Consolidation of Memphis City Schools & Shelby County Schools

Overview:

The Shelby / Memphis unification is considered to be the largest school district consolidation in American history. Fraught with historical tensions, issues of race and equity, this is a consolidation ambitious both in scale and momentum. It is the result of actions by members of the Memphis and Shelby school boards, local city councils, a 2011 referendum, and ongoing lawsuits that have divided the local landscapes along political lines.

Discussions about a possible consolidation occurred as far back as October / November 2010, spurred by a proposal by Shelby Board David Pickler to authorize special district status to Shelby School District. In response, Memphis City Board member Martavius Jones proposes the city of Memphis relinquish its charter. What followed has proven to be a hugely influential series of efforts to reform two very different school districts, the implications of which will reverberate in school districts across the USA, especially here in New York State.

Following a lengthy and often tenuous period of debate in which proponents and opponents of the merger asserted their views with a great deal of public conviction, the ratification of the Norris-Todd Act sought to decelerate the consolidation process, ensuring a three year execution, the creation of a Transition Planning Commission (TPC), and the developing a transition plan. Upon voters’ approval of the merger during a March 2011 referendum the Norris-Todd Act has been in effect, compelling the TPC to finalize the Transition Plan by August 2012. The Plan declares this consolidation to be:

“A historic opportunity for our community to unite behind the children of Shelby County. For the first time in the region’s history, a single public school district will allow the community to bring together all of its resources to ensure every student in Shelby County receives an excellent education.”

Shelby County Transition Planning Commission, 2012

However, the move has divided community members, parents, and local residents due to the significance of the logistical, legal, and community challenges such a substantial consolidation process poses. Some of the issues it raises for those directly affected include, but are not limited to:

- Memphis teachers are unionized, Shelby County’s are not.
- The county owns its yellow buses, the city has historically relied on a contractor.
- Both use different textbooks and different curriculums
- Each district implements different teacher evaluation systems.
- Median family income in Memphis is $32,000 a year vs. suburban average of $92,000.
- 85 percent of students in Memphis are black vs. 38 percent in Shelby County are black.
- The potential for reduced allocations of Federal and State Dollars (Title 1 as an example) could affect mostly former Memphis students

Once finalized, the Shelby Unified School District would become the 16th largest school district in the US, supporting 150,000 students, 70% of whom will qualify for free or reduced lunch, 12% of whom will receive special education services. Seven percent of students in Shelby Unified School District will have limited English proficiency, and it is estimated that 2% of students will remain homeless.
Key Players:

Several key players have emerged throughout the consolidation process. Their roles and impact are outlined in the “Timeline of Events” section:

- **Mark Norris (R)** Senate Majority Leader
  - Primary author of the "Norris-Todd Act"

- **Curry Todd (R)** State Representative
  - Co-sponsor of the "Norris-Todd Act"

- **Bill Haslam (R)** Tennessee Governor
  - Signs into law the "Norris-Todd Act"

- **Ron Ramsey (R)** Speaker of the Senate
  - Passed the “Norris-Todd Act”

- **Beth Harwell (R)** Speaker of the House of Representatives
  - Passed the “Norris-Todd Act”

- **Samuel H. Mays, Jr.** District Judge
  - Upholds key provisions of the "Norris-Todd Act"

- **Kevin Huffman** Tennessee Education Commissioner
  - Signs the Transition Planning Commission’s Plan

- **Kriner Cash** Memphis City Schools Superintendent
  - Under contract through August 2013

- **John Aitken** Shelby County Schools Superintendent
  - Under contract through February 2015

- **David Pickler** Shelby County Schools board chairman (in 2010)
  - Proposes special district status to Shelby School District

- **Martavius Jones** Memphis District 4 Commissioner & Board President
  - Responds to Pickler by proposing surrendering of charter

- **A C Wharton** Memphis Mayor
  - Initially pressed Pickler for more time to consider his suggestion

- **Mark Luttrell** Shelby County Mayor
  - Appoints 5 members of the 21 member board

- **Mark Goins** State Elections Coordinator
  - Claims City Council must vote ahead of public referendum

- **Mike Ritz** Chairman of the Shelby County Commission
  - Proposes countywide sales tax to close Shelby budget deficit

