



## How Did We End Up With 54 School Districts in San Mateo and Santa Clara Counties?

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There are many stories about how our region's school district system developed. It appears that there was little thought about what system would best serve our kids because, at the time, education was not valued in an 19th century agrarian economy as it is in a 21st century global technology economy.

Here are the facts on current student performance: Large and pervasive gaps in achievement and education opportunity continue to exist between low-income students and students of color, and their more advantaged peers. Moreover, less than half of all Silicon Valley's high school graduates have taken courses that meet college entrance requirements, making this a much larger issue than the traditional framing that improving student performance is a discussion about poor kids or kids of color. If we were succeeding with our kids, perhaps we could tolerate an inefficient system. The fact is we are not coming close to succeeding and therefore we need a system designed to support quality education for all of our kids.

Over the years, with surprising degrees of success, various groups with vastly different viewpoints, ranging from the California Taxpayers Association and Chamber of Commerce to the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, have agreed that we have too many school districts and have advanced efforts at consolidation.

This report is not premised on the false argument that reducing the number of school districts alone will magically improve dismal school performance. It is also not an argument for a single, massive district.

What seems clear is that our current system makes district accountability virtually impossible and systemic innovation too hard. In the current system, there are close to 300 independently elected school district board members who make decisions in San Mateo and Santa Clara counties. Moreover, recent state legislation to push more decisions to the local level means that school board members will need to have an even greater understanding of educational issues to be successful.

It is also clear that at a time when every dollar counts, we should actively look for ways to avoid duplication of services and personnel.

Finally, this is not an argument about local control. School boards will still be elected by the public and parents will drive the system of education. However, we can no longer afford to have high school and elementary school districts serving the same kids which operate independently and human resources and procurement operations for each and every district. Hopefully, this report will help shape a dialogue that puts what's best for our children ahead of any other consideration.

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## Introduction

From Daly City to Gilroy, more than 350,000 students now attend 566 public elementary and secondary schools in the cities lining the western side of San Francisco Bay. Those schools are divided into a complex and often confusing patchwork of 54 school districts<sup>1</sup>, the artifact of another century. That pattern evolved over the span of more than a century and the growth of the region from an agricultural center into the thriving capital of technological innovation known as Silicon Valley.

The decentralized approach to education persists despite decades of concerted efforts by state government to encourage the unification of districts into larger and theoretically more efficient organizations. Although the number of districts statewide has shrunk dramatically over the years, due in large part to those efforts, Peninsula and South Bay voters repeatedly have rejected proposals that would create large unified districts in their suburban communities. With few exceptions, voters have approved unification only in cities with strong municipal identities.

When many of the school systems were established in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, San Francisco was “The City” and the majority of the communities stretching southward in San Mateo and Santa Clara counties were little more than hamlets. San José, the first state capital, was a small city that served as a hub for the orchard towns scattered throughout what was then called “The Valley of Heart’s Delight”.

Each of those communities opened its own elementary school. Secondary schools, however, were few and far between since only a small number of young people went on to high school in that era. San José High was the second public high school in the Bay Area when it opened in 1868 on grounds shared with Horace Mann elementary school. When Sequoia High School opened in Redwood City in 1895 as a preparatory school for Stanford University, it became the first high school to be built between San José and San Francisco.

From these beginnings emerged a system of neighborhood elementary schools organized into community school districts, each with a board of trustees. High schools drew from a wider area and eventually were organized into separate districts that served students from two or more elementary districts. Each of the high school districts also had its own school board. The history of earlier efforts to reconstruct that system into a modern model offers important lessons for those who seek to organize schools in new ways for the 21st century.

