

TITLE-----Marin Co—19 school districts. Why?

"Neighborhood Speak"-----by Steve Patterson—Federation of SR Neighborhoods

In Marin County there are nearly 20 independent free standing school districts, most of which are driven by top down, Superintendent driven, organizational administrative structures. In a sense, each district stands as an independent organizational silo which requires a tremendous dollar investment to support the people employed to do administrative tasks. In these times of continued cutbacks and lack of funding at all levels, we should question whether this the best way to have our educational dollars spent.

Recently, the IJ did a piece on the top 14 districts and the pay of each Superintendent. These pay packages are generous, as are the accompanying pension/benefit packages. Many of the Superintendents are receiving pay increases, as called for in their contracts or by school board decision-making. With dramatic cuts underway and the firing of the youngest and often the best teachers, this creates an obvious disconnect. And the losers are the students and the education process. Often parents have to "kick in" financially to keep certain student programs functioning or they have to invest "sweat equity" with their time and efforts in order to keep basic elements of the educational process intact. Art programs, libraries, and field trip activities are just a few of the elements which are in constant peril of otherwise being cut.

What is happening in Marin is not unique. California is loaded with administratively bloated school districts but solving the budget problems will take more than massaging budgets or being creative about the cuts which are still coming. Real consolidation needs to take place and be seriously discussed by those in a position to make real changes. Until that happens in meaningful way, taxpayers will remain conflicted about being viewed as the solution by being forced to pay higher taxes.

Why do we need all these free standing districts, each with its own very well paid Superintendent and administrative hierarchy? Many will say it is about "local control". This local control as a concept may well sink the educational ship in these budget challenged times in many districts. While some consolidation has occurred among some of the smaller districts, much of it has not been discussed or acted upon in any meaningful way. As budgets keep shrinking at the expense of basic education and literacy of our children, they will be the first to feel the loss when spending cuts and program cuts are made.

Let's dispense with these many redundant districts and make a leaner structure that creates more efficiencies based on scale. Innovation often happens in the classroom but innovation is often in short supply when it comes to school boards, school administrations, and other educational bureaucrats who often are slow to change and even slower to engage in real consolidation discussions.

The quality of our public education is at stake and the future outcomes do not appear promising given the state of California's economy and future prospects. Consolidation is one of the few tools we have

left in the toolbox. Each of the options needs to be carefully looked over, but consolidation needs to be seriously considered, and the real potential of having these administrative silos dismantled needs to be seen as an alternative to the rubber stamping of pay raises and long term benefits contracts which these silos demand.

Once consolidation is addressed and implemented, school districts might investigate the 4-day school week which is gaining traction in other parts of the country and saves money, jobs and actually seems to enhance academic performance. But that is a subject for another time...

And when the schools get streamlined, it will be time for cities ,towns, as well as special districts to have similar conversations as well. Our public sectors are among the most "over managed" in the world and in terms of financial, environmental and sustainable practices, these special districts are all going to need, at the very least, a makeover of some kind.

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