- **Heidi Shafer** Shelby County Commissioner
  - Opposes timing of Ritz’s tax proposal

- **Betty Mallott** District 2 Commissioner of Memphis School Board
  - Proposes transference of operations to Shelby County Schools
Details of the Transition Plan

The following information is taken directly from the document: Transition Plan for the Merger of Memphis City Schools and Shelby County Schools:

“Norris-Todd Act” required the creation of a Transition Planning Commission (TPC)
TPC was appointed in August and September 2011 and is comprised of 18 appointed commissioners and three ex-officio members:

Joyce Avery
Former Interim Shelby County Mayor and County Commissioner

Jim Boyd
Executive Director of the Pyramid Peak Foundation

Kenya Bradshaw
Executive Director of Stand For Children, a nonprofit education reform group

Dr. Reginald Green
Professor of Educational Leadership at the University of Memphis

Tommy Hart
Former County Commissioner

Richard Holden
Retired Shelby County Schools Operations Chief

Staley Cates
Southeastern Asset Management President

Dr. Fred Johnson
Former Shelby County Schools Administrator and Board Member

Martavious Jones
Former Memphis City Schools Board President

Rickey Jeans
County Schools Parent and Insurance Executive

Dr. Dr. Keith McDonald
Bartlett Mayor

Louis Padgett, III
Northaven Elementary School Principal

Mayor Mark H. Luttrell, Jr.
Shelby County Mayor

Christine P. Richards
Executive Vice President and General Counsel of FedEx

Daniel Kiel
University of Memphis Cecil C. Humphreys School of Law Professor

Dr. Barbara U. Prescott
Former President of the Tennessee School Boards Association

Barbara Roseborough
Interim Associate Vice President at Southwest Tennessee Community College

Dr. John Smarrelli, Jr.
Christian Brothers University President

Larry Spiller
Owner/Operator of Home Pest Control of Bartlett

Katie Stanton
Former President of the TN Education Association and Shelby County Education Association

Five member were chosen by MCS, five by SCS, five by Shelby County Mayor Mark Luttrell and one each from the state's top three elected officials (Gov. Bill Haslam, State Sen. Speaker Ron Ramsey, and State House Speaker Beth Harwell). Luttrell, SCS chairman David Pickler and MCS chairman Martavious Jones also are on the team. The transition team consists of 11 suburban residents to 10 Memphis residents, 15 men and six women, 14 white members and seven black members. It elected former MCS president Barbara Prescott as its chairman, former SCS board member and superintendent Fred Johnson as vice-chairman and made longtime SCS building operations chief Richard Holden its treasurer. Tennessee Stand For Children executive director Kenya Bradshaw is secretary.

http://blogs.commercialappeal.com/cgi-bin/mt/mt-search.cgi?IncludeBlogs=14&tag=consent%20decree&limit=20

• 23-MEMBER UNIFIED SCHOOL BOARD
Effective October 1, 2011, the 23-member SCBE governs both Memphis City and Shelby County Schools. The Board is comprised of the nine former MCS Board Commissioners and seven former SCS Board Members. Seven additional Board Commissioners were appointed by the Shelby County Commission.

http://www.scsboard.org/
The plan outlines a process for the merger of Memphis and Shelby County schools and includes:

- **Adoption of ten guiding principles to guide its work:**

  1. The academic success and well-being of our students come first
  2. Educators and staff are our most important resource
  3. We have high expectations
  4. We are all in this together
  5. We aim to enhance our district by balancing stability with needed change
  6. We desire excellent community schools and options for all
  7. We believe parent engagement is essential
  8. We must save where we can to fund what we need
  9. We value strong leadership
  10. This is our once-in-a-lifetime opportunity

The Transition Plan is designed to serve as a guide for the SCBE and merged SCS leadership to use in leading the transition. The Plan provides guidance on all the core components—academics, student support, district organization, finances, personnel, and operations—for the merged SCS. It is intended to support—not substitute for—the leadership of the SCBE and district staff during the transition process.

- **An Education Plan (two sections) outlining priorities to ensure students graduate ready for college and career:**

  The Education Plan provides recommendations to ensure every student experiences a world-class education. Recommendations relate to educational programs and services, strategies for ensuring all students have high-quality teachers and principals, and an administrative structure that enables schools to innovate and succeed.