## From the Gold Rush to the Great Depression

The first public school in what was to become Santa Clara County opened in a big blue denim tent in downtown San José in 1850. The state constitution, approved a year earlier at a convention in Monterey, had called for the legislature to “provide for a system of common schools, by which a school be kept up and supported in each district at least three months in every year.” As the region grew and people settled in little agricultural towns south of San Francisco, small schools popped up wherever there was a concentration of families with children to educate. Woodside, then a booming mill town that provided much of the lumber to build San Francisco, opened one of the first in 1851, the year that the new state legislature passed an act formally authorizing public elementary schools. In 1853, the legislature empowered school districts to levy taxes and San José opened a one-room school near the Plaza de Cesar Chavez where it would build its first city hall. Mountain View, a stagecoach stop on the route between San Francisco and San José, formed a school district in 1854.

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<sup>1</sup>This report focuses on public school districts in San Mateo and Santa Clara counties, including unified, elementary and secondary (high) school districts. Unified districts operate schools covering Kindergarten or 1st grade through 12th grade. These are the most common forms of school districts. Elementary districts operate elementary schools only. Secondary, referred to as high school districts in this report, operate high schools only.

In the area now known as Morgan Hill, Burnett School was opened in 1855, the same year that a state law regulating common schools went into effect. “Unless otherwise determined and established by the proper authorities,” the law declared, “each city and each town or township in this State shall constitute one school district.” San José schools were run by a superintendent and a board of education under the auspices of the city council. Outside of cities, though, the most common administrative unit for education was a single school. State government didn’t make any provision for consolidation of these one-school districts until 1902.

By the beginning of the 20th century, there were widely scattered elementary schools from San Mateo and Redwood City on the Peninsula to the Santa Cruz Mountains community of Loma Prieta and the cattle ranches of Gilroy in the south. Until Sequoia High School opened in 1895, however, the only secondary school was in San José. Few young people in the lightly populated region continued their education beyond eighth grade at that time. Those who did go on to secondary study usually went to private or parochial schools.

In 1891, the Union High School Act authorized free high school education for rural students for the first time. It permitted two or more elementary districts to join together to create a union high school district to serve their students. The reasoning was that a single elementary district was unlikely to have enough secondary students or resources to support its own high school. Special state revenue for high schools was provided by a constitutional amendment in 1901 and union high school districts were formed in Campbell, Mountain View, Los Gatos and San Mateo between 1900 and 1908. Not until 1915, though, did the state pass legislation to make a secondary education available free of charge to all eligible students throughout the state.

By 1920, there was concern in some quarters that the school system that had been patched together over the years in California was not as efficient or effective as it might be. The legislature appointed the Herbert C. Jones committee to survey the state’s schools. The committee criticized the pattern of single schools governed by elected school boards in rural areas. “In fact, it may be stated as generally recognized among educational authorities today that it is just such minute organization, with the scattering of authority and responsibility, that increases the expenses of our schools, makes them ineffective as rural institutions, and stands in the way of proper educational organization and much needed educational progress.” It recommended that schools be organized by countywide districts.

The California Taxpayers Association took up the mantle of organizational reform in 1929, when it sponsored a bill to place all schools into one of three types of unified districts—county, city or independent—with the boundaries set by each county’s board of supervisors. The bill was opposed because it would have made the new districts liable for all the bond debt previously incurred by the districts they absorbed.

## **A Quest for Efficiency**

Efforts to reorganize school districts gained momentum in the 1930s, as California sank into the economic depths of The Great Depression. Over the course of the decade, four major studies called for combining small school districts into larger units for better delivery of education. A report prepared under the direction of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching in 1932 criticized the small district concept and recommended better coordination of the state’s school system. A 1933 bill sponsored by the State Chamber of Commerce would have folded all elementary districts into existing high school districts at a time when there were more than 3,500 school districts, most of them very small, spread throughout the state. Despite broad support, the bill failed because critics objected to the proposed establishment of trustee representation areas for the new school boards. Four years later, the state Department of Education and U.S. Office of Education released a joint study suggesting that the high school district become the basic unit of state school organization. That would have reduced the total number of districts to 300.

Amid all the debate and legislative proposals, one bill led to the creation of unified city school districts. The 1936 law sponsored by a state Committee on the Reorganization of School Districts required elementary and high school districts to unify in circumstances where they shared the same boundaries and governing boards. This move created unified districts in 36 cities throughout the state, including San José, Palo Alto and South San Francisco.

