

## OPINION

# America's School Districts Are Too Big

By Andy Smarick

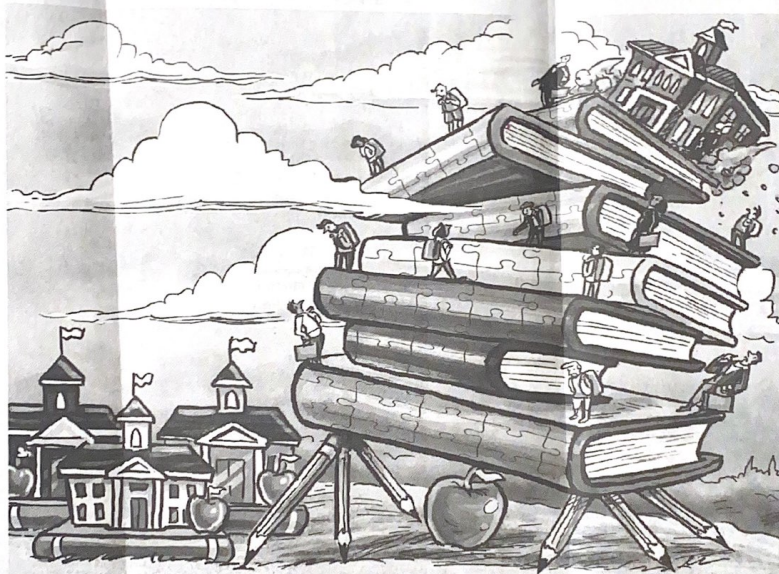
Some U.S. school districts have become so large and unwieldy that parents and taxpayers feel they have no ability to influence them. To restore local, democratic control, it's time to break up those big districts.

Public schooling was largely decentralized a century ago. A movement to standardize and professionalize K-12 education began in the Progressive Era. Consolidation may have accomplished some of its goals, but America's largest districts today tend to be among the lowest-performing. For the most part, they are

**Communities feel they've lost the ability to influence bloated bureaucracies. Time to break them up.**

located in big cities and their ring suburbs. The nation's three largest districts serve the nation's three largest cities: New York City, Los Angeles and Chicago. Many large districts also spend vast sums per student: San Francisco and Atlanta spend more than \$17,000 a pupil; Washington spends more than \$22,000; Boston more than \$25,000; and New York more than \$28,000.

Breaking these behemoths into smaller districts won't resolve any particular policy argument by itself. Over the past several years, small and large districts have debated the same issues. Board meetings have run hot, voter turnout has been high, school-board seats have been contested, teacher retirements have increased, and recall efforts have been mounted. But while threats against public officials are intolerable, vigorous public debate among parents and community members over the future of their local public



institutions defines civic engagement—and democracy. Civic virtue in a pluralistic, democratic republic doesn't require only participation; it also requires acceptance of lawful democratic decisions.

A district-deconsolidation movement wouldn't touch the vast majority of districts, and it wouldn't be a federal initiative. State governments would concentrate on the largest 1% of districts, roughly those with more than 40,000 students. A state could begin by passing a law requiring those districts to be deconsolidated by a future date—say, within five years. The resulting districts would be capped at an enrollment of 10,000 students. If the state decided a district couldn't objectively deconsolidate itself, a temporary commission

could do the work or state education officials could take charge.

Since the ultimate goal of this reform is to create small, democratic self-governing education bodies, each new district would need to have its own board and administration. Beyond that, though, different states—even different regions within a state—could approach deconsolidation differently.

Whatever a state decides, it should avoid setting arrangements in stone. Flexibility is important. Regardless of its flaws, a large, long-standing district will have valuable programs and customs suited to its community. No matter how well-planned, bold reforms will be unsettling, potentially unwinding some successful practices and causing new

problems. In the first few years, the state and its new districts may discover more-sensible arrangements related to district composition, shared services, enrollment systems, facilities management, transportation, school choice and more.

Large districts and those who benefit from them will object. Running a system with a billion-dollar budget confers prestige. Those in charge of such districts wield political power that will be hard to relinquish. Private providers of goods and services (such as books, professional development and school meals) prize the big contracts they score with massive districts. Unions and other professional associations have more power when they can organize on the scale of a huge district. They will

argue that breaking up districts would lead to inefficiencies and duplication of services. Why, they will ask, should we have five school boards, five central offices, and five superintendents, when we can have one of each?

Whether such large districts are actually more efficient remains debatable. But advocates of deconsolidation should be clear that there is more to public-school governance than efficiency. After all, separation of powers, bicameralism, federalism, democracy and individual rights can be considered inefficient.

Public schools are valuable not only because they teach young people reading or job skills but because they enable communities to pass their values on to the next generation. We shouldn't assess a school system based solely on math scores or graduation rates per dollar spent. We should also ask whether local citizens and parents feel as though the schools are theirs: Do the schools reflect their priorities and give them a way to engage in key decisions?

Parental and community control of public schools makes sense to most Americans, but K-12 policy has long been guided by principles like efficiency, accountability, college-readiness, fairness and transparency. All these are important. But we seem to have lost our commitment to schools as community-led institutions. Seldom does one hear that public-school reform should make a priority of the will of local citizens, even though in many places that principle is alive and well in practice. In big cities and the areas surrounding them—places where the need for strong, responsive, community-oriented schools is often most acute—it's time to re-establish the principle of local, democratic control.

*Mr. Smarick is a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute. This op-ed is adapted from City Journal's autumn issue.*