  **Educational Services**
  - Priority 1: Every Child Ready For School
  - Priority 2: Every Student Ready For Success In College And Career
  - Priority 3: Rigorous Implementation Of Standards
  - Priority 4: Quality And Accessible Educational Choices
  - Priority 5: Engaged Parents And Families
  - Priority 6: Supportive Community Members And Partners
  - Priority 7: Tailored Interventions And Support
  - Priority 8: Effective Teachers
  - Priority 9: Effective Instructional Leaders (Principals And Assistant Principals)
  - Priority 10: Culture And Climate Of High Expectations

  **Administrative Organization**
  - Financial Model
  - Organizational Structure
  - Central Office Design
  - School autonomies and responsibilities
  - Student assignment
  - Schools footprint

- **Models for Operations, Personnel, and Finances to identify efficiency opportunities Shelby County Schools:**

  The Operations Plan provides recommendations to ensure every student experiences a school that has the resources it needs to provide a world-class education. This chapter describes how the district can maximize efficiency while also improving the quality of operational
services. The Plan focuses on operational support functions in six areas: transportation, facilities (including capacity utilization, custodial services, maintenance and utilities), purchasing, information technology (IT), safety and security, and nutrition.

### Operations
- Custodial
- Utilities
- Maintenance
- Capacity Utilization
- Transportation
- Purchasing
- I.T
- Safety & Security
- Nutrition
- Shared Services

### Personnel
- Central Office Staffing
- School Staffing
- Compensation
- Benefits

### Finances
- Context
- Summary Of Current State
- Methodology For Projections
- Cost Management Of Enrollment Shifts
- Recommendations
- Summary Of Projected Future State
- Recommendations
- Contingency Plan
- Other Relevant Considerations

- **8 Key Milestones, which are:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>2010-11 actual</th>
<th>2016-17 target</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Kindergarten readiness</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>TBD%*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. 3rd Grade reading proficiency</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. 7th Grade math proficiency</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. 9th Grade “on track”</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>TBD%*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. ACT college ready / ACT minimum score of 21</td>
<td>10% / 24%</td>
<td>25% / 60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Graduation rate</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Post-secondary college enrollment</td>
<td>40% (MCS data only)</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Post-secondary college completion</td>
<td>16% (MCS data only)</td>
<td>TBD%*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **The Plan includes a Migration Plan section, which outlines the process for developing a shared approach.**
  Focuses on the implementation activities that need to occur prior to the merger, while recognizing that there is also important implementation work to be done in the first few years following the merger. This is divided into three sections:

  1. Day one milestones: Summary of the most critical milestones for the merger
  2. Transition management: Outlines the responsibilities and structure of a team to lead the transition process
  3. Activities and milestones for key initiatives: Provides more detail in the approximately 30 areas identified as key initiatives
The following aspirations will guide the implementation of the merger:

- Students, families and staff are ready for the first day of school in the fall of 2013
- The 2012-13 school year is successful in the midst of planning for the merger
- Merger planning decisions are well-informed and decision-making processes are effective
- The district retains and attracts the best talent
- The new district develops its own distinct culture
- A management structure is in place during the pre-merger implementation year to make tough decisions for the merged district
- The district hits its financial targets
- The selection of staff for the central office is fast, fair and disciplined
Timeline of Events:

2010

August
Bill Haslam wins the GOP nomination for Tennessee governor, which proves to be the first of several wins for Republicans in 2010.
http://voices.washingtonpost.com/thefix/governors/knoxville-mayor-bill-haslam-ra.html

November
Bill Haslam wins the election for Governor of Tennessee, starting a chain of events that would impact the Memphis / Shelby school districts almost immediately. A Democrat (Phil Bredesen) had previously held the office of Governor since the 2002 election. This proves to be the first time that Republicans gain “control of the Tennessee Legislature and the Governor’s office…since the Reconstruction”.
Elections.nytimes.com/2010/results/tennessee

Beth Harwell elected Speaker of The Tennessee House of Representatives

November
Shelby Board Chairman David Pickler pushes the state legislature to grant special school district status to Shelby. Shelby County Mayor, Mark Luttrell and Memphis Mayor A C Wharton, who both request more time to discuss the matter, meet this request unfavorably.
http://www.wmctv.com/story/13571678/mayors-call-for-more-discussion-on-school-charter

Memphis Board Commissioner Martavius Jones counters this with a proposal that Memphis surrenders its charter, effectively forcing a consolidation of the two districts.