By the mid-1940s, with World War II winding down, legislators once again called for a study of “the administration, organization, and financial support of the public school system of the State.” The 1945 Strayer Survey report recommended a statewide survey “of all local school districts for the purpose of effecting desirable unifications.” It called for regional commissions to develop plans to be approved by a state commission and then sent to voters for ratification. The law that grew out of this recommendation created county committees on school district organization for the first time. The state offered financial incentives for voluntary unification, guaranteeing that each new district would receive state aid equivalent to the combined aid given to its component districts before unification. The increased cost of busing students also was to be subsidized for five years after unification. The incentives prompted more reorganization. By 1950, the number of California school districts had dropped to 2,091.

## **The Legislative Push**

After decades of encouraging schools districts to merge, the California Legislature forced the issue in 1959, when it ordered each county committee on school district organization to develop a master plan for the consolidation of school districts in its county by 1964. If a county failed to produce a plan, the state Department of Education would be ordered to prepare one for approval by the State Board of Education. Approved plans were required to be presented to district voters within two years of the State Board's authorization. In most cases, the law emphasized, unified districts would be the preferred form of organization. At a minimum, the new districts were expected to conform to the boundaries of existing high school districts where possible.

For the first time, local communities would be compelled to reconsider the ways their schools were organized. The Peninsula and South Bay had grown into sprawling suburbs by the 1960s. Orchards were giving way to housing tracts, shopping centers and business parks. As communities incorporated, the school districts formed in earlier days often saw their boundaries stretched across more than one city. In southern San Mateo County, Sequoia Union High School District eventually drew students from eight cities between East Palo Alto and Belmont. San Mateo Union High School District took in six cities in the middle of the county and Jefferson Union High School District encompassed four cities in the north.

The most complicated pattern of school districts was found in Santa Clara County, which did not begin to urbanize until the 1950s. The county was divided into two unified districts, eight high school districts and 35 elementary districts cutting across city lines. In San José, alone, nearly two dozen school districts crowded within the city's confusing borders. Although San José Unified was the largest single district, it occupied only a long, narrow band of land reaching south from the original city center into the Almaden Valley.

San José's complex political geography was the legacy of aggressive annexation drives in the 1950s, when city leaders rushed to strengthen their property tax base and build an industrial metropolis. Rather than going after blocks of land adjacent to the city limits, City Manager A.P. “Dutch” Hamann and his staff targeted strips of land—perhaps just one side of a street—to capture key intersections where they expected shopping centers would be built one day. They leapfrogged large tracts of open space to establish footholds in outlying areas attractive to industry. In the process, they created a patchwork city, where boundaries were difficult to identify. Orchards and canneries were replaced by housing tracts and industrial parks. By 1960, the city's population had more than doubled to 204,196 people and its area had grown from 17 square miles to nearly 150.

Under state law at the time, San José Unified would have been required to take over the areas annexed by the city, too. But outlying districts were outraged by what they saw as a grab for their schools and property taxes. “The school authorities would take almost any means to forestall us, strong arming developers, financing counter action, anything,” recalled former San José Mayor George Starbird in a speech to the Rotary Club in 1972. Opposing districts often delayed and sometimes stopped annexations. To smooth the way for expansion, the City of San José joined with a number of school districts to lobby for a change in the education code. In 1955, a new law took effect that prevented a school district from being automatically annexed to a unified city district when its territory was acquired by that city. With passage of the law, Starbird said, “the one biggest stumbling block disappeared.”

The tiny Sunol and Almaden school districts elected to annex to San José Unified anyway in the mid-1950s. Other small districts, including one-school Luther Burbank Elementary, which is completely surrounded by the city, remained independent and free to operate as they had since the turn of the century.

The new master plan law would shake things up. Many people liked the idea of smaller, locally controlled districts. Others objected to the possibility of higher taxes and increased costs for everything from busing to placing all teachers on the highest salary schedule in newly unified districts. But the state was compelling districts to draw up blueprints for unification and put them before voters.

