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# State officials push plan to ease consolidation

## School districts could merge in new ways

Friday, December 23, 2005

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BY JOHN O'CONNOR  
OF THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

**SPRINGFIELD** - Illinois education officials will push a proposal in the Legislature next spring to make it easier to consolidate school districts.

Gov. Rod Blagojevich's top education aide said Thursday the plan attempts to answer problems some of the state's hundreds of school districts have encountered in trying to "come together in ways that state law didn't allow."

"We see this as actually an expansion of local control because it gives local boards and local voters the option to try combinations that they couldn't before," said Elliot Regenstein, director of education reform.

If approved, the framework could save administrative costs, put more money into classrooms or reduce tax rates, and help school administrators provide more continuity in curriculum between middle and high schools, Regenstein said.

But Regenstein and others who have worked on the proposal stress that it remains a voluntary one.

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"Those arguments have to be made locally, the debate has to take place locally and that's the important part of this, that this allows people that flexibility," said Rep. Roger Eddy, a Hutsonville Republican and local school superintendent.

For decades, authorities have tried to encourage, push and cajole school districts to streamline and save money, but have been bucked by the dearly held concept of local control of schools, a reluctance by school districts to surrender power, and an unwillingness to shutter the local school, the heart of many small communities.

The state's 875 school districts are a far cry from the 12,000 one-room schoolhouse districts in Illinois in 1940. But since a law designed to ease consolidation restrictions passed in 1985, the number of districts has dropped by only about 125.

And Illinois remains one of only a handful of states that allows schools in the same area to be divided into elementary districts and high school districts, with separate sets of administrators, Regenstein said. Most states require all schools to be in "unit" districts - kindergarten through 12th grade under one administration.

The Blagojevich plan would allow elementary districts to merge even if they're not next to each other so that even if buildings can't close, administrative staffs can be combined.

It would allow elementary districts to merge with the high school district they feed even if voters in not all of the districts approve. One holdout district has killed many consolidations.

"When you have multiple elementary districts feeding to a high school district, any one of the elementary districts can stop the others from coming together because it's an all-or-nothing proposition," Regenstein said.

Holdout districts would have five years to change their minds and join the consolidation without another vote by the district they are merging with.

The plan also would allow a high school district to join an adjacent unit district alone. Currently, a high school district has to get its feeder elementary districts to consolidate into a unit district before it can subsequently merge with the adjacent unit district,



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Regenstein said.

Finally, the proposal would eliminate minimum enrollment numbers or district property value to allow a consolidation and would set up a system that allows a newly formed district to slowly roll back its tax rate while it reorganizes and saves money over time.

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