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*Dr. Steve F. Dixon
Past President, Bristol*

*Ms. Reecha G. Black
Alamo*

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Athens*

*Dr. Lyle C. Ailshie
Greeneville*

Association of Independent and Municipal Schools

SCHOOL CONSOLIDATION IN TENNESSEE

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Twyman
Humboldt*

*Mr. Wayne Miller
Lenoir City*

*Ms. Marilyn M. Mathis
Murfreesboro*

*Ms. Janice Shelby
Executive Secretary*

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The Association of Independent and Municipal Schools (AIMS) is a voluntary, not-for-profit organization of city and special district public schools that was founded in 1992. Its purposes are to promote the development and improvement of municipal and special district schools in Tennessee; protect the right of those systems to maintain themselves; represent their interests in the General Assembly and other forums; foster closer ties among directors of schools, boards of education, and local government officials; and enhance the leadership role of municipal and special district systems as "lighthouses" for educational innovation and excellence.

AIMS CONSOLIDATION REPORT

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Historical Background

School consolidation has been a nationwide trend now for more than seven decades. As one might expect, schools and school districts have been getting larger due to various population explosions; yet, ironically, the number of schools and school districts historically have been decreasing. Between 1940 and 1990, there existed a 70 percent increase in school population throughout the nation; however, during this time period, the total number of K-12 schools declined more than 69 percent, and the total number of school districts declined by approximately 87 percent. The impetus towards school consolidation derived from reform efforts to “professionalize” the institution of education and redirect the decision-making authority over education away from the local community and into the hands of educational bureaucracies. State governments promoted consolidation by offering financial incentives to local districts. Although at the outset, resistance to consolidation by the local communities was strong, the local districts ultimately yielded to the financial and political pressures of the state government.

Perhaps the most significant reason for school consolidation is the increased “economy of scale.” The rationale behind “economy of scale” is the notion that school districts may decrease their production costs by increasing the size and administrative operation of their facilities. That is, as school districts seek to economize their operations, they shed themselves of surplus facilities and merge other functions into larger facilities.

School district consolidation was at its peak between 1939 and 1973. During this time frame, school districts were consolidating at a rate of 13 percent per year, thereby creating an inverse relationship with student enrollment trends: As the rate of student enrollment increases, school districts consolidate. For example, between 1930 and 1940, the average school district size was 217 students with the average school size being only 81 students. Compare these figures to the statistics taken for the year 2001: In 2001, the average school district enrollment in the nation was 2,788, and the average school size was 521 students. Furthermore, in 1937, there were more than 119,001 school districts in the United States. By 1999, the number had been reduced to 14,928.

In general, the national movement toward decentralization has reduced the number of school districts by over 100,000 since 1938, a decline of over 90 percent. Yet, over the last decade, the number of schools with over 1500 students has doubled. High schools with 2000 – 3000 students are now commonplace. Although advocates of consolidation contend that large schools offer students a broader array of courses and more sophisticated

technology, the research reveals that large schools are actually detrimental in that they foster alienation and violence, abolish the role of parents and neighbors, and lower student achievement.

B. The Tennessee Experience

The pace of school consolidation in Tennessee has been much slower than than in many other states. In 1950, Tennessee had 158 school districts; as of 2004, Tennessee has only reduced the total number of school districts by 22 to a new total of 136 school districts. The most recent school mergers have been Morristown – Hamblen County in 1985; Knoxville – Knox County in 1987; Jackson – Madison County in 1990; Chattanooga – Hamilton County in 1996; Harriman – Roane County in 2003; and Covington – Tipton County in 2003.

Of the 136 districts in Tennessee, 94 are county systems, ²⁸~~31~~ are municipal systems, and 14 are special school districts. Gibson County does not operate a countywide school system, and Carroll County does not operate a countywide program. Public education in Carroll County is provided by five special school districts and provided in Gibson County by four special districts and one city system.

In Tennessee, consolidation is frequently promoted as a means of achieving intro-county equality of school expenditures. Other proponents claim that consolidation will save money by eliminating duplicative school administrative costs and by achieving a larger economy of scale whereby more students can be educated at a lower unit cost. Advocates favoring consolidation also tout as additional benefits the provision of greater educational opportunity to the rural schoolchild and the equalization of existing pay disparities among teachers working in different districts within the same county. However, as this paper will demonstrate, there are serious ramifications to consolidation that must be considered by the school systems considering a merger.

II. LEGAL/POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

A. Methods of Consolidation

In Tennessee, consolidation of school districts can occur in any one of five ways:

1. By consolidation of governments, as when Metro Nashville-Davidson County was created in 1963;
2. By consolidation of school districts pursuant to procedures set forth in Tennessee Code Annotated section 49-2-1201 (Clarksville-Montgomery County, and Jackson-Madison County schools were consolidated by this method);