## **Most Voters Resist**

While county committees were preparing their proposals for reorganization, the state passed major new legislation in 1964 offering carrots and sticks for schools to reorganize along lines approved by the State Board of Education. AB145 was designed as a funding equalization measure based on the theory that larger districts would spread property tax revenue more evenly to schools. The law stated that it was the Legislature's intent that unified districts should be the ultimate form of school organization in the state. It increased the level of state funding for unified districts and gave elementary districts a bonus if they voted to unify with high school districts—even if the overall effort failed. Districts that did not get voter approval to reorganize would be required to return to the polls every two years or face financial penalties. The election requirement later was extended to every four years.

In San Mateo County, unification went smoothly in the rural communities along the coast. Voters approved the new Cabrillo Unified district for the area around Half Moon Bay and the La Honda-Pescadero Unified district in a 1964 election. Controversy emerged, however, in the suburban communities edging the Bay. The county committee proposed to split each of the three high school districts and its feeder schools into two or three smaller unified districts rather than create larger organizations. But the State Board rejected variations of those plans three times, noting that the intent of state law was to unify along existing high school district lines in most cases. It argued that the county committee's proposals would create districts with widely varying property tax bases and could contribute to racial segregation. The State Board ordered a plan sent to voters that would create a single unified district within each of the existing high school district boundaries.

Some local residents saw the possibility of improved education programs and increased efficiency in larger districts. They also warned that the state could mandate a countywide unification plan in the future if the high school district plans failed at the polls. Opponents argued that bigger districts would be unwieldy and unresponsive to parents and students. Glen Hayden, the chairman of the county committee, signed the ballot argument against the San Mateo Union High proposal, contending that taxes would rise and educational programs would suffer.

A Palo Alto Times editorial a few days before the June 1966 election sharply criticized the Sequoia proposal even though the newspaper supported unification plans in Santa Clara County. The editorial pointed out that the State Board had three times rejected local proposals to divide the Sequoia district into a trio of unified districts. "The all-Sequoia proposal is the baby of a special committee imported under a special law designed to get at residents especially loath to fling aside their special local know-how about running schools and unify only in the way Big Daddy thinks best." (Big Daddy was the nickname of Assembly Speaker Jesse Unruh, the author of AB145). Among its arguments, the editorial noted that the cost of the switch to a single salary schedule in the Sequoia district was estimated at \$1 million or more.

Voters turned down the state plans in all three districts in June 1966. The margin was two to one against the plans in the San Mateo and Sequoia districts. When the State Board put the same plans back on June 1972 ballots, local voters rejected them by even larger margins. State law had changed again by then and that was the last mandatory election on unification. Financial incentives for unification also were withdrawn.

While the major unification elections followed similar scripts in San Mateo County, the plot varied widely in Santa Clara County, where there were more elections overall between 1964 and 1972. Although the cities of Morgan Hill, Gilroy, Milpitas and Santa Clara approved unification, there was significant resistance throughout the rest of the county. Los Gatos and Saratoga, which

started the election process earlier than most in 1960, took unification proposals to the polls four times and each time they were rejected. Some of the loudest objections came from the one-school Lakeside district in the hills above Los Gatos, which had been educating local children since 1863. Residents complained they didn't want to lose local control of their district. Mountain View-Los Altos and the Fremont Union communities of Sunnyvale and Cupertino voted on reorganization proposals three times and the Campbell Union High district twice. In each election, unification was rejected by large margins.

Unification campaigns were hard fought in Mountain View and Los Altos, where schools in the affluent communities of Los Altos and Los Altos Hills shared a high school district with Mountain View and the working class Whisman elementary district. In 1964, many Los Altos residents made it clear that they would prefer to form their own unified district rather than the single district proposed by the county committee. The Los Altos school board argued that unification would mean higher taxes since its residents, which didn't need new schools, would be paying for growth in Mountain View. The Mountain View school board unanimously opposed unification and launched an "informational campaign" to defeat the ballot measure, while Whisman and the Mountain View-Los Altos High School District board supported the proposal. Sixty-one percent of the voters rejected the measure in June.

