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Consultants recommend consolidation of 3 districts

No action taken on feasibility study for Avon, Abingdon, B-PC

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The Register-Mail

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AVON — School board members and citizens from three different counties met Thursday to view a reorganization study that could change the face of west-central Illinois public education.

No action was taken as citizens from Abingdon, Avon and Bushnell-Prairie City school districts met in a packed Avon High School gym to address the feasibility of at least two districts consolidating their school systems. However, the three University of Illinois-Springfield professors who conducted the Avon-initiated study recommended the consolidation of all three school districts.

“What you have now is the information to make that decision,” said professor William H. Phillips, who lead the study. “But we think this would be the greatest opportunity to educate your students.”

The three professors provided a neutral viewpoint on three reorganization scenarios:

- Scenario 1 — Avon School District consolidates with Abingdon.
- Scenario 2 — Avon consolidates with B-PC.
- Scenario 3 — All three school districts consolidate.

Under the recommended third scenario, which would create a district of roughly 1,700 students:

- High school students from the three districts would attend Bushnell-Prairie City High School.
- Abingdon’s current middle/high school building would become the new district’s fifth- through eighth-grade building
- Each town would retain its elementary school. No kindergarten through fifth-grade buildings would be shuttered.
- For special education, the districts likely would have to drop one of the two cooperatives they belong to: Avon and B-PC are part of West Central Illinois Special Education cooperative while Abingdon sends its students to Knox-Warren Special Education.

“The beauty of merging all these high schools is that you have enough space, you have the technology,” added professor Scott L. Day.

Day thought the consolidation would improve the curricula of all three districts.

Another professor told the crowd that building-wise the consolidation also appeared to be the right choice.

“The buildings are in great shape,” said professor Leonard Bogle, who found no major health or life safety, plumbing or electrical issues at any of the recommended buildings. Avon Elementary School is in need of a \$500,000 roof replacement, Bogle said, which will need to be conducted no matter what action, if any, is taken on the study.

District finances passed muster as well.

“These three districts are in pretty good financial shape,” said William H. Phillips, whose expertise at U of I is on education finances and who addressed each district’s general state aid payments and expenses.

The hypothetical reorganization could generate potentially \$4.5 million in state-funded reorganization incentives, Phillips told the crowd.

The 241-student Avon School District, which lies roughly equidistant from the other towns, initiated the study, sending letters of interest to B-PC and Abingdon in 2009.

If the districts choose to pursue consolidation, a referendum could be on ballots as early as November.

Although emotions ran high, the gymnasium was filled with more laughter at Phillips’ jokes about the state’s financial situation than alarm over the loss of schools.

Some, like Marnie Dugan of Avon, attributed the light atmosphere to the early stage of the discussions.

Dugan was encouraged about what she heard, but understood where others would be concerned.

“I think with consolidation the curriculum for my children would be expanded,” she said. “Then again, we live here in the middle of everything so it would affect us less.”

Representatives of each district said they will make an electronic version of the study available on their Web sites in the coming days, while the item will be on each board's agenda in February.

As well, Abingdon will hold a special meeting at 7 p.m. Feb. 4 to review the study with the public.

Sound familiar?

A similar reorganization feasibility study between Avon, Bushnell-Prairie City, Abingdon and Spoon River Valley was conducted in 2003, but resulted in no action. In 2006, Knoxville and Abingdon talked reorganization, eventually reaching a committee of ten. Ballot referendums allowing the public to vote on the consolidation of District 217 and District 202 were voted down by both school boards.

Consolidation and How it Happens

Consolidation is the merger of two or more existing districts to create a new district.

What it requires:

- Petition filed by voter signatures or school boards
- Local public hearing conducted by regional superintendent
- Approval by state superintendent
- Successful referendum in all three districts

Source: ISBE Web site, www.isbe.state.il.us/

Educational Costs

"There is an inverse relationship between the size of the a district and the cost of educating a student," said University of Illinois-Springfield education professor Scott L. Day who conducted the feasibility study.

Educational cost per pupil in 2009

- Abingdon: \$4,705
- Avon: \$6,329
- Bushnell-Prairie City: \$5,230

Enrollment

2009 Six-day enrollment figures

- Abingdon: 743
- Avon: 241
- Bushnell-Prairie City: 820

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