December
Memphis City Schools Superintendent Kriner Cash publically announces his opposition to the Memphis / Shelby consolidation believing any surrender of the charter would set the district back decaded: "My position would be to put an injunction on it"

The Memphis City School (MCS) Board meets to consider surrendering its charter that, if agreed, would force a consolidation with Shelby County Schools.

MCS board passes a resolution to consolidate city and county schools. The resolution passed by a vote of five to four. Commissioners Hart, Jones, Gatewood, Robinson, and Webb all voted in favor of surrendering the charter.
The Shelby County Election Commission receives official notification from Memphis City Schools to request an election date for a referendum to surrender the MCS charter. The election, which must take place in accordance with state law is set to cost $1 Million


Grassroots movements such as Stand for Children and Save our Students emerge as the debate concerning the Shelby / Memphis Consolidation escalates


Timeline of Events:

2011

January

The Tennessee State Coordinator of Elections rules that there must be an election by the City Council to show support of the referendum before a date can be set for a public vote. The Election Commission votes to defer calling an election date.


Disagreements arise regarding whether the City Council Vote can vote to surrender the charter, or if a public vote is needed.


Memphis NAACP announces its support of Memphis City Schools surrendering its charter, citing "a unified system is the best for the boys and girls of this community"


A planned lawsuit to demand that a date be set for the charter surrender by the Election Commission is postponed because a letter from State Elections Coordinator Mark Goins backtracks on its original claim that the City Council must vote. The postponement is put in place until clarification can be gained.

http://www.wmctv.com/story/13825947/group-halts-school-charter-lawsuit-for-now

A potential “Compromise” is cited as occurring between leaders of both Shelby and Memphis school districts, which asks that both districts agree to a county-wide referendum to take place which, which would provide considerably more more time to work on a transition plan.


Referendum is set for March 8 following a ruling by a judge that the Election Commission must set a date.


Tennessee Lieutenant Governor Ron Ramsey threatens a state takeover of Memphis City Schools as a potential effort to stop the consolidation of both school districts.

http://www.wmctv.com/story/13924499/lt-governor-ramsey-moves-to-block-or-delay-charter-referendum
Additional lawmakers make their voices heard on the issue, with Memphis Mayor A C Wharton, State Senator Mark Norris, and Representative Brian Kelsey each weighing in on the issue. Norris and Kelsey submit bills to delay the vote on March 8.


**February**

Governor Bill Haslam requires that a personnel plan be drawn up by the school districts to address the issue of teachers in Memphis and Shelby County. He requires the personnel plan to be finalized by February 15, and a transition plan by March 1st.


State Senator Mark Norris’s Bill (with provisions for a three year transition period, a 21 member committee, and the creation of a transition plan) is approved by the Senate and House Committees.

http://www.wmctv.com/story/13966464/bill-that-would-force-school-merger-delay-passes-house-committee

City Council agrees to postpone the charter surrender vote until further meetings have taken place.


Norris’s bill is approved by the Tennessee Senate in a 20 to 10 vote (along party lines). A companion bill is later approved by the Tennessee House.


Bill Haslam – Governor, Ron Ramsey – Speaker of the Senate, and Beth Harwell – Speaker of the House of Representatives approve an amendment to the Tennessee Code, Title 49, Chapter 2, relative to administration of local education agencies.

http://www.wmctv.com/story/14014222/haslam-signs-bill-that

Governor Bill Haslam signs Bill 25 / House Bill 51 regarding school consolidation in Memphis and Shelby County.

https://news.tn.gov/node/6698

**March**

Shelby County Commission agrees to create a board to govern a consolidated school district should the vote approve the charter surrender on March 8. Commissioners passed an item to add 18 members to the unified school board if the merger passes, and also voted to establish a redistricting plan.


John Aitkin, Shelby Superintendent has his contract extended two years to 2015. His original contract was due to expire in June of 2013 with $193,000 salary. The result of the extension is that he would be paid two years of this salary, totaling nearly $400,000, if not chosen to lead a unified school system.