Two years later, the issue was put on the ballot again. This time, the county committee predicted that tax rates would have to go up a dollar or more per \$1,000 of assessed valuation to "get the best of everything" in the new district. The committee also called for at-large elections for the new school board even though many residents argued for electing trustees by areas. Unification was defeated again at the polls in 1966 and 1972. A poll conducted by Rodney Diridon, Sr., a member of the Saratoga City Council, in January 1972 showed that voters were evenly split at 39 percent for and 39 percent against merging school districts in some combination. Diridon noted that voters in large households and those in the age 30 to 49 group—who were most likely to have school-age children—were most likely to oppose the reorganization of districts.

Perhaps the most difficult unification debates revolved around the mammoth East Side Union High School District, which stretched for more than 15 miles along the eastern foothills from Milpitas in the north to Metcalf Road in South San José. District residents were anxious to break East Side up into smaller units that they felt would be more responsive to their children's needs. Milpitas Elementary District also wanted to split off into a unified city district with the rural Air Point district. As early as 1956, Berryessa Elementary residents had petitioned unsuccessfully to secede from the district.

In 1960, the Evergreen, Franklin-McKinley, and Oak Grove elementary districts in San José petitioned the county committee for a study "to determine the best possible school organization that will best serve the children of these combined school districts." Two years later, the Santa Clara County Office of Education recommended formation of two unified districts in east San José. The North Unified School District would bring together Air Point, Milpitas, Berryessa, Orchard and the portion of Alum Rock elementary district north of Story Road with the northern half of the high school district. South Unified would encompass the southern portion of Alum Rock along with the Mount Pleasant, Franklin-McKinley, Evergreen and Oak Grove elementary districts.

The study had rejected unification of the entire high school district on the grounds that it would cover too much area and too many students. It also had vetoed the idea of dividing the high school district into three parts because that would create an impoverished central district with Alum Rock and Mount Pleasant. The study concluded that a two-district solution appeared most equitable financially and did not bisect any attendance areas or natural communities. The county committee approved proposals for the two new districts but the State Board turned them down, citing AB145's stipulation that existing high school boundary lines should be the minimum geographical boundary of any proposed district. State Superintendent of Schools Max Rafferty noted that the board could find no justification for approving an exception to that stipulation when he sent the proposal back to the county committee on Sept. 16, 1964. He called for the committee to revise the plans to meet the intent of the legislature.

The county committee responded in March 1965 with plans to create a smaller unified district in the area covered by the Air Point and Milpitas districts and a large unified district in the rest of the East Side area. It argued that the City of Milpitas was the only established and clearly identified community within East Side's boundaries and that the city's master plan proposed



joint development of school sites and adjacent parks. The State Board, however, turned down those proposals on the same grounds as the first set of plans and Rafferty again called for revision. When the county committee capitulated and recommended a single unified district within East Side's boundaries in 1966, the community rejected the plan by 62 percent of the vote. Milpitas finally succeeded in a separate bid for unification in 1968 after a spirited campaign by the elementary board. But 65 percent of voters again opposed unification of the remaining area of the East Side District in 1972.

Across the Valley in Sunnyvale and Cupertino, efforts to consolidate all the schools within the territory of Fremont Union High School district met a similar fate. After voters twice turned down plans to unify the Sunnyvale and Cupertino elementary districts with the high school district by 58 percent in 1965 and 72 percent in 1967, the county committee proposed to create separate unified districts for the two cities. Opponents of the earlier measures had pointed out that a single district would have been the sixth largest in the state and argued that it would result in a loss of identity as well as financial problems. Still, the smaller districts were rejected, too, with a 70 percent no vote in 1972.

