were so bad, why isn't there a push to break up districts into smaller districts," he said. "This isn't a measure to close schools, this just will change the way schools are governed, like every other school district in Madison County is governed."

*Article was edited to remove misquote attributed to Pearson.*