Memphis voters approve the transference of control from Memphis City Schools to Shelby County. The vote passed with 47,812 in favor of the surrender, while 23,612 voted no. Officials at the Shelby County Election Commission said 17 percent of eligible voters cast a ballot.


June

Martavius Jones elected as Memphis Board President (The race was between Jones and Dr. Jeff Warren, who stood on opposite sides of the charter issue)

http://www.solutions4schools.org/school-entry/martavius-jones-gets-tapped-to-lead-board-for-mcs

October

The Transition Planning Commission (TPC) was created by state law. The legislation (TCA 49-2-1201 effective October 1, 2011) lays out the Transition Planning Commission’s makeup and mission of creating a plan to guide the merger of the Memphis City School System with the Shelby County School System. The solution was subsequently supported by Norris-Todd and court orders entered by U.S. District Judge Samuel H. Mays, Jr. USDC 11-2110.


Effective October 1, 2011, the 23-member SCBE governs both Memphis City and Shelby County Schools

http://www.scsboard.org/

ByLaws created


Timeline of Events:

2012

February

The Transition Planning Committee are persuaded by Shelby County Mayor Mark Luttrell to invite suburban mayors to appear before the commission to discuss their plans. This will include Memphis Mayor A C Wharton and is aimed to alleviate some of the tensions that have persisted.


Academic priorities are to be set by the end of this month, with associated costs to follow by March


Funding issues legal questions surface as the Memphis / Shelby consolidation discourse continues. This is compounded by the fact Arlington, Bartlett, Collierville and Germantown consider seceding to start their own school systems

March

While the TPC easily agreed upon its educational goals and themes, it struggles to agree on the administrative structures of the newly formed Shelby Unified School District are discussed to support their themes.

A six-region model called the "Multiple Achievement Paths" model is agreed upon by the TPC. Each region will have between 20 to 30 schools, and will each be led by a regional director. The plan needs to be ratified by the unified school board.

Six local legislators, including Senate Majority Leader Mark Norris, say they will let local school boards decides how to dispose of their school buildings.

April

The State Senate passes a bill that will allow new municipal school districts to hold school referendums in the Memphis suburbs. The bill's House sponsor, Rep. Richard Montgomery, said he doesn't plan on using the bill for any purpose other than the way it passed the House 90-4: to require local school boards to develop and implement annual evaluation plans for local school directors. However, it is delayed in the House.
http://www.commercialappeal.com/news/2012/apr/03/bill-lifting-ban-municipal-school-districts-delaye/

The state House approves the bill to allow the Memphis suburbs to hold its own referendums on the issue of creating new city school districts and electing school board members. The Senate next approves the bill next, and it moves to the Governor’s office.
http://www.commercialappeal.com/news/2012/apr/30/municipal-referendum-bill-approved-senate-headed-t/

May

Governor Haslam signs bill to allow new municipal school districts to hold school referendums in the Memphis suburbs

Lakeland becomes the first suburb to start take advantage of the recently signed bill

Mike Ritz, Chairman of the Shelby County Commission cites budget deficits amid tax hike projections.

Discussions regarding the appointment of the new Superintendent take place behind closed doors.
June
Superintendent search will take place under the watch of the unified school board. However, it has yet to be determined how the search will be conducted

The Transition Planning Committee votes to approve a full draft of the Transition Plan, rolling out a plan for the full merger of the two districts
http://teachmemphis.tumblr.com/post/25331195109/shelby-county-transition-planning-committee-approves

July
Superintendent search for the unified school district continues, with no decision in sight
http://www.commercialappeal.com/news/2012/jul/02/superintendent-search-indicates-mergers/

Tennessee Education Commissioner Kevin Huffman cites his satisfaction with the TPC plan in terms of protecting teacher salary and benefits

August
Mallott resolution fails to pass. This would have approved the Resolution to commence the process of transferring of operations and administration of Memphis City Schools to the Administration of Shelby County Schools.

Four incumbent board members (two from the city and two from the county) are guaranteed a spot on the unified school board even if they lose the general election
http://www.commercialappeal.com/news/2012/aug/01/win-or-lose-150-incumbents-stay-on-school-board/

Mayor Luttrell vetoes the countywide sales tax referendum. The resolution puts the half-cent sales tax hike on the Nov. 6 ballot.