## **A Return to Voluntary Reunification**

By the early 1970s, California was weary of the cycle of mandatory school unification votes. A 1971 bill by State Senator Fred Marler of Redding struck down the requirement for elections every four years in districts that had not yet consolidated. The change took effect after the 1972 elections. AB145 left its mark, however. In the decade after its passage, the number of elementary and high school districts dropped from 1,325 to 1,048. There were 253 unified districts in 1974 compared to 164 in 1964.

That was not the end of unification efforts, although the movement slowed to a crawl. Some communities still saw benefits of greater coordination and accountability from unified systems. More often than not, unification proposals were initiated by school districts with an eye toward more efficient operations. But the Mid-Peninsula Task Force for Integrated Education was seeking social justice when it entered the field in November 1973. The task force petitioned the county committees of both San Mateo and Santa Clara counties to unify the elementary districts of Menlo Park, Las Lomas, Portola Valley, Ravenswood and a portion of Sequoia Union High School District across county lines with Palo Alto Unified. The goal was racial integration. The San Mateo and Santa Clara county committees held joint public hearings on the petition but eventually voted not to recommend the proposal.

The San Mateo committee also studied the possibility of unification in the Jefferson Union High School District area but dropped the idea for lack of public support. It recommended unification of the Belmont School District area in response to a local petitioner in 1976. The State Board denied the proposal, explaining the new district would leave "a disproportionate share of minority students in the remaining territory" of the Sequoia district.

In Santa Clara County, Dan Predovitch, the superintendent of Mountain View-Los Altos Union High School District, suggested in 1975 that the high school district try again to unify with its feeder districts to cut costs and deal with declining enrollment. George Pflieger, superintendent of Mountain View Elementary district, endorsed the plan, saying separate elementary and high school districts represent "an archaic system." But the Los Altos Elementary school board came out against the idea and its superintendent, Ian Hutcheson, commented that unification had not proved to be a more efficient system. In the end, the Santa Clara county committee turned down the new proposal after a \$10,000 study concluded that the merger would cost districts more than if they remained separate.

When Saratoga residents petitioned to form a unified district along city lines in 1979 the county committee responded by ordering a study of the possible merger of the Campbell, Fremont, and Los Gatos-Saratoga high school districts and their feeder districts into one large system. The committee also ordered its staff to study the possibility of splitting the Fremont district in half along Interstate 280—a proposal similar to the one rejected by voters seven years earlier. Work on those plans ground to a halt, however, in October 1979, when the state attorney general ruled that school district boundaries could not be changed in the wake of Proposition 13 if the result was a change in tax rates on either side of the boundary.

Proposition 13, the landmark property tax initiative of 1978, also cut short a San Mateo County bid to create a unified district in the Foster City area. The State Board tabled the Foster City proposal “until the Legislature provides funds for the construction of needed school facilities.”

Interest in voluntary school district reorganization fell off dramatically in the 1980s. The Evergreen and Mount Pleasant elementary districts proposed a study of unification with Silver Creek and Mount Pleasant high schools from the East Side district in 1982. Advocates said the move would foster better communication between elementary and high schools. Talks broke off, though, after the county committee determined there was little community interest in the merger.

The Mountain View and Whisman elementary districts also began talking of merger again in 1982 after Whisman Superintendent Duane Bay offered consolidation as an answer to his small district’s economic woes. It would be eight years, however, until the community finally approved the Mountain View-Whisman School District on a 77 percent yes vote. The 2000 election created a 5,000-student district with seven elementary and two middle schools.

Since that time the number of school districts in Santa Clara and San Mateo counties has declined by only one. The Montebello School District in the hills above Cupertino was dissolved in 2009, when its enrollment dropped to nine students. Its property and students were transferred to neighboring Cupertino elementary district.

Efforts to create a unified district in Foster City and carve out a new unified district in the Moreland community on the west side of San José both failed at the polls in the 1990s. Emotions ran high among supporters, who said they were trying to create the best possible schools for their children. But educators in the districts that would have been broken up fought hard, arguing that their systems would suffer if they lost students and schools to the new districts. In Foster City, the contest was complicated by the fact that voters throughout the San Mateo-Foster City school district were allowed to cast ballots because they would be affected by the split. Still, supporters picked up only 39 percent of the vote in Foster City. Even though Moreland was not required to include voters from the larger high school district in its special election, it lost nonetheless with just 46 percent of the vote.