September
A recommended selection process to find a superintendent for the unified district is near.

Seven recently elected members and two new appointees are sworn into the unified school board
Current Situation:

TPC
The Transition Planning Committee continues to forge ahead with its Transition Plan, which was presented to the TPC on August 3, 2012

Lawsuits
Shelby County municipalities of Bartlett and Collierville, along with Arlington, Germantown, Lakeland and Millington, held an August 2, 2012 vote that approved the creation of public school systems for all six suburbs. They are subsequently defending themselves against a lawsuit brought by the County Commission challenging the legality of this vote. Many believe the issue is motivated by a desire to create majority white school districts and to discriminate against black residents

Judge Smauel H. Mays Jr. agrees to hold a hearing on a motion by Shelby County Commissioners to stop the scheduled Aug. 2 votes on creating new school districts.

Shelby County Commission has asked the local Election Commission to not place races for six municipal school boards on the November ballot. Election Commission Chairman Robert Meyers, Chism stated it would be unconstitutional to exceed six districts
http://www.jacksonsun.com/article/20120830/NEWS01/308300023/Shelby-County-commissioner-asks-school-board-elections-struck?odyssey=tab%7Ctopnews%7Ctext%7CFRONTPAGE

Funding.
Chairman of the Shelby County Commission Mike Ritz is pushing for a countywide tax increase (a $0.5 cent sales tax) to offset a budget deficit that will affect the new Unified School District. He predicts a minimum of $57-60 million deficit unless the school board makes some deep cuts, in which case he predicts it could be close to $100 million. City and suburban residents, however are resisting this because they want to implement their own tax increases. Ritz is pushing to override a veto by Mayor Luttrell. County Commissioner Heidi Shafer believes the timing is inappropriate and becomes issue in terms of sending this to a referendum. If it fails, she states, it can’t be put on ballot for another year.
http://www.wknofm.org/post/radio-roundtable-funding-unified-school-district

The Shelby County R-IV Board of Education sets the district's 2012-13 tax rate, approving a tax levy rate of $3.75 for the 2012-13 fiscal year broken out by fund as follows: $3.75 Incidental Fund 1, $.00 Teachers Fund 2, and $.00 Capital Projects Fund 4.
http://www.hannibal.net/article/20120831/NEWS/120839735
Implications for other Districts, Cities, and Counties

The implications for school districts beyond Tennessee are becoming increasingly apparent as the Shelby / Memphis process continues. The prospect of creating unified school districts appears to be gaining renewed levels of interest as declining enrollment and a stubborn economic outlook persist across the USA.

On the East Coast, Western New York is uncommonly experienced in the school consolidation process, with a reduction in school districts over the past 90 years from more than 1,500 in 1920 to about 1,000 in 1940, to 130 in 1962 and to 98 today. With the most recent merger in the region occurring in 2000 between Cattaraugus Central and Little Valley Central, the timing for renewed interest in consolidation seems propitious. The Brocton and Fredonia districts in Chautauqua County, for example, are currently discussing a merger, and a recent University of Buffalo report cites a “perfect storm” of factors that could lead to increased instances of unified school districts.

As the national economy remains unresponsive and many local states are forced to cut their aid to school districts as a result, the allure of potential cost savings appears to be a powerful draw. However, for cost savings alone, consolidation may yield less impressive results. The University of Buffalo’s report, for example, concluded in a 2009 study that larger school districts fare much less favorably financially due to the costs associated with the consolidation process itself:

“Pre- and post-merger costs suggest that school districts with enrollments under 1,000 are the best candidates for mergers. Currently, 36 of the region’s 98 districts fit that description, accounting for 10 percent of the region’s enrollment and 11 percent of total spending. Based on published models, the institute estimates that merging these 36 districts with neighboring districts would save about $133 million per year, or 20 percent of their current combined $665 million budget...For larger districts, those with more than 2,000 students, for example, efficiency gains are often much smaller and are sometimes nullified by the costs of merging”

http://www.buffalo.edu/news/10261

Similarly, in Amherst, MA, there is the potential for a vote to create a single district by consolidating schools across the four local towns of Amherst, Leverett, Shutesbury and Pelham. This is the fifth such attempt in the area, with the most recent being in 2009, and aims to address previous concerns regarding the loss of local control of local elementary schools