The Foster City and Moreland experiences were not unique. Few unification measures have succeeded anywhere in the state since the 1960s. From 2000 to 2010, the numbers of school districts in California declined by only 24 to 963 districts and 40 percent of the state’s students still are enrolled in districts with fewer than 1,000 students. In Santa Clara and San Mateo counties, district sizes in 2009-10 ranged from the 89-student Lakeside district to the 32,400 San José Unified. A third of students in Santa Clara County were enrolled in unified districts and 14 percent in San Mateo. Four schools in each county were smaller than 1,000 students.

## **The Next Wave**

Despite the reluctance of voters to approve school district reorganization, legislators, business leaders and grand juries continue to raise the issue periodically. Interest in the potential efficiencies of larger and more coordinated school systems picked up new momentum when the recession began in 2008. As states slashed spending to make up for sharply declining revenues, many hard hit schools were forced to lay off teachers and even shorten the school year. In California, the state budget is still in shambles and schools continue to face the possibility of additional budget cuts.

While a number of mostly rural states pushed for consolidations, California legislators in 2010 called on the Legislative Analyst’s Office (LAO) to study whether the state should more actively promote the reorganization of small districts. The LAO report, released in May 2011, recommended that the state leave reorganization decisions to local districts since there was no persuasive evidence that consolidation would lead to substantial savings or higher student achievement. At the same time, the report suggested that the state should do more to encourage efficiencies and improve accountability. One step would be to set a minimum threshold of at least 100 students for a school district. No action followed the report.

The Santa Clara County Civil Grand Jury took on reorganization in 2010 in its search for operational efficiencies to stretch school budgets farther during hard times. After reviewing the administrative expenses of all 31 districts in the county, jury members called for unifying four high school districts on the west side of the county with the elementary districts they serve in addition to merging four elementary districts in East San José into two larger districts. They estimated the annual savings for the new unified districts would run between \$6.3 and \$20 million. In addition, they predicted that reorganization would bring education benefits, including better communication between schools, more flexibility in staffing and student assignments, and the restoration of specialized programs. “The path to consolidation is difficult and time consuming,” their report acknowledged, “but the financial situation justifies the effort. The Grand Jury recommends that the hard work be undertaken now to achieve the long-term financial and education gains.”

Leaders of the districts targeted by the Grand Jury report uniformly rejected its recommendations. Some, like Cupertino elementary district’s school board, agreed that there were “certain circumstances where consolidating/unifying smaller districts will achieve efficiency of scale,” but none accepted that reorganization would be warranted in their case. Fremont Union High trustees contended that unifying their district with the Cupertino and Sunnyvale districts actually would result in a loss of about \$13 million a year because the districts’ finances are based on different funding models. Even Lakeside, with only 84 students in 2010, objected, noting that it was a high performing district. “If it’s not broke, don’t fix it,” trustees said in their response to the Grand Jury. Lower performing districts also disagreed with the findings. “Bigger is not better or more efficient,” wrote George L. Perez, superintendent of Mount Pleasant. “Educationally, smaller settings are better for children, teachers and families, hence the charter school movement.”

Such responses don’t surprise Anne Campbell, San Mateo County Superintendent of Schools. “I think you can’t underestimate the identification people have with their community schools,” she says. Although community leaders in San Mateo County often are eager to talk about the economic advantages of consolidation or unification, educators and parents rarely are. Even suggestions that schools collaborate to provide specialized services such as speech therapy often receive a lukewarm response. When Campbell presented a study on shared services to a meeting of San Mateo school superintendents in the fall of 2010, there was not much interest. “People have definite turf issues and they’re skeptical that if they join forces with other people they will achieve the economies of scale as promised,” she explained.

Still, Campbell thinks there’s a future for schools pooling their resources. The shared services study conducted by School Services of California indicated public agencies might increase efficiency, reduce cost and eliminate duplicated functions under a collaborative arrangement. The study was sponsored by Silicon Valley Community Foundation, the County Office of Education, the County of San Mateo, and the San Mateo County School Boards Association. It found that school officials expressed a high degree of interest in sharing purchasing functions and teacher training programs. Some districts also were interested in joining insurance pools or sharing specialists such as occupational therapists and adaptive physical education teachers.

Two of San Mateo’s smallest districts are leading the way. Brisbane and Bayshore at the northern end of the county together serve a little more than 1,000 students and long have struggled with tight budgets. They now share both a superintendent and a chief business officer. They also participate in a special education collaborative with the Jefferson elementary and high school districts. Other districts may find themselves moving in the same directions in the future, says Campbell, who points out that building relationships and trust are the essential first steps toward developing partnerships. Local identification may be strong, she says, but financial reality is hard to ignore: “As we move forward in time, I think it’s going to be interesting to see what school districts are going to do, especially as budgets get more bleak.”

Joseph di Salvo, President of the Santa Clara County Board of Education, argues that the time is right to begin a new conversation about the benefits of unification for both school budgets and student achievement. The county board already is moving in that direction, spurred in part by the most recent Grand Jury report. At its March 21 meeting, the board approved the commission of a revenue impact analysis study by School Services of California on school district realignment.

“I think you need to start making a case for it. Nobody has made a case for it,” di Salvo says, suggesting that issues of racial and ethnic disparities in academic achievement could provide strong motivation for reorganization. “I think we need to create a high level conversation—with information—in this valley, this valley of innovation.”

## Conclusion

When school districts began forming in the fledging state of California more than a century ago, the pattern of organization was both practical and logical. Widely scattered rural communities needed elementary schools close to home to teach their children reading, writing and arithmetic. As young people began going to high school, individual districts often found they had too few students and resources to support more advanced academic programs. Separate districts, covering the territories of two or more elementary districts, were established for secondary education.

Over the years, however, as California's population exploded and rural communities grew into cities and sprawling suburbs, a jigsaw puzzle of overlapping districts evolved haphazardly. School district boundaries often had no relationship to city lines and the elementary and high school districts within the same communities operated independently of one another. This highly decentralized approach to education persists despite the efforts of state legislators to encourage a more coordinated system.

Since 1920, the state has been pushing elementary districts to unify with the high school districts that serve their communities. The periodic drives to reorganize schools slowly reduced the number of California school districts from about 3,500 in the 1930s to nearly 1,000 in 2011. Of those, only a third are unified.

In San Mateo and Santa Clara counties, local voters have resisted change time and again. Loyalty to community schools and a reluctance to raise taxes have trumped arguments about the fiscal efficiency and academic effectiveness of unified districts time and again. In only a handful of cases—where the elementary and high school districts share a common community identity—have unification elections succeeded. School boards remain wary of the concept too, even when facing devastating budget cuts. When the Santa Clara County Civil Grand Jury recommended reorganization of 21 districts in 2010, each district submitted a formal reply disputing the jury's findings of lower and administrative costs and better education.

History offers clear lessons. Any efforts to change school district organization in Silicon Valley face serious obstacles. However, Larry Gerston, a professor of political science at San José State University argues that “one way or another, consolidation will come”. In a recent San José Mercury News article Gerston notes that at a time of diminishing resources communities have recognized the need for shared services and pooling of resources in a variety of programs, including police, fire and public works. And some leaders believe it is time for public education to do the same.



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## **About Aleta Watson**

This report was written by Aleta Watson, an award-winning journalist with a strong background in writing and editing on topics as diverse as education policy and food. After serving as the education writer and an assistant city editor at the San José Mercury News, Watson switched hats and became the paper's restaurant critic and food writer in 2002. Her work has appeared in newspapers across America. Currently, her clients include the Hewlett Foundation and the California Council on Science and Technology. She occasionally writes for European trade magazines as well.



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