“A 12-member committee, with equal representation from Amherst, Leverett, Shutesbury and Pelham, has been meeting through the summer. The committee is about to hire consultants to examine the financial and educational benefits and costs of greater school consolidation, and expects to make a recommendation next spring.”

http://www.gazettenet.com/2012/08/28/school-district-consolidation-on-docketIn

Money is certainly front and center of discussions regarding the consolidation efforts underway in Nevada, where the merger of the Nevada City Elementary and Grass Valley School Districts has been presented as a resolution by the Board of Elections. On August 12, 2012, a public meeting was held to request a vote on the consolidation within the statewide general election in November 2012:

Roxanne Gilpatrick, Nevada City Elementary School District Superintendent…presented her School Board’s summary of the Plusses, Minuses and Points of Interest for Consolidation of the Nevada City Elementary and Grass Valley School Districts. Gilpatrick was followed by Grass Valley Superintendent Eric Fredrickson. Both sides see many benefits for combining the two districts, but there were
also some concerns. Money is a key factor for both districts. Grass Valley Board President, Paula Roediger wants to be sure fiscal concerns are addressed.

In Clearfield, Pennsylvania, moves are well under way to proceed with plans to close their middle school and two of their elementary schools with a public hearing regarding the closures scheduled for October, at which time one of three options will be decided upon. The most likely includes a proposal that would include an expansion of the remaining school locations:

“HHSDR has proposed a plan to consolidate all of the district’s classrooms and administration into two buildings by moving grades seven and eight and the administration offices to the high school and grades one through six going to Clearfield Elementary School. To accomplish this, both the high school and the elementary school would need to be expanded. A $34 million expansion/renovation project is already underway at the high school but no final decision has been made on what will be done with the elementary schools.”

http://www.theprogressnews.com/default.asp?read=32056

In Ohio, where 2,674 school districts existed in 1915, there now exists just 614, the result of state legislature (predominantly in the 1950s) that offered incentives to small, often rural districts who decided to merge. However, the matter has gained some traction in recent years as a result of newly published data:

“The issue reared again in 2010 and became an issue in the gubernatorial campaign when the Brookings Institute, one of the nation’s most influential think tanks, issued a report “Restoring Prosperity: Transforming Ohio’s Communities for the Next Economy,” that called for a further reduction of the number of school districts to around 400.”


While different in size and scope, the fact we can observe multiple consolidation efforts from across the USA in the past two years alone indicates that momentum is building for such efforts to be considered as school districts confront issues of size, budgetary constraints, reduced state aid, spiraling staff benefit and pension costs, and a growing uncertainty of the short and long term economic outlook.

Consolidating school districts can potentially act as a lever for elusive internal changes and the restructuring of systems many believe are necessary to transform our educational landscape. Education reformers would cite, for example, a greater ability to refine the processes by which school districts support their students, and teachers, which becomes especially pertinent as a growing number of districts consider tenure and teacher evaluation alternatives.

While opinions will differ on the purpose, intent, and eventual outcomes of consolidated school districts, there remains little doubt in my mind that we are poised to observe a rise in the number of proposals for school mergers in the coming years. Our charge as educators is to weigh the benefits not merely for employees, or even the local residents, but for the students for whom these efforts will most dramatically impact.
References:

Transition Plan

Tracking Title 1 Money

Norris-Todd Act

Amendment

Timelines of News Stories

Curry Todd
State Representative
http://www.capitol.tn.gov/House/members/h95.html
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Curry_Todd

Mark Norris
Senate Majority Leader
http://www.capitol.tn.gov/senate/members/s32.html
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mark_Norris_(Tennessee)

Bill Haslam
Governor
http://www.tn.gov/governor/
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bill_Haslam

Ron Ramsey
Speaker of the Senate
http://ltgov.tn.gov/
Beth Harwell  
Speaker of the House of Representatives  
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Samuel H. Mays, Jr.  
District Judge  
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Kevin Huffman  
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Betty Mallot  
Memphis (District 2) Commissioner  
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Martavius Jones  
Memphis (District 4) Commissioner  
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